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JASON ISBELL

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

N

ow that our first print edition should be in the mailboxes of the first round of subscribers, I hope you really enjoyed it. Rest assured, we are knee-deep in the summer and winter editions, so we will settle on a June and December publishing schedule for our print special editions. I must admit I'm still not over the giddiness of seeing *TONE* in print, even though I steadfastly grumbled that it would never come to pass.

To let the cat out of the bag, the June issue will be all about systems: setup and a group of handpicked systems in a wide range of price categories that we have all set up and optimized. In short, for those of you who *do* just want to follow us blindly, we can help you out. Worst case, these concepts should at least give you a good starting point.

As the saying goes, pardon our dust. *TONE* is taking a much more multidimensional approach going forward, expanding our social media reach, updating our review index, and this year, working on a major overhaul of our website. As Fee Weybill of the Tubes once said, "We work for you; we do it here because you're there."

In our ongoing effort to expose the world of high-end audio to a wider audience, I've teamed up with old friend Alan Taylor on the ERN network as the new host of Popular Technology Radio, live on Saturday mornings from 9–11:00 Pacific.



I'll be discussing cameras, computers and gadgets to be sure, but Alan has given me free reign to spend plenty of time talking about music and audio. The show will then be available as a podcast a week later, so I hope you'll join me. I am very excited to tell a new set of people about the world of *TONE*. Keep an eye on *TONE*'s Facebook page for more details.

Along with all the awesome music coverage this issue, we've got a lot of fun stuff: speakers galore in all shapes and sizes, and a close look at Simaudio's flagship MOON 780DAC. I've been an audio enthusiast for forty years now and it never stops amazing me at how much more music these manufacturers can wring from their latest offerings. Every time I think it's about to hit a plateau, the bar keeps getting raised — at all price points.

And that's what makes this job a blast.

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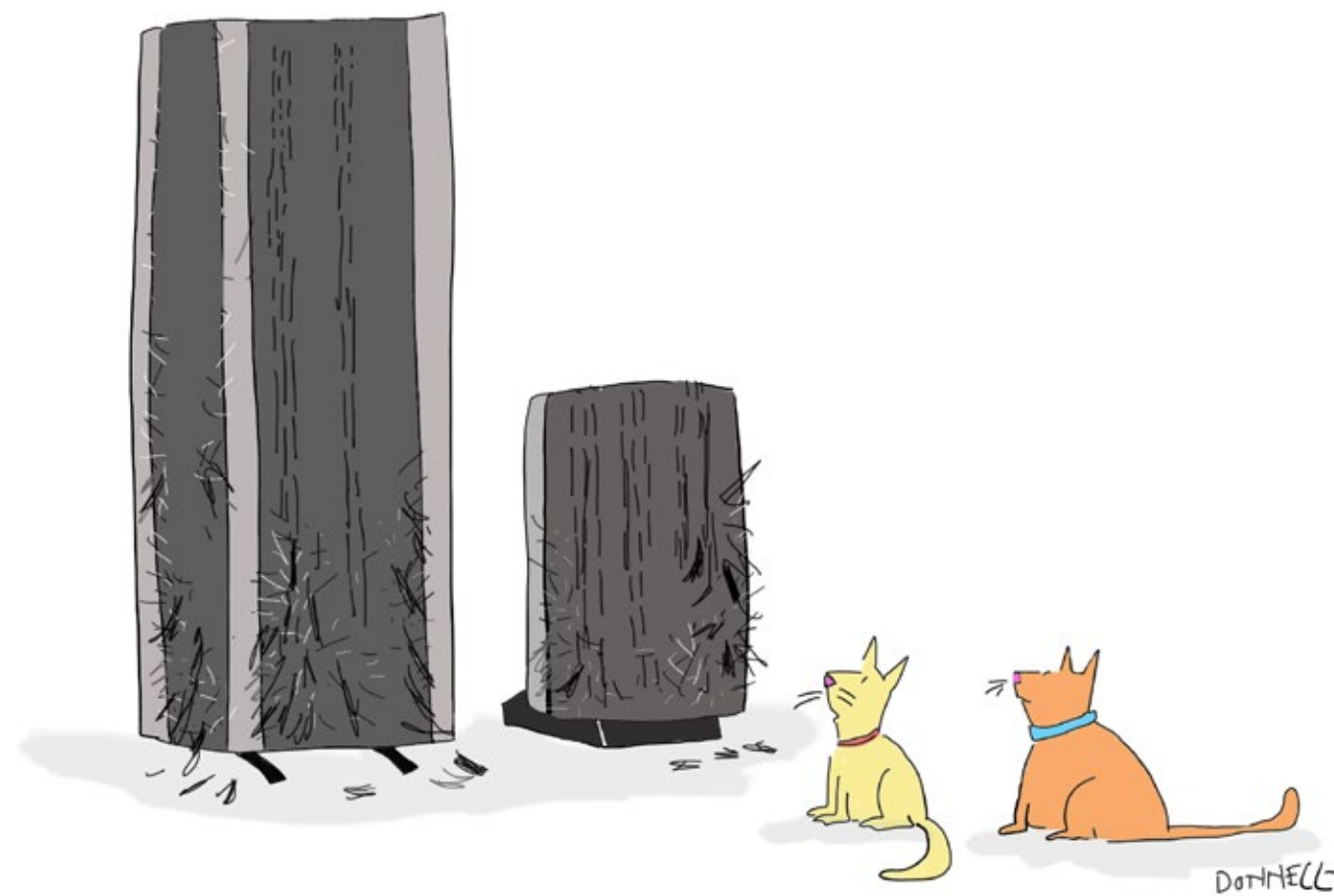
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“Magnepans, Quads — honestly, I can’t feel the difference.”

Jason Isbell
October 25, 2015
Ryman Auditorium
Nashville, TN

By Bob Gendron

Photos by
Steven Cross

Jason Isbell

Two songs into his concert in late October at Ryman Auditorium, Jason Isbell slowly walked up to Amanda Shires until they were face-to-face, their toes separated by only a few inches. As the musicians made brief eye contact, a warm grin washed over Isbell's face. Shires, focused on the violin balanced against her shoulder, couldn't help but quickly look up again and respond with the same expression. In a matter of ten seconds, the bandmates—who also happen to be husband and wife—conveyed everything that needed to be said without stating a single word.

“Cover Me Up” started as a hushed declaration before, one by one, each member of Isbell’s band joined he and Shires, causing the momentum to swell before the final verse swallowed up the room, shook its pews, and rattled the chains of all the ghosts therein.

Such rarefied emotional and musical chemistry coursed throughout the stellar concert at which Isbell surprised the crowd by performing the entirety of his recent *Something More Than Free* album from start to finish for the first and, according to his humorous quip, possibly last time. Recognizing the special honor of playing at the iconic “Mother Church of Country Music” for four sold-out nights, the grateful front man saluted legends that stood on the famous wood-floor stage before him with heartfelt remarks and acknowledged his father’s presence in the crowd. Mostly, however, the Alabama devoted the moments to making a watertight case for his group deserving to leave their footprints amidst the shadows of giants such as Hank Williams and Johnny Cash.

There were no special guests, no cover songs, no drawn-out encore breaks, and no frills. Nothing extra seemed necessary. Framed by a backdrop of three stained-glass windows, Isbell and his support quintet, the 400 Unit, transmitted a purity, dignity, and candor that any additional touch would’ve probably spoiled. The 130-minute set served as a glimpse of an artist not only in his prime, but one still growing in stature despite already having attained a degree of greatness that places him at the forefront of his generation as well as those that came before.

Indeed, with his last two studio records— *Something More Than Free* and 2013’s *Southeastern*—plus his finest songs from his first handful of solo efforts and contributions to the Drive-By Truckers—Isbell proved he deserves inclusion in a roots-minded circle that counts Bruce Springsteen, Lucinda Williams, and John Prine among its membership. Couple the 36-year-old’s insightful songwriting and masterful guitar skills with the crack abilities of his veteran band, and, at least on this night, the result is a sound that ranks at or very near the top of the most honest, sincere, and dynamic in all of music.

Watching Isbell interact with Shires elevated several of his most personal songs to an even more intense stratum. On the surface, the gorgeous, stripped-down “Flagship” bears no direct autobiographical relationship to the pair. But hearing them wordlessly harmonize and hum between the richly detailed verses turned the acoustic-based piece into a shared promise of unconditional love. Even more potent, “Cover Me Up,” dedicated here to Shires, came on as soul-baring catharsis. It started as a hushed declaration before, one by one, each member of Isbell’s band joined he and Shires, causing the momentum to swell before the final verse—sung by the vocalist with gale-force-hurricane conviction—swallowed up the room,

shook its pews, and rattled the chains of all of the ghosts therein. Strong and devoted, Isbell’s powerhouse delivery on the closing chorus rendered the microphone obsolete. It stands as one of the most stirring vocal performances I’ve ever witnessed.

Putting a priority on feeling, Isbell and company caused everything to resonate on multiple levels, stirring passions via a commanding combination of rich, detailed imagery and direct, narrative-accenting arrange-

ments. A descending piano motif paralleled Isbell’s patient, poignant singing on “To a Band I Once Loved,” a eulogy for Centro-Matic. The slight buzz of a slide guitar hovered in the wings of “Speed Trap Town” as Isbell’s matter-of-fact drawl set the scene with literary paintings of a protagonist weighing familial obligations, consequences, and histories. Contemplation also clawed at the interior of the catchy “24 Frames,” goosed by mallet-thumped percussion and

steely guitar passages that doubled as a whistling steam-train engine.

Just as the collective brought gravity to serious ballads, it lent celebratory vibes to uptempo fare and fist-pumping crunch to heavier, resolute material. Bassist Jimbo Hart, gussied up for the occasion in a bowler hat, tie, and vest, served as the secret weapon. He held his instrument like a soldier carries an M16 rifle, chocking up on the neck to add pace and subtle heft. *(continued)*





Equally capable of greasing slippery notes and bolstering bottom-end foundations, he anchored a rhythm section fluent in Memphis R&B, Muscle Shoals soul, traditional barn dance, back-porch blues, tobacco-spitting rock, and old-school country. Shires' amber, rosin-hued strains and elegant, Texas-inflected backing vocals further broadened the palette.

Taking on the guise of a widescreen film, "Children of Children" assumed the unstoppable momentum of a freighter cutting through turbulent ocean waves when, midway through, a single snare-drum strike echoed throughout the building and shot the band into orbit, Isbell's drifting slide-guitar solo giving the impression it contained enough energy and stamina to rotate the earth on its axis. Referencing a classic automobile, "Hudson Commodore" glided on the equivalent of a luxury suspension system. By contrast, "Never Gonna Change" hit with bruising uppercut blows and snarled with the menace of a passed-out drunk rudely awakened from his slumber at a dive bar.

Blood, guts, and shrapnel—both the physical and sentimental variety—littered the swampy build-up of "Decoration Day." On the extended coda, Shires' melancholy fiddle tones functioned as a remorseful aftermath while her life partner ripped soaring, amplified leads that followed along the back roads of his Southern upbringing and chased down dusty two-lane highways to places yet unknown. Long may he ride. ●

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The Paradigm Atom

An Incredible Start

By Jeff Dorgay

I think it was back in the late 80s or early 90s that I picked up a pair of Atoms for about \$150 from my local dealer for the floor models. I needed a pair of small speakers for use in my darkroom to get me through the long hours spent printing pictures of UHaul trucks that I had traveled around the country to shoot. Remember those trucks with the graphics of all 50 states? Yep, I followed them everywhere.



I had never even *heard* of Paradigm back then and they did not have a huge product range, but these little speakers blew me away for such a small amount of cash, even in those days. The white ones you see here were procured on EBay for \$40, not a bad depreciation for 25 years.

While plenty of people on Facebook piped in to tell me how to tweak the Atoms, I've left them stock, and though I no longer have a darkroom, they are going to serve garage duty going forward. They still sound fantastic.

Perusing the Paradigm website, the v.1 Atom had a .75 inch dome tweeter and 5 1/4 inch polypropylene woofer, with a frequency response spec of 90hz – 20khz +/-2db. They still seem to have more bass than that, and mated with an inexpensive sub make for an incredibly engaging budget system. Today, Paradigm is up to v.7 on the Atom and they retail for \$400 a pair – again not bad. Back when I bought my first Atoms a Volkswagen GTi was about \$12k and now they are \$30k. *(continued)*

FEATURE



Just as they do today, the Atoms coming off the assembly line are compared to a “reference model” to make sure everything stays in spec. Many people don’t know what a massive company Paradigm is. When I visited the factory in 2012, I was given a tour of an over 200,000 square foot facility, where all of their drivers designed and built in house, along with every aspect of crossover and cabinetry. Paradigm also has one of North America’s largest anechoic chambers to evaluate both their raw drivers and the finished speaker systems.

The 2016 Atom v.7 is one of the best buys in high end audio, but it’s fun to get in the time machine and revisit their early days in this manner, because it reveals their design and performance priorities have always been paramount. While they were available in light and dark cherry or black ash, I’ve always been partial to the white ones you see here. Great speakers, great memories. Don’t pass a pair up if you see them lurking at a garage sale somewhere, you won’t be disappointed. ●

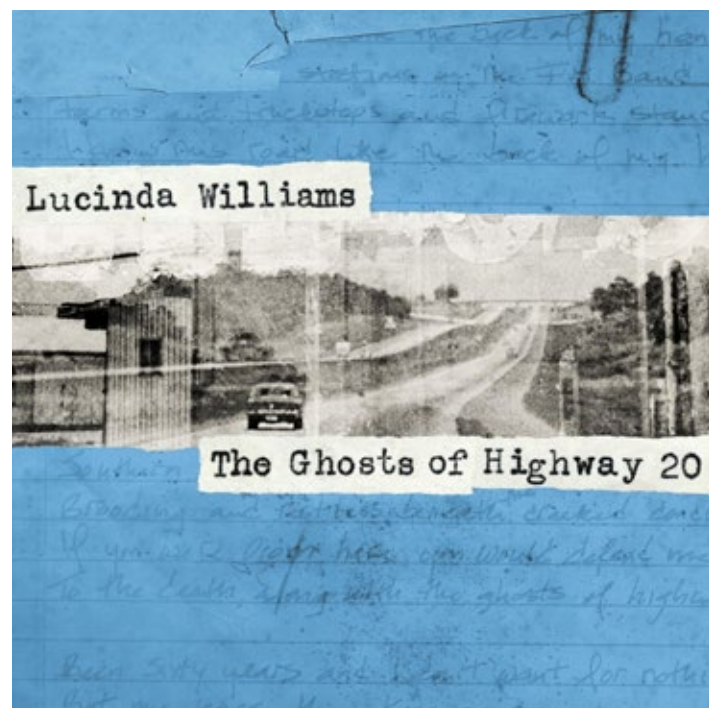
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NEW RELEASES



Lucinda Williams

The Ghosts of Highway 20

Highway 20 Records/Thirty Tigers, 2LP or 2CD

Highway 20, commonly known as Interstate 20, begins near Kent, Texas and runs for more than 1,500 miles before ending in Florence, South Carolina. In between, it sprawls across Louisiana, Mississippi, and Georgia. On her latest album—a relatively quick follow-up to 2013’s stellar *Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone*, arguably the finest of her remarkable career—Lucinda Williams isn’t so much concerned with the geography of the Southern road as the memories it triggers.

© Photo by David McClister

Personal experiences directly connected to the route—and the emotions they inspire within the 62-year-old singer-songwriter—inform the organic *The Ghosts of Highway 20*, which often spreads out akin to its namesake artery and finds Williams exploring autobiographical themes. Featuring 12 original tunes as well as a cover of Bruce Springsteen’s “Factory” and interpretation of the “lost” Woody Guthrie track “House of Earth,” it occasionally evokes the wider-ranging moments on 2007’s *West* yet sounds unlike anything else in the Louisiana native’s catalog.

Unbound by conventional song lengths and eager to stray from

familiar Americana molds, Williams experiments with improvisational structures, atmospheric textures, and stripped-back albeit expansive arrangements. She also adopts phrasing and time signatures owing more to jazz than country or rock, a shift underscored by the dominant presence of revered guitarists Bill Frisell and Greg Leisz. Their nuanced tones, light/dark contrasts, and haunting lines wind through the songs like the Mississippi River snakes its way down through the Delta: Assured, temperamental, slowly—a permanent part of the landscapes.

Recorded without any overdubs, *The Ghosts of Highway*

20 doesn’t make for uplifting art even as it rewards repeat listening. The reflective, often pain-scarred moods—combined with a primarily languid pace—project a downbeat tenor. No doubt Williams would’ve benefitted from the inclusion of more upbeat fare such as the bounding, gospel-laden “Doors of Heaven” and insistent, electrified pick-and-grin “Bitter Memory.” A swampy slide guitar combines with Williams’ molasses drawl and tenacious attitude to turn the former into a rallying cry. On the latter, she achieves the longed-for catharsis that’s become one of her hallmarks while kicking longstanding troubles to the curb. *(continued)*



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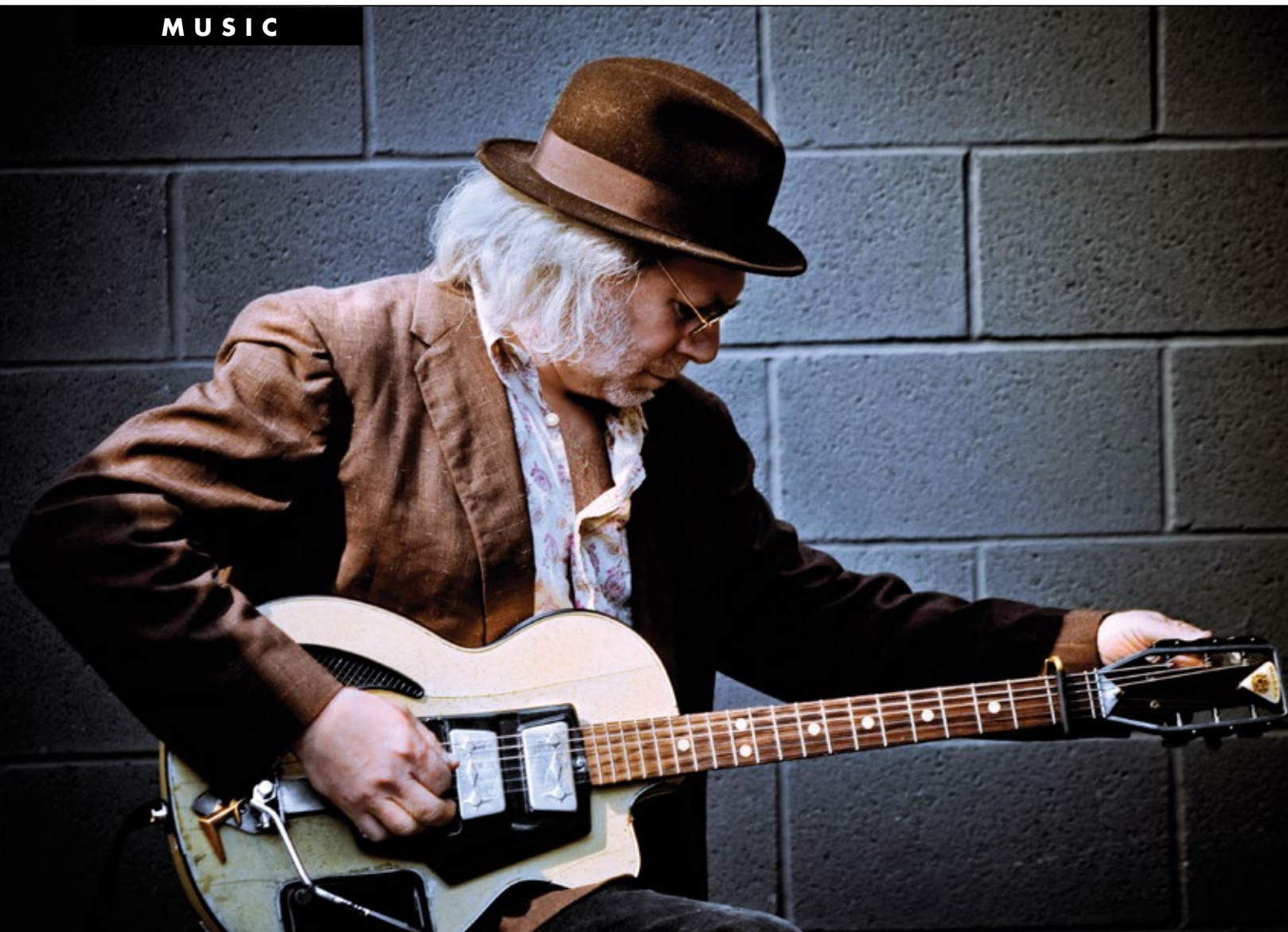


Mostly, however, Williams mulls and contemplates over patient, forlorn frameworks. They showcase the weariness of her voice as she combs through places, times, and characters that stay with her. Hurt, secrets, and loss figure into a majority of the storytelling. The unsettled and unsettling “Dust” emerges as a portrait of the deepest kind of sorrow—that which cannot be properly expressed. Breathy and spacious, the melancholy “I Know All About It” hones in on personal affairs in such intimate matters that it could double as a letter Williams wrote to her former self.

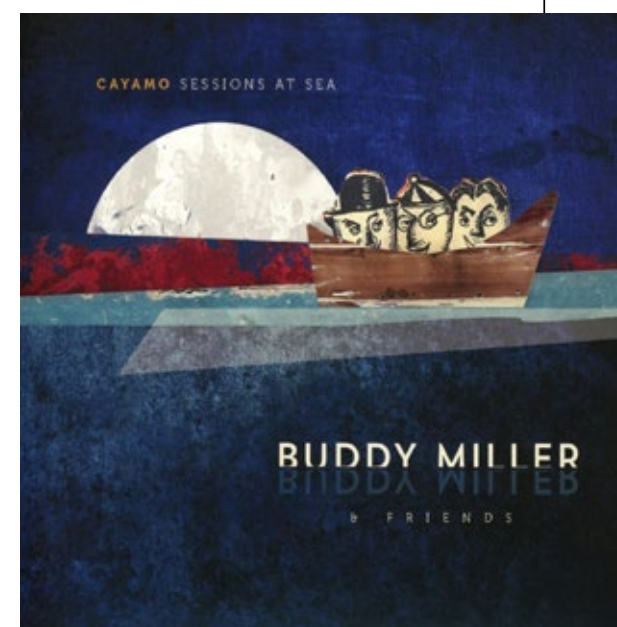
By contrast, the standout title track serves as a note to herself in the present. Truck stops, old junkyards, and firework stands populate the gritty narrative on which the vocalist chronicles her love/hate relationship with the road and its inhabitants. Singing with dirt-underneath-the-fingernails toughness, Williams suggests we never divorce ourselves from the past, no matter how hard we may try. Save for the tender “Place in My Heart,” a ballad steeped in forgiveness, redemption remains hard to come by on *The Ghosts of Highway 20*.

Ditto some needed editing. While Williams displays admirable ambition throughout, several songs—“If My Love Could Kill,” “Louisiana Story,” the 12-minute-plus ramble “Faith and Grace”—cling to repeated tempos or take the form of improvisational, unfinished sketches that wander about. These shortcomings, and the set’s relative overall downcast tenor, serve as reminders that the unflinchingly personal nature of *The Ghosts of Highway 20* means everything gets left to chance, warts and all.

—**Bob Gendron**



Buddy Miller is a man with a blessed career. When he and his singer-songwriter wife Julie Miller moved to Nashville in the 1990s, the city's Americana elite—a cast that included Emmylou Harris and Steve Earle—embraced them. Over the years, Miller has grown in professional stature, evolving into a roots-music power player as a producer, musician, and singer-songwriter. He's currently the executive music producer for ABC's Music Row soap opera "Nashville." That is clout.



Buddy Miller & Friends

Cayamo Sessions at Sea
New West Records, LP or CD

So when Miller releases an album with some "friends," you can rest assured it's going to be an impressive lineup of session players and marquee talent. Indeed, you'll find no slouches among a crew that includes British folk-rock icon Richard Thompson, country thrush Kacey Musgraves, and eccentric singer-songwriter Elizabeth Cook. The assembled artists tackle classic songs written by the likes of Buck Owens, John Prine, and Bob McDill.

Miller captured the material during the Cayamo music festival, a popular annual event that takes place aboard the Norwegian Pearl cruise ship and features a passel of highly regarded roots artists. These aren't live stage recordings. Rather, they're tracks Miller recorded in a makeshift studio he created aboard the ship over the last couple of years. Comprised of covers of well-worn country and Americana crowd-pleasers ("Angel from Montgomery," "Love's Gonna Live Here"), the performances are strong but the fare often predictable. And while the arrangements score points for tastefulness, the dearth of surprises doesn't allow *Cayamo Sessions at Sea* to be the record it could've been.

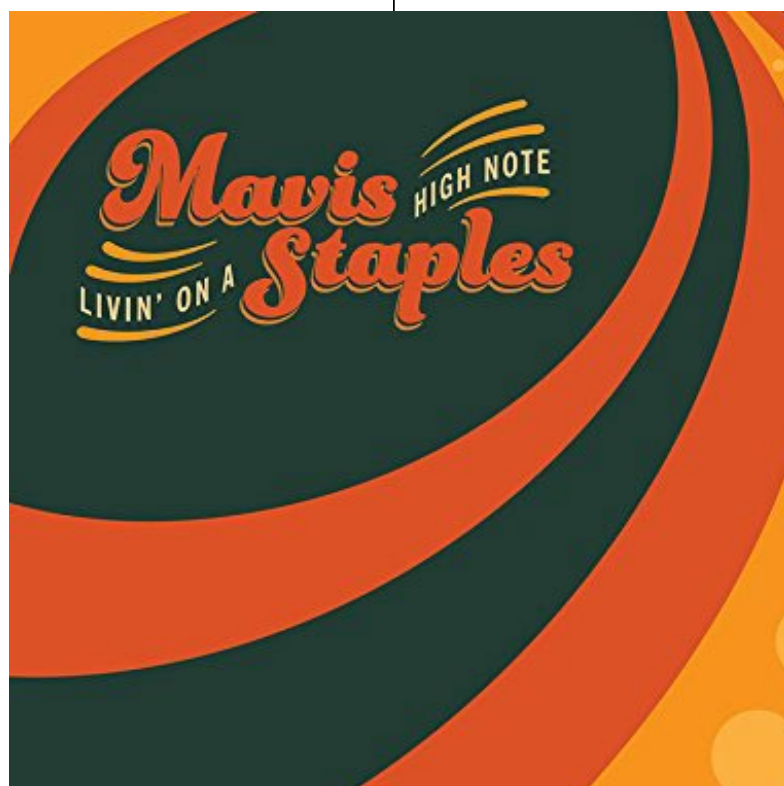
It's not easy finding a fresh interpretation of an old classic, but some artists

pull it off. On a redux of the Rolling Stones' "Wild Horses," Shawn Colvin offers up a beguiling version that resonates long after the song concludes. Miller surrounds her with warm and understated flourishes, including a bittersweet solo from steel player Fats Kaplan.

Lucinda Williams brings gravitas to any song. On Gram Parsons' "Hickory Wind," she's Haggard-esque in her ability to convey the loneliness of the big city and the nostalgic pull of home and memory. Kris Kristofferson, now 79, revisits his self-penned masterpiece "Sunday Morning Coming Down." In a weathered and wizened tone, he strips the tune down to its rueful foundation. The rest of the album features nicely rendered performances from Lee Ann Womack, Nikki Lane, Jill Andrews, Doug Seegers, and Brandi Carlile with the Lone Bellow.

Miller remains a multi-talented artist with a fine producing style. He presents uniformly strong performances throughout this 11-track set. But the next time he sets up his studio aboard the high seas, he might consider pairing his singers with more adventurous song choices.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**


Mavis Staples

Livin' on a High Note
Anti-, LP or CD

At the tender age of 76, Mavis Staples is operating at the peak of her powers—no small feat given the legendary vocalist's tenure with Staple Singers during the height of the Civil Rights movement. Indisputable proof comes courtesy of the unadorned *Livin' on a High Note*. Punctuated by songs whose themes reverberate with the same pertinent relevance of those on acclaimed recent efforts by younger contemporaries such as Kendrick Lamar and D'Angelo, the record coincides with the release of *Mavis!*, a bio-documentary scheduled airing soon on HBO. It also follows by two years Greg Kot's *I'll Take You There* definitive print biography and, ultimately, caps a late-career streak of creative successes that began a little more than a decade ago.

Kick-started by 2004's *Have a Little Faith*, a self-financed album that put her back in the public eye, the Chicago native discovered a new audience and gained a hip label, Anti-, eager to release her music by the mid-00s. She also found a willing collaborator and producer in Wilco front man Jeff Tweedy. His involvement pushed Staples further into the mainstream and, along the way, helped her land high-profile festival slots. While such assistance shouldn't be necessary given her pedigree, little about the music industry is fair—a fact the gospel great knows all too well.

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On *Livin' on a High Note*, M. Ward steps in for Tweedy, who helmed Staples' last two solid albeit somewhat cautious albums. The change nets positive results. Paring nearly everything down to its bare essence, Ward eliminates some of the antiseptic "dad-rock" characteristics that stultified certain arrangements on 2010's *You Are Not Alone* and caused 2013's *One True Vine* to feel like an overly safe repeat. Ward's employment of a tasteful horn section on select tracks also jives with the loose grooves laid down by guitarist Rick Holmstrom and drummer Stephen Holmes, both longtime Staples foils. In addition, Ward enjoys the benefit of getting to work with a stronger batch of songs than heard on Staples' previous set.

Evoking Solomon Burke's outstanding 2002 comeback affair *Don't Give Up on Me* in several regards, *Livin' on a High Note* features ten tracks expressly written for Staples by the likes of Nick Cave, Neko Case, Justin Vernon (of Bon Iver fame), Merrill Garbus (Tune-Yards), Benjamin Booker, and Ben Harper. Paired with Ward's no-frills sonic architecture, their songs come across as tunes Staples could've penned herself. The moods and topics match both Staples' dynamic and persona.

While it now seems only a dream that Staples might record one last studio album that captures the transcendent energy of her live performances, Ward's spare approach harnesses the lived-in soulfulness of her pipes and urgency of her message without adding superfluous details that get in the way. What really stands out is how the songs connect to current times.

"Chicago wasn't always easy/But love made the Windy City breezy," Staples announces on the album-opening "Take Me Back," which slides, dips, and glides akin to an old-school stepper decked out in a fancy

top hat and slick dancing shoes. With her hometown embroiled in controversy surrounding multiple fatal police shootings of African-American men, the sentiment resonates by serving as a reminder of past history and accomplishments—as well as a mental prompt that there's still much to be done to achieve social justice. Similarly, the moral compass of Case's concise "History Now" points toward the past so that we can find a better way in the future. Rather than lament, Staples uses the solemn reflection as an opportunity for hope—an impression underscored by Ward's nimble, soulful arrangement.

Garbus' urgent "Action" is even more direct. Declaring she's tired of living in fear and being scared for children growing up in our world, Staples sings as if she's still marching down freedom's highway. She remains fully invested in the moment as she broadcasts a state of emergency that requires immediate attention—and action. "Who's gonna do it if I don't do it?" she wonders, before leaving no doubt as to the answer. Here, and throughout, she leads by example.

On Ward's "Don't Cry," a should-be radio single goosed with limber horns, Staples stands her ground in the face of turmoil with unshakeable conviction. She channels her signature spirituality on Ward and Vernon's solemn albeit uplifting "Dedicated," which echoes the classic Stax sound and conveys us-against-the-world solidarity. Her compassionate interpretation of Cave's "Jesus Lay Down Beside Me" abides by a Christian edict that sees her put others before herself. Only the pedestrian "If It's a Light," contributed by the Head and the Heart, fails to light a fire. It's a minor hiccup in an otherwise stellar performance.

"If I can spread the message as the master taught/ Then my living will not be in vain," Staples declares in her familiar husky tone on the record-closing "MLK Song." Comprised of Martin Luther King's words set to music by Ward, the bluesy shuffle comes on like a personal credo of an inspirational artist whose voice, faith, and example have never been in greater need.
—**Bob Gendron**


Carrie Rodriguez
Lola

Luz Records, LP or CD

The effect of the past in our lives remains unpredictable and ever changing. It can burden or galvanize us. On *Lola*, singer-songwriter and violinist Carrie Rodriguez finds inspiration by looking back while remaining grounded in the present.

An Austin, Texas native who blends cultural influences in her Tex-Mex music, Rodriguez is a respected Americana figure. Having honed her chops at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and Berklee College of Music, she's collaborated on duet recordings with songsmith Chip Taylor (writer of the timeless hits "Wild Thing" and "Angel of the Morning") and recorded her own solo material. She's also been a featured guest on the venerable roots-friendly shows "Austin City Limits" and "Prairie Home Companion."

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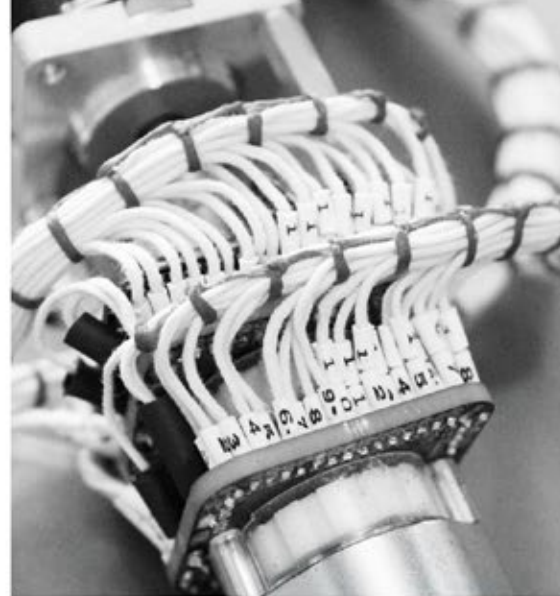
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MUSIC



©Photo by Sarah Wilson

Here, she finds her muse in her own family tree—specifically the 1940s-era vintage recordings of her great aunt, the revered Tejano singer Eva Garza. Rodriguez's bilingual tracks arrive as a mixture of old and new tunes sung in English and Spanish. Throughout, she's ably backed by the Sacred Hearts, a nuanced outfit that includes acclaimed guitarist Bill Frisell. Rodriguez is not a superstar vocalist, but she is a solid one. Her clear voice avoids the raw edges. Smooth and studied, her pipes come across as more Broadway than Nashville's gritty Lower Broad.

"I Dreamed I Was Lola Beltran" finds Rodriguez contemplating her great aunt's legacy in

a restrained and dreamy arrangement. "La Ultima Vez" emerges as a lovely outing built on muted percussion and haunting violin. The break-up ballad "Que Manera de Perder" ("What a Way to Lose") is a Spanish-English duet with musician Luke Jacobs. He's a quiet joy, his weary vocals aiming for a sweet spot that lays somewhere between Willie Nelson and Leonard Cohen.

On several songs, Rodriguez addresses class disparities. "The West Side" focuses on the hardships of underprivileged kids bused into an upscale school district. On the country-rocking "Z," she critiques the current state of commercial country music. Operatic country crooner

Raul Malo of the Mavericks joins her for harmonies on a breezy country-pop version of the Spanish language gem "Perfidia." This classic was originally released in 1939 and subsequently covered by a plethora of artists, including Nat King Cole. It's also a song whose earworm melody is heard cropping up in Chad & Jeremy's wistful 1964 hit "A Summer Song."

Rodriguez has yet to write a song as memorable or influential as "Perfidia," but her rendition is a fine entry in a long line of homages. It also reveals a sincere contender that ably bridges the past and present.
—**Chrissie Dickinson**



If one were to try and chart musical genres via a Venn diagram, Chicago's Tortoise will for the better part of its 20-plus years fall somewhere on the outskirts of nearly all of them. But Tortoise isn't a group that points at new directions so much as burrows under current ones, unearthing unexpected tangents or twisting rock melodies so they ride an avant-jazz groove. On *The Catastrophist*, the largely instrumental shape-shifting group discovers that its often-challenging mood music has a lighter side. Tortoise hinted at this chilled-out, synth-enhanced style in the past, but it's rarely been so relaxingly jovial.



Tortoise

The Catastrophist

Thrill Jockey, LP or CD

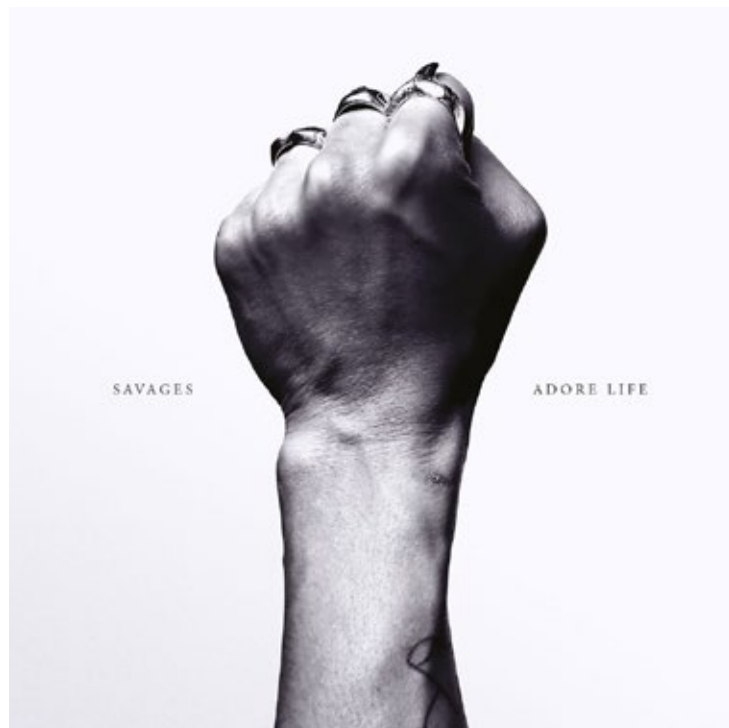
How else to explain Tortoise's take on "Rock On," David Essex's classic-rock radio staple from 1973? Tortoise distorts the rhythm, making it unclear just where the beat starts and ends, creating a patient foundation that's both thunderous and casually serpentine. But this is no deconstruction. (The song in its original form is already rather minimalist.) Instead, the five-piece ensemble soon layers on the horns. Could it be that Tortoise, a group sometimes pegged as jazz for rock fans, created an album centered on fun? *The Catastrophist*, despite its ominous title, feels just that.

Of course, the Chicago-based ensemble has long been heralded as music contortionists, creating collages that feel at once birthed in the studio and yet improvisational at their core. By intertwining elements of jazz, dub, and worldly art rock, Tortoise represented the 90s underground at its most cerebral, even nodding to remix culture with a cut-and-paste approach to arranging. Heady stuff, and when last we saw the band with a proper album, 2009's *Beacons of Ancestralship*, Tortoise had been tinkering with more aggressive textures—a dirtier, rougher sound unafraid to put a guitar front and center.

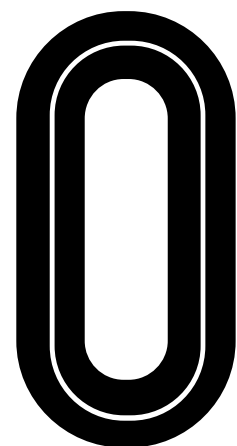
The Catastrophist, however, represents Tortoise's most spacey and loose recording since 2001's *Standards*, a set almost giddy in its use of bright rhythmic colors. If Tortoise covering "Rock On" arrives as a bit of a surprise, it nonetheless fits in with the overall tone of the album—one that takes a look at the future from a vintage, digital state of mind. Think the 1970s, as *The Catastrophist* may as well be Tortoise's love letter to German Krautrock. Here, the bass, beat, and orbiting tranquil atmospheres remain the focus of instrument-swappers Dan Bitney, John Herndon, Doug McCombs, John McEntire, and Jeff Parker.

The title track sets the tone via a cascade of watery computer symphonies that slip around bass and drums before everything crests with an all-out electronic finale. The bobbing notes of "Duke" swarm the tune like a drone looking for a safe space to land amid anxious percussive brush strokes. "Gopher Island" threatens to dance as a buzzy, electro-magnetic pulse jitters all over the frantic beats akin to a polygraph gone haywire. It's over in less than 90 seconds, but Tortoise keeps the mood upbeat with the blocky beats and bell-like knocks of "Shake Hands With Danger." Nothing feels cold. Tortoise mixes the organic and digital to maintain an otherworldly aura. Late in the album, the band telegraphs its intent, tapping Yo La Tengo vocalist Georgia Hubley for the tender "Yonder Blue," an indication that the computerized can still be human.

Indeed, "Tesseract" plays out like a jazzy, chirpy ballad—even droids need love, it seems to suggest—while "At Odds With Logic" serves as a romance that ends as a sparse horror show. A full breadth of human emotion fills the songs, which beep and bop their case against being relegated to background-music status. Take "Gesceap," which opens with a dose of circular, techno hypnotism but soon stacks layer upon layer, all of them heading in opposite directions until the song feels like a giant interconnected highway system. It may sound like circuitry, but there's real life under this hood. —**Todd Martens**


Savages
Adore Life

Matador, LP or CD



On their electrifying new sophomore album, Savages are obsessed with love. At first glance, the issue seems rote. The subject has likely served as the impetus behind more rock and pop songs than any other in history. And while love's indefinable characteristics still make the topic fresh for exploration, does the world need another record based around feelings of strong affection and all that revolves around harboring such emotions?

In the case of *Adore Life*, the answer is an undoubted “yes.” Savages approach love from multi-faceted perspectives, doing away with irony and any relationship specifics to present the theme as a state of mind, a solution, a bonding agent, a retaliation, and/or a liberator—and, occasionally, all of the above. The ten-song set, a follow-up to the female quartet’s Mercury Prize-winning debut, *Silence Yourself*, doesn’t view love as choice. Instead, it frames it as a perspective imperative to seizing your independence and optimizing your surroundings. Honest and balanced, the album has nothing to do with devotional ballads, lustful declarations, or on-bended-knee pleas. *Adore Life* is about seizing the day, crushing negatives, and fully understanding what it means to be alive even when doing so involves uncomfortable truths.

Embracing such a mindset comes with its challenges. For vocalist Jehnny Beth and company, no problem casts a more ominous shadow on their desires than evil. “Evil is on the other side/I will not let you down,” Beth asserts on “Evil.” She closes out the tune by repeating the word as if it represents a voodoo hex that can only be dispelled by awareness and an action that shows she’s unafraid of its power. Enveloped by a battery of percussion, Beth’s warding off of the spirit proves equally dangerous and sensual, the band following her lead by daring to tread on sharp edges and venture into treacherous realms.

Musically, peril and uncertainty loom at nearly every turn. Savages maintain their intensity via post-punk architecture arranged around chord fragments, sawed-off distortion, shattered notes, and controlled feedback. Ayse Hassan’s bass plays a large role in shaping the songs and, in tandem with Fay Milton’s textured drumming, comprises the rhythmic minimalism that acts as glue holding all the stray pieces together. Instruments frequently drop out to reveal skeletal passages and Beth’s fluctuating intonations. *(continued)*





When they re-enter the fray, guitars and drums take on greater potency, the possibility of violence never removed. The resulting conflagration of topsy-turvy grooves, twisted riffs, and swirling dirges creates a seemingly uneven, dizzying effect that mirrors the evocative churn of Beth's deliveries.

Desperate and raw, Beth's self-assured performance occupies a space somewhere between singing and speaking. Her methods often evoke Patti Smith's early works. They possess a similar exoticism, mysticism, and excitement. You don't want to look away for an instant out of fear you'll miss something. The next phrase could be a whisper or the sonic equivalent of a hand grenade lobbed at a wrongdoer.

"If you don't love me/You don't love anybody," she cries, with vitriol and pathos, on the claustrophobic assault that is "The Answer," the

lyrics combining with wave upon wave of feverish noise to attack, and then smother, an unnamed target. "I need something new!" Beth exclaims on the song of the same name, her mates seconding the statement with tribal-pounce beats and ricocheting guitar lines that appear to be biding their time until they murder everything in their path. The track grows more menacing as it continues before climaxing with a dark, wall-of-sound din. Even Savages' looser fare terrifies with emotional ferocity and a furious intent to awaken all the senses.

"Sad Person" teases out a dance groove but doesn't necessarily emerge as an invitation to a party. "Love is a disease/The strangest addiction I know," Beth admits, while reassuring she's flirting with, not out to hurt, a potential partner. "When in Love" stabs as it stomps, challenging the listener to escape the firm grip of its

predatory clutches. "You say you want love/But what kind of love?" queries Beth. Akin to much of the record, it's impossible to tell if she's issuing a threat, asking a question, reflecting on a notion, or making a promise.

Savages' marriage of urgency and confrontation, hazard and award, peak on the over-heated "T.I.W.Y.G." It's a red flag, summons, lesson, and temptation all wrapped up into a three-minute, ten-second rollercoaster ride that comes with no brakes or safeguards. Sounding as if she's running with a knife in her hand and circling her prey in anticipation of a feast, Beth matches the group's animated pace while returning to the same thought.

"This is what you get when you mess with love," she wails, and there's no doubting she knows of what she speaks. Consider yourself warned. —**Bob Gendron**

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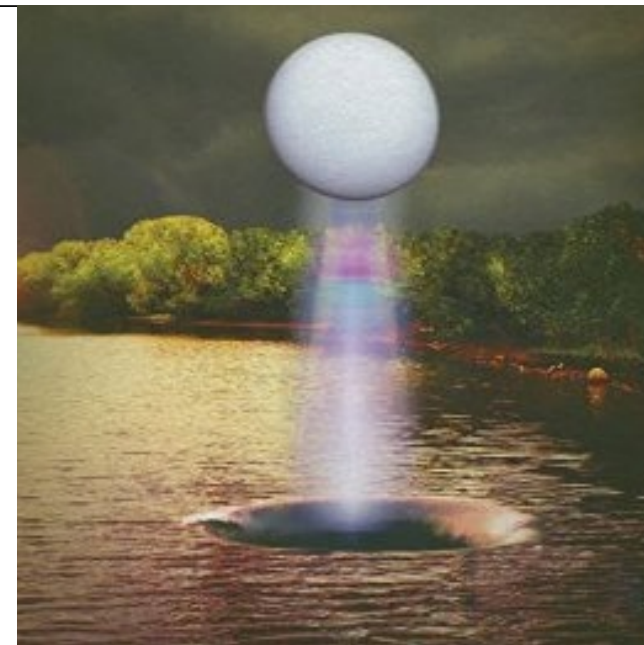
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Fans of fairy tales and fantasy are living in a great age. In recent months, a fresh *Star Wars* film and live-action take on *Cinderella* greeted the pop-culture world. On the small screen, a new interpretation of “The Wiz” joined shows such as “Once Upon a Time” and “Grimm” on major networks. Artists may consider the present an opportune moment, then, to release songs that chronicle tales of a “bray road beast,” a “golden lion,” and mystical towers. Indeed, there’s a magical quality to the work of the Besnard Lakes, where guitars are tangled, harmonies enchanted, and tunes laden with a mythological lore.

Granted, the Canadian collective’s songs aren’t, perhaps, as accessible as stories involving glass slippers. The sextet’s arrangements come across as a thick, a heavily coated cauldron filled with churning guitars, manipulated keyboards, and otherworldly vocals. Besnard Lakes embrace melody—and hypnotics—but the band’s sound has become increasingly elusive over the course of five albums.



The Besnard Lakes

A Coliseum Complex Museum
Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

As much as the group, led by the husband-and-wife pair of bassist Jace Lasek and vocalist Olga Goreas, nods to an era when hard rock referenced Tolkien—a period during which it was deemed permissible to drive a van decorated with fantastical, airbrushed creatures—we get the sense that Besnard Lakes songs remain frozen in time. They crest and twist rather than aggressively advance, and they swirl and float rather than break apart. They also un-ironically reference “dark and stormy” nights.

On *A Coliseum Complex Museum*, the core ensemble is bolstered by its heartiest lineup yet in the form of non-touring guitarist Richard White, touring guitar slinger Robbie MacArthur, drummer Kevin Laing and, a new addition, keyboardist Sheenah Ko. As a result, the new album breaks from the dreamier, more patient arrangements of 2013’s *Until in Excess*, *Imperceptible UFO* and brings a greater sense of forward momentum—think

oceanic waves gradually gaining speed—to the band’s sound.

In turn, the lushly orchestrated rock album also brims with personality and life. The guitars, for instance, practically sound as if they’re swooning and sighing on “Pressure of Our Plans.” On “The Bray Road Beast,” the instruments seem as if they’re being rewound and then played over themselves. Is it moving ahead or backward? It’s never clear.

Ko, too, uses her instrument to shade rather than lead. Synthetic effects flicker in and out like digital radio frequencies. Songs hint at grand, unexpected frontiers. There’s a Western tinge to the melodies of “Nightingale,” but twilight eeriness soon creeps in to distort any sense of time or place. Rhythms shiver and shake like metal sheets during a violent rainstorm on “The Plain Moon,” while “Golden Lion” swells to a near-theatrical finale of triumphant, falsetto-soaked vocals and celebratory guitars.

Lasek and Goreas, primarily, trade vocals. Yet voices are often layered to the point that it sometimes sounds as if an entire choir is present. Mystery prevails. Check the ride into a roaring night amid a groove that sounds comprised of a mix of a wind-up toys and salt shakers on “The Bray Road Beast.” Or the swirl of 60s-pop songcraft with *Sleepy Hollow*-like nightmares on “Tungsten 4: The Refugee,” on which a mid-song break reveals Goreas’ bass shimmering as if caught in an old Beach Boys anthem.

Then again, Besnard Lakes have always featured old-timey undercurrents beneath the waves of guitars. What’s more developed on *A Coliseum Complex Museum* is the act’s ability to conjure another world. The call on the boldly whip-smacking “The Plain Moon” to “put those guns away” is striking, not just for the rare moment of complete lyrical clarity, but because it conjures images of real-world violence. It’s a reminder that these songs are, in fact, of this earth. —**Todd Martens**

In 1957, country legend Marty Robbins scored an enduring hit with his self-penned "A White Sport Coat (and a Pink Carnation)." The song is a first-person lament of a boy dumped by his girl just before the prom. He's left with only a flower in his hand and a broken heart on his sleeve. Robbins' delivery is intimate but the impact feels operatic. It's a classic of male vulnerability, an epic of emotional desolation.

I thought of Robbins when I first heard Page Burkum and Jack Torrey, the brothers (with different last names) that form the retro duo the Cactus Blossoms. Like the quietly fearless Marty, these lanky Minneapolis siblings address a facet of life that's too often mocked and discounted in contemporary society: the interior lives of men.

In the haunting "You're Dreaming," a man watches his partner sleep, fretting she's dreaming of a past love. The Cactus Blossoms' twin harmonies rise and cry out with a frank admission: "It's raining inside me." Akin to Robbins' work, it's honestly told, and both smart and devastating. The duo traffics in an older sound straddling the border between classic country and nascent rock n' roll. They are singers with intuitive phrasing and dazzling control. A bit of Hank Williams' truncated blue yodel flavors their voices, which also contain a lot of the Everly Brothers' blood harmony.

THE CACTUS BLOSSOMS YOU'RE DREAMING



The Cactus Blossoms

You're Dreaming

Red House Records, LP or CD



Singer-guitarists Burkum and Torrey receive stellar backing from a small crew of restrained sidemen. Producer and soul man JD McPherson, moonlighting from his day job as a masterful throwback artist, is at the helm. McPherson keeps the mix focused on the two men at the center of the project. Every instrumental passage remains in service to the song. There's no excess or fat to be trimmed. No one steps on the vocals.

Retro-sounding artists always run the risk of coming off like wax replicas of a bygone era. That is not the case here. As with his own music, McPherson helps the Cactus Blossoms pull off an impressive feat—creating a vintage sound filled with fresh surprises. The midtempo "Mississippi" serves as an exquisitely haunting mix of bossa nova beat and proto-surf reverb. "Change Your Ways or Die" terrifically blends train-chugging percussion, dreamy steel, judiciously placed Les Paul-style guitar licks, and mirrored voices. "Clown Collector" swings like a track from the late, great Ricky Nelson.

"Take a walk around this room/And the gifts that you took too soon/Too many memories/Drags out the worst in me," the Cactus Blossoms sing on "If I Can't Win." This is honest songwriting from a real-deal act unashamed to sing from the heart. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Sarah Cass

"Put down the knife." The order comes about halfway through *Jet Plane and Oxbow*, the latest from Austin, Texas-bred band Shearwater. Despite the dread of the sentiment, the words are calmly delivered. Musically, everything is in its right place. Electric guitars are ready for their close-up—so much so that Shearwater lets you hear the vibration in the chords—and the strings composed and tranquil. Every strike of the drum comes through crisply, the song ending with a tin-like march. If there's paranoia here, it's panic delivered with reverence.

Jet Plane and Oxbow does fear and topicality with grace. By crafting an ambitious and widescreen album that aims to reflect uncertain times in America, Shearwater has completely shed its folksy roots. Images of "guns in silhouette," disastrous floods, dogs chained to gates, and foreign towns famous for "killing made holy" appear throughout. Yet for all the fraught nerves, Shearwater's approach to rock n' roll remains practically elegant. Arrangements get embellished with what sounds like a harpsichord on one song, a soothing piano on the next, and guitars prepared to be whipped into a roar at moment's notice still on the next. Each tune doubles as a mini vista, with instrument upon instrument handing off bits and pieces of the arrangement and creating density that plays with calm/loud dynamics.



Shearwater

Jet Plane and Oxbow
Sub Pop, LP or CD

It's difficult, in fact, to imagine divorcing one of these songs from the overall piece. Shearwater has always made music with an album-first approach. But here, the Jonathan Meiburg-led group feels out to reinvent itself. Once an ornate but quiet band, this version of the unit is built for festival stages. The set-opening "Prune" comes on like an overture, a slow build anchored by Meiburg's orator-like voice. It crests to a chorus sprinkled with a flurry of synth notes and lands with a finale topped with a booming drum. The effect foreshadows the breadth and loudness still to come. A protest song with the mistrust of David Bowie and flair of Roxy Music, "Quiet Americans" delivers frustration with a swoon-worthy vocal hook and digital sounds that conjure a heartbeat stuttering to

life. Such new-wave touches represent a new look for Shearwater.

Working again with producer Danny Reisch and longtime collaborators such as Cully Symington, Howard Draper, Lucas Oswald, Jesca Hoop, Abram Shook, and Jenn Wasner, Shearwater has evolved into a mini rock orchestra. Film composer Brian Reitzell, who regularly works with Sofia Coppola, is a new addition. Without knowing exactly what Reitzell brings to each individual track, it's worth noting the odd accruals throughout, all adding more heft to the arrangements. Take, for instance, the auto-machinery-like beat that kicks off "Filaments" and the monstrous, mysterious howl that brings the song to a close. Or, the strings that start to drip like a

faucet in "Backchannels," the electro groove of "Radio Silence," and Western touches of "Glass Bones."

These traits reward close, repeated listens, and only then does the restraint in Meiburg's lyrics start to reveal itself. From the passiveness of "Quiet Americans" to the small-town urbanism that populates "Wildlife America," *Jet Plane and Oxbow* at times feels like a quest for the soul of a country. Scenes cut in and out—shattered safety glass lies on the floor and foreigners viewed with trepidation—yet Meiburg and company don't give in to the emotion even as synths quiver, pianos trot, and guitars leave contrails over a swaying melody. The mood is that of today, but the sound is pure pop classicism. —**Todd Martens**



The Waco Brothers
Going Down in History
 Bloodshot, LP and CD

“Commit to something drastic,” implore the Waco Brothers on *Going Down in History*. It’s sage advice, and the rowdy quintet isn’t about to waste such an opportunity—particularly not after more than a decade has passed between proper studio albums. Re-energized and seemingly yearning to lay waste to every dive between Hoboken and Olympia, the Chicago-based collective plays here with the last-chance desperation and enthusiastic drive of a band half its age. The world may be going to hell in a bucket, but the Wacos aren’t checking out without a fight.

Jon Langford, Tracy Dear, Deano Schlabowske, and their ever-rotating cast of colleagues haven’t exactly been sitting idle watching Rome burn. Other bands and business pursuits—Langford’s distinctive visual artwork is at the center of the Country Music Hall of Fame’s must-see Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash exhibit—continue to demand the full-time attention of members. The Wacos, too, recorded a collaborative record with Paul Burch just a few years back. *(continued)*



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To be clear: This isn't the sound of a group out to crack the charts or charm anything resembling the mainstream. It's more daring, far more spirited, often political, and endlessly fun.

Besides, there's never been any pressure for the Wacos to do anything. Langford used to maintain he and Schlabowske started the group just to be able to drink free beer at shows.

Myths and Langford's signature wit aside, few efforts in the Wacos' nine-album discography kick harder than the 10 tracks—eight originals, two stellar covers—on *Going Down in History*. Raw, muscular, and charged with piss and vinegar, catchy fare such as the high-wattage “Diybyob” and five-dollar-steak-tough “Devil's Day” come across with a go-for-broke attitude that mirrors the broken

landscapes chronicled in the songs. Occasionally overshadowed by the band's on-the-surface looseness, the lyrical observations point to the smart protest and clever rebelliousness at the core of the Wacos' working-class anthems since the mid-nineties.

To be clear: This isn't the sound of a group out to crack the charts or charm anything resembling the mainstream. It's more daring, far more spirited, often political, and endlessly fun. “We Know It” hijacks the amphetamine rush triggered by liquor and rock n' roll, its fuzzed-out chords and staggered

rhythms strapped to accelerated reggae structures. Gang vocals, wordless harmonies, and throw-back Mod-era guitar hooks shove “Had Enough” from behind and lend a hummable, sick-of-it-all stammer. Goosed by Langford's soapbox-style pronouncements, “Building Our Own Prison” lunges at targets like a barstool-perched day drinker with blurred vision and long-simmering frustration. Just like the locals at your corner pub, the Wacos have something to say or debate at nearly every turn.

“Cheap gas/My ass/Democracy dead at last!” Langford rants as he contemplates society's

downfall. Not to worry. Indemnity against ruination—and the imminent panic to follow—can be had in the form of the knowledge that divorce from the establishment is a must. “You can't kill us/ We're already dead,” the group boasts less than a minute into the record, treating the statement as a unifying address to a larger collective before pledging to keep the party roaring through the night. The mandolin- and violin-spiked title track also rails against the status quo. Never one to ignore the activist-minded aims of a rallying cry, Langford repeats the phrases “going to haul the

bastards over” and “gonna bite the hand that feeds you” with the bloodthirsty glint of a man ready to lead a mutiny.

Given such intent, it's only fitting the record's centerpiece is an organ-stoked rendition of the Small Faces' classic “All or Nothing.” While dedicated to Ian McLagan, the hope-streaked performance serves less as an homage to the late keyboardist and more as the thematic statement of a band whose staunch refusal to cave to the ordinary invigorates the spirit in inestimable ways.

—**Bob Gendron**


Ty Segall

Emotional Mugger
Drag City, LP or CD

W

hen Ty Segall's *Emotional Mugger* sees release, it will have been about 15 months since the garage rocker's last proper album. In Segall's universe, that time frame represents an eternity.

This, after all, is a guy that averages about an album per year, sometimes two. What's more, at just 11 tracks, *Emotional Mugger* feels downright svelte compared to 2014's 17-song opus *Manipulator*. So what happens when the prolific Los Angeles-based artist slows down a bit? The sound, it turns out, doesn't just get bigger. It gets weirder. Emotional Mugger is just as fuzzy and psychedelic as Segall has been in the past, but it also features more left turns and otherworldly sonic overtures.

None of the changes would matter if *Emotional Mugger* wasn't accessible. From the opening notes, where heavily layered guitars shimmy and shake like an R&B horn section, to the closing cut, on which hand-claps become manipulated to sound like a tap dancer, Segall loads *Emotional Mugger* with curious details that view classic rock through a warped lens. And that says nothing of the album's odd obsession with the word "candy" and Segall's odd vocal ticks that find him playing call-and-response with himself. A little goofy and a whole lotta loud, *Emotional Mugger* is rock 'n' roll at its most colorful.
(continued)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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MUSIC



©Photo by Denee Patrick

Grounded in *Revolver*-era Beatles, *Emotional Mugger* jumps from decades and influences with zany self-confidence. A vocal harmony nods to Cheap Trick here, an out-of-control guitar pulls from the wackiness of Syd Barrett there. "California Hills" opens with a snarl and a stomp not unaccustomed to early 70s metal, only to be broken up with upper-register guitar notes that move more frantically than a feral cat trying to break free from a leash.

The title track arrives as a mini-suite paired with "Leopard Priestess." Segall gets a little

flirty. "I'll give you pleasure through email," he sings. Bluesy licks pull in multiple directions until the tune builds to an alternate-reality biker anthem where Segall, despite slacker vocals, becomes the cool guy. Lyrically lighthearted—characters have their "fingers on the pulse of their parent's alienation"—*Emotional Mugger* appears comically disaffected. Segall debates about whether to care about the war or lay on the floor on "Breakfast Eggs" as guitars stop, start, and churn like the inner-workings of a bell tower springing to life.

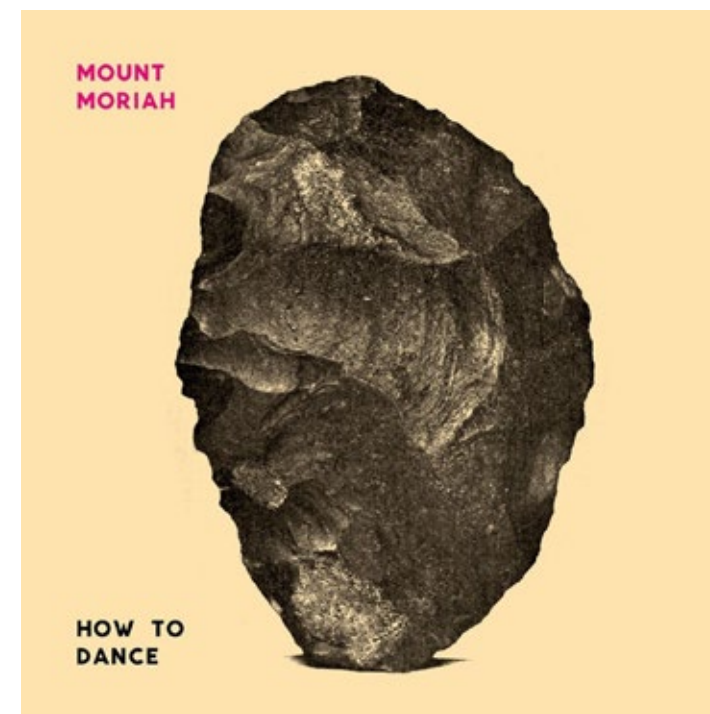
"Diversion" gets coated with futuristic effects and red-alert vocals, while "Mandy Cream" effectively reinvents Southern boogie. "Squealer Two" ups the bizarreness with a trashcan beat, spry handclaps, alien effects, and high-pitched backing vocals. Then, of course, there are moments dedicated to just plugging in and turning things up ("Candy Sam"). In the twisted universe of *Emotional Mugger*, classic rock never faded away. It just got stranger. —**Todd Martens**



©Photo by Lissa Gotwals

O

n Mount Moriah's third full-length album, lead singer Heather McEntire remains the main event. Sounding like the middle sibling between spiritual sisters Neko Case and Lydia Loveless, her clarion call of a country voice is a lovely if familiar one. The best songs here showcase her pipes. On several numbers, however, she's hampered by a muddle of overcooked tunes. The flaw owes to the fact that backup vocalists and players augmented McEntire and company Jenks in the studio. Such extra musical muscle is only successful about half the time.



Mount Moriah

How to Dance
Merge, LP or CD

Standout tracks on *How to Dance* maintain a stately pace, never rushing yet never dragging. They breathe and unfold in their own time. The band achieves lift-off with the nicely textured "Calvander," a Southern-rock brew enhanced by a full-throated horn section. The slow, aching vibe of "Baby Blue" comes on as wistful heir to Little Feat's classic "Willin'," no small praise. Here, Mount Moriah manages a thoughtful and searing arrangement filled with smacked drums, purring organ, and soaring voices.

Other moments feel heavy handed when a lighter touch would do. "Fox in the City" winningly starts with the sort of restrained, broken-blues lament that remains the hallmark of Americana queens Emmylou Harris and Lucinda Williams. But the song is soon marred by instrumental busyness that squanders the good will of its appealing opening. The band also falters when pursu-

ing quirky pop. "Chiron (God in the Brier)" is more Sugarland outtake than ambitious undertaking. The jittery number is hampered by an abundance of sonic distractions. "Cardinal Cross" follows suit, devolving into an excess of stuttering beats that yank the listener out of the tune.

Throughout, words frequently get tossed about. Shards of poetic imagery rise and recede. Sometimes, it works. With its raw stride, percolating beat, and shimmering backing vocals, "Precita" references an evocative landscape where sacred fires burn beneath a father sun and mother moon. Elsewhere, however, the lyrics sound too indistinct to leave a lasting emotional impact.

Mount Moriah is comprised of capable players. But in adding to its sound, the group occasionally layers it on too thick in this unfortunately overstuffed—and mixed—bag. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Mia Kirby

**Jennylee***Right On!*

Rough Trade, LP or CD

O

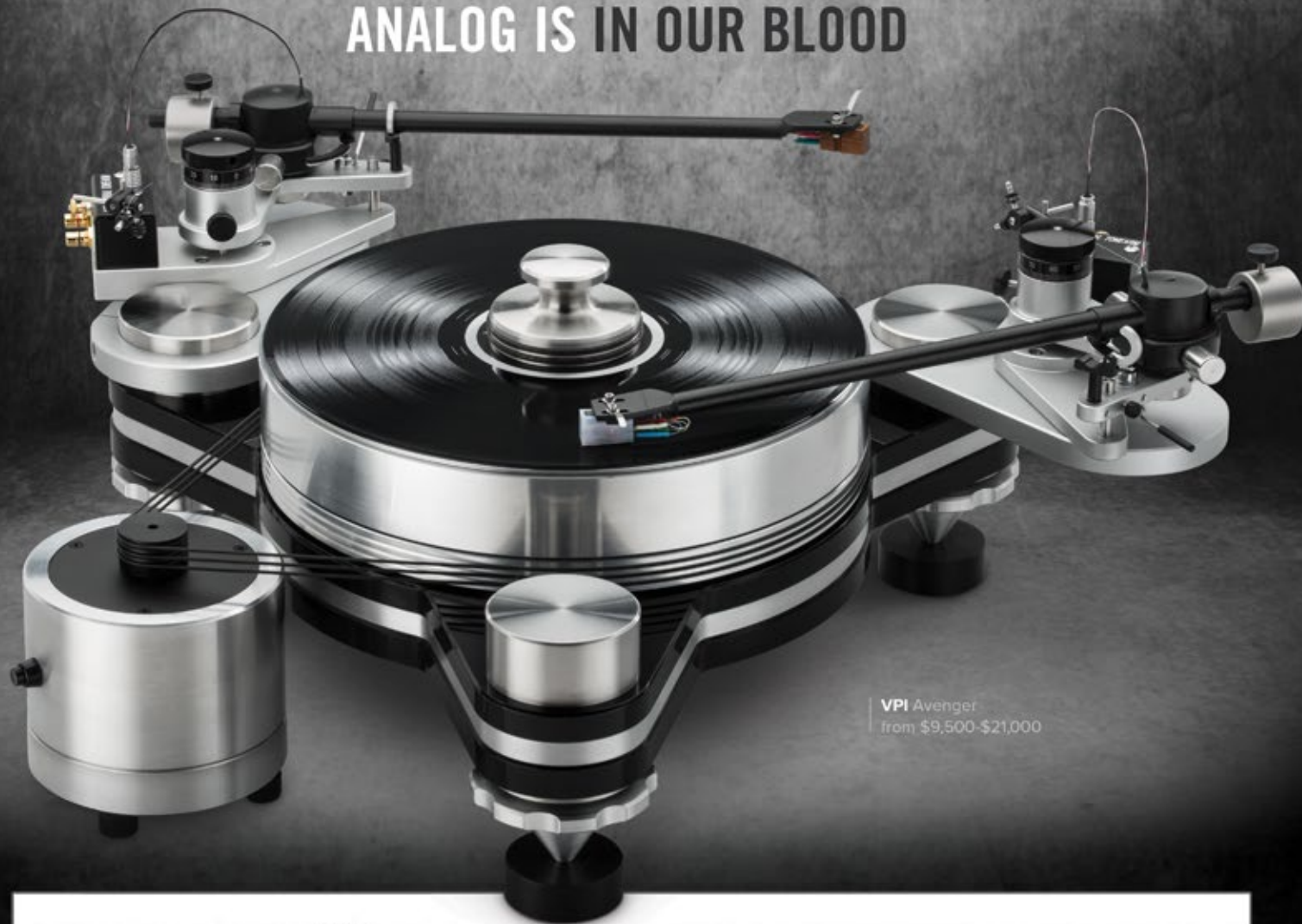
ver the course of two albums, Los Angeles trio Warpaint has specialized in the sensual and the abstract. Sounds come into view and then evaporate. Guitar notes flutter, bass lines slither, and drums conjure a dance just as often as they do a trance. Bassist Jenny Lee Lindberg, whose striking playing sets the pace and tone, is the key to the band's most lascivious sounds. Her instrument moves like a whisper, working its way through dark-tinted arrangements as if it was smoke.

Right On! bows as Lindberg's solo debut. Stylistically, it's equally as moody as Warpaint, albeit at times more animalistic and, at other times, more meandering. Melody? Forget

it. Lindberg strictly chases after sensation. "Can you feel me shake my body from left to right?," she coos on "Boom Boom," stretching the directional words and letting the bass ricochet off the drums. Her vocals, relegated to backing duty in Warpaint, are presented here in their most-hushed format.

So don't be thrown off by the exclamation point in the album's title. *Right On!* arrives as a low-key affair. Its slowly unfolding songs aim to fit somewhere between a dream and a nightmare. And since Warpaint drummer Stella Mozgawa jumps aboard as a collaborator, it's practically a Warpaint album. In theory, at least. *(continued)*

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MUSIC



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Considering Warpaint's strength relates to the band's ability to ride a groove, one may expect a similarly trippy journey from its rhythm section here. Unfortunately, *Right On!* doesn't provide such an experience. While Lindberg's instrumental prowess is on display, too often, her songs tumble into near nothingness rather than tantalize the senses.

Occasionally, as in "Blind," tunes get outfitted with little more than a few plucked notes, some wayward chimes, and Lindberg's barely-awake vocal approach. "He Fresh" adds soothing fingersnaps to the mix, and while the candlelight vibe hits on an intimate level, it becomes repetitive and lyrically clunky, resulting in a closeness that feels unapproachable. The biggest crime? The composition feels unfinished—a late-night jam session that isn't any fun for anyone not playing.

Gothic art-rock tones pervade the record. Shades of the Cure loom over the early 80s

guitar work of "Never," while the minimalistic instrumental interplay throughout often makes it feel as if the album is interconnected song. The latter approach works in Warpaint's favor, but Lindberg's arrangements—from the odd shrillness of "White Devil" to the twisty and oblique "Bully"—needle rather than enchant.

As such, the guitars are spindly, and the production emphasizes the heaviness of the bass rather than its slyness. The singing, too, is breathy but awkward to the point that one gets the impression Lindberg is possibly uncomfortable putting her vocals out front. While looser moments, such as the stroll-like pace of "Long Lonely Winter" and uptempo "Offerings," feel stronger and let the bass skate around a toe-tapping beat and somber guitar, Warpaint's lushness is sorely missed. *Right On!* is all undertone in search of a backbone or, rather, rhythmic sketches in search of a song.

—Todd Martens

Graham LS5/9 Loudspeakers

Luxurious Lineage

By Rob Johnson



M

any of our readers are familiar with the highly regarded BBC monitor designs rooted in the late 1970s including the Rogers LS3/5a. Offering great sound, vintage pairs still command a substantial price. With such a successful and sonically rewarding design, other companies like Stirling, Harbeth and Spondor have licensed the original BBC designs, and folded modern elements into their own versions of the classic monitors. With the help of Derek Hughes, who designed the very first BBC models, Graham's own iteration of the LS5/9 joined the fold in 2014, offering the classic and much-loved LS sound wrapped into a beautiful cabinet design.

While the LS3/5a is a small bookshelf-sized monitor with limited bass heft, the LS5/8 is much larger in size and more adept at handling the lower frequencies. Made entirely in the U.K., the LS5/9's size and appearance resides between its other siblings, although its sonic capabilities are designed to more closely match that of its larger brother. While not cheap at \$6,799 the LS5/9 speakers do their extended family proud.

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FEATURE

Luscious Looks

While freeing the traditionally shaped LS5/9s from their protective packaging, the quality of the speaker surface finish is among the initial delights. The speakers are enveloped in a beautiful birch plywood in a cherry finish. Graham also offers a choice of alternate colors to best complement the owner's existing decor. It's obvious that Graham spent quite a bit of time to select and place the wood for the most attractive appearance.

The back of the speakers showcase an equal level of finish, interrupted only by the single pair of gold-plated five-way binding posts, and an adhesive plaque with a hand-written model number, serial number, and the final sign-off from the person inspecting them. Set apart from one another by two inches, the metal posts have a nicely knurled grip making it easy to crank down on spade terminations or bare wire speaker cables for a tight, secure connection. Bananas can also be used.

These medium sized speakers measure 28cm x 27.5cm x 46cm, with a substantial heft of 14kg. As a medium sized monitor, they do require stands. For an upcharge, Graham offers an ideally matched set of metal stands which place the tweeters at ear level from the listening position. *(continued)*



FEATURE

Unlike their earlier LS family members which secure grilles with plastic tab-in-socket design, the Grahams connect the black grilles with magnets making the experience both handier and more modern.

Removing the grille reveals but two drivers doing all the woofing and tweeting. A newly built 200mm polypropylene woofer faithfully replaces the original BBC model design specs, while adding modern durability. The 1" domed tweeter resides directly above the woofer, about one third of the way down from the top of the cabinet. It's great to see the sensitive tweeter protected by a very substantial metal grate. After witnessing the result of kids playing "elevator buttons" with unprotected speakers' domed tweeters, a secure tweeter is certainly a welcome feature for those with kids and dogs. With this combination of components Graham measures the LS5/9 frequency response at depth of 50Hz on the low end, and an extension to about 16 kHz at the top. While not completely full range, these speakers certainly do a great job interpreting the music within their stated range.

Unlike many speaker pairs which appear as mirror images of one another, these Grahams are identical twins. The upper right-hand corner of each speaker frames a 2.5" open port, allowing the speakers to be placed closer to a rear wall. The left edge of the cabinet reveals a crossover adjustment with an open wire soldered in place. Rather than using a switch, the wire can be soldered to one of three pins labeled +1, 0, or -1. This is not a tweeter adjustment in the classic sense, but a setting to "trim" the frequency response between production tweeter samples, to insure staying within the BBC spec. These are not meant to be user adjustable. *(continued)*



FEATURE

FEATURE

Lavish Listening

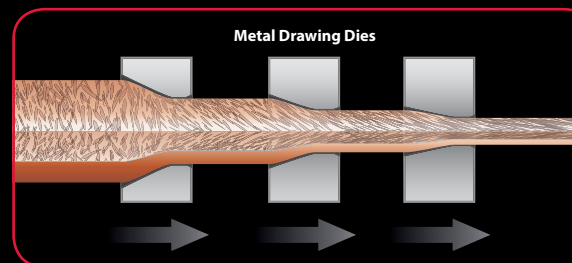
These speakers immediately impress in several ways, throwing a wide, deep soundstage in a way that the instruments rendered defy the physical speaker position, producing sound well beyond the speaker boundaries in every direction. The LS5/9s live up to their reputation as a great monitor speaker, especially through the vocal range. Vocal reproduction is a huge strength for the Grahams. Cover songs like Johnny Cash's rendition of "Hurt" or Storm Large's version of "Where Is My Mind" represent an experiential treat. With great upstream gear feeding the speakers, it's almost like having the vocalists there in the room.

These speakers do an equally remarkable trick of disappearing into the room. Once placed optimally, sound seems to emit from everywhere near them, except the speaker body itself. Some speakers I've experienced create a wide soundstage, but with eyes closed it's easy to point out the placement of those speakers in the room. Sound seems to bunch up audibly around them, creating a telltale sign of the speaker body. In contrast, the LS5/9 design makes the speakers disappear sonically. Material's *Hallucination Engine* creates a challenge for most speakers, given many types of instruments across the stage coupled with subtle ambient sounds and varying degrees of reverb. The Grahams sort out all the information with finesse.

(continued)



Directionality: It's All About Noise



If you've ever wondered about the arrows on AudioQuest cables, read any of our educational materials, or merely followed any of the online chatter regarding our products, perhaps you've wondered what this "directionality" thing is all about. Maybe you've even made the incorrect assumption that it's the analog or digital signal that's directional.

There is the widely accepted version of directionality: In most audio-grade shielded interconnects, as compared to standard coax, negative has its own internal conductor and the metal shield is attached to ground at only one end, thus defining the cable's directionality. Many cable manufacturers end their exploration of directionality there, going only as far as to mark their cables for directionality based on the relationship of shield to ground, but altogether neglecting conductor directionality. Because we believe in directing noise to where it can do the least harm, we, too, believe in the advantages of controlling for the attachment of the shield. In fact, long before we controlled for conductor directionality, AudioQuest interconnects were also controlled for direction based on the relationship of shield to ground.

Over the years, our understanding of conductor directionality and its effect on audio performance has steadily evolved, growing stronger and more complete. While we've always been keenly aware that directionality plays a significant role in the overall sound of any hi-fi system, we couldn't completely explain it. This was okay: We trust our own ears and encourage listeners to do the same. The test is easy enough: Simply listen, then reverse the direction of the cable, and listen again.

In one direction, music will sound relatively flat and a little grainy, as though being forced through a screen door. In the opposite direction, the obstruction is removed and music will be communicated with a natural ease, depth, and an open invitation to pleasure. When presented with a cable whose conductors have been controlled for the correct low-noise directionality, a listener feels a sense of comfort and relief: *Ahh...Music!*

But the definitive empirical evidence of directionality demands seeking a scientific explanation. What is the technical explanation for directionality?

In order to fabricate copper or silver into a strand or conductor, it must first be cast and then drawn through a die—a process

that inevitably creates a directional, chevron-like pattern in the conductor's internal grain structure and a non-symmetrical overlay of grains at the conductor's surface.

While most are either unaware of conductor directionality or have chosen to ignore it, we have learned to use conductor directionality to our advantage.

A conductor's asymmetrical surface structure causes a directional difference in impedance at noise frequencies and very high interference frequencies. Due to skin-effect, such high-frequency energy travels almost exclusively on the surface of a conductor, giving significance to the directional difference in impedance at these frequencies. Because all energy will *always* take the path of least resistance, when a cable is oriented so that the high-frequency noise—whether from a computer, radio station, cell tower, etc.—is "directed" to ground, or to the end of the cable attached to less vulnerable equipment, the dynamic intermodulation and associated ringing generated in the active electronics will be greatly reduced.



Noise-Dissipation System, Dielectric-Bias System, JitterBug USB filter, Niagara 1000, and Niagara 7000—all work toward the proper dissipation of noise to enable cleaner, clearer, more naturally beautiful music.

Our efforts toward the proper dissipation of noise are not limited to our analog and digital cables, but extend to other AudioQuest products, as well—most recently evidenced in our Niagara 1000 and 7000 Low-Z Power Noise-Dissipation Systems, in which every single link in the conducting path has been properly controlled for low-noise directionality.

As always, the proof is in the listening.

The unpleasant, strained sound that occurs when conductors have the wrong orientation is the result of noise entering and causing misbehavior and intermodulation in an active circuit. The more relaxed, full-bodied sound of correctly oriented conductors is the product of less high-frequency interference—conductor directionality fully acknowledged and put to its best use!

Ahh...Music!

audioquest

FEATURE

Trying my eyes-shut test a few times with the Grahams. I rarely managed to align my pointer finger perfectly with the center of the speaker baffle.

Through the LS5/9s, music broadcasts in a way that places a listener several rows back in the auditorium. Each musical element is heard easily, weighted appropriately against all other musical elements around it, but not with the in-your-face detail of a front row seat.

Like many predecessors of the BBC design, the Grahams offer an opulent midrange and reproduce music in a way that offers a strong degree of accuracy, combined with a bit of forgiving warmth. Regardless of the music thrown at them, the speakers reproduce it faithfully, yet without a cold analytical edge some very detailed speakers can impart on the music. While not as transparent as some speakers I've encountered, the LS5/9's highs are well extended and float forth into the room with a good degree of realism.

Unlike the bass-limited LS3/5a, these 5/9s do a very nice job of articulating low frequencies. Bass is robust, tuneful, and offers plenty of punch – especially for a smaller listening room. However, those listeners who crave hard-hitting, kidney-rattling, low bass reproduction may find the Grahams a bit polite for their taste. For those individuals wanting maximum bass oomph, a larger floorstanding speaker may serve better.

Lots to Love

The Grahams offer fantastic sound and stellar soundstaging. The long-

standing BBC-inspired heritage of an opulent midrange has certainly continued through the new LS5/9. While these turbo-monitors do a great job with all the music thrown at them, the overall presentation lends itself more toward subtle nuance than muscled force.

If a prospective owner's musical references lean to hard-hitting rock music or high energy electronica, the 5/9's may not be the right fit. They certainly can boogie when pushed, but that's not their forte. Those who enjoy the subtleties of classical, jazz, and vocal music among other types of music, are likely to love the reproduction the Grahams provide. It's a musically-balanced speaker that makes is easy – maybe too easy – to find oneself locked to a listening seat eager to hear "just one more" favorite album.

At \$6,799, these beautifully-made monitors have a lot to offer their owner. In that budget range there is a lot of competition, but if this review leaves you with a desire to experience the LS5/9 for yourself, do yourself a favor and visit a Graham dealer for an audition. If you love what you hear, plonk down the cash and expect to live in harmony with them for many years to come.

**Graham Audio LS5/9
Loudspeakers**

MSRP: \$ 6,799

**grahamaudio.co.uk/
(Manufacturer)**

**grahamaudiousa.com
(US distributor)**

FEATURE



iCarbon skin for MacBook Pro

\$29 www.icarbon.com



Those not wanting a thick case for their laptop, iPad or other iDevice, look no further than iCarbon. They provide coverage for other phones and game consoles too, in a number of cool colors. You could just do black or grey, but with 13 colors at your disposal, it's easy to get carried away.

Installation is quick and easy, with the iCarbon skin easily repositioned. It might take you more than one go if you choose the option with your device's logo cut out of the skin, or you are not a Jedi master. Regardless of skill level, wash your hands thoroughly before beginning the installation process. Be sure to remove all dirt and fingerprints from your device, and give it a quick blast with a can of dust off for good measure.

Within minutes, your favorite device will not only look cooler (especially if you choose a bright color) but will be better protected from minor abrasions. Laptop users can choose outside case coverage only, or for a slight additional charge protect the inside surface too. Regardless of color choice, this is a great way to protect your electronics.

Tile Bluetooth Item Tracker

\$25 www.thetileapp.com



If you are constantly losing, or more politely speaking, *misplacing* things, the tile will save you a lot of time you are wasting in the pits looking for stuff, while other people are zooming past you leading much more productive lives. A little dramatic, maybe, but once you have a few of these, you'll wonder how you ever did without.

The mini battery inside is good for a years worth of location duty and the Tile itself requires no maintenance or upkeep. The Tile will help you find anything you have it attached to. If it's in the 100 foot range of Bluetooth reception, pinging said lost item will make the Tile ring. If you are out of Bluetooth range, it will use your GPS and tell you where this item was last located. There's even a tile community function to help people help you find your stuff. It even works in reverse, if you've lost your phone, gently squeeze the Tile on your keychain twice and it will make your phone ring, even if it is in silent mode! How cool is that? The Tile is by far the coolest thing we've seen in a long time.

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Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound - October 2015

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Chris Martens, Hi-Fi+, September 2015

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

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio - THE SHOW, Newport 2015

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

John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014



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Atmosphere Soap

\$6-12ea. www.atmospheresoap.com



Can't get grumpy about \$12 a bar soap when we're buying \$4,500 tonearm cables, can we? This bespoke soap company makes incredible soap in a very deliberate, meticulous way and the end result as Pee Wee Herman might say, is "soapy."

But seriously, thanks to careful production and a wonderful blend of natural ingredients, you'll walk away from washing with Atmosphere soap feeling more than refreshed. Purposefully concocted to lather slowly, and leave plenty of moisturizer behind, this will spoil you for any other soap – guaranteed. And the fellow behind the company is a music lover as well. What's not to love? Whether you purchase these as a gift for that special someone or keep it all to yourself, this is a personal indulgence everyone can put their hands on.



The ZUS Charger

\$34.99 www.nonda.co

What do you do when you both jump in your car with depleted smartphones? Get a ZUS! In addition to having a pair of USB outlets, it automatically detects whether you have an iOS phone or an Android phone and adjusts the charging rate accordingly. Best of all, the ZUS will charge your phone in half the time that other car chargers will.

This alone would justify picking up a ZUS for your next road trip, but it offers more functionality. Their trademarked "Elegant Shine" lighting system glows to provide a soft task light for your interior

when it is super dark outside, a bonus should your car have either tinted glass or an all black interior. Perhaps the coolest feature doesn't even involve the charging aspect of the ZUS, its Smart Car Finder keeps track of where and when you last parked. This is an invaluable feature, even more awesome if you own a white Honda Accord that you're struggling to find, exhausted after a day of outlet mall shopping. Built to military spec (MIL-STD-810G), the rugged outer case should keep the ZUS charging in Arizona or Alaska and able to withstand multiple parking lot encounters or a densely packed Louis Vuitton purse.

NEW



M O O N

Nēo 430HA

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

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



MUSICAL ECSTASY



M O O N

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TONE STYLE

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Would you rather be sipping a latte instead of waiting for the cable guy so you can get on with your life? Now you can with the Ring video doorbell. Its wide angle lens broadcasts a clear picture of whoever is in front of the door it's affixed to, transmitting in real time to your smartphone.

Those wanting to be notified of guests from the other end of the castle in a more traditional way need only plug the wifi enabled door chime into a nearby outlet. It's not much bigger than a digital camera battery charger and the logo glows blue when all is well.

Installation is easy and requires no more tools than the multifunction screwdriver enclosed in the package. You can power the Ring by the internal

rechargeable battery, which is claimed to have nearly a year's capacity once fully charged. If you have 8-24 volts AC already there from an existing doorbell, that can be taken advantage of as well.

Once mounted to the supplied flush wall bracket with locking Torx screws, a five minute install process keys the Ring to your wifi network and your smartphone. Additional phones can then be invited to join the network so everyone can monitor the door.

For additional security, you can use the on board video camera to keep constant watch and upload the clips, triggered by the motion sensor to the cloud, so you know who's been stealing your LP's when the mailman claims to have left the package at your doorstep.



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The new **Excite X18.**

DYNAUDIO

Run, Don't Walk

The Pass HPA-1

By Jeff Dorgay

As I'm listening to Thomas Dolby's "Ability to Swing," the Acoustats in my living room have dramatically increased their ability to swing in every way: these vintage ESLs known for their somewhat loose and flabby bass now stand up and deliver Dolby's snappy synth bass lines with authority. The low level resolution that this preamplifier brings forth unearths minute details normally only heard on the *TONEAudio* reference system costing almost a hundred times more; all three dimensions of the sound field painted now expanded to the point of being psychedelic. In 35 years of listening to the Acoustats, they've never sounded this exciting. The slow sax fade in on Traffic's "The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys" becomes conscious so deliciously, so delicately, as the accompanying instruments fold into the mix, it's creepy the way these vintage ESLs wrap you up in sound.

But this *isn't* Pass' \$38,000 Xs preamplifier; it's their new HPA-1 headphone amplifier. This thing sounds so damn good twenty minutes out of the box, the thought of plugging a pair of headphones in is frightening, fearing my head will either melt or serious flashbacks will be triggered. So for the next few days, it merely does duty as the anchor of a modest 2-channel system, logging some hours on the listening clock. Before you start griping about the unobtainable price, the HPA-1 retails for \$3,500.



When super size won't do.

Getting great sound in a smaller space requires extra placement and planning. Large speakers usually won't do, components often need to be stealthier and neighbors in close proximity might not appreciate your need to rock out at all hours of the day and night.

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Sheer genius

Wile E. Coyote lists himself as “super genius” on his business card, but I can’t think of guys more deserving of this title than Nelson Pass and his crew at Pass Labs. I’ve been buying his designs since his days at Threshold circa 1980, and I’ve never heard one I didn’t love. Not like. Love. Personal bias, maybe, but I keep trying everything else, finding plenty of lovely things, but when I come back to a Pass product, it just feels—or should I say sounds—perfect. So in case you haven’t been reading my reviews for years now, I confess my personal bias here, openly.

Even if you aren’t a headphone enthusiast, but have been shopping for a lineage in the \$15,000 range, consider the HPA-1. (Remember, it’s only \$3,500...) If you have a minimalist, yet high performance system and can live with two single-ended inputs and a lone single-ended output to your power amplifier, get your hands on an HPA-1 and spend the rest of the money on your system.

Pairing the HPA-1 with everything in the studio and at home from bare-bones vintage amplifiers up to the Pass Xs300 mono-blocks used as the anchor to our

main system is a treat. Comparing it to a number of other preamplifiers in the \$5,000–\$10,000 range, the Pass holds its own or outperforms them in terms of quietness, dynamic range and tonality. Once powered up for a few days, and played for about 100 hours, it opens up further, exhibiting a level of refinement you would expect from a \$10k preamplifier. Remember, only two inputs, no remote and one set of outputs. But purely from a sonic standpoint, it is stellar.

From a visual standpoint, it looks like an Xs Pre put in a shrink machine. *(continued)*

FEATURE

Its diminutive size is less than half of a standard component, making it great for a compact, yet high performance system, or the perfect desktop headphone amplifier.

Oh yeah, it's a great headphone amplifier

Pass keeps the minimalist thing going here too. With only a single ¼-inch jack on the front panel, they haven't addressed the balanced thing, or multiple outputs, merely concentrating on the one way of connecting that most headphones offer. Forget about that; this thing sounds awesome.

The Pass press release mentions that it will easily drive planar phones, and this is instantly confirmed with a quick test drive of HiFiMan, Audeze, and Oppo phones. Even the notoriously tough-to-drive AKG phones pose no threat to the HPA-1.

For those who haven't had the Pass experience, Nelson Pass has said on more than one occasion, he "likes the sound of tubes, without the hassle," that is, replacing tubes and the occasional catastrophic failure that can accompany high voltage and high heat. The HPA-1 sounds just like the current crop of Xs gear: refined, dynamic and quiet, with a tonal balance a few molecules to the warm side of neutral. Never a bad thing with today's current crop of headphones, especially the top of the line Sennheiser phones.

After running through a wide gamut of phones to confirm no rocks in the road, most serious listening was done with the Audeze LCD-2s (current version) and the OPPO PM-1s. While this is a very well-balanced amplifier, its strongest suit is the sheer dynamic range it offers. *(continued)*

FEATURE



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Robert Harley — The Absolute Sound

FEATURE



Much like the Xs300 monoblocks we use daily, this extra dynamic range and grip helps whatever headphones you might have, fully controlling their diaphragm, resulting in quite possibly the most wonderful experience you will have with your current phones. Even my late '70s vintage Koss Pro4aa's took on new life with the HPA-1 driving them.

If you've ever been in a hifi show room, or trade show where the speaker manufacturer uses a massive power amplifier to drive a small pair of speakers with great result, you know what I'm talking about. It also gives whatever phones you are listening to extra oomph in the bass department. Favorite EDM tracks now really feel weighty, especially with the Audeze phones.

As you might expect, the stereo image produced by this amplifier on a premium pair of headphones is big, bold and exciting. A couple of times I caught myself getting up out of the chair, ready to walk away, thinking that I didn't even have headphones on. *(continued)*

FEATURE

FEATURE

**A \$3,500 headphone amp with free preamp or vice versa?**

Rather than bore you with audiophile cliché after cliché, let's break it down. The Pass HPA-1 is on the top tier of the world's finest headphone amplifiers, regardless of cost, end of story. If you can live with the single-ended functionality and a single output, you'll have a tough time getting better sound anywhere. It is an expensive headphone amplifier, but delivers the goods. If you are only looking for a headphone amplifier, this is the top of the heap.

As the control center of a minimalist hifi system, it offers performance far beyond what you'd expect to get from a \$3,500 lineage, and it has a world-class headphone amplifier thrown in for free. Again, if the topology fits your needs, even the most crazed audiophile could live the rest of their days with the HPA-1. It's that good. Even if you never plug a pair of phones into the front panel and merely use it as a preamplifier, this is one of the best values in high-end audio today. ●

The Pass HPA-1
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JAZZ & BLUES



I remember listening to Esperanza Spalding's debut album a decade ago and being tickled by the then-buzzed-about, now-acclaimed bassist's youthful authority. But I also recall being impressed by the pianist on that date, a wily improviser I hadn't heard much about—a guy who used his instrument to not only forward a melodic agenda, but a percussive one, too.



Aruán Ortiz Trio
Hidden Voices
 Intakt, CD

As he wound his way through Chick Corea's "Humpty Dumpty," he made it clear he liked his beauty to be limned with a little friction. A provocative blast of notes from the right hand, an itchy groove from the left: Aruán Ortiz brought a perpetual flux to Spalding's music. The Cuban-born, Brooklyn-based leader has been enhancing his approach and broadening his rep ever since, and with *Hidden Voices*, a trio session recorded with an enticing sense of sonic verité, he's made his most articulate album yet.

There's a choppy feel to several of these pieces, but it's oddly engaging and gives the music a seductive turbulence. Because he bends traditional Caribbean rhythms in myriad ways, and because he's smitten with everything from minimalism to mathematics, Ortiz plays with unusual buoyancy. Many of the beats are slippery. They often support an overarching rhythmic statement built on a string of intricacies.

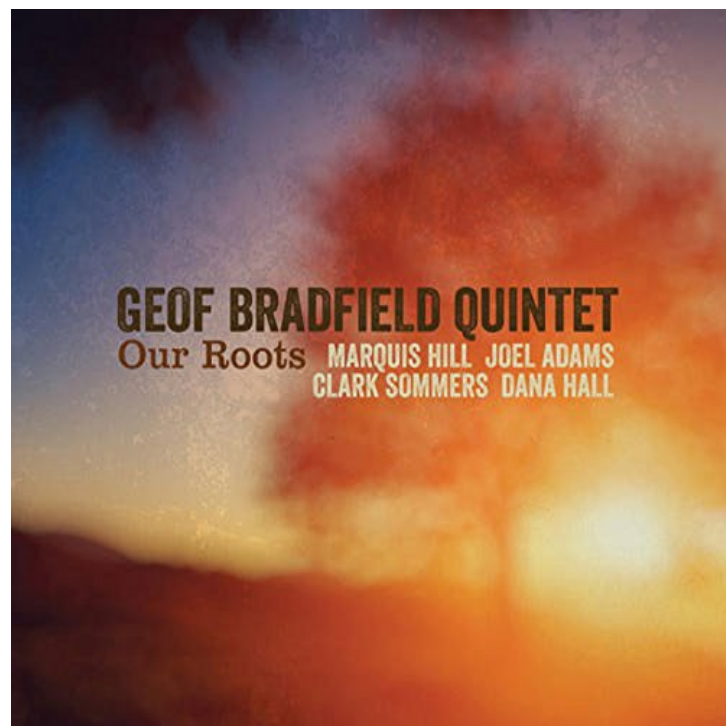
But as Ortiz's outfit—a stellar combo of bassist Eric Revis and drummer Gerald Cleaver—churns though the changes, all the hook-ups are made.

"Analytical Symmetry" remains brooding yet propulsive, a study in contrasts that comes off like Andrew Hill pondering the meaning of life after a double espresso. Ortiz's melody may be built on a cascade of hard-hit notes, but everyone surfs it so well that coherence carries the day.

Such connection binds the action across the board. Unity emerges as the key trait "Caribbean Vortex/Hidden Voices," where two clave players join the group. A crosshatch of Cuban beats get put into play, and even the most discursive moments have a clattering forward motion—heady, but lyrical. That's probably the most exact way to describe "Fractal Sketches," as well. Cleaver, who is becoming one the New York's most eloquent powerhouses, brings a glorious rattle to the piece. His string of mini explosions sets off colorful fireworks. Even the totally free "Joyful Noises," with its inside-the-piano string plunking, is made valuable by the trio's attention to detail.

As a musician that's thanked Muhal Richard Abrams for some lofty mentoring and duetted with Wadada Leo Smith, it comes as no surprise that Ortiz's work has such reach these days. He's penned charts for a Cuban ballet company, helmed the 2013 East Village series "Music and Architecture," and turned lots of heads with a group that features Greg Osby, himself a cagey rule-breaker. But there's always room for masters and tradition in his search.

As such, the most thrilling moments of *Hidden Voices* arrive when Ortiz totally refracts the melody of Thelonious Monk's "Skippy" and makes a mash of Ornette Coleman's "Open & Close" and "The Sphinx." Some trad swing, a few inside-out designs, the kind of well-placed dissonance that keeps everything on edge. Like much of the album, these "standards" boast a playful approach that breaks a sizable chunk of conceptual ground while still delivering plenty of pleasure. —**Jim Macnie**


Geof Bradfield Quintet

Our Roots
Origin, CD



Houston-born tenor saxophonist Geof Bradfield's *Our Roots* grew out of a smart Chicago series in which improvisers perform the music from some jazz classic. Bradfield picked 1965's *These Are My Roots: Clifford Jordan Plays Leadbelly*, one of curiously few jazz salutes to the Texas-Louisiana songster famous for singing his way out of one or two state prison farms before energizing New York's folk music scene. (The rousing 1987 *Out on the Western Plains* by Austin's Leadbelly Legacy Band is a worthy follow-up.) On *My Roots*, Bradfield does just four tunes from Jordan's album, including "Dick's Holler" and "Take This Hammer," but echoes Jordan's method: A three-horn front line favors loose, colloquial interaction more out of field hollers (like "Dick's") than Dixieland or hard bop.

Like Jordan, Bradfield doesn't gussy up the simple harmonies much—there's no chording instrument, making for a more airy sound—although the players may impose their own complications.

Bradfield's all-Chicago band assembled is wonderfully cohesive. The saxophonist, bassist Clark Sommers, and gloriously interactive drummer Dana Hall also work as Sommers' trio Ba(SH). Hollering trombonist Joel Adams had a pivotal role on Bradfield's 2013 *Melba!* Trumpet spitfire Marquis Hill won the 2014 Monk Competition and comes ready to show what the fuss is

about. (Jordan's expandable band had the same three-horn/two-rhythm lineup at its core.) The leader's brawny braying tenor sings out, suggesting Jordan's inspiration without ever sounding like an echo.

Non-Leadbelly tunes include two ring shouts recorded by the Georgia Sea Island Singers, their polyphonic call-and-response recast for saxophone and answering brass. Fricative trombone dissonance on the head of "Before This Time Another Year" hints at that roughhewn source material. On "Adam in the Garden," the bassist and drummer

spark the soloists by changing up the time feel behind Bradfield and Hill's declamatory improvisations. Sommers' time, tone, and intonation on bass are all on the mark, and Dana Hall comes on as a master of loud, cross-rhythmic snare and cymbal accents. Here and elsewhere, like Tootie Heath on *These Are My Roots*, Hall breaks out a tambourine for shades of street-corner sermonizing and the 60s folk revival.

Bradfield also arranged two numbers by East Texas gospel ace Blind Willie Johnson. *(continued)*

MUSIC



It brings the band no shame to observe its “Dark Is the Night, Cold Is the Ground” can’t match the stark power of Johnson’s wordless moaning and slide guitar. Two of Bradfield’s three originals reside in the same earthy vein as the bulk of the program. His “Meshell” serves as the change-of-pace ballad, Hill warming the ensemble with a harmon-muted sound. His animated phrasing and leaping lines fend off any Miles Davis comparisons.

The treatments of the Leadbelly songs mirror Jordan’s, yet they wander farther afield—the dirge “Black Girl” becomes a boiling rubato ballad for tenor—with more opportunities for collective improvising over the forms. On “Dick’s Holler” and “Yellow Gal,” the horn voicings closely follow the 1965 model. But the latter song’s tempo feels a hair more excited, and the players mix it up more. Bradfield and Hill share a long leapfrog episode that shows off the trumpeter’s precise attack and articulation.

There isn’t a hint of mustiness in this hat-tip to a 50-year-old album that commemorated music recorded 25 or 30 years before that. Bradfield’s tight and spirited quintet makes good old tunes sound newly minted, like the best revivalists of any age.

—Kevin Whitehead



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Terry Adams

Talk Thelonious: NRBQ+ Plays Terry Adams Arrangements of Thelonious Monk Songs
Clang!, CD

The first time I heard NRBQ live, the band moved from Sun Ra's "Rocket #9" to Sonny Rollins' "Valse Hot" to Thelonious Monk's "In Walked Bud" in one stretch. Can't recall the program, but I believe that before the last beer was quaffed, we also heard Monk's "Bemsha Swing" and "Bye-Ya." Plenty of jazz flavored that particular mid-70s show, and the group's choices skewed heavily towards the High Priest of Bebop.



©Photo by Dave Yandell

As Q fans know, pianist Terry Adams has been a Monk man from the get-go. In the liner notes of the new *Talk Thelonious*, he recalls a 1971 encounter in the kitchen of the Village Vanguard, where he asked the maestro to play the somewhat obscure "Gallop's Gallop." When queried about how the melody went, Adams sang the complex theme note for note. He also curated the wise but out-of-print Monk 1979 compilation *Always Know*. His Monk knowledge isn't too surprising. NRBQ has long peppered its sets with Monk tunes (don't miss the collective frolic through "Little Rootie Tootie" on Hal Willner's *That's the Way I Feel Now*), bringing a profound sense of fun to an icon that helped shape its anything-goes aesthetic.

Now Adams has dropped an all-Monk album, culled from a 2012 concert in Vermont. His dedication to his hero can be partially heard in the way he stresses singularity. No one sounded like Monk, and no one has made Monk tracks sound the way Adams does here. From pipe organ to pedal steel, he brings a few oddities to the table. While known for the raucous way he leads NRBQ through a charge of high-flying nuggets on the concert stage, Adams has also long had a way with ballads, and this 12-song program is generous with Monk's somber side. *(continued)*



©Photo by Dave Yandell

"Ask Me Now" comes on as a stark affair for two keyboards, with Scott Ligon's Hammond organ eerily stating the theme while the pianist dances around him. Adams picked up part of his style from the fractured phrases his idol turned into bop poetry. On "Monk's Mood," he flashes through a lyrical cluster of ideas while setting the stage for harmonica and steel guitar contributions. As each gets its say, the jazz classic's forlorn vibe momentarily takes on the air of prairie lament. And it's a ghostly pipe organ that defines "Reflections," all churchy reverence and willful idiosyncrasy. In the unusual instrument category, saxophonist Jim Hoke even plays ocarina on "That

Old Man." (Remember, it was Monk that caused a few people to scratch their heads when he tried out a celeste on "Pannonica" in '57.)

But don't worry, rockers, there are plenty of spots where the exclamation points fly. A hornless "Humph" jumps out of the gate and swings hard, giving Ligon room to work out a bouncy solo that has as much to do with Jimmy Bryant as it does Monk. Rhythm marks the band's spin on "Think of One," with the addictive groove veering somewhere close to a kaleidoscopic boogaloo. Here, Hoke's cagey alto connects with Klem Klimek's mighty tenor and, like their twists and turns on "Hornin' In," there's nothing shy

about their approach.

The band comes closest to echoing Monk's own approach on the knotty "Gallop's Gallop." Its thrills can be found in the melody's wound-tight string of backflips, as well as in the lithe approach bassist Pete Toigo and drummer Conrad Choucroun take to give Adams and Hoke ample elbow room. The leader's solo is animated and concise; he definitely knows the rules of pop. Indeed, Adams sounds sage throughout the entire album. The decades he's spent absorbing Monk have paid off. Insight and adoration form a seductive blend in this charming repertoire romp.

—*Jim Macnie*

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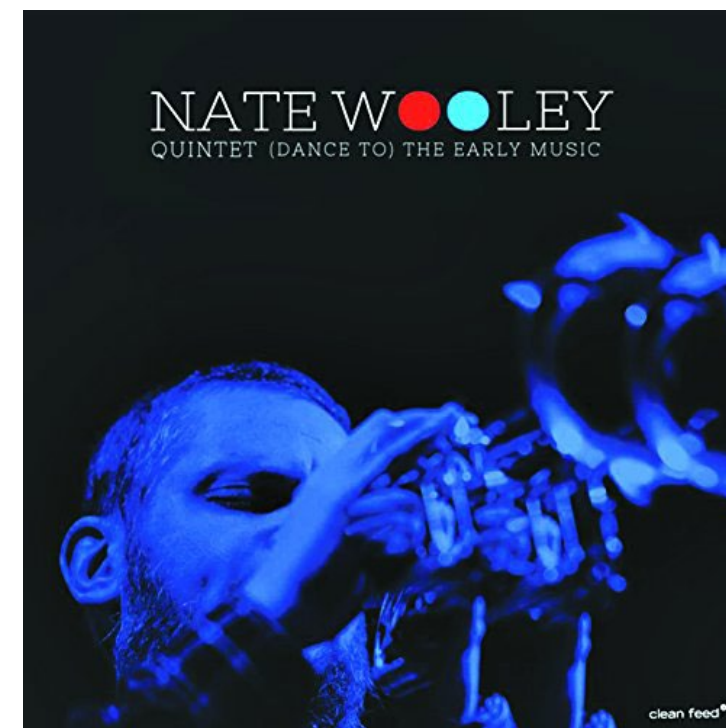
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Nate Wooley Quintet

(Dance to) The Early Music
Clean Feed, CD

Exploratory trumpeter Nate Wooley's album spotlighting 1980s Wynton Marsalis tunes arrives with several liner-note disclaimers. (Dance to) The Early Music is not intended as an homage to Marsalis, or postmodern commentary on his work, or "ironic," however you define the word. When Wooley was 12 and discovering jazz in the mid-80s, Marsalis' quintet and quartet records really sparked his interest. Give that music its due. Marsalis' first quintet blatantly emulated Miles Davis' classic mid-60s band.

But that remains a high mark for which to shoot, and at best, those young lions were unabashedly brash—ferocious even. Marsalis' early music could be tricky, full of lopsided phrases, shifting meters, and other rhythmic displacements. You can hear how it could inspire a hungry young trumpeter like Wooley.

Which brings us to what he's really up to, playing pieces from Wynton Marsalis, *Black Codes from the Underground*, and the quartet sequel *J Mood*. Revisiting those compositions functions as a way for Wooley to access his own early enthusiasm for jazz. His new versions can take the listener back, too. The two-horn intro to the opener "Hesitation" sounds strikingly like the original—until each player holds his last note for 18 endless seconds, taking the title literally.

Those first seven-and-a-half bars before that long fermata are about as close to Marsalis' sound as the quintet gets, what with Josh Sinton's bass clarinet in place of tenor saxophone, and Matt Moran's vibes more or less replacing piano on the six of nine tracks where it appears. Moran doesn't always lay down chords in support, piano-style. Sometimes a single-note vibraphone line will shadow one or both horns, lending a spectral presence to the ensemble.

Wooley picks a few of Marsalis' more intricate melodies, such as "Phryzzinian Man" and "J Mood," and if the players don't always improvise on the fiendish forms, neither did Marsalis' bands. Wooley's rhythm section tracks the lurch-and-surge momentum of "Delfeayo's Dilemma," where Marsalis went to straight swing time for the solos. (continued)

cardas.com/reflection





©Photo by Ziga Koritnik

The melody of “J Mood” actually sounds warmer here, thanks to Sinton’s bass clarinet at its most buttery, smoothly blending with trumpet. Sinton, of the Steve Lacy repertory quartet Ideal Bread, possesses a sturdy hardwood sound as a soloist, although once in a great while he sounds like a parody of the excitable master of the instrument, Eric Dolphy.

Wooley rethinks some possibilities. The 3/4 section of “For Wee Folks” becomes a Modern Jazz Quartet waltz, Moran’s vibes channeling Milt Jackson. In general, the band opens up the pieces and textures, the approach more free-bop than hard bop. On the aforementioned “Hesita-

tion,” Wooley and Sinton tag-team through the improvising, overlapping on the handoffs. The musicians step out of jazz time here and there, but they are not so obstinate as to forgo propulsive swing. Plump-toned bassist Eivind Opsvik has excellent time, and drummer Harris Eisenstadt (Wooley’s boss in the similar quintet Canada Day) can keep the cymbals dancing as well as get down into the microbeats.

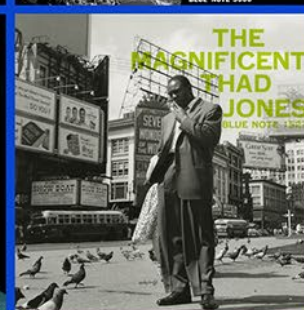
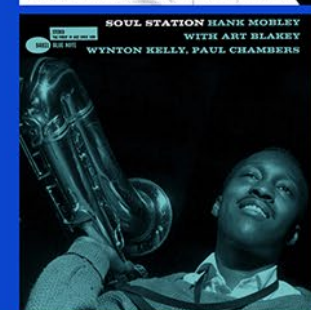
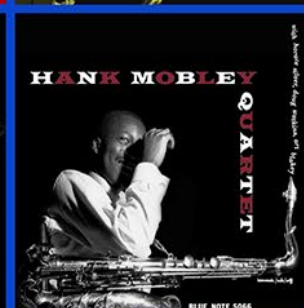
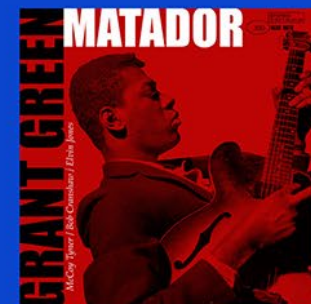
Three tunes are new, including a blues for trumpet and bass, where Wooley shows off voice-like pitch bends, a confidential quiet side, and lines that leap upward and descend the same way. A longer reprise of “Hesita-

tion” (minus that ten-bar hold) gives way to Wooley’s “Post-Hesitation,” a slow sleepwalk for winds over tolling vibraphone chords. His “On Insane Asylum” twists the melody of Marsalis’ “Insane Asylum” beyond recognition. That one’s all about the trumpet, a three-minute intro to Wooley’s range, clean and slightly breathy attack, and his wealth of ideas as he weaves together inside and outside strategies.

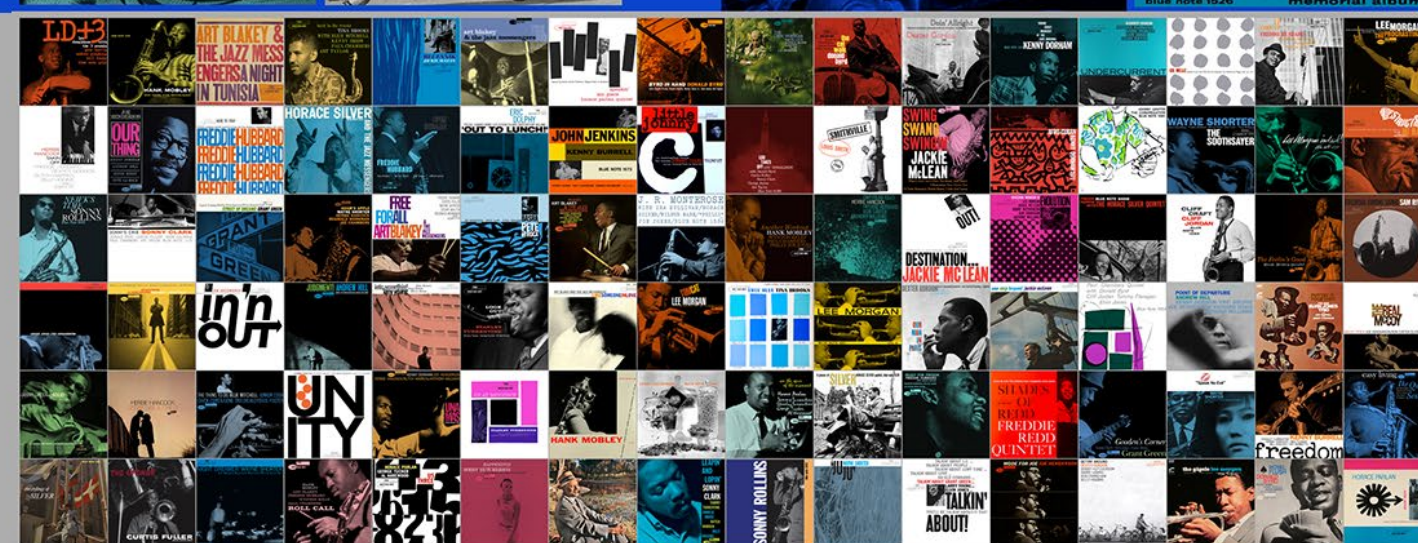
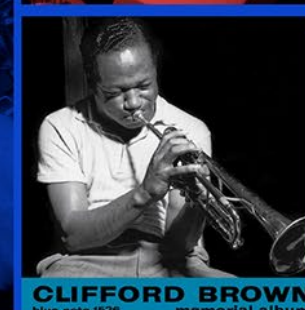
A few years after writing the music on this program, Marsalis changed direction, with Duke Ellington his new role model, and left his early rock-’em-sock-’em pieces behind. Good that someone is playing them again, with affection.

—Kevin Whitehead

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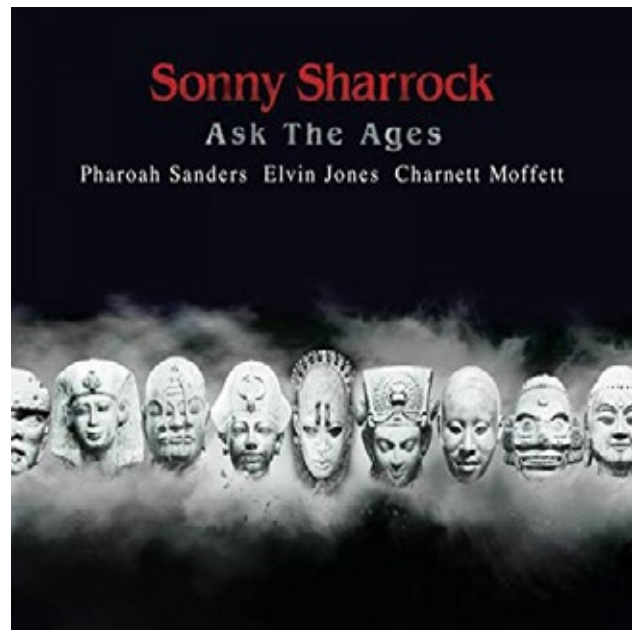


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Iron Path
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Sonny Sharrock
Ask the Ages
M.O.D., CD

Expressionism holds a major cachet in jazz. Use your instrument to tear at your heart or spill your guts, and you're addressing this music of immediacy in head-on fashion. The squall that results may tilt towards mania, but its vigor often entertains as it storms about. Such confrontational art seldom elicits a "meh" response.

That's what Last Exit banked on during its short ride through the mid-80s and early-90s jazz/rock firmament. The lacerating *cri de coeur* of saxophonist Peter Brötzmann, guitarist Sonny Sharrock, bassist Bill Laswell, and drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson was unmatched in its unabashed roar.

Their initial gigs served as explosions of collective vehemence born, for better or worse, of an unfettered macho attitude.

After a string of unruly live albums cemented their rep as creative disruptors, the quartet hit the studio for a more cohesive yet no less volatile session that's been out of print for decades. Now it's back and a new generation of listeners, with ears attuned to cacophony and its fallout, might appreciate the near violence of its attack. As the record winds through tracks with titles such as "Eye for an Eye," "Detonator," and "Marked for Death," *Iron Path* waves the flag for well-sculpted bluster.

Brötzmann's unparalleled caterwaul often represented the band's calling card. (After a gig, he once noticed he'd broken a rib from blowing his horn too

hard.) But here, the shrieks and growls are wonderfully balanced by Sharrock's lyrical fuzz and the rhythm section's insightful sense of design. As extreme as the music gets, a series of architectural ploys guides the action. There's a wise focus to its contours.

As often as not, this coordination arrives in the form of a Sharrock riff or lick. The guitarist peals as intently as the saxophonist hollers on "The Black Bat." Both musicians are experts at shredding, and much of Last Exit's canon is filled with the kind of blitzkrieg antics that made the band's shows so vivid. Jackson's radiant thud fuels several of the improvs and generates its own perverse sensuality as *Iron Path* blasts forward. If you love aggressive drums with a tribal flair, this is your album.



©Photo by Jack Vartoogian

Another must-hear Sharrock outing has also resurfaced. 1991's *Ask the Ages* arrives via Laswell's M.O.D. label (he produced the original issue on Axiom), and though less fierce than Last Exit's work, it's more impressive. As on *Iron Path*, the guitarist is surrounded by a masterful percussionist and horn player. Elvin Jones gooses every aspect of this soaring music, bringing overt waves of swing to the foreground while Pharoah Sanders offers keening exclamations as a foil for the leader's axe. Sophisticated skronk isn't the end game here, as it is with Last Exit. Rather, *Ask the Ages* is all about liftoff, coherence, and agility.

The one-two punch of "Little Rock" and "As We Used to Sing" serves as an apt synopsis. The first is built on a simple blues motif that might be a bar band's outro tune—if the bar was on Mars. Clarity and muscle make their mark, and Sharrock's wail lands somewhere between Mahavishnu and Hendrix. The latter song is a pinnacle of his frenzied approach, with a sustained squall riding a free-bop groove put down by Jones and bassist Charnett Moffett. Sanders isn't known for his soprano work, but he answers his mate with a convulsive essay that fits the charged atmosphere. Somehow, regardless of the hysteria, articulation is the overall result.

When the tempo slows down, the intention increases. "Many Mansions" rides a riff that grows more and more ominous with every repetition. Sanders becomes spurred by the waves of Jones' polyrhythms and delivers an august explosion that paves the way for Sharrock's distraught address. Every splash of the drummer's cymbals nudges the soloists further.

Heard in tandem with *Iron Path*, *Ask the Ages* strikes a blow on the poetic side of aggression. By bringing a soulful essence to a decidedly hardened music, Sharrock reveals his squad goals: Make assault approachable. —**Jim Macnie**



Dali Opticon 1 Speakers

By Rob Johnson

At TONEAudio, we have had the pleasure of reviewing a few of Dali's speaker offerings including the flagship Epicon 8 and smaller Rubicon 2. Given great sound at their respective price points, it's equally rewarding to learn of the latest addition to their speaker lineup: the Opticon series, released in 2015.

Like all their other speakers, the Opticons are designed and built at Dali's factory in Denmark. Very few components are outsourced, giving Dali greater control over every aspect of the design and build processes. The level of attention to detail certainly shows in the final product. The new Opticon range has offerings in many different sizes including floorstanding and bookshelf-sized models.

FEATURE

Design objectives and setup

After revisiting the \$20k/pair Epicon 8, we put their tiny Opticon 1 speakers through their paces with impressive results, primarily due to technology trickle-down. High frequency reproduction is supplied by a 26mm silk dome tweeter. Instead of doped paper, Kevlar, or aluminum utilized by many manufacturers for woofer cones, Dali takes a step off the beaten path with their own woofers. The brown color of the 4.5-inch woofer cone is due to the special wood fiber used. Driving the woofer is Dali's specially constructed magnet comprised of what they call SMC or Soft Magnetic Compound. Unlike traditional magnets, SMC is a compound that can be shaped into any form Dali requires. According to Dali, SMC also offers a sonic benefit through lower distortion during playback.

Opticon 1s are designed in a ported bass reflex configuration. The port is placed in a very unique way: it's incorporated into the recess for the binding posts. While an unexpected configuration, there's a science behind the design choice. The port faces slightly downward, helping the Dalis to perform even in close proximity to a rear wall.

The Opticon 1s weigh in at a substantial 9.9 lbs. (4.5kg), but keep a modest form factor of 10.4 x 6.1 x 9.2 inches (261 x 152 x 231mm). These speakers are equally at home on speaker stands, an audio rack, or a shelf. Regardless of placement, Dali recommends that the tweeter elevation be at ear level from the listening position in order to maximize sound quality and imaging. As always, a prospective owner should do some experimentation to identify the best resting place for the speakers to achieve the best sonics. *(continued)*

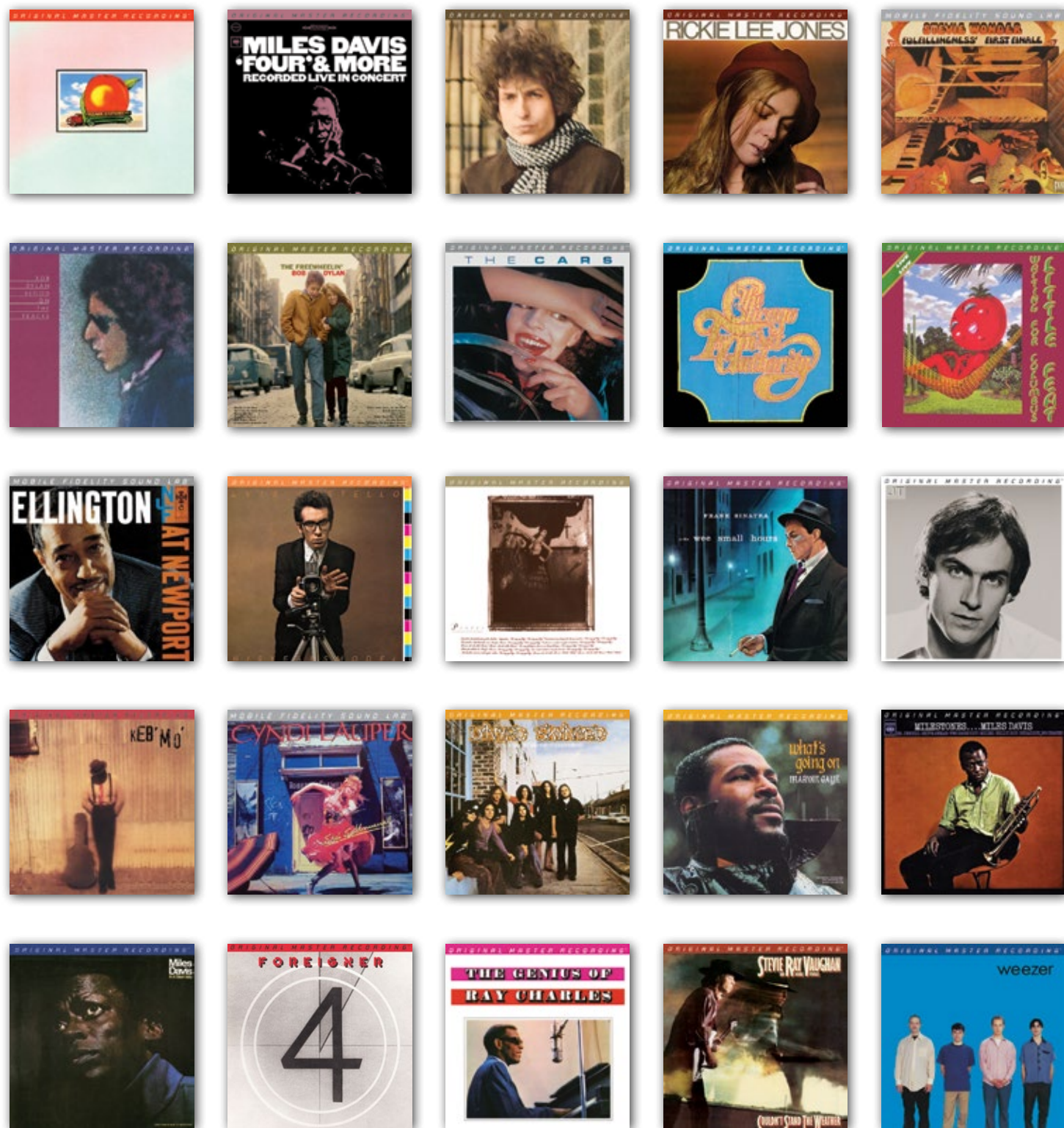
FEATURE



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FEATURE

Unlike their more expensive siblings featuring lavishly finished wood cabinets, the Opticon speaker enclosures combine an MDF shell with a well-executed vinyl veneer to keep the cost in check.

Serious listening

Immediately, the Dali lineage is apparent. It's impressive how much these speakers do well, with the same natural tonal balance that the rest of their speakers are famous for. Once placement in the room is optimized, the Opticon 1s render a large, three-dimensional soundstage, disappearing in the room as a good mini monitor should.

A bevy of tracks from Sia to Supreme Beings of Leisure to Sisters of Mercy, reveals a few common traits. Midrange transparency is a clear strength, portraying vocals with plenty of detail, but never at the expense of edginess or an overall loss in musicality resulting in fatigue. These speakers are easy to settle into for long listening sessions.

Highs are equally well extended and articulated, with the Opticon 1s revealing a lot of sparkle without grain. The touch of warmth to the presentation proves beguiling overall and helps these speakers work well with a wide range of entry level amplification choices. Whether small integrated or vintage receiver, these speakers are equally at ease in the system.

With such a small enclosure, one cannot expect bass to be the Opticon 1's strongest suit, and the Dali spec sheet suggests Opticon 1's LF limit to be around 60 Hz. *(continued)*



FEATURE

In our larger listening space, these tiny speakers did a remarkable job of producing some bass drive, with mid and upper bass notes taut and well defined. Those craving the lowest octaves are best off with the addition of a subwoofer, and Dali has a few compatible units you might find a match in a larger room.

Pulled in to nearfield or desktop duty in a smaller room is a different situation, with these speakers taking advan-

tage of room or desktop gain to render a bit more bass. Whether a sub is needed in this situation will be a personal decision.

A value proposition, indeed

Like every Dali speaker, the Opticon 1s represent major value at their respective price point. Combining every aspect of design and manufacture in-house gives Dali an advantage that few other speaker companies enjoy,

allowing them to pack so much performance into such a reasonably priced pair of speakers.

For just under \$1,000 per pair these speakers offer great sound in a small form factor, perfect for smaller listening environments. Should you move up to one of Dali's larger offerings later, they will still work wonders as surround channels or elsewhere in your house. ●

www.soundorg.com
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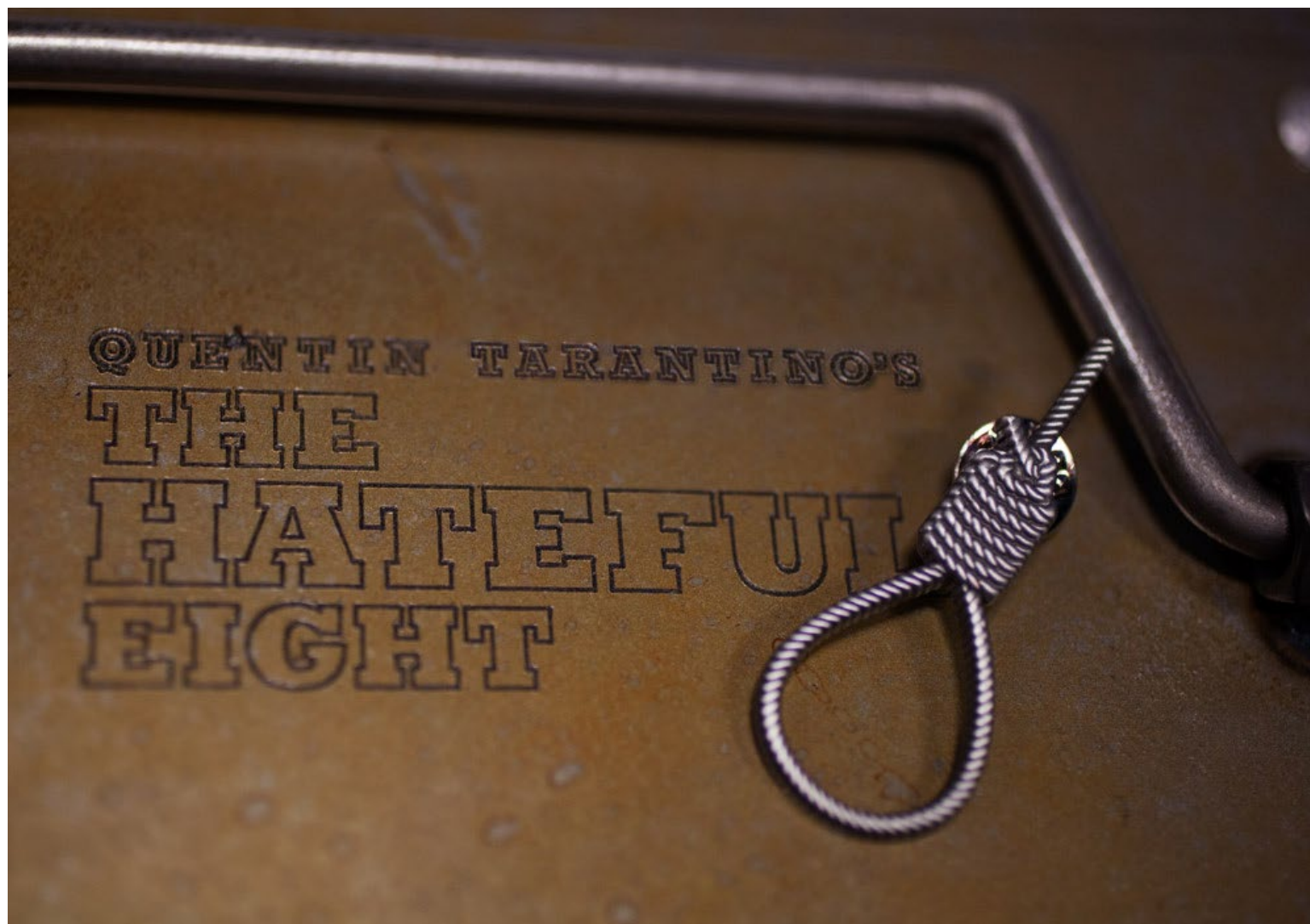
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AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Bob Gendron



Ennio Morricone

The Hateful Eight Soundtrack

Third Man Records

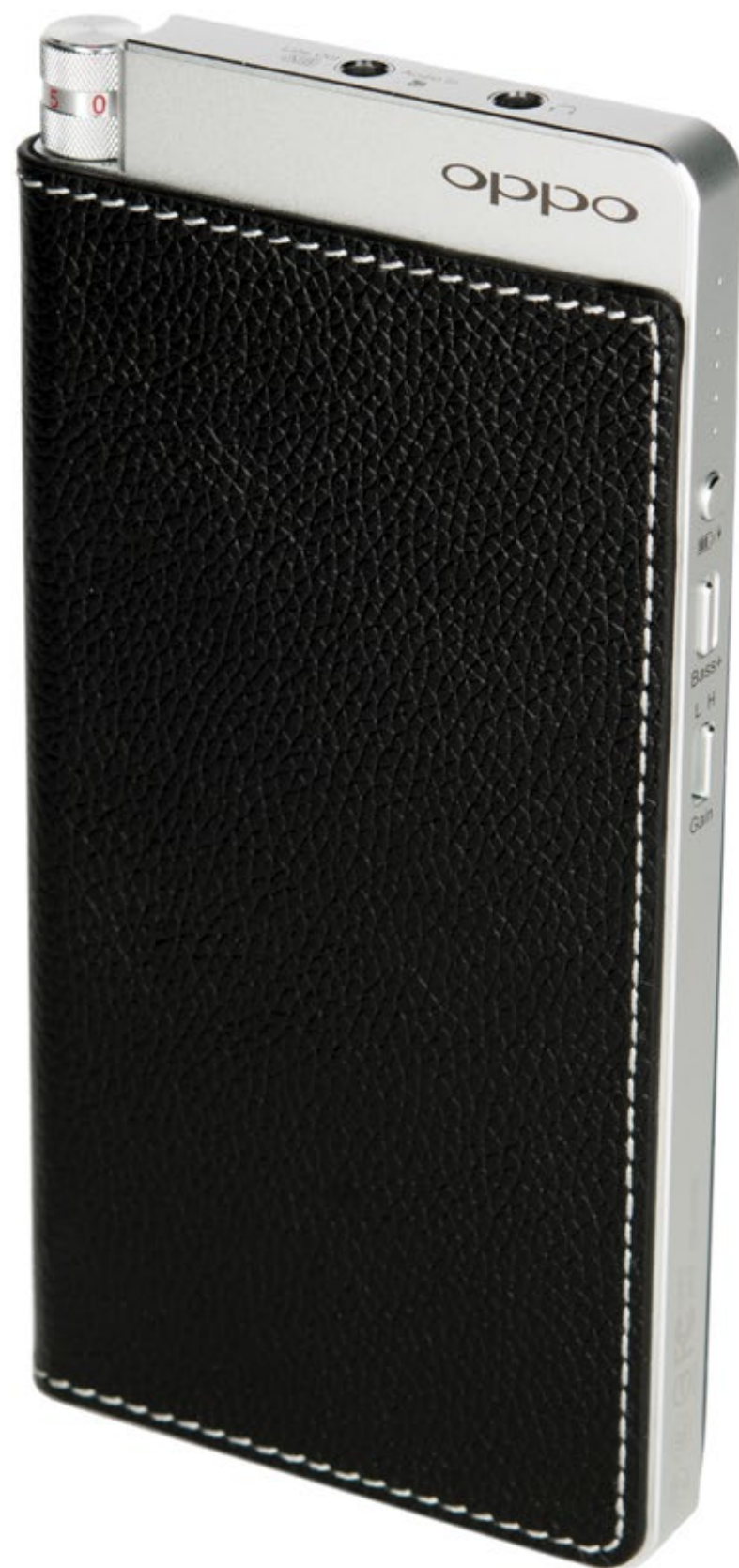
180g 2LP or 8 x 7" box set



Q

uentin Tarantino's ability to finally get Ennio Morricone onboard to score *The Hateful Eight* seemed the only news that superseded the excitement surrounding the movie's filming in Ultra Panavision 70—the first project to do so in nearly five decades. Having turned down Tarantino's requests on prior occasions, Morricone effectively agreed to come out of a self-imposed retirement from making Western soundtracks. After pioneering the style's trademark sound in the 1960s and 70s, Morricone spent the past four decades pursuing other projects. The collaboration also brings full circle a wished-for relationship that began more than 20 years ago when Tarantino utilized some of the -Italian-born composer's music in 1994's *Pulp Fiction*.

Aptly, the 87-year-old maestro gives Tarantino's latest drama plentiful sweep, complexity, and, most importantly, tension. An ebb-and-flow matrix of strings and horns affords lushness and density, light and dark. Mirroring the wintry conditions and claustrophobic settings in the film, sections like "Sangue e Neve" swell with eerie violins and staggered lines that portend not only the threat—but the certainty—of violence. Morricone works most effectively with the low end of the spectrum, ensuring no passage comes across with pure calm even when his tonal landscapes hint at pastoral beauty. The consistent appearance of simple melodies and minimalist techniques further heightens the emotional responsiveness of his tactical ploys. Yet the most impressive feat is that Morricone, facing time constraints, accomplished it all by stitching together unused pieces he created for John Carpenter's 1982 thriller, *The Thing*.
(continued)



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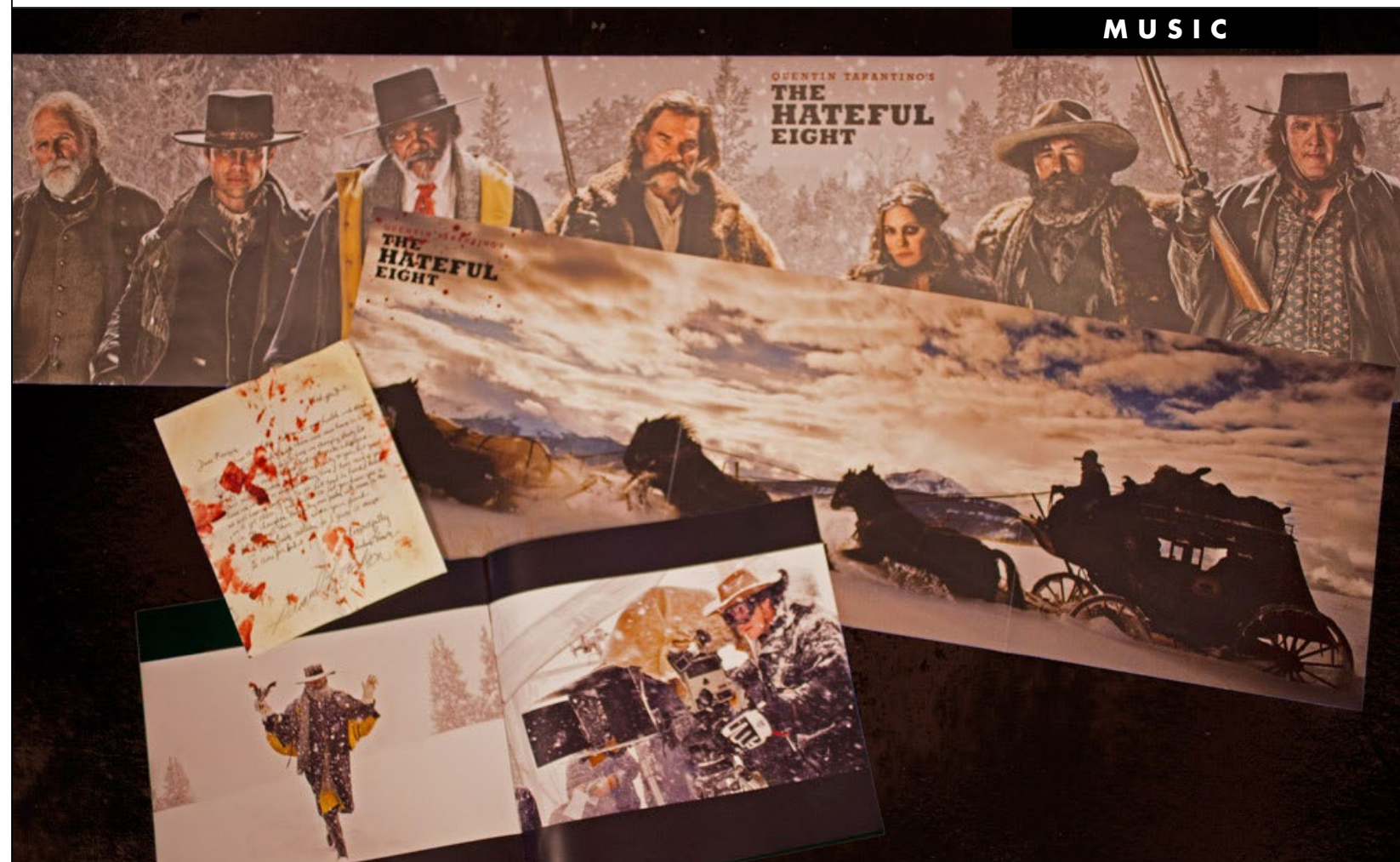


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MUSIC



Being a Tarantino feature, *The Hateful Eight* also includes various snippets of dialog and three songs, the most apt of which happens to be the White Stripes' "Apple Blossom" for reasons both thematic and practical. While the tracks from Jack White and company, David Hess ("Now You're All Alone"), and Roy Orbison ("There Won't Be Many Coming Home") fit into the whole, the soundtrack's flaw relates to the recurring speech interludes by the likes of Samuel Jackson and Kurt Russell. Most surpass the one-minute mark and many contain a certain derogatory term best left unsaid. These traits interrupt the flow and take away from what should be the focus of the experience: Morricone's score.

On the plus side, Third Man Records' double-vinyl set goes a long way towards compensating for any shortcomings. Dead quiet and pressed on 180g LP, it arrives in a gorgeous tri-fold reversible gatefold jacket that feels like an audiophile release. Two posters and a 12-page booklet insert complete with film stills add to the opulence—and bring the listener back into the art-house cinema, or at least provide the illusion.

As enticing as the \$30 standard 2LP version sounds and looks, however, the imprint's limited-edition 7" box set exists in an entirely different parallel. An early contender for a best

packaging of 2016 award, the deluxe volume can only be purchased in Third Man's Nashville and Detroit stores. Limited to 500 copies, it comprises eight (naturally) blood-red-colored 7" records in character sleeves. They're housed in an 18-gauge galvanized steel box with authentic bullet holes, handle, latch, and laser-etched logo. A metal noose pin and replica of the film's "Lincoln Letter" tops off what is likely the most indestructible and coolest-looking 7" box ever produced. The imaginative homage to two artistic greats is enough to inspire one to set the GPS to 623 7th Avenue South in Nashville or 441 Canfield Street in Detroit. —**Bob Gendron**

DIFFERENT CLASS

★★★★★



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PREVIEW

Focal Sopra N°1 Speakers

\$8,999/pair
www.focal.com

Focal's flagship Grande Utopia EM is a sonic and visual tour de force, but they not for everyone, tipping the scale at nearly 600 pounds each, towering over six feet tall and a healthy price tag of almost \$200k/pair. If you have the room and a system that is of equal quality, the Grande's are worth every penny and will leave you breathless.

We're not sure what the bigger miracle is; the Grande Utopia EM, or Focal's new Sopra speakers, incorporating their depth of technical expertise, now optimized for smaller spaces at an incredibly reasonable price. All new from bottom to top, the Sopra N°1 and larger Sopra N°2 are built to the same exacting standards as the Grande Utopia EM. We've been smitten since they've been installed, and you can read about them in our next issue.



Vinnie Rossi Lio VR120 Power Amplifier

\$4995

www.vinnierossi.com



Vinnie Rossi abandons the highly successful Red Wine Audio moniker to put his own name on the front panel of his latest LIO components. Built around his new ultracapacitor technology, Rossi claims “no expensive power filters, cords or conditioners are required.” Does the VR120 deliver the goods? We’ll let you know as soon as we’ve run more extensive listening tests, but the initial listening is exciting.

Like all of his other products, the VR120 is moderate in size, yet high in performance, (and the exact same size as the companion LIO preamplifier, also in for review soon) allowing them to easily integrate into any listening environment. Delivering 120 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load and doubling into 4 ohms, the VR120 can be bridged for those just having to have more power. Initial listening shows this to be one robust little amplifier, driving our ESL and Magneplanar speakers with ease. This one could be a keeper.

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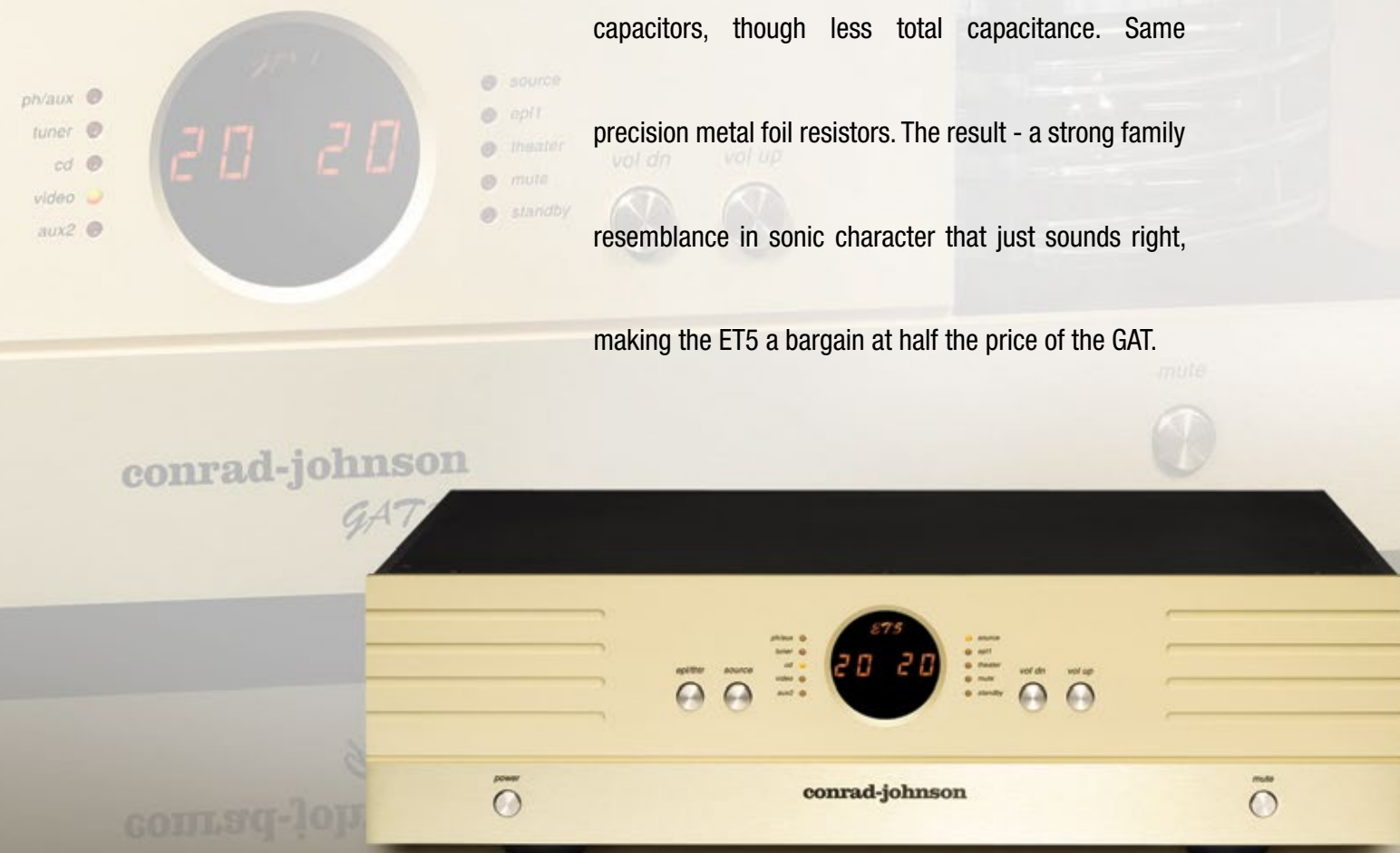
circuit, but shared between the channels. Same CJD

capacitors, though less total capacitance. Same

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resemblance in sonic character that just sounds right,

making the ET5 a bargain at half the price of the GAT.



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PREVIEW

Paradigm Prestige 75f Speakers

\$2,999/pair
www.paradigm.com

They've certainly come a long way from the Atoms we revisited on page 20! This slim, four driver, 2½ way system is a great addition to your main or home theater system. As a replacement for their highly successful Studio series, the design team at Paradigm went back to the drawing boards along with getting input from their dealers and customers to create the current Prestige line, which is a major jump in visual and audible performance from the prior models.

The new speakers not only deliver sonically, but give you the option of keeping the fashion forward visual design buttoned down, or should you remove the magnetically attached grilles, very futuristic. Thanks to their massive scale of manufacturing, the 75f is executed to a level that many speakers costing much more are not. And as with all Paradigm speakers, they are easy to drive, making them a fit for whatever electronics you have on hand. Watch for Mark Marcantonio's review in issue 77.





JL Audio Dominion D110 Subwoofer

\$999 (black ash finish), \$1,099 (black gloss finish)
www.jlaudio.com

Like the Focal Sopra, JL Audio's latest Dominion subwoofers benefit from the JL Audio's expertise in producing a wide range of award winning subwoofers for the home and mobile environment. JL builds the Dominion subwoofers from the ground up, here in the US and their smaller subwoofer has the same level of execution that has made their top of the line Gotham and Fathom subwoofers award winners the world over. The only thing missing is the built in room correction and larger power amplifier that the top models feature. Yet, the D110 is no slouch with 750 watts on tap and a LF (-3db) spec of 25hz. At this price, we suggest using a pair, and with a little bit of care in placement, the Dominion subs will bring your system to life in a way you never thought possible. More to come in issue 77.



A Perfect Blend

The ProAc D48R

By Jeff Dorgay

In a somewhat trance-like state, enjoying Neil Young's recent Blue Note Café performance, eyes closed, it's like someone either swapped the Tablette Signatures for bigger speakers or snuck a subwoofer in the room, adding more top end resolution while they were at it. This is the perfect balance that ProAc achieves with their latest creation, the D48R: full-sized floorstanding speakers that disappear like their famous mini monitors but with the additional might that only big woofers can provide. The D48Rs have a retail price of \$10,900/pair.

Thanks to a 90dB sensitivity rating, the big blue meters on the mighty Pass Xs300 amplifiers aren't even budging, tracking through the Afghan Whigs' *Gentlemen*. These speakers definitely play loud, not clogging up at high volume for those who like to rock, yet are equally engaging at low volume – proof of their incredible linearity. The delicate intro of John Mellencamp's "Sweet Evening Breeze" opens with guitar in the far left channel as his voice swells and the Hammond organ waltzes in. At this moment, the massive soundstage and distinctive spatial cues feel as if I've swapped the floorstanders back to the Tablettes – with eyes closed, there is no hint of a cabinet anywhere, like a large ESL. As the rest of Mellencamp's band chimes in, the heft of the performance sets me back in the chair like the Maxell guy.



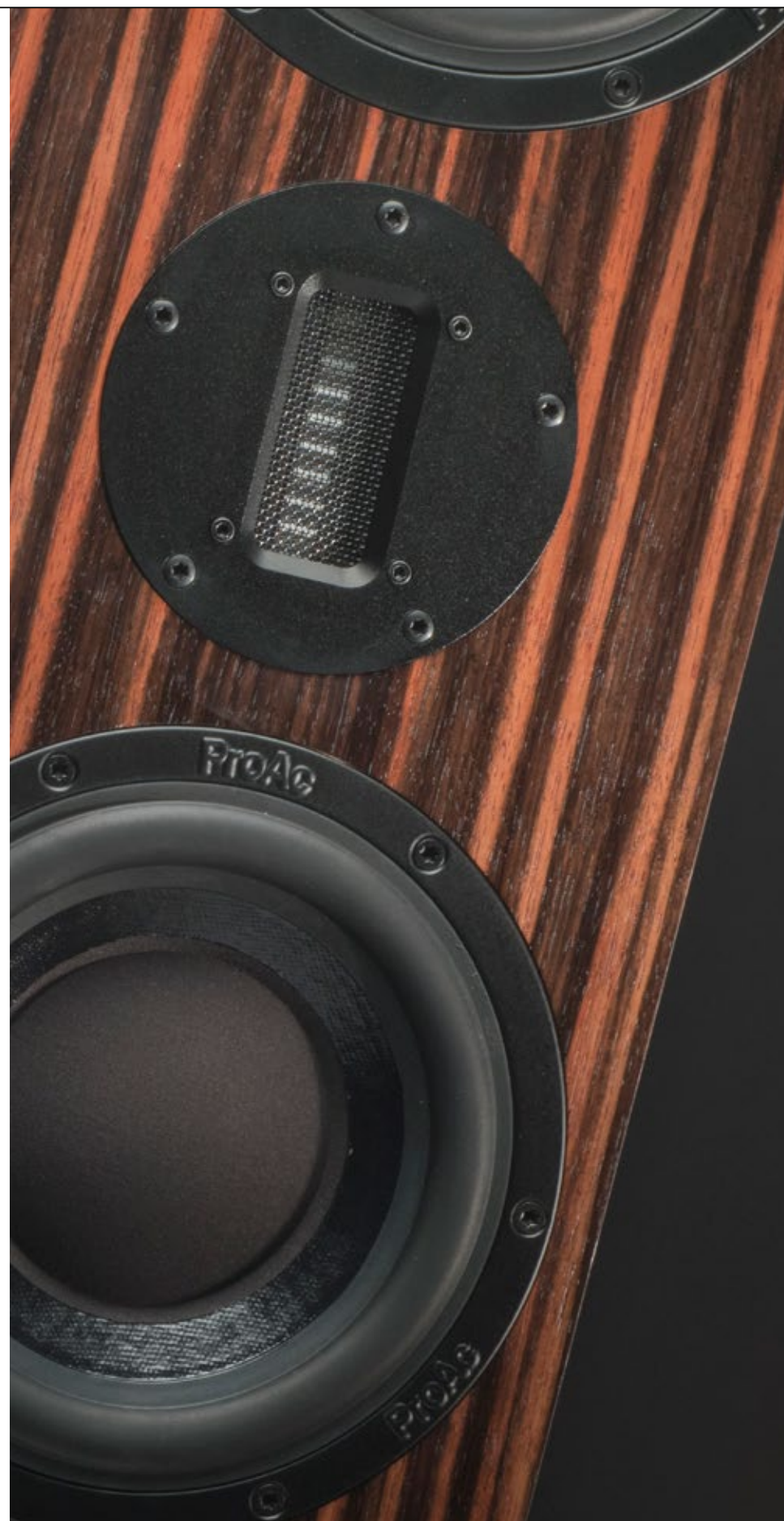
Ribbonlicious

These are not speakers that only excel with a few chosen audiophile favorites, and it only takes about half a dozen familiar tracks to determine that the magic of the D48Rs lies in their ability to deliver an incredibly rich, deep portrayal of any musical material.

ProAc does a better job at integrating the ribbon tweeter than most manufacturers who have attempted this daunting task. Though I normally spurn the ribbon, ProAc has done their homework here, integrating woofers with said tweeter to perfection. HF extension is tasteful and highly resolving without being harsh or overly forward. This is indeed a ribbon tweeter design that can be enjoyed for long listening sessions without fatigue.

Whether mastering an LP, adjusting images in Photoshop, or performing cosmetic surgery, the best work comes across as if nothing has been done. The same can be said for voicing a speaker, and for most the D48R delivers the sonic goods. However, those with a system that is already on the forward, revealing side might find the “R” a bit too much of a good thing. As always, we suggest a good demonstration with material you are highly familiar with.

This is not the classic British sound you might be used to or expect. Where Harbeth and Spendor’s current offerings are more like driving a mid-’80s Jaguar – posh, comfy and coddling – nothing sounds bad, mind you, but nothing sounds exciting and nothing pulls you into the presentation. Sacrificing engagement for comfort is fine, as long as you don’t crave engagement. *(continued)*



Weekend Pro-Ject



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The D48R is like stepping up to a current Jaguar TYPE-R, with the big V-8, always maintaining a solid connection to musical fundamentals, but providing a much more visceral experience. These are very engaging speakers.

Great houseguests

Unlike most slim-footprint floorstanders with side firing woofers that have always proved fussy to set up, the D48R is an incredibly easy speaker to place in the room, thanks to the downward, side-firing woofer ports. This is one of those rare speakers that sounds fine just “thrown in the room,” yet it rewards with an even larger soundstage when you can spare 30 minutes to optimize speaker placement to finesse the integration of the low end and midrange response. At 89 pounds each, you might need a bit of help to avoid back strain.

On the short wall in my 16 x 25-foot listening room, a wide sweet spot is achieved with the speakers about 8 feet out in the room and four feet from the wall, with my listening chair 11 feet from center soundstage. The ribbon generates enough HF energy to not require any toe-in in an untreated or slightly live room, but in my listening room with GIK absorption panels at first reflection points, three degrees of toe-in made for the best balance overall.

The two 6 ½ inch woofers provide plenty of heft, possessing no upper mid bass hangover, bloat or other anomalies, mating perfectly to the ribbon tweeter. Listening to the combination of Kurt Vile’s



husky voice and acoustic guitar riffs on his latest album, *B’lieve I’m Goin Down...* the D48Rs almost feel like an ESL. Quickly switching back and forth between the ProAcs and the new pair of Quad 2218s directly behind them for comparison, the ProAcs are mighty impressive in the coherency department.

As easy as the D48Rs are to place, they are even easier to drive, with one caveat. Because of their high resolution, they will reveal whatever is upstream, so a vintage Pioneer receiver will not provide top sonic results. However, their relatively high sensitivity doesn’t mean you need a ton of power.

Playing the D48Rs through everything from a 2 watt per channel 2A3 SET to the big 300 watt per channel Pass Xs monoblocks, all with excellent, but different results. I had a particularly good time with Nagra’s 300i integrated producing 20 watts per channel. This exquisite amplifier uses 2 300B tubes per channel in push-pull mode, but sounds more like an SET than not, and the silky smooth yet extended top end of the Nagra is a sumptuous match for the ProAcs. Should you be a vacuum tube lover, their relatively benign 4-ohm load will work well with whatever amplifier you have on your rack, but experiment with output taps for the best result; we did find a few that worked better using the 8-ohm tap, like the ARC GS150. You’ll know you have it right when you have the maximum amount of bass extension and control. A little wrong, and the bass gets whumpy – don’t blame it on the valves! *(continued)*





Big bottom

ProAc lists the LF frequency limit at 20Hz, but without a +/-dB qualifier. In a 16 x 24-foot room this proves ever so slightly ambitious, but test tones reveal solid output at 30Hz diminishing rapidly after this. Real-world music listening proves that unless you are listening to a consistent diet of EDM tracks, you'll never need a sub, as the D48Rs offer plenty of low frequency oomph. Whether listening to the heartbeat at the beginning of *Dark Side* or your favorite Dr. Dre cuts, these speakers deliver.

Because the pair of 6 1/2-inch woofers are so fast, those not familiar with these speakers might misinterpret the lack of mid bass bloat for lack of output. A nearby pair of vintage JBLs appeared to have a warmer, fuller bass response until we started playing tracks with real bass information. Immediately the tables were turned in favor of the D48Rs, with impressive results. *(continued)*

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

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REVIEW

A good look at the top of the mountain

Like a few other great speakers we've auditioned in the \$10k–\$20k range in the last year, the ProAc D48R in a moderately sized room delivers so much of what you'd expect from a \$40k–\$60k pair of speakers, there's hardly a reason to spend more, unless you just have to play music in a massive room at headbanging levels. For all but the most well-heeled audio enthusiast, these will provide a fantastic upgrade from someone currently listening to speakers in the \$3k–\$5k range and will prove an excellent anchor for a system in the \$20k–\$80k range. Even when we paired the D48Rs with considerably more expensive electronics, they deliver a command performance.

Our European readers are well aware of Pro-Acs full range of loudspeakers, but many here in North America only know ProAc for the (excellent) Tablette. The D48Rs small 8 ¾ inch wide by 13 ½ inch deep profile takes up precious little more floor space than a pair of Tablettes on stands, so they should fit anywhere with ease, and a wide range of finishes are available. Those concerned with aesthetics will love the high degree of fit and finish that these speakers present, so they will complement any décor.

The ProAc D48R
\$10,900/pair

MANUFACTURER

ProAc

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IT GOES TO 12

MOON by Simaudio's Evolution 780D

By Jeff Dorgay

With so much excitement surrounding analog these days, it's easy to forget about digital, but as cool as it is to play records, the tremendous progress made is even more amazing for this reviewer. Digital used to be downright unlistenable, with even the really good stuff still not holding a candle to analog. Yet a few seconds into the high res download of Van Halen's "You're No Good," as that infamous cymbal hit fades into its flanged glory, full of life and grandeur, you instantly know this is the good stuff. And at \$15,000 it damn well better be.

Moving to more acoustic faire, *real* music if you will, just widens the smile. And just like my reference dCS and Gryphon DACs, what makes the MOON 780D part of the digital elite, is that it does a phenomenal job with 16/44.1 files, and god forbid, MP3 files as well. No matter how big your high resolution music collection is, chances are good that if you're a major music lover, you have a ton of standard resolution files.

We can argue forever about 16/44.1 vs 24/192 or DSD files, or better yet, digital vs. analog (yawn), but if you have a big server full of 16/44.1 files (I've got about 12,000 CDs ripped on my server) or explore new music on Tidal, you want outstanding redbook performance. The MOON Evolution 780D delivers the goods and is on par with the world's best players.

Ray Lamontagne's voice on his latest, *Ouroboros*, streamed via Tidal is tremendous, as is some other favorite male and female vocalists. The hardcore vinyl enthusiast with perfect pressings might grumble a bit, but these are mighty thin hairs you're splitting here. This is a damn fine digital experience, no it's a damn fine musical experience.

Precisely why you write the big check

In 2016 you can buy a much better DAC for a thousand bucks than many of us ever dreamed of ten years ago, even five years ago. But you don't get sonic quality, and in the case of the 780D, a *lack* of sound without laying out some cash. Just as it is with analog, you can have fun and enjoy music for peanuts, relatively speaking, but an immersive experience at this level still requires a serious investment.

The good news is you won't spend any time diddling around with precise setup as you might with a \$15k turntable. Though the 780D provides pristine sound, the minute you connect your source, you can customize functions and rename the inputs on the massive LED display, a real bonus if you do take advantage of those nine inputs at your disposal.

As mentioned, the 780D reproduces music with such finesse, it's hard to believe it's digital and with high resolution digital files or rips from my favorite LPs, the gap is virtually nonexistent. Like the rest of the Evolution series, the 780D has expansive dynamic range, or as some like to call it – jump factor.

Whether you are listening to Prince scream, Miles Davis blast his horn or Keith Moon pound on his drum kit, the 780D delivers a visceral experience that goes a long way to convince your brain that you are listening to the real thing.

MOON by Simaudio components have always carried a highly accurate, yet tonally natural voice – neither embellishing, nor over-emphasizing the overall sonic experience. Again, the 780D is true to form with a wonderful midrange that is never harsh or strident, but never truncates leading or trailing edges of musical notes in the name of warmth. Yet, after countless all day listening sessions, I can testify that the 780D does not fatigue due to an overly resolute presentation either. This is a source component that you can easily build around because it has no sonic signature of its own.

Speaking of experience

Canada's Simaudio has been making great gear for nearly 40 years now, and if you click [here](#), you can read about my visit to their state of the art Montreal facility, which includes one of the finest listening rooms in the audio industry. And while every aspect of their plant was very cool, one of the things I liked the most about my visit was that there was only one repair guy and he didn't have many components stacked up on the repair bench awaiting his skilled hands. That's why it's always easy suggesting their gear, new or used as a great value. *(continued)*



Extensive listening sessions with the previous 650D and 750D DACs had not prepared me for the quantum leap that the 780D provides. With an MSRP of \$3,000 more than the 750D, something is gained and something is lost; mainly the ability to play CDs. For most, this will not be an issue. As with all marketing decisions, the development team in Montreal probably spent some time agonizing whether to please the smaller ranks of physical media toting audiophiles, or go for broke with a no holds barred DAC instead.

Though I still enjoy spinning a CD now and then, I applaud the direction they took, and in addition to eliminating the CD transport, they incorporated their coolio MiND streamer onboard.

Notice that little wireless antenna? Honestly, this is what gives the 780D the power and separates it from the pack. While some in the world of audiophilia might accuse me of heresy to suggest it, the 780D sounds so damn good, that unless you've got 30 – 50k analog rig and shelves full of first stamper British this and that, forgettaboutit. Just buy a 780D and play your favorite digital files, whether via the built in Tidal capability on the MiND app, your server, or your computer – I suggest a combination of a ROON server with Tidal and a transport, just for when you feel like playing a pile of discs, or heaven forbid you have a network issue.

Family resemblance

At 35 pounds, this DAC is solid, and it's not just because of the heavy duty casework, there's a power supply under the top panel that's bigger than that in a lot of moderate sized power amplifiers. Thanks to multiple advances in power delivery, filtering and regulation, the analog output signal is quiet, quiet, quiet; but that's not the whole story. The 780Ds advanced MHP (MOON Hybrid Power) supply keeps out the harshness and glare that creeps through in lesser players. This approach carries over from the rest of the Evolution series of components. It goes without saying that if you have an

all MOON system, the synergy here will be perfect. Say that ten times as fast as you can. Last, but not least, it has an outstanding remote control; intuitive, functional, and built with a level of mechanical integrity in keeping with a component of this price.

While compatibility in a rack full of MOON components is a given, the 780D mates equally well with anything else. Its 2 volt output from either the RCA or XLR connectors should drive any linestage to full output. The 780D features a fully balanced differential analog output stage offering optimum performance into a fully balanced system, yet we experienced no lack

of quality driving Robert Koda and Conrad Johnson preamplifiers in single ended mode. Both balanced and unbalanced outputs will drive a 20 foot pair of interconnects with ease and no degradation of sound quality.

As part of MOON by Simaudio's Evolution series, the 780D shares the same elegant chassis work that graces the rest of their matching components. Thanks to having their own 5-axis mill in house, Simaudio can offer robust casework that is not only aesthetically pleasing, but acoustically inert without it driving retail prices through the ceiling. *(continued)*

Connections galore

I achieved excellent luck with both my dCS Paganini transport and a friend's borrowed MOON Néo 260D, which you can add to your digital front end for an incredibly reasonable \$3,000, making a 780D/260D combo along with a power cable and maybe a premium USB cable weigh in right at \$20k. Both transports did a killer job via the AES/EBU inputs with a short run of Nordost Frey balanced digital cable.

The rest of you can either connect wirelessly, or hardwired, via USB, SPDIF, Toslink or Ethernet. For my money, a hardwired Ethernet connection and a NAS drive is not only the easiest way to roll, but the most robust from a data integrity standpoint, but I admit to not being a terribly geeky end user. I use what works. For those of you with better computer Jedi skills, the 780Ds manual is incredibly concise, so you'll have no problem getting it to do what you'd like it to do. Along with the plethora of inputs comes equal capability to decode any digital files you might have in your collection, including DXD and 4x DSD.

It's worth noting that the MiND renderer always did a better, more musical, more natural job decoding digital files than anything on my Mac or Windows laptops.



Kiss suffering with Amarra and other third party playback options in the quest of higher performance goodbye. It all happens on board with the 780D and I'm all for anything that makes listening to music simpler.

Those needing more in-depth technical analysis can visit the MOON by Simaudio website here. They answer every little bit that the audience requires. Better yet, just go listen to the damn thing.

Parting comments

We've had the pleasure to listen to the MOON 780D for some time now and compare it with numerous other products. There is no question that this is a world class DAC with no compromises made in any aspect of its design. It plays anything you can throw at it and with its onboard streamer/renderer, offers tremendous flexibility. As it had been returned some time ago, the only aspect of the 780Ds performance that I can't address is the addition of an MOON 820S external power supply. If it offers the same level of performance that it did to both the MOON 750D DAC and the MOON 810LP phonostage, it should be substantial.

I could wax poetic about technobabble, and the engineering department has an arsenal of acronyms to describe their prowess in analog, digital and power supply designs, but the bottom line is that this is one hell of an instrument to listen to music with. Like a very short list of DACs that truly get out of the bitstream and immerse you in the musical experience, MOON by Simaudio's MOON 780D is one of the best. It will take you but five minutes in your dealer's chair to convince you of its excellence. *(continued)*



Audible performance is certainly a big part of a high performance audio component, but an often overlooked aspect of esoteric audio components is consistency, reliability and long term value. I have owned a number of Simaudio products as reference components over the years, as have other TONE staffers, and we have never experienced an equipment failure. Should you need service at some point, their products carry a ten year warranty and with an extensive world wide dealer network, help is close by in most major cities.

A quick look at the small number of MOON by Simaudio components for sale on the secondary market, and the high price their components command also reinforces the long term value of their gear. This is not to be taken lightly when you're spending this kind of money.

You might call me wacky to award a \$15,000 *anything* an Exceptional Value Award, but considering how many \$40,000 DACs we've heard that don't approach the performance of the MOON 780D, it's justified. Simaudio can offer a DAC this good for \$15k because of their extensive in-house manufacturing and engineering capabilities. If they had to job out metalwork and subassemblies, this DAC would easily cost twice as much and it would still be a killer at \$30,000. That's what makes it a major bargain at \$15,000. Flame suit on. ●

The Simaudio MOON Evolution 780D
MSRP: \$15,000

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Simaudio Ltd.

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers
Robert Koda K-10, Pass Labs Xs Pre, Audio Research GSPre

Power Amplifiers
Pass Xs300 monos, Audio Research GS150, Nagra 300i

Speakers
Gamut RSi5, Dynaudio Evidence Platinum, Quad 2812

Cable Nordost Frey and Heimhall

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LS5/9



LS5/8

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GamuT RS3i Loudspeakers

Superior Sound

By Rob Johnson

At *TONEAudio*, we've had the chance to review several GamuT products, including the marvelous RS5i floorstanding speakers. The RS5i certainly set a high bar, and we eagerly awaited the opportunity to test the smallest sibling in the RSi line, the stand-mounted RS3i. Would these Danish beauties blow our socks off like their bigger brothers?

GamuT's chief designer, Benno Meldgaard, shared his top goals for the company's flagship RSi Series. First, he wanted exceed the capability of their previous "S" series in every way. After poring over every aspect of the design and build, GamuT gave the revised "RSi" Superior moniker to the new speakers. Secondly, rather than focusing on charts, graphs, and numbers defining the RSi prowess, Meldgaard's speaker design escaped further scrutiny and tweaking only when the RSi voice met the GamuT team's unanimous agreement in listening tests. Subjective judgements count. Statistics may represent accuracy, but beautiful music is judged in the ears of the beholder.

In my own room, the speakers exhibit a flat frequency response, but the level of musical engagement they provide certainly reinforces the achievement of GamuT's overriding design mission: delivering great music.

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REVIEW

Stunning Surfaces

Twin RS3s arrive together in a single wooden crate, weighing in at about 210 lbs. Our backs certainly were better off because of the attached wheels on said crate, allowing ease of movement in our environment. Inside the mammoth crate, a carefully constructed and padded cradle supports and protects the speakers from damage in transit. As with the other GamuT speakers we've used, you simply pop the crate out, remove the two bars holding them in place and slide them out. Where a few premium speakers can take hours to get unboxed and in place, this is a five-minute operation with GamuT. Impressive.

The matching stands arrive attached to the monitors, so there's no assembly required. Some potential buyers might want to use their own stands to cut acquisition cost, but that's not an option with the RS3. Stands and speakers come as a package deal. The integrated stands serve two purposes: one functional, and one aesthetic. First, they provide a rock-solid base for the speakers, including a metal outrigger stand at the bottom for added stability. Threaded spikes facilitate adjustments necessary for ideal speaker placement. Secondly, the accompanying stands are a stunning part of the overall speaker package. The beautiful wood finish matches the speaker set perfectly, and the cantilevered appearance of the speaker-stand combination offers a stunning visual draw complementing the requisite functionality.

The speakers feature a sloped, time-aligned face placing the tweeter a little further back from the listener than the woofer. Since the sound starts at the voice coils of each driver, this arrangement means the sound from each driver will arrive at the listeners ears at the same time. *(continued)*



Other than the ruby finish of our sample pair, a prospective GamuT owner has a choice of three other wooden finishes: onyx, ivory, or maroon. Regardless of color choice, the external façade of the speaker is a marvel to behold. Beneath the outer finish, each speaker body is comprised of an amazing 21 layers of wood. Various types and thicknesses of wood reduce cabinet resonance and add rigidity to supplement the internal bracing. Such a hefty build comes with an equally substantial weight. Each speaker tips the scale at 57 lbs. (26 Kg). Dimensions, including stands, are 41.6" (1059mm) tall, with a width and depth of 8.9" (226mm) and 18" (456mm) respectively. The depth measurement includes binding posts and grilles.

A two-way RS3i design includes a one-inch tweeter assembly, described by GamuT as a ring-radiator, silk cone Neodymium Magnet system. Lower frequencies are delivered by a seven-inch combined midrange/woofer driver featuring a paper cone doped with a blend of plant oil and wax. The RS3i front grille features a minimalist configuration, comprised of 10 black elastic-like strands stretching horizontally across the speaker front, and connected to vertical metal bars near the speaker edges. If you have small children who may be tempted to touch the speakers, be warned that the grilles will do little to protect the sensitive woofer and tweeter beneath. GamuT does offer normal cloth grilles as an option.

Standing Symmetrically

Every listener's room is different, so GamuT includes some helpful instructions to optimize speaker placement. In addition to written recommendations, GamuT provides an Excel spreadsheet allowing an RS3i owner to plug in the length and width of their listening space. An immediate calculation returns measurements for ideal RS3i placement. When placed at those coordinates, GamuTs perform their best for imaging and accurate frequency response. This calculator is a real time-saver, giving a new owner a substantial head start toward audio nirvana.

(continued)

Optimized or Compromised?



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After general placement is complete, two more setup steps must be executed for the best possible sound. These must be completed by ear. The outrigger base of the speakers, and the threaded spikes built in, make this process simple using an Allen wrench. Applying the same number of twists to left and right side spikes ensures the speakers remain vertical while the rear is elevated and the front is lowered. As a final check, a carpenter's level (or phone app) can help ensure the speaker pair are locked in at an identical, forward-leaning angle. GamuT suggests beginning with the speakers at zero toe-in, focusing on the speaker tilt first. All Gamut speakers are made for a standard 3.5m listening distance, with 1 meter ear height. Meaning zero tilt. Moving away from this position, means changing the tilt of the speaker – Closer to the speaker means more forward tilt and vice versa. Higher ear height means more back tilt. The correct tilt will be at the point where the center image is closest to being dead centre. This also means that the toe-in of the speaker normally ends up between 0 – 10 degrees of toe-in. *(continued)*

REVIEW

The RSi-series speaker binding posts are unique, and frankly, rather frustrating. Thick, knob-like structures conceal a very wide, cone-like post underneath. With this post design, spade-terminated speaker cables are rendered unusable. Banana terminations, or spade-to-banana adapters are necessary. While GamuT suggests using jumpers of the same brand as your speaker cables, they do supply gold plated copper jumpers to get you going. And the special arrangement of the binding posts is really optimized for stripped wire ends, which Meldgaard feels is superior to any connector at all.

Stunning Sonics

Once the speakers start playing, put on your seatbelt and prepare to be impressed. From the get-go, the RS3is impress. There's nothing slow, laid back, or overly romantic about the RS3i's sonics. However, there's nothing strident, etched, or overly accentuated either. There's simply a high level of realism when voicing a performance. It's easy to enjoy these speakers for all-day listening sessions without any ear fatigue.

No matter what musical genre is played, the RS3is achieve a miraculous balance of characteristics that leave this listener craving nothing. Sonic chameleons, the RS3is can portray with equal aplomb the warmth of a lush vocal performance, the dynamic swings of an orchestral ensemble, or the punch and speed of a vibrant rock track. Few speakers I've encountered seem to excel to this degree with any recording thrown at them.

Specified to reproduce frequencies as low as 34Hz, the RS3is are not quite full range. However, bass is a surprising strength of these monitors. In my own listening space, I find little roll-off at the lower limits of the RS3i's claimed range.



Bass is taut, tuneful, and true. Even with the subterranean notes inherent in Bill Laswell and Jah Wobble's *Radioaxiom*, the speakers never exhibit strain in producing satisfying bass. Yes, the sofa and kitchen cabinet doors did rumble. That said, those craving the deepest growling bass may desire the addition of a subwoofer, or perhaps one of the full-range speakers in the RS lineup.

Highs are rendered with similar delight. RS3is boast frequency extension up to 60 kHz, well beyond human hearing and into the sonic realm of the beluga whale. Not having any sea creatures on hand, I'll have to take GamuT's word for that. The frequencies I can hear, like the subtleties of cymbal rides and crashes, are portrayed with both force and delicacy as the recording dictates. Shimmer and decay float effortlessly into the room. Piano notes render with both a firm strike and ambient reverberation. Soprano vocal crescendos may coax forth a shiver down the spine, but never a wince from stridency.

The upper and lower frequency extremes sandwich an equally beguiling midrange, which frankly left me stunned. Vocals like k.d. lang's on *Ingenue* have such a natural and unveiled sound, it's easy to be immersed in an experience like having a private concert. While each breath a vocalist takes can be perceived due to the RS3i's command of subtle audio cues, that detail never distracts from the bigger-picture performance.

Imaging through the RS3i speakers is among the very best I've experienced. When placed correctly, the speakers manage the feat of wrapping audio elements far beyond the speaker boundaries. That, combined with the realism of the RS3i's sound, admittedly caused me on occasion to twist my head in surprise toward a stray, unexpected sound projected into the periphery of the room. *(continued)*

The RS3is blend in with the soundstage so well, with eyes closed and a finger extended, I have difficulty pinpointing the speaker bodies. Sound seemingly floats around the speakers, rather than emitting from them. Sonic elements extend into the distance behind the rear room wall, up to the ceiling, and wrap well into the room. It's a truly immersive and three-dimensional experience that left me tethered to the listening seat for many late night RS3i listening sessions.

Summing Strengths

To answer the question posed at the beginning of this review: Yes, my socks were blown off by the RS3i, landing in a smoldering heap in the corner of the room. The RS3is are among the most engaging speakers I have experienced.

I remain adamant there is no such thing as a universally "best speaker" since listener preferences, upstream equipment, and room acoustics all weigh into the equation. Taking those variables into account in my own case, I have not yet encountered another speaker that achieves such a Goldilocks-like "just right" balance for my own sonic preferences. RS3is offer a perfect combination of detail, soundstaging, speed, realism, and overall musicality. It's a fantastic achievement.

In short, these speakers are keepers. If you are in the lucky position of having \$20k in your speaker budget, I cannot recommend the GamuT RS3i speakers highly enough. Be sure to put the GamuT RS3i on your shortlist for audition. I purchased the review pair so the socks will have to wait. ●

**GamuT RS3
Loudspeakers
MSRP: \$19,900/pair**

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audio racks, Coffman
Labs Equipment Footers,
AudioQuest Jitterbug,
Atomic Audio Labs Mac
Mini stand

LIVING UP TO THE MONIKER

Rotel's RC-1590 Control Preamplifier

By Mark Marcantonio

Those with more than one or two sources are not always served by modern preamplifiers. In many cases, gone are the onboard phono stage and headphone amplifier sections, yet with the resurgence of both the headphone and turntable, there is a comeback of old-school thinking to be sure. Rotel takes it further, incorporating a DAC and streamer under the hood of their RC-1590 Control Preamplifier. This is a 21st century component, designed from the ground up to keep up with future system expansion!



The RC-1590 offers no fewer than 14 inputs; it accommodates 3 Toslink, 3 Coax, PC-USB, aptX Bluetooth, USB (iPod/Phone), Ethernet, phono, CD, tuner, and auxiliary. Yet with all this flexibility, the RC-1590's front panel remains understated and simple.

Removing the top cover reveals how Rotel's reputation for building top quality gear has made them a quiet legend in the audio world. The RC-1590 combines a tidy component layout with robust mechanical construction, including heavy

duty input connectors. Larger, weightier premium audio cables will not weaken the connections in this preamplifier over time, leading to circuit failure, something often overlooked at this price point.

Plug your pod right in

An Apple certified USB port on the front panel gives you the option to use your iPod/Pad/Phone as an easy-to-access digital source. Whether you have a new or old "iDevice," front panel access makes it easy for

everyone in the family to enjoy your hifi system, whether playing stored favorites, or streaming from a variety of sources.

Cranking the volume on the bass riff opening of R.E.M.'s "Belong" sets the stage for this review. The RC-1590's onboard DAC section provides way more resolution than the iPod's analog outputs; this becomes clearly evident while listening to the separation between lead guitar and vocals. It only takes a few more tracks to hear what you've been missing.

Rotel has always produced solid-state gear that provides a natural tonal balance. The RA-1520 integrated amp and matching RCD-1520 CD player that I reviewed in issue 23 still brings fond memories, and the RC-1590 continues the tradition with upper and lower registers that are neither exaggerated nor limited. George Winston's arrangements in his *Forest* album flow with ease, with no sharpness in the digital version of the opening track "Tamarack Pines" whatsoever.

The smooth output from the multitude of digital inputs is translated into analog via the on-board AKM 32-bit/768kHz DAC chip. While not of the caliber of a more expensive standalone DAC, it covers the bases. And its being all on one chassis makes the need for – and clutter of – an out-board unit unnecessary for someone purchasing a preamplifier at this price point. The RC-1590 is a fantastic anchor for a versatile system, handling PCM and DSD files with equal efficiency. *(continued)*

What's on the menu

The menus for drilling down into each input to set controls is logical and intuitive. Accessing the four horizontal buttons (MENU, +, -, ENTER) under the volume control customizes each source, along with output, including tone bypass, which is “on” in the factory settings. Each can be adjusted temporarily or as a permanent setting. The option of assigning each output as variable or fixed adds additional flexibility.

This receiver also accommodates the increased popularity of Bluetooth streaming, offering the aptX codec to please the Android users as well as the Apple brethren. I notice some compression when listening to non-audio-ophile fare, but not enough to put the phone down and search out a lossless version via a hardwired connection. Again, the balance between performance and functionality that Rotel provides is spot on; just press the BT button and go.

Back to the DAC

Spinning “I Miss You” and “All I Ask” from Adele’s 25, the RC-1590 does show the limits of the AKM built-in DAC architecture. Adele’s vocals sound two-dimensional and overly processed in comparison to when they’re played through my reference Simaudio 300D and Oppo HA-1 DACs, but it took some pretty soaring vocal tracks to reveal the limits of the 1590s onboard capabilities. *(continued)*



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The RC-1590 displays the bit rate of various digital material; the recognition speed is instantaneous. The Linn sampler *24 Bits of Christmas* jazz collection sounds very sensual and smooth via the AKM DAC chip. Tommy Smith's saxophone digs out the soulful melancholy at 24/96 in "Sophisticated Lady." The extra air in Claire Martin's breathy rendition of "Some Children See Him" lifts the vocals into communal experience. Jumping from 96 to 192 is equally rewarding and the RC-1590 gets out of the way of the music handily.

Plugging in the latest generation of the original Apple TV via optical input is a snap, no need

to restart all the equipment in the chain a few times to properly sync. This is a one-and-done effort. Once again, kudos to the Rotel engineers for making sure the digital linkage works without hiccup. PCM information can be decoded up to 24/192. Signal dropouts are non-existent while playing Christmas music courtesy of the Apple TV Music app.

Additional versatility

Amplifier pairing can be done either by XLR or RCA cables. If your budget doesn't allow the purchase of the matching RB-1590, the neutral tonal balance of this pre-amplifier leaves you a plethora of choices, tube or solid state.

For this review I used the RCA out jacks while listening through my Vista Audio integrated tube amplifier, or a borrowed Musical Fidelity M1PWR class D amp. The RC-1590 sounds clean through either unit, though the tubes add a bit extra lushness to a variety of music.

It's the little touches that impress with Rotel gear. In the case of the RC-1590, it's the recognition of providing owner with either a fixed or dynamic IP setting for Ethernet usage. Updating the RC-1590 software is quite straightforward, or plug in the Ethernet cable (if you're not already using it), scan through the display menu and select update. It's that simple.

Spinning several LPs via my Rega RP1/Ortofon Super OM40 table and cartridge, the RC-1590 MM phono section, much like the DAC section, performs just fine by itself. A 2L recording of Living by pianist Jan Gunnar Hoff reveals some nice residual artifacts in the upper mid keys. The bottom sounds a bit flat, as reverberation of bass notes don't project out into my room. On the other hand, the upper registers give no hint of shrillness.

Even the Rotel's remote scores big points. The RR-AX100 remote breaks up the controls into five sections via different shaped buttons, making for easy navigation by sight or touch – even though all the buttons are the same color sans the red OFF in the top left corner. White name, numerals, or symbols are easily identifiable.

Headphone output is solid, with the Rotel catering to the latest phones more easily with a 1/8" mini jack. The KEF M500 on-ear, as well as a vintage pair of budget Sennheisers, match up quite well. Therefore, the RC-1590 will do quite well in either escaping to or from the music if sharing the room.



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design tenets. While other expensive speakers are seemingly “redesigned” every couple of years to turn new sales, the Seven has been in production continually since 2009 and updated just once. Model Seven owners can upgrade to Mk II status so **our best customers aren't left behind**. The Seven's legacy of Best of Show awards over the years is legend, and the Mk II earned four such designations in its first year. Yes, a super speaker in every sense of the word, designed and built to last.

Buy Vandersteen, Leave “Upgrade-Itis” Behind. When all of the information from the amplifier is faithfully retrieved, especially in the crucial time domain, you hear that something is missing. That something is the distortion of the original signal

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that leads to the inevitable feeling audiophiles experience called “upgrade-itis.” Yes, moving up the Vandersteen line always offers more performance and ever greater musical pleasure, as will

any other true upgrade to your system. But owning Vandersteens and upgrading **because you love the way your music sounds** is so much better than swapping out your gear because you *can't stand* the way your music sounds.

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REVIEW



Additional Listening

Going all the way back with Rotel to their earliest pieces with black faceplates, the RC-1590 is a welcome treat to revisit, now with the silver livery. Using this preamplifier with the matching RB-1590 amplifier makes for a formidable combination and my review of the power amplifier is almost finished.

Good as you'd expect an all-Rotel combination to sound, as Marc hints, this preamplifier is indeed compatible with other brands equally well. A week-end listening session with Conrad-Johnson, vintage Audio Research, PrimaLuna, Simaudio and Nagra power amplifiers all proved the RC-1590 up to task.

Moving upscale a bit with the phonostage to the VPI Classic 1 and Ortofon 2M Black is impressive; proving to be quiet, dynamic and engaging. Like 'em or lump 'em, (count me in the “like 'em” category) there's a bass and treble control at your disposal, and that can go a long way towards making marginal albums much more palatable.

The Rotel RC-1590 combines great sonics, build and convenience all in a package that is unbeatable for well under two grand. And, you can still get one in black. A perfect recipient of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016.

— Jeff Dorgay

Rotel RC-1590 Preamplifier
\$1,790

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Rega RP-1/
Ortofon OM40, VPI Classic 1/
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Paganini Transport

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M1PWR, CJ LP125sa+, ARC
D-79, Nagra 300i

Speakers Penaudio Cenya,
Quad 2812, Graham LS5/9

Cable Cardas Clear Light

Quad ESL-2812

Yes, That Good

By Jeff Dorgay

Remember the first time you got a ride in a really cool car? Sat in the front seat of a roller coaster and held your arms up all the way down the hill? It changed you forever, didn't it? At the risk of sounding overly sensational, the Quad experience is the same way, whether it's the original Quad 57 or the current 2812 you see here. There is something so special about the way these speakers render music; there is nothing else quite like it, and once you've experienced a pair of Quads, they will alter your perception of what recorded music can sound like. No, these aren't the world's best speakers, whatever the hell that is, but they are one of the world's most unique speakers.

For those not familiar, the Quad 2812 is an ESL, or electrostatic loudspeaker. To simplify, instead of using cone woofers and tweeters, which pump in and out, the Quad uses a series of four panels, consisting of a fine, Mylar-like membrane that is coated with a conductive material and stretched tightly. This large driven area only has to move a very slight distance to move air and make music, and is between a pair of transparent wire grids that are charged with 5,000 volts to push and pull said diaphragm back and forth instead of the magnet structure in a traditional cone driver. Yes, that means that you do have to keep these powered up and plugged into the AC line at all times.





The resulting driver has an incredibly quick transient response, and Quad claims it is the only speaker that can accurately reproduce a 1kHz square wave accurately – a tough feat. Test tones aside, they do an amazing job at reproducing musical notes with an extremely low distortion.

Those interested in learning more about the Quad ESL, the British company that produces them, and nearly every bit of Quad trivia known to man should consider Ken Kessler's excellent book, *Quad: The Closest Approach*. This extensive volume will tell you everything you need to know and then some, adding great historical photos of the factory, products and people behind Quad.

Today's Quad

A few years ago when Quad moved some of their manufacturing from the UK to China there were a few quality control issues, more related to shipping than anything, with units arriving in less than perfect shape. This has all been sorted out, and today's speakers arrive perfectly packaged, with a superb instruction manual to boot.

Listening to Crowded House's "Fall at Your Feet," a tune I've heard a million times before, feels brand new, revealing minutiae I've never heard on this track with any of the other speakers at my disposal. If you've spent any time at all in the world of audiophilia, especially around those of us who have been here a while, chances are good you've had to listen to *someone* go on and on about the magic midrange of Quads. This is the good stuff; the 2812 delivers voices with such ease along with a level of tonal saturation that goes a long way to convince you that you are listening to the real thing.

Springsteen's voice on *Tunnel of Love* achieves the same effect, with his vocals floating between the speakers, completely disappearing, yet when played through an excellent amplification chain, feels correct in size as well. *(continued)*

This is a very different effect from the one Magnepan owners (especially owners of the big ones) enjoy, where the soundstage is nearly as transparent, but lacking the sheer coherence the Quads achieve, while at the same time painting a sonic image that is immersive, but so much larger than life – it is fun but not believable.

The MartinLogan electrostatic speakers take a different path, with most of their ESL panels mated to a dynamic woofer. MartinLogan does this better than anyone, and their speakers (long a *TONEAudio* reference and favorite) can play Metallica, but they lack the last bit of coherence and midrange transparency that only the Quad has.

Back to the source

If you've had a chance to hear the Quads here in the States at a recent hifi show via their current importer, MoFi Distribution, with various AVID turntables and Koetsu cartridges, you know this is a lovely setup indeed. These speakers offer so much fine detail without punishing your ears in any way, it's so easy to get completely lost in the music being played, and that is their magic.

Spinning the MoFi remaster of Los Lobos' *Kiko* is close to unbelievable, as is my test pressing of Aimee Mann's *Lost in Space*. Luscious is more like it. As with the original 57s, the more space you can give the Quads between the rear walls the better.

The Quad 2812s are not merciless in their rendition of recorded music, as some speakers with a tipped-up high end can be. They offer such a clean window into what is recorded though, that these \$13k/pair speakers are worthy of the world's finest electronics and source components to drive them. Audiophiles with multiple formats and pressings be warned: you've met your match here. These speakers reveal the tiniest bits of detail, so you may never leave the listening chair if this is your game. *(continued)*

Appearances can be deceptive.

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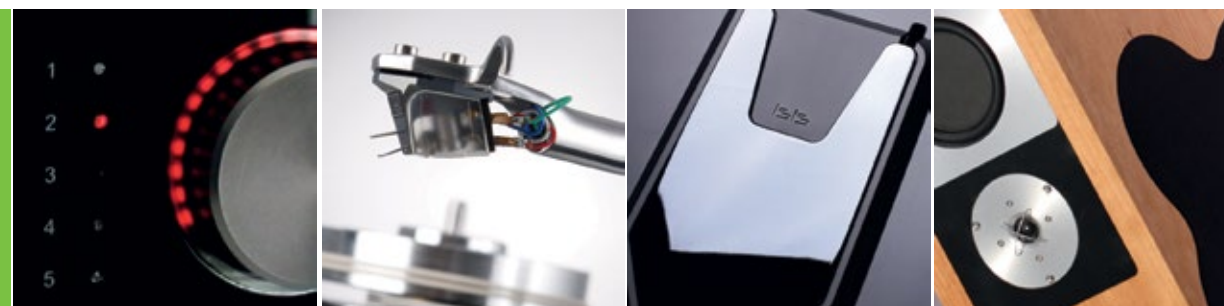
Quite simply, if it doesn't sound better, it doesn't happen. (If it does sound better, but is considered 'impossible,' they'll figure out how to do it anyway. There's a very good reason the company's named Rega Research).

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

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



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Again, the better your software, the further the Quads will let you glimpse into your recordings without squinting.

They can't do everything, but ...

Changing the fare to Led Zeppelin pushes the Quads outside their comfort zone. Though the current 2812s are more dynamic than any Quad before it, they still won't really do justice to heavy rock music at a major sound level. You wouldn't try to win a burnout contest against a Hemi Challenger with a Lotus Elise either. But if you know anything about Quads, you aren't expecting this.

That said, these Quads play at much more realistic levels than my 57s or 63s ever did, making them incredibly friendly with everything but the heaviest rock and electronica tracks. Because they play within the range they do at such an incredibly low level of distortion, it's easy to be fooled into thinking they aren't playing that loud, until someone calls from the other room that the house is burning down around you.

Don't discount the amp

If you've had a great experience with the Quads, pay careful attention to the amplifier used in the demo. As they're able to handle a maximum voltage swing of 40 volts, you might think that tubes are the way to roll here, but not always. To get the best they can deliver, plan on auditioning a *lot* of amplifiers. If you have a fair amount of air around the speakers and the sound is flat or constricted in any way, it's the amplifier.

A perennial favorite with the 57s, Eve Anna Manley's tiny Mahi

monoblocks, with 40 watts of EL-84 power is a sweet combination, painting a lush, dynamic and dimensional portrait. The latter is the key; some claim the Quads do not present a stereo image with much depth. This means you have the wrong amplifier. Get the right amplifier and the heavens part with these speakers: it's like sitting inside an eight-foot tall pair of headphones when you get it right.

Though incredibly counterintuitive, the massive Pass Xs300 monoblocks are absolutely dreamy, not only providing tons of grip throughout the frequency range, but the best bass response we've ever experienced with these speakers. One fan on our Facebook page was concerned that we would "totally melt the Quads with those amps," but it's all good. We were able to achieve nearly the same result with the \$6,595 Pass XA 30.8 class-A power amplifier. Matching up with our award-winning Audio Research GSPre and the new Rossini DAC from dCS made for a \$60k system that we'd put up against anything at any price. (Provided we aren't playing Zeppelin – ha!)

A few things that we expected greatness from (a pair of McIntosh MC30s, a restored Dynaco Stereo 70 and a pair of PrimaLuna ProLogue Monoblocks) just weren't a great fit. Neither was Vinnie Rossi's new LIO amplifier (which is positively brilliant on every other speaker we've tried it with) or our Devialet 200. Not on a boat, not on a goat.

So, if you have to have a pair of Quad 2812s, be prepared to do a bit of experimenting, but that's what this pursuit is all about, isn't it?

Final thoughts, tips and tricks

Though the 2812s use only a tiny bit of power, they still benefit from clean AC and you don't have to go crazy here. Merely stepping up to a pair of modest upgraded power cords from IsoTek and their \$999 power strip gives the Quads a slightly cleaner overall sound. In the case you don't feel like going this far, even putting them on their own dedicated circuit does nearly as much. Keep in mind that because these speakers are so resolving, your choice of speaker and system cables will be revealed rather quickly too, so along with the power amplifier, you may need to make a change here as well to get the last 5% of performance you desire.

As hinted at in the beginning of this review, the more space you can give these speakers, the better – and remember they radiate a lot of sound from the rear face of the panels, so careful experimentation with distance, toe-in, and rake angle will make massive differences in the end result. Just as your amplifier choice makes a difference, we suggest placing the speakers for a good blend of upper bass and lower midrange frequencies first and then fine tuning for the biggest soundstage you can achieve in all directions before you start swapping amplifiers or speaker cables.

Offering a much larger sweet spot than the original 57s, the 2812s still have a somewhat narrow window for the most engaging sound, so expect a dance between speaker placement and seating position. On the short wall in my 16 x 26 foot listening room, the 2812s ended up about five feet out in the room, with about 8 feet between them and the awesome-o GamuT Lobster Chair about 7 feet back. Sheer bliss. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Properly configured, the Quad 2812s deliver a stunning presentation that few other speakers can match when they are operated within their capabilities. But be warned, should you be converted once you hear it, there is no turning back. No other speaker will do and that's why so many fans of this marque still have their Quads.

If you haven't spent time with a pair of Quad loudspeakers, you owe it to yourself to at least have the experience, even if this is where you don't decide to hang your hat. It's an awesome ride you'll never forget. ●

The Quad ESL-2812 speaker
MSRP: \$13,000/pair

MANUFACTURER

Quad Electroacoustics Ltd

CONTACT

www.quadhifi.co.uk

(factory)

www.mofidistribution.com

(US distributor)

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

AVID Acutus Reference SP/SME V/
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Ryan R630

Nailing the Fundamentals

By Jeff Dorgay

With cars costing as much as houses used to, and speakers costing as much as cars do these days, it's really refreshing to see a company that produces a solid floorstanding speaker that doesn't cost crazy money. Back in 1978, a pair of JBL L-100s set you back about \$700, translating to about three grand in today's money. Though the orange grills looked awesome, sonically the L-100s were no big deal.

Neophyte hifi reviewers love to exhaust their adjective gland, throwing out violent superlatives when describing components, especially when it comes to loudspeakers. Brand X speakers annihilate brand Y ... destroy, brand Y – or anything else, for that matter. The \$4,995 per pair Ryan R630 speakers do not pillage, plunder or maim other comparably priced speakers, but they *do* provide a very natural, lifelike presentation of music without much fanfare, and that's a lovely thing. The wider your musical taste the more you will enjoy these speakers. Thanks to wide dispersion, frequency response and power handling capability, you can play anything from the thrashiest metal, the most bass-heavy hip-hop, to your favorite string quartet with ease.



These are solid, un-narcissistic speakers that go about the business of recreating music in your room, not drawing attention to themselves due to a bizarre shape or a bright automotive paint color. As someone who was a happy owner of a pair of bright orange KEF Blades for years, I've got nothing against that, but it's not for everyone. The Ryan R630s are straightforward, rectangular boxes, nicely finished in a few different shades (oak, walnut or cherry veneer with clear, black and red finishes) with black grilles. You won't see these in the Museum of Modern Art, but I'm betting you will see more than a few pairs of these passed on from generation to generation. There's a reason for 5-series BMW's having 250,000 miles on the clock while Ferraris of the same vintage have 2,500 miles on them. The Ryan R630s are a speaker to use and enjoy every day.

The Ryan brothers designed and built these speakers in California, and they've gone back to the basics with all of their speakers. The stout R630s are a full-range three-way design, featuring a pair of 6 1/2-inch woofers, a 4-inch midrange and a 1-inch soft dome tweeter whose silk dome comes from Japan. All the drivers have been designed by the folks at Ryan and are built to their specifications, a common practice for all but a few of the world's largest speaker manufacturers.

Some of the best touches, like the binding posts and the veneers, can easily be seen; however, the high quality parts used in the crossover networks remain hidden. Yet they all add up to solid construction and solid value. A quick knuckle wrap of the cabinet is steadfast proof of the effort the Ryan team puts forward.



Get a friend to join the party

Don't let the nondescript shape fool you; the R630s weigh almost 90 pounds each. Unless you have major core strength, get a buddy to help set them up. With a rear-firing bass port, these speakers need to be a few feet out from the rear wall to give the most even bass response, so plan your listening space accordingly. The soft dome tweeter is very good off-axis, so super precise placement is not as critical as it is with other designs. The R630s sound nearly as good sitting on the far end of the couch or off on the floor as they do in the sweet spot.

Once bass is optimized in your room, the only other thing to make sure you get right is the tweeter placement. Ryan suggests tweeters in for best imaging, and ignoring the instructions for the sake of investigation reveals a very diffuse soundstage with tweeters out. We achieved the most cohesive sound field with just a couple degrees of toe-in and spikes installed in our listening room. An afternoon of geeking out will improve imaging and upper bass performance somewhat, but unlike speakers that require incredibly precise setup, the R630s get you there easily, and those with modest Jedi skills can get great sound right now.

The R630s did not take terribly long to settle in. A few solid days of playing at a moderately loud volume got the job done. These speakers don't sound overly veiled or stiff out of the box, but 50–100 hours on the clock makes for better integration between the four drivers, especially in the upper bass/lower midrange region. It's smooth sailing from there on. *(continued)*

You need more than a quick listen

The R630s are so natural in their presentation, a cursory listen will not produce an “a-ha” response like a few of the zootier speakers out there. Forget the female vocal records and drum solos. The “a-ha” moment comes after about 10 or 20 of your favorite tracks, with music that you know intimately. You’ll come away highly impressed with the R630s.

Balance is the word here. That may not make the R630s sound like as much of a superhero speaker to some of you, yet that’s why you see so many one-year-old speakers for sale on Audiogon. Think about it. How many times have you been enamored with a speaker after a quick demo, only to shell out your hard-earned cash and be disappointed weeks or months later? I’ve done it too, I feel your pain.

Where the ProAc D48Rs [also reviewed in this issue and costing twice as much] deliver a more laser-like focus in terms of imaging and placement, music tends to unfurl from the R630s. The soundstage presented is large, but it feels more like listening to a symphony orchestra: broader strokes that are slightly more diffuse, unlike a studio rock record where things have a distinct placement. The Ryan 630s offer a huge helping of the musical fundamentals without effort.

Even though some highly produced classic rock LPs from the ’70s and ’80s reveal a more homogenous presentation which will either appeal to you or not, don’t get the opinion, however, that the R630 is rolled off or lacking in high frequency extension. Cymbals and percussion sound natural, not exaggerated. Moving back to the 21st century, spinning the excellent collaboration between David Byrne and St. Vincent reveals a powerful, well-controlled low end on the opening track, “Who.” The large ball of sound that makes this record fun is well represented and both vocalists come through with authority. On most tracks, whether Annie Clark or David Byrne front the song, the other is mixed right behind and the the R630s keep things well-sorted, and they always do a fantastic job at unraveling complex material without losing focus.

While Ryan doesn’t have an exact spec for the bass response, a quick run-through of our trusty *Stereophile Test CD* reveals solid output with the 40 and 31.5Hz tracks, with a pretty rapid fall off on the 25 and 20hz tracks; very respectable for a five thousand dollar pair of speakers. The quality of the bass present is equally high, and all but those craving wall-rattling low frequencies should not require a subwoofer. Whether listening to Snoop Dogg or Stanley Clark, output is solid, quick and well-defined. (continued)



REVIEW

Thanks to an 88dB sensitivity spec, the R630s don't need gobs of power to fill your listening room, but because they have a high degree of resolution, the better your components are, the better. They prove easy to drive with tube or solid state electronics, but we feel a high-quality, high-current solid state power amplifier not only gives them the last bit of bass grunt and control, but every bit of high frequency extension they are capable of as well.

Enthusiastically suggested

The Ryan R630s offer big performance and major value, enough to get our first Exceptional Value Award for 2016. In many respects, they may be a final destination speaker for someone building a system in the \$10k–\$30k range. ●

The Ryan R630
\$4,999/pair

MANUFACTURER

Ryan

CONTACT

www.ryanspeakers.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital source

Simaudio NEO 430HA
(also used as linestage)

Analog source

VPI Classic One/Eminent
Technology ET2.5/Ortofon
Cadenza Bronze

Phonostage

Audio Research PH8

Cable Cardas Clear

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A CLEAR ADVANTAGE

Going up the range with Nordost

By the TONE Staff

Other than fringy room treatments and other various bizarre system tweaks, nothing arouses more anger, controversy and naysaying than the thought of cable, especially premium audio cables. Those subscribing to the religion of ABX testing pretty much claim everything sounds the same and wire is “hoo-hah.”

However, one of the areas most often overlooked in the reproduction chain is the cable carrying the delicate signal from a phono cartridge – especially a moving coil cartridge, typically only generating two to five *ten thousandths of a volt*. So, if there ever was a place where a meter of wire could make a difference, this is it.



Should you be a cable skeptic or cable grumpy, what we’ve got to say probably won’t change your mind one way or another. After spending an amazingly disproportionate amount of time on this review, the differences between these cables jump right out at even the uninitiated. While the \$4,800 price tag on the Valhalla 2 cable is probably out of the range of sensibility for most audio enthusiasts, it will make a sizeable difference on a really high end system, and in the context of a \$50k–\$100k system, the improvement offered by a \$4,799 cable is worth the expense.

Because we had a similar experience a couple of years ago when re-cabling our dCS Paganini digital player with about \$10k worth of Nordost cable, which is still in place today, trying them again for a range of tonearm cables made perfect sense. Our only complaint is that the gap between the \$839 Frey 2 cable and the \$4,799 Valhalla cable is rather large and exclusionary. Something around two grand would make sense.

The flavor of cable you prefer is, or course, personal choice. As one of the industry’s premium cable vendors, (much like AudioQuest, Cardas, Kimber or WireWorld) what we enjoyed most about this exercise with Nordost was that as we went up the range, the level of music revealed did increase. Whether the extra expense is worth it *to you* is a value judgment we can’t make *for you*. I have cycling fanatic friends who spend thousands to save grams of weight on their competition bikes.

And while I think they are crazy, because I am equally crazy about hifi, I get it completely and laud their passion. The same applies here, as we feel there is no absolute value judgment. Nordost fans should be able to go to their favorite dealer and get a few of these to take home for a trial, and that’s the only way you’ll ever really get it.

So to make this clear, while we have always found premium cable to offer an improvement in an audio system, we suggest you optimize every other setup parameter in your system before spending your hard-earned cash on wire. There’s nothing worse than spending big bucks on a tonearm cable only to find out that your table isn’t level! So let’s proceed, shall we?

The test platform

AVID’s Volvere SP, with SME V arm and Koetsu Onyx Platinum, proved to be a perfect platform for the test as it is in use every day in our publisher’s reference system — and while a high performing combination, is not a six figure table by any means. At the end of the test, our modded Technics SL-1200 with used SME 309 arm and Ortofon 2M Black was a great “real world” table, representative of what is available to the average audiophile for a few thousand dollars.

At the end of the tests, just to push the boundaries further, we installed a \$379 Denon DL-103r cartridge on the AVID/SME table just to see if an upgraded tonearm cable still makes sense. Even with a budget cartridge and even at this level, the differences between all four cables were nearly as apparent as they were with the \$10k Koetsu. *(continued)*

The SME arms were chosen both because we are intimately familiar with them, and because if there ever was a great tonearm that needed a better cable, SME is the one. Using VanDenHul wire in the stock form, this cable is notoriously dark. The nearly \$40,000 SME 30 turntable with SME V arm will benefit tremendously from even a modest tonearm cable upgrade.

The rest of the system is also very familiar: the GamuT RS5 loudspeakers, powered by the Audio Research GSPre and GS150 (our product of the year for 2015) and the Pass Labs XP-25 phonostage. While the rest of the reference system is cabled with Cardas Clear, for the purpose of this review, all components were connected with Nordost Frey 2 interconnects, power cords and speaker cables, so we were working in an all-Nordost test environment. Again, after all the test listening was completed, the Cardas wire was returned to the system, and the differences between tonearm cables remained the same, so while your favorite Nordost retailer would love you to use all Nordost cable, you can start with one of their tonearm cables and achieve excellent results.

While a number of different, well-worn tracks were used during the course of the evaluation, five favorites from Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs were painstakingly listened to with all combinations as close to back-to-back as we

could. The two-input capability of the Pass XP-25 made it easy to change between two cables quickly to try and retain as much user memory as possible.

And to take things to their ultimate end and enrage a few more naysayers, all records were thoroughly cleaned with the VPI Cyclone RCM before each play, and then cycled through the Furutech De-Mag, insuring our getting the maximum amount of analog molecules to come through those tiny wires!

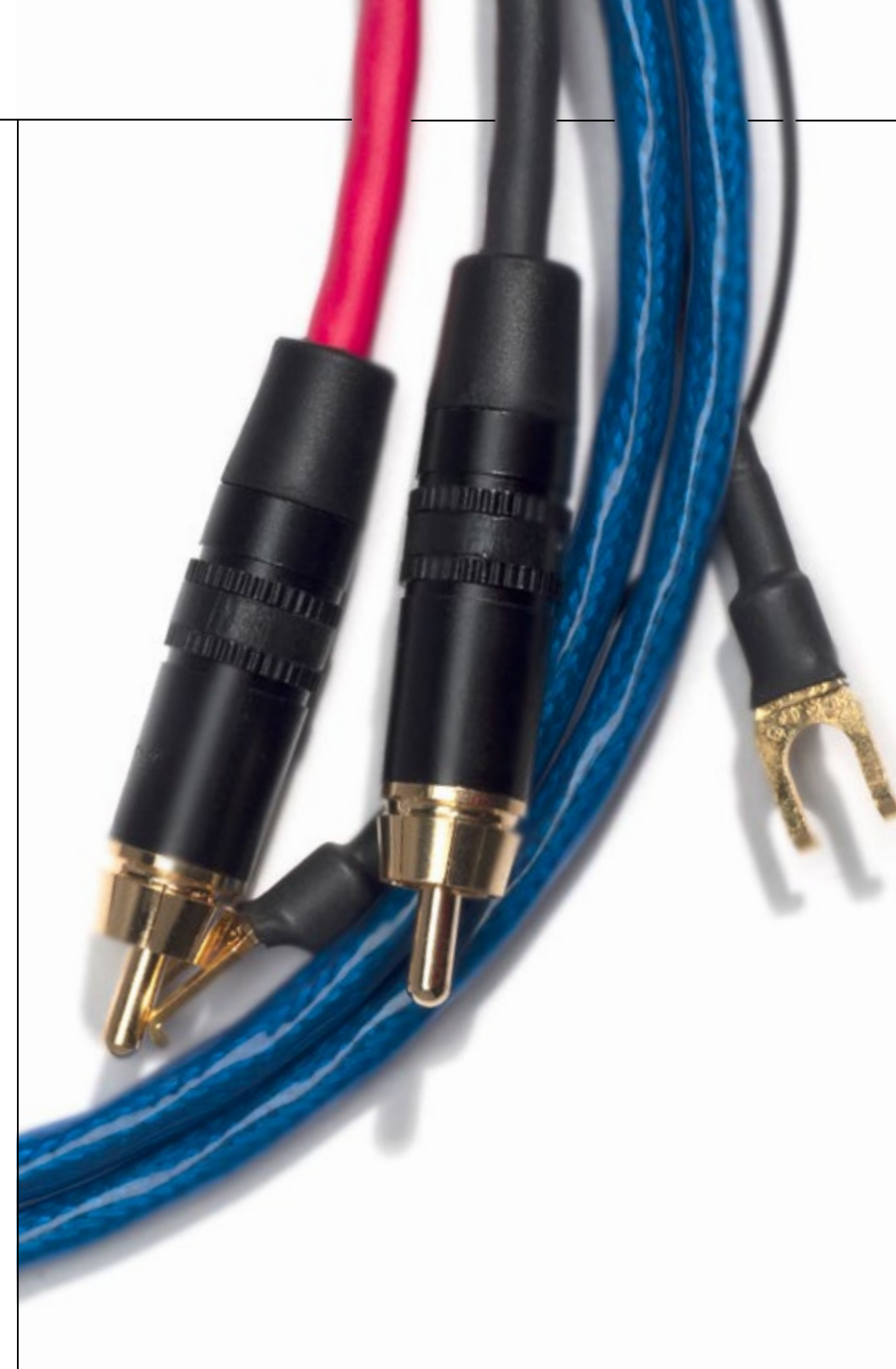
The main test tracks were as follows:
Lynyrd Skynyrd – “That Smell”
Traffic – “Low Spark of High Heeled Boys”
Rickie Lee Jones – “Easy Money”
Beck – “The Golden Age”
Madeleine Peyroux –
“Dance Me to the End of Love”

If you’re a believer in premium cable, then there’s a good chance you are an advocate of cable burn-in as well. Because tonearm cables carry such a faint signal, they tend to take more time to settle in than most. To accelerate this process somewhat, each cable got 500 hours of time via our Hagerman Audio Fry Baby, which takes the signal from a CD player or other high level source and drops it down to phono cartridge level, making it easy to burn in a tonearm cable with a cheap CD player set on repeat or a tuner. Each cable was given an initial listen, fresh out of the box with notes taken, and then revisited

after some hours were put on each.

To further this process, most Nordost dealers offer the use of their VIDAR device, which uses a broad frequency spectrum signal to burn cables in before you pick them up. We’ve had great luck with this process and highly suggest it, especially with a tonearm cable.

Here are our impressions, from least to most expensive. It’s worth mentioning that all models can be ordered terminated with straight or 90 degree angle DIN connectors, so they should work with any table and arm combination at your disposal. You can also order your Nordost tonearm cable with RCA or fully balanced XLR terminations on the other end. Those with a mega phonostage will be able to take full advantage of this slight advantage in wringing every last bit of information out of your grooves, but when you’re dealing with .5mv, why not go for it? Our experience with phonostages offering both balanced XLR and single-ended RCA inputs usually favor the balanced, in terms of the balanced option being slightly quieter, so choosing a Nordost tonearm cable will not hold you back. Should you make a drastic system change in the future, Nordost will re-terminate your cables to suit your current needs. Another great reason to purchase these products from a company with a major dealer network in place!



Blue Heaven

1.25m, \$399

Even a modest step up from the stock SME cable provides an improved musical conduit, and those wanting a quick fix will be well served here. The difference is immediate, on a number of fronts, particularly as regards the cloudiness that is now beginning to dissipate from the overall window.

Blue Heaven is constructed to the same high level of quality that Nordost’s top of the line ODIN cable enjoys. Utilizing silver-plated 99.9999% pure solid core OFC conductors, they claim a “velocity of propagation” of 85%. Regardless of how this measurement is achieved, the sheer speed that Nordost cables are famous for comes through in their entry level cable, with the music played having a much more lively feel.

Going through all five test tracks as well as a number of other favorites again bears out the initial impressions. The Blue Heaven cable opens up the soundstage somewhat and brings more extension to the HF spectrum without being grainy. The Skynyrd track is probably the dirtiest of the group, yet the layered guitars come through well-defined, with noticeable delineation between the individual tracks, and the end-of-the-track banter has more clarity as well. We also noticed on a number of classical tracks that the piano has a much larger, more realistic feel than it did with the stock cable.

The only detriment from the stock cable is a result of the fog dissipating. Going back to the stock cable now reveals a bit of mid-bass porkiness that some may actually prefer, but it is easy to see how the SME tonearms have gotten an ill-deserved reputation for being “woody” sounding. It’s the cable, along with an overzealous use of tonearm damping fluid — but that’s another story.

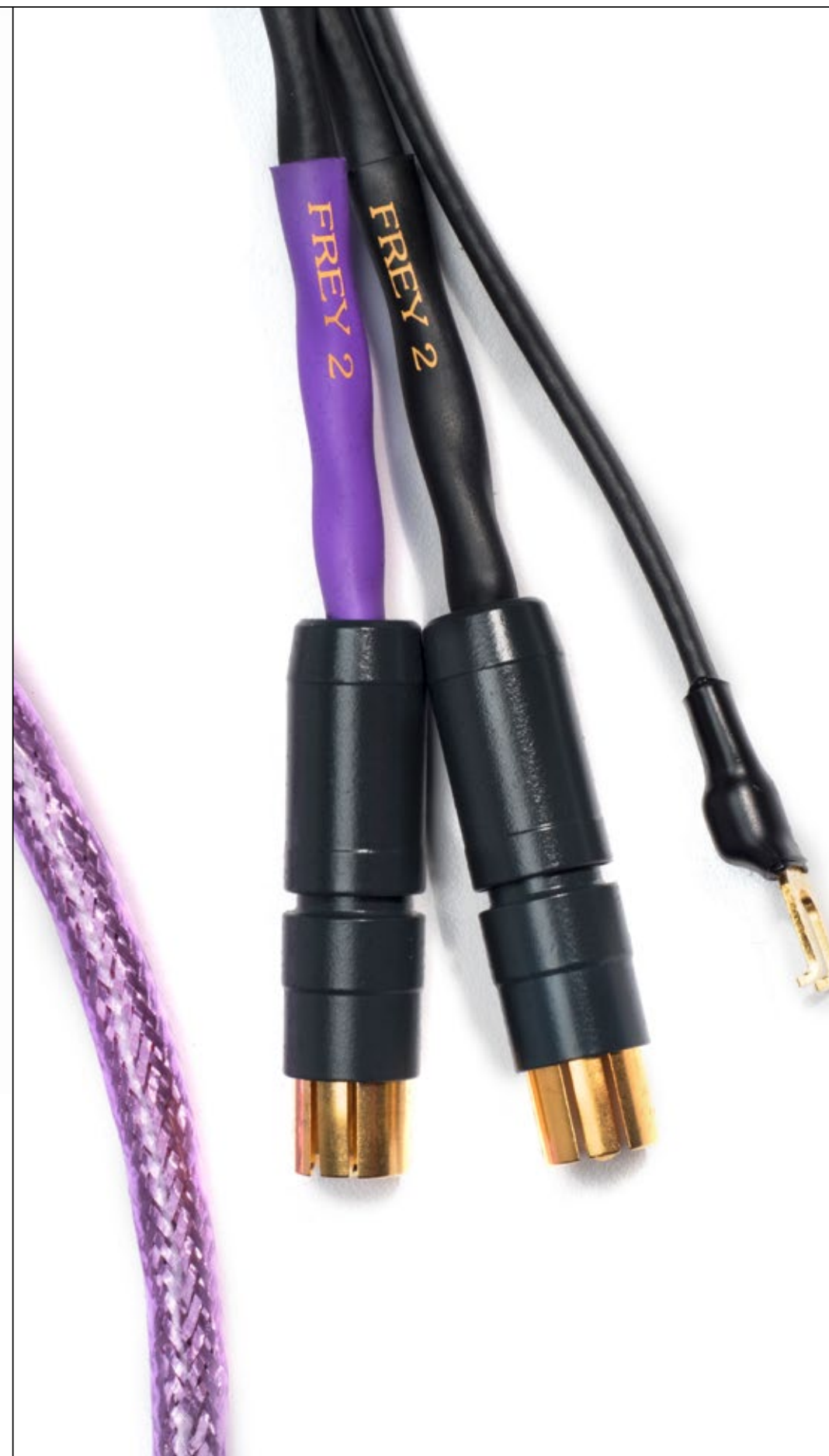


Heimdall 2

1.25m, \$659

Big jump in clarity here. The fast, well-delineated Nordost sound is here in abundance, just more of it. For those wanting a major analog improvement without spending a fortune, this is your cable. In the past, we have always suggested the \$700 Furutech AG-12, but the Heimdall 2 really unmasks the analog picture in a way we never previously thought possible.

The overall soundstage got so much bigger, going from the Blue Heaven to the Heimdall 2, with an increase in LF weight, that it's easy to justify another \$250. Further listening after the first blush of the bigger, weightier presentation also reveals less grain in the high frequencies as well. Going off the established paths to a few violin-heavy tracks illustrates this quickly and easily. Classical music lovers will really appreciate this cable, thanks to its tonal purity.



Frey 2

1.25m, \$839

This one was a bit tougher to discern, but repeated listening sessions where we swapped cables without telling the audience was going on revealed the same comments: a deeper and somewhat taller presentation was observed, though the tonality difference between the Heimdall and Frey cables was tough to tell in our setup. However, returning to the stock SME cable was pretty shocking, the soundstage now collapsing dramatically and the overall sonic picture extremely cloudy.

Listening to some really bass-heavy tracks from Daft Punk, Massive Attack and Kraftwerk through the SME V/Koetsu and switching quickly back to the Heimdall cable definitely hands the edge to the Heimdall. Those listening to a lot of chamber music and vocals, or those with a system having less than major bass extension might not notice the difference between the two cables. All of the improvements provided by the Heimdall were also available with the Frey. So perhaps it's just a question of red or purple?

Valhalla 2

1.25m, \$4,799

That's not a typo. Nearly five grand for a tonearm cable. This is the big league, considering a lot of people don't belly up to \$5k for their entire turntable. As much as haters love to hate the high dollar wire, the Valhalla 2 delivers more music than most, and I shudder to think what more their \$10,000 Odin 2 offers.

Expectation bias might lead you to expect too much or too little, but this cable is damn amazing. Is it \$4,000 more amazing than the Frey 2? In our publisher's reference system with the \$10,000 Koetsu Jade Platinum, hell yes. Moving the SME V arm to the top of the range Acutus Reference SP table, with the Valhalla 2 now an integral component in an almost \$80,000 analog front end, it's a no brainer. Just like the experience we had recabling our dCS Paganini stack with \$10k worth of Nordost cable, noting a major difference, the same holds true here. Keeping that in mind, the cost of the Valhalla 2 is really only adding 5% to the total cost of the front end and it easily reveals 100% more musical information in every dimension. You might even call it a bargain, but wait until we get our Kevlar vests on please.

This is the analog magic that we audio writers are always preaching about. All the differences between the Valhalla 2, and for that matter all of the other tonearm cables on hand, ranging from about \$500 to \$2,500 were subtle, but added up made for a much more engaging analog experience, now much closer to what a master tape offers.

The Valhalla 2 is completely grain-free in its presentation, and where Nordost cables of older vintage have sounded a bit too forward and edgy at times; there is none of that here. This cable is a pure conduit in every way, and none of us were prepared (and a few of us really wanted to hate the damn thing) for the difference switching this one thing would change, actually transforming the experience.

Yes, \$4,799 is a staggering amount for a tonearm cable, but if you've already spent a huge pile of hundred dollar bills on your analog setup, we suggest trying a Valhalla 2 (or maybe even an Odin 2) before you step up to the next phono cartridge – this is that significant of an upgrade.



So, what have we learned?

As much as we all wanted to squeal to high heaven that a nearly \$5,000 tonearm cable was bullshit, it isn't. If you have the system to show it off, you will not be disappointed in the least if you purchase a Valhalla 2 tonearm cable. Even hooked up to our modest Technics 1200 table with used SME arm and Ortofon MM cartridge, the gap in performance between the Valhalla and Blue Heaven cables was staggering, but at that level a cable of this magnitude doesn't make sense.

The better news is that even the \$399 Blue Heaven cable will allow your turntable, tonearm and cartridge to reveal more music than it probably is now, and if you've made a cable upgrade at some point, either the Frey 2 or Heimhall 2 will give you a bump without breaking the bank. If you've got an SME table with the stock cable, run, don't walk, to your nearest Nordost dealer and snag one of these.

Like all the other Nordost cables we've had the pleasure to audition, they offer a linear increase in performance as you go up the range, and their products command decent value on the secondary market, so jumping up a click or two won't mean starting from ground zero again.

High performance audio cable is a sensitive subject, but should you be intrigued, Nordost products are supported by a number of great retailers the world over, so you should be able to get a good enough demonstration to decide if this is a route you'd like to explore. We've walked away from hundreds of hours of listening to not only be impressed, but to suggest them heartily. ●



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FROM THE WEB

Sonus faber Pryma

\$499 - \$549 (depending on
standard or carbon finish)
www.pryma.com

If you love the natural, organic sound of Sonus faber speakers and wondered what it would sound like to have headphones with similar voicing, your wait is over. The Pryma phones not only deliver the sonic elegance of Sonus faber speakers, they offer the same level of visual style of a Zegna suit or a pair of Prada shoes; or as the Italians say “bellissima.” In a world of headphones where most offerings range from pedestrian to nerdy, sometimes touching on sci-fi, the Pryma’s, with their elegant choice of materials are beyond bellissima. I don’t know what the Italian word for that is.

● We go further in depth here.

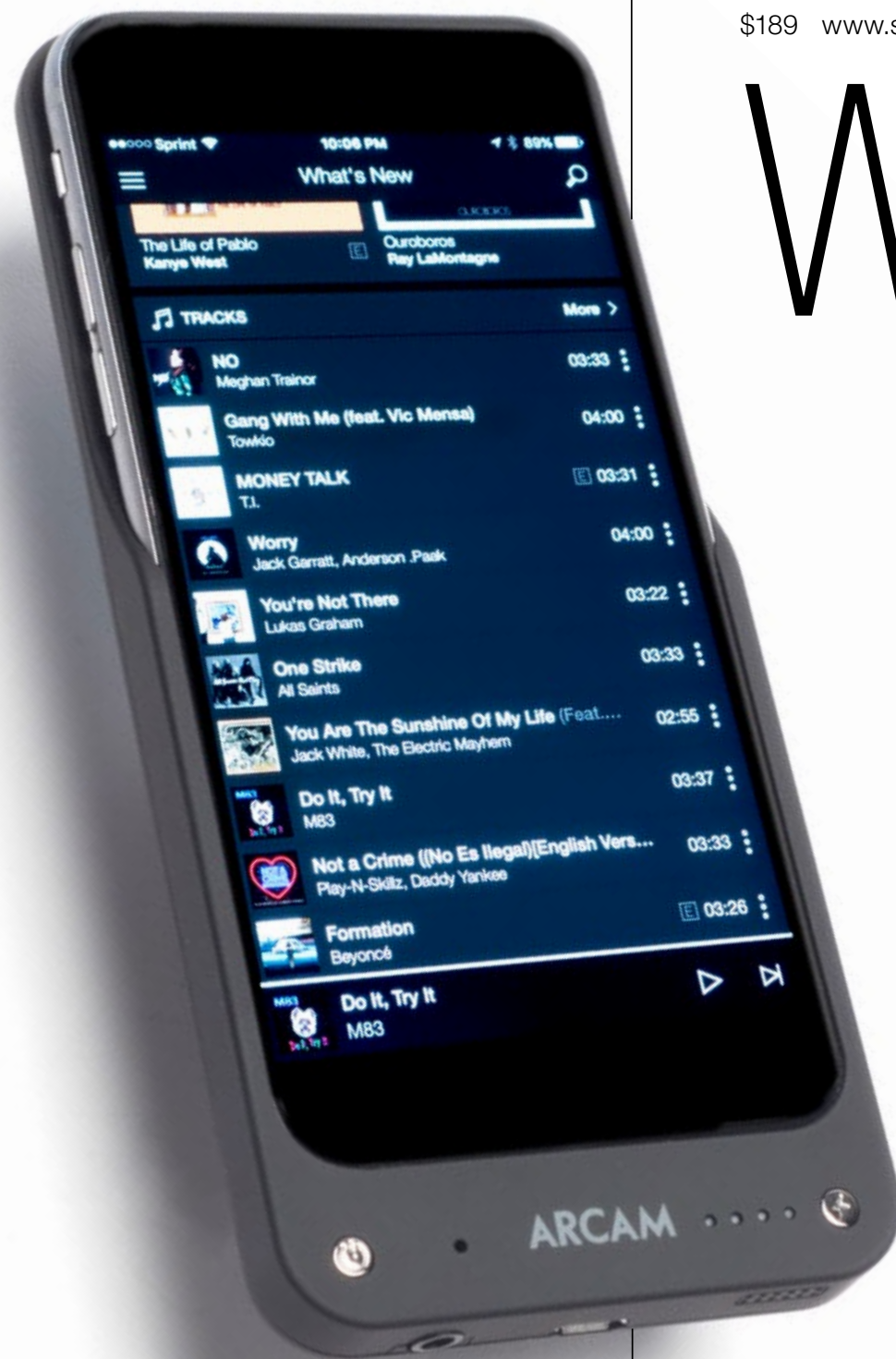
Arcam MusicBoost

\$189 www.soundorg.com

With so many external headphone amplifiers and DACs its not only easy to get lost in a sea of choices, but a number of options requiring external cables adding complexity and cost to the mix. Arcam's MusicBoost offers an excellent alternative to standard iPhone sound that is affordable and of high quality – just like everything else Arcam builds. For now, only the smaller form factor, standard iPhone 6 is supported, but after living with the MusicBoost for a little while, we truly hope this will become available for the larger 6+ model asap.

Weighing only 3.5 ounces (about 100 grams to our friends in the rest of the world) the MusicBoost serves three functions: high quality headphone amplifier, DAC via the lightening connector and a batter extender. It also makes for an understated, black case to protect your iPhone.

● Click here to share our enthusiasm.



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FROM THE WEB



Audio Engine HD6

\$749/pair
www.audioengineusa.com

The team at Audio Engine has moved upscale with their latest creation, the HD6. Exceeding their original designs by a considerable margin, the HD6 dispels the notion of AE speakers as mere desktop or computer speakers; these are true audiophile grade powered loudspeakers that need nothing more than perhaps a turntable and subwoofer (Their A8 makes a fantastic match) to play *everything*.

Thanks to a digital input, the ability to stream and play

all formats and a free 90 day subscription to Tidal, you are ready to rock right out of the box with the HD6. 50 watts per channel has you rocking and the gorgeous wood cabinets, complete with magnetically attached grills will fit in any décor. When you consider how many power cords cost way more than a pair of HD6s, these are one of the best values in audio going.

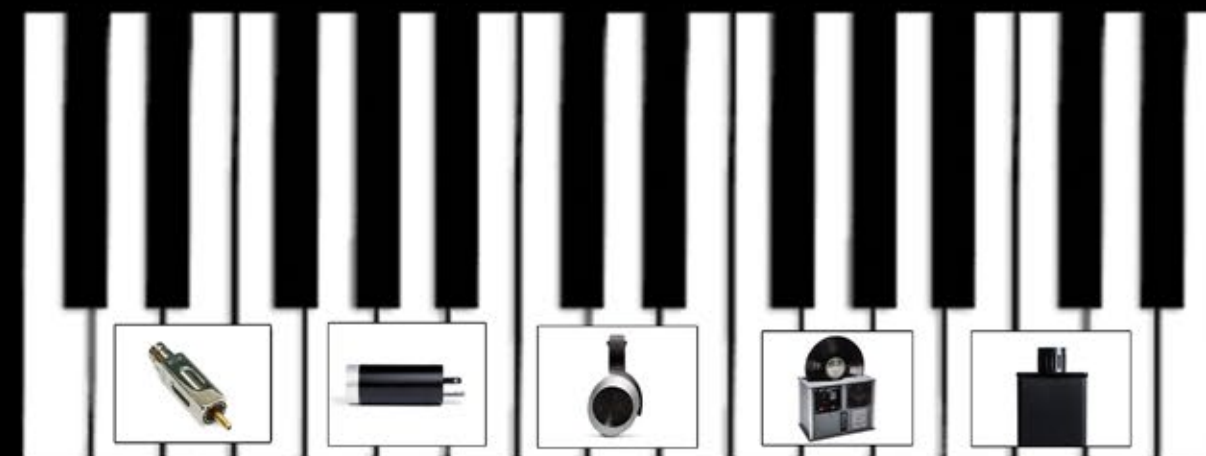
● Read our full review right here.

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SLUMMIN'

The Good, the Bad and the Dusty

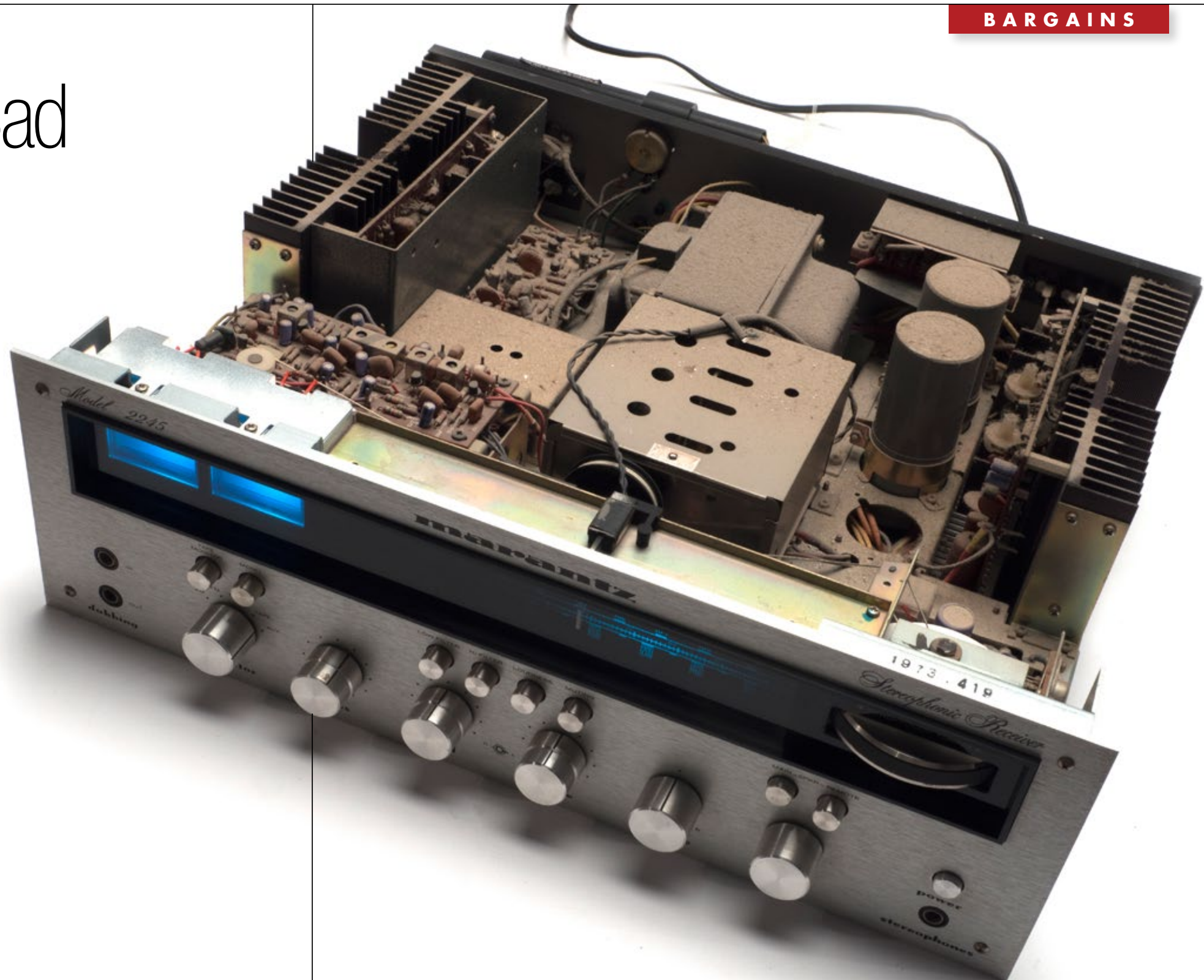
By Jeff Dorgay

This issue I found two really special things. A while back, two of our long time readers, John and Ali Barclay sent me a very kind email telling me about how they've always enjoyed TONE, and they wanted to know if I knew anyone interested in their Marantz 2245 receiver, owned since day 1.

When I mentioned that I would be interested, they were kind enough to send it to me, with all the original stuff and the Marantz wood case for only \$200. I know that's not a dumpster find, but it's significantly less than they might have got it on the open market.

As you can see from the photo, it's a beauty cosmetically and looks like it hasn't been opened since the 70s! Other than a few expired lamps, it still sounds pretty damn good. But a receiver like this only comes along now and then, so it's going up to our friends at Gig Harbor Audio for a full recondition. I plan on keeping this jewel in my garage for a long, long time.

My old boss, the late Harry Pearson used to always say at the height of his days at *The Absolute Sound*, "I love my job." I know that feeling, and while I don't know if we produce the world's best hifi and music magazine, I really feel like we have the best readers, and that's a big part of why I enjoy my job so much. Check this baby out! ●



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

Sponsored by Music Direct and Tidal

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

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

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

The Besnard Lakes
A Coliseum Complex Museum
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-374022-the-besnard-lakes-a-coliseum-complex-museum-limited-edition-colored-vinyl-2lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/55602713>

Buddy Miller & Friends
Cayamo Sessions at Sea
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-378625-buddy-miller-and-friends-cayamo-sessions-at-sea-180g-vinyl-lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/56252718>

The Cactus Blossoms
You’re Dreaming
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-379622-the-cactus-blossoms-youre-dreaming-vinyl-lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/55430574>

Jennylee
Right On!
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-369044-jennylee-warpaint-right-on33-vinyl-lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/58085391>

Mount Moriah
How to Dance
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-390976-mount-moriah-how-to-dance-vinyl-lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/55210546>

Carrie Rodriguez
Lola
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/55893693>

Savages
Adore Life
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-374020-savages-adore-life-vinyl-lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/58081705>

Ty Segall
Emotional Mugger
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-393579-ty-segall-emotional-mugger-vinyl-lp.aspx>

Shearwater
Jet Plane and Oxbow
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-375311-shearwater-jet-plane-and-oxbow-vinyl-2lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/56056250>

Mavis Staples
Livin’ on a High Note
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-407394-mavis-staples-livin-on-a-high-note-vinyl-lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/56996459>

Tortoise
The Catastrophist
Purchase LP from Music Direct
www.musicdirect.com/p-370215-tortoise-the-catastrophist-vinyl-lp.aspx

The Waco Brothers
Going Down in History
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/57222409>

AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS
Ennio Morricone
The Hateful Eight Soundtrack
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<http://www.musicdirect.com/p-378011-ennio-morricone-quentin-tarantinos-the-hateful-8-soundtrack-limited-ed-180g-vinyl-2lp.aspx>
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/55160661>

LINKS

Jazz

Terry Adams
Talk Thelonious: NRBQ+ Plays Terry Adams Arrangements of Thelonious Monk Songs
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/55085845>

Aruán Ortiz Trio
Hidden Voices
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/55278321>

Geof Bradfield Quintet
Our Roots
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/51841423>

Sonny Sharrock
Ask the Ages
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/35708647>



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ps audio
quadraspire
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sonos
soundsmith
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unison research
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LINKS

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

ALO Audio: www.aloaudio.com

Anthem: www.anthemav.com

Arcam: www.soundorg.com

Auralic: www.auralic.com

AudioVision SF: www.audiovisionsf.com

Audio Research: www.audioresearch.com

AudioQuest: www.audioquest.com

AVID: www.avidhifi.co.uk

BAT: www.balanced.com

The Cable Company: www.thecableco.com

Cambridge: www.audioplusservices.com

Dali: www.soundorg.com

dCS: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com

Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com

GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com

Graham Audio: www.grahamaudiousa.com

Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com

Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com

Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com

Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com

Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com

Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com

Naim: www.audioplusservices.com

Nordost: www.nordost.com

OCTAVE: www.octave.de

Oppo: www.oppodigital.com

Paradigm: www.paradigm.com

Pass Labs: www.passlabs.com

Plinius: www.pliniusaudio.com

PrimaLuna: www.primaluna-usa.com

Primare: www.vanaltld.com

Rega: www.soundorg.com

Rogers HiFi: www.rogershighfidelity.com

Simaudio: www.simaudio.com

Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com

Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com

Vandersteen: www.vandersteen.com

VPI: www.vpiindustries.com

Manufacturers Links