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No.75 November 2015

## Behind the Lens

The world of music and  
celebrity photographer  
**Karl Larsen**

**IN-DEPTH REVIEWS OF  
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Neil Young, Tinariwen, Pinkish Black,  
Darlene Love, and More; Plus, the  
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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER

**S**o many of my contemporaries long for the “good old days” of hifi, when there was a stereo and record store on every corner, and like anything, we tend to glorify the past as if it were somehow better. All it takes is a spin around the block in a 1973 BMW 2002 Tii, and jump into a current 3-series to realize how much progress has been made. That doesn't mean vintage isn't cool or fun. The grass might just be greener on the other side, but remember that guy mows, trims and weeds his lawn more too!

However, one of the most exciting things I've seen in the hifi world is the fusion of the old with the new, and no one is doing this better than Mat Weisfeld and his father Harry, over at VPI. Harry has built his whole house around hifi, aptly dubbing it “the VPI House.”

He and Mat, along with the staff at VPI and support from some industry friends, have built a number of different sized rooms with systems small, large and vintage; allowing a prospective customer or dealer to get the full VPI experience from entry level to top of the range. They've even started record cleaning clinics to demonstrate the importance of vinyl maintenance. Mat Weisfeld joked on Facebook, “just don't bring a truckload of records over!”

A recent event at the VPI House was well attended with nearly 75 people in the audience. We've got some photos on our blog *here* and as you can see, there were smiles all around. When was the last time you saw anyone in a room at a hifi show smiling? Call me selfish, but for me this is what it's all about – having a drink with some friends, listening to music and maybe discovering something cool that I need to put on my list, whether it be an album or a turntable!



While I hate to say anything negative about those promoting our industry, I feel that we need a lot more of this kind of effort and perhaps a few less shows. It isn't necessarily feasible for all of us in the industry to invite everyone over to dinner, but if there is a way to bridge the gap between the current show model and what VPI is doing, it will really help our cause. Perhaps even a fusion between this and a few dealers might be a way to get people together in a more intimate, friendly environment to experience what our world has to offer.

As we are about to enter another new year and attend yet another Consumer Electronics Show, tell me what you think. I'll be happy to pass the word on to the various manufacturers, and even happier to help. Drop me a note at [jeff@tonepublications.com](mailto:jeff@tonepublications.com) or message me at the TONEAudio Facebook page. I'm all ears.





“You look *just* like your profile pic!”

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**Lucinda Williams**  
**September 24, 2015**  
**City Winery**  
**Chicago, IL**

**E**arly on during

the second of Lucinda Williams' two-night stand at City Winery in Chicago, her gut took over. "I have a feeling in my bones this is gonna be a good night," she remarked in a relaxed Southern drawl that served as the welcoming equivalent of a glass of ice-cold sweet tea enjoyed on a neighbor's front porch on a hot summer day. The Louisiana native's premonition served her and the sold-out crowd well.

Not too long ago, Williams seemed to exist in a different, darker place. While her live performances usually adhered to an across-the-board consistency, her emotional state appeared fragile and reflected the brooding nature of 2007's *West*—a record inspired by a bad breakup and her mother's death. Her engagement and subsequent marriage in 2009 to her manager, Tom Overby, changed Williams' outlook. Last year's superb *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone* ranks among the best work of her career and showcases a shift in songwriting toward topical issues.

Performing with the backing trio Buick 6, Williams displayed likeminded artistic breadth and diversity over the course of a decades-spanning 110-minute concert rife with passion, intimacy, and rawness. Wearing a black blouse, blue jeans, and abundant eye makeup, the 62-year-old singer came across with the take-no-muss attitude and learned experience of a veteran bartender whose sympathy shouldn't be confused with her toughness. Her innate ability to make songs biographical, from-the-heart declarations couched in pride, identity, and persistence repeatedly showed that her type of quiet intensity often proved more potent than the kind produced by rapid tempos or thrash riffs.

Inhabiting the persona of a woman used up and thrown away, Williams transformed "Those Three Days" from a somber reflection of defeat into an assertive statement of self-worth. On "Compassion," one of several tunes she played solo, the vocalist appropriated her father's poetry and became an involved observer that countered weariness with pathos. Indeed, while Williams still does relationship-rooted sadness and toxicity like nobody else, her mood and approach suggested much more complex, and deeply compelling, possibilities.

Embracing a defiant stance that would've been hard to imagine a few years ago, she treated the slithering "Cold Day in Hell" as a fierce kiss-off, belting out the bridge and holding notes to underline her intent. The cautionary "Something Wicked This Way Comes" moved to a taffy-pull groove, Williams twisting words as if expressing them while sitting on a tire swing that kept her just far enough away from unknown danger. *(continued)*

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# Lucinda Williams



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### LIVE MUSIC

On the cathartic “Unsuffer Me,” she reeled off a litany of torment and utilized buzzing feedback, muscular textures, and growling guitars to turn negative sensations into positives. Williams wouldn’t be denied.

Neither would her band, which came to rock. Locking onto a Staple Singers rhythm, Williams and company rounded out the upbeat “Protection” with serpentine curves and heavier cymbal clatter than that on the studio version. Even more charged, the metaphor-rich rave-up “Honey Bee” galloped as it celebrated satisfactions associated with fresh love and sexual pleasure. A tribute to Paul Westerberg, “Real Live Bleeding Fingers and Broken Guitar Strings” stabbed and staggered, Williams’ amplified six-string answering her mates’ metallic rattle at every turn. However unrushed, the funky “Joy” subscribed to a related energy as its swampy arrangement visited humid bayous while inviting everyone to dance.

Throughout, Williams’ phrasing and timing excelled, her variations sharpening narrative meaning and providing insightful contrast, shading, and dynamics. They simultaneously complemented and elevated the country-and-western contours of the tragic “Pineola”—wonderfully accented by guitarist Stuart Mathis’ streamlined solos and drummer Butch Norton’s mallet percussion—and lent a warm, homegrown soulfulness to a beautiful rendition of “Lake Charles.” On a slow-burning cover of the Allman Brothers Band’s “Ain’t My Cross to Bear” that ended in a double-time clip, the frontwoman testified via gospel tones.

Williams’ distinctive vocal touches also turned the brand-new and still-unreleased “The Ghosts of Highway 20” into a stand-out. Bluesy, restless, and filled with a mix of repentance and saving graces, the title track to her forthcoming album intimated Williams still has demons to conquer—but now does so on her very own terms. —**Bob Gendron**



# Wonderful Wedgie

**Nakamichi's 620 Power Amplifier**

By Jerold O'Brien



Ah, memories. Back in the early '80s when our publisher and I were building up our systems, he used to buy his neighbor's hand-me-downs, and when he was ready to move on, I bought them. Which is why I always had a cooler car, but that's another story for another day. When neighbor (and occasional *TONE* contributor) Todd got a full complement of Nakamichi 600 components, I knew it was only a matter of time before the ADD twins got tired of them and they would make their way to my house.

These wedge-shaped beauties had their moment of fame in the cult classic, *Diva*, in the main character's sparse yet cool Paris apartment. So what better place to start this reunion and my upcoming review of the Graham Audio LS5/9 speakers than with this obscure soundtrack?



### Better than expected

The review begins with the Nak 620 powered by a well-kept Audio Research SP-11 preamplifier and an OPPO BD-105 disc player. As the late, great rock photographer Jim Marshall once said, “Beatles or Stones? Fuck that – Allman Brothers!” So what better record to spin than a great favorite from when I first bought my Nak 620, *Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East*, on Mobile Fidelity SACD.

All that’s required after substituting the excellent Graham speakers for a pair of JBL L26s (yeah I had a pair, too) is to put on my Bucky Badger t-shirt and I’m transported back to my dorm at the University of Wisconsin-Madison partying down as the Allmans glide into “Stormy Monday.” It feels good, too.

Rounding out the system is a Nakamichi 630 tuner/preamplifier and a 600 II cassette deck, lovingly refurbished by our friends at Echo

Audio here in Portland, Oregon. Owner Kurt Doslu used to be a factory-trained Nak tech and he’s always kind enough to entertain us and fix the strays that we drag in. He makes it a point for a potential 620 owner who isn’t handy with a scope and digital voltmeter to find a good tech to check the bias current on the output transistors and adjust if necessary. He laughs, “If it’s not right, this thing can cook itself quickly.”

### Back to the present, or is it the future?

Stopping by the *TONEAudio* studio, I upgrade to more modern ancillaries to see just what the 620 is really capable of. With a full complement of Nordost Frey cable and the dCS Rossini acting as front end, the 620 proves up to the task of driving a wide range of speakers, even powering the current Quad 2218s as well as our publisher’s vintage Acoustat 1+1s with ease, just as they did back in the ’80s. (continued)







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### FEATURE

Though not a Nelson Pass design like the PA-7 we auditioned in this column a few years ago, the 620 still sounds damn good for early solid state, with admirable high frequency extension as well as decent low frequency weight and control.

To make it even more fun, the left side of the heatsink assembly has integrated power indicators that turn green at 1, 5, or 25 watts and then to red at 25, 50, or peak power. As a child of the late '70s, I'll always dig some kind of visual power indication; it just seems more rock and roll. Purists in the group can, of course, shut them off. But then you can't see them go to hard red as the cannon shots fire at the end of AC/DC's "For Those About to Rock." Extended operation in this mode usually meant a liquefied tweeter or two and a trip back to the hifi shop. Those were the days. Rated at 100 watts per channel into 8 ohms on all but the ESL speakers, it's tough to get that red peak power light to come on much these days.

Today, a clean 620 should only set you back about \$200–\$250 in decent cosmetic shape, and plan on paying your favorite tech about \$50–\$75 to rebias. This one is going to get power supply capacitors upgraded and a newer, beefier power cord, so it's a keeper. Unless our publisher can wrestle it out of my cold hands for garage duty. ●

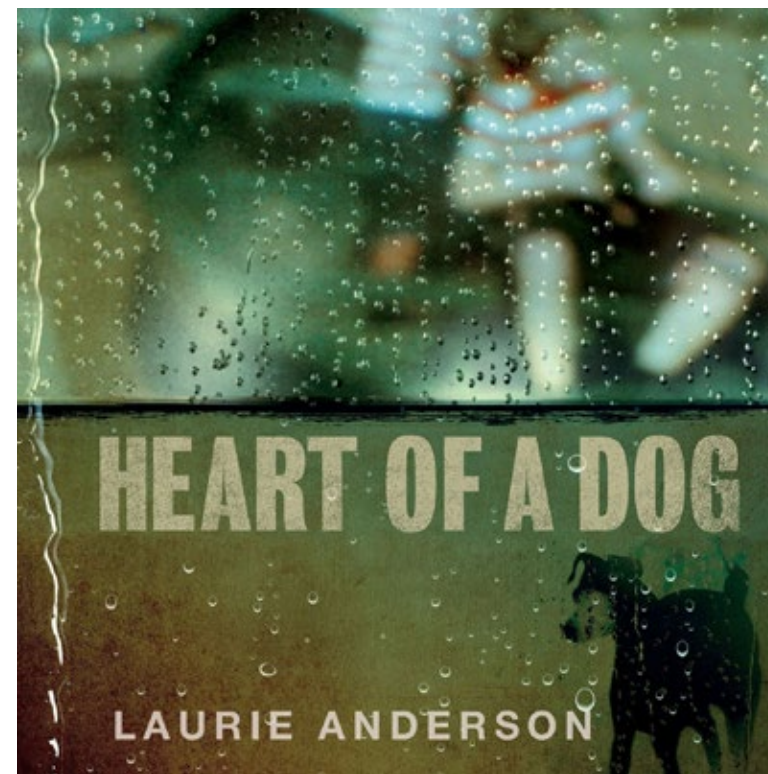


## NEW RELEASES



©Photo by Noah Greenberg

Is it possible, Laurie Anderson wonders midway through *Heart of a Dog*, to feel sad without actually being sad? “To feel sad,” she repeats, “without actually being sad.” The feat, she confesses, is “actually really hard to do.” In the context of the largely spoken-word record, she’s paraphrasing her mediation teacher. A couple, Anderson tells us, has just gone through a divorce, and a dog, Lolabelle, gets caught in the middle of the separation. The man doesn’t want Lolabelle. The woman doesn’t want her, either. What’s a poor rat terrier to do? Lolabelle, Anderson concludes, learns to feel empathy.

**Laurie Anderson**

*Heart of a Dog*  
Nonesuch, CD

The tale is one of the many stories-within-a-story on *Heart of a Dog*, an album that’s a companion piece to a film of the same name that hit the festival circuit in 2015 and debuts on HBO in early 2016. Anderson’s narrative, like all of them here, deals with loss. There are stories about the loss of a parent, the loss of a pet, the loss of a loved one, the loss of naivety, and the loss of trust. But they’re really all stories about life, about how we live and we forget, and how what we choose to remember can not only haunt us but also trick us. The mind is powerful, but deceitful. “We still have no idea why we dream,” Anderson softly utters.

*Heart of a Dog*, commissioned by the European TV network Arte, is told in fragments.

It’s often surreal, but reality has a way of intruding in jarring ways. The terrorist attacks of September 11 figure heavily into the whole. They jostle Anderson from escaping into her mind, where Lolabelle has become a grand pianist who entertains crowds at a charity ball. The past, real and imagined, gets mixed up. At times, *Heart of a Dog* serves a love letter to the companionship of a pet. Anderson even concocts a scene in which she gives birth to Lolabelle. At other times, *Heart of a Dog* functions as an examination of how we grieve—and why we feel so much guilt when we do. Anderson’s time with Lolabelle provides the filter and frame.

The absorbing work is an essay more than it is an album, and one flush with vivid scenes. When Anderson tells of a childhood tragedy that fueled her skepticism and resolve, she does so with powerful images that are as emotional as they are illustrative. Bed-ridden in the children’s world of a hospital, we feel angst when Anderson is read stories targeted for a much younger set, and we pause when Anderson confesses she “cleaned” the story up for public consumption. That is, she made it about her own anxieties and needs, and left out the horrors of the situation. Such existential tug-o-war, between empathy and selfishness as well as our own needs versus those around us, fuels *Heart of a Dog*.

Throughout, Anderson’s phrasing is careful and her tone welcoming. She never once deviates to heighten the drama. Left largely unspoken is the shadow of her late husband, the great Velvet Underground architect Lou Reed, who died in 2013 while Anderson was at work on the project. Reed’s “Turning Time Around” closes the album. It’s a sadly optimistic coda, one on which Reed sings of love’s indefinable nature with patience. *(continued)*



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MUSIC

While Anderson isn't out to depress us, there are tough moments on the album. Her last minutes with her estranged mother, for instance, or the uncomfortable conversations she has with a vet when her pet enters old age. Sonically, there's never a beat. Only abstract noises and hints of more musical notes—a piano here, or a bagpipe, there. A rustling of leaves, or sometimes a helicopter, breaks up the quiet. Indeed, the Chicago-area native, who throughout the 70s made a name for herself in the avant-garde art world, can be a thoughtful, approachable arranger. She's been a figure on the minimalist electronic scene since the release of her "O Superman" single in 1981, and she uses space and textures like a painter. Here, she underscores her narration with violins and soft, otherworldly synths, letting difficult and universal subjects tenderly land.

Anderson, to paraphrase Reed, wants to turn grief all around, to ask why it's so often "more about you than the person." She quotes David Foster Wallace. "Every love story is a ghost story," he wrote, and she wants to get to the bottom of why grief is tied up with thoughts of missed opportunities. "Could I have done this? Could I have said this?" she says. It would be easier, she admits, if we had a "reserve heart," one we could drop in when the first one breaks. Absent that, how do we move on? *Heart of a Dog*, ultimately, is the consolatory quest for an answer.  
—Todd Martens



©Photo by Noah Greenberg





### Tinariwen

*Live in Paris*

Anti-, 2LP or CD

About 15 years ago, Tinariwen showed the world how much life and community can thrive in an environment that seemed merely isolated. The band, comprised of Saharan Tuaregs, used its songs to describe life in the desert and struggling through war and exile in Mali, Algeria, and Libya. These messages have been delivered through the fierce guitar lines of such players as Ibrahim Ag Alhabib and Abdallah Ag Alhousseyni, who transformed the sound of indigenous northwest African strings with electric instruments obtained in refugee camps. Since Tinariwen began recording and touring internationally, Niger's Bombino and the Malian band Terakaft have also brought their versions of modern Tuareg music to global stages. But on *Live in Paris*, the primary rockers reaffirm they are still setting the pace for this movement.



Part of Tinariwen's artistic strength comes from its ability to collaborate with a range of musicians while retaining its own strong identity. This spirit highlights 2011's *Tassili* on which outside contributors—including the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, Wilco guitarist Nels Cline, and members of TV on the Radio—sound like they comfortably fit in at a Saharan campfire. On *Live in Paris*, Tinariwen turns toward its origins. The featured guest is singer Lalla Badi, a mentor to the group for more than 40 years.

Now in her mid-70s, Badi remains a revered singer of tindé, a form of Tuareg musical poetry that emphasizes women performers and the small drum of the

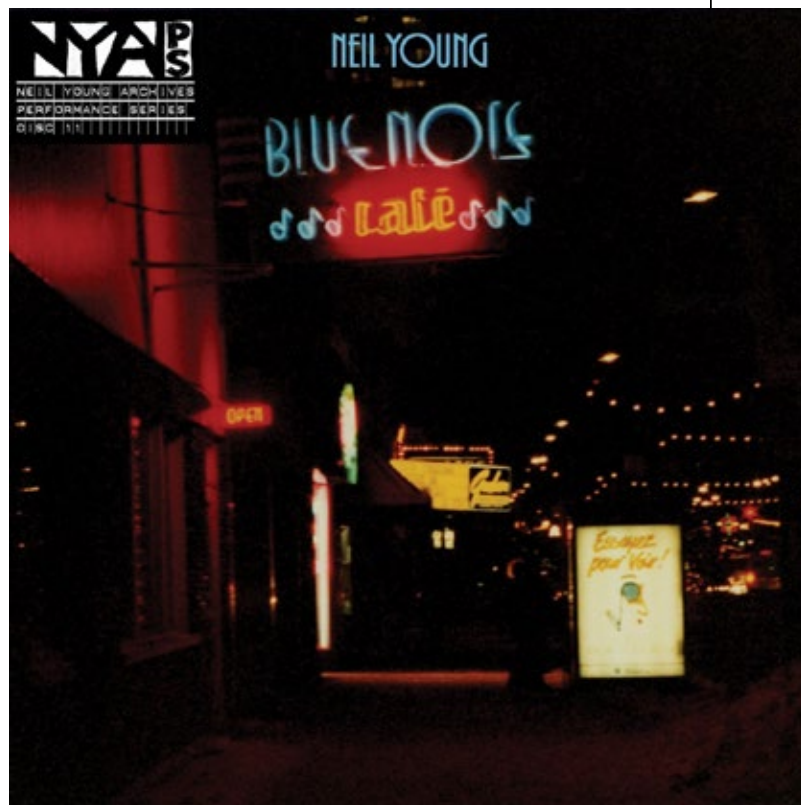
same name. Undoubtedly, her life experiences have made her tougher than any forbidding climate. Such determination comes across in her forceful vocal delivery. She's all attitude on the opening "Tinde Tinariwen," rhythmically spitting out verses on top of light percussion as the band sings elongated single-note lines behind her.

When Tinariwen unleashes its guitars, the overall sound is sharper on *Live in Paris* than that of earlier albums. The version of "Tamatant Tilel" here features intense, quiet distortion compared to that of the reading on 2007's *Aman Iman*. During other parts of the concert recording, such as "Koudedazamin" and "Azawad,"

the guitarists' infectious groove becomes relaxed and spacious enough to make Keith Richards seem hyperactive. They also deliver stunning tempo shifts, such as on the driving "Chaghaybou" and "Toumast Tinch." In addition, Tinariwen still stands out among the current wave of its home region's musicians via lyrical call-and-response vocals, especially on "Tamiditin," where mellifluous voices contrast with the guitars' clipped punctuation.

*Live in Paris* concludes with another take on "Tinde Tinariwen." Badi returns to sing in an incantatory mode. No lyric sheet translation is needed to declare the message: This group of fighters is in it for the long haul. —**Aaron Cohen**





### Neil Young

*Bluenote Café*

Reprise, 4LP box set or 2CD

# N

eil Young's 1980s period is usually associated with the stylistic diversions he undertook, a series of uneven creative pursuits that ultimately resulted in Geffen famously suing the eclectic artist for allegedly making albums "uncharacteristic of [his] previous recordings." In that case, as well as with the hilarious video for "This Note's for You"—a scathing parody of pretentious advertising and corporate sponsorship that MTV banned before later granting it the Best Video of the Year Award—Young got the last laugh if not commercial success. He closed the decade with 1989's now-classic *Freedom*, returning to topical songwriting and an amplified approach.

Yet, as all but diehards and curious listeners primarily (and, somewhat mistakenly) dismissed Young's Reagan Era output, a tour with the Bluenotes—subsequently renamed Ten Men Working after a suit filed by Harold Melvin over the group's name—has gotten lost in the shuffle. Ostensibly launched to support *This Note's for You*, a blues- and R&B-drenched set that served as the final "experimental" effort Young recorded, the live outing included a few fall 1987 gigs and a more formal spring and summer stretch in 1988. Displaying an energy, dynamic, momentum, and soulfulness often absent from the flat-sounding studio album, the dates became cherished among tape traders for good reason.

Backed by a large ensemble that included members of Crazy Horse as well as a six-piece horn section, Young utilized the occasions to debut previously unheard material and stretch out on guitar in newfangled contexts. One of the most prized unreleased performances came in the form of "Ordinary

People," a staggering epic on which Young reels off a narrative of non-repeating verses documenting the swept-under-the-rug state of America all while his screaming six-string whipsaws like a downed electrical line and a gaggle of wailing horns throws haymaker punches. Young finally released the track in studio form on 2007's *Chrome Dreams II*. Yet the marathon saga benefits from the more urgent, dramatic, show-stopping live reading that made the rounds among collectors—not the least because the vividly real challenges and situations Young chronicled on a Connecticut stage that August day were all too familiar to many in attendance.

That almost 13-minute-long concert version—as well as an angry, pre-*Freedom* "Crime in the City" with alternate lyrics; wry "This Note's for You" goosed with sardonic vocal inflections; bright, revue-style rendition of "On the Way Home"; and mammoth, mesmerizing, and impassioned (even by Young's standards) take of

"Tonight's the Night" that stretches out for nearly 20 minutes—comprise some of the highlights of *Bluenote Café*. Collecting songs captured over 11 dates during the 1987-88 outing, the eleventh volume in the ongoing Archival Performance Series also features an array of upbeat, funky workouts and emotional, well-structured ballads, several of which (including the arresting "Bad News Comes to Town" and "Fool for Your Love") make their debut here.

"If you never heard him sing/I'd guess you won't to soon," Young quivers on his heartfelt tribute to fallen friends Bruce Berry and Danny Whitten, the finale on this compilation. The same could've long been uttered about Young and the superb Bluenotes, which never again hit the road. Filled with pleasant surprises and hidden gems, *Bluenote Café* changes those odds and serves as a second chance to hear what many missed the first time while, in the process, righting historical wrongs.

—**Bob Gendron**





**El Vy**  
*Return to the Moon*  
4AD, LP or CD

**C**ynicism, black comedy, and heartbreak have helped the National become one of America's leading indie-rock bands. Some rather exact arrangements haven't hurt, either, as the National's tightly wound guitars and rhythms constantly stare one another down to see which side will snap first.

But the group's most under-appreciated asset remains its dark humor that comes from a seemingly unlikely place and gets conveyed by the baritone singing of Matt Berninger.

It's a halting, striking sound—a sturdy, stately and muscular voice that demands attention and respect. His barbs, then, land like sneak attacks. His characters are the people at the party stealing all your wine or driving their car into the neighborhood plants and apologizing to the leaves. In that theme, El Vy tries to ask the following question: What if the focal point of the National loosens up even more?

The duo, a Berninger side project with Brent Knopf, a multi-instrumentalist and producer known for his work with Portland's Menomena and Ramona Falls, proves a freer and groovier take on the singer's rather dignified work with the National. At times, the debut record is a little funky, and some light theatrical touches—characters resurface throughout numerous songs—add flavor. But by and large, El Vy's light-stepping songs are outfitted with fragments of more experimental ideas.

Is casual a good look on Berninger? Tread cautiously. There are trifles—see the wordy title track with its squiggly guitars and moderate dance beat—and there are heart-aching ballads. “No Time to Crank the Sun” sounds actually more affecting than not, and utilizes a melancholic piano that gradually gets more damning as the song builds. It's the standout. Yet there are also downright horrors such as “I'm the Man to Be,” a misguided attempt at dark humor. *(continued)*



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MUSIC



On the tale of autoerotic asphyxiation gone horribly wrong, Berninger taunts the listener with cringe-inducing images of the male appendage hanging in the sunlight as the song meanders, complete with dreadful vocal interludes and an out-of-place keyboard line that tries to lend a dose of creepiness. Tonally, it's a misfire. Berninger's dry wryness falls flat on top of a weightless arrangement that doesn't know whether to play the song for laughs or shock.

*Return to the Moon* recovers from the early disaster but never really hits stride. Nostalgia plays a heavy role—for past loves, lost friends, and old records—and Knopf does his part to liven up the mood. Still, the effort feels more wistful than urgent. Throughout, we're told of Berninger's love for the Beatles and L.A. punk rock mavericks the Minutemen. But this passion for rock n' roll is delivered with sugarcoated dourness on "Paul Is Alive" and lullaby acoustics on "It's a Game." Elsewhere, a potentially illicit affair on "Silent Ivy Hotel" gets smothered in cabaret cheese. The lone real rocker, "Happiness, Missouri," rides one riff. It comes on more like an addendum to another song than a stand-alone piece.

The laughs, too, can use a punch-up. It's heartbreaking, Berninger tells us on the piano-driven jaunt "Need a Friend," that his pal never showed with the promised weed. Maybe in the moment, sure, but now, it's all too nonchalant. Cynicism, black comedy, and heartbreak, it turns out, can use a little more melodrama. —**Todd Martens**





**N**o matter the season, autumn's brooding skies hang overhead in Glen Hansard's world. Then again, the singer, songwriter, and actor (*The Commitments*, *Once*) hails from Ireland, a country of serious bards (Joyce and Van Morrison) and rainy atmospheres. This dark soulfulness has always colored Hansard's music, be it with the Dublin-based Frames or Oscar-winning duo the Swell Season.



**Glen Hansard**  
*Didn't He Ramble*  
Anti-, LP or CD

And plenty of dark clouds dot his second solo album, *Didn't He Ramble*. But Hansard lightens the proceedings with a few downright upbeat numbers. On the folk-pop outing "Winning Streak," a tune that sounds like a sequel to Bob Dylan's advice manifesto "Forever Young," he wishes good luck to a pal. The beautifully rendered "Her Mercy" begins as a spare rhythm-and-blues number filled with moody organ drones before a horn section rises from the ether. Soon enough, the track achieves lift-off into a gospel shout. It's beautiful and uplifting, akin to a sparkling lost take from *The Last Waltz*.

The 45-year-old veteran is aided and abetted throughout by a crack team of backing musicians versatile in soul, jazz, folk and blues. But even when the world-class band fires on all

cylinders, the mood remains restrained. *Didn't He Ramble* is filled with terrific arrangements of the less-is-more school of production. The nostalgic and pensive "McCormack's Wall" showcases the singer in a mostly spare setting, emoting over echo-laden piano chords and scraped fiddle. The clanking and raw "Lowly Deserter" unfolds like a New Orleans funeral march via smacked cymbals and bleating horns.

Hansard proves an intimate singer, his scratchy tone stained with a patina of melancholy that drenches even the happiest of numbers. It's a voice custom-built for darker, conflicted fare. "There's not much joy in the work/Unless you're born to do what they say," he sings on the working-man's lament "Paying

My Way." Like Merle Haggard and Shane MacGowan, fellow chroniclers of the down and out, Hansard possesses a sharp sense when it comes to expressing the complicated mix of dashed dreams, anguish, and pride residing in the hearts of working-class heroes.

Holding his own against an impressive beat and layered instrumentation, he's equally compelling when the vibe is so up close and personal, you can hear fingernails scraping on steel guitar strings. "I'm at your side if you didn't know," he intones on the album's finale, "Stay the Road." Understated and bittersweet, it's just the right dose of low-key cheerleading to steel the listener for a world filled with gray skies.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**



**R**ichard Hawley's eighth studio album begins with what sounds like a torch song. "I Still Want You" is all guitar romanticism, complete with jazzy rhythmic brushes. Hawley, a veteran of the Britpop scene and in possession of a swoon-inducing baritone, wants to reconnect with a lover, to "move our bodies like a twist of smoke." As the tune—and Hawley's love-letter poetics continue—one increasingly gets the impression he isn't singing of a lost love but of a till-death-do-us-part commitment. "Under the stars is a sweet hollow meadow, where all of us are bound," Hawley croons, his voice stained just a tad from a lifetime of over-indulgence.

Details are subtle and the orchestration light, but the tone here and throughout much of *Hollow Meadows* proves welcoming. It comes on as that of an adult reflecting on a life lived comfortably but not without regrets. While one may wish Hawley tinkered more with arrangements and strayed further from lyrical vagueness—there'd be no way to guess album-closer "What Love Means" pertains to a child leaving home if Hawley hadn't spoken of it in interviews—the set serves as the rare album approached from a decidedly middle-aged perspective.



### Richard Hawley

*Hollow Meadows*

Parlophone/Warner Bros., 180g 2LP or CD

These are songs of being haunted by memories and of wondering what's next, if anything. And it's all delivered with a hint of on-the-rocks stoicism. When Hawley is on, he's affecting. The artist, now in his late 40s, enjoyed a brief stint in Pulp and made his name as a guitar rocker in the 90s group the Longpigs. Save for his performance on 2012's *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, which ups the guitar atmospherics, he's evolved into a folk-pop crooner in his solo career. A similar vibe continues here. With *Hollow Meadows*, a twilight feel—or, more aptly, a candlelight feel—hovers over many of the songs, each touched with a slight glint. While one may wish Hawley tinkered more with arrangements and strayed further from lyrical vagueness—there'd be no way to guess album-closer "What Love Means" pertains to a child leaving home if Hawley hadn't spoken of it in interviews—the set serves as the rare album approached from a decidedly middle-aged perspective.

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## MUSIC



These are songs of being haunted by memories and of wondering what's next, if anything. And it's all delivered with a hint of on-the-rocks stoicism. When Hawley is on, he's affecting. The artist, now in his late 40s, enjoyed a brief stint in Pulp and made his name as a guitar rocker in the 90s group the Longpigs. Save for his performance on 2012's *Standing at the Sky's Edge*, which ups the guitar atmospheric, he's evolved into a folk-pop crooner in his solo career. A similar vibe continues here. With *Hollow Meadows*, a twilight feel—or, more aptly, a candlelight feel—hovers over many of the songs, each touched with a slight glint.

A hint of noir graces “Which Way,” a dash of island daydreaming accents “Long Time Down,” and a little blast of guitars gooses “Heart of Oak.” But by and large, *Hollow Meadows* proves to be an album of hushed orchestrations. The observational “Welcome to the Sun,” in fact, boasts a beat that sounds fashioned out of footsteps walking through an empty house. Particulars are small and fleeting, but they linger when caught. Don't miss his images of names scrawled on moving boxes.

The record's success owes to how it doesn't shy away from maturity. Check

“The World Looks Down,” in which reassuring strings give the song the casual warmth of a parent wishing prosperity for their children. Or see the gentle “Serenade of Blue,” during which an off-again-on-again romance gets chronicled in all of its ups and downs. Pal and former collaborator Jarvis Cocker quests on “Nothing Like a Friend,” adding dashes of synth notes on a track where a guitar bellows like a trombone. As Hawley sings of revisiting once familiar locales, and does so as a fiddle beckons in the background, he and his collaborators create a mini-orchestra, all of it swaying to the tune of getting older. —**Todd Martens**

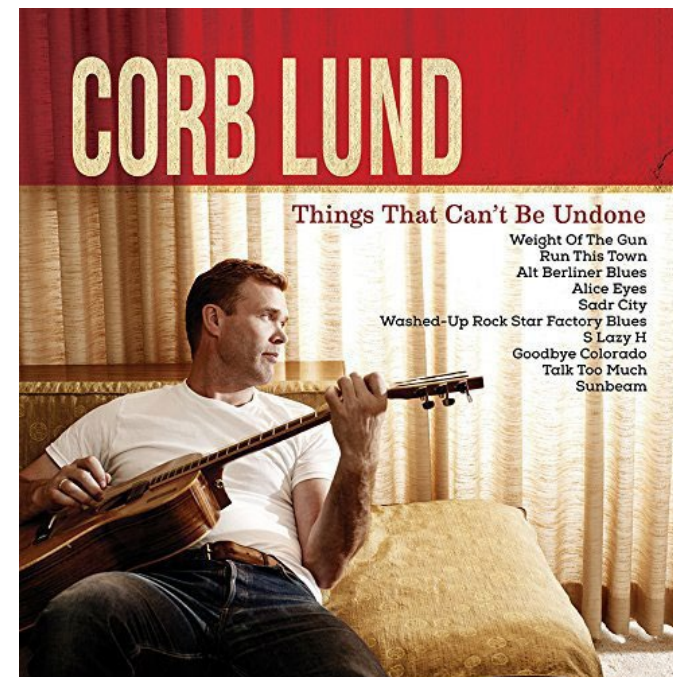




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H

ard-touring troubadour Corb Lund has made smart indie country music across a string of albums. While not a household name by any stretch, he's increasingly built a devoted fan base drawn to his well-crafted songs. *Things That Can't Be Undone*, his first new studio album in three years, could go a long way in introducing the Canadian singer-songwriter to an even broader audience.

**Corb Lund**

*Things That Can't Be Undone*  
New West, LP or CD

Here, he pulls out the big guns, including producer Dave Cobb, the in-demand phenom who applied his uncanny retro studio skills to a wave of acclaimed Americana releases by the likes of Jason Isbell, Sturgill Simpson, and Chris Stapleton. The choice to have Cobb at the helm is not just for show. This is a fresh-sounding production. The room sounds so alive, it breathes.

But however accomplished the production might be, an artist has to live up to that promise. Lund proves more than up to the task. A terrific songwriter, he never gets precious or fussy with words. Rock-solid accompaniment comes courtesy of his longtime band the Hurtin' Albertans, featuring electric and steel guitarist Grant Siemens, bassist Kurt Ciesla, and drummer Brady Valgardson.

Lund couches his songs of conflict inside breezy, entrancing melodies. A dark tale of bad choices burbles beneath the peppy musical exterior of "Weight of the Gun." Singing against the slapping beat and reverbed guitar, his voice sounds like a throwback to the melodramatic yearning of early rock n' roller Gene Pitney. Unafraid of densely told tales, he frames "Alt Berliner Blues" as a tribute to a historic German beer hall that fell to gentrification. The tune tumbles forth like a rapid-fire talking blues, taking a jab along the way at "cheap young Brooklyn trust-fund expat kids."

Similarly outspoken, the narrator of "Sadr City" is a soldier in Iraq that provides a blow-by-blow account from the front lines. Lund sings the number in a restrained, sing-song monotone, conjuring a vision of a young man rendered emotionally numb by the horror. Throughout, his humor is as dark as it is hysterical. A chicken-pickin' electric guitar (ala the Bakersfield sound) clucks through "Washed-Up Rock Star Factory Blues," a wickedly funny cautionary tale. A musician loses his fame and lands back at his old warehouse job, punching a clock once again while enduring the mocking insults of the foreman. When he wakes up on his tour bus and realizes it was all just a bad dream, he resolves to stop complaining and work harder on his songs.

It's hard not to feel this is Lund's crafty way of speaking for himself. The big fame may never come, but he needn't sweat his songwriting abilities. This is someone with important stories to tell, and one who does so with panache. —**Chrissie Dickinson**





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## MUSIC



### Car Seat Headrest

*Teens of Style*  
Matador, LP or CD

**T**here are breakup records, and then there are breaking down records. *Teens of Style* belongs to the latter camp. But if Car Seat Headrest, the project of 22-year-old Seattleite Will Toledo, is going down, it's going down swinging. A collection of rambunctiously old-school garage rock, the album doesn't so much as capture the desolate moments of loneliness as it does the absurd ones, when our thoughts are left to wander to old records, bad TV shows, questionable money-making schemes, and better-off friends. The more depressed Toledo gets, the more deadpan his observations become. He's embarrassed for his own sad self, and he's inviting us to the pity party. Welcome to heartbreak, sure, but heartbreak at its most self-deprecating.

Throughout, the production is rudimentary—the guitars, at times, sound as if they're going to blow-out the speakers—and matches Toledo's sarcastically whimsical personality. Despite the desperation of some of the subject matter, a weightlessness informs the songs, which attempt to marry full-blast guitars with swooning melodies. It's a proven formula. Toledo even name-checks R.E.M.. Early 80s low-fi gets celebrated, as does the turn-it-up and then tune-it-out style of Guided By Voices. The format usually only works when an artist has a personality, and Toledo's pinpoint observations show us the ridiculous side of moping.

Are we to laugh or cry? Maybe both on "No Passion." All seems lost at the start. A tick-tock drum sets the pace, and a singsong vocal that sounds recorded through an empty Campbell's soup can creates an alone-on-the-bedroom floor atmosphere. Toledo's fuzzy, burnt-out guitars are toned-down and thoughts of suicide (don't worry, Toledo dubs it "embarrassing") run through his mind. But instead of taking a turn for the dark, the music swells and amateur background harmonies arrive like the morning light. As the song reaches its finale, Toledo wonders what the heck he's doing. What's he doing, exactly? He's trying and failing to watch porn. "There's too much sunlight shining on my laptop monitor," he sings. (*continued*)



There's more where that came from. "Psst, Teenagers, Take Off Your Clo" imagines a cruel modern world where love is a selfie away. It's over and done with so fast that Toledo can't be bothered to spell out the word "clothes" in the title. Heartache gets spelled via a vintage candy-coated organ on "Maude Gone" while "Something Soon" takes an is-this-as-good-as-it-gets panic attack and gives it the album's most ambitious arrangement. Verses rattle with the slow, steady hum of electronics while choruses go for broke with multi-layered vocals and guitar riffs built for jumping up and down on the bed. Philosophers, artists, and religious texts appear in the lyrics, but they still serve the mantra of breaking up boredom—be it on the rough and scratchy "Times to Die" or scatterbrained "Los

Borrachos (I Don't Have Any Hope Left, But the Weather Is Nice)," which ruptures the energy with a vampy bass and junkyard rhythm.

Toledo's punky attitude remains intact even on slower songs. Any accompaniment is built for minimum fuss. Still, they hint Toledo's future work will involve more ornate orchestrations. Check "Oh! Starving" and its wistful backing harmonies and cheery synths, or the aforementioned "Los Borrachos" with its knee-jerk changes in direction. It comes complete with Toledo's advice to fellow wallowers.

"Get out of your head for a while," he sings, adding, "jump into mine." It may not work as well as therapy, but it carries a better tune. —**Todd Martens**



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**Darlene Love**

*Introducing Darlene Love*  
Columbia, 2LP or CD

**W**hile Darlene Love has mostly avoided recording studios for the past couple of decades, the title of her new disc is surely intended with a wink and a nod. Her alto voice delivered numerous early 60s hits for Phil Spector, and while she did not initially get credit for “He’s a Rebel” and numerous other favorites, time changed all that. Her appearance in the 2013 hit documentary on background singers (*20 Feet from Stardom*) and her singing “Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)” annually on the “The Late Show With David Letterman” for 28 years make up for the avarice of a certain record producer.

*Introducing Darlene Love* shows how strong the veteran’s voice has remained over the long haul.

Indeed, this time around, Love enjoys a far more sympathetic producer in longtime associate/E Street Band guitarist/garage rock advocate Steven Van Zandt. Both artists have also built up enough industry goodwill that they were able to recruit a number of A-list rockers to contribute new songs, which Love performs alongside a few pop and gospel standards. The resulting material, and Van Zandt’s arrangements, make for a mixed bag. But even on the weaker pieces and above some heavy-handed instrumental solos, Love’s strength always shines through.

All of the album’s best elements come together on Elvis Costello’s “Forbidden Nights.” A discerning scholar of the girl-group era, he’s aware that those songs conveyed a sense of mystery more than innocence. Love expresses such feeling through her knowing inflections. She also maintains a sure-footed dialog with the horns in Linda Perry’s upbeat “Love Kept

Us Foolin’ Around.” Another horn player, E Street tenor saxophonist Jake Clemons, recalls the unapologetic romanticism of his late uncle, Clarence, on Bruce Springsteen’s “Night Closing In.” Love proves equally convincing when she returns to her church roots for Walter Hawkins’ “Marvelous.”

Other religious themes don’t fare as well, and Van Zandt occasionally stumbles in his attempts to create a less-chaotic version of Spector’s multi-layered Wall of Sound. Love’s voice can’t save Jimmy Webb’s maudlin and tuneless “Who Under Heaven.” And Desmond Child/Joan Jett’s “Little Liar” deserves better than the treatment provided here. It comes across like an 80s power ballad. Likewise, the streamlined update of “River Deep, Mountain High” does not convey the demented magic of the original.

Despite the misguided moments, *Introducing Darlene Love* serves as a fine calling card that shows how much the singer—now 74 years old—deserves more opportunities to deliver her gifts to audiences everywhere.

—**Aaron Cohen**





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## MUSIC



## Pinkish Black

*Bottom of the Morning*  
Relapse Records, LP or CD

“Everything’s the same again,” sings Daron Beck on the title track of Pinkish Black’s third album. Then he finishes the thought: “But everything is not the same.”

And he doesn’t just sing it. He stretches out the word “same” for a good 13 seconds. He’s a crooner, and one that cites Tom Jones as an influence. However, hunting for the source of Pinkish Black’s sound isn’t advised. The Fort Worth, Texas-based duo disorients on a regular basis. By the time Beck sings himself into circles on the title track, he and bandmate Jon Teague have put the listener in an aural dryer and hit spin.

It all begins innocently enough: A jazzy late-night groove followed by a relaxed synthesizer that feels like it’s out for a casual stroll. But by the time the nine-minute mark passes, the song’s synthesizers become doomy and go haywire, like a plasma globe about to shatter the glass.

Pinkish Black invites such metaphors. Sprung from the South’s indie metal scene, and from the ashes of the Great Tyrant, which ceased to be after bassist Tommy Atkins committed suicide, Beck and Teague keep it trippy. *Bottom of the Morning* is a gloomy record, one on which life’s foibles figure so much so that the work begins with what could be a haunted-house organ. “Goodbye, so long,” Beck sings, and it’s safe to say he’s probably not out for a quick run to the grocery store. Then, over the course of seven songs, the pair keeps everyone guessing. Like the band’s prior works, the record manages to be both intense and guitar-less. Pinkish Black employs drums, keyboards, and synthesizers, save the sparingly utilized horn or violin.

Cinematic in scope and full of elusive sounds, *Bottom of the Morning* doesn’t feel like an electronic record so much as a textured one. A thunderous rumble, a typewriter beat, a militant march, a metallic gust of wind—the sonic effects all take on a melodious character when wrapped in layers of Pinkish Black’s otherworldly synthesizers. *(continued)*





“Special Dark” builds from a low hum and a rush of cymbals to a spooky hard-rock incantation with neon-tinged electronics. There’s a roaring breakdown in which a computer keyboard behaves as if it’s going mad. “Burn My Body,” the album’s most cynical and darkest moment, takes a page from Italy’s experimental gothic-horror band Goblin and opens with what could pass as an overture to a vampire movie. A rhythm hits like bells tolling and Beck calmly sings, like he’s leading a church choir, as the arrangement sneaks in and out of the shadows.

The closing “The Master Is Away” reverses the course. A mournful keyboard gets lost amid a crush of fuzzy synths. But instead of building, the song becomes a downbeat instrumental ballad with a single bright melodic strand acting as wordless vocals. Consider it the sound of the band easing the listener back into the real world, a place no less unsettled but rarely as musically unhinged. —**Todd Martens**



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# Bob Dylan

**T**he *Cutting Edge 1965-1966*, the twelfth volume of Bob Dylan's wonderfully unpredictable Bootleg Series, brings to light exhilarating musical revelations while simultaneously challenging longstanding thoughts. Incredibly rich, critically insightful, and primarily sequenced in chronological order, it's the most absorbing and significant release in Dylan's ongoing archival program in nearly two decades—rivaling the now-mythical *The Bootleg Series Vol. 4: Bob Dylan Live 1966, The "Royal Albert Hall" Concert*, not coincidentally from the same era.

On the surface, the latest offering gathers previously unheard songs, outtakes, rehearsals, and alternate versions cut during sessions for the Bard's sacrosanct trilogy of mid-1960s albums—*Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*—a succession of records that reshaped culture and music. Dozens of books and countless articles have already shed light on their importance and explained how they can be used to trace the singer-songwriter's evolution from a folk performer into a kind of rock n' roll artist that had never been seen. Given the avalanche of scholarly and D.I.Y. ink, along with previous Bootleg Series sets and unauthorized bootlegs, skeptics could be forgiven for thinking that no more meaningful substance could possibly be gleaned at this stage. But then, they'd be very wrong.

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While a seemingly impossible task, *The Cutting Edge 1965-1966* allows listeners to see songs made for the three albums from a fresh perspective and dares to suggest, albeit indirectly, that despite the amount of press and praise lavished on them over the course of the past 50 years, they're in certain ways underappreciated—or, at the least, taken for granted. Available in three configurations (a two-CD set whose contents are replicated on the vinyl edition; a Deluxe Edition six-CD offering with 110 tracks; and a massive 18CD Collector's Edition that includes every note of every 1965-1966 session), *The Cutting Edge 1965-1966* deserves to be enjoyed (and, for Dylan zealots, examined) in the median format. The abbreviated volume barely scratches the surface; the huge, 379-track edition is too much for most, and that's before the \$600 cost comes into play.

Indeed, the disc devoted entirely to the complete 16-take session for "Like a Rolling Stone" and which includes the rehearsals, false starts, re-makes, breakdowns, and the master takes of the instrumental and vocal mixes, alone justifies the worth and existence of *The Cutting Edge 1965-1966*. Meticulously transferred and mixed from the original studio tracking tapes, the material here does everything but give you a chair behind the consoles in New York and, later, Nashville. (continued)

oppo



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

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

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

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

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Everything, from sound bleed to producer comments to Dylan announcing oft-humorous titles for in-progress songs, comes through with startling clarity and detail.

Nothing gets conveyed with more power, certainty, and depth than the chemistry, lyrical vision, and musical profundity on display in sessions that occurred inside a mind-boggling 15-month period. The disclosures are myriad; the delights innumerable. Hearing Dylan shape structures, juggle tempos, change words, experiment with different styles, alter his pitch, graft previous ideas onto new arrangements, and verbally interact with his producers happens with such frequency, picking out individual highlights amounts to a superfluous exercise. Equally astonishing is the absence of multiple versions of certain Dylan standards. "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," for example, required just two takes. By contrast, "Visions of Johanna," profiled here via five different takes recorded with the Hawks, demonstrates why Dylan needed the versatility and proficiency afforded by the Nashville musicians he utilized after decamping from New York in 1966.

Still, even given the aforementioned treatment afforded "Like a Rolling Stone," *The Cutting Edge 1965-1966* isn't about how trial and error led Dylan to find the desired meter and key for "Desolation Row" or how fits and starts with rhythmic patterns, interludes, and varied instrumentation ultimately birthed the version of "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again" found on *Blonde on Blonde*.  
(continued)

©Photo by Don Hunstein



MUSIC





Rather, the collection pertains to the bigger picture—illuminating not just Dylan’s fervid originality, tireless spirit, and faculty to get each song right in scant few takes, but also those same characteristics of the musicians that helped fashion the foundations and feel of tunes that continue to inspire, engage, and energize. Chief among these players are the Nashville virtuosos that, in teaming with the singer, changed history on multiple levels. Their capacity to shade, complement, adapt, and play any type of music—blues, pop, country, R&B, boogie, carnival included—in practically any mood and setting arguably towers over any similar feat, even those achieved by the Wrecking Crew.

Few albums, and far fewer box sets, hold such promise and sway.

As a further credit to the producers, a pair of digestible essays by Bill Flanagan and Sean Wilentz, respectively, provides context. Even more useful are track-by-track notes expounding on what happens in the sessions. They function as cues and annotations, both spotlighting what to listen for and underlining interesting historical tidbits. A handsome 120-page hardcover book with rare photography and memorabilia adds to the comprehensive feel and suggestion that between January 1965 and March 1966, Bob Dylan invented soundscapes of transformative music and transmogrifying poetry that cast an even greater shadow than what most experts have acknowledged.

Given that all-time-best al-

bum lists never seem to lose their conversation-starting currency, *The Cutting Edge 1965-1966* strongly hints these inventories need be reconsidered—and that, specifically, the performances that led to *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde and Blonde* merit a loftier status that once and for all knocks beloved albeit flawed perennial picks (i.e., the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*) down a few pegs. And when you’re listening to Dylan mold the likes of “Desolation Row” and “One of Us Must Know (Sooner or Later),” heed the advice he uttered onstage to the Hawks on May 17, 1966—a command audible on *Bob Dylan Live 1966, The “Royal Albert Hall” Concert*. Namely, play this brilliant set fucking loud. —**Bob Gendron**

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# Simply Stellar Sound

## Conrad-Johnson's MF2275 SE Power Amplifier

By Rob Johnson

A

fter reviewing Conrad-Johnson's MF2550 SE amplifier, we walked away mightily impressed with the build quality, power handing and overall musicality it offers. Its smaller sibling, the solid state MF2275 SE, certainly reveals the family resemblance in physical form, circuitry and sound. Because these amplifiers are built with common topology, the main internal difference is the power rating. While the MF2550 pushes 250 watts per channel into eight ohms, the 2275 offers 135 watts.

In the smaller model, C-J maintains the use of a standard 19 inch wide faceplate. However, the other dimensions are trimmed down to 14.6 inches deep and 4.9 inches tall. At 33 pounds, the amp is substantial, but also very user friendly when loading it into an audio rack. Position of the heat sinks offers one more physical difference: in the 2275's case, they project out the back instead of the sides.

MF2275 has five internal fuses, protecting sensitive circuitry from potential damage. In the unlikely event a fuse is blown, it's nice to know that this can be easily accomplished by the owner without sending the entire amp back to the factory. Obviously, make sure to power down and unplug any amp before you consider removing the cover!



## FEATURE



As with all C-J amps the MF2275 features a pair of RCA inputs on the back, and a set five-way speaker binding post; the amplifier setup is simple and straightforward. With merely the addition of a power cord, you'll be ready to rock in minutes. Once plugged in, a single, circular button on the front plate activates the unit. Conrad-Johnson recommends at least 15 minutes of warm-up before critical listening, allowing the amp to reach its sonic best. It's really about 45, but who's counting?

### The Sound

From first listen, it's obvious the attributes we enjoyed most about the MF2550 trickled down to the MF2275. The sonic benefits described in that review certainly still apply. Building upon that characterization, the 2275's sound provides details a listener wants to hear from favorite tracks, yet it portrays elements like vocal or horn

crescendos without grating edge or harshness. Consider the amp's sonic character one click to the warm side of neutral.

While it can't magically heal a bad recording, it certainly attempts the feat. Done in the early days of digital recording technology, Peter Gabriel's "I Have the Touch" exhibits elements of digital glare and flatness baked in. Somehow the MF2275 embraces and builds upon the best parts of the recording, while simultaneously convincing harsher elements to relax a bit before they make their presence known.

In the bass department, the C-J's slight sonic warmth does not come at the expense of bass punch or heft. I found myself surprised at how well it handles the same Sonus faber Olympica III speakers used in testing MF2275's big brother. While the extra power of the 2250 offers more control of

the speakers, especially at lower volumes, the 2275 proves itself more than capable of handling the task.

As with many other tracks, the C-J's portrayal of Steel Pulse's "Roller Skates" reinforces how much there is to love about the amp and how little remains open for criticism. Not only does each musical element maintain a solid focus in the soundstage, but when multiple instruments and vocals occupy the same position left and right between the speakers, the C-J does a nice job rendering them as individual layers behind one another. There's a lifelike aspect to the music that not every amp can decipher. The 2275's ample detail retrieval acknowledges the reverb added to lead singer's voice, and simultaneously hints that similar reverb is more stringently applied to background vocals and instrument tracks. Many highly resolving amps reveal the same nuance.

However, that prowess often comes with an equal magnification on every aspect of a recording. That's not always a good thing. Some overly revealing components pull a listener's attention away from larger, cohesive musical experiences. It reminds me of my grandpa telling me as a kid, "You can't see the forest through the trees." For a listener seeking every bit of honest edge inherent in a trumpet or saxophone blast, this voicing may seem a step away from realism. But after several days with the C-J, trading out a bit of raw transparency for a significant jump in overall musical enjoyment is a welcome tradeoff.

### Summing Up

With the beautiful musicality of its brother, C-J's MF2275 is easy to recommend as a fantastic choice for an all-around amplifier. \$3,850 is a substantial investment for most people. While there are amps that can exceed the capability of this

C-J contender, they regularly do it at a cost multiple times the price of the MF2275. It's refreshing to enjoy a product that brings marvelous performance, and a high pedigree, within the aspirational financial reach of most audiophiles. To my ears, the marvel of this amp resides in its subtlety, naturalness, and overall musical experience. It's a piece of gear I could live with happily for a long time. When enjoying the MF2275 SE in the audio chain, it's easy to get lost in a long, unplanned listening session.

Potential owners should consider a few small caveats. First is the amount of power it produces. Those with efficient, less power-hungry speakers will find this amp a terrific partner. However, those craving more forceful bass tangibility from larger speakers will be better off with something like C-J's more powerful MF 2550. You may find this C-J the roommate you've always wanted.



FEATURE



## Additional listening

Though many know Conrad-Johnson for vacuum tube amplifiers, their solid state efforts have been equally formidable. I have used their flagship Premier 350 amplifier as the anchor to my reference system here at TONE for almost the first six years of the magazine without a hiccup, and that amplifier was pretty much powered up the whole time.

As Rob mentioned, the MF2275 is slightly warm in overall tonal characteristic, where my Premier 350 was very neutral. This is an excellent thing 99% of the time, and personally, I'd always prefer a solid state amplifier to have a little more tonal saturation than not. Running a gamut of preamplifiers, both from C-J and others, proves this to be a very potent partner for your system and it even did a fantastic job driving the Quad 2218 speakers we now have in for review. Pulling my reference Conrad-

Johnson LP120sa+ out and substituting the MF2275 makes for a bit more slam with the Quads and a bit less soundstage width and depth, but that's an unfair comparison between a \$10,000 tube amplifier and an almost \$4,000 solid state unit. Those requiring a bit more warmth should consider a fine C-J tube preamp.

My PV-12, which was sent back to the C-J factory a while back for a Teflon capacitor upgrade proved the perfect partner for the MF2275, with both units providing incredibly high performance and a low profile on the rack as well. If vintage is not your thing, consider the C-J Classic or Classic SE preamplifier. About six grand new for the pair will put you in audio nirvana. Highly recommended. —**Jeff Dorgay**

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# ON THE GO WITH KARL LARSEN

**K**arl Larsen is a Los Angeles based photographer that travels the world shooting bands and celebrities. We featured his shot of Keith Richards on the cover of TONEAudio's 8th issue, back in 2006. Larsen's career has grown exponentially since then, now actually encompassing more entertainment related PR photography. Currently on location in Cambodia, covering the shooting of Angelina Jolie's latest film, he was kind enough to bring us up to speed on things and share some career highlights with us.



**TA:** Your site mentions love for photography “at an early age.” When did you get your first camera and start shooting? Film or digital?

Larsen: I got my first camera, a Kodak Rangefinder 110 film camera, in 1979 when my family and I were living abroad in Winchester, England. I don't recall if it was a gift or a request, but I took off with it immediately. I remember getting artsy with it later that same year on a trip to Brugge, Belgium, taking extreme close ups of flowers while having the typical city architecture of the buildings in the background.

**When did you go digital? Was it happily or reluctantly? Did it take long to get in the groove with Photoshop? Is Photoshop a major creative part of your photography or only to enhance, touch up or take out the occasional nasty bits?**

I started with Digital with the Canon D60 in the summer of 2002. (Not the Canon 60D but rather the Canon D60, boy was that camera *slow*.) I always did half the job with my Nikon N90s film camera and the other half with the canon 60D, but was too nervous to completely jump in without a film back up. I did that all the way until the summer of 2007 when I bought the Canon 10D and never picked up a film camera for a work job again. Then it was just my Leica for the artsy cool factor at someone's art opening, but for no other reason than having fun.

I use Photoshop from time to time but really ACDSee is my application of choice, ever since I went digital; I use it every single day. It's been months since I used Photoshop and I can't really remember what for. *(continued)*





*Karl, I followed your lead and put the ACDSee app on my iPhone 6+, it's incredibly easy to use and intuitive, thanks!*

***Is the majority of your work today music, movie, or otherwise?***

The majority of my work is now news, typically entertainment news. If there is a musician in the news than its music, if there is a movie in the news then its movie. Basically if something is happening in the entertainment world and you think, "Gosh, If someone was to get a photo of..." You can bet I am on the way to get that photo before you finish that sentence.

***You mentioned getting hired at House of Blues and it sounds like you spent a lot of time there. Do you still shoot bands there? What was the most memorable show for you there? What was the craziest? Any Spinal Tap moments?***

You know they just closed down the Los Angeles House of Blues. It was a very said moment in history of the Sunset Strip when that happened, almost as sad as Tower Records closing. The closest House of Blue's is now Downtown Disney, which isn't the same to say the least.

My most memorable show was when the Cult's Ian Ashbury (one of my all time favorite bands) sang with the remaining members of The Doors (another one of my all time favorite bands) as The Doors of the 21st Century. I shot their first band portrait upstairs in the Foundation Room, which also was my first portrait for *Rolling Stone*. Their next 10 shows in 10 weeks was pretty insane, and I remember the Prince surprise show...  
(continued)

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BY PLINIUS AUDIO



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

The new Avanti is not a recreation of an early

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

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



***What gear do you use today? Do you prefer to travel light and improvise, or loaded to the gills with everything under the sun?***

Loaded to the gills with everything is an understatement of how I work and travel. I'd rather have everything than be to say loaded to the gills with everything under the sun is still an underestimation of how I travel. I like to have everything I own with me on location. I currently use a Canon 1Dx, Canon G15 and the new Canon 5DS, which is my main body. For lenses, I carry 24mm, 40mm, 300mm and 600mm fixed focal length lenses as well as the Canon 24-70mm f2.8 and 70-200 f2.8 zooms. I carry this gear on every job I do.

***How easy is it to get access to performers these days? With so many publicists, the splintering of the music business, etc etc, is it tough to get in and get the photos you need? Do you find the artists pretty cooperative in 2015 or pretty difficult overall?***

It has gotten so bad I won't shoot a show unless I have an Artist Pass. A media pass from a nerdy intern telling me I can only photograph up to the second song is not interesting. I like to talk to the artist first and go in with them – it's the best way.

***Do you have a favorite venue to shoot in? And do you prefer working in larger arena situations, or clubs? What's the most out of the way and perhaps the most difficult venue you've had to work in?***

My favorite places to shoot are small outdoor arenas like the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles; if a band uses smoke it dissipates into the air rather than getting trapped in. Having said that I like to shoot at the Roxy on the Sunset Strip because of their use of red and yellow lights, and the stage doesn't sit high at all. House of Blues clubs are tougher because the stage is very high and they lean towards dark blue lights or none at all! You know how important light is to getting a great artist shot! (continued)





*Amen to that Karl!*

***Are you neutral with the bands you shoot in terms of excitement their work? What bands have you been turned on to via your work? Have you ever lost interest in a band because either they were terrible live or you had a bad experience photographing them? I'll never go see Greg Dulli of the Afghan Whigs again because he was such an asshole to me at a show we were trying to cover.***

I am very neutral with bands, and I mean that in a good way. I actually am so focused on the visual that I turn off my conscious hearing; but my sub-conscious hearing is still there. I want to make sure the subject is in razor sharp focus and that I have a great composition; I have no time to listen to melodies. If a band or solo artist captivates the crowd and are great performers that always makes for a great image. However, if someone was to ask me 'What song did the band open with?' I have no idea at all!

I heard Spearhead and Taylor Momsen the first time

when I went to shoot them. Now when either are in town I will go see them and I have become a big fan of their music. But I never would have discovered them if I didn't have a photo assignment first.

***Have you ever been injured on a shoot? Hit by stuff flying off the stage? Mobbed by angry fans? Blown up by flash pots? That almost happened to me in the 80s shooting Triumph – yikes!***

There was a time in 2006 when I was shooting the Rolling Stones in the worlds largest concert of 1.4 million people on the Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Fans were climbing over the barricades into our section and the security guards couldn't stop them because there were too many people doing it at the same time. I was forced to leave the pit and protect my gear and oh yeah my life, retreating back to my hotel that overlooked the concert venue. I was fine and enjoyed the end of the show from the safety of the hotel's roof. In retrospect, had I not been forced back to my hotel before the concert was over I may not have ever made it back in one piece. I was lucky on that one.



***Has your photography led to any personal relationships with the musicians that you can discuss? Have any of them purchased your work for their homes?***

I was at a party at Slash's house once in a hallway leading to a bathroom behind his kitchen; noticing all the personal photos he had of his family up on the wall on this back section of his huge home and realized he didn't have any work related images here. Just personal images of him walking on the beach with his sons, or his sons riding their bikes. When I got to the end of the hallway I noticed he had a shot I recognized of him holding his son London at 18 months old or so with London looking right at camera with a bright red pacifier his mouth and Slash himself looking out a doorway in black leather pants held up by handcuffs as a belt with a strong window light on his face.

Then I realized it was a print that I had given him, that I took during a break after a music video shoot. And made me think of the millions of photos he must have given to him or taken himself he chose my image to hang in his section of personal favorites and I think me discovering that on my own rather than Slash or some else showing or telling me about it has really stood in my head that I finally have made it as a photographer.

***Who's the most unlikely person you sold or given one of your photos to?***

I got a chance to give President Barack Obama a print from his original inauguration which I was quite proud of getting a chance to do so.

*(continued)*





Though I never met him a boss from one of my past employers went to high school with him in Hawaii and that's how the connection was made. Drea De'Amato bought a Rolling Stones print from me at the Hard Rock hotel in Vegas... that was pretty cool.

**What is your absolute favorite live shot? Can you tell us a bit about that?**

There is one shot in particular that will always be my favorite. While in Tokyo Japan at the Zepp while I was on tour with Velvet Revolver.... Scott Weiland stood on stage right in front of me while standing on his teleprompters with his legs spread allowing me to get the rest of the band logo thru his legs with my 16 mm lens. That image has always stuck with me.

**Any exciting projects on the horizon?**

I am actually on a very exciting assignment at the moment in Siem Reap, Cambodia following the progress of Angelina Jolie's next film about the struggle of the Cambodian people in the 1970's.

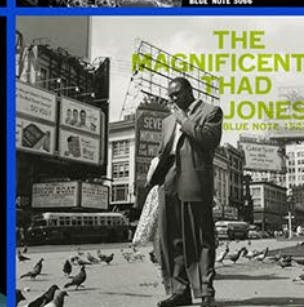
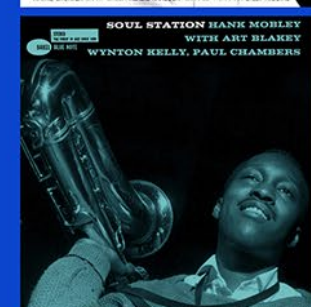
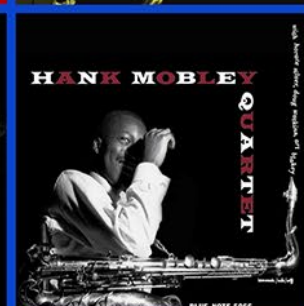
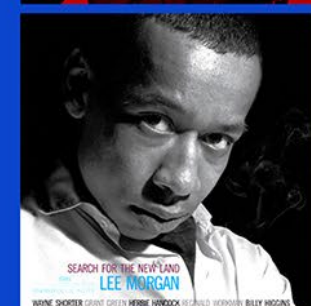
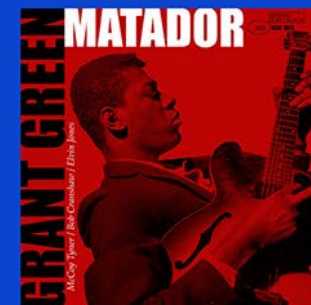
My first set of images can be found here:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3307962/First-look-set-Angelina-Jolie-s-new-film-heart-Cambodian-jungle.html>

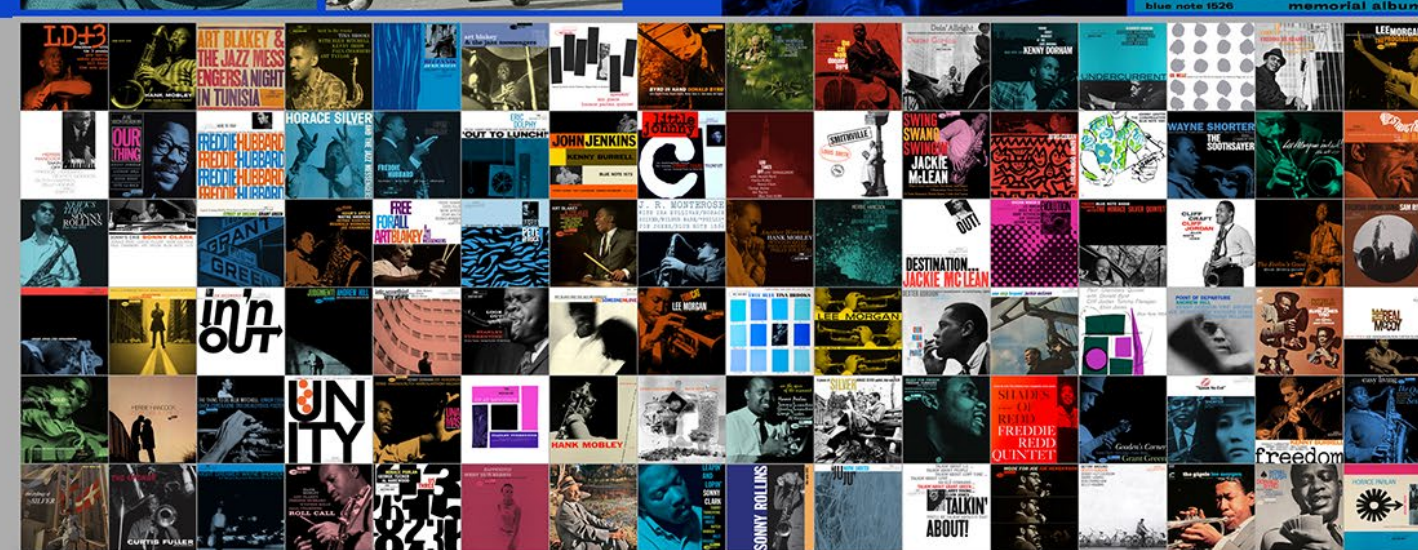
**Thanks man, have a great trip. You'll be on our cover by the time you get back...**

Larsen: :)

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# Silvercar

## A new paradigm for vehicle rental

By Jeff Dorgay

**L**et's face it, one of the biggest complaints with business and pleasure travel is renting an automobile once you arrive at your destination. We can't all be James Bond and have a silver Aston Martin and a perfect martini waiting for us at the gate. But you can have a sparkling clean silver Audi A4 (complete with S-line package) waiting for you, sans martini, at the Chicago, Denver, New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Austin airports.

The Silvercar experience is beyond wonderful. Getting out of Chicago's O'Hare International from the other car rental carriers is usually 60–90 minutes minimum, sometimes longer if you aren't a premier rental customer. Silvercar has an app for your smartphone to manage your reservation, and it allows you to ping one of their representatives the minute your plane hits the ground. By the time you get through baggage claim, a friendly Silvercar person is there to hand your Audi to you.



## TO NE STYLE

Silvercar check-in takes all of 90 seconds; a quick walk around the vehicle to check for flaws (our rental car was showroom perfect), scan the bar code on the window and agree to their terms – all done on the app – and you're driving away in comfort. Audi drivers will feel right at home, and even those driving like luxury brands will love not having to drive a Ford Focus when on the road.

All of my friends and clients visited on the trip were impressed with our vehicle choice, and they were stunned to find out that renting the Ford Focus would have set us back about \$100 more at the Budget counter. The A4 with S-line package includes a premium sound upgrade, heated leather seats and a bit crisper handling than a standard A4 provides. Stuck in downtown Chicago traffic, we really appreciated the extra luxury the Audi provides, keeping stress to a minimum – all the more critical to the business traveler.

The Chicago fleet totals 93 A4s, and counting only about 15 cars in the lot when we dropped ours off proves that Silvercar is a trend that is catching on quickly. If you're tired of dodgy rental cars, slow service and endless lines, Silvercar is the way to roll. They are the new standard in car rental. Now if they would only offer a fleet of silver Audi TTs too!

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TONE STYLE



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Quadraspire claims that these shelves will hold 264 pounds each, so we will be putting them to the test with our four box Pass Xs300 monoblocks. We'll report back to let you know what gives out first; our back, the floor or the SVT! However for those with more realistic shelving needs, this is a wonderful rack indeed.

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**TONE STYLE**

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Think I'm crazy? Stop by the GamuT room at a hifi show near you and take a test drive. You'll be surprised at how good it is. Available in red or black and a range of wood finishes. Goodbye Eames Lounge, hello GamuT!





# REL Longbow

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www.rel.net

A subwoofer can be one of the most important components of your hifi system, but the toughest to find room for. As beautiful as the REL subwoofers are, bathed in gloss black, they are big boxes tethered to a long cable, which can compromise where you need to put them for the best sound and integration into your system, versus where the cable reaches.



With their new Longbow wireless system, you get all of the functionality and connectivity that REL subs are famous for, and you only need to attach the small transmitter close to your equipment rack. Thanks to their high speed, 24 bit, 48kHz data stream, (REL claims about 80% faster throughput speed than typical wifi) there is no lag, or latency, to the soundstream.

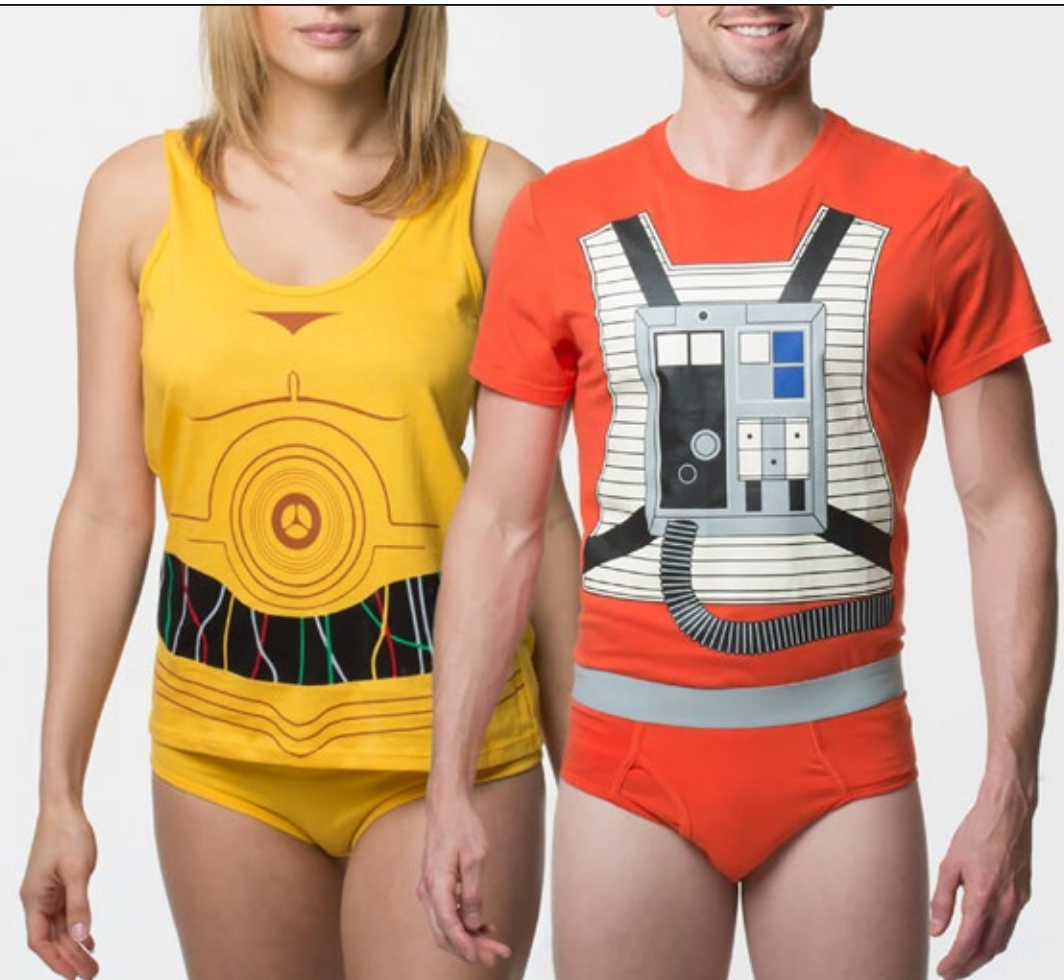
The bottom line is you now have nearly a 45-foot placement window, with lightning fast delivery, so bass is clean, quick and clear. Our tests in a number of rooms large and small revealed no loss of bass performance going wireless – and an informal group of fussy audiophiles could not tell the difference between the wired and wireless connections.

Best of all, current REL subwoofers have a Longbow receiver built in, so in under a minute, you merely insert the speaker link cable from your subwoofer into the Longbow transmitter and power it up. You're instantly free to place your subwoofer or multiple subwoofers wherever you choose.



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None of us can afford first stamper pressings of Beatles albums, so we might as well start collecting Underoos, eh?



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LS5/8

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FEATURE

# Triple Play

The Lounge Audio  
LCR mk.III and Copla

By Jerold O'Brien

FEATURE

**A**bout two years ago we turned you on to what we still think is the best value in phonostages today, the Lounge Audio LCR. Robert Morin could have easily lounged around, put the LCR in a bigger case, charged a thousand bucks for this jewel and called it a day. But he's grown the company a bit, and made not one, but two updates to the design and eliminated the only bottleneck of it only being an MM phonostage. Enter the Copla step-up device. (Which is amazing for those of you with an MM stage that you love but would like to add MC capability to.)

Everything that was fantastic about the original has only been improved. The incredibly quiet noise floor remains intact and the slightly warm tonal balance has moved a few more molecules toward neutral, yet now the mk. III reveals more music across the spectrum. Comparing the mk. III to my original (which cost \$200, to the current model's \$300 price tag) is a night and day jump in analog prowess. There's no better \$100 upgrade to your system out there. Heck, if you're an audiophile on a tight budget, give your mk. I to a friend and just buy the mk. III; it's still an amazing value at that point.



## FEATURE

Listening to the recent MoFi version of Miles Davis' classic *Kind of Blue* via an Ortofon OM40 cartridge on the Rega RB600 tonearm and AVID Ingenium turntable is a blast, but using it with two RB600 arms and identical Ortofon cartridges makes it even easier to see how much the new model has improved. Where the original lacks the sheer dynamic slam and inner harmonic detail of the original model, the current one gives you more shimmer on the cymbals, longer decay trails and especially more zip on the leading ends of transients.

You can read our original review here, but for those who want a quick synopsis, the LCR mk. III is the king of grain-free, smooth, natural analog reproduction. Thanks to its solid state design, it's super duper quiet, so no matter what kind of music you listen to, noise will never intrude into the presentation.

### But the big surprise is the Copla

As wonderful as the LCR mk. III is, being able to use it with a moving coil cartridge really opens up the possibilities. Morin refers to the Copla as an "electronic version of a moving coil step-up transformer," varying the gain from 9 dB at the 300 ohm position to 27 dB at the 40 ohm (standard loading equivalent) position. The 100 ohm, a great place to start for most moving coil cartridges, is straight up and down on the indicator. *(continued)*

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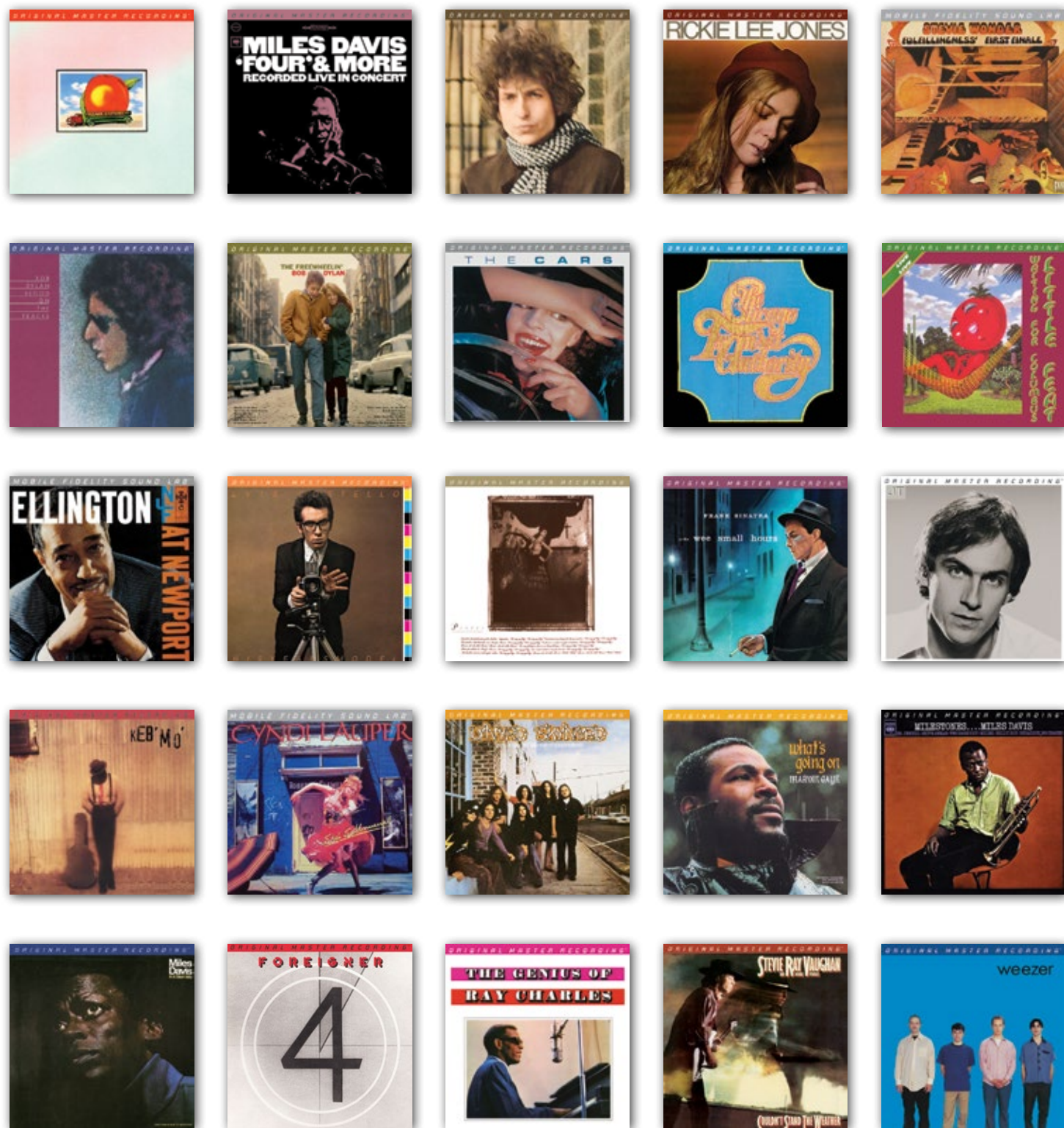




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## FEATURE



But unlike a step-up transformer, even one with multiple taps, this is continuously variable, so you can easily fine tune the cartridge loading to your taste. Many five-figure phonostages don't give you this flexibility!

The go-to option in a modestly priced analog rig based upon an MC cart is always the legendary Denon 103r. Like the Lounge, its \$379 price is incredibly low for the performance delivered. Mounting up the Denon on the Ingenium – this time with a nice, used SME 309 tonearm made for an incredibly high performance analog experience without dropping a lot of coin – led to the only weak link in the setup. Both of these boxes

are so good, scrimping on the interconnect between them is going to cost you performance. For laughs, I started with a \$2,000 pair of Nordost Frey and this proved stellar, but alas this isn't going to be the way the average Lounge customer rolls. I suggest a .5 meter pair of WireWorld Oasis 7 interconnects, which should be able to be sourced for under \$100. But keep in mind this "little phono combo that can" has enough resolution to reveal the difference. I'm hoping that Mr. Morin gets enough requests to put both products in a bigger box, so you don't need to use the two wall warts and buy an interconnect. It would still be the

analog bargain of the 21st century at \$995. But hey, I'm not an equipment designer.

Good as the combination is, we also had excellent luck using the Copla with a handful of MM-only phonostages and even a few vintage receivers with outstanding results. Our recently restored Marantz 2275 has a pair of phono inputs, so adding the Copla and the two-arm AVID makes for an incredibly cool MM/MC analog system. This was a ton of fun with identical vintage SME 3009 arms, one with the Shure M97/Jico stylus combo and the other with an Ortofon SPU. Adding MC capability to the LCR mk. III makes the possibilities endless. *(continued)*



FEATURE



**Still the best you can get**

*TONE's* publisher, who turned me on to the original Lounge LCR, and I tried a wide range of phono cartridges all the way up to the \$10k (not a misprint) Koetsu reviewed this issue and we both remain astonished at how you can get this much performance for such a reasonable price. I'd go as far as to say if you have a big bucks, vacuum tube- based phonostage, I'd keep a Lounge LCR mk. III and Copla in the closet just in case your big player takes a dump, so you're never without music.

For everyone else, there's no better phonostage for the money – still. The Lounge LCR mk. III reveals more music than anything we've heard under \$1,300 except the \$1,295 Decware that we reviewed last issue, and that is also MM only. Add the Copla to the mix and this combo is nipping at the heels of the \$2,000 contenders. So whether you are an analog lover on a tight budget, an analog lover who wants to spend more money on software than hardware, or an analog lover needing a spare phonostage for whatever reason, we can't suggest the Lounge Audio LCR mk. III with Copla strongly enough.

And for the third year in a row, we're happy to give it one of our Exceptional Value Awards; we think there's no better value in analog, period.

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

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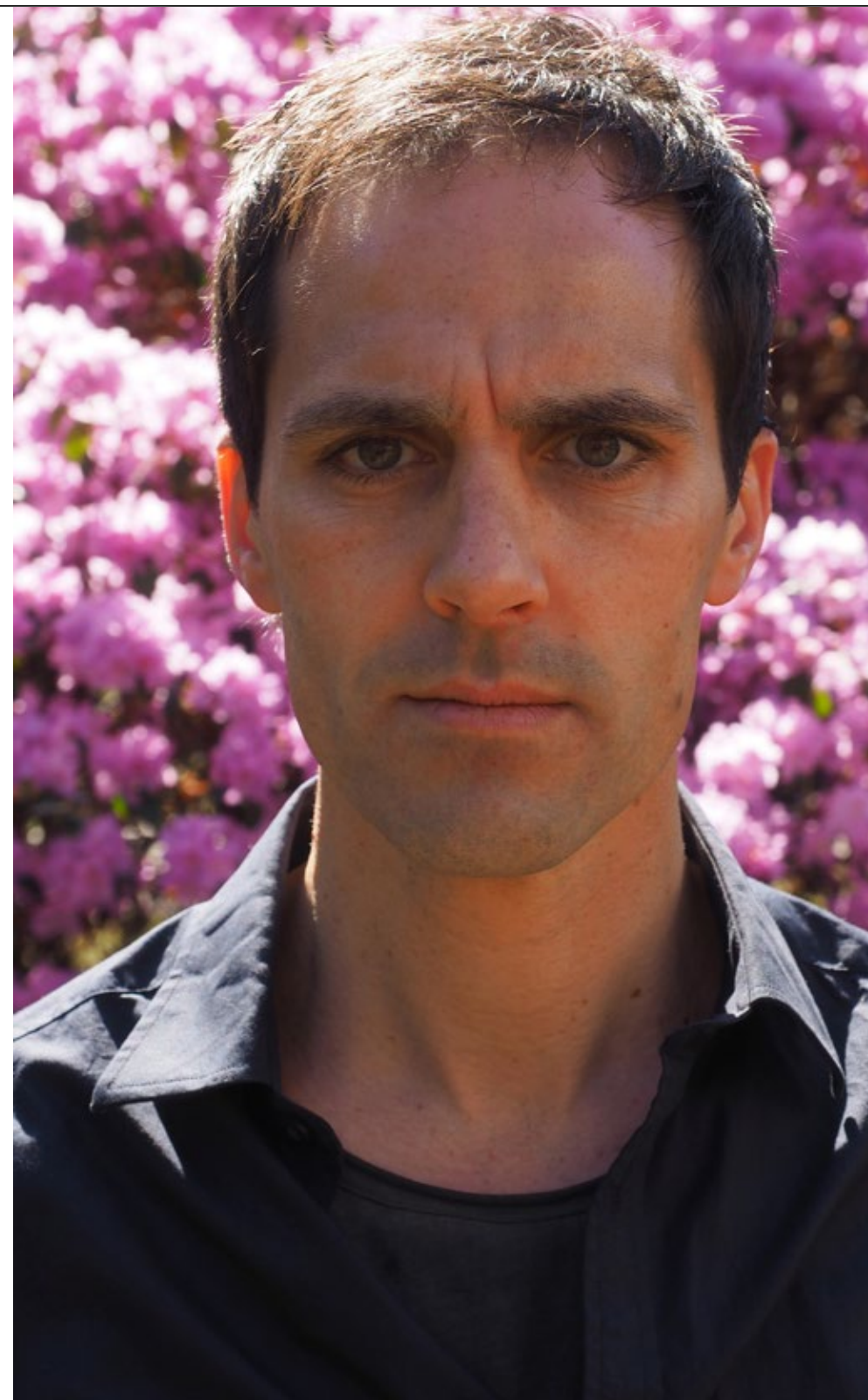


## JAZZ &amp; BLUES



**Food**  
*This Is Not a Miracle*  
 ECM, CD

I have always been a sucker for contrasting elements that wind up making more of themselves than you initially bet they will. You know, the old  $1 + 1 = 3$  thing, where the recipe contents are seemingly at odds with each other, but the yield is epic. Cecil Taylor attacking the upper register of his piano while Tony Williams taps at that high-hat in “Morgan’s Motion.” Or Malachi Favors flailing at his bass as Lester Bowie evokes some sweetie-pie romance on the trumpet during one of the Art Ensemble’s excursions. Dissonance has its poetic side, and in the right hands, contrarian clashes can produce a rich form of consonance—beauty lurking within the friction.



©Photo by Knut Bry

Food, the ever-shifting Euro ensemble centering on Norwegian percussionist Thomas Strønen and UK saxophonist Iain Ballamy, milks this tack for manna on its third ECM album. Joined by Austrian guitarist Christian Fennesz (who helped the group calibrate its last two ECM discs, *Quiet Inlet* and *Mercurial Balm*), the collective sets a series of pacific maneuvers against a backdrop of percolating beats and fuzzy guitar clouds. With each new turn, Food captures an antsy eloquence that blends art-music extravagance with modern pop pithiness.

“The Concept of Density” features a galloping drum pattern effected with brushes, a string of laconic tenor peels that gives the music a heartache vibe, and humid guitar shading that momentarily turns to gnarled guitar scraping. On paper, these elements could be strangers that just met at a bus stop. But by the time the track subsides, they feel like family. “Exposed to Frost” puts that same plaintive horn sound on a turbulent bedrock of churning electronic drones and skittish trap-set punctuations. Somehow, it evokes tranquility.

To call the work jazz might be fibbing a bit; these pieces aren’t concocted in real time. Each member of Food is a skilled improviser, and together, the trio hit the studio to cut its initial sketches. *(continued)*



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## MUSIC



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But this time out, Strønen tried to capture something slightly more focused than the inspired ramblings of the past, and he brought the files back to his home studio for editing. Fragments were looped and phrases realigned to concoct new textures or re-contour melodies. Call it a 2015 extension of Teo Macero's work with Miles Davis' electric stuff and deem the result a second cousin to Brian Eno's *Music for Films*.

A vibe of gentility courses through the program, but there are moments when everything leans forward, too. "Where the Dry Desert Ends" steamrolls with a cascading synth riff. A thick Fennesz guitar lick brings a tasty hook to the hubbub of "Sinking Gardens of Babylon." Interplay is not forsaken; it's just

stacked according to Strønen's design sense. His electronics get nudged to the fore here as well, and they temper the final result as much as Ballamy's sax does. This isn't the first electro-acoustic session to turn heads with its articulate manipulation of textures. Forebears exist in Wayne Horvitz's moody pieces with the President and the *Nine Below Zero* trio. But *This Is Not a Miracle* is definitely a memorable one.

Clatter has a sensual side. Hip-hop taught us that years ago, and there are several instances where I can hear an R&B futurist like FKA Twigs spitting a rash of whispered lyrics over the heartbeat pulse Team Strønen has built. That's one of the music's many intrigues—its pliability is seductive.

—**Jim Macnie**





©Photo by John Abbot

For the follow-up to Cécile McLorin Salvant's breakthrough *WomanChild*, she and producer Al Pryor had the sense to stick with what already works: Letting her strut in front of pianist Aaron Diehl's crisply efficient trio, here including bassist Paul Sikivic and drummer Lawrence Leathers.

McLorin Salvant pretty much has it all: A beautiful instrument, sure pitch and timing, charm, humor, chops, and taste. Her range easily scales three octaves, and she'll change up her timbre, dynamics, vibrato, and intonation from one syllable to the next—foggy veiled tone to full-bellied bellow to dying croak—in ways that make musical sense. She's a swinger who brings a great editor's focus to the meaning of a lyric. McLorin Salvant is also a curator of obscure old songs that she'll come at from odd angles, clearing your ears for a fresh appraisal. She seems to have listened to and learned from everybody. Who else's prominent influences include Bessie Smith, Sarah Vaughan, Blossom Dearie, and Abbey Lincoln?



### Cécile McLorin Salvant

*For One to Love*  
Mack Avenue, 180g 2LP or CD

The Miami-born singer first blossomed in France, and sings one tune here in French—namely, 60s chanteuse (and Jacques Brel buddy) Barbara's "Le Mal de Vivre," which the trio tags with a lovely, Modern Jazz Quartet-y baroque ending. McLorin Salvant stirs in some of that *nouvelle chanson* melancholy along with echoes of classic Broadway baladry into her five originals on which the singer's persona is apt to be chronically lovesick. The titles—"Look at Me" and "Left Over"—are tells. But the helpless air is ever undercut by her total musical control. (When she pops a *p*—"Fix your makeup" on "Wives and Lovers"—it's on purpose.) The best and cheeriest of her own fare comes in the form of "Underling," distinguished by its leaping ascents and precarious dips to port-wine lows.

McLorin Salvant shines most brightly on the borrowed tunes, spanning 1926 to 1964. She's funnier when she gets some distance from the material. The thematic meeting point between songs old and new is the short and sweet "Stepsisters' Lament" from Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1957 *Cinderella*: A plain girl's complaint, even as she begrudgingly admits her flashy rival's got something. Later on Bessie Smith's "What's the Matter Now"—not a blues, and taken as a 2/4 stomp—the singer addresses her withholding mate as if placating a child throwing a tantrum. Getting the tone right is a high-risk business; that's what makes it thrilling. A little earlier (on the line, "Tell me pretty papa did you break that thing?") she gets a little too kewpie cute, but such missteps are rare.

The band always knows it's her show, the players holding up a frame or melting into the background. But they get their moments to stretch, as on a long "Something's Coming" from that other 1957 musical, *West Side Story*. There, as on "Fog," they restrain themselves before kicking into booty swing time. The tour de force for all hands is "The Trolley Song" from 1944's *Meet Me in St. Louis*, as McLorin Salvant makes that meet-cute narrative Technicolor-vivid. On the introductory verse, she even slips in a bar of ersatz Judy Garland, a showbizzy tip o' the hat so musty it's endearing. On this "Trolley" ride, the trio makes frequent stops and gets up to syncopated speed on the straightaways, till they all exit on cue on the end line "Till the end of the line." And for once on *For One to Love*, the gal gets the guy. —Kevin Whitehead



“Moderation is a fatal thing... Nothing succeeds like excess.”

Oscar Wilde



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Xs 150: Dual chassis monoblock  
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### Erik Friedlander

*Oscalypso*  
Skipstone, CD

At this late date, jazz repertory boasts an impressive breadth. Thanks to a younger generation's interests, all sorts of once-neglected artists, styles, and songbooks have enjoyed their moment in the sun—think everything from Ron Horton personalizing Andrew Hill to Miguel Zenón updating plena. With so many rocks already overturned, unearthing a truly singular canon remains a victory of sorts. It's doubly attractive when the choice transcends the novelty of mere contrivance. The real win-win is saluting a forebear that has had at least a bit of aesthetic impact on your own work. Personal resonance goes a long way when you're tipping the hat to a hero.

You can hear those kind of historical feels all over *Oscalypso*, Erik Friedlander's nod to Oscar Pettiford. The late bassist was a bop maven and spent time with everyone from Ellington to Gillespie. The 55-year cellist is a longstanding member of NYC's downtown scene who's made hay in contexts ranging from pensive solo recitals to raucous quintets. A few years ago, Friedlander organized a band inspired by Pettiford's work on the cello. (In 1949, the bassist turned to the more petite instrument while nursing a broken arm, essentially brokering the use of pizzicato string plunking in a jazz setting.) With bassist Trevor Dunn and drummer Michael Sarin goosing the action, Friedlander's 12 originals boasted a slippery élan that mark Pettiford nuggets such as "Cable Car" and "Trioctism." Lithe yet rambunctious, the music scampered in several directions. Some pieces employed nimble flourishes, others paused to ponder a few textural ideas. They named it the Broken Arm Trio. Utterly charming.

Now that group has invited saxophonist Michael Blake help create an addendum of sorts. *Oscalypso* deals in Pettiford's own tunes, which in general boast a deftly rendered logic driving their gentle swing and pop-tinged themes. It's one of those easy-access albums, a pithy affair that bounces along and wins you over in a mere track or two. *(continued)*



## MUSIC

Friedlander's foursome possesses a remarkable agility. The quartet's updates have oomph, but they keep Pettiford's tunes as spry as the original recordings, which is saying a lot. It almost seems that the composer writes a breezy demeanor into several of the melodies. The word "vivacious" is antiquated, to be sure, but as "Cello Again" and the title track spill forward, it continuously pops into my head.

The leader picks at the strings on "Bohemia After Dark" (a Pettiford classic and jazz jewel), inviting counterpoint from everyone around him. He breaks out the bow on "Oscalypto" and builds a web that slowly woos the others to its center. Last time out, the rhythm section proved how supple it could be. Now the musicians sound even more pliable and, also, wonderfully precise. That makes Blake the game-changer. Like Friedlander, he's fluent in several jazz lingos, and here, the bop acuity he's been refining for years gets wisely dispensed.

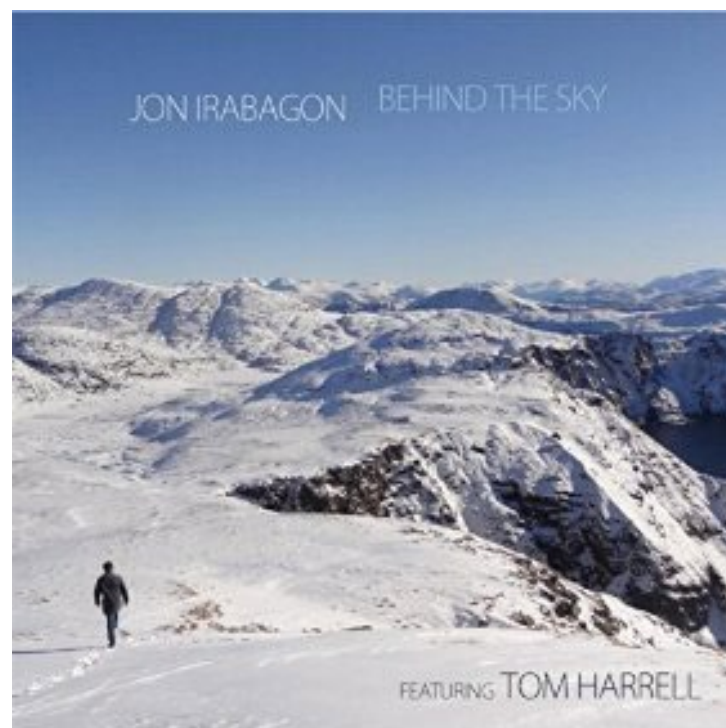
As the pair spends the first few seconds of "Pendulum At Falcon's Lair" twirling around each other, it's easy to hear why cello and tenor make for such a confluent match (ditto on the heartache of "Talampais Love Song"). When the band comes in, it's like a West Coast cool session has been catapulted into the future—bohemia after dark, indeed. —**Jim Macnie**

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**Jon Irabagon**
*Behind the Sky*

Irabagast Records, CD

Saxophonist Jon Irabagon is so prodigiously talented and prolific, it's hard keeping up. This fall he has two new records out; the other is the bracing *Inaction Is an Action*, for solo soprano. He's also on three more, by Dave Douglas's quintet (it brings out Irabagon's warm side), by merry chameleons Mostly Other People Do the Killing (indulging a penchant for mangled quotations on *Mauch Chunk*), and by drummer Barry Altschul's unfettered trio 3dom Factor, which gives Irabagon ample blowing room.

In some ways, he recalls his elder by a decade: James Carter, likewise a Midwesterner and playful virtuoso on several saxophones who shows how widely and well he's listened, covering a lot of stylistic ground over time. Not that they sound alike. Carter goes back to Don Byas, Irabagon forward to Evan Parker. *Behind the Sky* is Irabagon's most straight-ahead outing since 2009's *The Observer*, a swing through the post-bop continuum and a bid for mainstream listeners that might be missing out.

He has the virtues they prize. Irabagon's tunes grow from catchy nuggets, something to hang your ear on as they set the players spinning. On tenor, he has swagger to spare, boasts a brawny pliable tone, and makes easy work of wayward chord changes. Even his ecstatic cries fit neatly over quickly shifting harmonic undercurrents. On the yelp-and-holler "Mr. Dazzler," a convoluted stop-time head gives way to flat-out swing, à la the early Marsalis brothers. It's a quick intro to what Irabagon can do on tenor, minting new figures and spinning variations on those. The pumped up "Sprites" shows him hitting the same marks on soprano.

His rhythm trio nips at his heels, and raises the energy level even when he's already headed for the roof. Drummer Rudy Royston takes the heady rhythmic subdivisions Irabagon improvises and throws them right back at him. Royston boils straight through the brisk "The Cost of Modern Living," busier than some drummers on their solos. Caracas-born Luis Perdomo comes out of the Tyner/Hancock/Corea piano nexus and goes for Latin inflections whenever a tune gives him an opening, here locking into a montuno groove down below. *(continued)*





## MUSIC

The rhythm players may gang up on the beat—the blues-march bit on “One Wish”—or approach the pulse from three directions. In the latter mode, bassist Yasushi Nakamura is the essential player, calling everyone home before they wander. He anchors the prowler “Obelisk,” one of three numbers where the quartet is joined by brass elder Tom Harrell on flugelhorn or trumpet.

Harrell has his own warm, quavering sound, twining around Irabagon’s tenor in spontaneous counterpoint or harmonizing on the melodies. The horns state the first part of “Obelisk” a dissonant half-step apart, 1961 Oliver Nelson style, but before long they head for a country church, the playing rough but quietly reverent. Harrell’s mulled trumpet brings a fresh color to the otherwise familiar Coltrane-spiritual turf of “Eternal Springs” with Irabagon on soprano.

*Behind the Sky* isn’t all gold. A soprano and piano ballad fizzles. Strong and serious as the best of it is, I miss the leavening humor Irabagon flashes elsewhere. By now he could squeeze all his considerable strengths into a single setting. But then he might miss reveling in all that variety.

—Kevin Whitehead



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The Vandersteen VLR Wood

# Up Against The Wall

By Jeff Dorgay

FEATURE

**A**s I listen to the expansive presentation of Prince's "Pearls B4 Swine," the tiny Vandersteen VLR speakers are practically nowhere to be seen in the room. Unlike so many other mini monitor style speakers that need to be out in the middle of the room to create this effect, designer Richard Vandersteen actually voiced these to work up close to the rear wall, making them perfect for the music lover living in smaller digs. Popping the Prince disc out and dropping in the recent MoFi copy of *Kind of Blue* is nothing short of a revelation for a \$1,275 pair of speakers sitting six inches from the wall. Bass is not in short supply and Davis' signature horn is lifelike, floating between the speakers with the drum kit locked firmly in place.

Vandersteen speakers are known for a natural tonal balance and have always been incredibly easy to drive, regardless of amplification choice. Richard Vandersteen's choice years ago to pay careful attention to time alignment of woofer, tweeter and midrange is a *huge* component to the fatigue-free presentation that his speakers offer.

(continued)



FEATURE

The VLR Wood speakers you see here are only about 12 x 9 inches and 10 inches deep. Available in six different finishes, they will integrate in any décor. In this small of a cabinet, instead of doing this the traditional way of physically placing the midrange and tweeter drivers progressively behind the plane of the woofer is not possible, so Vandersteen developed a coaxial driver with the tweeter concentrically mounted inside the center of the woofer, not unlike the popular KEF LS-50 that has received tons of acclaim both here and in many other hifi publications.

**Smackdown: VLR vs. LS-50**

We rarely do head-to-head comparisons with components here at *TONE* because so often it is an apples-to-oranges comparison that doesn't really make a ton of sense. If there were ever a comparison that begged to be drawn, it's in the case of the LS-50s at \$1,495 a pair and the VLRs at \$1,275.

Both speakers are so intriguing because they offer so much capability for the price and in a small package to boot. The LS-50 draws from 40+ years of KEFs design and manufacturing experience and borrows heavily from their Blade speaker, which is a sonic and aesthetic masterpiece. Vandersteen has been in business for 30+ years as well, and the economies of scale they (like KEF) enjoy as a major manufacturer also makes it much easier to bring that expertise to bear on a small speaker.

Having lived with the LS-50s for some time now, I find their only weakness is that they really need a high current, high quality power amplifier to shine. Much like the Magnepan 1.7, they are a \$1,500 pair of speakers that need a \$10k amp to sound awesome, and they're not terribly tube friendly to boot. Don't believe me?



FEATURE

Listen to the difference between how the LS-50s sound connected to a low powered, moderate quality amplifier and to something from ARC, CJ, Pass, Simaudio or your other favorite high current power amplifier. Night and day.

Not so with the VLR – it has plenty of treble extension, and a level of coherence and refinement that the KEF's just can't match. Best of all, the Vandersteens are easier to drive with any kind of amplification, whether it's a 30 watt per channel valve amp or a vintage '70s receiver (the Harmon Kardon 730 makes for a heavenly combination). Much like the Vandersteen 2ce series, the 86dB sensitivity spec doesn't tell the whole story. Bottom line: it doesn't take much power to make beautiful music with the VLRs, and while they sound great with a budget amp, they steadily reveal more with better components behind them.

Throughout the musical range, whether driven by the HK 730, a PrimaLuna Prologue Integrated or the Audio Research GSPre and GS150 (tipping the scale at just over \$30k) the California speakers not only reveal more music, doing a better job of vanishing into thin air, than even the lovely British ProAc Tablettes we reviewed last issue.

But the VLR must be placed within about a foot of the rear wall to produce full range sound. They image well in the more traditional mini monitor/nearfield setup – putting your listening chair in the middle of a triangle, with speakers and chair out in the room – but be prepared to add a subwoofer. I suggest solid stands about 24 inches from the ground for best results and observing the usual mini monitor protocol of as much mass as you can muster in the stands. Coupling the speaker to the stand with care will wring every last bit of performance from them. *(continued)*





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## FEATURE

### Back to the tone

Whether you love acoustic, rock or vocal music, you'll be stunned when you sit down in front of the VLRs for the first time. The sonic image they paint is a large one and if you didn't know better, you'd swear you were listening to a pair of Vandersteen floorstanders.

As someone who has owned Vandersteen speakers on and off for the last 25 years, and still keeps a pair of 1Ci's around as a reference speaker (almost identically priced, by the way), I can say that the VLR does an even better job of driver integration than the excellent 1Ci. The VLRs just breathe in and out with the music. Ellen Reid's voice on

The Crash Test Dummies' "Just Chillin'" is sublime as it delicately weaves itself between the slinky keyboard riffs, keeping its own space panned fairly hard right of center, yet when Brad Roberts' signature baritone takes over for the rest of the album, it too is reproduced with equal clarity and weight.

After tracking through a wide range of recording and musical styles, the amount of realism that the VLRs exhibit is staggering for a pair of speakers at this price. And like the rest of the speakers in the Vandersteen line, they can play loud when required. While it might be wrong to label a speaker "a great rock speaker," because

of its wide dynamic range and gentle way that it reacts when pushed too far, I've always loved playing rock music loudly through Vandersteen speakers, even though they do everything equally well. Yet cranking up *Led Zeppelin II* with the VLRs is a real blast.

We can go on and on with esoteric prose, but these speakers handle the musical fundamentals better than many speakers, regardless of price. You'll find the VLR in our print annual next month as one of our Products of the Year in the small-speaker category. I can think of no small speaker more deserving.

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





# AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay



## Bob Dylan

*Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits*  
Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP set

## Bob Dylan

For some, Bob Dylan is a polarizing artist, with many listeners unable to look past his nasal voice to uncover the genius within, while for others, he can be an acquired taste. Because of his diverse catalog that includes dozens upon dozens of albums, debates still surround which Dylan album represents the best introduction to his prodigious (and divisive work). *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits* was released as Dylan's ninth album in 1967 and ultimately achieved five-times platinum status. For my money, there's no better primer to this legend's music.



©Photo by Jerry Schatzberg

Featuring tracks like “I Want You,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Like a Rolling Stone,” and seven others, the compilation primarily consists of album cuts rather than single versions originally released on 7-inch 45RPM records. Split up into two albums cut at 45RPM, Mobile Fidelity’s analog reissue is spectacular. Blowing the dust off an original Columbia pressing reveals a high degree of compression, with tipped high frequencies and diminished bass—no doubt to play better on the radio and record players of the day.

Merely sampling “Like a Rolling Stone” will convince the analog aficionado and newcomer how much care has gone into this version. Whereas the recent Steve Hoffman remaster is warm, rolled-off, and distant, the MoFi edition brilliantly captures the delicacy of Dylan’s instrumental work and overall depth of the recording. The extra body present through the midrange gives Dylan’s voice a fullness that previous fans might not know if they’ve only experienced the original Columbia LP and CDs. The perfectly silent surfaces on all four sides of this pressing astonish. It’s honestly hard to believe these recordings were made in the mid-60s.

Whether you are a completist collector, newly exposed to Dylan, or merely need a desert-plate worth of this icon, MoFi’s pressing of *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits* should be in your collection.





### Elvis Costello

*Imperial Bedroom*

HD Tracks, 24/192 download

## Elvis Costello

Some music lovers have multiple pressings of *Dark Side of the Moon*; others have countless copies of favorite Beatles and Led Zeppelin albums. I won't call anyone a bad Smurf for that; I've got way too many copies of Kiss' *Alive!* and Elvis Costello's *Imperial Bedroom*. Of course, the gravitational pull of the latter on the HD Tracks proved too much to resist (don't get me started on the unavailable DSD copy of the first Boston album) in the 24/192 format.

If you haven't purchased a title from HD Tracks in the last few months, you will be pleased that you no longer need to go out for sushi or do a load of laundry to pass the time while the download takes place. This selection took about five minutes to complete in 24/192 FLAC. Impressive. More impressive is that the sound of this remaster truly sounds like a high-resolution file. HD Tracks has been taken to task in the past for merely upsampling CD-resolution files, a charge they repeatedly deny while stating they only use what has been supplied by record companies. This time, Costello lovers will strike gold. The download even sounds a bit livelier than the excellent, recent version on Mobile Fidelity vinyl.

By comparison, the standard Columbia LP and CD sound dreadfully flat and lifeless. The 1982 Japanese CD (if you can find one) possesses more dynamics than the original, yet remains somewhat flat tonally and has a small soundstage. *Dark Side of the Moon* it isn't. While all versions but the MoFi LP lack bass weight, the HD Tracks download boasts power and texture, tremendously adding to the music's impact. Still, the biggest overall improvement comes via the low-level detail now available. Every cut is awash in sparkle and texture, with backing vocal, guitar, and keyboard bits all previously inaudible. The decay in the bells at the end of "Human Hands" is lovely.

The Tidal download is flat and lacks pace. It also suffers from weak bass and a one-dimensional quality barely better than the original pre-recorded cassette tape. Honestly, in terms of palpability, the cassette doesn't sound half bad, but that's crazy talk.

Should *Imperial Bedroom* be near the top of your favorites, Costello's five-star masterpiece finally has the sonics it deserves. And it's only minutes away from your server.

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## MUSIC



### Santana

*Santana*

Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP set

## Santana

There are more than 100 different pressings of the self-titled Santana album. As former *Rolling Stone* scribe Ben Fong-Torres likes to say: "Crazy." While the number pales in comparison to the 300-plus different versions of *Dark Side of the Moon*, it makes it tough to evaluate *Santana*. Shaking the pot seeds out of the Columbia original brings back great memories, yet spinning the record reveals why we needed trendy chemical amusement aids in the first place: The original is a lousy-sounding record.

Mobile Fidelity issued a single 33RPM LP and SACD of Santana's debut back in 2007 and they are excellent, light years ahead of the original in every way. Comparing this new, dual-disc version with the prior edition proves enlightening. The older MoFi pressing offers a smidge more high-frequency extension (and we are really splitting hairs here), no doubt due to the further degradation of a tape going on 40-plus years old, but this version is all about dynamics and separation. Splitting this 37-minute-and-change album across four sides, MoFi engineers still ran the tracks to the center of the record—benefitting both the vocals as well as the percussive nuances.

The newfound dynamics on the 45RPM pressing transform the presentation, making it more lively, engaging, and three-dimensional whereas the original Columbia pressing renders the performance along a single, ruler-flat plain. MoFi's 33RPM release adds more dimension but the 45RPM version stuns, with Santana's signature lead guitar locked in place like a planet and the rest of the instruments orbiting near and far. And yes, there is plenty of cowbell.





**Miles Davis**  
*Kind of Blue*  
 Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM 2LP box set

## Miles Davis

Many mastering engineers have taken a shot at this Miles Davis classic. While one might question the reason that Mobile Fidelity chose to produce another copy, the query can easily be answered: The 45RPM pressing immediately sold-out and demanded a second-run batch. Our staff collector, Tom Caselli, who possesses every significant pressing of *Kind of Blue*, also says it stands up to the best, offering great sonics in every way.

There's nothing to be said about the actual performances that hasn't already been said, so it's up to you whether you need another copy. Those without a pristine early original need look no further. And should you have an unobtainable pressing, this MoFi will make a fantastic daily driver. It also showcases the growth and maturity of Mobile Fidelity as a label. The attention to detail goes beyond the phenomenal surfaces on these platters, as the printing and box-set packaging are equally first-rate. It makes you feel good about spending \$50.



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## MUSIC

# Jefferson Airplane



### Jefferson Airplane

*Surrealistic Pillow*

Mobile Fidelity, 180g 45RPM mono 2LP

Blasting “Somebody to Love” through JBLs in my garage while evaluating this record was one of the best experiences I’ve had this year, and one enhanced by a few strings of multicolored Christmas lights for full psychedelic effect. The local sheriff arriving on the scene, however, didn’t seem amused to find staff member Jerold O’Brien and yours truly partying down. But he did show a sense of humor when he said, “You two aren’t driving anywhere, *right?*” And he admitted the record sounded pretty damn good.

As cool as this record sounds on a completely geeked-out analog rig (primarily consisting of an AVID Acutus Reference SP turntable and Koetsu Onyx Platinum cartridge), if there is any way you can make your way to a great vintage system and crank the hell out of it, you will be instantly transported back to the beginning of an era that forever changed rock.

Produced in the original mono, the Mobile Fidelity version of this Airplane classic comes on like you’ve never heard it before. We could go on with a gaggle of audiophile descriptors, but just go grab a copy. It’s worth the asking price if you do nothing more than play “White Rabbit” really loud. Just be sure to inhale.





# dCS Rossini DAC

\$23,999 [www.dcsltd.co.uk](http://www.dcsltd.co.uk)

Those feeling the six-figure cost of the four box dCS Vivaldi is just too damn much, take heart. You can have awesome dCS – ness for a lot less money. Just \$24k puts the Rossini DAC in your rack and on all but the most mega systems, the sound quality is frightfully close.

Physical media owning, silver disc spinning music lovers take note; the latest generation of dCS transports no longer play SACDs, so if you have a large SACD collection, a different transport option will be required. Our publisher is using his Paganini transport with smashing results. Connection via dual AES cables is all that is required. dCS USA's John Quick assured us that spare parts are available forever for customers with legacy dCS transports to put your fears at ease. If redbook playback is all you require, the \$28,999 Rossini Player may be the perfect solution.

The Vivaldi broke ground as the first dCS DAC with streaming capabilities. Building on the success of their streaming app, they have licensed the Roon player, (which should be available by the time you read this) and makes the Rossini the perfect one box digital solution. Well, two if you add a clock later, but we'll cover that as a follow up review as it becomes available.

\$24,000 is still a lot of money for a DAC, but considering that the Rossini borrows heavily from the volume control and output stage of the Vivaldi, unless you want to hear the specific voicing of your linestage, you *won't* need a preamplifier with this box. If you happen to be an all digital listener, you'll save \$20k on eliminating an equally proficient line stage, power cord and pair of interconnects, making the Rossini one of the best values in high end audio. Watch for our full review in issue 76.



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PREVIEW

## Graham Audio LS5/9 Speakers

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

When the monitor discussion turns British, Rogers and Harbeth often dominate the conversation, but these new, licensed BBC monitors from Graham Audio are very worthy of your consideration.

These are not laid back British monitors. Honoring the time honored British way of building these cabinets with thin wall birch plywood, combined with current versions of the original drivers and crossover networks, these speakers have a lively sound indeed. If you've always enjoyed the Harbeth Compact 7, but wanted a higher octane version, this is your speaker. Watch for reviews in our Print Issue as well as a short take at the Audiophile Apartment right here.







# Marantz HD-DAC1

\$799 [www.musicdirect.com](http://www.musicdirect.com)

We really like small, all inclusive DAC/Preamp/Headphone Amp combos. They keep clutter down and a set of variable outputs makes the HD-DAC1 a perfect segue into amplifier and speakers territory when time, budget and space permit.

Featuring optical, coaxial and USB inputs, the HD-

DAC1 can accept digital files up to 24bit/192khz as well as native DSD, so no matter what's lurking on your NAS, it can handle it. Fixed and variable outputs make this component right at home as a standalone DAC or full function preamplifier, insuring a solid upgrade path.

The HD-DAC1 does

everything right, with each of its functions incredible for the under \$1000 price point. Combine this with legendary Marantz sound and build quality in a very attractive case, featuring tastefully done wooden end panels, the HD-DAC1 is a fantastic anchor to a headphone or full blown 2-channel system.

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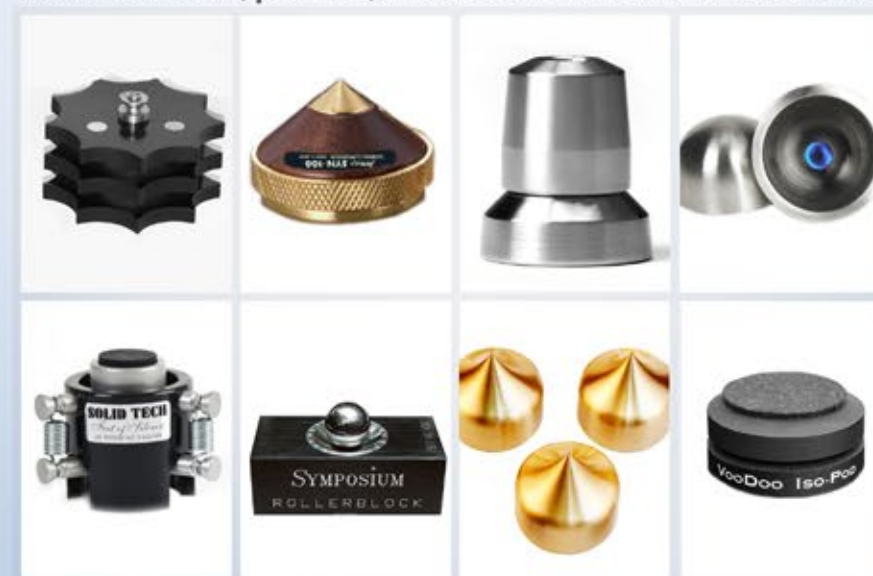
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# Another Precision Tool from Acoustical Systems

## The AIWON Cartridge

by Richard H. Mak

**D**ietrich Brakemeier, designer of Acoustical Systems, is one of the most innovative individuals to have come out of the analog world in the last decade. In 2011, Brakemeier invented the UNI-DIN cartridge alignment geometry, the first serious attempt to improve upon the old Lofgren and Baerwald geometry of 1938. In that same year, Brakemeier came up with the Uni-Protractor and the subsequent SmarTractor cartridge alignment tool, bringing cartridge setup and alignment to an unprecedented level of accuracy (2015 *TONEAudio* accessory of the year).



In 2012, Brakemeier invented the Arché headshell, the first in the world to incorporate both azimuth and SRA (stylus raking angle) adjustments right into the headshell. We are fortunate enough to have the first crack at his latest brainstorm: serial number 001 of his new AIWON phono cartridge.

The AIWON's design philosophy is in keeping with that of the rest of Acoustical Systems' products: utilizing precision engineering to deliver realistic analog playback while retrieving as much delicate analog information as possible, and to accurately retrieve recorded information through precision engineering, delivering the most realistic playback of the original performance. In developing a straightforward moving coil design, Brakemeier pays close attention to a combination of materials delivering the most efficient energy transfer, especially in the areas of resonant properties and hardness. He uses a material called TIMET 1100, a grade 5 titanium with an ultimate tensile strength of 1100 psi: one of the strongest materials in existence. (continued)





The gold stripes that you might mistake for paint are actually 24kt gold traces epoxied to grooves carved in the titanium body to eliminate resonance related effects. A hollow aluminum cantilever further reduces these effects because, unlike diamond or boron, aluminum resonates at a frequency outside of the audible spectrum, minimizing the hissing effect that other materials can cause. Finally, silver coils and strong neodymium magnets have the ability to generate a strong signal with the minimum number of coil windings, resulting in an output of 0.28 mV with an internal resistance of only

4 ohms, making the AIWON one of the most efficient cartridges available.

#### Special setup

When the sound did not come together immediately using normal setup parameters, a quick call to Brakemeier provided the necessary solution. Unfortunately, all the bells and whistles did not give rise to a good start. With this cartridge having a steeper than normal angle (92°), determining the optimal angle by eye is impossible. Using a distortion analyzer, I performed an intermodulation distortion analysis and determined that the

optimal SRA requires lowering the tonearm a few centimeters at the pivot column from where I would normally set it.

At first go, this not only looks awkward, the armwand plays so low that the lift mechanism must be removed to prevent hindrance of movement. The Arche headshell solves this problem, allowing the extra adjustment right at the headshell itself. A mere 2 degree adjustment to the SRA at the headshell level is equivalent to approximately a 2 – 2.5 cm change in tonearm height, eliminating the need to change the height of the tonearm's pivot column. *(continued)*

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Fortunately, all subsequent models of the AIWON will come with a standard 92 degree SRA angled stylus, requiring no unusual VTA angle beyond the normal acceptable range.

Optimal torque on the headshell screws is found to be 0.65-0.70 in/lbs, and the tracking force most pleasing to my ear is at 1.705 grams. Because each cartridge is made by hand, invariably each will require a slightly different tracking force. Brakemeier recommends that users experiment with different tracking forces as long as they are within the range specified by the owner's manual.

### A few sonic comparisons

Where my favorite Koetsu and Kondo cartridges focus heavily on invoking an emotional response from the listener and can be known to embellish a bit, tonally speaking, the AIWON offers remarkably fast transient attack and accurate sound, providing it is properly set up. The explosive dynamics of the AIWON remind me of the Goldfinger V2, but with more body and warmth in the midrange. Its transient response is not as fast as the My Sonic Lab Ultra Eminent BC, nor does it have the frequency extension of the ZYX Universe Premium, yet the Aiwon cartridge strikes a unique balance between realism and emotion, conveying music with an exquisite balance of physical presence and power, never sacrificing tonal color and body at the expense of sharpness or visual transparency.

*Valentina Lisitsa plays Liszt* on DECCA captures Lisitsa's performance directly onto analog tape

and is pressed onto LP without edits, resulting in high quality production that instantly reveals the AIWON's strengths. Despite the fact that several countries have banned Lisitsa from performing because of her controversial political stance on the Russian Ukraine conflict, her dazzling performance on Liszt's masterpiece makes this LP well worth purchasing. The AIWON gives the most dynamically satisfying performance of Liszt's Ballade No. 2 I've yet experienced in my system. This technically challenging piece is performed on the famous Bosendorfer Imperial 290 piano, featuring 97 keys versus the normal 88 keys of a standard piano, registering eight full octaves, providing a system-stretching test like few others.

Where the lower notes are muddled through the intense passages with Kondo IO-M or the Dynavector XV-1T, making the notes less distinguishable, every key is perfectly rendered with weight, punch and clarity via the AIWON. The resonance decay on the lower notes of this piece is over 15 seconds long, and may be mistaken for rumbling on a lesser cartridge. The AIWON delivers low-level definition with the utmost clarity and detail. The only two cartridges I've experienced that rival the AIWON with this performance, are the Lyra Olympos and the Clearaudio Statement or V2, neither of which is better or worse; each cartridge simply registers its own unique presentation. The Olympos is liveliest; the Goldfinger has the most dynamic contrast and intensity, while the AIWON projects the piano with the most weight and palpable solid presence – a lovely blend.



Hans Zimmer's soundtrack for the movie *Interstellar* is another recording worthy of demonstrating the AIWON's realism. While frustrated fans have pointed out that the all-important "Day One Dark" track used in the climatic docking scene is missing from the soundtrack, the LP has enough monumental sequences to create a 2-channel "surround sound" experience making its \$29.99 price tag on Amazon justifiable, especially for a double LP. Be sure to buy the Sony version, not the Warner Brothers copy, which has less frequency extension than the Sony. Drop the needle, crank the volume up high, turn off the lights, and buckle up for a major sonic experience. The AIWON will retrieve every deep vibrational note from the soundtrack's lowest organ pipes, sending it across the room, up onto your sofa and into your spine in a way that you actually feel the music through every vein in your body. It transports you into deep space and immerses you in a psychedelic journey extending beyond the boundaries of the room's four walls.

The AIWON performs very well with jazz and big band music. Cymbals, drums, percussive instruments, and double basses are rendered with enough snappiness and liveliness to recreate realism in your audio room without sounding bright or clinical. *(continued)*



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The AIWON may not be the last word in rendering minute details and the fastest of transients; the holographic projection of the relative size and weight of physical instruments in the spatial dimension is what makes the AIWON stand out amongst its peers. Violin and guitar strings are presented with a bit of a bite, as in a live setting. I particularly enjoyed Kai Windings and J. J. Johnson's "Out of This World"; the trombones had a life-size presence and a high level of contrast between the two players' unique style and conception. The AIWON will not artificially smudge the edges of the sonic picture to make the presentation more pliable. The dynamic contrast and

the textural vividness of the sound makes the AIWON one of the most realistic sounding cartridges on the market.

In a world where a handbag or a pen can cost more than a car, the value equation is best left to each person's own devices. As Boromir in *Lord of the Rings* says, "Is it not a strange fate that we should suffer so much fear and doubt, over so small a thing. such a little thing?" At \$ 9,500, the AIWON is hardly fanfare for the common man, but if you are in the market for a *little thing* that will rival the very best cartridges in the world, the AIWON will undoubtedly be a strong contender. ●

## REVIEW

**AIWON Cartridge**  
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## PERIPHERALS

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Rossner & Sohn Si 1.2  
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Audio Research  
Reference 2,  
Burmester PH100



## The Wyetech Ruby STD Line Stage

# A Touch of Royalty

By Rob Johnson

When unboxing the Wyetech Ruby the first eye-catching feature is the violet purple, powder coated exterior accented with brass feet below, and brass handles on the front. Purple is a color often associated with royalty. With a bold color statement like that, the company must have confidence in a product's sound. Would my ears get the royal treatment? As it turns out, yes, it's a mighty good sounding piece of gear, as it should be for \$9,500.





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## REVIEW



### The emperor's clothes

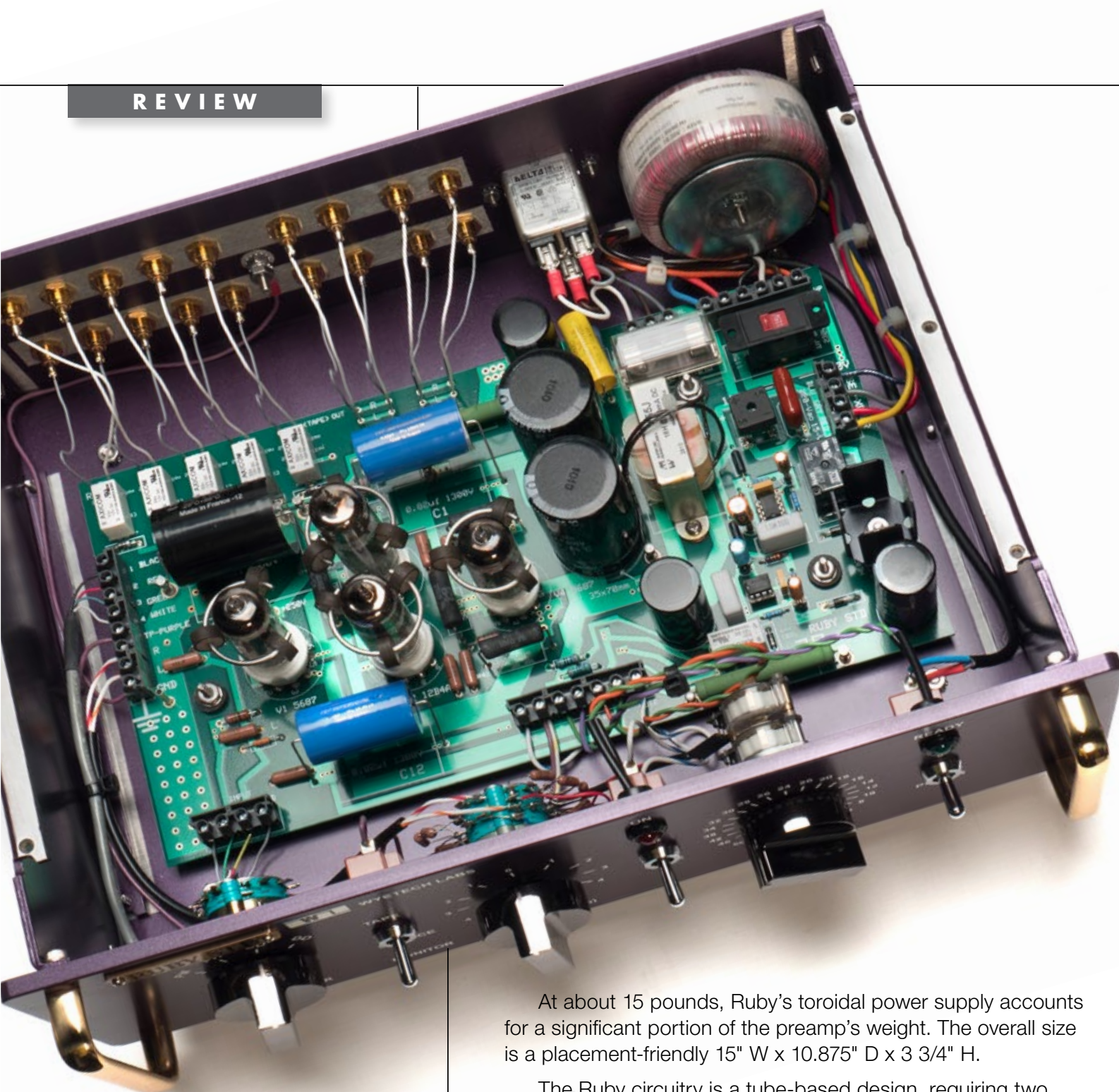
The Ruby's front panel controls offer an equally unique look. At first glance, the Wyetech looks more like a piece of scientific gear than a high-end audio component. Knobs, toggle switches and two LEDs have a Cold War era aesthetic, accentuating readability, adjustability and functionality over subtlety. The striking appearance has potential to be polarizing. On one hand, witnessing a unique external design is a lot of fun. Houseguests noticing its façade are guaranteed to pause and ask questions. On the other hand, those who prefer gear that draws attention to itself only by its sonics may find the Ruby's physical appearance a showstopper. If the look is to your liking though, a marvelous piece of kit it is.

Controls are straightforward and

intuitive. The volume knob's stepped attenuator with gold-plated contacts offers plenty of increments to select a desired decibel level. While I respect the desire to have the cleanest signal path, the design downside is that there's no remote control. Each potential owner will need to weigh whether remote functionality is a must-have, and if so, the Wyetech falls from the short list immediately.

Other knobs controlling source and balance, plus three heavy duty toggle switches, round out the front panel control complement. The three switches control power, mute, and the choice of source or tape monitoring. The tape / source switch serves as a home theater pass-through should an owner wish to integrate their two channel system into a larger system. *(continued)*





At about 15 pounds, Ruby's toroidal power supply accounts for a significant portion of the preamp's weight. The overall size is a placement-friendly 15" W x 10.875" D x 3 3/4" H.

The Ruby circuitry is a tube-based design, requiring two 5687s and two 12B4As. Wyetech factory-installs NOS military grade JAN Philips tubes, so you have a high quality valve complement right out the gate.

We conducted our testing in the stock configuration; however the Ruby offers opportunity for tweaking, fine tuning the sound to its owner's preference—tube rolling, swapping the included Herbie's Halo tube dampers, and experimentation with vibration-isolating materials in addition to the included 3M material on the feet.



Ruby features only single-ended ins and outs. Four source inputs are flanked by the tape loop ins and outs. An additional lineout connection allows a little extra versatility many preamps lack. Rounding out the rear panel are two sets of main outputs. If the owner chooses to send a signal to a subwoofer, for example, Wyetech has you covered.

After making all the necessary connections, the Ruby is ready to shine. Turning on the power switch activates a 90-second warm up sequence during which the unit is muted automatically. Mute engagement is indicated by a red LED. Once the warm up period concludes, mute is deactivated and a green light over the power switch indicates all systems are a go.

### Sing, my minstrel

With a purple linestage it is only right to choose Prince's *Purple Rain* as an initial album for listening. On "Let's Go Crazy" Ruby does a marvelous job offering a clean window into the music, capturing the excitement of the performance. Sound is not romanticized, but it's not stark either. There's a neutral organic quality that's inherent in the sonic signature regardless of music genre.

Wyetech claims that Ruby STD's frequency response remains almost flat from 9Hz to 1.25 MHz. (no, that "MHz is not a typo). With a frequency range both below and far above human hearing potential, the numbers may serve more as bragging rights than as an enhanced

audio experience for a human listener. I do know, however, that the frequencies I can hear through the Ruby are well presented.

Bass is weighty with plenty of punch, and equal portions of definition and detail. The old wisdom suggesting that tube-based designs have limitations to their low-frequency presentation is proven an obsolete notion in this circuit design.

Ruby does a very good job of separating musical elements in the soundstage. Even when a recording's engineer pans vocals, drums, and other instruments into the center of the overall stereo image, the Wyetech manages to take the musical information, sort it, and recreate it in a way that each element maintains a perceived location in three dimensions. *(continued)*





Instruments are not compressed together into a flat and heavily occupied plane. Vocals remain upfront, and decay revealed by the Ruby places percussion at the rear of the soundstage. While not as wide as some soundstages I've experienced, Ruby does extend the stereo image beyond the right and left speaker boundaries when the recording dictates. Similarly, the vertical soundstage has a lot of extension when the music demands it.

Female vocals are presented in a very enjoyable and lifelike way. Ruby manages to reduce vocal stridency sometimes revealed in albums like Portishead's *Dummy*. At the same time, there is no perceived loss of information. Simply put, vocals sound natural. Some preamplifiers magnify small musical details, generating a perceived front row listening experience, while others offer a sonic profile placing the listener further back in the auditorium. The Ruby does neither, dropping you into the seat where the sound engineer has decided you should sit.

Emotional connection to music is a different experience for everybody, yet the Ruby provides a window into well-traveled recordings, capturing the essence of a musical experience, more than just playing back the songs. Not every piece of equipment offers that level of listener engagement. It's easy to get lost in late night listening sessions with the Ruby in place. Foo Fighter's live acoustic version of "Everlong" captures all the nuance and upfront detail of Dave Grohl's voice and accompanying acoustic guitar, with applause, whistles and yells from the audience residing far back in the distance. When the audience sings along, it's hard not to get swept up in the experience and join them singing as if there at a live concert. That's what high-end audio is all about.

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#### PERIPHERALS

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**Preamplification**  
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#### Additional Listening

Like any proud papa, Wyetech's Roger Herbert made some pretty strong claims for his creation. With a handful of great preamplifiers at my disposal from Pass Labs, Audio Research, Octave and my reference Koda K-10, it was a fun exercise to compare. With a \$9,500 manufacturer direct price, it's more than fair to put it up against the majors costing nearly twice as much.

Always hesitant to exhaust my adjective gland with the usual audiophile banter, I do feel the Wyetech Ruby reveals a lot of music, with performance on par with the preamplifiers I have on hand. However, like comparing a 3-series BMW to an Audi, Lexus, or Mercedes of a similar price, it's more about "different" than

"better or worse."

In the context of the four different systems at my disposal, the main characteristics of the Ruby that came through loud and clear, even on my modest reference system over at The Audiophile Apartment (Simaudio NEO 430 DAC, BAT VK-P6 Phono, Clearaudio Concept Wood Turntable, modded SAE 2200 power amp and rebuilt Acoustat 1+1s with REL sub), were this preamplifier's spectacular bass drive, extension and control along with an incredibly deep soundstage.

Of the preamplifiers in my collection, I'd compare it the most closely to the \$33,000 Koda K-10, with an almost absence of "sound," but with a few drops more of tonal saturation. Particularly with the Acoustats,

the Quads and the ProAc Tablette Anniversary speakers, all masters of throwing a three dimensional soundfield, this preamplifier is absolutely intoxicating.

The Ruby also excels at low-level detail retrieval. Revisiting old recordings brought that "a-ha" moment more than once, hearing little tidbits a little clearer, a little cleaner, or even ones that weren't there before.

It may turn out that you love the purple color and the industro-retro styling, but you might not be able to live without a remote, or balanced capability. Herbert swears by single ended, as does Lew Johnson at C-J and the guys at BAT; Boulder and ARC swear by balanced operation. That's your call. The Ruby im-

plements its topology flawlessly and has no problem driving a 20-foot length of Cardas Clear interconnects with no loss of signal integrity.

So, the \$9,500 question is whether you want to go direct and deal with a nice man from Canada, versus the more traditional dealer channels. I haven't seen any Wyetech preamplifiers for sale on the secondary market recently and the few people I've talked to that own one, wouldn't part with theirs. Herbert offers a five-year warranty, and what's under the hood looks straightforward enough, that should something take a dump fifteen years from now, it should be easily serviced. Last but not least, Herbert offers replacement tube sets for a very reasonable \$200. Consider-

ing how volatile the tube supply can be, I'd suggest purchasing at least one extra set, maybe two, when you purchase your Ruby. I can't imagine you'd be trading up to much better down the road, but you know how wacky audiophiles can be. I suspect that the Ruby would be one of those components you'd always miss if you sold yours.

You'll see the Ruby next month in our tenth anniversary print issue, where it will be receiving a Publisher's Choice Award – and I only hand 7 or 8 of those out a year. This is a very special preamplifier, offering performance rivaling the world's finest, as Herbert said it would. If its other parameters work for you, you will not be disappointed—this is a wonderful preamplifier.—**Jeff Dorgay**



## A RARE JEWEL INDEED

# The Koetsu Onyx Platinum

By Jeff Dorgay

**M**ounting a \$10,000 phono cartridge gives you a bit of respect for surgeons: one slip and kaboom! All that craftsmanship down the drain. But the effort is worth it. Once mounted, moving a smidge here, a smidge there and back a molecule at a time until your vision of setup perfection is reached, and then analog bliss occurs. It certainly does with the \$9,995 Koetsu Onyx Platinum phono cartridge.

The entry level Koetsu sound of the Black is very warm and forgiving, almost like a vintage Grado, but as you move up the range, each model provides a higher level of depth, dynamics and low-level resolution, never losing the gentleness through the midband that makes these cartridges an object of desire around the world. The Onyx Platinum is nearly the pinnacle of the Koetsu line.



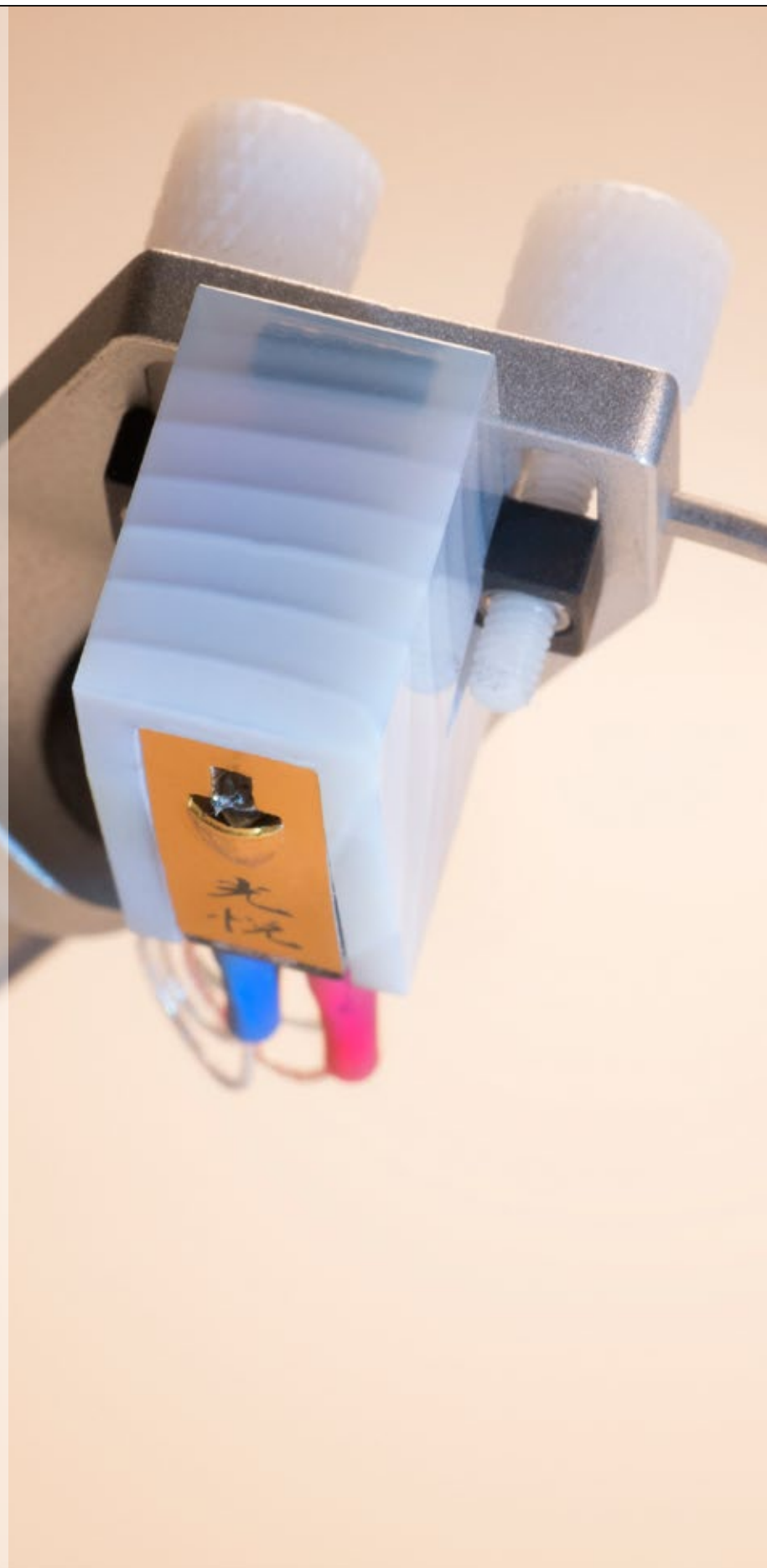
## REVIEW

Beginning the audition with a less than perfect record, in this case, the MoFi version of Rickie Lee Jones' *Pirates*, instantly captivates. The signature digital edge of this recording is still present, but the inner detail of this previously ignored record is staggering, from beginning to end. Cymbals remain slightly crispy, but the midband is full of warmth, palpability and almost a fourth dimension of liveliness. If you're the type of audio enthusiast who wants a "reach out and touch it" experience from your records, the Koetsu delivers the goods. Switching to a better recording, like Shelby Lynne's classic, *Just a Little Lovin'*, is otherworldly, and if the rest of your system is up to snuff, this cartridge brings Lynne diabolically close to performing between your speakers. It's that good, that exciting, that involving.

Aside from the extra-steady hand required with a cartridge of this magnitude, like the other Koetsu cartridges we've used, the Onyx Platinum is straightforward to set up. As a relatively low compliance cartridge, a higher mass tonearm is required for this cartridge to deliver the maximum dynamic range. As with past Koetsus, the SME V arms mounted to a few of our reference tables prove a wonderful match as well as the JMW 10.5 arm on the VPI Classic tables.

### The test bench

We settle on three major combinations for the Koetsu, all good, yet different. The SME 30, AVID Acutus Reference SP and our highly geeked out Technics SL-1200 – all featuring the SME V tonearm. The SME table proves the weightiest of the three, with the AVID a very close second, yet the Acutus SP proves quicker and more nimble, allowing the Onyx Platinum to sound more open than you might expect. (continued)



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## REVIEW

The modded Technics shows surprisingly well, with incredible pace due to its direct drive system, though not possessing the ability to throw as big of a soundstage like the much more expensive AVID and SME tables. SME setup wizards will tell you, as they've told me many times, do *not* use too much damping fluid in the trough, or you will find all that delicacy absent, and you'll get the "woolly bass" that SME arms are wrongfully noted for. If your SME V has woolly bass, it's over-damped. Make sure the goo just barely touches the damping paddle and you're there.

Where the Urushi Blue tracked best at 1.95 grams, the Onyx Platinum settles in at 2.10, offering the best combination of dynamics, HF extension and an incredibly quiet background.



## REVIEW

The cartridge proves a quick setup in the SME tonearm and after weeks of listening doesn't feel as if it's fallen out of alignment like some hypersensitive combinations on the market – another reason I prefer the AVID/SME combination. It's easy to set up, tolerant of less than perfect setup and does not waver once set up. There may be a more revealing combination, but I love using AVID turntables both for work and pleasure because they are so user friendly, yet offer tremendous performance.

For the more technically inclined, the Onyx Platinum features silver-plated copper windings, with platinum magnets and a solid boron cantilever. Everyone else claims their way is the right way, but Koetsu puts these elements together perfectly. Using the Pass Labs XP-25 phonostage, 100 ohms proves the best loading combination in our reference system. *(continued)*

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Those tiny coils only generate .3mv of output, so both the BAT VK-P6SE we recently reviewed (55db of gain) and the phono section of the Audio Research GSPre (56dB) can't muster enough gain to use the Onyx Platinum successfully. Switching to the Rogers PA-1A with 12AX7 tubes (65dB), the Pass Labs XP-25 (72dB max) and the Simaudio MOON LP 610 (72dB max) gets the job done handily.

### More music!

Thirty seconds into the ORG 45 r.p.m. remaster of Duke Ellington's *Jazz Party in Stereo*, and you'll know what the Koetsu magic is all about. Cymbals have seemingly endless decay, and the horns bleat with texture, presence and authority. That being said, Cheap Trick's *In Color* sounds pretty damn cool too, with Rick Nielsen's crunchy guitars having enough bite to feel like one of his Marshall stacks are right here in my listening room.

The wider the range of music in your collection, the more you will appreciate the Onyx Platinum. Comparing it to the other super duper cartridges we've lived with long term, it feels somewhere between the spectacular Clearaudio Goldfinger and the Lyra Atlas, with the Goldfinger being even meatier, weightier and more substantial sounding, yet not quite as neutral tonally as the Atlas. All three are amazing, yet if I had all three, the Koetsu would be my daily driver.

Where some cartridges come across as warm, throwing resolution out by the roadside, the Koetsu



is more gentle, striking a perfect balance of being ever so slightly forgiving, yet resolving the slightest details at the same time. Yet the presentation offered from this cartridge goes beyond that. If you've spent much time with single driver or full range electrostatic speakers, they offer a seamless, cohesive, holistic presentation that no speaker system with multiple drivers can recreate in the same way. What they lack in presenting the last few molecules of dynamic punch or extension is nothing in comparison to the organic recreation of music they offer.

The Koetsu Onyx Platinum is very similar in the sense that the music coming from it unfolds in a way that this unique continuity settles in rather than jostling you into submission. The other high-dollar cartridges are equally compelling, yet in different ways – and much like a Quad 57 speaker, if you love the way it presents music, nothing else will do.

That sums up the performance of the Koetsu Onyx Platinum phono cartridge. If you get the opportunity to hear one and love the way it presents recorded music, it will probably gnaw away at you until you can possess one. While there are plenty of other great phono cartridges costing a lot less money – and you don't *need* to spend \$10k on a cartridge to enjoy music – if you want this experience, this is what it costs. And if you fall prey to its spell, you will write the check, happily. ●



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**PERIPHERALS**

**Turntables**

SME30/SME V tonearm, AVID Acutus Reference SP/SME V tonearm, Technics SL-1200 (heavily modified)/SME V tonearm

**Phonostages**

Pass Labs XP-25, Rogers PA-1A, Simaudio MOON LP610

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# Straight Ahead Red(book)

## Reimyo DAP 999EX DAC and CDT 777 transport

By Jeff Dorgay

If you think digital audio is merely bits being decoded and there isn't any difference between players, you haven't been listening. Much like your favorite phono cartridges, all digital players have their own personalities, too. They all take a different approach, and it's not necessarily better or worse, but it is certainly different – with each manufacturer putting a different emphasis on the part of the player they find the most important. This DAC and transport combination from Reimyo is a perfect example.

With so much emphasis on high resolution digital audio, Reimyo's Kauzo Kiuchi (the founder of Combak) chooses to optimize his player, in this case, as a separate DAC and transport, for 16 bit/44.1kHz playback, and incorporate his take on fine tuning the combination; two sets of their Combak tuning plugs are included to deliver the digital goods. They also suggest using a bevy of their signal and power cables to achieve the ultimate result.





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## REVIEW



In the day of DSD and high res files, this may seem like an anachronism to some. But let's face it, unless you started collecting music three weeks ago, the bulk of your collection is probably redbook files, or even compact discs. Should you be the music lover that really doesn't care all that much about high resolution audio files, the Reimyo pair could be your destination, at least for the foreseeable future. Back when I traded my Naim CD555 for a dCS stack, I had remarked more than once that I could have lived happily ever after with the CD555 if it had a digital input on the rear panel. But computer audio dragged me down another path.

### Un-digital digital

Listening to the ease at which the vibes and violin in the introduction of Elvis Costello's "This House is Empty Now" are rendered, it's clear that Kiuchi-san has created a masterpiece for music lovers. Forget everything you think you know about digital if you haven't heard this player. Years ago it was very hip to have a first generation Play Station to play CDs, because it had a very warm and involving, yet unresolving sound that masked many of digital's errors of omission.

The Reimyo pair gives this same warmth without loss of resolution. I wanted to open the cover and look for vacuum tubes, but photos on

the internet reveal that there are none inside. Another review of this player mentions the effect, comparing it to photography, saying that this player lacks the "sharpening" often associated with image processing. As a photographer, I agree with this analysis, but as digital camera sensors have improved with more dynamic range and resolution, that precious little sharpening is not required anymore. And thanks to the 999EX's approach, it's not needed here either. For those that remember film, the Reimyo feels much more like Kodachrome than an unsharpened digital image, with a wide tonal scale that seems to fade out almost to infinity that to the uninitiated seems soft. *(continued)*



## REVIEW

The longer you listen to this combination the more under its spell you fall. You'll be stunned at just how much musical detail exists in those standard resolution discs of yours.

While both components are excellent on their own, the pair together is where the glamour lies. Using the CDT 777 with Simaudio, dCS and Gryphon DACs all proved excellent, and vice versa using Simaudio and dCS transports with the Reimyo DAC, the combination takes the relaxed analog-like effect to the ultimate level. I'm always great at spending your money, but in this case I highly suggest buying the two as a pair instead of working your way up. Unfortunately, we weren't able to get the full complement of Combak cables, so the thought of even more resolution and ease lurking with this pair is indeed compelling.

### More music

This player will really shift your paradigm in terms of worrying about high resolution downloads. With so many of these files just being upsampled redbook, it's tough to know where the rocks in the road lie, and it's often too late to turn back once you've bought a bum album. Anyone having a huge CD collection should really give the Reimyo combination serious consideration as a destination player and call it a day. There was never a time during the review period that I found myself craving the high resolution files lurking on my Aurender W20 server. *(continued)*



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MAKING THE CONNECTION





Listening to Dave Stewart's understated masterpiece from the '90s, *Greetings From The Gutter*, there was so much subtle spatial information lurking on what has always seemed like a brilliant album that was only mediocre in the recording department, it was a revelation. Even The Monkees' *Then and Now*, which has to be the worst sounding CD ever, sounded fantastic with this player. Songs that felt hopelessly compressed to the point of being unlistenable are now palatable.

Which means well-recorded CDs sound brilliant. Tracking through Neil Larsen's *Orbit*, mastered by Bernie Grundman, is full of percussive attack, a massive soundstage and weight that feels like a 24/192 recording, as do all of the best sounding CDs in my collection.

#### Single purpose player

The CDT777 transport links to

the Reimyo DAC via a single coaxial output, where the DAC features coax, BNC, AES and optical inputs, so those streaming music will not be left out. Unfortunately, the only input lacking is a USB connection, but with so many good, reasonably priced outboard converters, this will not stop you from using your computer with the Reimyo DAC. Though precious few audiophiles will need the Toslink input, it is incredibly well implemented, should you need to use it, proving that not even the smallest detail is overlooked in the design of the Reimyo DAC. As mentioned, files are kept in their original format without being converted to higher resolution before digital conversion, which is done at a 24 bit/16x rate.

A Phillips CDM-Pro 12 mechanism, with clamp (very similar to the Naim 555...) is used to spin the discs with excellent results. This transport is robustly

built and at this point in the game, should outlive you. A very basic remote is offered to control machine functions and switch digital inputs, so the rest is really installing the various Combak bits and getting down to business.

#### It's really all about tonality

If you've ever been taken under the spell of a great SET amplifier, a well-presented single driver loudspeaker, or the original Quad 57 loudspeaker, these devices all present a "continuous tone" type of musical reproduction, because of the simple signal path, lack of crossover effects and the lack of interaction between multiple drivers or output devices.

There is a certain signal purity that accompanies any of these that is unmistakable and, once you hear it, it will either become your holy grail, or it will not be detailed (a.k.a. "audiophile enough") for you.

#### MANUFACTURER

Combak Corporation

#### CONTACT

www.wynnaudio.com  
(NA distributor)

#### PERIPHERALS

##### Preamplifier

ARC GSPre

##### Amplifier

ARC GS 150

##### Speakers

GamuT RS5, Quad 2218,  
Dynaudio Evidence  
Platinum

##### Cable

Nordost Frey

##### Power

IsoTek Super Titan  
and IsoTek Power Cords

Add the Reimyo combination to this list of components that has an all encompassing, musical feel to its presentation.

At first blush, you might even find it slightly dull, but the more time you spend listening, the more difficult it is to leave the couch or chair in front of your speakers.

This continuous tone nature really starts to pull you into the music after a few minutes, especially with vocal tracks and acoustic instruments. The piano takes on a new life through the Reimyo, and it's tough to believe that you are actually experiencing digital music, let alone redbook CD.

#### Is it for you?

In the day of multiple, high resolution digital formats that change like the wind, there will always be a steady supply of compact discs to play, much like the massive collections of analog records still floating about. Should you be a music lover with a substantial collection of CDs, in search of a better rendition of your library, the Reimyo CDT777 and DAP 999EX will be your grail. ●



Reimyo  
DAP 999EX DAC  
and CDT 777 transport

MSRP: \$11,500 DAC  
and \$12,500 transport

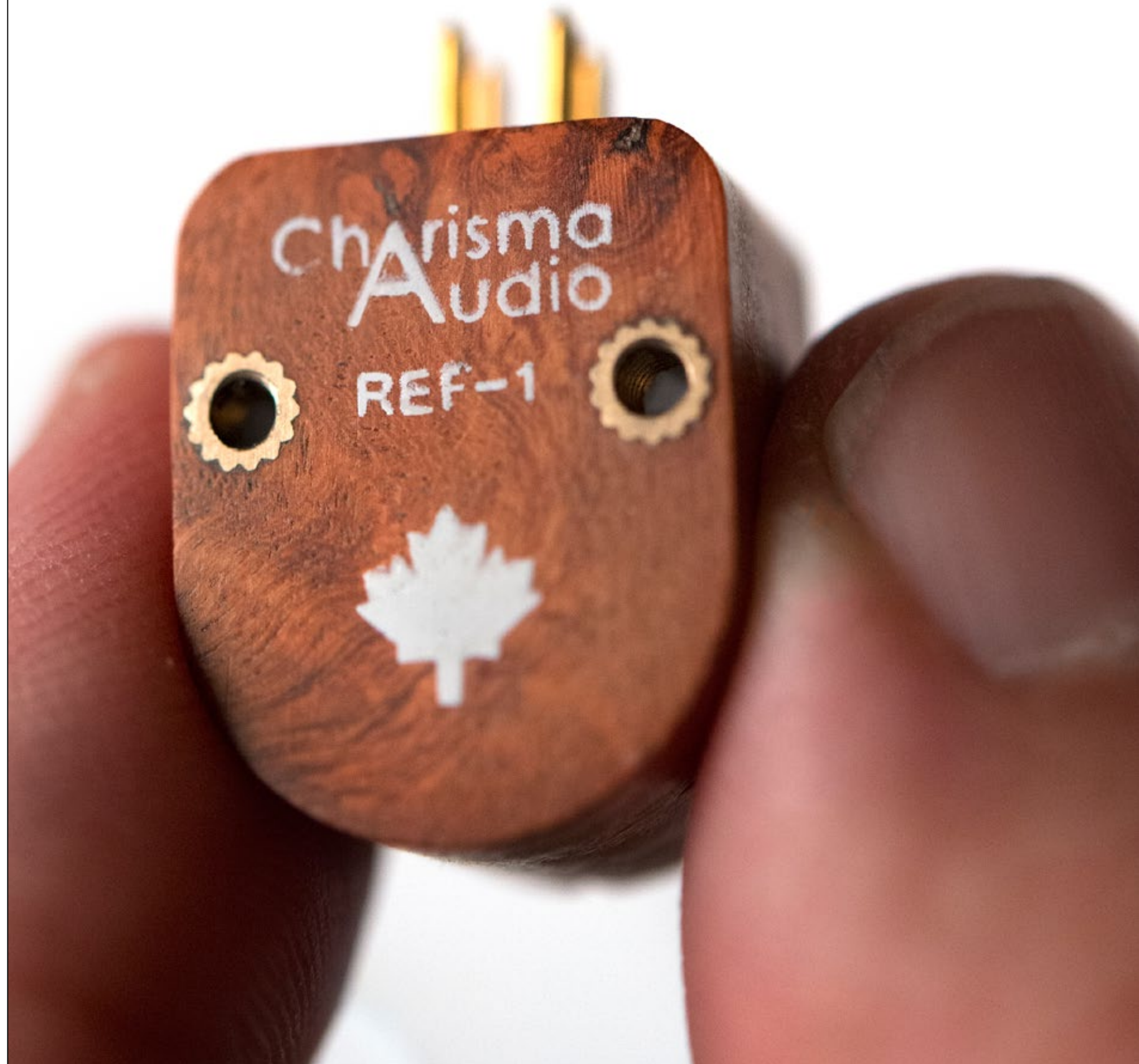


# Charisma Audio Reference One and Two Cartridges

By Richard H. Mak

Canadian audio manufacturers are no strangers to *TONEAudio*. From exotic turntables to speakers, we have reviewed Canadian-made gear in all equipment categories, ranking high in their class in quality and performance. Yet they have never really made a serious effort at a phono cartridge. Other than a gentleman briefly marketing a Japanese cartridge under the brand name “Shinon” in the early ’80s, there has not been a single brand of cartridge from Canada. This changed in 2013, when Bernard Li, president of Charisma Audio, turned his attention to phono cartridges.

The first thing you see when you remove the the cartridge from its snappy wooden box is the white Canadian maple leaf logo printed on top, paying proud homage to its home. Li emphasizes that these cartridges are *not* rebadged OEMs from abroad. The bulk of the design, engineering and quality control work is done in Canada and is declared thusly on the “country of origin” box on the customs documents. Li meticulously specifies everything from body and cantilever material, right down to the number of coil windings.





### A one and a two...

The craftsmanship in these wooden bodies is extraordinary at this price, reminding one of more expensive models. The \$1,975 Reference One is housed in an Amboyona burl body, while the \$2,695 Reference Two is a semi-nude design housed in Bocote wood. Li points out that the strongest wood does not always produce the best sound and he's chosen these body materials for their specific density and bending strength (modulus of rupture), aided by his panel of trusted audiophiles.

Cantilever materials are given the same scrutiny, choosing ruby as it is hard enough to maintain rigidity and light enough to have a quick transient response. In this case, minimizing the diameter to a mere .29mm. The specially formulated rubber suspension will not harden with age or humidity changes, assuring long life. Lastly, the cross-wound coils use single crystal ultra high purity copper, and both have an output of .4mv, making them compatible with MC phono stages having 60dB or more of gain.

Li's goal is to make a tonally neutral cartridge and while he feels accuracy is important, he feels it can be taken too far, producing a cartridge that ends up being cold and analytical, like turning the sharpness of your TV to the max. Not enough and the opposite occurs, resulting in a laid-back sound, overly colored at its worst.

Listening sessions began with the cartridges mounted on a 9.5" Jelco tonearm and a Michell Engineering Gyro Dec turntable. True to Bernard's design goals, the Reference One is quite neutral sounding, reminiscent of my experience with the Ortofon Per Winfeld cartridge, with the midband a tad warmer than the Per Winfeld – almost like a Benz Micro Ruby, but not as much as a Koetsu. The manual suggests a very conservative 50 hour break in period, as straight out of the box both of these cartridges lack the last bit of rhythm, excitement, and a sense of openness.



### Time marches on

After playing the first 20 LPs, fine tuning the vertical tracking angle to a level slightly higher than normal (18°–20°), with the tail of the tonearm pointing higher than front, the sound opens up and blooms nicely. After break in, the Reference One does not change tonally, but the excitement and liveliness improves dramatically, with the lowest frequencies tightening up and the top end becoming more extended. Optimum tracking force was 1.95g on both the One and Two, well within the range specified in the owner's manual.

A Lyra Delos cartridge mounted on the exact same 9.5" Jelco tonearm sitting beside the Reference One on the same table proves interesting. Alabama Shakes lead singer Brittany Howard's voice on their *Sound and Color* album projects with warmth and intimacy, somewhere between Prince and Bobby McFerrin. Further comparisons reveal the Lyra's reproduction of the vocals to be leaner and cleaner with more ambience and HF extension than the Charisma, but the biggest difference between the two is the focus of the tonal sweet spot.

If you want clarity and sharper lines, you will love the Delos. If you want warmer mids and fuller bass, the choice would be the Reference One. Bass-heavy tracks is where the fun begins with the Reference One. The ever popular classic, *Dark Side of the Moon* is immediately telling with the Canadian contender rendering the heartbeats in the beginning of the record with prodigious pounding, as you'd expect – yet bigger, fatter, and with more reverberation than the Lyra. This same heartbeat has crisper lines and better defini-

tion via the Lyra Delos, but with less weight. Enjoyable with both cartridges, again the Delos is more clinical, with the Reference One warmer and more full of body.

On Rosa Passo & Ron Carter's album *Entre Amigos*, the double bass which sets the mood for the entire song, "Insensatez," is truly where the Reference One excels. The rhythmic pace and musical flow of the song would be undermined if the plucking of the bass strings were any less affirmative, or the bass notes any less extended. Image size is projected correctly, with just enough resonance to make the double bass feel real, but not so much that it becomes boomy or voluptuous – a tough dance to follow that the Reference One aces.

### So which one do you want?

How does the Reference One perform in comparison with its more costly sibling, the Reference Two? Surprisingly, the Reference Two carries almost remarkably similar tonal characteristics as the Reference One, but sweeter, more natural and with a slightly warmer tone. You also get more of everything, as beautifully demonstrated in Oscar Peterson's *Night Train* album. The small number of instruments in this jazz album makes it easy for each instrument to stand out. With the Reference Two, mid range carried more articulation and definition; bass goes deeper and is more refined; and the overall sound exhibits a higher contrast and is less compressed. The biggest difference is with the piano which appears more velvety on the hammer, and with more body, as if the piano has gone one size up. (continued)





Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances* on Reference Recording, as directed by Eiji Que, reveals the subtle difference between the two cartridges in terms of sound staging. The Reference Two presents the orchestra with a larger soundstage, projecting a greater sense of width and depth; instruments also carried more weight which makes the performance ever more realistic.

Moving onto symphonic music on an even larger scale, Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* on RCA, with Fritz Reiner directing the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, is a perfect example of a performance which captures all the qualities that constitute the essence of this historic masterpiece. From the sheer

size and scale of the orchestra and the concert hall, to the soul-captivating chorus of the "Ode to Joy" final theme, the entire recording will put the best of cartridges through an ultimate test on every imaginable criteria for judging a cartridge as well as an audio system. Both the Reference One and Reference Two fare remarkably well, keeping up with the right tempo and rhythmic pace of Reiner. Neither cartridge ever sounds harsh or sibilant. On demanding passages, however, the Reference Two fares better than the Reference One by offering more resolution, better separation on the mass strings and bass drums, as well as in the all-important chorus finale. *(continued)*

## Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



We know. Sorting through the jungle that is pre-owned hi-fi gear can be tough. Myriad Internet forums and online shopping sites just don't offer the expertise required to make sound decisions.

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## Two great Canadians indeed

The Reference One and the Reference Two cartridges both give involving performances, but neither represents the last word on the subject when it comes to dynamic contrast and transient response, as it is with all cartridges in this price category. Percussive instruments are well rendered on the Reference Two, but lack the chest pounding impact of the higher priced cartridges such as the Phasemation PP1000. Mass strings and choruses are not harsh or sibilant, but lack the cutting-edge spatial precision, separation and clarity of the Lyra Kleos.

Bernard Li tells us that the Reference Two is not the end of his analog journey and that another cartridge – with a square wound coil generator – is on the drawing board, promising more resolution and dynamic contrast. Li's hope is that it will be released in the latter part of 2016. Watch for a review as soon as it is available.

As a proud supporter of Canadian audio, I had to purchase the review sample of the Reference One, but wherever you hail from, if your taste mirrors mine, you will be just as proud to add it to your analog arsenal. ●

## The Charisma Audio Reference One and Two Phono Cartridges

MSRP: \$1,975 and \$2,695

### MANUFACTURER

Charisma Audio

### CONTACT

charismaaudio.com

### PERIPHERALS

#### Turntable

Michell Engineering Gyrodec

#### Tonearm

Jelco SA-250

#### Phonostage

iFi iPhono

#### Amplification

McIntosh MC275 amplifier/  
C2200 preamplifier

#### Speakers

Focal Electra 1028 Be





## SLUMMIN'



## Pioneer SX-424

Ebay, \$20

I don't know what you do when you're unable to sleep at 3 in the morning, but I buy vintage hifi, always on the prowl for that occasional deal that can't be passed up. Sometimes, you get really lucky – an auction just ends at an odd time and no one is bidding. That's where the real EBay deals are, with the uninitiated sellers.

This little 15 watt per channel Pioneer receiver was one of the sweetest

sounding low power early transistor designs ever, highly reminiscent of the original Naim Nait; maybe even better. If you want a competent FM tuner section to go with your 15wpc, this one is the way to roll, but they are usually beat, because new they were only \$199 on a good day.

But this jewel came out of the box looking and sounding perfect. A case for insomnia if there ever was one.

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A collage of high-fidelity audio equipment. It includes a Pioneer SX-424 receiver, a Manley Chinook phono preamp, a Primaluna Dialogue Premium integrated amplifier, a VPI HRX turntable, and a pair of Sonus Faber Venere speakers. There are also images of various vacuum tubes (Telefunken 6922/E88CC, Mullard 620/6V4) and a box of Telefunken tubes. The background is a mix of white and red.



# 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.

## Laurie Anderson

*Surrealistic Pillow*

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/52459805>

## Car Seat Headrest

*Teens of Style*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-362315-car-seat-headrest-teens-of-style-vinyl-lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/52682186>

## Glen Hansard

*Didn't He Ramble*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-355168-glen-hansard-didnt-he-ramble-vinyl-lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/50935999>

## Richard Hawley

*Hollow Meadows*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-345375-richard-hawley-hollow-meadows-import-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/50742032>

## Darlene Love

*Introducing Darlene Love*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-350793-darlene-love-introducing-darlene-love-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/51116503>

## Corb Lund

*Things That Can't Be Undone*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-352329-corb-lund-things-that-cant-be-undone-vinyl-lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/51795849>

## Pinkish Black

*Bottom of the Morning*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-361098-pinkish-black-bottom-of-the-morning-vinyl-lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/48807999>

## Tinariwen

*Live in Paris*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-359823-tinariwen-live-in-paris-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/51571941>

## Neil Young

*Bluenote Café*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-364706-neil-young-bluenote-cafe-limited-edition-vinyl-4lp-box-set.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/53261911>

## AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

## Elvis Costello

*Imperial Bedroom*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-16867-elvis-costello-imperial-bedroom-numbered-limited-edition-180g-vinyl-lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/4038702>

**HD Tracks** <http://www.hdtracks.com/imperial-bedroom-266431>

## Miles Davis

*Kind of Blue*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-72912-miles-davis-kind-of-blue-numbered-limited-edition-180g-45rpm-vinyl-2lp-box-set.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/2178485>

## Bob Dylan

*Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-111777-bob-dylan-bob-dylans-greatest-hits-numbered-limited-edition-45rpm-180g-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/50351368>

## Jefferson Airplane

*Surrealistic Pillow*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-314681-jefferson-airplane-surrealistic-pillow-numbered-limited-edition-180g-45rpm-mono-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/42714>

## Santana

*Santana*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-153691-santana-santana-numbered-limited-edition-180g-45rpm-vinyl-2lp.aspx>

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/29280669>

## LINKS

# Jazz

## Erik Friedlander

*Oscalypso*

### Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal

<http://listen.tidal.com/album/50367975>

## Cécile McLorin Salvant

*For One to Love*

### Purchase LP from Music Direct

<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-350445-cecile-mclorin-salvant-for-one-to-love-180g-vinyl-2lp.aspx>



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sonos  
soundsmith  
stillpoints  
unison research  
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# Manufacturers Links

## LINKS

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

ALO Audio: [www.aloaudio.com](http://www.aloaudio.com)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

dCS: [www.dcsLtd.co.uk](http://www.dcsLtd.co.uk)

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

Echo Audio: [www.echohifi.com](http://www.echohifi.com)

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

Graham Audio: [www.grahamaudioUSA.com](http://www.grahamaudioUSA.com)

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

IsoTek: [www.isoteksystems.com](http://www.isoteksystems.com)

Lyra: [www.lyraanalog.com](http://www.lyraanalog.com)

MartinLogan: [www.martinlogan.com](http://www.martinlogan.com)

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

Mystere: [www.mystere-usa.com](http://www.mystere-usa.com)

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

Music Matters: [www.musicmattersjazz.com](http://www.musicmattersjazz.com)

Nagra: [www.nagraaudio.com](http://www.nagraaudio.com)

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

Nordost: [www.nordost.com](http://www.nordost.com)

OCTAVE: [www.octave.de](http://www.octave.de)

Oppo: [www.oppodigital.com](http://www.oppodigital.com)

Paradigm: [www.paradigm.com](http://www.paradigm.com)

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

Plinius: [www.pliniusaudio.com](http://www.pliniusaudio.com)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Upscale Audio: [www.upscaleaudio.com](http://www.upscaleaudio.com)

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

Vienna Acoustics: [www.vanaltD.com](http://www.vanaltD.com)

Vandersteen: [www.vandersteen.com](http://www.vandersteen.com)

VPI: [www.vpiindustries.com](http://www.vpiindustries.com)