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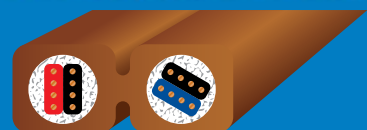
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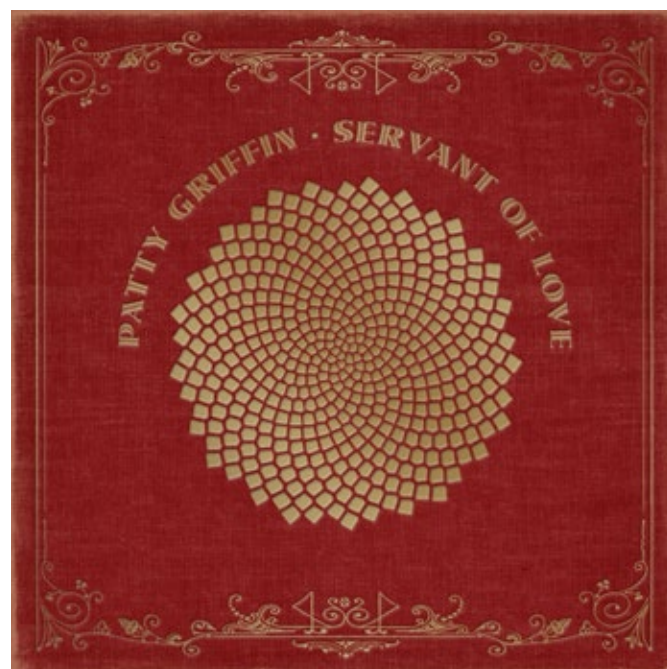
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Wherever you live, I hope you've been enjoying your summer and enjoying your environment before the cold of winter forces many of us indoors. While the colder pace of the fall and winter months usually means a bit more concentrated listening time, there's never a bad time to spin records. While we're definitely overdue in producing an all-analog issue for more than one reason, many of our industry partners have been busy with the grueling show schedule this summer, so Issue 74 will be a “mostly analog” issue.

Who would ever have guessed that analog would have this much staying power in the year 2015? It's great fun, and there are more choices than ever before. No matter what your budget, you can get in on the fun that is analog. Turntables, cartridges and phonostages have become more plentiful and with more performance for the dollar than many of us ever could have imagined. We've been evaluating a lot of equipment at all price ranges this issue, and will have quite a few more analog-related reviews both in the pages of the magazine, and out on the web in the months to come. Contributor Richard Mak in Toronto has been working feverishly on a bevy of analog goodies to share with you, and the rest of us have been spinning more records than normal too.

Enjoyable as the physical act of playing records is, we never forget about the music. This issue is filled with some great selections, new and old. I've been digging through the remasters and our staff has done their usual excellent job in mining the current releases. None other than Eddie Van Halen graces our cover, thanks to new contributor Annie Zed, and Andy Downing chats with Craig Finn of The Hold Steady.

On the gear side of the fence, we've got two versions of the latest creation from Balanced Audio Technology, the VK-P6 and -P6SE, a couple of great MM phonostages from Decware and Frank Van Alstine for the more budget-minded audiophiles, as well as some time with the nearly physics-defying ProAc Palette Anniversary speakers.

And as usual, there are plenty of other things for you to enjoy in this issue. We're celebrating our tenth birthday in October, so should you be attending the Rocky Mountain Audiofest then, and if you see me roaming around, be sure to say hello. I hope to see you there.





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Foo Fighters/Cheap Trick/Naked Raygun/ Urge Overkill

Wrigley Field

Chicago, Illinois
August 29, 2015



©Photo by Kevin Mazur

Although Dave Grohl's musical ties to the Seattle grunge movement and the Washington, D.C. punk scene are well known, his love affair with Chicago goes back even further. In the early 1980s, he saw punk band Naked Raygun at a tiny venue called the Cubby Bear while visiting his older cousin, Tracey. The life-changing experience set him on a path to his career as a musician. Perhaps that's why the Foo Fighters' Wrigley Field headlining show—the first stadium the band ever sold-out in the U.S., Grohl told the crowd during one of his many interludes—felt like such a joyous homecoming.

Of course, it helped that Foo Fighters also tapped three iconic Chicago-area artists to open the show. Throwback rockers Urge Overkill, who opened for Nirvana on the band's *Nevermind* tour, turned in a 25-minute set that included hits ("Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon," "Sister Havana") and cuts from their soon-to-be-reissued *Stull* EP. Naked Raygun then unleashed a taut, fiery set that inspired fans to commence with hardcore-style pit dancing in the upper decks.

The last of the openers proved the mightiest: Rockford's own Cheap Trick. Despite playing in front of such a huge audience, the quartet (as always) didn't dumb down its setlist or make commercial concessions. The group opened with a zippy new song, "Bang Zoom Crazy Hello," that fit in seamlessly with the rest of the performance; played the rare (and sleazy) deep cut "Daddy Should Have Stayed in High School"; and unleashed an extended version of the Velvet Underground's "I'm Waiting for the Man," featuring snarling garage guitars and bassist Tom Petersson on lead vocals.

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Such lack of pandering has helped Cheap Trick remain a fresh-sounding, powerful live band. The group filled the cavernous space with massive hits like “Surrender,” “Dream Police,” and “I Want You to Want Me”—all of which spurred sing-a-longs—as well as the proto-metal leer “Gonna Raise Hell” and sneering “Stiff Competition.” By the time the quartet ended the all-too-brief set with the traditional closer, “Goodnight,” it felt like Robin Zander and Co. were just getting started.

Thankfully, guitarist Rick Nielsen had the chance to jump onstage early in the Foo Fighters’ set to guest on “Something from Nothing.” The song was written and inspired by Chicago, and from *Sonic Highways*, the album and documentary series that spawned the current Foo Fighters tour. It wasn’t the last time the city received kudos. During the concert, Grohl gleefully recalled his Naked Raygun Cubby Bear experience and noted several of the other venues he’s played with Nirvana or Foo Fighters, including the nearby Metro. He also expressed wonder that the band—which includes guitarists Chris Shiflett and Pat Smear, bassist Nate Mendel, keyboardist Rami Jaffe, and drummer Taylor Hawkins—was headlining such a massive place.

In many respects, his awe is justified. While the Foo Fighters remain a spiritual descendent

of 70s hard rock and 80s AOR bands, they attack their tunes like a well-oiled punk act. The opening “Everlong,” which the band started playing while a gigantic curtain emblazoned with the Foo Fighters logo still covered the stage, simmered

While the Foo Fighters remain a spiritual descendent of 70s hard rock and 80s AOR bands, they attack their tunes like a well-oiled punk act.

like a pot of boiling water. “White Limo” came on as if a metallic flash, and “Monkey Wrench” careened like an intense pinball game. The choppy soul-blues boogie of “The Pretender” and gnarled “Congregation” also had more aggressive energy than they do on record.

It had nearly everything to do with Grohl, despite the fact his broken leg led to him performing while perched on a ridiculous-looking mobile throne. Being forced to stay (mostly) seated felt like a catalyst for him to amp his personality. He banged his head, screeched like a hawk, and constantly chatted, the latter resulting in the show being needlessly stretched out and causing a serious dip in momentum. Nonetheless, it was all charmingly unpretentious.

Similarly, fans took pleasure seeing how much fun the Foo Fighters were having onstage. Before “Times Like These,” Grohl brought out his mom and cousin for birthday greetings and cake,

and talked about the fact he had a “cool mom.” During band introductions, impromptu Van Halen riffing introduced Shiflett. “If anybody has a bar mitzvah and they need a Van Halen cover band, you can just call the Foo Fighters,”

Grohl quipped. Later, an Alice Cooper cover and a snippet of Yes’ “Roundabout” extended the party vibe. Grohl even ceded the spotlight to drummer Taylor Hawkins for a mellow “Cold Day in the Sun” and disco-etched cover of the Rolling Stones’ “Miss You.”

Despite asserting that he didn’t want to get overly sentimental and “be the guy crying on YouTube,” Grohl visibly wiped away tears before the night’s final song, “Best of You.” The group clearly didn’t want the song—or the concert—to end. A protracted, bluesy jam preceded a noisy conclusion. As Grohl sang, he wore his audible hoarseness as a badge of honor—a hard-fought and well-earned casualty of passion first learned just blocks away when he was a teenager. —**Annie Zaleski**

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LIVE MUSIC

Van Halen

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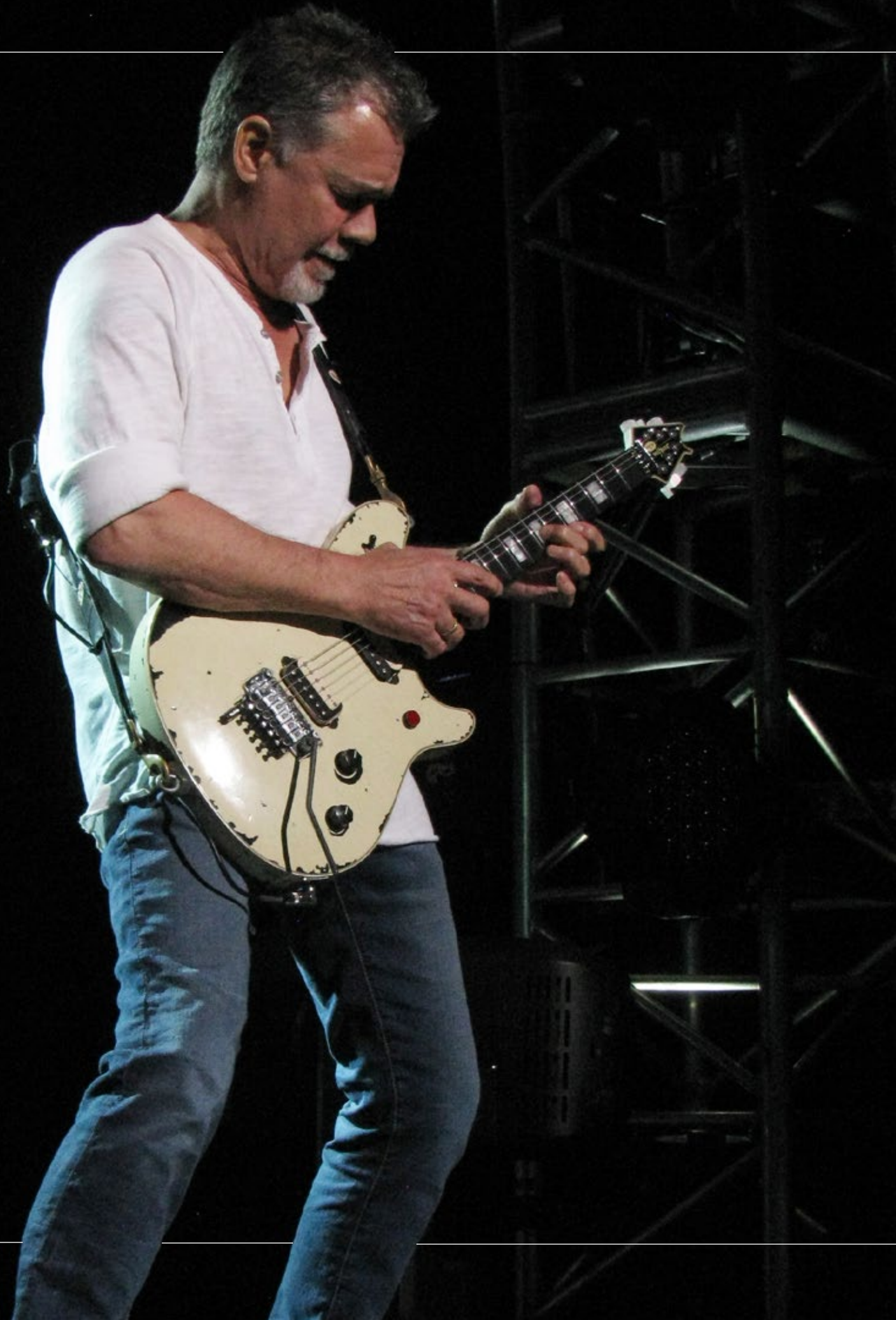
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

August 3, 2015

Text and photos by Annie Zaleski

Before the start of Van Halen's summer tour, guitarist and band namesake Eddie Van Halen gave a controversial interview to *Billboard* during which he insulted everyone from former bandmates Sammy Hagar and Michael Anthony to current singer David Lee Roth. Of the latter, Van Halen said: "How can I put this: Roth's perception of himself is different than who he is in reality. We're not in our 20s anymore. We're in our 60s. Act like you're 60." While this negativity was somewhat surprising—after all, denigrating someone that you have to perform with for the next few months isn't exactly a recipe for tour harmony—in certain ways, it simply represented the latest example of the tension that's always propelled Van Halen forward.





Surprisingly, the band's Cleveland-area appearance, which took place in front of a healthy crowd at a bucolic outdoor amphitheater, showed no signs of such friction. Eddie Van Halen spent the majority of the concert looking like a kid in his first band that was just thrilled to be on stage. He grinned, mugged for smartphone cameras, and unleashed an array of joyful guitar-face grimaces and rock-god poses. During "Ice Cream Man," Roth sat backwards on a chair and air-drummed right near Van Halen's head. The latter kneeled down next to his bandmate as he flailed, adding to the lighthearted scene.

And Roth, while being his usual showman-like self, seemed acutely aware of his age. At one point, he told a fan close the front that he once might have insulted him by saying that he slept with his girlfriend. However, "at this point in our career, I'd have probably slept with your mother."

That the band sounded fantastic felt more gratifying than the lack of obvious vitriol. As expected, Eddie Van Halen played flawlessly, whether coaxing out the lurching blues-rock snarls of "She's the Woman," needling out riffs that cut like shards of glass on "Little Guitars," or dabbling in evocative rock n' roll melodies on "Dance the Night Away." The rhythm section (e.g., Eddie's brother Alex on drums and son Wolfgang on bass) was equally locked in, which enabled the band to improvise—most notably on the intro to "Everybody Wants Some!!," which featured jungle-animal-like percussion and chirping guitar effects.

Wolfgang, instrumental in choosing the tour's setlist, wisely deferred to his mates. He cut a low-key albeit anchoring presence on stage right, contribut-

ing vocal harmonies on "Feel Your Love Tonight" and "Somebody Get Me a Doctor" while tapping out precise bass lines. Alex, too, preferred to stay out of the spotlight, only really taking center stage for a chaotic mid-set drum solo that focused on volume and noise rather than technical accuracy.

Unfortunately, Roth's vocal shortcomings tempered the musical proficiency. Although he started strong—defying expectations and recent, suspect high-profile performances—he couldn't sustain any momentum. Beginning with the tenth song, "I'll Wait," cracks began to appear. The song dragged, and Roth's voice started sounding ragged. The raspy tone (and subsequent off-key warbling) only became worse on the subsequent "Dance the Night Away" and "Beautiful Girls." Although it's impossible to really ruin "Hot for Teacher" or "Unchained," both of which appeared late in the set, his obvious struggles robbed the show of its energy and cast a pall over the night.

Ever the comedian, Roth compensated for vocal mishaps with an undeniably compelling stage presence. He preened through "Drop Dead Legs," and swung the microphone stand like a golf club and raised it above his head like a barbell. His costume changes were both frequent and flamboyant. Roth wore a variety of shiny or loud-patterned jackets that made him resemble (alternately) an 80s game show host, a Vegas lounge act, and a grandfather out for Sunday dinner. (He did away with any sort of shirt after the first few songs, a decision that revealed elaborate, suspender-like tattoos on his chest.) *(continued)*

LIVE MUSIC

The frontman remains the master of self-deprecating one-liners, at one point randomly uttering “50 Shades of Daaaaave,” a light-hearted conflation of both the best-selling book and his sexual prowess. He noted that early in his career, “everybody [crowd-wise] that we didn’t conquer I was going to sleep with.”

Alas, the most affecting moments occurred when Roth turned down the cheeseball persona. During his typical monologue during “Ice Cream Man”—during which he kept making sure drummer Alex was paying attention by cheekily bellowing, “Al, are you listening to me?”—he grabbed an acoustic guitar, sat on a chair, and told a rambling (and most definitely embellished) story about Van Halen’s early touring struggles. While reminiscing about the days of having nothing but a “cheap-shit guitar, a chair, and a harmonica,” he added, “Somewhere along the way, I ended up in one of the best rock bands in history.”

While certainly calibrated for maximum crowd reaction, the statement rang true. And despite Roth’s obvious flaws and imperfections, the concert boasted flashes of greatness—from the delirious, desperate sing-a-longs to “Ain’t Talkin’ ‘Bout Love” and engine-revving guitar acrobatics of “Runnin’ With the Devil” to rarities such as “Light Up the Sky” and “‘Dirty Movies.’” Sure, this Van Halen show didn’t rank with those on the band’s 2008 resurrection tour, but rumors of the band’s demise are greatly exaggerated. ●



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Vintage Test Records!

by Paul DeMara

Like many others who love music I spend a lot of time shopping for vinyl. One thing I'm always on the hunt for is vintage test records.

While somewhat rare they can be invaluable when setting up and testing your turntable and playback system.

While simple in theory, vinyl playback requires many complex things to work together perfectly if you want the best sound. So how do you know if everything is up to snuff? Vintage test records may help you with your quest. Using a test record can demonstrate issues with your turntable and cartridge, exposing the subtle acoustics quirks with your playback system. The better your setup, the more emotional your connection with your vinyl rig will be. There are a plethora of test records, but these are my favorites.





The Shure TIR-110 *Audio Obstacle Course - ERA III LP* is a good place to start. Track 1 is an introduction to what the test record is all about, and track 2 offers level, balance and phasing tests. It's really important to have the correct phase of signal from cartridge to speaker, as incorrect phase will make your music sound thin and lifeless with no bass. Left-to-right balance is critical as well. When you close

your eyes and listen while sitting in the sweet spot you should have a sense of a wide sound stage. If the balance is off, everything will seem shifted to the left or right of center. When things are balanced and in phase, your speakers should seem to disappear. You should be able to get to that point fairly quickly: close your eyes if that helps the visualization process!

The musical bells test featured on track 3 will demonstrate how well your cartridge can track bells with significant harmonic information. The test progresses along through five levels which increase by 6 dB. Only the best of the best cartridges can track properly and pass level five. You might be surprised how well cartridges at various price points handle this test.

Sibilance is that “shhhh” sound you hear when an artists makes a strong “s” sound. It's also one of the most difficult things for a stylus to track. The test plays back difficult test material at five different levels that jump up by 6 dB to determine how your cartridge is tracking. The better the cartridge, tonearm and the interface between them, the better the traceability. When the needle isn't able to track properly you'll hear distortion in the playback. If you can track at level five you have an exceptional cartridge.

Finally, the bass drum test on band 5 can actually make things vibrate in your room, so if you hear distortion or something unusual make sure that it's not something vibrating nearby. The test will stress your system's low frequency capabilities. Again, only the best playback systems will navigate the fifth level successfully, and you'll hear a rattle as mistracking sets in.

While the Shure *Audio Obstacle Course* is my favorite test record, I also enjoy *The Audio System Test Record* from Sound Canada. This album has several tests that I find helpful, including many of those offered on the Shure record. Though out of sequence, I often start with track 9 on side A, taking

advantage of the silent groove and rumble test. This quickly ferrets out how noisy your turntable's main bearing is and how much hum is present in your analog section. A vital component of analog playback is eliminating any noise that isn't part of the music, so turn up the volume on track 9 and start listening closely.

Bouncing back to track 1, the white noise in the right and left channels helps to identify cross talk between channels. While vinyl doesn't offer the 90+ dB of separation that a CD does, it's still best to optimize your setup, which will improve your perception of a soundstage between your speakers.

Track 4 will help you dial in the anti-skating (or bias, for our British friends) force. Ideally the correct amount of anti-skating will ensure equal pressure on both sides of the groove walls as the stylus tracks through. Uneven pressure can create additional record and stylus wear, as well as cause tracking issues. When things are off you may hear a strange cracking sound as the stylus mistracks the groove, literally bouncing off the walls of the groove at its worst. *(continued)*



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Track 7 provides a pure test tone sweep with announcements ranging from 20,000 Hz to 20 Hz tones. If you have a sound pressure meter, you can measure each level to see if all of them are represented at same dB level which is the ideal state. Remember, room acoustics can create nulls so you may find you have to move your signal level meter a few inches in different directions. The final part of the track sweeps down through the various lower frequencies. At higher volume levels and at lower frequencies you may find you have vibrating floor vents or pictures or some other object in your room that starts to resonate. Sometimes it's an easy fix; sometimes it's not. The goal in maximizing the bass energy your system is capable of is to ensure that there are no vibrating objects at any frequency in your listening room.

Test records are a great way to verify that your turntable and system are working as they should, and they're valuable tools to get things back up to snuff if they aren't. While many of these records are available on Ebay in the \$10–\$30 range, they can often be found at used record stores for considerably less. If you can, a pass through a good record cleaning machine before you start the process will be a big help towards achieving great results.

Good hunting. ●

NEW RELEASES

**The Dead Weather***Dodge and Burn*

Third Man Records, LP or CD

C

an rock 'n' roll still feel dangerous? Cops and robbers, murderers, road hounds: The imagery of the Dead Weather's *Dodge and Burn* conjures visions of leather, blood, and smoke. Guitars are on high alert one

moment, ringing like emergency sirens that foretell of a bad moon rising, and then, suddenly, they're locked-on with rage. Riffs reverberate as if they're trying to scar holes in the studio foundation. Rhythms halt and reverse to drive the songs in all sorts of erratic directions. No doubt there's fire in the Dead Weather's first album in five years, but is it dangerous?

Led by Jack White, our modern-day bluesman of multiple personalities, and the scratchy howls of vocalist Alison Mosshart, still known best for the low-fi thrill of her work with the Kills, the Dead Weather is comprised of part-time players that have always attempted to kick up enough mayhem to demand our full attention. Having released two prior studio efforts, in 2009 and 2010, respectively, the Dead Weather has, to mixed results, attempted to catch the bluesy fury of its live show on record. Following more in the tradition of PJ Harvey and Nick Cave than any sort of blues revivalists, the band's songs double as troubled waters littered with Gothic, noir-like visions and vocal patterns that require a map.

Dodge and Burn, recorded over the last two years and preceded by the release of four singles, comes off, in short, as the band's strongest set. It isn't perfect, and one gets the sense the band, rounded out by Raconteurs bassist Jack Lawrence and Queens of the Stone Age guitarist Dean Fertita, thinks it causes more bedlam than it actually does. The joy is listening to the quartet try.

"Let Them Through" emerges as a swampy march in which the beat and guitars snake around each other until everything gets all mixed up. "I'm a bad man," Mosshart scowls, and for a second, you believe her. "Mile Markers" get a little sexy, with jug-like drumming alternating with a swooning chorus. Then it gets darker, and brighter, as guitars ring and lyrics detail "blood on a trip to the Bahamas." Like an old crime novel, *Dodge and Burn* is pulpy, and arrangements shift direction with breakneck pace. If this album was a film, it'd be in black and white, and star Humphrey Bogart as a boozy private eye.

The Dead Weather begins on the run, with Mosshart romanticizing the rush of the blacktop at night on "I Feel Love (Every Million Miles)." Everything is big. The guitars don't rush with Mosshart. Instead, they take giant lumbering steps, and the groove feels like it mirrors a helicopter's chop. *(continued)*

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“Why does my heartbeat feel like a speaker?” Mosshart yowls, her voice cracking as she does, driving home the idea she’s inhabiting the role of a woman possessed. “Buzzkill(er)” plays give and take with Mosshart as she spits in the face of the “good lord.” Guitars become laced with feedback before building into an upper-register panic as they reach the chorus. Such instances catch the ear, and they dot *Dodge and Burn*, where instrumental flair usually trumps individual songs. The Dead Weather specializes in such quick attacks—musical strikes rather than drawn-out melodies.

Missteps occur when the band tries to get a little too fancy, as on “Three Dollar Hat,” which blends space effects and sing-speak vocals. White, taking the reins, sounds as if he’s trying to out-do Eminem.

“Don’t take my life, I’ve got three young kids and a badass wife,” he says in the character of a street villain. Hip-hop, even when hinted, isn’t a good look for the Dead Weather.

Thankfully, the guitar stomp of “Lose the Right” and striking piano-graced rock balladry of “Impossible Winner” cleanses the palate. Likewise “Rough Detective,” in which White and Mosshart circle around each other like stray cats scared of making the first move. The cop-meets-robber shtick is cuter than it is thrilling. “What’s happening?” White yells as Mosshart starts shrieking to the beat. What’s happening is the sound of a group turning the ol’ fashioned idea of rock n’ roll danger into a comic book. Dangerous? No, but the individual panels often grab your attention.

—**Todd Martens**



The Bottle Rockets

South Broadway Athletic Club
Bloodshot, LP or CD



©Photo by Otis Gibbs

A

new release from the Bottle Rockets always gives cause for celebration. In fact, a strong case could be made that, at this point, the scruffy, scrappy Missouri quartet is as much a life philosophy as it is a band. One would be hard pressed to find a guru that could teach us more about surviving with grace, unflagging energy, good humor, and smarts.

"I've been a star and I've been a square and every other shape you can be," lead singer and guitarist Brian Henneman intones on "Shape of a Wheel," the last track on the band's terrific new album, *South Broadway Athletic Club*. "I roll with the punches/I roll with the wind/I'm a wheel no matter what shape I'm in."

The Bottle Rockets have been rolling with rock n' roll punches for the better part of 20 years. The current and longest-running lineup of the group includes original members Henneman and drummer Mark Ortmann, along with guitarist John Horton and bassist Keith Voegelé. What's most remarkable is that after a long career spent buffeted on the rough seas of the music business, the quartet's work shows no signs

of slowing down in terms of consistency or quality.

The Bottle Rockets charge out of the gate with guitars blazing and drums pounding. Long-time fans will rejoice that the 11 tunes here bear the band's raw, gnarly trademark. Newcomers may wonder why they aren't in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Heavy on irresistible melody and electrified crunch, *South Broadway Athletic Club* is packed with memorable tunes.

A discerning mainstream country star could take any of these expertly crafted numbers to the top of the country radio charts and the world would be a better place for it. (I'm talking to you, Blake Shelton.)

Rip-snorting tracks such as "Big Lotsa Love" and "Building Chryslers" (a long-time live favorite finally released in finished form) are filled with jangling, angular guitars and propulsive beats. Henneman qualifies as that rare vocalist in modern rock—a gritty singer that lands in the pantheon between Bruce Springsteen and Lynyrd Skynyrd's Ronnie Van Zant. Whether he's serious or having fun, Henneman never strays from his honest heartland sensibility.

"Time flies/Elvis dies/It's all over but the shoutin' now," he cries in the chorus of the mighty "Something Good," a breakup epic written with Nashville country trio the Henningsens. In the folds of the extraordinary song reside swirls of the Clash, the Bangles, and Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers at their stinging, emotional best. It's that good. And so are the Bottle Rockets.

After more than two decades, it would be understandable for a band to rest on its laurels, lose its mojo, or retire. We live in a lucky age in which the Bottle Rockets aren't just soldiering on. They're a great band that just gets better.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Zak Bratto

There are certain emotions we've grown accustomed to in our rock n' roll, especially when it comes to the sleeves-rolled-up elbow grease that often accompanies the tougher-than-thou Made in Detroit stamp. Assaultive, angry, and maybe a little aggressively showy, there's tradition there, from the Stooges to the MC5 to Alice Cooper to Death to Jack White. Protomartyr, too, can be as loud and abrasive as anyone touched by a little punk rock in the Motor City. But now, over the course of three albums, Protomartyr has managed to temper the hostility with an all-too-often missing ingredient: humility.

**Protomartyr**

The Agent Intellect
Hardly Art, LP or CD

Credit the lyrics and vocal approach of Joe Casey. He often singspeaks, but not in a way that's conversational. Resignation colors his voice, an indication that the modest approach is more powerful than shouting. "They don't see us," he sings in "Clandestine Time," a song that, if handled with more bravado, could have come from the Clash's playbook. On *The Agent Intellect*, however, Casey is a matter-of-fact narrator, a gruff voice in the crowd. The guitars are high-pitched and smooth, as if the clapper of a bell sticks in time at the exact moment it hits brass. The rhythm stutters but remains consistent, like dozens of feet moving on an urban sidewalk in harmony. When Casey finally lets go to repeat the word "us," it sounds

as if he's counting off rather than starting a rallying cry.

Rock n' roll, and punk especially, has always tried to give voice to the common man or woman. That's especially true here. Protomartyr on *The Agent Intellect*, the act's strongest of three increasingly impressive and expansive albums, feels directly in tune with everyday struggles. We're all a bit of a mess, and maybe even a little sinister.

"The Devil in His Youth" finds evil in an ordinary suburban bedroom while "Uncle Mother's" sees Casey ordering listeners to "leave your children in the car." Elsewhere, something strange went down in a small Michigan town in 1987—Casey sings of witnessing money

change hands on "Pontiac 87"—and the human body quivers and quivers on "Why Does It Shake?" The sound is raw and frayed, as if held together by electrical tape. Greg Ahee plays the guitar like an alarmist, and it further highlights the sarcastic anxiety of Casey's lyrics.

And so the social pressures that "kicked in" Casey's head on "Cowards Starve" become underscored by strikes of upper register notes, and the song reacts as if being punctured by needles. Drummer Alex Leonard and bassist Scott Davidson aren't any less predatory, hugging close the madman elegy of "The Hermit" and stitching together the fragile "Ellen."

All along, Casey and his mates come off as a quartet that has seen its share of disappointment and come out hardened realists. Over time, the band has gradually gotten more experimental—see the frightening, knee-jerk shift in direction of "Why Does It Shake?" or the rush of instruments that oscillate between tight spaces and wide-open vistas on "I Forgive You"—and nary a song goes down without a slight tonal shift. Yet for all the dissonant chords on a track such as "Feast of Stephen," it's cynicism with a populist streak. Jobs, riches, religion, rock n' roll, intellect: None of that matters on the driving "Dope Cloud." Besides, a "fall from grace" is exactly what Casey wanted in "Pontiac 87." These songs just so happen to be the most melodic on the record. Fatalism, it turns out, is a rather tuneful equalizer. —**Todd Martens**


Kurt Vile
b'lieve i'm goin down...

Matador, 3LP, 2LP, or CD

“I woke up this morning/Didn’t recognize the man in the mirror,” Kurt Vile warbles during the opening seconds of *b’lieve i’m goin down...* before delivering a self-awakening punchline on the very next line. “Then I laughed and I said/‘Oh silly me, that’s just me,” he mutters.

Themes of identity and withdrawal swirl around the multi-talented singer-songwriter’s sixth album, the follow-up to 2013’s *Wakin on a Pretty Daze*—a set that earned the Philadelphia artist greater attention and placed him on bigger stages.

Reflecting the lazy, hazy atmosphere that has always infused his fare, Vile retreats to an acoustic-based comfort zone that suits his nonchalant attitude and preserves his eccentric bent. Much of Vile’s charm relates to his causal nature and ability to channel similar free-and-easy vibes on songs that touch on deeper thoughts than their surfaces suggest.

Continuing a course begun on 2010’s *Smoke Ring for My Halo*, the 35-year-old wisely confines lo-fi production to his past. Here, the stripped-down settings and relaxed moods belie the complexity of his adroit guitar playing. The deceiving slacker approach parallels that honed to perfection by Pavement’s Stephen Malkmus, whose winding lines and aw-shucks vocals undoubtedly made an imprint on a then-teenage Vile.

Leaving his electric guitar on the shelf, Vile surrounds himself with an interchangeable cast that includes seven instrumentalists and four backing vocalists. The 35-year-old expands the sonic palette to include strings, farfisa, lap steel, mellotron, horns, and more. Instead of swelling compositions to orchestral proportions, the range of options offers him a protective, minimalist-minded cocoon in which he delves into matters that convey a strong desire for escapism and concealment.

In its patience and calm, *b’lieve i’m goin down...* unfolds as an anachronistic comment on a modern-day society ruled with of-the-second social media updates, unrelenting speed, and instant gratification. Amidst beautiful melodies, psychedelic strains, and fingerpicked passages, the record’s darker undercurrents indicate Vile has little interest in participating in such commotion—and suggests, particularly on “Life Like This”—that for the sake of personal happiness and health, we should all take a few steps back from the constant overload of information and bustle. *(continued)*



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Sung-spoken in a low voice, words tumble out of Vile's mouth like the clouded expressions of someone stumbling around in the morning trying to focus through bloodshot eyes and attempting to locate a mug to fill with yesterday's leftover coffee. "Breathe in deep and sigh," Vile reminds anybody who'll listen during "Wheelhouse," on which notes climb an invisible spiral staircase and keep repeating the task. The contemplative "That's Life, tho (almost hate to say)" finds the singer musing about people faking their way through everything and admitting he turns to pills to "just take a chillax man, forget about it."

Vibraphones and a funky beat stamp "Lost my Head there" with jazz textures, and as the tune ambles along, Vile surveys a mass of confusion. He pinpoints a pressure-release valve in his mind, disclosing, "I don't wanna sit around, walk around/I'd much rather levitate." The need to transcend the din of reality dominates. During the huff-and-puff shuffle "Dust Bunnies," couched with humorous references, Vile inquires: "How can you talk over all the racket?/What's there to feel but totally whacked?"

The questions double as the album's central motifs—concepts around which nearly all the songs revolve. Begging to be absorbed via solitary listening, *b'lieve i'm goin down...* imparts that the simple answers to Vile's concerns arrive by dialing down the white noise outside our front doors and letting the imaginations of our childhoods again run wild. —**Bob Gendron**



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Metric
Pagans in Vegas
 MMI, LP or CD



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M

etric frontwoman Emily Haines has a knack for making the existential come off as conversational.

"Why do I have to be such trouble to please?," she sings during "For Kicks." On "Celebrate," she asks, "Who wants to celebrate, and who's fine to just sit and wait?" Sure, that it sounds a bit like a trick question. But as Haines' icy non-chalance makes clear, she's not exactly willing to tolerate laziness. Her questions are of the rhetorical kind and on *Pagans in Vegas*, she takes a sleeves-up, no-bull point of view. The tone? If you want it done right, you better do it yourself.

Autonomy isn't the only topic Haines and her mates grapple with on the band's sixth proper album. There are greater quandaries Metric has long been trying to solve, and the group, over the course of its previous albums, outlined a thesis for how rock n' rollers should behave in this EDM-saturated age. *Pagans in Vegas*, if not the band's most electric work, is its most fundamentally consistent, finding a comfortable balance between the boldly assertive Haines and the desire to find a groove. Spoiler alert: To succeed, never let the latter supersede the former.

This is just one of two albums the quartet intends to release in the near future, and the effort remains centered on James Shaw's experimentation with an analog synthesizer. These are sounds he

smartly and largely keeps low to the ground. Check the buoyant "Cascades," in which Metric steps to a beat that feels generated by a floor-size piano mat. Or the upper-register scratches that put a red alert around Haines' voice on "The Shade." The other album, due in 2016, will allegedly be more acoustic-based and revolve around songs Haines recorded in Nicaragua and Spain. For now, however, *Pagans in Vegas* is the sound of a band still comfortably creating its own roadmap.

It's been a fun ride getting here. In 2009, *Fantasies* muscled its way to stadium aggressiveness. The album's digital touches are designed to match and exceed guitar power. On it, Metric attempted to build its own warehouse rock n' rave, complete with all the con-

struction clanks and digital dings. Three years ago, *Synthetica* took a smoother, traditional approach. Here, the ensemble experiments with studio electronics as atmospheres—the late-era U2 school of going techno. While *Pagans in Vegas* won't replace *Fantasies* as Metric's go-to album for car rides—or gigantic encores—it primarily gets the balance right. On a majority of the set, guitars are toned down, if not altogether absent, and Haines provides all the kinetic power.

"Lies Lies Lies" starts everything off on an antagonistic foot. It's one of the few tracks where guitars remain front and center and the riff is repetitive and slightly sinister. The approach serves to heighten the song's fighting nature. Rhythms pop like

pinball wires gone awry. A bass drum thumps a slow, incessant march that's briefly accentuated by handclaps and Haines' shots of "Hey! Hey! Hey!" It's a cheerleading routine dumped on its head, but this is no spectator sport, so best get out of the way.

Seven more thrilling songs follow. Vocals become manipulated, synths get twisted, and Metric works mid-tempo grooves into something rather demented and assertive. "I do expect fortunes to fold," Haines sings on the chorus of "Fortunes." Then she purrs that ours is a "sinister world." Metric has never sounded this coldly ferocious and coolly seductive.

The songs also play games of give and take. For instance, a spindly harpsichord-like sound may chirp and spin around the vocalist rather than blast the song off into club land. The music occasionally gets a little dizzy—take the hula-hooping neon strands of "Too Bad, So Sad"—and only when Metric loses sight of its center does the album suffer a misstep. The latter comes near the end, when Haines turns it over to Shaw for a song. *Pagans in Vegas* closes with more ambience than decisiveness.

But such moments feel more like a coda than a proper album end. That arrives earlier, be it the New Order workout of "For Kicks," digital craters of "Celebrate," simmering "Blind Valentine" or want-it-all grandeur of "The Shade." The problem isn't that the album sputters to a close. It's simply that Haines casts a big shadow.

—**Todd Martens**



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MUSIC



Le Butcherettes

A Raw Youth
Ipecac, LP or CD

P

roduction value can be a dangerous weapon for a band. As has been demonstrated by everyone from Metallica to Green Day to Modest Mouse, larger budgets, bigger sounds, and sleeker engineering do not necessarily a better record make. The same is doubly true in the world of punk rock, whose sound and ethos are by definition opposed to the sonic airbrushing that so often occurs with the production process. *A Raw Youth*, the third LP from garage-punk outfit Le Butcherettes, might be the exception to the rule. It's a rare instance when souped-up production does exactly what it should: Help a group be a better version of itself.

That's not to belittle the band's previous work. Project mastermind Teri "Gender Bender" Suarez arrived on 2011's debut *Sin Sin Sin* as a rock star fully formed, ablaze with the kind of swagger and attention to conceptual detail normally reserved for artists several albums into their careers. The Guadalajara-born musician, who relocated to Los Angeles before settling in her current home base of El Paso, would regularly perform in bloody aprons, accompanied by props ranging from feather dusters to flour to raw meat, all while helming guitar, keyboard, and vocal duties. At times, the intensity and range of talent could feel like more than her then-21 years knew how to process.

After a three-year gap during which time Suarez worked with longtime collaborator Omar Rodriguez-Lopez on the side projects Bosnian Rainbows and experimental supergroup Kimono Kult, Le Butcherettes returned with a new backing lineup and new label, Rodriguez-Lopez's Nadie Sound, Inc. Last year's follow-up, *Cry Is for the Flies*, shows the collaborative experience rubbed off. *(continued)*

MUSIC



©Photo by Monica Lozano

The record exists as a juggernaut of feedback and vitriol. But it was still the sound of an artist finding herself—its anger felt reactionary, and rightly so. The riffs and diatribes of *A Raw Youth*, by contrast, feel proactive in their conviction and organic in sound.

Lead single “Shave The Pride” hits the sweet spot between lean and unhinged, a chugging work of confrontation that dares a lover, and society, to strip away pretensions and biases. And, in a sense, that’s what the stylings of *A Raw Youth* do for the band, not that it had much of that to shed. The record’s clean sound drops the dead weight of the at-times overwrought

theatricality—vamping circus organs, vocal acrobatics—that could slow the momentum of Suarez’s past work.

“Stab My Back” bounces and writhes to the marching orders of drummer Chris Common and bassist Jamie Aaron Aux, who create an uncluttered soundscape for Suarez to stretch her vocals. The track teases with seductive, danceable verses before exploding into headbanger territory that makes no bones about what’ll happen to anyone who dares take her up on the title’s imperative. Other cuts, like “Witchless C Spot” and “My Half,” featuring John Frusciante, spotlight the higher production values.

They’re slow burners that explore the band’s biggest, most experimental sounds yet. Judicious use of synths, tribal drums, and stadium-ready fullness gird Suarez’s conviction rather than creating a bloated version of her old sound. It’s a fine line, and the team behind *A Raw Youth* walks it well.

After numerous lineup, label, and location changes throughout Le Butcherettes’ eight-year history, their third record feels like the band has come into its own. Suarez hones her passion and intellect into a weapon of guile and precision, and *A Raw Youth* is the sound of a woman who knows how to wield her power. —**Andrea Domanick**

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The Weeknd

Beauty Behind the Madness
Republic Records, CD

For those familiar with Abel Tesfaye's emotionally damaged R&B, which he performs under the name the Weeknd, he begins *Beauty Behind the Madness* on familiar footing. "This boy wasn't meant for lovin,'" he warns on "Real Life," a song that starts with an abrasive heap of guitars before being overtaken by spacious, tension-upping strings. His cautionary words are worth heeding: Over the course of the next 14 songs and hour-plus album, Tesfaye outlines a life of meaningless sex and heartache-inducing addictions.

We've been here before on 2013's *Kiss Land* and on *Trilogy*, the latter a repackaging of three EPs originally released independently in 2011. Yet one of the baddest, weirdest, and most disturbing voices in R&B doesn't always come off so bad, weird, and disturbing on *Beauty Behind the Madness*. Tesfaye's songs once sounded as if they were born out of the world's most decadent nightclub—all deep shadows, dark corners and delivered with a narcissistic stream of conscious. On this, his second proper album for a major label, Tesfaye isn't hiding behind the gloom anymore. He's out front, and ready to throw a party.

While a producer such as Kanye West suits Tesfaye's bleak outlook—no doubt the Weeknd owes quite a bit of debt to West's downtrodden *808s and Heartbreak*—the Canadian artist also works here with go-to hitmakers such as Max Martin, Stephan Moccio, and Cali the Producer. These studio technicians count Miley Cyrus and Carly Rae Jepsen among their collaborators, and it's safe to say that those works burn a little brighter than those of Tesfaye.

The good news: Tesfaye, by and large, brings his lunacy to the pop world rather than letting the latter consume him.

An early cause for concern, "Earned It," Tesfaye's hit from the film *50 Shades of Gray*, gets reprised here with all of its upbeat platitudes still in place. Then his chart-topping summer hit "Can't Feel My Face" arrived and implied Tesfaye was going for broke. Assisted by Swedish super-producer Martin, the song is all glistening, disco-infused finger snaps and candy-coated synthesizers. Long before it hit No.1, it was clear the tune had the pole position in its sights.

But if the music is bubblier than anything Tesfaye did in the past, the glistening production proves a welcome contradiction to Tesfaye lyrics, which on "Can't Feel My Face" equate a drug addiction with a steamy love affair. For once, you could go down the rabbit hole with him without feeling the need for a palette cleanser.



It makes for a far more assertive approach than Weeknd is accustomed to taking, and the haze becomes fully lifted on "Losers," where Tesfaye declares, "we're coming for the throne." Musically, a melancholic piano gives way to a horn section trying to get its jazz groove on, telegraphing, once and for all, that *Beauty Behind the Madness* isn't going to wallow in murkiness and is instead chasing sonic adventurousness. "In the Night" sees Tesfaye channeling *Thriller*-era Michael Jackson, and doing so with a gripping document of sexual assault. "Dark Times" pairs Tesfaye with British puppy-dog crooner Ed Sheeran as the two document a night spent brawling at the bar as a relaxed, noir-ish vibe sets up shop in the background. A spiked guitar

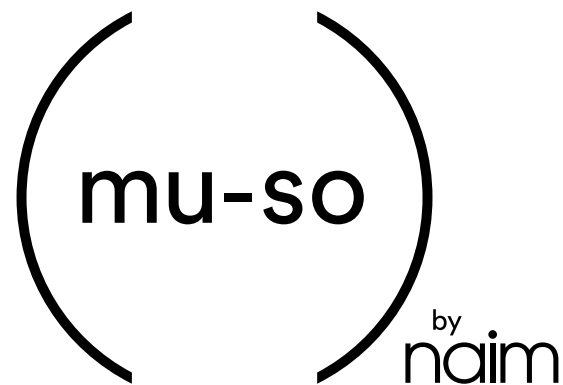
creeps in and out while the pair recounts the ways in which they're bad news.

The big-name guests don't stop with Sheeran. Tesfaye taps Lana Del Rey for "Prisoner." But with the record's lengthy run time, there are places to trim, and this is one. The song gives in to clichés, namely, the tired pairing of Hollywood's glitz and glam with down-and-out imagery. Exhausting, too, is "Tell Your Friends," which finds Tesfaye capitulating to the same rags-to-riches boasting that plagues modern hip-hop.

Of course, two or three clunkers on an album with 14 tracks ain't bad. While Tesfaye too often gives into the temptation to use "bitch" when referring to women,

he more times than not finds suave ways to bring his romantic mess into the pop sphere. "Acquainted" is so retro-cool that the beat feels lifted from a Genesis song. Meanwhile, "As You Are" sees Tesfaye dropping the tough-guy attitude and finding vulnerability in flaws. "Shameless," the standout acoustic ballad, functions as twisted centerpiece. "I don't want to hurt you but you live for the pain," Tesfaye croons, as if blame is something in flux.

The song works because it's so pretty one doesn't realize how warped it all is until it's too late. If the focused dim of Tesfaye's past works is missed, give him credit for shrouding the pop charts in the occasional shadow. —**Todd Martens**



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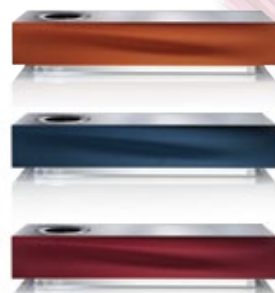
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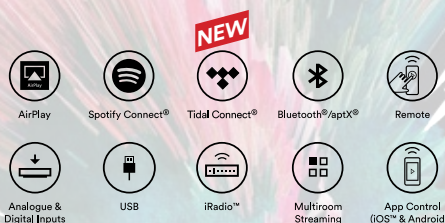
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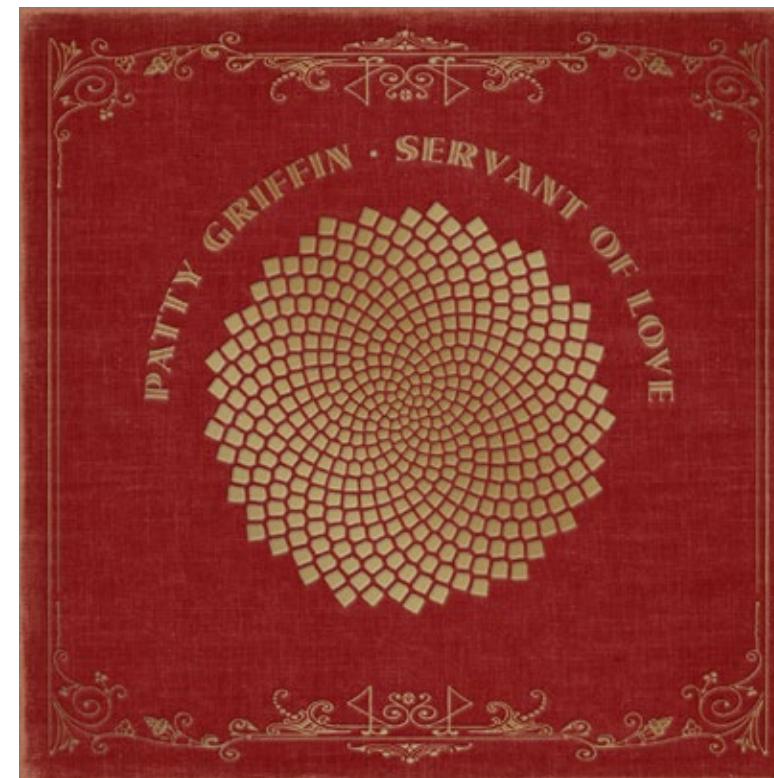
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MUSIC



Patty Griffin
Servant of Love
Thirty Tigers, 2LP or CD

Patty Griffin is a striking performer but not without her flaws. She's a unique lyricist that can also be a trying one, a songsmith that offers thrilling turns of phrase and exasperating abstraction in equal measure. Her latest album contains all the qualities that make Griffin such a fine—and occasionally frustrating—artist.

Servant of Love bows as the veteran singer-songwriter's first release since her broken romance with Led Zeppelin icon Robert Plant. Given Griffin has always been an impressionistic songwriter, it's impossible to know how much—if any—of the material stems from the highly publicized breakup. Still, the images swirling through many of these songs suggest characters in somber moods, buffeted by life, and yet, uniformly taking the high road.

Smartly mixing windswept ballads, ethereal soundscapes, and seductively wiry jams, the music is stellar. Griffin's distinctive voice features plenty of punch, of the alternately breathy and bluesy variety. Her lyrics often sound like stream-of-consciousness writing. *(continued)*

MUSIC

The approach pays off on “There Isn’t One Way,” a rock-tinged number that reaches gospel fervor. Griffin snarls out advice and testifies to the fleeting nature of life and importance of living in the now: “Be thankful for the sun/Be thankful for the blues/For the gold in your ears/For the holes in your shoes/You will never ever, never ever come this way again/Be in awe my friend because it’s amazing.” In Griffin’s hands, this is heady stuff.

Not everything works as well. The stately “You Never Asked Me” initially unfolds as a rueful reflection on a relationship gone south. While Griffin’s quavering voice packs emotional gravitas and it’s hard not to be floored by its immediacy, she’s soon referencing ambulance drivers and polar ice caps. By the conclusion, the once-delicate number suddenly feels top-heavy and overcooked.

For those that savor straightforward tales, Griffin’s songwriting style doesn’t always make for a satisfying listen. The ticking-clock beat of “Everything’s Changed” creates a foreboding atmosphere, but the terse lyrics remain as inscrutable as a fractured dream. Similarly, “Snake Charmer” is irresistible—restrained, swampy, and punkish. But the words sound more like clever verbiage than actual insight.

Griffin’s most effecting tunes step back from dense, overly mannered poetry and instead render a simpler tableau. “When I dream of you, we’re sitting near the window/Laughing, bathing in the winter sun,” she sings on the bittersweet folk number “Made of the Sun.” “If I had to choose one moment for forever/My friend, I tell you, that would be the one.”

This is Griffin at her best: Allowing a song some breathing room rather than smothering it in showy frills.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

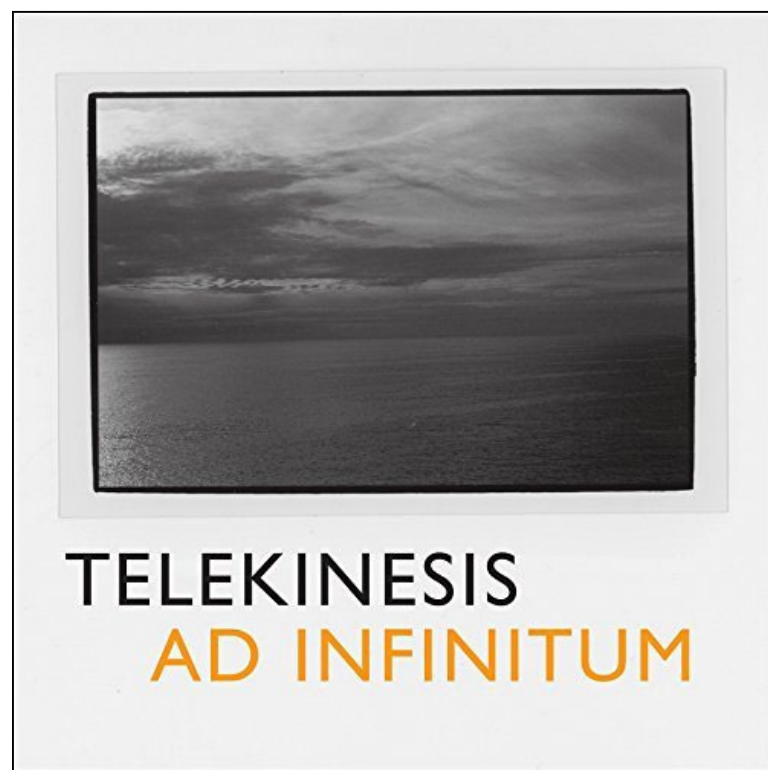


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Telekinesis
Ad Infinitum

Merge Records, LP or CD

The ten songs on *Ad Infinitum* are missing something: End credits. Which is to say that essentially every moment on Telekinesis' fourth album feels like the punctuation mark to an 80s-era movie. The record teems with tracks that could be the uplifting finale to a family-friendly romp or bittersweet postscript to a teenage romance. It's pop with a heart, and it's built with synthesizers with a soul. You may not always know what the lyrics mean, but it sure would feel great to be singing such lines as "you can't come home to a courtesy phone, oh no!" while the end credits roll.

Alas, there's no movie, just a new album from Telekinesis architect Michael Lerner. The bespectacled Seattle-based artist has always been exuberant, and he's no less so here, even though he sounds as if he's collaborating with robots. It should be noted that the album never feels like a nostalgic trip. While Lerner expresses constant interest in the exquisite synthpop of Scotland's Blue Nile and shares that act's appreciation for bringing humanity to digital sounds, a sense of discovery permeates *Ad Infinitum*. It still sounds like a basement album, and one on which Lerner continues to be just as surprised as the listener at what computers can do.

The high spiritedness surrounding Telekinesis partly owes to Lerner's boyish voice. A Peter Pan-like quality infuses the songs, even when they slow down for a languid approach. Schooled in the hook-first world of power-pop, Lerner is the sort one could picture air-guitaring to playbacks of his own songs, or, here, air-twisting knobs and air-throwing levers. A mournful piano appears on "Farmer's Road," and Lerner even sings of snow falling on empty roads and of mornings spent with a coffee and newspaper. It all conjures images of desolation, but the sensation proves fleeting. Soon, synthesizers with toy-like electro-fuzziness and shuffling handclaps carry the song into more uplifting terrain. If it wasn't for the obsession with winter, by tune's end, you could mistake it for a summer song.

Such an approach could turn grating, if anything was ever all that fast or all that slow. Instead, when it



©Photo by Chris Beck

comes to pacing, Lerner chases the often-elusive sweet spot of the middle ground. Where jangly guitars once dotted older albums, bright synthetics now emerge. Picture an old circular Simon Says game. Imagine its red, blue, yellow, and green light-up colors bobbing to a pulsating bass and a peeping piano. Add spacious albeit firm rhythms. That's what "Sylvia" feels like. It's vivid, a little video-game-like, but still romantic. "I can see the future from your bed," Lerner sings, just as a racing piano cuts through the effects and pushes the song forward.

"Edgewood" comes across as a rock n' roller trapped in a vintage coin-op machine, while "Sleep In" sounds fashioned out of a zoo of digital creatures leisurely walking and squawking to an air-pumping beat. Lerner is in on the silliness; at one point, he even pipes in what could be the sound of kids in a playground. During another, there's a breakdown driven by what sounds like an old Speak & Spell.

Technology doubles as Morse code. "In a Future World" almost approaches its electronic foundation in a conversational manner, as the beeps and boops mimic the phrasing of speech. As a digital groove zigzags around a triumphant piano, Lerner offers up the observation that "in the future world, there's nothing to say." Probably not true, but at least the influence of the past makes for a good look on him.

—**Todd Martens**



©Photo by Daran Herrman

It's no accident that Jason Boland and the Stragglers have a name that cheekily echoes the iconic Merle Haggard and the Strangers. The group takes inspiration from Hag as well as the other leading pioneer of the Bakersfield sound, Buck Owens. These influences and more can be heard on *Squelch*, the band's eighth studio album.

In true country road-warrior fashion, Boland and crew are nearly 20 veterans of the musical trenches. The group formed in Stillwater, Oklahoma and has become a hard-working indie success story, selling more than a half-million records and touring far and wide. Boland and company's new release is filled with punching drums, stinging electric guitar, crying pedal steel, and sweet fiddle.



Jason Boland and the Stragglers

Squelch

Proud Souls/Thirty Tigers, CD

Although the frontman possesses a sure grasp of country's past, he also recalls a more recent and far less-obvious figure—George Strait. With his warm croon and western image, Boland comes across with a funkier version of the superstar's understated cowboy cool.

Boland also has a knack for recording songs filled with unexpected shadows. In the brisk two-stepper "The First to Know," he parses dark dysfunction. The sentiments are raw: "If my voice sounds scared and frozen, it's because I'm afraid and cold." In his best songs, storm clouds threaten at the edges of every sunny sky. A couple cruising down the highway in the percolating and

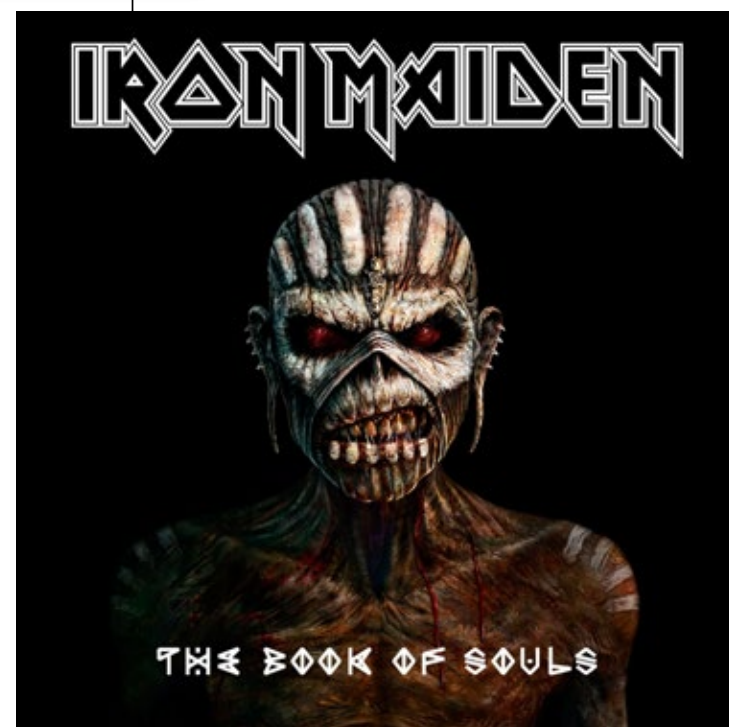
pretty "Heartland Bypass" sets up the dichotomy. "Go see it all if we can/Time to take flight /Make a new plan," the narrator happily sings. But an aside at the song's end suggests the man fears they may be traveling on borrowed time: "One day may be a reckoning."

On "Do You Love Me Any Less," Boland captures an insecure moment in a couple's life. A woman asks her traveling man not to forget her when he's out on the road. He soothes her concerns. But soon enough, her words throw doubt in his mind and he begins his own worried line of questioning: "Do you love me any less when I'm gone?/Do you love me any

more when I'm at home?"

Boland is less successful when he devotes a number of tunes to scalding political and social commentary. Unfortunately, he's no Phil Ochs. Songs like "I Guess It's Alright" and "Fuck, Fight, and Rodeo" are clumsily written and often confusing in their messages. As such, *Squelch* serves as a well-played album, but the disjointed subject matter makes for a lopsided listening experience. Boland proves far more effective when he backburners awkwardly expressed politics and puts his focus on matters of the heart.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**


Iron Maiden

The Book of Souls
BMG, 3LP or 2CD



©Photo by John McMurtrie

A

rriving more than 35 years after its debut, Iron Maiden's first-ever double album brings to mind a similar path followed to disastrous effect in 2008 by the group's metal peers and fellow countrymen, Judas Priest. Testing the loyalty and patience of even the most diehard denim-jacket-clad headbangers, Priest's nearly unlistenable *Nostradamus* lingers as an ill-advised blot on a proud catalog. The same fate doesn't befall Maiden, whose experience with grandiosity stretches back to Reagan's first term in office. Largely avoiding the overthinking that often mars ambitious projects, *The Book of Souls* dismisses any concerns of excess or overreaching.

While the 92-minute epic contains one momentum-stalling tune (the derivative "Shadows of the Valley"), the enterprising opus extends the sextet's upward second-act trajectory that began when vocalist Bruce Dickinson rejoined the ensemble in 2000. The ongoing run, which now eclipses the length of his original tenure with the band, nearly ended after the singer was diagnosed with a cancerous tumor on his tongue late last year. Dickinson's successful treatment postponed the release of a record that bows as Maiden's 16th studio effort—and, more significantly, spurred the band's approach to the material.

Rather than devoting weeks to rehearsing almost-finished work, members brought rough outlines into the studio, where ideas were immediately shaped into songs recorded on the spot. A collaborative effort on which all six musicians share at least one writing credit, *The Book of Souls* exhibits a spontaneity that adds to the album's dynamics and immediacy. Such zeal hits like a series of concussive lightning strikes on "Speed of Light," a nod to Maiden's patented gallop of old. *(continued)*

MUSIC



©Photo by John McMurtrie

The get-in, get-out attack comes on akin to a back-alley stabbing. “The Red and the Black” also updates tradition, and even as it bears more than a passing resemblance to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” soccer-stadium-size chants and the slash-and-chug inertia transcend the nostalgia.

Indeed, Maiden sounds vital for its age—particularly for a band that enjoys indisputable popularity across the world (chronicled in the globe-trotting documentary *Iron Maiden: Flight 666*) and really has nothing left to prove. Apparently, the group feels differently. In an active field that includes Priest, Slayer, Megadeth, Metallica, and even Black Sabbath, Maiden stands apart from its brethren. A diverse array of material and techniques—

the complex theatricality of the 10-minute-plus title track; the aggressive, thundering romp through “Death or Glory”; the melodic mazes traversed amidst barbed-wire riffs on the poignant “Tears of a Clown,” written about Robin Williams—resonates with a passion and urgency often lacking in newer music by long-in-the-tooth artists. For Maiden, repeating the past can wait another day.

Defying the ticking of the clock that erodes most singers’ ranges, Dickinson’s voice remains a marvel of power and expressiveness. On the opening “If Eternity Should Fail,” the indefatigable instrument serves as a foghorn of a ship sailing across turbulent seas. You can almost picture the frontman perched on the bow, fearlessly

leading the way as the band’s heavy chug pushes everything forward through a dark fog. Yet Dickinson’s spotlight moment comes on the closing “Empire of the Clouds.”

Based on the 1930 crash of the gigantic R101 airship, a subject close to Dickinson’s heart (he is a licensed commercial airline pilot), the narrative saga ripples with piano, nuanced orchestrations, webs of intertwined guitars, and invested storytelling. Seeming much shorter than its 18-minute length, the soaring composition finds Maiden moving the needle on what’s possible in the area lurking between extravagance and rawness—a sweet spot achieved throughout *The Book of Souls*. Up the irons. —**Bob Gendron**



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Windhand

Grief's Internal Flower
Relapse, 2LP or CD

Fire. That's the sound that opens Windhand's third proper full-length, *Grief's Internal Flower*. Fire. It's the sound of leaves crackling. Maybe it's a campfire, but it's definitely fire. There's also a cricket. Nature figures heavily on *Grief's Internal Flower*, a mesmerizing album that even when quiet, is usually loud—so loud that if one were to place a speaker in a field, it would be easy to picture leaves of grass bowing over, cartoon-like, at the heavy make-believe breeze caused by guitar riffs. So, fire. That's how it starts.

Grief's Internal Flower then spends nine songs and 70-plus minutes trying to distort any sense of place. No, said the band's representatives, when lyrics were requested. A shame, as a map would be helpful. Vocalist Dorthia Cottrell cuts a vaporous, virtuous figure, her voice an angelic contrast to the churn. The singer's words hover over dual guitars that ebb with the might of an ocean and a bass that trembles like it's caught in a never-ending thunderstorm. Rhythms pummel as if the gods are angry. And yet it all starts with fire.

Never mind that fire and metal have long enjoyed a tight relationship, be it a Dio lyric, pyrotechnics, or a "Beavis and Butthead" chant. Fire here denotes a constant—a flame that smolders during songs that sometimes last just shy of 15 minutes. That's short for Windhand, a Richmond, Va.-based act that takes a page from the Electric Wizard school of rock n' roll patience. On *Grief's Internal Flower*, the band tries something new. Windhand is after the consistency—the hum—of a contained flame, yet the group also wants to unravel the delicate intricacies of a slow burn all in songs that mostly fall under 10 minutes in length. Stare into the crackle, get hypnotized, and move on. That's the mantra, and these are trippy, doomy tunes that make one feel like a tourist to witchcraft.

With songs titles such as "Crypt Key," "Forest Clouds," and "Kingfisher," metal mysticism pervades *Grief's Internal Flower*. Although the overriding tone, one of loud droning enchantments, remains similar throughout, each song creates its own setting. They're aural dioramas, and sometimes unsettling. When Cottrell sings "I tuck you in" on "Forest Clouds," there's a sense that whatever beast to which she just said "goodnight" isn't going to be waking up.



©Photo by Tony Lynch

Her voice spins high above a two-pronged guitar attack as the two instruments gradually drift apart. When the instruments find each other again, it's thrilling, as Cottrell's operatic hollering now counts the brute force of Asechiah Bogdan and Garrett Morris behind her.

"Tammgrisenir" begins with a growl, and just as you settle in for a rager, another guitar starts tick-tocking akin to a clock. The song eventually slows to a hymn-like pace, with cymbal crashes and deep thumps digging it out of its self-imposed hole. The extended intro of "Hesperus" craters a maze into the earth's landscape as Cottrell references the album's title,

declares herself the rain, and starts approaching the vocals as if she's in a completely different band. Suddenly, she's calmly speak-singing as the drums stay unpredictable and the guitars roar in snake-like patterns. Consider the track 14-plus minutes of slow-motion pruning. Drums drip; guitars mimic head-pounding violins. Welcome to Windhand's orchestra of the damned.

And yet the magic the band works with feels more ancient than fantastical. Maybe it's all the references to the natural world or the knowledge that Cottrell last year released a folk record. Either way, Windhand is old-world metal.

Take "Sparrow," a folk strummer on which Cottrell sings of a "love running out of breath," of having eyes like wolves, and of dying like sparrows.

The band gets quiet again on "Aition." Whenever Cottrell brands an acoustic instrument it feels important. Her vocals, once obscured, suddenly come into view, but she doesn't offer complete closure. "Make sure your sleep is light," she advises at album's end, as a blustery breeze overtakes the guitar and harmonies.

Grief's Internal Flower starts with fire. It ends with the wind. In between are nine songs that create a helluva storm. —**Todd Martens**



©Photo by Andrew Stuart

The past five years have not been kind to Slayer. For nearly three decades, the metal kingpins ruled uncontested on a throne staked to precision, speed, virtuosity, urgency, and intelligence. Beginning in the mid-80s, Slayer also set infallible standards for maintaining principles as uncompromising as its visceral music. The quartet steadfastly resisted any move that could be construed as selling out, going against its identity, or damaging its craft. Rather than cheaply provoking or promoting attention-seeking extremism—approaches taken by countless followers—its songs commented, protested, and challenged.

Slayer

Repentless
Nuclear Blast,
LP, CD/DVD, or CD



Slayer's strict dedication to its style, purpose, and fans—in tandem with its untouchable live performances—gained it a following as loyal as any in rock. Save for a brief slog in the mid- and late 90s, the group upheld levels of consistency that seemed all but foreign to its peers, many of which had already broken up or ceased to be relevant. Released on the day the Twin Towers fell, Slayer's *God Hates Us All* emerged as a visionary late-career statement, a soundtrack for the times that found the quartet making its

most vital music in years and returning to peak form. Even 2009's underrated *World Painted Blood* hinted the ensemble might defy the inevitable slow-down that impacts heavy bands. But then the bottom began falling out.

Never an artist to capitulate, Slayer soon started selling commercial merchandise that gave into the tacky clichés it had always avoided. Slayer-branded condoms, jewelry, handbags, socks, backpacks, and infant clothing suggested the group decided to cash in on its brazen

image. Then, in February 2011, founding guitarist Jeff Hanneman contracted a flesh-eating disease that forced him to take a leave of absence. Slayer elected to soldier on and tapped Exodus' Gary Holt to temporarily fill his spot.

With Hanneman's status still in limbo, the group abruptly fired drummer extraordinaire Dave Lombardo—his third exit from the band—over a controversial contract dispute in February 2013. Three months later, Hanneman passed away from liver failure related to alcohol-induced cirrhosis. (continued)

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MUSIC

Slayer's denouement appeared imminent. But vocalist/bassist Tom Araya and guitarist Kerry King chose to continue as Slayer, with Holt and drummer Paul Bostaph—returning for a second stint—in the fold.

At the least, *Repentless*—Slayer's first record without any involvement from producer Rick Rubin since 1985's *Hell Awaits*—represents a pyrrhic triumph. Even if the assaulting title track didn't indirectly refer to Hanneman's death, the much-delayed effort serves as Slayer's tribute to its fallen brother. At its best, it manages to sound like later-era Slayer. Exploding with plaster-cracking ferocity, the 12-track outing contains a few songs that wouldn't be out of place in the group's concert sets—most notably, the cautionary "Chasing Death," the rabid "Repentless," and album standout "Piano Wire,"

revealingly, the only Hanneman-penned tune here.

Yet for all the teeth-gnashing aggression, blistering physicality, and all-out thrash mentality, *Repentless* exposes just how much Slayer misses Hanneman. With the person responsible for most of the band's signature works gone, the writing torch has passed to King. Lacking his deceased mate's flair for nuance, melody, riff architecture, and shrewd lyrics, King primarily operates at one speed and prefers hardcore contours. His limitations show on the rumbling "Cast the First Stone" and one-time B-side "Atrocity Vendor." They, as well the barnstorming "Take Control" and lumbering "Pride in Prejudice," repurpose prior ideas. Ditto "When the Stillness Comes," an attempt at changing up tempos that copies from *Seasons in the Abyss* and fails to go anywhere.

We've heard most of this before, and heard it done better. And with Holt playing on just four songs, King remains bereft of a solo-trading sidekick to push him to higher extremes. No matter how hard Slayer tries, it cannot shed the long, dark shadow cast by Hanneman's absence.

That's not to say *Repentless* is a disaster or lacks passion. On the surface, anyway, intensity and anger are present, but the arrangements frequently feel recycled and yearn for distinctiveness—Hanneman's stock in trade. The relative dearth of raw edginess, imaginative structures, and sense of swing indicate the window on Slayer's incredible run as a dominant creative force has finally been shut. Slayer, it turns out, is mortal after all.

—**Bob Gendron**



©Photo by Andrew Stuart

An Amazing Newcomer: Kind Of ...

The Fern & Roby Integrated Amplifiers

By Jeff Dorgay

The name Fern & Roby doesn't really come to mind when discussing audio, but to be fair, this Virginia company's priority is furniture design and manufacturing – very cool furniture to be specific. However Mike Bettinger, the design partner behind the circuitry of this jewel is well known to many as the man who took over servicing GAS (Great American Sound) amplifiers after the original company went out of business back in 1981.

Fern & Roby's tasteful, cast iron and bronze chassis complements Bettinger's circuit better than chocolate and peanut butter. At \$2,350, complete with a high quality moving magnet phono stage built in, this amplifier is destined to become not only a classic, but has high potential for being an heirloom. Making great designs last forever is part of Bettinger's DNA, so it's safe to say that this little amplifier will be cranking out music long after most of today's audio journalists (myself included) have turned to dust.



FEATURE



The clear, safety glass top provides a sense of functional and, on one level, a moral sense of transparency – it's nice to see the quality components and attention to detail that goes into this amplifier. Don't let the 30-watt per channel power output fool you; the F&R has no problem driving the pair of Acoustat 1+1s in my living room to high volume without strain. A major torture test for any amplifier – the match between the two here is unbelievable – as the F&R controls the big ESL panels simultaneously with depth and authority.

Way beyond expectation

Even blasting Guns N' Roses' *Appetite for Destruction*, this diminutive amplifier does not cease to amaze everyone that comes in contact with it. Yet, slowing down the pace somewhat to spin some vinyl proves an even bigger surprise. My modest home table, consisting of a Technics SL-1200 turntable modified to accept a Rega RB-600 tonearm and Exact mk2 MM cartridge, gives a great showing through the F&R. You'd easily pay \$600 - \$800 for this level of performance in an external phonostage. *(continued)*

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Slowing the pace down for Beach House's *Depression Cherry* reveals this amplifier's ability to capture the most delicate aspects of a performance. Sounding a lot like Julee Cruise and leading to a full listening session of *My Secret Life*. Enjoying Cruise's slinky voice wrap itself around the ProAc Tablette Anniversary speakers now in for review, it becomes clearer and clearer that this amplifier is not only amazing, but for those not requiring massive power, all you ever need.

Mixing and matching cables has only minimal effect on the overall sound of the F&R, and that's a good thing. My Acoustats are a little dull, so the extra zazz provided by Nordost Frey cable is a welcome thing. Everything else works brilliantly with Cardas Clear Reflection, or whatever else happens to be on hand. The overall sonic signature of the F&R is ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral, which will benefit nearly every set of speakers you connect up to it. What separates this one from so many other contenders in the price category is its ability to render fine musical detail and tonal nuance like a \$20,000 amplifier, but it's only 30 watts' worth. With a number of high dollar amps at my disposal from SimAudio, Pass, Nagra and a few others, I'm constantly amazed at how well the F&R stands up to the mega competitors at modest volume levels.

The tough choice

For \$2,350, this amplifier is a killer, especially if you would love to integrate a decent turntable into your system. Those wanting to be strictly digital or to step it up a notch should consider the \$2,800 integrated *without* phono. While it might seem counterintuitive for an integrated amplifier

without a phono stage to cost more, Mike Bettinger explains that the box with phono was meant to be a more all inclusive piece and the version without geared solely towards higher performance.

Michael Bettinger explains, "The Fern & Roby Line Stage Integrated Amplifier is a thoughtful elevation of our original amp component, intended for people who already have a favored phono preamp or DAC. The line stage on the board takes the place of the original's phono preamp. More developed and fine-tuned than the passive preamp, it features a higher wattage transformer, tightly matched JFETS and transistors, and an upgraded volume control and speaker connectors."

Though each looks identical, the second you plug in the Line Stage, the experience goes from great to exceptional. The gentle guitar intro at the beginning of Yo La Tengo's "My Heart's Not in It" not only gets way more meat on the bone, but lead singer Georgia Hubley's vocal disperses into the wall of sound painted between the speakers in a way that it now sounds like two more speakers have been added at the rear of the room; it's spooky, expansive and wonderful.

Both amplifiers are voiced very similarly, but for those already having a great DAC and a phono stage they are already happy with will be served well by stepping up to the Line Stage, especially if they have an awesome pair of speakers. The lower priced model performed flawlessly with all the speakers at my disposal in the *TONE* studio, but reveals its pedigree when mated to the \$40,000 GamuT RS5s or the \$20,000 Dali Epicon 8 speakers that we recently reviewed. *(continued)*





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FEATURE



The lower priced amp feels comfy with a \$500–\$5,000 pair of speakers, but the Line Stage is right at home driving the big boys. If you don't need concert level volume levels, or live in a more compact space, I can't suggest the F&R Line Stage highly enough.

Aesthetically pleasing

Where many have tried to embrace an overly industrial look, Fern and Roby does a smashing job of incorporating the cast iron chassis and bronze control knobs in a timeless, organic way that doesn't scream "steampunk." (I hate that word.) Its small 10 x 10 x 4 inch profile fits anywhere, and

even when rocking the Casbah, neither of these units gets hot or even overly warm.

The dark grey texture of the casework with the bronze controls has an incredibly nice feel, the amplifier just exudes quality, and when you lift this hefty little box up, you'll be equally surprised. There's no remote and on so many levels, justifiably so. With three analog inputs and an additional line out for a subwoofer, the F&R integrated is as versatile as any music lover should need. We had excellent luck with driving subwoofers from the speaker outputs with a REL sub and line level outputs with the Audio Engine S8.

Not everyone will successfully wrap their brain and ears around the Fern & Roby integrated amplifiers. You will immediately embrace the physical design or not, and you will either be able to hear the nuance that this product brings to the table or you won't get it. Those that have been on a bit of an audiophile journey will get this little amp right away and will never let it go.

This is one of the most enjoyable amplifiers I've had the pleasure to spend time with at any price. I truly hope those of you that investigate this amplifier enjoy it as much as I do. ●

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Audio by Van Alstine Vision Phono Preamplifier

Price-Performance Pleasure

By Rob Johnson

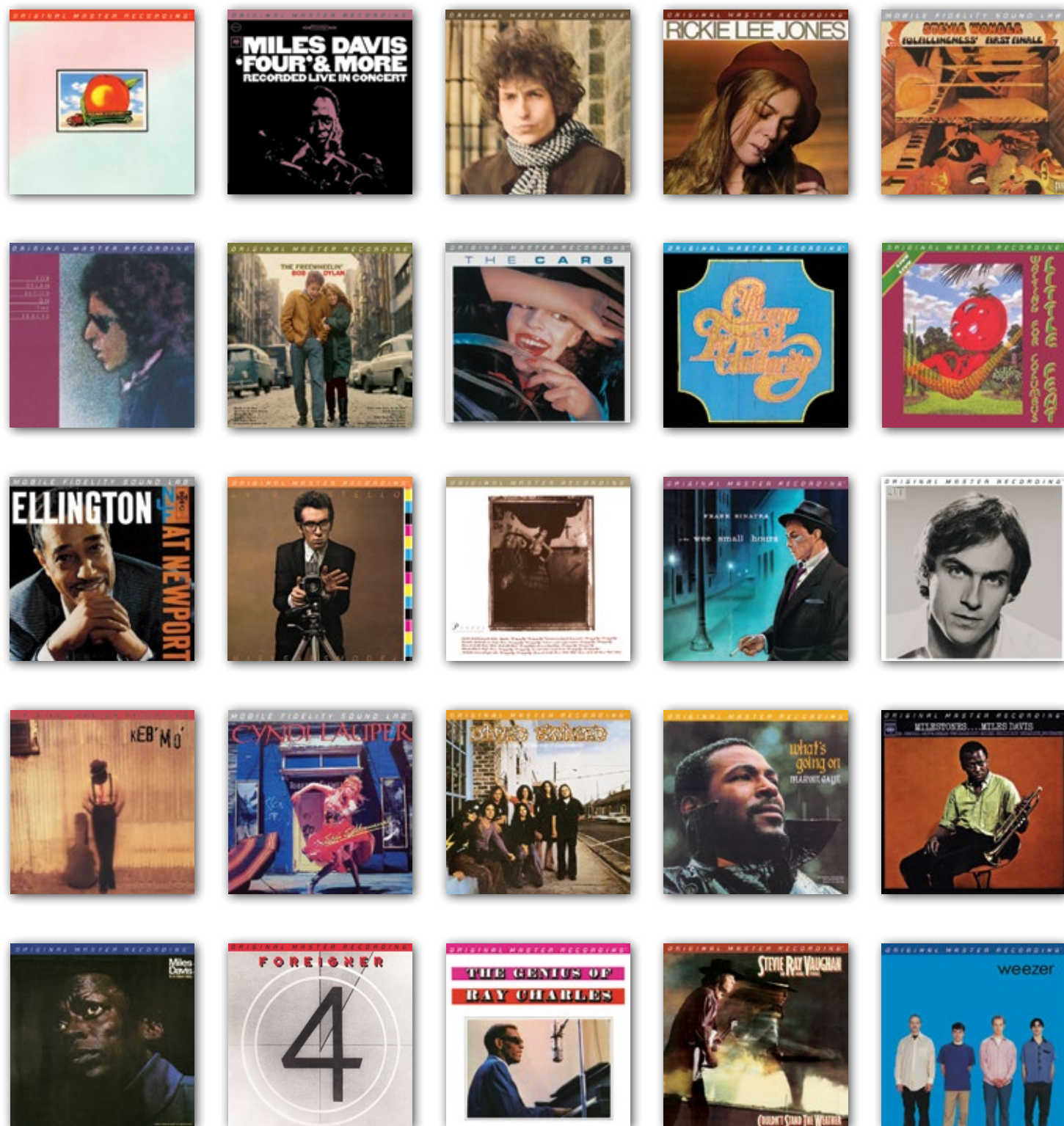
Out of his shop in Minnesota, Frank Van Alstine's audio equipment design efforts started with modifications to improve the sound of Dynaco and Hafler equipment. While he still makes these upgrades possible, his focus these days is primarily the development of his own audio product line: Audio by Van Alstine, or AVA for short. After reviewing the Van Alstine FET Valve CF Hybrid Preamplifier, we walked away impressed by its high performance and reasonable price tag. His new Vision Phono Preamplifier, which supports both MM and MC cartridges for under \$500, is equally compelling.



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FEATURE



There's an interesting backstory to this phono stage. Frank Van Alstine designed its solid state schematic back in the 1970s, but unsatisfied with the quality of the integrated circuits at the time and the negative impacts they had on sound reproduction, the plans fell to the wayside. Fast forward four decades, and the magic of Moore's Law brings with it vastly improved electronics. Van Alstine felt it was time to revisit the original design concept with modern circuitry. Blowing the rhetorical dust off the plans, and experimenting with various electronic components available today, Van Alstine's earlier vision finally has the opportunity to prove itself. As he describes the story, "We spent weeks testing and listening to almost all the modern linear ICs available, some even surface mount chip types. We finalized the design with the very expensive Burr-Brown OPA627 ICs in both the first and second stages. The third stage uses a

LME49600 current buffer to isolate the EQ from the real world and provide nearly one-quarter ampere of current drive to interface with any real world load. This device has .00003% THD and a 2000 volt per micro-second slew rate, day and night better than any IC based line driver. This combination provides the low noise and grain-free outstanding dynamic range we demand."

With such a clean and compact schematic, the AVA Vision's case measures a scant 7"x 5" x 2.5". The power supply sits outside the case in a wall wart connector to avoid interference with the sensitive electronics within. For those lucky enough to own an AVA line stage already, and who want to delve into the world of vinyl, AVA can simply add in the Vision phono stage circuitry into most existing AVA preamplifiers. The happy owner is ready to rock with no extra shelf space required. *(continued)*

FEATURE

Simple Setup

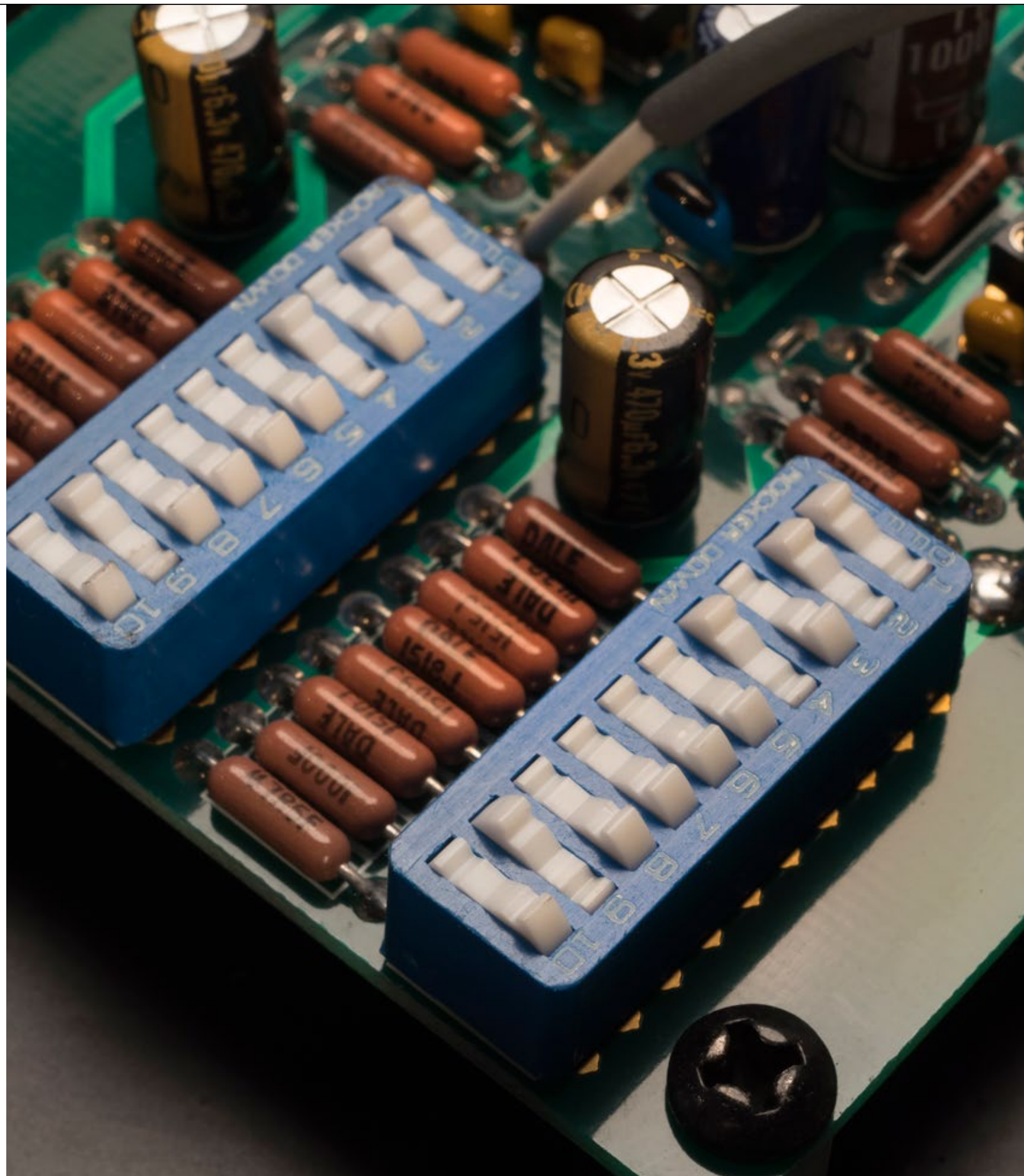
The Vision phono preamp poffers the ability to adjust settings to match the owner's specific cartridge. Removing the AVA's metal cover reveals two sets of tiny toggles – one for each channel – allowing adjustments for gain and loading, accommodating MM and MC cartridges. It also allows the owner an opportunity to experiment with the different settings and determine what sounds best to his or her ears. Four machine screws secure the cover and the user adjustment guide is printed on the inside of the cover.

Then connect your turntable and get down to business spinning records. Like most solid state equipment, the Vision requires about 100 hours to sound its best and your patience will be rewarded. While it sounds fine out of the box, it does open up with some time on the clock.

Marvelous Music

The Vision quickly reveals its warm and inviting portrayal of music, with an ability to get-up-and-go when music genre dictates, but any harsh edges in poor recordings find themselves filed down somewhat, leaving behind smooth and relaxed listening pleasure.

Enjoying MoFi's issue of *First and Last and Always* by the Sisters of Mercy, the song "Possession" through the AVA showcases Andrew Eldritch's vocals panned to the extreme far and left of the soundstage. The voice extends well beyond the speaker bodies. While the AVA does a nice job separating vocals and instruments across the entire perceived stage, the front to back layering and definition of individual images are not as nuanced as those we've experienced



FEATURE

with more expensive phonostages that retrieve the subtle spatial cues separating various elements. For those listeners seeking pin-point definition and imaging, the Vision may not be the perfect fit. The Vision's interpretation of a song never detracts from the overall musical enjoyment. While you cannot expect to own the analog world for \$500, this pre-amplifier certainly gives you more than a mouse pad's worth of real estate.

Bass reproduction proves another AVA strength. Bass plucks on Shriekback's "Underwater Boys" emerge with depth and heft, complementing the sultry nature of the song. Similarly, various drums, cymbals, tambourine and other percussive elements sing forth in cohesive balance. The AVA does not endeavor to pull every nuance out of the record grooves. It's like sitting back several rows in the auditorium where each piano keystroke releases a beautiful note, but the listener is at a distance such that she is unlikely to perceive the tangible thunk of the key itself being depressed. Similarly, cymbals maintain the energy of an anticipated crash and ring. However, some delicate subtleties of the lengthy decay are diminished. Those listeners who crave transparent realism and every tiny detail in a recording may find this aspect of the AVA a compromise, but those wanting the bigger musical picture are likely to find the AVA's portrayal very appealing. *(continued)*

FEATURE



The AVA maintains a well-balanced sonic interpretation of each song, never accentuating one musical element over the others unless the recording itself dictates it. Like those albums preceding it, Pink Martini's "Hey Eugene" features a very complex mix of vocals and instruments. Each element is heard clearly through the AVA, which encourages them to find their appropriate place in the musical picture without over-accentuating or repressing them further down in the mix. Sia's *1000 Forms of Fear* is a treat. As with her earlier albums, Sia's vocal crescendos pour forth with a lot of power. Some audio gear translates that into a fatiguing edge, but instead, the Van Alstine smoothes everything out a bit. It is very easy to settle into a long listening session and simply enjoy the music.

It's worth mentioning that the Vision works well with a wide range of cartridges too. We sampled it with a number of cartridges in the \$300 - \$1,200 range, including the

relatively low output (.3mv) Denon DL-103L and (.25mv) Dynavector 17D3. Thanks to the highest gain (66db) setting, these propose no problem.

Delivering Delight

After several days with the Vision Phono Preamplifier, it's clear that AVA continues its legacy of modestly-priced products that deliver a lot of value. To his credit, Mr. Van Alstine concentrates on the circuitry and build quality rather than fancy packaging or case-work. When building a component at this level, every dollar spent is critical in the outcome of the final product, and the Vision has it all where it counts: under the hood.

This AVA offers flexibility in several ways. First, the load settings can be adjusted manually to accommodate future cartridge changes. Second, the standalone and embedded form factors offer a prospective owner the choice as shelf space, aesthetics, or personal preferences dictate. *(continued)*

oppo



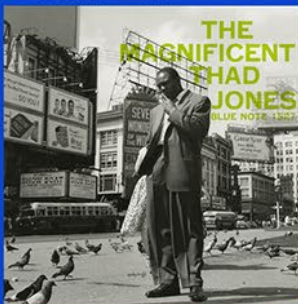
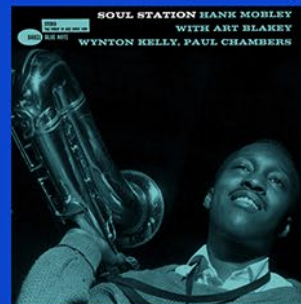
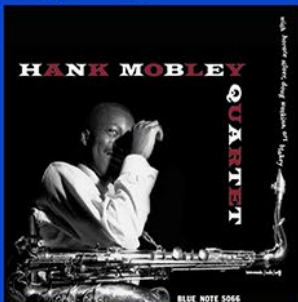
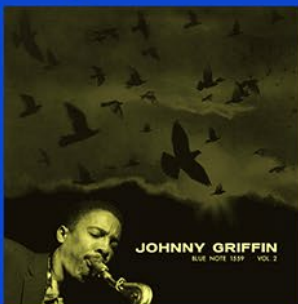
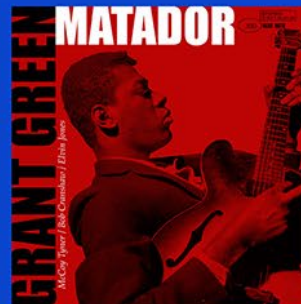
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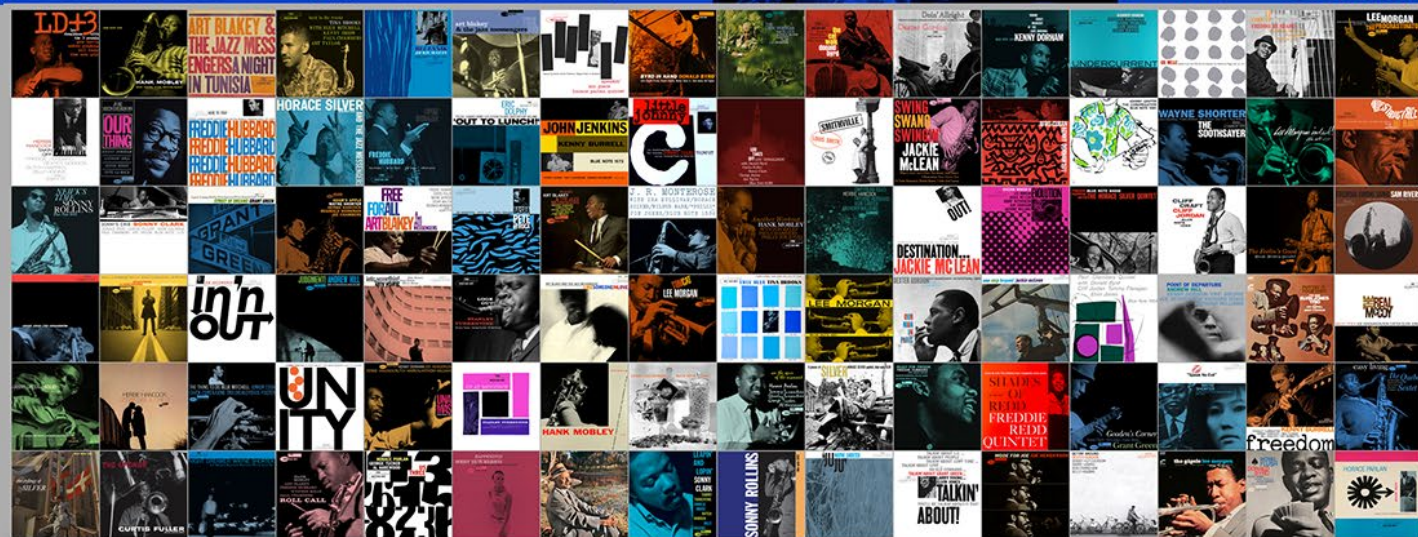


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FEATURE

In both cases the same great circuitry serves to provide the owner great sound from the vinyl grooves.

If you have a phono stage budget around \$500, the Van Alstine Vision Phono Pre is a marvelous option. If you already own an AVA line stage, it's a no-brainer to install the RIAA phono capability right into the chassis you already own. If you are considering vinyl playback in the future, you'll be glad you took advantage of the inexpensive upgrade option.

AVA does not have a dealer network. Their intention is to lower prices as much as possible by selling directly to the public. With that in mind, the Vision should compare to comparable products sold via a dealer network for nearly twice this price. That considered, the Vision still offers high value and performance. Considering you can get this much performance for just under \$500, it's a steal. Keep in mind they have a 30-day return policy if you are not satisfied with the sound, so all you have to risk are a few bucks for return shipping. In the end, this baby is highly deserving of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015. ●

Audio by Van Alstine
Vision Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$499

www.avahifi.com



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NEW



M O O N

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M O O N
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MUSICAL ECSTASY

TONE STYLE



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Looking like a pair of vintage microphones, the tiny Samson Meteor M2 speakers come to you from the same people that not only build powered studio monitors, but the Hartke bass cabinets that you've seen on stages all over the world. So it's no surprise that thanks to some knowhow and a bit of DSP processing, these rear ported 2.5-inch speakers kick some major ass.

The die cast design makes for roadworthy reliability, so they should be able to withstand a bit of knocking around in your luggage or briefcase and make a perfect addition to your desktop and travel arsenal.

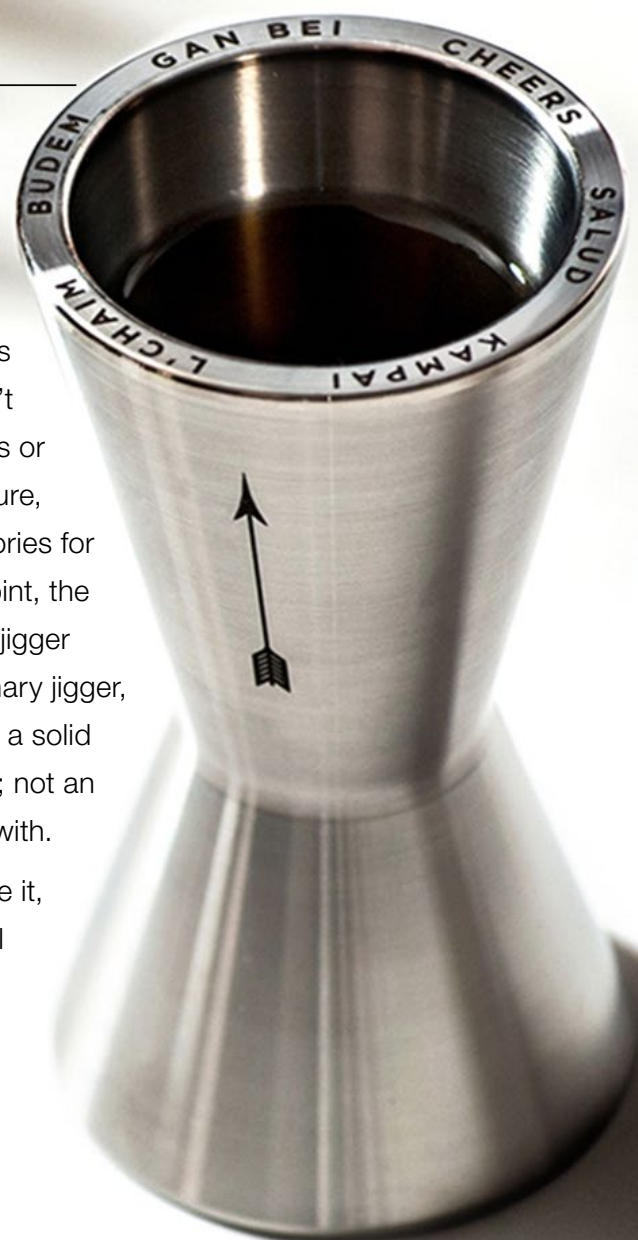
The Titanium Jigger

\$125.00

www.fernandroby.com

When the guys at Fern and Roby aren't building amplifier cases or incredibly stylish furniture, they make hip accessories for your home. Case in point, the 1 ounce over 2 ounce jigger you see here. No ordinary jigger, this one is turned from a solid 2 -inch bar of titanium; not an easy material to work with.

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Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound - October 2015

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Chris Martens, Hi-Fi+, September 2015

"If I didn't know better, I would have sworn I was listening to much bigger speakers! These (RS3) are stunning small monitors that deliver big speaker sound!"

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio - THE SHOW, Newport 2015

"The (RS3) speaker proved so wonderfully descriptive of the textures and timbres of acoustic and electronic sounds that it was never anything other than wholly captivating."

John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014



TONE STYLE



iPhone 6s

\$199-\$849

Yes, Apple is at it again; "This is the best iPhone ever." Aren't they all? You either drink the Apple Kool-Aid or you don't but you only need to know two words about the latest (ok, ok, greatest) iPhone. The Camera. 3D Touch, peek, and pop are all fun, but this phone is all about the camera.

The front camera has been updated, but you shouldn't be taking all those selfies anyway. The big news is the 12-megapixel rear camera that now shoots 4k video. Initial images we've taken are absolutely stunning, and that's probably a big reason why this damn phone costs more than an 88 Honda Civic on Craigslist.

All you wanna-be Spielbergs, get down to the Apple Store and get on the list. As with the last iPhone, the larger plus-sized model is on major backorder, but if you can live with that measly 4.7-inch screen, you should be able to get one now. Those more stylishly concerned take note: there is a new color for this iPhone – Rose Gold, so now there are two manly and two girly colors from which to choose.



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Should you be lucky enough to live in one of the 15 cities where this service is offered as an option for your Amazon Prime subscription, you can now get your Amazon goodies almost as fast as you think of them. Seriously, that's next. TONE staffer Tom Caselli, who hails from Atlanta was astonished by how quickly his latest vinyl purchase arrived, only hours after he placed the order, and in perfect shape. Who needs the mall anymore?



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TONE STYLE

The Home Depot Crate

\$9.99
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Sure, you can get a couple of those fancy, \$75 - \$100 boutique record crates, and granted they have a bit more panache than the ten dollar model at Home Depot, but these aren't bad for the beginning vinyl enthusiast, or if you just want to revisit your college dorm days, these are pretty awesome.

The wood surface is fairly raw, and as you can see from the photo, they are not quite record size when used in the horizontal plane. But a little matte Krylon goes a long way and if you're really OCD, you can easily pop the top panel and slice the remaining boards down for a tidier look. Forty bucks, a little elbow grease and a steady hand will get you storage for about 200 albums, and that's not bad.



ToughPad 4k

\$3,999
www.panasonic.com



If 5.5 inches isn't enough, how about 20? The bad news? It runs Windows and it's kind of spendy. But when you need a lot of pixel area on the go, Panasonic's ToughPad 4k is breathtaking. Whether you're a photographer, video enthusiast, or just want your Grandparents to see the kids a bit easier, this tablet rocks.

All kidding about Windows 8 aside, the ToughPad 4k is surprisingly lightweight (5.6 pounds), and very responsive. With an SD card reader built in, it's easy to download, share and edit audio, photos and video on the go. This is where the full blown Windows OS comes in handy, you can actually run Adobe Creative Suite on this and get some work done. Back at the office, you can take advantage of an accessory stand and wireless keyboard to be a full blown workstation, or dock the ToughPad 4k to a second monitor and stretch out even further.

For many graphics professionals and those needing to have the coolest toy ever and take it everywhere they go, Panasonic's ToughPad 4k is the ticket.

IKEA Nordmarke

\$64.99
www.ikea.com

Who names this stuff anyway? Much like DOS commands, sometimes the names of IKEA products sound *remotely* like what said product is or does, but not this time. Either way, if your mobile device supports wireless charging, the Nordmarke is pretty cool, especially for those of you that are always losing your charger and cord. Note, you will need the Vitahult charging cover to make this all work. WTF.



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Decoupled Double Dome tweeter

Pure Vinyl Soap

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www.amazon.com

The latest cleaner from Pure Vinyl works equally well with a Spin Clean or vacuum record cleaning machine, like our VPI Cyclone. We had equally excellent results with both. Pure Vinyl is a two step process, requiring a dunk, scrub and dry cycle with the solution itself and then another with pure distilled water.

With the Spin Clean, it's best to either have two of them, one with cleaning solution and one with the distilled water, or keeping the distilled water in a separate spray bottle for the VPI. A microfiber brush from MoFi works well, or the VPI brush. Should you be using multiple cleaning concoctions, a separate brush strictly for the Pure Vinyl solution, kept in a sealed plastic bag eliminates any kind of contamination.

We've been using Pure Vinyl for a few months now, and all seems good. Records have been coming off of the Cyclone squeaky clean and there have been no examples of any kind of strange buildup. Everyone has their favorite record cleaning elixir, this may become yours. ●

TONE STYLE



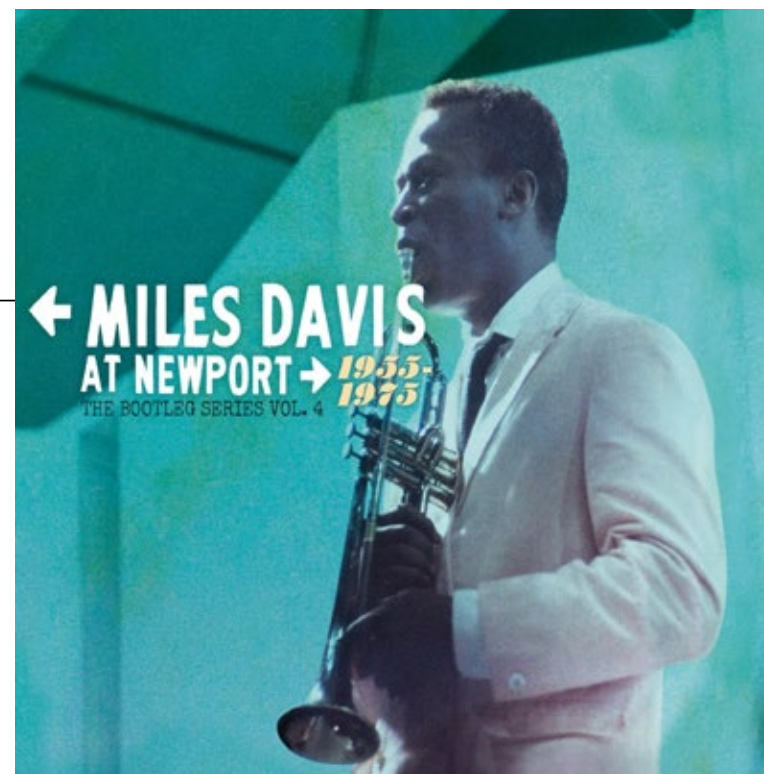
JAZZ & BLUES

W

hen we talk about Miles Davis, we're always talking about evolution. How he used a scorched-earth policy to move from bop to skronk. How he was an aesthetic Pac-Man drilling forward while swallowing genre after genre. How he invented a couple of those genres on his own and left them in his wake while obsessing over his commitment to the new. How his refusal to float in place invariably reaped the rewards of innovation.

Ostensibly, *Miles Davis at Newport 1955-1975* is a collection of the trumpeter's work at George Wein's iconic festival brand. But Davis was his own brand as well, and this four-disc set really is something more utilitarian: A rather concise package that, in the large, accounts for the breadth of his stylistic maneuvering and illustrates just how much ground he gained while unfurling his artistic worldview.

We hear him first as a relative newbie in a dinner jacket blowing eloquent in an ad hoc ching-chinga-ching jam session with Gerry Mulligan and Thelonious Monk. His lines are filled with daring and lyricism. We hear him last as a renegade in psychedelic garb, throwing funk into the fires of hell while directing two electric guitarists and waxing as aggressive as any rocker of the day. His lines are throttled and disruptive. In the two decades that passed between those events, he became a global icon—an inspired trailblazer and superstar headliner that wooed one of the broadest audiences in jazz history.



Miles Davis

Miles Davis at Newport 1955-1975
Legacy, 4CD

The bulk of this music is being released for the first time, and certain sections are flat-out fantastic. As far as performances go, Miles' Second Great Quintet—featuring saxophonist Wayne Shorter, bassist Ron Carter, pianist Herbie Hancock, and drummer Tony Williams—is well documented on its groundbreaking studio albums and *The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel* set. The collective's signature flexibility remains an irresistible draw. But on the 12 tracks from 1966-67 here, the band seems more awesome than ever.

The group is almost at the end of its run, and its familiarity with each other opens all sorts of doors as far as interplay goes. "R.J." comes on as a swirl of ideas driven by an overwhelming consensus; "Gingerbread Boy" is a controlled blast with Shorter blowing supercharged

lines. Everywhere, Williams explodes the action with every press roll and cymbal crash. This is must-have music for any fan.

The electric tracks are almost as enticing. The quartet including bassist Dave Holland, drummer Jack DeJohnette, and pianist Chick Corea clobbers tunes that eventually turn up on *Bitches Brew* later in 1969. It's one of the sparsest ensembles with which the trumpeter ever gigged, but between DeJohnette's assault and Corea's web of harmonies, the performances sparkle. At the center lays Davis' own horn—cocky, intrepid, inspiring. In comparison, what comes next absolutely rages.

By '73, Davis widened his group to a septet with two guitarists and yen for squall. *(continued)*

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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).

Rega's view is that hifi's simply a tool for listening to your music.

So we think you'll quickly forget all about the technology. But we're 100% sure you'll remember the performance.



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MUSIC

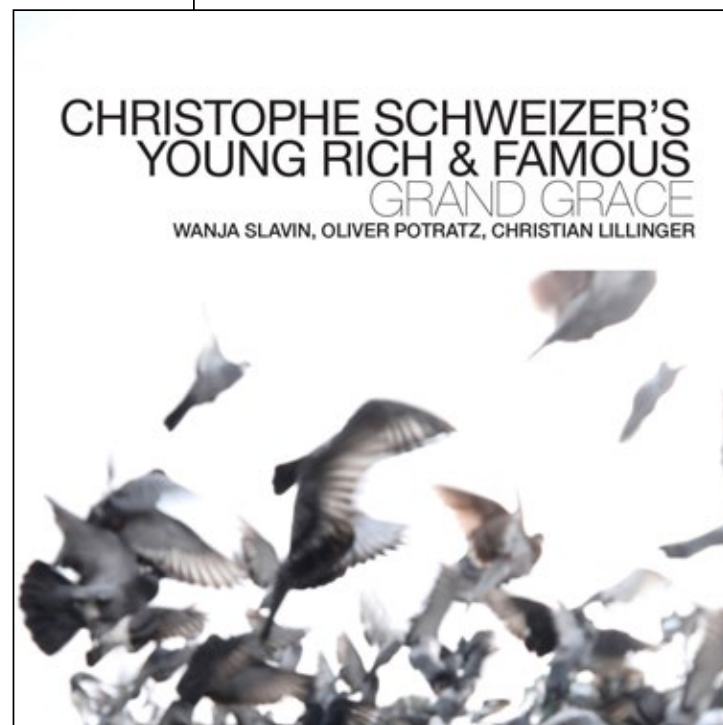
Riding a fat bottom driven Michael Henderson's funk bass and Al Foster's caustic drumming, he sanctioned the kind of polyphony that generated a true disturbance. On a Berlin stage at a *Newport in Europe* date, saxophonist Dave Liebman twisted his lines with Davis' to create pure fi-yah. Between three or four pieces in a stretch of music clocking in at approximately 45 minutes, the essence of the leader's infamous *Dark Magus* ensemble scalds some of the densest and most convulsive grooves in his discography.

A fascinating tidbit: If 1973's ardent expressionism harks to anything, it's the group offensive that's at the center of the action back in Rhode Island's city by the sea in '58, when the *Milestones* sextet romps through "Ah-Leu-Cha," "Two Bass Hit," and "Fran-Dance," among other pieces. In several ways, the group feels like it's invading the tunes—holding 'em hostage until they're done stripping 'em of their possibilities. From drummer Jimmy Cobb's exclamation points to John Coltrane's cascading phrases, their creative process seeks a spot where exuberance becomes agitation.

This band's flourishes and—most importantly—its attack also has parallels on "It's About That Time" from a ferocious '71 Swiss gig that closes this mighty set. In both spots, Davis flaunts his *modus operandi* of wringing a tune dry. Maybe it's time to consider a theory that states the more Miles changed, the more he stayed the same. —**Jim Macnie**

©Photo by Hank Parker





**Christophe Schweizer's
Young Rich & Famous**

Grand Grace
Between the Lines, CD

In the 1990s, Swiss trombonist Christophe Schweizer wrote ultra-complicated music, sometimes to the despair of its interpreters: 19- or 42-beat patterns, rhythms derived from the Fibonacci series, things like that. He didn't write that way just to be difficult, he said, but to see what ideas might work in a jazz context. *Grand Grace* shows how that research paid off. Schweizer and his two horns/two rhythm quartet deftly balance compositional rigor and improvisational leeway. His lines are easier to play—spacious medium tempos predominate—but his pieces remain structurally intricate. Only the fast kinky closer “Gom Dagom” harks back to his old steeplechases.



Like other leaders, Schweizer seeks to blur lines between the composed and improvised, and has many ways to do it. A solo line that at first sounds improvised may reveal itself to be written; alto saxophonist Wanja Slavin may plant a figure in a solo that looks ahead to a theme arriving minutes later, perhaps after an intermediate episode; sometimes scored phrases are injected into otherwise improvised solos. The longest piece, “Ondonde Fira,” is a sort of unofficial concerto for Slavin, who uses a recurring wide-interval saw-

tooth motif to tie together several of his improvisations. Other composers (like Tim Berne) write long suites for improvisers punctuated by bursts of written material. Here, each pithy episode sounds like part of one long interrupted melody. Schweizer's more aphoristic tunes are downright catchy, and they're all shapely, suggesting a trajectory a soloist might follow.

Roles blur within improvisational space too. When one horn player extemporizes, the other will fall in behind, maybe to steal the lead in time. (*continued*)



The balance of power keeps shifting. Beginnings and endings of solos also overlap, but trombone and alto never crowd each other, any more than bass and drums crowd them. Schweizer has spoken of the trombone's "talking sound"—he was playing Dixieland jazz at 14, with Dicky Wells a hero—and there's conversational ease to the interplay.

Schweizer gets a big gar-rulous open-horn sound. The way he leaves room for his partners recalls the dynamic of (but doesn't mimic) Dixie-meets-free trombonist Roswell Rudd's piano-less quartets. Slavin shows off a contrasting clean and piercing tone on alto, strong in all registers, every note in fast runs articulated. He conscientiously varies his phrasing, too. (The altoist's yipping on the "Lan Dene" rideout nods to Ornette Coleman.) Both horn players gravitate toward the front of the beat, compatible.

Bassist Oliver Potratz and Berlin drum phenom Christian Lillinger are equally simpatico, quietly backing each other's solos, negotiating umpteen rhythm change-ups, and playing intricate lopsided patterns in unison. Potratz loves the deep low end; Lillinger's snare articulation is so fast it can sound like drum-'n'-bass digital stutter. Early on the springy "Wandida," the drummer revives a classic 80s hip-hop beat, then nimbly crosses it with a New Orleans second-line groove—taking a long view of the available options, rather like his boss. —**Kevin Whitehead**

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Oscar Wilde



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Louie Belogenis

Blue Buddha
Tzadik, CD

Saxophonist Louie Belogenis has been a Buddhist for 40 years. The title of his new album reflects his faith. His tone—sometimes ecstatic, other times incantatory—also sounds like it derives from spiritualist traditions, many of which run throughout jazz, especially within the exploratory stream that emerged in the 1960s. This impact is heard not just because of how Belogenis reaches into the extreme ends of his instrument's range as if he were crying out, but also from his quartet's sense of exultation.

Blue Buddha derived from spontaneous encounters (and one could connect such episodes to a Buddhist belief about being in the moment). Belogenis jammed with trumpeter Dave Douglas at Tzadik label executive producer John Zorn's small New York venue, the Stone, and they hit it off.

Afterward, Zorn invited the saxophonist to record and suggested bassist Bill Laswell and drummer Tyshawn Sorey to fill out the rhythm section. With all compositions credited to the entire quartet, the writing also feels refreshingly unplanned.

Belogenis has made no secret of his admiration for a hero of free-jazz tenor saxophone, Albert Ayler. He previously recorded with one of Ayler's 60s colleagues, drummer Sunny Murray (on 2011's *Tiresias*). This inspiration comes across throughout *Blue Buddha*: His long and dynamic upper register wails, melodic sense, and even that both were heavily influenced through faith (although Ayler grew up in the Sanctified Christian church).

But Belogenis and his bandmates create entirely new soundscapes from the template. That's especially the case when pieces build softly and gradually, such as the opening "Purification." The saxophonist blends with Douglas' long and lyrical lines and the piece shifts in tone only via Laswell's background electronic effects. The contrasting dynamics between Belogenis' volume and the rest of the group's serene approach feels just as bracing on "Truth of Cessation." On "Double Dorje," Belogenis leaps into Ayler's overtones but also cuts away from them by moving into a dialogue with Sorey, who constantly, and unexpectedly, shifts his own patterns.

Laswell's wide palette and odd tonalities also shade in the musical spaces that seem like their own comments on the saxophonist's vibrato, especially on "Renunciation." The four-minute bit of collective extroversion that comprises "Wrathful Compassion" sounds like pure release. And afterwards, the group's energy remains undaunted, such as with Sorey taking his turn to ignite while ostensibly staying in the background during "Lineage."

With Belogenis' ad hoc group already sounding this sharp and constantly surprising, it could have boundless possibilities as a working band.
—Aaron Cohen



I start to grin when a new People, Places & Things album arrives. Mike Reed's feisty freebop can be captivating for several reasons, but it's all beholding to one key element: The raucous sense of swing that invariably sits front and center. The Chicago-based drummer likes his quartet to project the oomph of a larger outfit. Each member is unafraid of doing a little pushing and shoving to bolster the band's collective whomp. From Clifford Jordan's bluster to Sun Ra's hubbub, that's part of the Windy City spirit, I guess—*let's move some bodies around a bit*. But Reed's two-sax working band carries out its mission with unusual aplomb. Its agitated throw-down teems with a signature strut.



Mike Reed's People, Places & Things

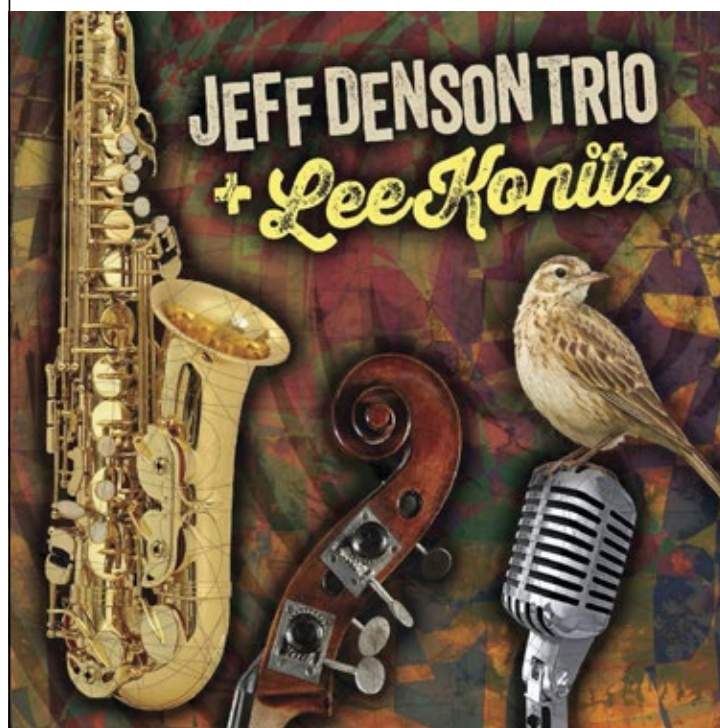
A New Kind of Dance
432 Music, CD

And perhaps even more so with this sixth outing, a program dedicated to the art of movement. Team Reed veers through quite a few rhythmic variations in support of the thesis that fuels the album's title. Along the way, the members tweak the orthodoxy of waltzes, horos, and kwelas, adding improvisation and its exuberance to the mix. From the swirling romp of "Candyland" (with all the surprise swoops, it could've been called "Chutes and Ladders") to the punchy groove of Mos Def's hip-hop beats (bolstered by a sassy recollection of Reed's early blues-band gigs), they bend expectations just enough to keep you guessing. Art guides it all, but by the end it's overt pleasure music. There's been lots of head-bobbin' going on in my house this week.

This time out, pianist Matthew Shipp and trumpeter Marquis Hill occasionally join People, Places & Things. The brass player bolsters the high-flying Balkan motifs of "Markovsko Horo" and hot-wires Michael Moore's South African nod "Kwela for Taylor" with the kind of the animation that's central to essaying *joie de vivre*. Fans of Shipp know he's expert at both developing poise and raising the roof. The title cut benefits from the latter, which finds the pianist nudging things up to a boiling point.

But it's the band's horn players, Greg Ward and Tim Haldeman, who carry the day. They've been weaving their lines together for years, and the compatibility is obvious. The squirrely unison lines of "Candyland," the abstract scramble at the start of "Jackie's Tune," the breathy romance of Billy Strayhorn's "Star Crossed Lovers"—whether going balls-out or whispering their way through a ballad, they parlay their singular differences into a combined asset.

Last time out, on *Second Cities: Volume 1*, Reed tipped the hat to Amsterdam and its adventurous clique of improvisers. Here, he covers tunes by two of its key players, Moore and Sean Bergin. If you haven't heard a Dutch blues shuffle driven by a fierce little rhythm section (bassist Jason Roebke goes everything across the board on this album), you'll soon understand that, with the kind of splash Reed dispenses on "AKA Reib Letsma," a South Side gin joint can be conjured almost anywhere. —**Jim Macnie**


Jeff Denson Trio

Jeff Denson Trio + Lee Konitz
Ridgeway Records, CD

M

ore than 60 years ago, Lennie Tristano quietly shook up jazz conventions—even though he's not widely known as a revolutionary. The pianist and his groups sounded unaffected (or, as termed in the 50s, “cool”) as they subtly shifted away from expected time signatures and opened up new harmonic possibilities. Meanwhile, they still frequently adhered to jazz’s standard repertoire. Throughout the decades, a number of musicians, especially saxophonist Anthony Braxton, have spoken of the crew’s influence. Bassist Jeff Denson also pays homage to the Tristano school on this disc, which features the most renowned living link to the pianist’s inner circle, alto saxophonist Lee Konitz. *(continued)*

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Two lesser-known Tristano pieces comprise the album's highlights: "Baby" (which, according to Denson, the composer never recorded) and "317 East 32nd Street" (which Tristano recorded only once). Both tunes never let their changing tempos get in the way of sharp melodic statements. And Konitz, now in his upper 80s, sounds masterful steering through them all. On "317 East 32nd Street," Konitz and Denson converse over Tristano's signature harmonies while drummer Jon Arkin adds different colors via a deceptively light touch.

That bright dynamic is also pronounced on the first take of Konitz's signature composition "Subconscious Lee." Pianist Dan Zemel-

man's offbeat chords navigate the rich solos and call-and-response from Denson and Konitz. Similarly, the bassist's deeply resonant opening on the saxophonist's "Kary's Trance" turns fleet on top of the pianist's baroque flourishes. Both Denson and Konitz are credited with "Duet," which sounds spontaneously written for all the right reasons, especially with the pair's fluid sense of timing.

On some tracks, Konitz puts down the saxophone and scat sings, typical for his performances nowadays. Besides, absorbing music through singing was an educational technique Tristano emphasized. But while Konitz refers to the practice as "a new musical dimen-

sion for me," his voice tends to remain flat and the performances never come close to the heights of his alto solos. Denson, who also sings, shows better range on Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies" and the standard "Body and Soul."

Still, Denson's palpable admiration for Konitz ultimately makes this an effective tribute to the saxophonist and his lineage. His moving bass solo that anchors the concluding track, another take on "Subconscious Lee," exemplifies such sense of reverence to a living master. He's also astute enough to plan more collaborations between his working group and other accomplished guests in the future.

—Aaron Cohen

FEATURE

FEATURE

Cypher Labs®
CL

Cypher Labs Sustain84 Headphone Amplifier

Happiness for the Head

By Rob Johnson

FEATURE



Building on the successes of many battery-powered Amps, DACs and headphone accessories, David Maudlin and the Cypher Labs team adds to the fold an all new offering, the Sustain84 headphone amplifier. As an ECL84 tube-based, class A design, the Sustain84 requires a power cord, so it is not intended as a portable device for use during airplane travel. But with width of 8.8 inches (225mm), depth of 4.5 inches (116mm) and a height of 4.4 inches (113mm), it's no burden to carry the 5.5 pound (2.5kg) component in one hand. It is easy to take the unit with you to the office, or on a vacation trip so you always have your tunes at the ready.



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FEATURE

At the option of the owner, the pair of tubes can remain fully visible like an audiophile lava lamp, or be shrouded in black aluminum shields. The tube chimneys match the unit's stealthy matte black appearance, supposedly blocking out external RF signals too. So, the black shields may provide (ahem) blacker background to your ears. Tube shields or not, Sustain84 is mighty quiet. With music paused and volume turned all the way up, only a slight hiss is audible. Once the volume is set at a normal listening level and music starts, there's no extraneous noise interfering with enjoyment of music.

On the front, the Sustain84 sports a single ¼" headphone output and a volume knob. Those needing a mini-jack are forced to use adapters. An additional toggle on the front panel allows the user to set the '84 for larger headphones or IEMs. The rear of the unit offers a set of gold plated RCA inputs and a simple power switch.

Putting the amp through its paces with a variety of music and headphones on hand, the Sustain84 offers a lot of benefit across important elements of sonic portrayal. The overall sound character is slightly to the warm side. Highs offer plenty of detail without any accompanying singe. Mids come through with equal joy, and vocal performances remain highly engaging.

While low bass has a very present and musical character though the Sustain84, it's not quite as taught and punchy as some setups I've encountered. For example, kick drums may not have the authority and impact of the real McCoy. Those who love the excitement of fast-punching music might find the '84 a bit polite.



FEATURE

However, the tradeoff is not necessarily a compromise. Having one's eardrums boxed for a few hours can be a fatiguing experience. Those like me who prefer a warmer, more forgiving, and engaging musical experience will find the '84 easy to settle into for long listening sessions. Users should note that the '84 also accepts 6DX8 tubes for increased user versatility. We only had the stock tubes on hand to experiment with, but I suspect tube rolling could tweak the sound a bit toward an owner's preferred sonic character.

As with many head-fi systems, the '84 cannot emulate the expansive soundstage width and depth that stand-alone speakers can showcase, and a prospective owner should not expect it to. The bulk of the perceived soundstage resides within a basketball-sized globe around one's head. Inside that radius, lush sound will immerse the ol' noggin and it is easy to get lost in the music. I certainly did.

\$1,200 is an investment for many, however, those who prioritize music reproduction in their lives may find the Sustain84 a very good investment indeed. It offers plug-and-play excellence for all headphones we had on hand including UE18 and JH16 IEMs, Sony MDR-7506, Sennheiser HD650, and Audeze LCD-X. If you need a battery-powered amp for use on plane, other offerings from Cypher Labs will serve you better. But if you are willing to be tethered to a power cord, the Sustain84 will reward the small tradeoff with hours of listening pleasure. With the Sustain84 and plenty of music on hand, you may find yourself a happy hermit! ●

MSRP: \$1,200
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A SECOND ARM:

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DOUBLE YOUR PLEASURE

The Sound HiFi DP-10

By Jeff Dorgay

T

he SME 10 remains one of my favorite turntables for a number of reasons; packing much of the performance of the costlier SME 20 into a compact chassis (especially with an SME V arm fitted) it's exquisitely built and feels like a much more expensive turntable. Like the rest of the SME range, it's easy to set up and it stays set up. However, I've always pondered how awesome it would be to have a 10 with two tonearms. Thanks to Dave Cawley at Sound HiFi in the UK, my dream is now a reality.

Mr. Cawley is a great guy with a nose for motorbikes and great analog. His TimeStep power supply upgrade for the Technics SP-1200 has been in use here for years and transforms this consumer table to a serious audiophile contender. While the DP-10 upgrade for the SME 10 doesn't improve sonics, it's an amazing upgrade for the analog lover who doesn't need a massive turntable.

My SME 10 is now living happily in Managing Editor Rob Johnson's system, and now that the TONE staff has made him a crazed analog person, he too has been itching for an alternative analog solution. The DP-10 is machined to the same standard as the rest of the SME

table, so it looks like a factory upgrade when complete. The entire process takes about five minutes and the necessary hex wrenches are included.

The DP-10 plate attaches to the left suspension tower, revealed once you remove the platter and subchassis. Wash those hands thoroughly before starting the operation so you don't get oil from your hands on the turntable belt. If in doubt, don some surgical gloves. Once tightened and aligned using your tonearm's alignment gauge, setup proceeds as it would with any other SME arm. You'll be spinning records with your other cartridge before you know it! *(continued)*



The DP-10 comes drilled for an SME tonearm, and for the purpose of this review, we pressed a spare SME V tonearm with the Kiseki Purple Heart cartridge we reviewed back in issue 67 into service. It proves to be a nice alternative to the Dynavector 17D3 that is the daily driver cartridge on the stock SME 10 arm, which is functionally almost identical to the 309.

If I were using this configuration on a 10 of my own, I think I'd opt for the SME V as the main arm and affix a vintage SME 3009 tonearm to take advantage of the range of removable headshells using this Ortofon-type mount. Using an Ortofon SPU on this table would be a major treat, but the second arm offers so many possibilities, it's up to you

whether you want to run a mega cartridge on one arm and daily driver on the other—or perhaps entertaining a mono cartridge on the other.

Either way, having a second tonearm/cartridge combination makes it easier to enjoy a wider range of records in your analog world, provided your phonostage has two inputs. Or maybe this opens up another upgrade opportunity?

So if having two tonearms on your SME 10 sounds like a cracking idea, give Mr. Cawley a call and tell him we sent you. The DP-10 is about two hundred pounds if you live in the UK. For US residents, it's just under two hundred fifty dollars plus shipping.

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FEATURE

A STUNNING SECOND ACT

MOON by Simaudio's 230HAD Headphone Amp

By Bailey S. Barnard

FEATURE

The only thing unassuming about the new 230HAD headphone amp/DAC from MOON by Simaudio is its appearance. The little black box isn't much bigger than a hardbound edition of *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, but it delivers a potent 1 watt into 50 ohms, which is enough to power all but the most sensitive headphones—and more than enough to extract the deepest nuances from your favorite recordings. I do the majority of my listening for this review through the new and highly capable HiFiMAN HE1000 planar magnetic headphones, which will run you \$3,000.



Whole Lot to Love

On a 24/192 version of Led Zepelin's "Whole Lotta Love," Robert Plant's vocals come through with as much character as I've ever heard, while John Bonham's kick drum is so deep and full that I forget I'm listening to headphones—until the bridge comes in. And then the persistent hi-hat taps ring with an accuracy rarely achieved by reproduced music and the various percussive hits and rattles circle around my head, and then what can only be described as Plant's orgasm sounds begin swirling

across the fully three-dimensional soundstage. The 230HAD achieves greatness.

It does so thanks in part to its forebear, Sim's 430HA headphone amp, which goes for \$3,500 *without* a built-in DAC (which is an extra \$800). For \$1,500 all-in, the smaller 230HAD includes the same DSD256/32-bit, PCM-capable DAC as the larger amp and, again, plenty of power for the majority of headphones. It doesn't deliver the same 8 watts into 50 ohms as the 430HA, nor does it accommodate balanced headphones, but if your

headphones require that much juice, you've likely already spent a few grand on a headphone amp capable of driving a mac truck (or perhaps one with vacuum tubes).

The 230HAD doesn't proclaim to be the end-all solution for every headphone ever made. Except for a small handful of truly esoteric and ghastly expensive headphones (like the \$5,250 Stax SR-009 electrostatic headphones, with their 145,000-ohm impedance), the little Sim amp is all you will ever need. It offers a 22,000-ohm impedance and a published frequency

range from 5 Hz to 100 kHz, with a signal-to-noise ratio of 115 dB. Its DAC is fully asynchronous, with three digital inputs—two single S/PDIF, one TOSLINK, and one USB—plus an analog RCA stereo input. It also offers dual analog RCA stereo outputs (fixed and variable) and two headphone jacks on the front panel—one big and one little. But enough with the specs...

Bring on the Monk

The keys have all the presence and vibrato of a live performance during a 24-bit CD remaster of

Thelonious Monk's Solo Monk. Every note carries beautifully into the next, with each one simultaneously filling its proper space within the three-dimensional soundstage. There are faint but wonderful moments on some of these tracks where you can hear Monk softly moaning with the music—and it takes a truly capable amplifier to expose such details. The 230HAD adds a rarely achieved dynamic to recordings, one that provides a deeper appreciation for music you've heard countless times. *(continued)*

FEATURE



And of course the ultimate example of this comes when listening to vinyl. On the opening track of Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, I'm immediately right in the middle of the party, with the various conversational vocals surrounding me before the music comes in. I can scarcely believe the depth and fullness across the vocal spectrum. The rhythmic finger snaps have more immediate presence than I've ever heard, so much so that the minute differences between each individual snap become audible. Toward the end of the track, as Gaye and the multiple vocal tracks begin bouncing around the soundstage, I have an all-new *ah-ha* moment. Rather than simply reproducing the audio recording, the 230HAD brings the feeling of the music to the forefront.

Curious to test the amp's ability on a lesser set of headphones, I plug in a pair of \$200 Pioneer on-ears and reach for *London Calling* on 180-gram vinyl. Of course, the limitations of these relatively inexpensive headphones are immediately apparent: The soundstage all but collapses, the low frequencies are fairly lackluster, and the highs are tinny. But what remains are the nuances of this detailed recording. Guitar licks tickle the far edges of the stereo image, with the stacked vocal harmonies well separated and distinct. It's actually really surprising how much detail the 230HAD is able to draw through these little headphones, which are perfectly decent, but nowhere near as capable as the big HiFiMAN ear cans. *(continued)*



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FEATURE

The Music Is Calling

Now that I know what I'm missing, I plug the HiFiMANs back in and am met with a multifaceted explosion of sound. When paired with the proper set of headphones, the 230HAD is virtually unstoppable, delivering sound with the full gusto of a reference-level system. It offers enough control to present delicate recordings with all the finesse they require, while providing more than enough power to drive hard-hitting or bass-heavy music with as much energy as a six-figure speaker system.

I've listened to *London Calling* dozens and dozens (if not hundreds) of times and the 230HAD headphone amp with the HiFiMAN headphones reminds me what I adore about the Clash. Though largely considered a punk band, the Clash put so many layers and details into its recordings, which this equipment spotlights as well as anything I've ever heard. It feels like I'm discovering the music all over again. ●

MSRP: \$1,500
www.simaudio.com

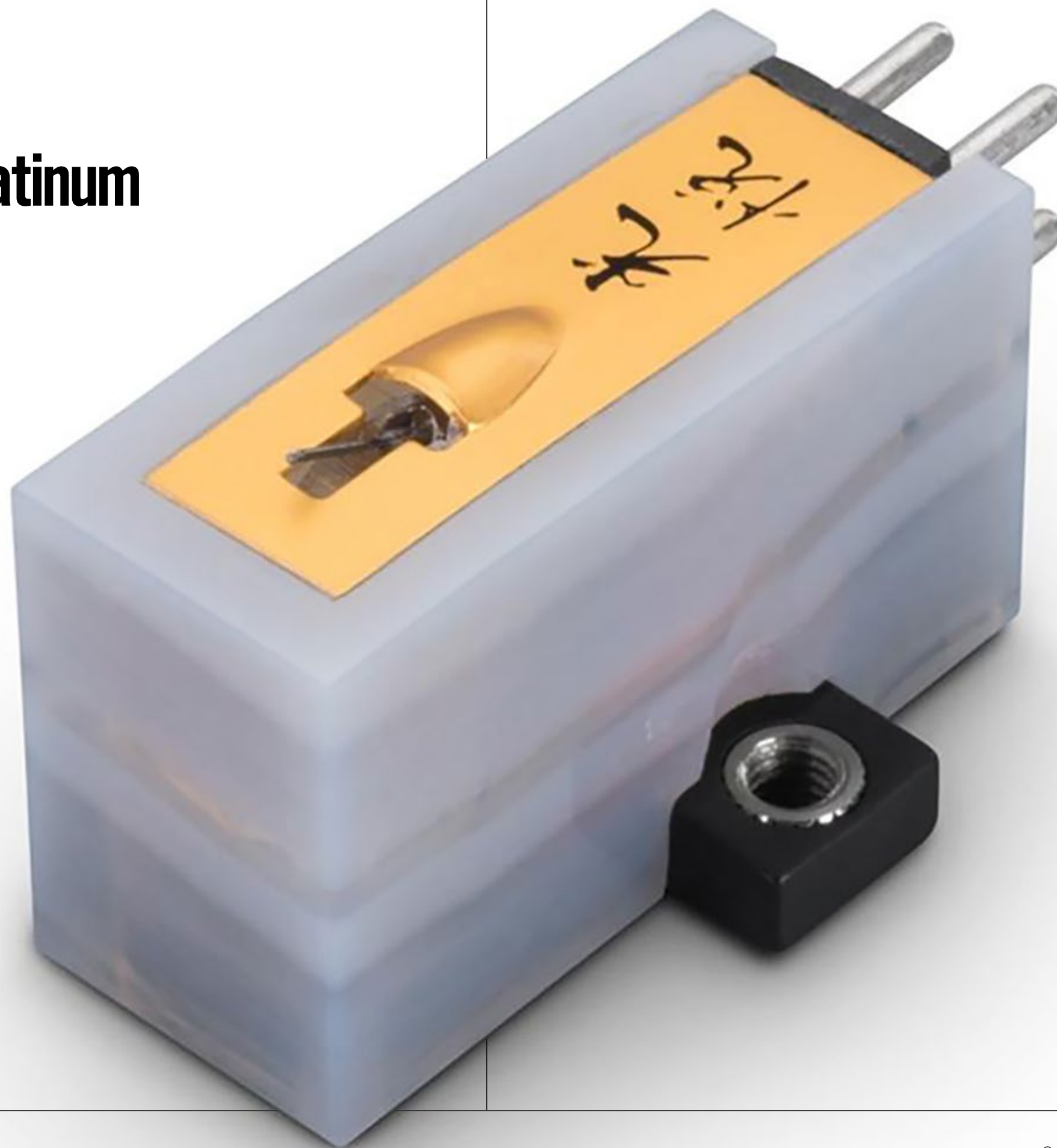
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Best of all, Koetsu cartridges are a long-term investment. When ready for a new stylus, you can send your cartridge back to MoFi Distribution and they will facilitate a full rebuild utilizing the same body, and the finished result will retain the same serial number. Watch for our enthusiastic review in issue 76.



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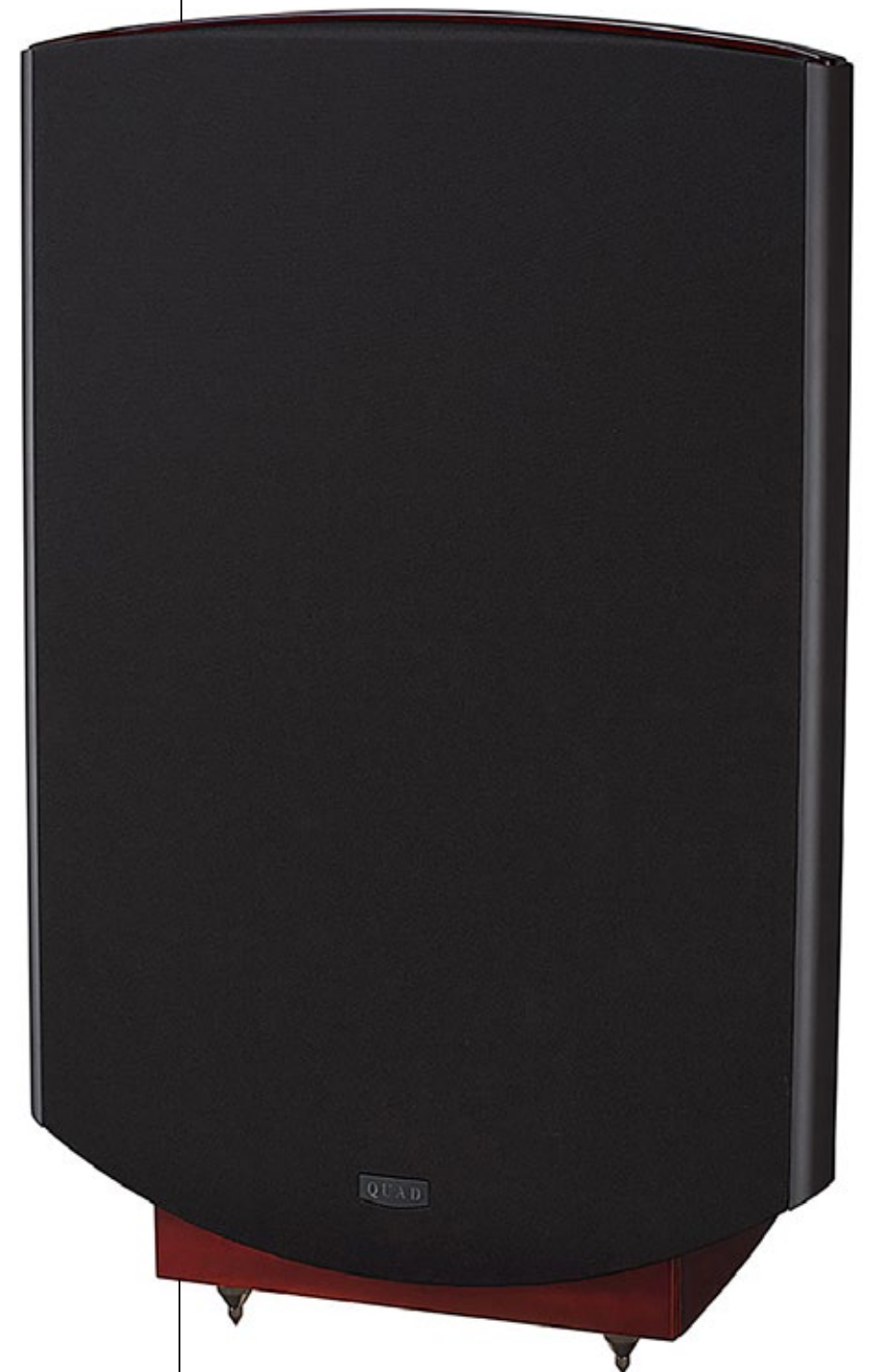
PREVIEW

Quad ESL-2812 Speakers

\$11,999/pair
www.quad-hifi.co.uk

The original Quad ESL speaker invented the term "midrange magic," producing an integrated, cohesive sound that many, to this day, feel has not been matched. Unfortunately, this dreamy speaker from yesteryear, while lovely, is somewhat fragile and getting long in the tooth. Although hardcore enthusiasts can have a pair rebuilt and updated by a few third party vendors, the current ESL-2812 retains all of the splendor of the original with considerably more dynamic range and extension.

As with the Quad 57, the 2812 is absolutely seductive with a valve amplifier, as we've seen with our reference Conrad Johnson LP120sa+, yet it is equally stunning, albeit with a different presentation via the Pass Labs Xs300s. Tune in to our review next issue to explore the adventure with us.



Clearaudio Concept Wood

\$2,995 with Concept MC cartridge
www.clearaudio.com

A couple of years ago we put the original Clearaudio Concept table through its paces and found it to be an incredible performer. At \$1,499 it was a lot of turntable, but for \$2,199 without cartridge, \$2,399 with Concept MM or \$2,999 with Concept MC, this table is better than ever thanks to an upgraded power supply and tonearm. Most manufacturers that didn't produce in the scale that Clearaudio does would probably charge you two grand for this tonearm alone, so consider this (especially with the Concept MC) as one of high end audio's finest tables bridging that gap between entry level and major expensive. Watch for our review very soon.



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Wood, wood everywhere! The folks at GIK have been busy creating a way to package their award winning (and patented) sound treatments in a spiffier package. They have succeeded brilliantly with the Alpha Wood Panels and according to their founder Glenn Kuras, "The Alpha Wood Series is one of the most attractive product lines we've introduced, and they are more effective than similar products on the market, made with the quality and high performance standards that our customers have come to expect. The Alpha is truly a game changer for GIK and for the industry."

Having used GIK products in the *TONEAudio* studio for nearly ten years now with excellent results, and having had disastrous results with the "similar products" Kuras describes, we can say with confidence this is a product you will want to examine in your home. Full review shortly.



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Most people think of speaker and interconnect cables when they think of Nordost, but they produce some pretty spectacular tonearm cables as well. We've taken a peek at (and a lengthy listen to) a range of these tonearm cables and noted the results up and down the Nordost range. All use the same conductors and attention to detail that the rest of the Nordost cables feature.

Regardless of what turntable, tonearm and cartridge you're sporting, Nordost has a cable and configuration available to suit your needs. We hope you enjoy our research as we go up the Nordost range in search of higher fidelity.



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For many audiophiles, the sound of an SET (single ended triode) amplifier is the holy grail, and for a subset of SET owners, the 2A3 tube, which has lower power than many, is the ultimate. The Whammerdyne amplifier, which is robustly built to say the least, takes 2A3 implementation to

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Near Perfection

The BAT VK-P6 and VK-P6SE

By Jeff Dorgay



LS5/9



LS5/8

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Balanced Audio Technology doesn't make wimpy anything. The phonostages you see here tip the scales at nearly 40 pounds. That's more than a lot of power amplifiers weigh. It's almost as much as my Smart car weighs. There's no air under the hood when you lift the top of either of these, as the photo illustrates. With dual mono construction throughout and massive power supplies, the VK-6 and -6SE embody the BAT philosophy of low noise, tonal accuracy and major dynamic heft.

Replacing the older VK-P5, which received major kudos here and was a reference component for some time, the VK-P6 is evolutionary rather than breaking new ground for BAT. Borrowing a VK-P5 from a friend and comparing it to the latest iteration is revealing; as BAT's product literature says, the newer P6 models sound closer to the old P10, with more heft and weight to the presentation. Going back to the P5, everything feels smaller, and less resolving. Where the \$2,995 VK-P5 was an exceptional value, the new P6 is even more so.



P6, P6SE or?

The dilemma is not really between the P6 and P6SE, but rather whether you should find some more cash and go all the way to a VK-P12SE. The earlier VK-P5 always felt a lot like a VK-P10SE with less gain, and the new 6 is the same game plan. If you have a cartridge in the .5-.8mv output range, you may not need to ever go from the 56dB of gain the P6 / SE offer, but if you have a cartridge with .4mv or less the P6 phonostages may never be enough.

Where the .2mv Ortofon SPU was too faint for the VK-P6 to get up and go, the .5mv Lyra Kleos was phenomenal,

offering a lively, dynamic presentation. Of the cartridges at my disposal, this and the Grado Statement 1, with .6mv of output, proved the most engaging with the BAT pair.

Both units have a single RCA input for one turntable and a single balanced output. BAT offers a set of balanced to single-ended adaptors for those needing it, and they work very well. When integrating both preamps into the Robert Koda and ARC linestages (with both RCA and XLR inputs) there is almost no noticeable difference in sonic quality should you have to use either of these in a single-ended system. *(continued)*

INSPIRE

BY PLINIUS AUDIO



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Tracking through a fair share of the Slayer catalog, both P6 models reveal more air between the screaming guitars, while simultaneously capturing heavier pounding from the bass drum and bass guitar without losing focus and merely sounding like a metal mess. Things feel more like you are right in the front row, hearing a lot more of the amplifiers and monitors rather than the PA.

Classical lovers preferring large scale orchestral pieces will notice the same thing, instantly. No matter what you choose, the hall feels bigger and more alive, with horns and strings having more subtle textures and greater silence between the notes.

And your favorite female vocalists will kill you. Anja Garbarek's *Smiling and Waving* and Julee Cruise's *The Art of Being a Girl* are chock-full of breathy, processed, steamy vocals. The combination of the P6 and the Grado cartridge was so natural and relaxed, that it seemed as if it couldn't get better until we swapped places with the SE model.

Like all BAT products, both the bass resolution and definition are their strongest suit, though the new P6 series features more refinement in the upper octaves as well. Yet, put on your favorite bass-heavy track and it's instantly clear that this phonostage delivers sound you may not have heard elsewhere. Thanks to the improved power supply and refined circuit topology, the current crop of BAT phonostages are even quieter than the past models, and considering there are



ten tubes under the cover, this is no small engineering feat. If you didn't see the glow, you'd almost think there weren't any tubes in these preamplifiers!

The jump in subtlety between the P6 and the P6SE is wide enough to justify the additional cost, as the SE model definitely reveals more music than its lesser priced brother. Though their overall sonic character is similar, those with a better record collection and system will notice the difference more easily than not. Fortunately, you don't have to decide this today, which leads us to one of the best aspects of owning BAT gear: you can have your P6 upgraded to an SE model at a later date, taking a bit of the sting out of the upgrade bug later.

Everything else notwithstanding, the ultimate question is whether you will have enough gain to suit your needs. Where the P6SE and P12 models are a bit limited is that for \$5,995 and \$9,995, they both only offer one input, so they are more suited to the single turntable/toner arm audiophile. It is worth noting that the VK-P12 models also offer a balanced phono input for those seeking the ultimate in quiet. We had the same issue with the LP610 and LP810 from Simaudio. Analog makes it easy to become obsessed, but informal reader feedback tells us that there are a sufficient number of audiophiles seeking high performance with only a solitary turntable in their system to justify the cost here. *(continued)*



Covers all the bases

These two BAT phono stages are excellent, and thanks to their robust construction should provide years of listening pleasure. Our experience with past BAT preamplifiers indicates they do not run their tubes very hard, so you shouldn't have to replace the tubes that often. The P6 features a complement of eight 6922s and a pair of 6SN7 tubes, while the SE model uses four 6922s and a pair of 6SN7s along with a new 6C45 gain stage with BAT's Super Pak capacitor upgrade as well.

The only minor inconvenience with either of these excellent phono stages is the limited loading options (100, 1000, 10k and a user-defined value) and the fact that you have to remove 12 screws to get the cover off to make these changes. Thankfully BAT does include a hex wrench with their excellent instruction manual to accomplish this task. Again, this will be more suited to audiophiles not switching phono cartridges often, but it would be nice to see this adjustment on the front panel, or better yet via remote control.

Both the 6SN7 and the 6922 have a plethora of vintage NOS options, so you could probably drive yourself crazy with tube rolling. The 6C45, not so much. Unless you want to get lost in a sea of madness, I suggest just going with the factory tubes and enjoying your record collection. Don't say I didn't warn you.

The BAT VK-P6 is one of the finest phono stages you can put your hands on for \$3,499 and we happily offer it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2015. The 6SE is a significant and worthy upgrade, but at \$5,999, will have a slightly narrower audience. ●

The BAT VK-P6

MSRP \$3,495

The BAT VK-P6SE

MSRP \$5,995

MANUFACTURER

Balanced Audio Technology

CONTACT

balanced.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Sequel Turntable/
SMEV tonearm/Kiseki
PurpleHeart cartridge

Digital Source

dCS Paganini stack

Speakers

Gamut RS5, Quad 2218

Preamplifier

Audio Research GSPre

Power Amplifier

Audio Research GS 150

Cable

Cardas Clear Reflection

Power

IsoTek Super Titan



LONG TERM UPDATE

REGA'S ARIA

Better Than Ever

By Jeff Dorgay

Last spring when we unboxed the Rega Aria phonostage, it seemed like the little phonostage that could and it received an enthusiastic review. However, after spending over a year with this little gem, with a broader selection of turntable/cartridge combinations, my appreciation for what Rega has been able to accomplish at this price point has increased.

Having been to the Rega factory three times in the last six years, I've seen the growth, change and further organization of this iconic British manufacturer. If there is a company that embodies the concept of "waste not, want not," it's Rega. They keep a tight rein on manufacturing every step of the way and there is not a bit of excess to be found anywhere. Everything that can be reused for another product or task is.

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REVIEW



The only disappointment will be for those wanting flashy casework, or electronics wrapped in silk purses. There's none of that here. A number of models share casework, switches, knobs and packaging. The result is maximum performance for the minimum of price, honoring a longtime commitment of founder Roy Gandy's ideal of offering best in class performance at a price most music lovers can afford.

Spinning Laurie Anderson's classic *Mister Heartbreak*, the trippy, three-dimensional soundstage created is nothing short of amazing. While we've mated this phonostage with nearly every table/cartridge combination in the Rega lineup, including the top of the range RP10 and Apheta (all with excellent result, by the way) it currently resides in the living room of my home system with

the latest Clearaudio Concept table and MC cartridge as well as a modified Technics SL-1200 table with Rega RB600 tonearm and Rega Exact 2 MM cartridge. It is the perfect solution for the analog enthusiast wanting to utilize two turntables or a dual tonearm table and not break the bank in the process.

Vinyl virtue

At \$1,499 the Aria reminds me of Rega's IOS phonostage that we reviewed a few years ago, sharing its neutral tonal balance and dead quiet background. Borrowing an IOS from a friend for comparison to refresh my aural memory, there are more similarities than not. The main differences between the two is the ultimate dynamic swing that the IOS possesses with its larger power supply and higher degree of resolution. *(continued)*



The IOS also reminds me that my only complaint after living with the Aria for a while, it really could use a bit wider range on loading adjustments than the supplied 70, 100, 150 and 400 ohms. But you can't have everything at this price.

While the Aria turns in an admirable performance with cartridges in the \$2,000 - \$3,000 range, it's really at it's best in the \$500 - \$1,500 range. And if you do use that second tonearm/cartridge combination the Aria's value increases that much more. Taking advantage of my two tonearm AVID Ingenium table, using a vintage SME arm with multiple headshells as a daily driver and a used SME 309 with Dynavector 17D3 for better pressings, I found myself playing more records at home than ever before, with all the bases more than adequately covered.

Though Rega's Gandy is not a firm believer in component break in, the Aria does take on a fuller sound after being powered up for about a week. As with most solid state components it certainly benefits from everything under the hood staying at operating temperature.

Love it

Techie stuff aside, the Aria simply goes about its business, taking up precious little shelf space in the process. Comparing it to a number of other contenders, new and vintage it steals the show every time. Perhaps it's highest virtue is the additional gain setting of 69db. This makes it easier to use with cartridges having .25 - .4mv, as the extra gain allows these cartridges to have enough dynamic range to be useful instead of sounding anemic.
(continued)

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REVIEW



Again, the incredibly low noise floor of the Aria adds to the punchy transient response, making for great dynamics, especially when tracking through the last set of Motorhead remasters. "Ace of Spades" never sounded better, and the Aria does a fantastic job of keeping Lemmy's vocals in their own separate space from the screaming guitar leads. On a more friendly basis, Michael Hedges classic *Taproot* is rendered with the delicacy that shows off Hedges virtuosity, yet the speed necessary for his lightning fast delivery. And female vocals sound pretty good too.

In the end, the Aria remains the phonostage to beat in the under \$2,000 category. While the Decware ZE2 that we've reviewed this issue will give you that last few molecules of palpability that only valves can, it only has one input and requires a \$629 step up transformer should you decide to use it with an MC cartridge. The Aria only requires to be plugged into the mains and left on forever to do its job. That's as good as analog gets for this reviewer. ●

The Rega Aria
MSRP: \$1,499

MANUFACTURER
Rega Research Ltd.

CONTACT
www.rega.co.uk (factory)
www.soundorg.com (US Importer)

PERIPHERALS

Turntable Clearaudio Concept Wood w/ Clearaudio Concept MC Cartridge

Preamplifier Simaudio 430HA

Amplifier Conrad Johnson LP120sa+

Speakers
Acoustat 1+1s w/REL S2 subwoofer

Cable Nordost Frey

Power IsoTek

The Other Amazing British Mini

ProAc's Tablette Anniversary

By Jeff Dorgay

Forget the headphones. Listening to Chaka Khan's voice blast through the Anniversary Tablettes from my comfy chair, I'm flabbergasted that these miniature marvels throw an even larger soundstage than my reference Quad 2815s, from which I've just removed the speaker cables. Now in its ninth version after 32 years, we have the Tablette Anniversary (signifying the 30th anniversary of its launch in 2013, when this speaker was originally introduced).

It seems like only yesterday when I got hooked on the sound of small British speakers, but after a pair of KEFs and LS3/5a's, I bounced back stateside for the legendary Spica TC-50. After torturing my local dealer with countless fried TC-50 tweeters and after reading *Stereophile's* review of the original Tablette, it was time to bid the TC-50s adieu and move back to the other side of the pond.

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REVIEW

Back to the Future

It's amazing how time flies, and today there is another new Tablette, the Anniversary model you see here. This diminutive cabinet still makes some of the most engaging small speaker sound you'll ever hear, and again is more refined in every way with nothing negative to report.

As good as the new dome tweeter is, the Anniversary Tablette makes tremendous strides in the bass and dynamics department. *(continued)*

I couldn't agree with the *Stereophile* review more: these speakers really nailed the mid-range, and in the small living room I inhabited, the lack of deep bass wasn't a deal breaker as I'd lived with ESLs for so long. After a while in a larger living room, tweeters started popping again, so the Tablettes and I parted company for a while. In 2003, I found myself in a small room again and on a limited budget; a quick call to my good friend Jonathan Spelt (the same gentleman who sold me my first pair in '84) at Ultra Fidelis in

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, had a pair quickly zooming my way.

Again, I wasn't disappointed. These speakers had only become more of what I loved and less of what I didn't. They had more LF energy: the top end now smoother and more extended, with the magic midrange and phenomenal imaging of the original model still intact. Unfortunately, when I packed my bags and moved to the Pacific Northwest, the Tablettes had to be part of the moving sale.



REVIEW

These little speakers don't sound little anymore. While they still sound better nearfield in the main 16 x 25 foot listening room, it's amazing how much air the Tablettes can move even in full-room mode. You will lose a smidge of their pinpoint imaging ability in a larger room, though adding a small subwoofer (I suggest the REL S/2 that we recently reviewed) makes for a formidable combination that easily knocks on the door of a lot of \$10k/pair speakers we've auditioned. But I'm not here to sell you a subwoofer.

Quick to unpack

The quandary you face with a pair of Tablettes is whether to optimize them for the biggest stereo image they can deliver, or the most bass reinforcement you can derive from your room. Those preferring the former should place them about 6 or 7 feet apart, making a triangle about the same distance to your listening chair, preferably as far away from the side walls as you can. If you want to cheat a bit and have to put your Tablettes a foot or so from the wall, I highly suggest a single 242 panel from GIK Acoustics just in front of the speakers to damp the first reflection. But if you really want Quad killers, get them about 6 feet from the sidewalls and be prepared to be blown away.

Angling the speakers in ever so slightly and keeping the tweeters at ear height helps to deliver everything the Tablettes are capable of, and the more solid your speaker stands (I suggest a pair of sand-filled Sound Anchors stands) are, the better the low frequencies will be rendered. A tiny bit of blu-tack or other suitable substance to improve the speaker/stand interface goes a long way, and be careful not to overdamp. Fifteen minutes and you'll have them sorted.



Around back, you'll notice that the Tablettes offer two pairs of binding posts to allow bi-wiring. That's an argument for your favorite internet forum, but we had excellent results with the new Clear Reflection cable from Cardas Audio that just happened to have two sets of bananas on the ends, so we were off to the races.

Tie your mother down

And with that in mind, Queen's *A Day at the Races* is the perfect choice to get the party started. Forget the hit single; you know what track to play. The current Tablette's ability to play really loud—this time courtesy of the Pass Lab's Xs300 monoblocks—is indeed impressive, with these little speakers giving their all, able to keep the heavily overdubbed vocals and guitars all in check. Diamanda Galas' *Plague Mass* increases the punishment; yet again the ProAcs come through reproducing her five-octave screams without strain.

Steve Winwood's piano glides through the entire first side of *John Barleycorn Must Die*, and about ten albums later, the way the Tablettes capture the essence of whatever music is thrown at them is their strongest suit. Just like a great ESL speaker, they are so coherent and smooth yet resolving, you don't want to flip through the tracks, whether listening to digital or analog.

REVIEW

Going back and forth between the new Quad and the Tablettes, it's tough to decide which is the more desirable speaker on certain program material – and when you consider a pair of these little ProAcs will only set you back \$2,400 a pair (\$2,800 in a premium finish), they are pretty sweet indeed.

Moving the Tablettes to the 10 x 13 foot room in my house is a much more intimate experience. As mentioned, the first reflection is absorbed with GIK 242 panels, and the rear wall about 2 feet behind the listening chair has a row of GIK diffusors. The sound is big, bold—and thanks to a bit of room gain—really not requiring a subwoofer at all. This is nearfield listening at its best, feeling like your listening chair has a pair of headphones strapped on it is the only way it can be described, with a vivid soundstage that is so immersive, in a dimly lit room you never even see the speakers.

Any amp will do

The current Tablette is easier to drive than the original. A clean original pair rustled from the shelves of Echo Audio in Portland, Oregon, for a quick comparison instantly puts perspective on how far this great speaker has evolved. While still relatively low on the sensitivity scale, requiring one watt for 86dB of output, the current speaker is much more “valve amplifier friendly.” (continued)

In our small listening room, the 35-watt per channel PrimaLuna Dialog integrated with EL 34 tubes is wonderfully romantic, while the 30-watt per channel solid state Fern & Roby integrated that we review this issue is equally engaging, yet slightly more dynamic, due to this amplifier's greater control. Both are fun, both are awesome and either amplifier makes for a high quality, fully engaging small-room system. The 100-watt per channel Conrad-Johnson LP120sa+ paints a larger sound field, but you don't need this beefy of an amplifier to enjoy the current Tablettes. Rega's Brio-R is a perfect budget solution and if you're really slumming it, the Harmon Kardon 730 vintage receiver will surprise you.

Having bi-wired speaker cables won't make or break the sound of these lovely speakers, and perhaps the improvement in sound we heard was more from eliminating the stock jumpers between woofer and tweeter. An equally good result was achieved with single wire speaker cable and upgraded jumpers between woofer and tweeter. Cardas, Chord and Nordost jumpers were tried, all with equally rewarding results – a smidge more clarity from the upper midrange on up. Let's call it a 5% improvement, but the better your ancillaries, the easier it will be for you to hear.

I want them

I can't resist a pair of ProAc Tablettes, so this pair is staying. I'll be using them as my small speaker reference both here and over at The Audiophile Apartment. They are the speaker to beat for a small- to medium-sized listening room with resolution that matches the big boys. They will be receiving one of our Publisher's Choice Awards in our upcoming special issue. I can't suggest them highly enough. ●

The ProAc Tablette Anniversary

\$2,400 - \$2,800
(finish dependent)

MANUFACTURER

ProAc

CONTACT

proac-loudspeakers.com
(Manufacturer)

soundorg.com
(NA distributor)

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Sequel Turntable/
SMEV tonearm/Kiseki
PurpleHeart cartridge

Digital Source

dCS Paganini stack

Phonostage

Rogers Audio PA1A

Preamplifier

Audio Research GSPre

Power Amplifier

Audio Research GS 150

Cable

Cardas Clear Reflection

Power

IsoTek Super Titan

Another Marvel from Decware

The ZP3 Phonostage

By Mark Marcantonio

Decware is one of those off-the-radar brands in high end audio that has earned a superb reputation on hard work, top quality engineering and delivery of stellar sonics at a reasonable price. Their loyal customer base and manufacturer direct sales model has allowed them to consistently deliver products that outperform similarly priced competitors and the \$1,295 ZP3 phonostage is another example of this philosophy.

The sheer musical clarity that the ZP3 delivers always highlights the skill of the recording engineer. As I was delving deep into Pink Martini's library, I noticed that the purposeful haze injected into "Hang on Little Tomato" doesn't turn into static mush – it oozes with '30s nostalgia carefully applied. The oboe's haunting, seductive melody is more magical with the ZP3 than with my current reference, and, for that matter, anything I've experienced at anywhere near this price.

Even the dreaded crunch from '70s and '80s Columbia records rock pressings is more tolerable, yet resolution is not sacrificed. The lack of annoying background noise in Billy Joel's ode "Where Is the Orchestra" makes it easier to separate the grunge of his angst from the grunge of the recording. The same goes for Aerosmith's debut LP, containing their signature hit, "Dream On." Through the ZP3, this rock staple sounds more like FM than AM, with more oomph and definition to the guitars present and the ability to see further into the star that Steven Tyler would eventually become.

Down to business

The ZP3 is a single-ended triode MM phonostage with 42 dB of gain. MC users can select one of three external step-up transformers, each optimized for a different range of cartridge internal resistance. Ease of setup is simple: plug in the tubes and turn it on. The glow of the big OA3 tube alone is worth every moment of startup eye contact.

If you've only seen Decware products in the traditional wood trim and can't see beyond what looks like picture-frame moulding, don't worry. Steve Deckert offers a smooth contemporary trim in a variety of woods. In case you aren't familiar with their products, all Decware equipment comes with a lifetime warranty to the original owner.

In addition to a stunning level of quality that I would expect from a much more expensive phonostage, the noise floor from this class-A single triode design is quiet. Even the wood base is lined with foil to keep spurious noise from intruding on the delicate phono signals.



Sometimes too many tubes in the reproduction chain can be too much of a good thing, but I'm happy to report that pairing the ZP3 with both solid state and vacuum tube based systems worked equally well. The overall tonal balance is definitely more voluptuous than you will get from a solid state phonostage, but never slow or syrupy.

With a pair of 12AX7s producing the gain, a 12AU7 buffer stage, a 5Y3 rectifier and the OA3 as a voltage regulator, you might find the ZP3 a tube roller's paradise. However, our experience with past Decware products has been that Mr. Deckert chooses some pretty damn good tubes to ship with his products and extensive tube rolling offers more "different" than "better," so I chose to leave well enough alone this time.

Let's listen!

Tube equipment done right is the holy grail for many, and the ZP3 more than delivers the goods. Steve Deckert proclaims in the owner's manual that "If you're new to tube gear, the amp will sound so good right out of the box you will have a hard time worrying about break-in, so don't." Listen to what the man says and just dig it. However, like all tube gear, the ZP3 will take about 30 minutes to fully warm up and deliver all it is capable of. Be sure to pick something special for your first listen and you will not be disappointed.

To wit, my first selection was Donald Fagan's *The Nightfly*. Even at 33 years old, its upbeat melodies still sound fresh between the shimmer of the cymbals and the xylophone as the ZP3 pulls out all the nuances. The light-hearted melodies flow quickly; the ZP3 leaves no gooey wake in the face of the slick production. (continued)



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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.

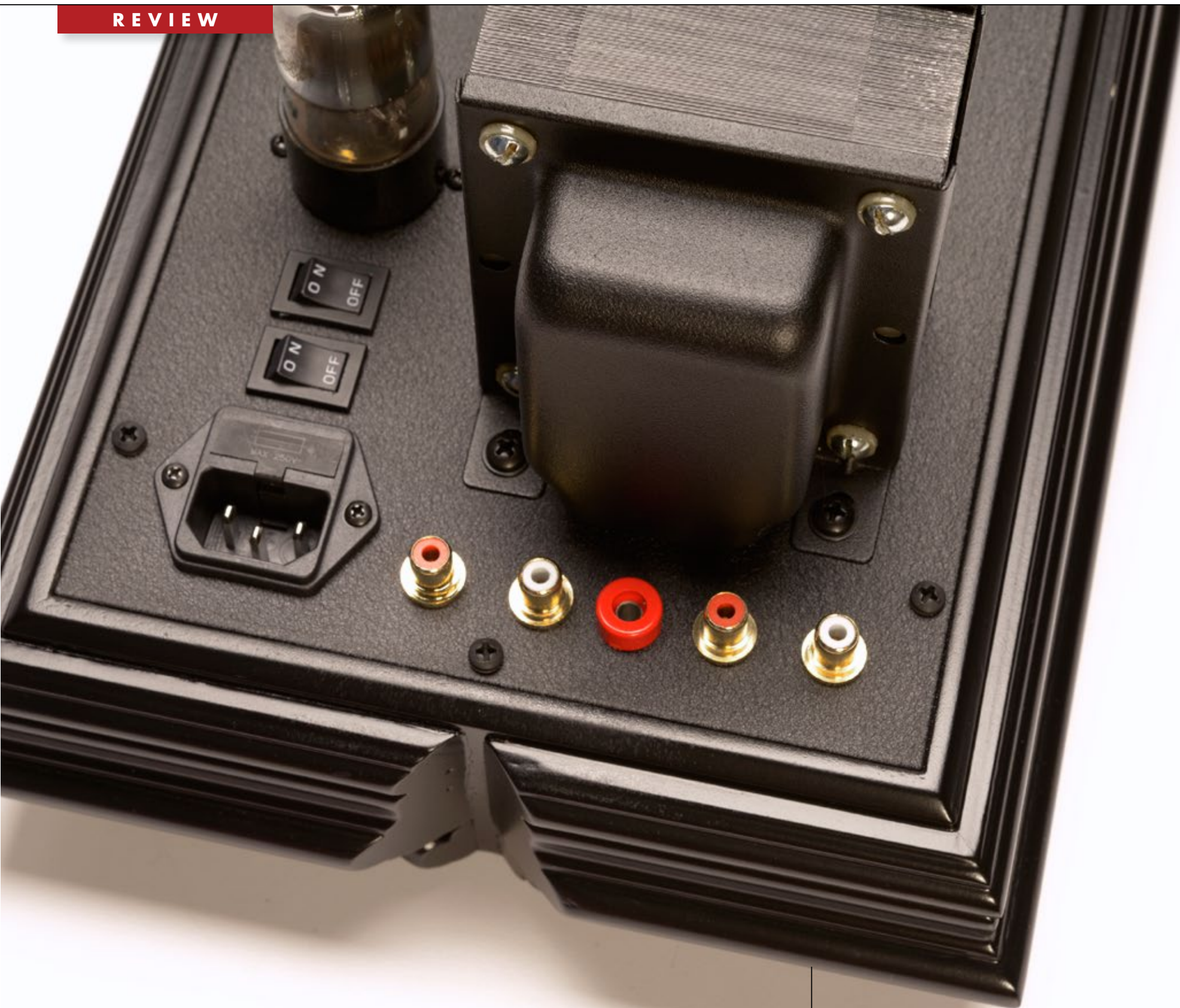
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REVIEW

Capturing the subtle inner tones and dynamics of an acoustic guitar is always a great way to show off the magic of the glowing bottles—and the delicacy of William Ackerman's "Anne's Song" takes you there instantly. A fresh copy of Mariah Carey's *#1 to Infinity* brings me back to 2015, with the sparkle and nuance that the ZP3 offers, working wonders on this multi-track, heavily produced album. The thumping beat that feels as if it's coming from a Honda Civic about two inches from the ground stays well defined and taut. Revisiting Carey's self-titled debut, the ZP3 easily illustrates this young singer's haunting, defiant ability. Like the Decware power amplifiers we've reviewed at *TONE*, the ZP3 never eases off into a mellow fuzziness to achieve its result. As Carey reaches hard into her uppermost registers, the presentation never wavers or appears harsh.

Switching to symphonic music, the ZP3 holds special sway with reed instruments; the shrillness that betrays most reasonably priced solid state phonostages in the movement "On the Trail" from Ferde Groffe's *The Grand Canyon Suite* is absent here. The opening violin solo that reminds you of the jagged cliff sides presents just enough sweetness to prepare the listener for the friendly oboe and percussion re-creation of the donkey ride down to the canyon bottom. Regardless of program material, the ZP3 never disappoints. Even the massive separation present in *Dark Side of the Moon* makes this well-worn classic seem new again. (*continued*)





More Cowbell

This is actually more of a long-term review, with Mr. Marcantonio confirming what I heard instantly with the ZP3. It's a real ear opener, and proves that you don't need to spend crazy money to get exquisite analog. Using the ZP3 with my favorite MM cartridges, this phono-stage instantly amazed me with how much music it reveals and resolves for a \$1,300 box. Up till now, my favorite budget phono-stage has been my trusty Audio Research PH-3SE, which retailed for exactly twice the MSRP of the Decware back in 2001 when it was discontinued and used FET's in the first gain stage. The ZP3 is even quieter, being all tubes.

Whether pre, power or phono, power supply is everything — and in this case, what powers the ZP3 looks more like the power supply in the ARC REF phono. This little phono stage is indeed robustly built!

The big surprise comes moving up the food chain, utilizing the ZP3 in the context of a much better analog front end and system. While it has spent a lot of time with a lot of MC cartridges as well as MM, and turned in brilliant performances with cartridges from Lyra, Ortofon and Clearaudio, my favorite combination has been with the AVID Volvere, SME V and Denon DL-103r.

Yes, this barely \$400 cartridge along with the SME tonearm and the ZP3 really makes beautiful music that is dynamic, tuneful and quiet, not to mention a wonderful combination with my home system, now featuring a pair of rebuilt Acoustat 1+1s, a REL subwoofer, the Simaudio 430HA that we've recently reviewed and the Conrad Johnson LP120sa+.

I continue to be impressed by the tonal delicacy, richness and contrast this phono-stage offers. Unless you have an ultra megabuck analog setup and system, I'd highly suggest buying a Decware ZP3, the matching transformer and calling it a day. It's that good. And it's good enough to get one of our Publisher's Choice Awards next issue, too. — *Jeff Dorgay*

The Decware
ZP3 phono-stage

MSRP: \$1,299
MC transformer
\$629 additional

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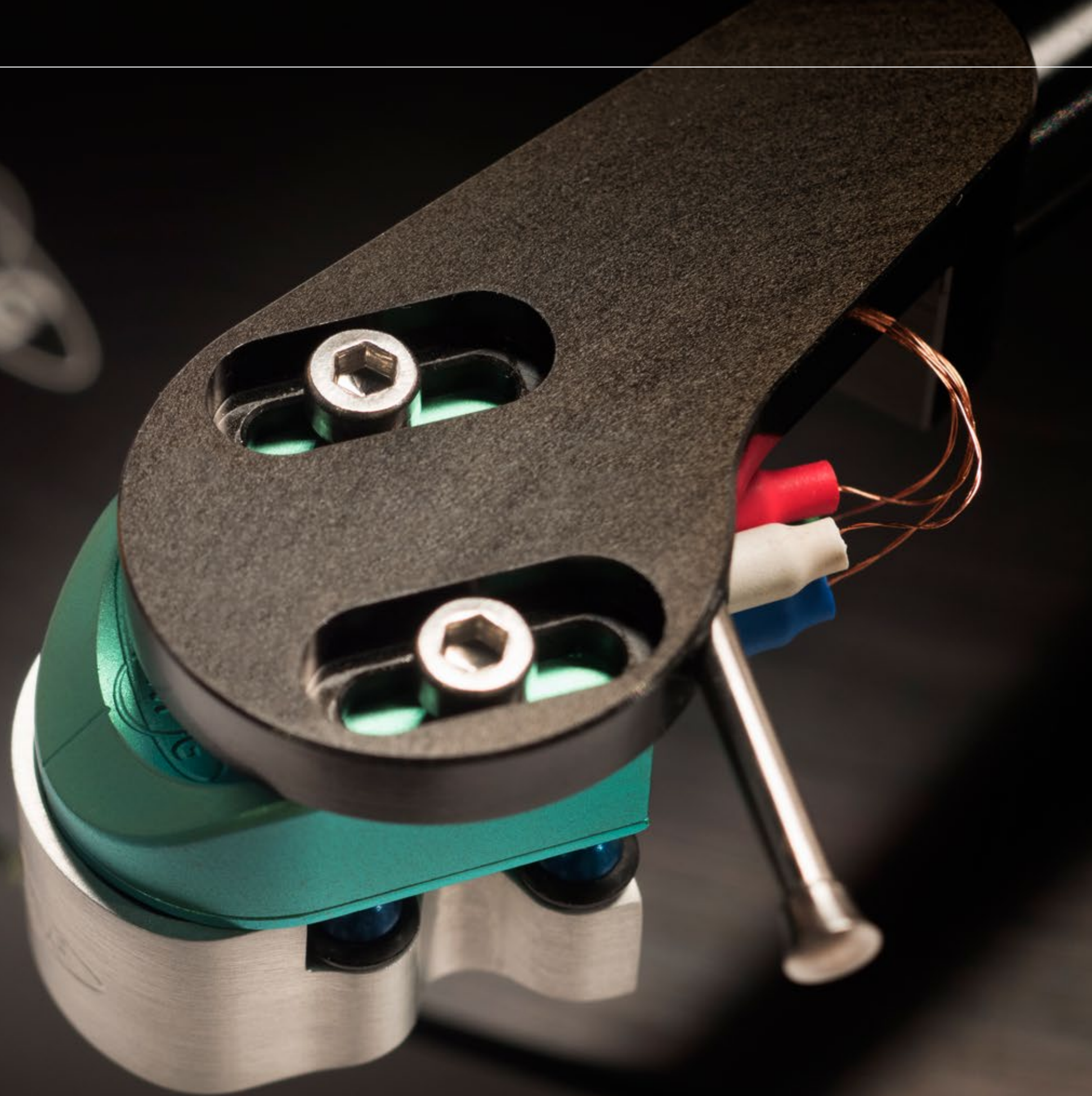
The Essence of Analog Simplicity

The AMG Giro Turntable

By Jeff Dorgay

Despite all the enthusiasm for analog these days, the analog versus digital debate remains a heated and polarized one. Much as I enjoy both, great analog at its best is still slightly more special, more organic, more engaging than digital. The gap has closed tremendously, but there is still something glamorous about the sound of vinyl. Particularly the way you can just keep turning the volume up when listening to analog, it's a picture that you can keep enlarging without loss of detail, where digital seems to pixelate at a certain point. It's like using big, incandescent lights to take a photograph rather than LEDs or flash – it's a continuous tone thing.

Which leads us to the next argument: how much is enough to spend on a turntable, tonearm and cartridge? Of course, this will vary depending on your system, bank balance and priorities, but in the context of a “destination” turntable, I see the points of diminishing return at \$1,000, \$4,000, \$15,000 and again at about \$50,000. Feel free to send all the nastygrams you'd like; you won't change my thoughts on this one.



REVIEW

\$50k and up tables are limited to a select, well-heeled few, but a \$15k turntable is much more approachable than you might realize. I've heard squawking about this price from many a vinyl lover who has a motorcycle they barely ride, a boat that gets taken out a few times a year, or a pile of camping equipment that they never use. And chances are you probably won't opt in at \$15k; you'll trade up from something else as your appreciation for analog (and record collection) grows.

Don't look to me to be the voice of reason as I've eaten more than my share of ramen noodles and Wendy's dollar menu items over the years to be able to spend a disproportionate amount on turntables. At \$12,200, the AMG Giro turntable and Teatro MC cartridge will even leave you a few bucks left for some decent dinners.

Immediately engaging

The subtle vibrato in Annie Lennox's voice on the Eurythmic's classic "Don't Ask Me Why" instantly justifies the purchase of an AMG Giro. It pulls so much information out of the grooves of a normal record, one that's been played many times over the years, that you instantly sit up in the chair and take notice. This just doesn't come through with the same delicacy and tenderness, if you will, with digital – even great digital. After a few weeks of careful listening, I question whether you'll need to jump to the next level. No matter where you choose to swim in the analog pool it's all good, but once you make the leap to a table in this league, analog is seductive. *(continued)*

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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Three years ago, I reviewed and purchased the AMG V-12, the Giro's bigger and more expensive sibling with a 12-inch tonearm that is nearly identical to the one on the Giro. According to importer Jesse Luna of Musical Surroundings, the 9W2 9-inch arm is a bit more traditional and "has the same bearing function, but redesigned to accommodate a shorter tube. This is not just a shorter arm with the same bearing, the entire arm is scaled down." German precision at its finest I say.

Listening to both tables side by side confirms that the Viella indeed reveals more music, but it's not a major jump – it's more like going from an Audi A4 with the sport package to the full-blown S4. If you've got the extra dough, by all means spend it, but you won't be disappointed with the Giro or the Viella.

Like the Viella, the Giro is a non-suspended table, so that may require more coddling from some environments. Musical Surroundings had supplied us with a custom base for the Viella made by HRS for more acoustically live listening rooms, and if that is your fate, this may help you get every bit of performance from your AMG table. With our test example placed on the top shelf of the SRA Scuttle Rack, we noticed no problem whatsoever.

Smaller in physical scale only

At first glance, the Giro looks almost exactly like the V-12 Viella without the wooden skirt, but when you see the two together, it's easy to see where else the design has been simplified. Where the Viella uses a complex armboard assembly allowing easy swapping of tonearms, the Giro limits you to the AMG tonearm. While some analog maniacs might think that is a terrible thing, you wouldn't put a different tonearm on your Linn LP-12, would you? *(continued)*



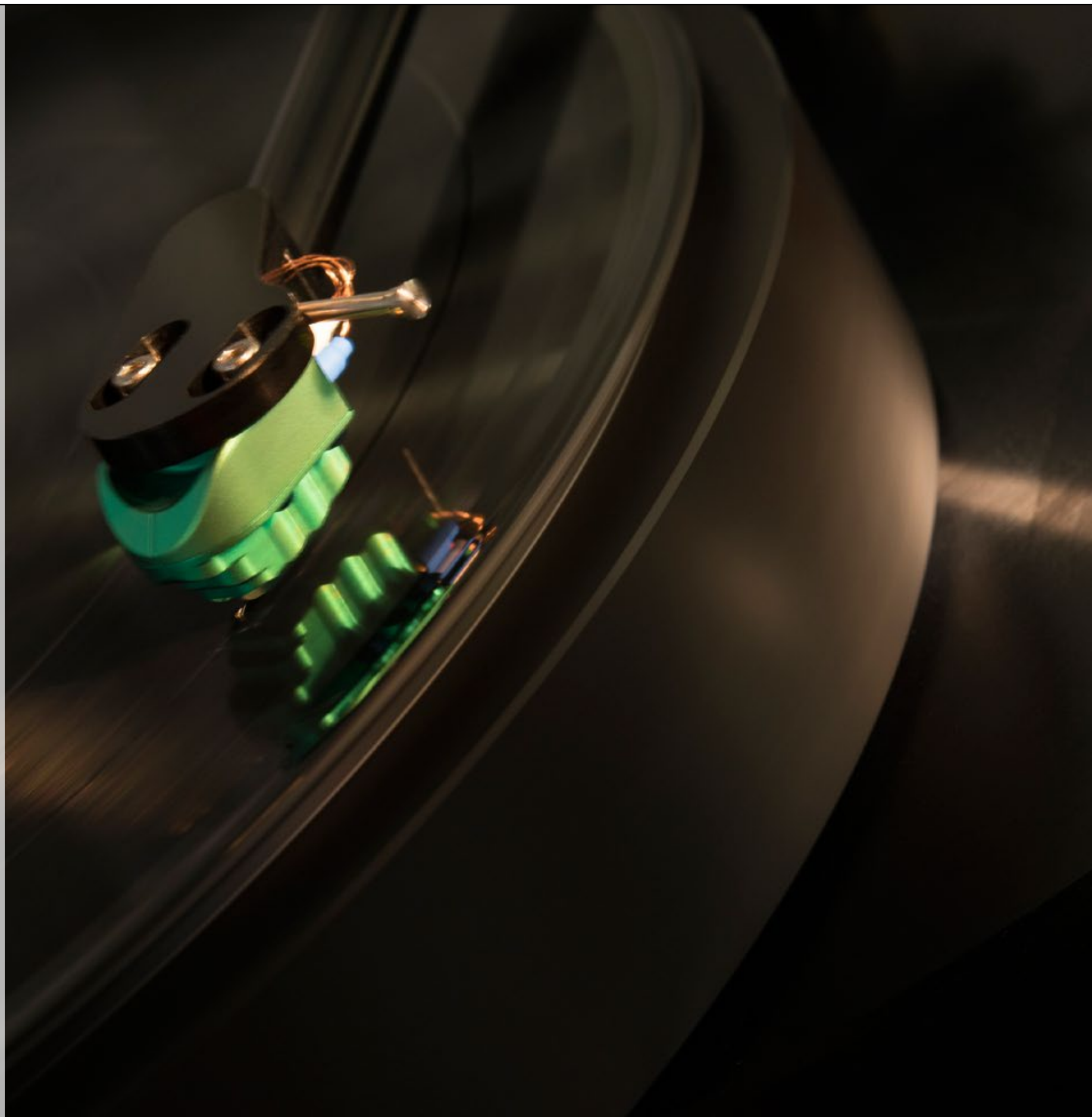
Just like those who put a Chevy V8 in a Jaguar, it never looks or sounds as right as what the factory provides. The same goes for the AMG. I can't imagine another arm on this table for aesthetic or performance reasons, but vinyl lovers with diverse record collections might want a second AMG arm with an alternate cartridge, making the Viella more attractive.

The Giro's tonearm is as finely machined as the Viella's, with equally fine and delicate adjustments; so proceed with care and caution during setup, as these tiny screws can be easily misthreaded. Luna had the Giro/Teatro combo spinning in no time at all and the overall balance is spectacular. For investigation's sake, I took the time to mount a couple of other similarly priced cartridges from Ortofon, Lyra and Grado, and there wasn't a pair that I liked as much (again) as the factory mount. Plus, the machined metal stylus guard is tough to beat!

You can use your own tonearm cable, but the opening in the Giro tonearm is somewhat tight, so I suggest using their cable, sourced by Cardas. Like all Cardas cables, it's soft, wiggly and not too large in diameter, so it makes a perfect mate for the Giro—and I'm very familiar with the sound, which makes this table even easier to evaluate. Again, unless you just have to tweak, go all AMG and be done with it!

Investigating the Teatro

A hifi system, like any other luxury pursuit, needs a point of engagement that has to be reached in order for you to stay engaged. You don't need to spend ten large to spin or enjoy records. However, if you can make the jump to this level in your analog journey, this is the point where it becomes more than interesting—it becomes immersive.



Of course for some, this point may vary, but after spending the last 12 years or so evaluating many turntable/tonearm/cartridge combinations from \$500 to over \$100,000, \$10k–\$15k is a wonderful stopping point.

The Teatro has an output of .4mv, so it should work well with most MC phono stages having upwards of 60dB of gain. Suggested loading is 120–500 ohms and used with the Simaudio 810LP/820S combination, 120 ohms proved the perfect balance of tonality and dynamics. When paired with the Pass XP-25 and ARC GSPre, 200 ohms was a slightly better match.

AMG suggests a tracking force of 1.8–2.2 grams and after a fair amount of experimentation, 2 grams proved optimal. However, this is a very easy cartridge to set up and get very good sound right away. Unlike some more finicky MC carts, the sweet spot is fairly wide with the Teatro, so don't panic if you don't get it perfect on the first go.

As mentioned, the overall tonal balance is just slightly on the more romantic side of neutral, so your system's overall tonal balance will be the determining factor. If we call an Ortofon SPU a 10 in terms of extreme tonal warmth, a Grado Statement 1 an 8, and a Lyra Titan i a 2, I'd give the Teatro a 6, with five being tonally neutral. Just a little bit extra tonal saturation but not enough to overly embellish.

Moving the Teatro over to the AVID Acutus Reference SP and Feickert Blackbird turntables confirms this decree and how neutral the AMG table happens to be. The Teatro fully retains its character in the other setups, yet has an amazing synergy with the AMG table, as it should. No matter what genre of music you may love, the Giro/Teatro completely disappears in the service of the music. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

The AMG Giro Turntable and Teatro Cartridge

MSRP: \$12,200 (table and cart)

MANUFACTURER

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www.amg-turntables.com
(manufacturer)
www.musicalsurroundings.com
(NA distributor)

PERIPHERALS

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Audio Research GSPre

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Speakers GamuT RS5, Quad 2218

Cable Cardas Clear Reflection

Power IsoTek Super Titan

You get what you pay for

While some argue about fit and finish, whether it is a necessary expense in fine audio components, I certainly argue for it. When you are spending this much money on a turntable, I feel it should look as good as it sounds. AMG has put all the effort beyond that spent on R&D in execution. There's no wasted effort and cost in a fancy box or packaging; this is efficiently achieved. All of the time and effort have been spent on making a product that sounds fantastic and looks at home in any circumstance.

Like the Viella, the Giro is a piece of audio fine art that does not sacrifice a molecule of performance to serve its aesthetic beauty. Both complement each other. It might seem a bit outlandish to give a \$12,000 turntable an exceptional value award, but the AMG Giro offers such a huge helping of what many \$50k and up turntables reveal, I do consider it an amazing value. Once you've heard the Giro, it might be tough to convince yourself you need to spend twice as much on another table, especially if you are an audiophile who likes to stick to a single tonearm and cartridge. If you are stepping up from a more modest turntable, the experience will be a revelation. You'll be glad you did. ●



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

Sponsored by Music Direct and Tidal

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

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

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

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