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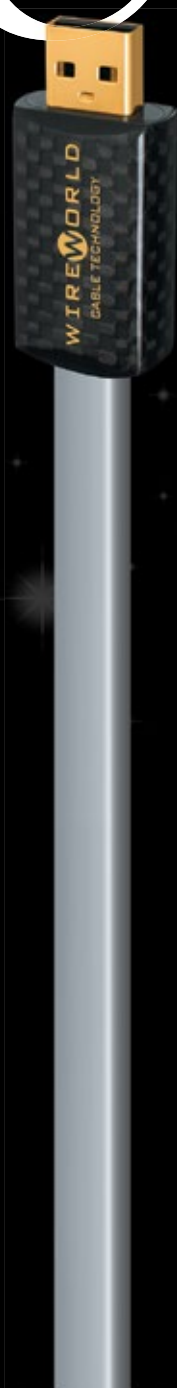
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No.77 June 2016

The Best Bits

WE REVIEW THE DCS ROSSINI AND ROSSINI CLOCK AND REVISIT THE DCS ELGAR



Make Your Early Summer Soundtrack More Fun: In-Depth Reviews of New Albums from Anohni, Car Seat Headrest, Bob Mould, Holy F!, A Giant Dog, Moderat, Avishai Cohen, Marc Copland, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Loretta Lynn, and Many More
Hamster Mania: Kia Soul with Infinity Sound • **Some History:** ModWright's SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition Preamplifier
New Column: Timbre Tantrum! • **Still Bitchin':** PrimaLuna's HP Integrated • And More from ZYX, Rotel, Simaudio, and JL Audio



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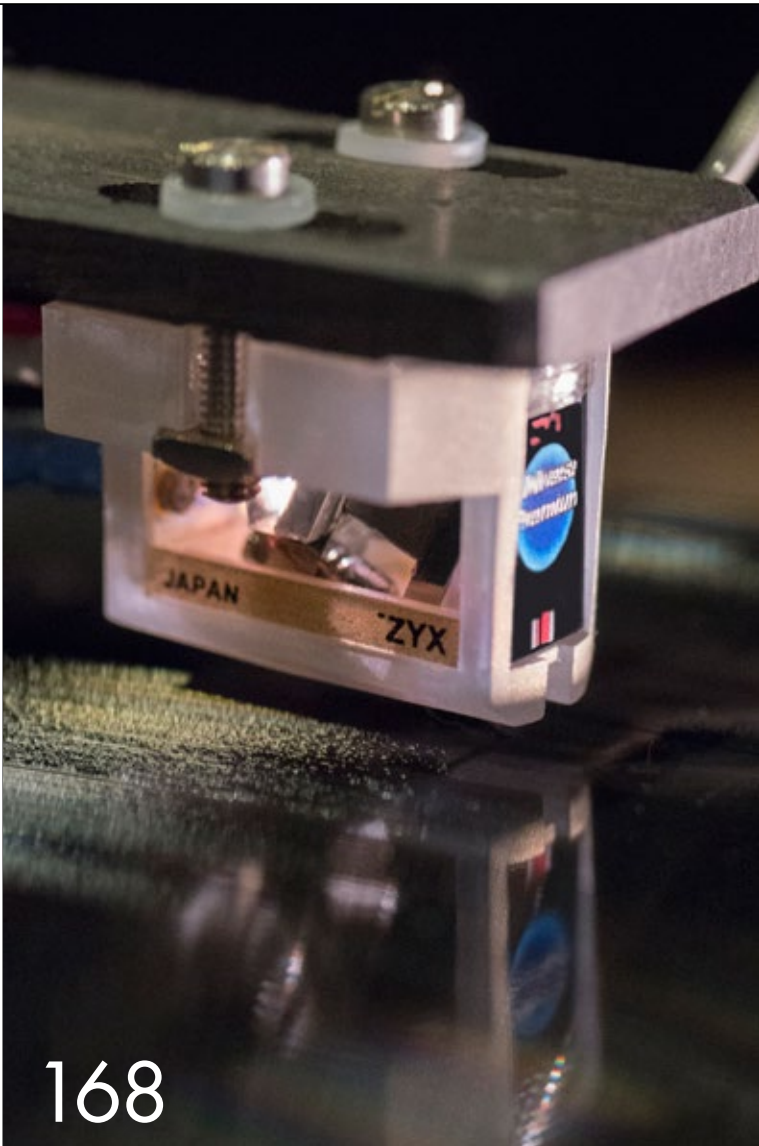
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



I have to thank my good friend Richard Colburn (formerly of Ryan Speakers) for giving me the inspiration for this issue's publisher's letter. After a long block on what to discuss, he hit the nail directly on the head when we were talking about cars, something we usually discuss instead of hifi. Both solidly in the boomer generation, we grew up with cars having increasingly more horsepower and receivers having increasingly more watts per channel – in effect, more horsepower.

Richard laughed, saying, "Today kids want cars with connectivity. I wonder if they even care about horsepower anymore." I know some do, but now they get out their laptops and remap engine functions for more horsepower, where we put high lift camshafts, headers and bigger carburetors. Personally, I think it's cool as long as you're geeking out with something and getting into it.

Which leads us to this issue's automotive sound system, the Infinity/Harmon system installed in the new Kia Soul. Yeah, that car. The hamstermobile. I always laugh when my readers think I'm a stereo snob, or as my good friend Michael Fremer at *Stereophile* likes to say, "dismissive" when I've put some amazingly good hifi systems together for a thousand bucks or so. The same is true with automobiles. Those who know me, or at least follow my personal Facebook page, know I have a bit of a penchant for German and Italian automobiles, but my new daily driver is a Kia.

And it's awesome. Imagine combining a Game Boy with a Sonos and an automobile.

That's the Soul. Accessing the mobile hotspot in my iPhone allows me to stream tunes from Tidal in real time while driving. I love it! Gone are the days when I used to drive cross-country with three clean t-shirts, some clean boxer shorts and a duffle bag full of CDs to make the journey (sorry if that's too much information for you...). Now, queue up Tidal and roll. It's a great time to be a music lover. Read my full report on page 86.

While we are on the topic of broadening our horizons, I'd like to introduce our newest contributor, Catherine Parkay. Though she's got the chops, Cat joins us more as a columnist than a straight-ahead reviewer. Rather than put a token female writer on the gear side of the masthead, writing reviews that sound just like reviews that some guy wrote, but with a female byline, I wanted someone smart, sassy and insightful. As Cat told me, "If you want a token female for the staff, I'm not your girl." I hope you'll read her column, "Timbre Tantrum," on page 14 where she'll muse on music, gear, life, and the integration of all this with an interesting perspective. And in the next few issues, we've got a few other new reviewers to add to the staff as well, so I hope we can broaden our perspective somewhat.

As always, thank you all for your continued support. I am truly humbled that *TONE* is coming up on its 11th birthday and is stronger than ever.

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FEATURE



FEATURE

The dCS Elgar

Still Impressive!

By Jeff Dorgay

It's always a blast to take a trip in the wayback machine, especially in the world of digital audio, where years are like dog years. Back in 1996, dCS introduced the world's first high performance DAC, the Elgar, with 24/96 capabilities. (And a \$12,000 price tag) It was later updated to Elgar Plus, allowing for 24/192 and DSD capabilities and there was no price increase of note, until the exchange rates forced the importer to raise the final price to \$15,000. Having spent the last six years using dCS as my digital reference, revisiting the Elgar, or in this case an Elgar Plus, supplied to us by Music Lovers in San Francisco – a premier dCS dealer.

Oddly, the current dCS facility in Cambridge, England, is located in the Meridian Office Park, though Meridian Audio is a bit down the motorway. More ironically, the casework of the Elgar/Elgar Plus was designed by Allen Boothroyd, the man at Meridian Audio responsible for all of their industrial and casework design. Talk about wacky British humor! The laughs stop the minute you turn the Elgar on. This is still a serious DAC almost twenty years later, and with a Paganini stack and Rossini DAC with clock nearby for comparison, it's easy to see why dCS has gone on to dominate the digital world.

FEATURE



With a bevy of inputs (RCA, Toslink, AES/EBU and FireWire) along with balanced XLR and RCA analog outputs, the Elgar, like current dCS DACs, can be used without a preamplifier. This is the aspect of performance that dCS has improved dramatically over the years; the current Vivaldi and Rossini can easily be used without a linestage, as the Elgar delivers the maximum with a preamplifier in the system.

Listening to the Elgar at length reminds me of getting back into a first generation Audi S4 after driving the current car. Today's S4 has a lot more horsepower and refinement, but driving the early car makes it easy to see and interpret the design team's vision. Spinning a few discs via my Paganini transport, which feeds the current Rossini DAC that is now my reference.

Everything that makes today's dCS DAC a stellar performer is in place in the Elgar. This DAC features dCS's now famous Ring DAC, which performs all decoding functions in software rather than off-the-shelf chips. Though a few manufacturers have managed to achieve state of the art basing their architecture on a chipset, the dCS approach not only allows for complete optimization, it allows for easy updates. *(continued)*

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Robert S. Youman

INT-60 Review
Positive-Feedback Issue 79

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Version 4.31 is the final software update for the Elgar Plus, but this gives it the ability to play everything but digital files via USB. Even this can be solved by adding a used Puccini U-clock, which will also provide an overall increase in performance. Adding the Rossini clock takes everything to a higher level of transparency.

Comparing the Elgar Plus to the current Rossini and Paganini, the lineage is tight. Pace, timing and sonic accuracy are still there in spades on the original box. What the new products bring to the table is even more low-level resolution in the quietest musical passages, (and this Elgar Plus is still no slouch in this department) a silkier top end and more transparency overall. But when was the last time you heard a nearly 20-year-old digital component and thought it sounded great? For that matter, when have you listened to a 20-year-old digital component that still works?

And much like that first gen Audi S4, after a few hours in the seat, you find yourself thinking, "I could live with this just fine..." So, even if you can't afford a new dCS Vivaldi, think about a nice, used Elgar. Once in a blue moon they pop up for about \$4,000–\$7,000 and still provide great sound and great value. This is a major part of why dCS products have established such a high level of excellence and have become an object of desire for audiophiles all over the world. ●

NEW RELEASES

**Anohni***Hopelessness*

Secretly Canadian, LP or CD

Anohni's *Hopelessness* does not make for an easy or comfortable listen. Nor is it meant to be. At a time when salient protest albums seem in short supply during this divisive political and cultural climate, the singer—formerly known as Antony Hegarty before embracing a name to coincide with his transgender status—has recorded a potent, bracing, and bold statement that goes beyond most protest efforts in that the artist also holds herself liable for the injustices and transgressions. Rarely does an artist display such naked accountability and self-analysis without bowing to self-pity. Channeling defiance and despair, Anohni asks challenging questions and attacks controversial issues with a fearlessness and passion that commands respect even from those at odds with her position.

Hopelessness also manages to break ground in the usually static field of electronic music. Departing from her previous chamber-pop approaches, Anohni embraces a fleet of mutated grooves, atmospheric textures, and manufactured beats that give her arrangements restrained albeit demonstrative dance flavors. The results of collaborations with cutting-edge producers Oneohtrix Point Never and Hudson Mohawke, the instrumental backdrops often provide contrast to difficult subject matter that spans everything from climate change to constant surveillance and unchecked warfare.

Anohni's beautiful vocals and breathy, melodic deliveries furnish additional juxtaposition. Intended or not, the sonic division between gentle and fierce acts as a striking metaphor. Anohni's silk-soft singing and experimental dance music mirror a majority of humanity's happy indifference to and/or ignorance of escalating world problems. The lyrics and thoughts—and occasional bursts of sonic gristle—symbolize the destructive realities to which most people contribute. Just as with any issue not in our immediate backyards, we can pretend the unpleasanties don't exist. But Anohni's attachment of poisonous themes to lush sounds ensures they cannot be erased from the canvas.

Some songs are more obvious than others. A cold, icy, and synthetic feeling hovers over the deceptively upbeat "Drone Bomb Me." Anohni's pleas and cries evoke the natural flutter of butterfly wings, and infuse the tune with apparent sarcasm until you realize the narrator is a young Afghani girl whose family has been executed by a military drone. At this stage for her, utter annihilation proves a superior option to living. Escaping the present tense also drives "Why Did You Separate Me from the Earth?" on which Anohni longs to slip back into the past and divorce herself from contemporary surroundings. Here, as on a majority of the 11-track effort, she sounds at once desperate, trapped, angry, and isolated. The swell of these emotions erupts into a heart-stopping apology on "Crisis." Singing

in a gentle voice, Anohni outlays the insensitivity attached to the televised murders and state-sponsored torture that present victims as mere beasts. "If I killed your father with a drone bomb/How would you feel?," she asks, knowing she's part of a society that possesses the wealth, means, and power to dictate who receives—and avoids—such a fate.

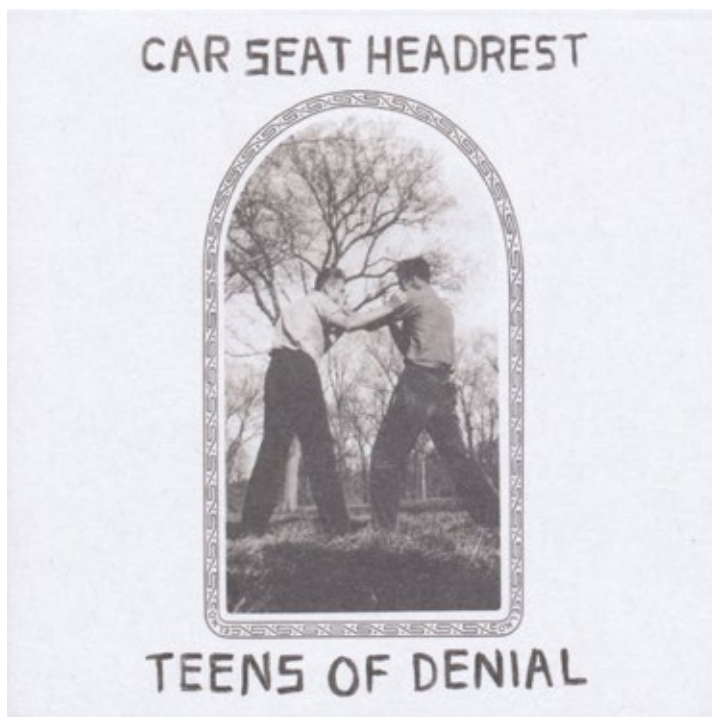
"Have no mercy on me," Anohni soulfully coos on "Execution," linking capital punishment to the American Dream. All the while, tiptoeing piano-like notes perform an innocent ballet around her and give the impression all is right with the world. The provocative song intimates that by practicing such gallows-minded policies, the U.S. is no better than that of other countries that place little or no value on human rights. As for the latter privilege, it disappears on the gorgeous synth-pop of "Watch Me," a savvy reprimand of privacy invasion that begs the question of how much we keep sacrificing in the name of protection. But what is the real evil? Here, Anohni suggests there's no greater threat than the inability to hide from ceaseless observation, a development that translates into the loss of independence and liberty.

Hopelessness nearly unfolds without any major flaws. Yet the brief "Violent Men" emerges as a sample-laden sketch whose contorted personality and artificial construction appear at odds with the whole of the album. Disorienting structures also fill "Obama," a

savage takedown of the sitting president. Jagged sonic debris and dreary moods float through a scarred framework that conjures a coming apocalypse. Anohni sings in a deep range, with a slowed pace and exaggerated intonation conveying decay, frustration, resignation, disgust, and disappointment. The song's on-the-nose nature and contentious commentary aren't just for show. They exist as additional examples of the vocalist's own complicity in the situations and decisions increasingly steaming towards the scenarios Elizabeth Kolbert deems "the Sixth Extinction" in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book of the same name.

Those ideas reach unavoidable peak on "4 Degrees," a scathing look at climate change and colossal extinction. Anohni sings amidst stark, violent, and oppressive settings, with beats slamming like meat-locker doors, jagged keyboard lines boiling with drama, and faux strings furthering the immediacy. "I want to hear the dogs crying for water," she insists. "I want to see the fish go belly up in the sea." Her sympathy for defenseless creatures and the ailing planet play out through the wicked satire, while her sincerity is matched by a pronounced fear and self-awareness that her own habits contributed to the catastrophic ruin. It's during these moments we realize we're no different, and that her protest and self-consciousness need to be ours as well.

—**Bob Gendron**



Car Seat Headrest

Teens of Denial

Matador Records, 2LP or CD

Loneliness isn't supposed to be fun.

Recent albums from electronic-pop artist James Blake and international superstar Beyoncé make that clear. Loneliness on the former is chilling, sparse and uncomfortable. On the latter, it serves as more of a call to action—a rise up to seize one's own independence. Loneliness on Car Seat Headrest's *Teens of Denial*, however, is more akin to a way of life, a badge of honor, if you will. We mope, not because we are sad, the album argues, but because it is where we are most comfortable. "You have no right to be depressed," Will Toledo sings on opening number "Fill in the Blank," before cheerily adding an explanation: "You haven't tried hard enough to like it."

And thus we're off, embarking on a 12-song, mostly up-beat rock n' roll journey where characters swear the current hangover will be the last one (it won't) and a big stress inducer comes from the anxiety generated by worrying if the cops will bust up the local house party (they might). But who cares if they do? The passive-aggressive slackers on *Teens of Denial* are likely just standing in the corner, anyway, as even the good moments aren't exactly cause for celebration. "This isn't sex," Toledo remarks on one song. "It's just extreme empathy." A winking desperation pulses throughout the album, Toledo's second in the past 12 months under the Car Seat Headrest moniker. Here, there's just as much joy in complaining about rejection as there is in actually getting the date.

By and large, *Teens of Denial* is less about teens and more about grown-ups acting like teens. People who, in short, should know better than to wake up on someone else's floor. Like last year's *Teens of Style*, the garage-like low-fi rock n' scuff of the album feels frantic, as if recorded in a rush in a basement before mom and dad got home. Think American indie-rock, early 80s, when the Replacements and Redd Kross concocted bang-up melodies but played them too fast and too messy for radio.



Still, more so than in the past, Toledo flashes some mature ambitions—even if he isn't above cheekily covering the Cars' "Just What I Needed" in one song and testing listener patience with a nearly two-minute intro that's little more than one plucked guitar note in another.

That song, "Vincent," eventually opens up. Call-and-response vocals ricochet around point riffs and a rolling, feel-good rhythm built for league nights at the local bowling alley. At more than six minutes, this is silly punk rock at its most epic, and Toledo's stream-of-conscious vocals ultimately sell the tune. In fact, each one of the songs comes with a lyric that should be scrawled on some kid's high-school folder. "If I'm being honest with myself, I haven't been honest with myself," Toledo sings in "Vincent." Later, on "Destroyed by Hippie Powers," he wonders, "What happened to that chubby little kid who smiled so much

and loved the Beach Boys?" The guitars are loud, the cowbells borderline obnoxious, and Toledo makes the case that he's one of the more humorous young voices in indie-rock.

Thankfully, he's also got a knack for a hook. Forgive the ridiculous title of "(Joe Gets Kicked Out of School for Using) Drugs With Friends (But Says This Isn't a Problem)" and instead focus on the sing-along "woos" and light folksy bounce. "Unforgiving Girl (She's Not An)" balances the jangly with the aggressive, while "The Ballad of the Costa Concordia" brings a tinge of early-morning reflection to the partying and the breakups. The usually jokey Toledo gets serious, as he tries to make sense of world that left him unprepared for adulthood. "How was I supposed to know how to make dinner for myself?" he asks. *Teens of Denial* may not be dealing with world-changing issues, but it knows how to have fun with smaller, life-changing ones. —**Todd Martens**



B

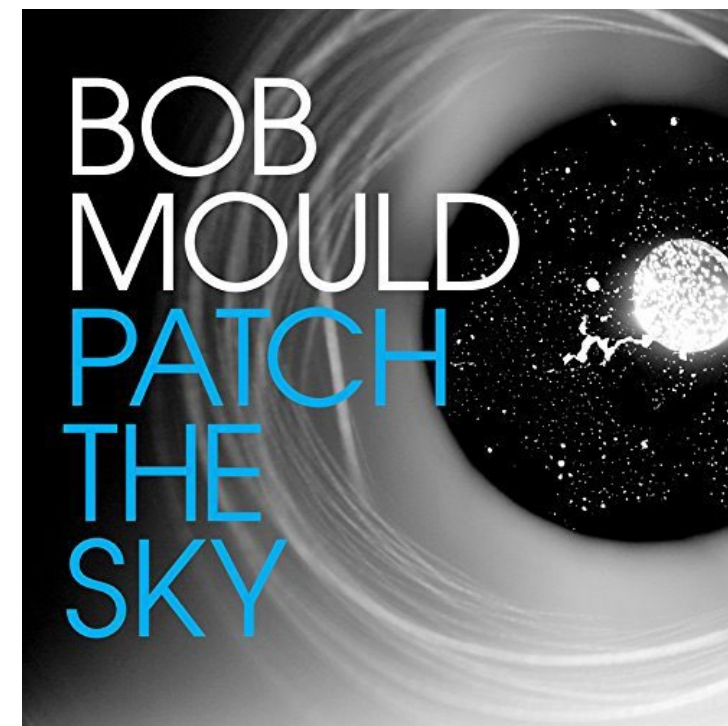
ob Mould has spent more than three decades primarily crafting loud, guitar-driven music where abrasiveness often gets tempered by catchy, cascading melodies. You'd think that by now the 55-year-old musician would've expressed everything that could possibly be done with the approach. Mould's monster of a new record, *Patch the Sky*, suggests otherwise.

Coming on the heels of two other searing statements—2012's *Silver Age* and 2014's *Beauty & Ruin*—the album makes a strong case for Mould having the best second—nay, third, given his 90s tenure with Sugar—act of any post-punk era artist. But the thematically interwoven songs here are much more than notices of Mould's existence. In its uncompromising emotional intensity and blunt songwriting, *Patch the Sky* sounds every bit as potent and vital as his work with Husker Du—just not as influential. Nobody would claim Mould still pushes the envelope as he did in the 1980s. Yet in an era where rock seems overshadowed by electronic and dance forms, the upstate New York native continues to show the guitar can eat trendy beats and self-absorbed rhymes for breakfast. And convey a wider spectrum of ideas while doing so.

Throughout *Patch the Sky*, the six-string instrument represents a way out. It's the path to light from the darkness; escape from certain ruin; the truth rescued from a fog of lies. To Mould, its razor-blade sharpness and cathartic fury also embody redemption unattainable by any other means. Few artists' work dares to be as bold and personal. By his own admission, the singer wasn't in a good place when he wrote the songs and withdrew from friends for six months in order to get his bearings. The unsparing lyrics aptly provide insight into the thoughts of a man dealing with substantial pain, loss, and frustration.

"Time to say farewell to all the ghosts and demons," Mould announces on the opening "Voices in My Head" amidst a landscape thickened with tarry rhythms and stacked echoes. While the midtempo arrangement teases a false sense of security, the overcast mood underlines the overwhelming anguish he needs to shake. Mould laments "the end of everything" on the roaring "The End of Things," the white-knuckle equivalent of speeding down the shoulder of a highway as surroundings whiz by in a dangerous blur. Cycles of despair run the course of "You Say You," a blitz punctuated by a tilt-a-whirling solo that cuts across the jagged terrain akin to an industrial buzz saw gone berserk. Toxic feelings abound.

"Hands Are Tied" proves harsher. Mould thrashes against denial, refusal, and the loss of freedom as he ponders his place in the aftermath of a taxing situation before trying to make sense of it all. Such heady contemplation continues on "Losing Time," a slash-and-burn jolt that witnesses drummer Jon Wurster and



Bob Mould

Patch the Sky
Merge, LP or CD

bassist Jason Narducy supporting the vocalist with a conflagration of crashing percussion, slingshot grooves, and tuneful distortion. The trio can also play as heavy as it does fast—a feat evidenced on the broad-shouldered "Lucifer and God," which comes across like a wrecking ball designed to demolish memories and resentments.

For all the all-in group chemistry and bitter-sweet tension gracing the songs, Mould's guitar speaks with the most convincing and distinctive voice. His array of wall-of-sound washes, cluster-bomb chords, and aluminum-tinted tones purge and purify. Mould's dynamic, primal guitar playing ultimately gives the impression he'll defy gravity and conquer the burdens of death, fractured relationships, and heartbreak.

However agitated and menacing a journey, *Patch the Sky* bursts with soulful and liberating payoffs—and a lust-for-life passion as big as Mould's signature hooks. —**Bob Gendron**



A Giant Dog

Pile

Merge Records, LP or CD

It takes guts to open an album with an overture, especially one that nods to the opera. *Pile*, the third album from Austin, Texas-based road hounds A Giant Dog, doesn't make an effort to hide its ambitions. In the work's first seconds, we hear stressed violin strings and dueling altos, which are arguably even tenser. It's theater, alright, and it sets the stage for an album that tackles various genres and styles as if they're whiskey shots waiting to be pounded.

Opera? Sure, over and done with in about 70 seconds. Elton John-inspired piano romps? Bring it. Vintage, 60s-era pop? Of course. Crunchy metal? Carnivalesque weirdness? Folksy stonerisms? All tackled with punk-rock brevity. With fifteen songs, and almost all under three minutes long, *Pile* has a lot to say—and does so quickly.



©Photo by Steven Ruud

And that opening overture isn't just for show, as Shakespeare-level drama fills the lyrics of Sabrina Ellis and Andrew Cashen. A royal backstabbing? Check. It's referenced in "King Queen." But by and large, *Pile* documents the drag of getting older, zeroing in on the misadventures of everyday weirdoes and all the mistakes made between birth, marriage, divorce, and death. "We can't tell all the kids about the things that we did," Ellis sings on the frantic "Sex & Drugs" after rattling off a laundry list of vices.

Long championed by Spoon's Britt Daniel, who guests on an ode-to-weed track here,

Pile was recorded about two years ago and finally sees release after the band linked with Spoon's alma mater, Merge Records. The group won a reputation as a rather reckless live band—a simple Google search brings up clips of Ellis performing pants-less—but *Pile* makes the case that A Giant Dog is far more than a boozy night out.

One can play the spot-the-instrument game throughout the album, what with a flugelhorn there and a saxophone here. Odd accoutrements are picked up and spat out with a fervor. The adrenaline rush of "Creep"—driven by the forceful, too-fast-to-break rhythms of drummer Orville Neeley—runs

its guitars through funhouse mirrors. "Jizzney" also flirts with the bizarre. Ellis and Cashen harmonize about their "little fantasy behind closed doors" even as the tune strays into jangly pop territory. "Not a Miracle" recalls the intensity of early Stooges while detailing dead-end, low-wage jobs. "Seventeen" alternates fist-pumping riffs with winding solos, each taking a different path to reflect Ellis' midlife teenage angst.

While Ellis and Cashen toss vocals back and forth and attract the most attention, bassist Graham Low sneakily anchors a ditty like "I'll Come Crashing" with his sinister, jagged rumble. Elsewhere, the dual guitars of Cash-

en and Andy Bauer remain on high alert throughout "Too Much Makeup," which best captures the band's warped sensibilities. Ellis sounds downright panicked as she envisions the gross manipulations that will happen to her body as it's prepped to be displayed at her funeral.

Ellis' voice is in fact A Giant Dog's most powerful instrument. She soars over the hurried rocking-chair groove of "Birthday Song" and brings a casual, soulful strut to the charming sex-obsessed bounce of "& Rock & Roll." "Baby," she sings, "lose your brain and rock and roll," as if onstage dramatics should be a way of life. —**Todd Martens**

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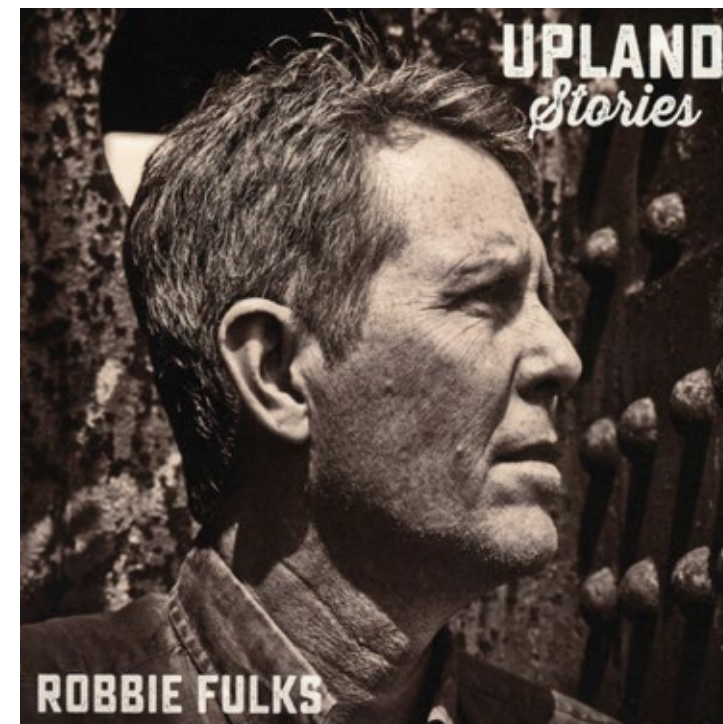
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Robbie Fulks

Upland Stories

Bloodshot Records, LP or CD

Across a couple of decades, alt-country icon Robbie Fulks has blazed a trail leagues beyond his Chicago home base. Although his identity leans far more toward cult artist than commercial titan, the singer-songwriter enjoys a dedicated fan base in both the States and abroad. His followers have come to expect his distinctive combination of punkish wit, artistic smarts, technical skill and emotional nuance.

For the most part, Fulks leaves the humor behind on his ninth album, *Upland Stories*, but delivers the other aspects in spades. These are mostly story-songs told from the perspective of male protagonists haunted by their own memories. As these men unpack their tales of hard luck and occasional happiness, Fulks follows his musical muse through a range of styles including bullet-hard mountain shouts, muted dream-pop, tender folk, and lilting soul.

MUSIC



©Photo by Andy Goodwin

Fulks pulls inspiration from his youth in Virginia and North Carolina. He also looks to literary sources as emotional touchstones. "Alabama at Night" imagines writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans on their legendary 1936 Alabama road trip to chronicle poverty-stricken sharecroppers, a project that eventually resulted in the classic book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. He constructs a lyrical scenario both bitter-sweet and sharply observed: "The camera 'round my neck drew suspicious eyes to me/But we were not there to talk/We were only there to see."

The songs reflect the powerful surges of memory that can at times overtake us as we grow older. Aging throws our early choices into stark relief. The past cannot be changed and we live with the consequences of our decisions. "Baby Rocked Her Dolly" emerges as the story of a widower in a nursing home that recounts his happy domestic memories to a lonely man

across the hall. Although it's the narrator who shares the warm recollections tumbling though his mind, in the end, it's the sadness of the solitary man that resonates.

Fulks also proves a fine guitarist in his own right. He employs a top-shelf backing ensemble that includes multi-instrumentalist Fats Kaplin and violinist Jenny Scheinman. Sweet acoustic guitar picking and the muted thump of upright bass shade a number of tracks.

For the most part, these songs come across as quietly told narratives that pulse with powerful emotion. In "Needed," a man reminisces on his 18-year-old self. The tune ends as a loving letter of advice to a son coming of age. The narrator hopes his child will "steer past shallow freedoms as you follow your own star." Like many of the songs on *Upland Stories*, it's a slice of hard-won wisdom gently proffered from a gifted country bard. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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Holy Fuck

Congrats
Innovative Leisure, LP or CD

Few indoor-outdoor rooms are as imposingly joyous as the dance tent at a summer music festival. Picture a spaceship hangar—one as influenced equally by Mad Max as it is modern-day cartoons. Video screens, often crooked, display images of static or reflect neon lights. Metal tubing shakes as if ready to burst, and the whole of the shed feels ready to explode in an eruption of glitter. Welcome to a futuristic party pavilion that, for the un-initiated, can feel apocalyptic. But for the converted, it's wholly euphoric.

On the outside, likely looking in, is Toronto's Holy Fuck, whose *Congrats* plays out like a work that's sometimes more interested in assessing the casualties rather than joining the festivities. It's reflective, violently aggressive, but also ready to throw down an irresistible rave of its own: A raucous albeit singular bash that wants to get inside your head as badly as it wants to get you into a groove.



©Photo by Ali McCann

Menacingly trippy one moment and otherworldly spacey the next, *Congrats*, from beginning to end, dances outside the confines of the expected or the normative. Consider it an exceptional display of sonic trickery where guitar, bass, drums, and a who-knows-what assortment of random objects-turned-instruments create controlled and excitable chaos.

"Chimes Broken" opens with a sound that splits the difference between a tribal beat and a 747 airliner. Guitars and voices get manipulated, and the song toys with the key hallmarks of modern EDM—the bass drop and the siren-like lead-up to release. Only things soon go haywire, and while the pulse never lets up the pace, the track becomes increasingly abstract as each rhythmic layer piles on top of another. If "Chimes Broken" is a workout, *Congrats* never puts the brakes on

the velocity.

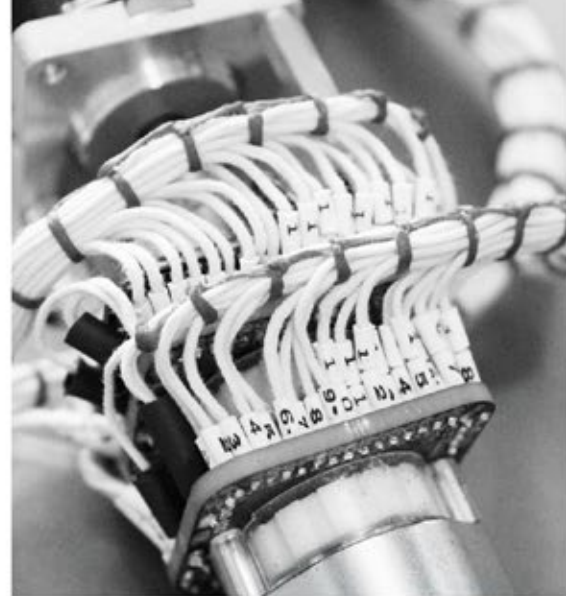
Check the fast-moving but eerie "Tom Tom," on which guitars twist and turn like knobs on a turntable and the bass generates a stomp worthy of the adrenaline-pumping introductions at a sports arena. Or "Acidic," driven by a high-flying beat that's borderline reminiscent of "Thriller"—at least until it picks up more dub trappings as the tune unfolds. Somewhere within the noise appears to be a horn section, a church organ, and a fire truck.

Holy Fuck, essentially missing in action for the better part of six years, has been hostile before. Yet the collective never sounded this tuneful with its harshness. The four-piece, built around keyboardists Brian Borchardt and Graham Walsh, plays as if caught in a tug-o-war between punk rock and electronic music. Traditional instru-

ments trade blows with found objects and warped synthesizers.

What to make, for instance, of "Neon Dad"? What begins as a vintage, 70s-influenced dream swells to a tambourine shimmy that gives way to UFO-like chemtrails and a thick, pounding drum. "Sabbatics" creates a club-worthy melody out of what could be old medical equipment (it works), while "Crapture" comes across as a frantic panic attack.

Congrats was recorded in a studio, with Matt "Punchy" McQuaid on a restless bass and Matt Schulz playing often-thunderous drums. Still, at times it sounds as if the record were built in an auto repair shop. Such violent machinery has no business being this hooky, but Holy Fuck proves there's plenty of room for dance music to thrive outside the big tent. —**Todd Martens**



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Various Artists

Day of the Dead
 4AD, 10LP box set or 5CD

Bidding for the unofficial title of the widest spanning, longest-running tribute album ever assembled, *Day of the Dead* encompasses five discs, comprises almost six hours, and involves more than five dozen contributors. Curators Aaron and Bryce Dessner of the National spent four years putting the project together. The enormous collection also represents a milestone: It's the 20th release of original music produced by Red Hot Organization. Per usual, all profits go towards fighting AIDS and HIV-related health issues. Suffice it to say the end total should eclipse the \$1.5 million raised by its predecessor, 2009's *Dark Was the Night*. Because of its vast stylistic scope and involvement of so many artists, *Day of the Dead* arrives as the highest-profile covers set issued this century. (continued)



The National, whose members Bryce and Aaron Dessner, spearheaded the *Day of the Dead* project.

©The National

Due to its magnitude, the 59-track effort occasionally suffers from a malady common to nearly every homage—namely, performances that either fail to come close to the original or that so radically depart from the inspiration, they elicit bitter reactions. Whether by design or accident, the Dessner brothers managed to sequence *Day of the Dead* in a way that segregates the weaker attempts from the healthy fare. Only during the last third of the compilation does the music sink under the weight of experimental misfires and creative mismatches. By contrast, the first two-thirds of the anthology witnesses a striking number of modern talents finding mystical communion and sharing ground with the San Francisco-based legends.

Unlike *Deadicated*, a long-out-of-print 1991 Dead tribute that counts Los Lobos, Elvis Costello, Indigo Girls, and Dr. John among its participants, *Day of the Dead* skews toward artists that aren't obvious Dead contemporaries. The presence of Bruce Hornsby, Bela Fleck, Garth Hudson, and Bob Weir prove exceptions. And for every offering by the Flaming Lips, My Morning Jacket's Jim James, Lucinda Williams, and Wilco—artists whose links to the Dead have played out in their music since their genesis—constant surprises and a-ha moments spring up from rising stars like

Courtney Barnett, Sharon Van Etten, Angel Olsen, The War on Drugs, Phosphorescent, and Kurt Vile. Transcending the merits of individual interpretations, the wealth of such chemistry and connectivity underlines the Dead's influence on a 35-and-under indie set that grew up amidst the alt-rock era. So much for the critics and press outlets that continually downed Jerry Garcia and company during their 30-year career. The artists here apparently didn't listen to their brattle.

From longtime fan Lee Ranaldo's fractal-rooted psychedelia on "Mountains of the Moon" to TV on the Radio singer Tunde Adebimpe and Ranaldo's spring-loaded version of "Playing in the Band" and Stephen Malkmus and the Jicks' aptly rambling "China Cat Sunflower—>I Know You Rider" suite, *Day of the Dead* sparks with the freedom, passion, soulfulness, and openness the Dead conveyed on its finest albums and in countless concerts. Still somewhat overlooked, the group's knack for melodic devices and detailed albeit simple songwriting also get exposed via Bonnie "Prince" Billy & Friends' innocent-sounding "Rubin and Cherise," the Lone Bellow and Friends' jaunty "Dire Wolf," and Barnett's deceptively sensual and dark-streaked "New Speedway Boogie."

Several artists take serious liberties with the shape of Dead originals and, in the process, come up roses. Anthoni and yMusic turn "Black Peter" into a lounge-pop ballad illuminated with pastel colors. Orchestra Baobab puts an Afro-Cuban dance stamp on "Franklin's Tower" and "Clementine Jam," the latter a cousin to the Dead's "Scarlet Begonias." Fucked Up transform "Cream Puff War" into a hardcore rant sent up with Krautrock grooves—and it works. Lucinda Williams & Friends slow down the tempo of the normally upbeat "Going Down the Road Feelin' Bad" to a crawl, stir up melancholy emotions, churn out fuzzed-out blues, and turn in the most hauntingly beautiful moment of the set. The brothers Dessner also make the highlight reel with their main act, the National, on a number of tracks, not the least of which is a poignant "Morning Dew" ripping with ominous currents owing Matt Berninger's molasses-rich baritone.

That same distinctive voice accents Weir's lead on a locomotive-charged live rendition of the Dead staple "I Know You Rider," the culmination to an homage that nails the spirit of its honorees as well as any other tribute album extant.

—**Bob Gendron**

**Moderat**

///

Monkeytown Records/Mute, LP or CD

It starts with a mantra.

“Meditation, medication,” sings Sascha Ring on the opening track of Moderat’s third proper album. He delivers the words with little change in tone and only a slight variation in style. “Medication,” technically, appears drawn out slightly longer. But the goal seems to make the words appear as one. If Moderat’s 2013 album, *II*, channels a more energetic, glitchy-and-scratchy party vibe, then *///* is the late-night come down. Here, the latest pairing of electronic wizards Modeselektor and Apparat—the former more techno and aggressive, the latter more ambient and pastoral—has a rather specific thesis in mind: Can a digital heart still have a soul? The answer is complicated.

Picture a sonic landscape already traversed to great effect by, say, the xx or Rhye. The laptops and synthesizers of Moderat, however, carry a hint of abrasiveness. This 9-song effort may have a 4 a.m. feel, but assume insomnia rather than dream sleep. Sounds clash, scrape, and pull at one another. “Eating Hooks” begins with faint, barely audible insect-like scuffs. Beats stutter—the sound, perhaps, of someone struggling to get up—and a brushfire-inspired static crystallizes around the jerky groove. Throughout, contrasts between vocals and arrangements become pronounced. Ring is a soft, human crooner while the aural visions behind him remain cold. If you’re looking for an easy reference point, imagine Radiohead side project



(Thom Yorke is a known fan and Modeselektor collaborator) *Atoms for Peace*.

Given the curious detours and unexpected left turns that fill *///*, headphones are recommended listening attire. It’s a journey via circuitry, where CPU holds significantly more importance than R&B. “Ghostmother,” with its images of “blank-eyed angels” and “astrology cards,” hints at some sort of end-of-life mysticism. Angelic harmonies complement a distorted sax and flugelhorn, and rhythms glimmer like sun reflecting on a mirror. “Reminder” brings things back to the world of the living. The underlying pulse feels constructed out of kindling. And the bass—the specialty of Modeselektor’s Gernot Bronsert and Sebastian Szary—features a deep-down rumble that brings a foreboding touch to an otherwise patient, orchestral universe.

When placed in the context of Moderat’s string of EPs and albums, *///* comes across as a concept album. Tone is given premium over variance. Guest vocalists are gone, and only “Running” really tries to hit a dancefloor pace. We are, as Ring sings on “The Fool,” but “a stranger in a lavish land”—an environment both downbeat and oblique, a place where the listener gets challenged more than comforted.

Take “Animal Trails,” which unfolds like a panicked brain scan, or “Intruder,” where an arresting, mid-song breakdown makes it sound as if a laser printer is trying tap around frantic and thunderous strikes. So sure, there’s a soul, but it’s one that greets the morning light with frigidness. Turn it on and turn off the lights, but bring an electric blanket. —**Todd Martens**

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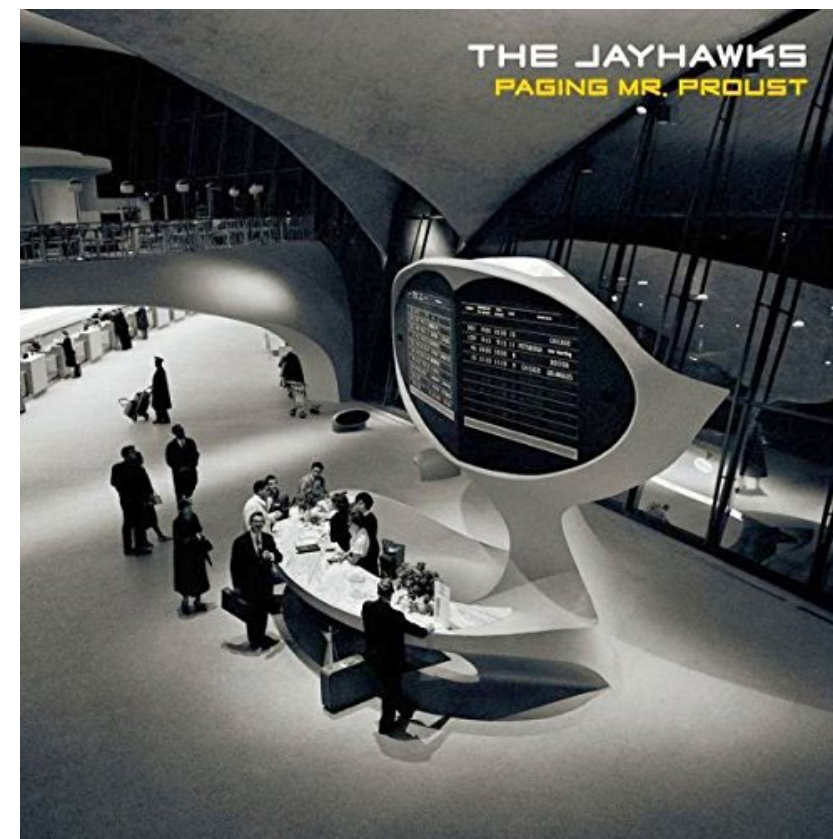
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MUSIC



The Jayhawks

Paging Mr. Proust

Thirty Tigers, LP or CD

Three decades ago, the Jayhawks released their debut album and emerged as a leading light of the alt-country scene. Although the Minneapolis-based group never attained the burnished stature of roots-music cult icon Uncle Tupelo, it amassed a large base of diehard followers and received critical accolades for plaintive records such as *Hollywood Town Hall* and *Tomorrow the Green Grass*.

In the time since, the Jayhawks soldiered on via a complex run of record releases, shifting lineups, stylistic changes, hiatuses, and reunions. The harmonic convergence of the band's primary co-founders—singer-guitarists Gary Louris and Mark Olson—remained the collective's most distinctive trait. But Olson left the band in the mid-'90s, returned for an album and subsequent tour, then departed again.



The Jayhawks

Paging Mr. Proust

Thirty Tigers, LP or CD

Each singer's voices answer and shadow the other, nestling somewhere between a discourse and peak into the private exchange that only the most committed of partners can understand—a “friend-first elemental communication,” Hoop helpfully observes on one song. At times they sync. Yet mostly, the musicians circle around one another, creating the sensation of hearing two very distinct thoughts.

“Welcome to feeling,” Hoop sings on the opener, an invitation into a work that flirts with harmony but emphasizes singularity. Each of the 13 compositions provides a different snapshot of a connection between two people. While the work chronicles the ups and downs of a relationship (primarily the sensations surrounding the ups), Hoop proves to be as versatile as Beam is reassuring. She's stern on “Chalk it Up to Chi” and then calming on “The Lamb You Lost.” They're elders looking back on life in “Know the Wild That Wants You” and later, lovers hoping their passion never fades on “Kiss Me Quick.”

As solo artists, Beam and Hoop are, if not outright unconventional, building careers out of the unexpected. Beam's Iron & Wine project has become increasingly orchestral while Hoop keeps listeners guessing with electric guitar eclecticism. Here, the two strike a quiet, contemplative mood. Arrangements get accentuated with choir instruments. It's gentle and relaxed, the sound intimating a relationship in a perpetual honeymoon glow.



©Photo by Josh Wool

“One Way to Pray” hits the pace of a consoling trot, with Beam and Hoop in supportive roles as they trade off leads. “Midas Tongue” gets mildly prickly with an out-doorsy percussive feel courtesy of Wilco's Glenn Kotche. “Every Songbird Sings” comes on as the aural equivalent of holding hands. “Valley Clouds” sways with a lullaby lilt and “Soft Place to Land” lets Hoop set the tone. Acoustic instruments cradle around her while a barely there violin contributes to the contemplative vibe.

Even with a tender atmosphere, the album channels a wide range of emotions—from the slow dance of “Sailor to Siren” to the frisky “Chalk it Up to Chi” to the sparse “We Two Are a Moon,” on which a guitar takes on a tick-tock quality. The clock serves as fine a metaphor as any for the album. This is a grown-up collection about the joys—and occasional confusion—of growing older together.

“Love yourself and come home,” the pair sings at midpoint. *Love Letter for Fire* serves as the album that wants to greet you at the door. —**Todd Martens**

In 1994, Mary Chapin Carpenter won a Grammy for her cover of Lucinda Williams' "Passionate Kisses." An accompanying video features Carpenter sitting in an upscale Georgetown cafe with a latte and a women's magazine at the ready. The attractive and stylized tableau could have been torn from the pages of a Lands' End catalog. And the presentation underscored one of the differences between the two artists. While Williams hit a raw cowgirl-biker note with her persona and songs, Carpenter came on like a classy post-grad folkie wistfully observing the world through a picture window.

But make no mistake. When it comes to Carpenter's own writing, there has always been a genuine poet at work beneath the polished surface. Her smooth songs often pack a deceptive punch. Even at the height of her chart success in the 1990s—when she became an unlikely star in mainstream country—she landed left-field hits like the feminist anthem "He Thinks He'll Keep Her." Exquisite songcraft has always been baked into the bright melody and commercial appeal of the music. *(continued)*



Mary Chapin Carpenter

The Things That We Are Made Of
Lambent Light Records, LP or CD

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MUSIC

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Carpenter shows she's at the height of her considerable powers on the new *The Things That We Are Made Of*, a masterpiece of mid-life contemplation. The album is an emotional travelogue of remembrance, a journal that chronicles "the dreams distilled and the dreams discarded." Ghosts are everywhere as Carpenter ponders old friends, past lovers, dead-ends, detours, and starry skies. She sings about looking back and moving forward. Many tracks feel like a bitter-sweet elegy to memory itself.

Every tune offers a gentle cascade of arresting observations. Against an upbeat swirl of guitars, the Dylan-esque "Something Tamed Something Wild" nails the powerful residue of days gone by. Carpenter sings: "There's a shoebox full of letters/Bound up neatly with some twine/Each one was like a diamond/Now the jewel is lost to time/

My reward is in the knowing/That I held it in my hands for a little awhile."

She sounds emotionally reinvigorated by her collaboration with producer Dave Cobb, the in-demand studio wizard who has helped acclaimed releases by alt-country luminaries Jason Isbell and Sturgill Simpson. Cobb intuitively has a serious talent at the microphone and wisely keeps Carpenter's warm, confiding alto at the center of the lovely arrangements. Songs are delicately colored with throaty piano chords, Hammond organ, gentle percussion, and sweetly picked guitar.

Carpenter reminds us that as we get older, the past looms everywhere we turn. Listening to this gorgeous and honest album is like taking a road trip back home with a trusted friend. With Carpenter at the wheel, we couldn't ask for a better companion.
—**Chrissie Dickinson**


Damien Jurado

Visions of Us on the Land
Secretly Canadian, 2LP or CD

Time and place are out of sorts of Damien Jurado's *Visions of Us on the Land*, the veteran singer/songwriter's 12th studio album. Song titles are familiar albeit vague—"Exit 353," "A.M. AM," "ONALASKA," "November 20." They're not so much descriptors as signifiers of a blurred, dreamy reality. Folksy with a symphonic edge, Jurado has crafted a set on which tunes casually drift into one another. It's the sound, perhaps, of an endless road-trip without a physical destination. *Visions of Us on the Land* is about hitting the highway for the sole purpose of contemplation, and the narrators don't always like what they see.

Mystery abounds on *Visions of Us on the Land*, and listener mileage will vary depending on how eagerly one wants to decode it. Working once again with labelmate/orchestrator Richard Swift, Jurado has now made three consecutive albums with loose thematic connections. Since 2012's *Maraqopa*, we've witnessed a car crash, a coma, and lots of running from public life. Sometimes, electronics flutter about, Latin percussion enters, and guitars intermittently quake like thunder. But these are reflective affairs, and *Visions of Us on the Land* feels less like a collection of melodies and songs are more akin to a film soundtrack comprised of brief sonic snapshots.

And yet *Visions of Us on the Land* finds Jurado at his most accessible. The 17 tracks represent some of his grandest, most lushly arranged works, even if they're designed as a series of moments rather than hooks. "TAQOMA" emerges as svelte retro-pop, whereas "Exit 353" comes across as a rather haunting scene where layered vocals and harmonies play the victims of a buzzing, side-sweeping guitar. "Cinco de Tomorrow" feels like a modern Western, with a galloping beat, starlight electronic twinkles, and a strumming that conveys lonesome-cowboy toughness.



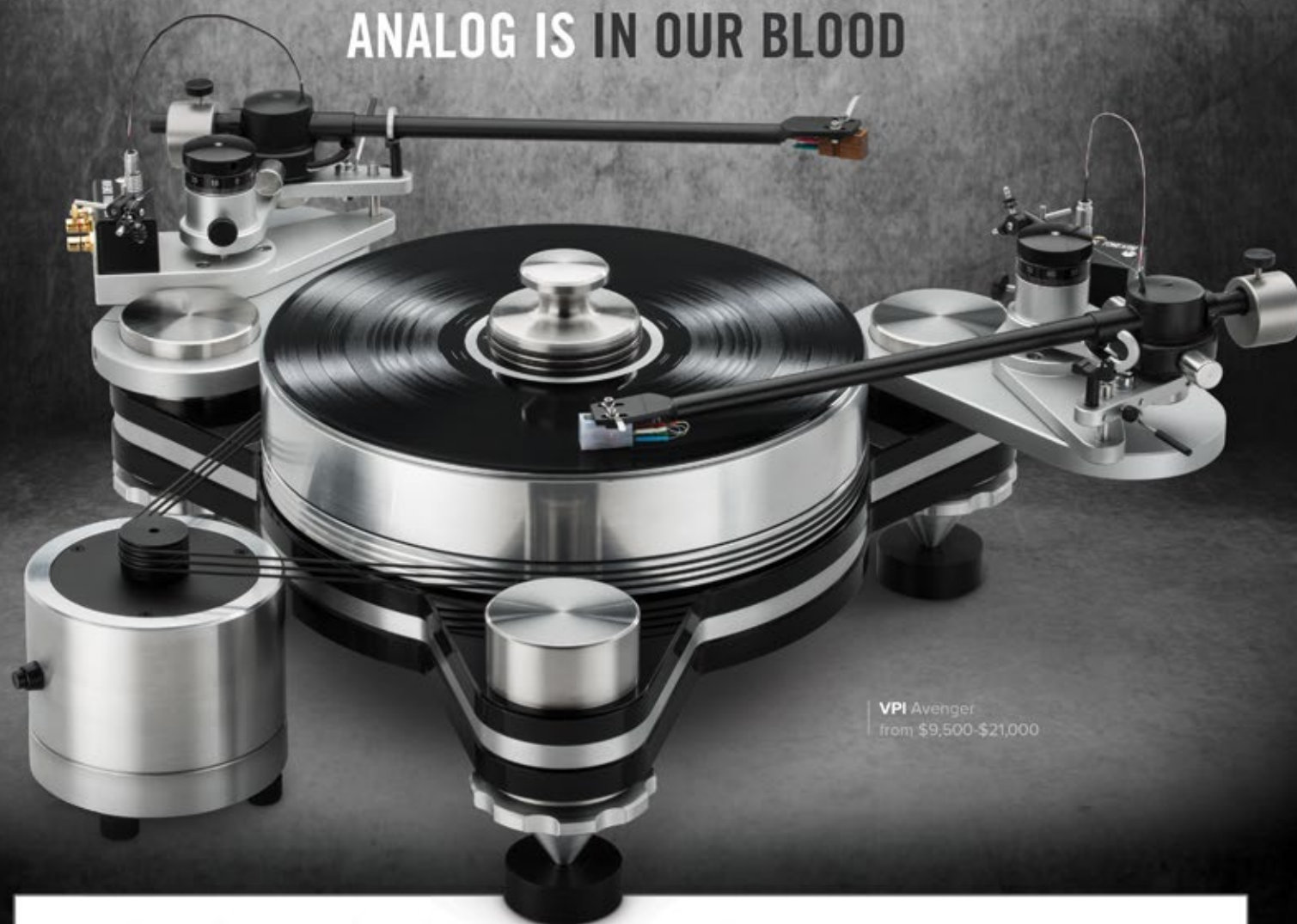
©Photo by Elise Tyler

"Orphans in the Key of E" is all acoustic late-night sedateness, but images of shattered glasses and open cash registers lend an eerie feel. It equates to a harrowing setting where we just miss out on the action.

For all the asphalt reveries and romanticizing, an underling sense that a rather familiar (and relatable) connection is lost runs throughout the work. A delicate slow-dance dedicated to a lost love, "Kola" ends the album with a man looking back at his life and seeing only heartbreak. "On the Land Blues" is sparser, even more plaintive, with a piano underlying the torment of being alone. "Better a ghost than a living man," Jurado sings, his voice trailing off into a falsetto.

Over time, *Visions of Us on the Land* starts to reveal itself less as an album about filling up the gas tank and setting off toward destinations unknown. Rather, it plays up tricks of the mind—the sonic fragments and random trains of thought that accompany the slow descent into becoming a hermit. It's still a roadmap, just one that unfolds like a cautionary tale. —**Todd Martens**

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Loretta Lynn

Full Circle

Sony Legacy, LP or CD

I clearly remember seeing Loretta Lynn perform at an outdoor festival on a scorching day in July 2011. Despite the oppressive heat, the country queen, then in her late 70s, wore a floor-length lavender evening gown. Halfway through her set, she announced her backing band would perform a few songs. I expected Lynn to take a well-earned break backstage to cool off in an air-conditioned dressing room. But the coal miner's daughter was having none of that. A chair was summarily brought out for Miss Lynn, who sat onstage like downhome royalty before soon rising to complete a killer performance.

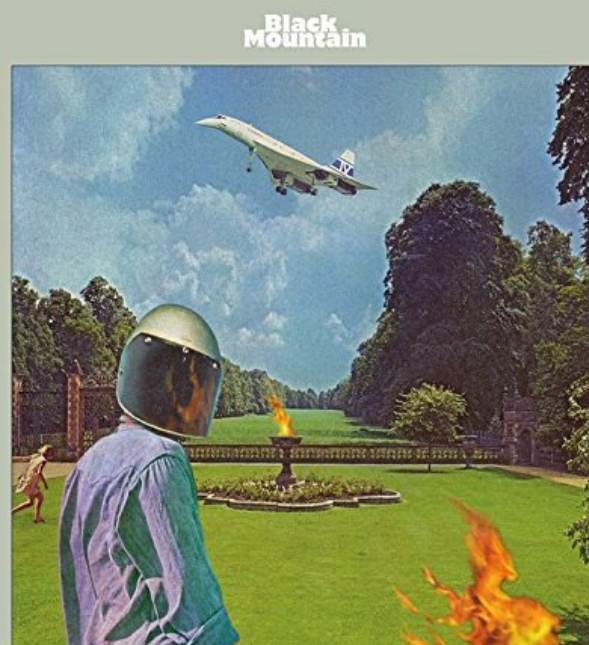
These moments came to mind when I saw the cover of Lynn's new release, *Full Circle*. It depicts the same dress, contemplative pose, fragile beauty, and iron resolve. At the tender age of 83, this American icon is still holding her stage—and how.

Full Circle arrives as her first new studio album since 2004's Jack White-helmed *Van Lear Rose*. Produced by her daughter Patsy Lynn Russell and John Carter Cash (the son of Johnny and June), these 13 newly recorded tracks cherry-pick from Loretta's hits, popular standards, influential songs of her youth, and recently written tunes. There's the jealous-wife smackdown "Fist City," the Carter Family's traditional tale "Black Jack David," and the 1950s pop hit "Secret Love."

At first blush, the track list seems sturdy but not particularly original or risky. But soon enough, even the most familiar numbers sound fresh. Remarkably strong in voice, Lynn brings a directness and honesty to even the most well-worn material. She doesn't just resuscitate songs; she invests them with new emotional life. The results are often breathtaking.

Recognizing the tone of the gentle song cycle, Russell and Cash's production never turns aggressive or fussy. It puts Lynn at the center of every song in all her unvarnished, candid power. She is alternately sassy, sweet, rueful, and resolute. Her interpretation of T. Graham Brown's "Wine Into Water," an alcoholic's desperate prayer, remains nakedly human from start to finish. Willie Nelson joins Lynn on the mortality duet "Lay Me Down." These two musical titans do a masterful job delivering the lyrics with touching understatement: "There are no tears where I am bound / And I'll be at peace when they lay me down."

It becomes hard not to grow verklempt over these words of acceptance in the face of death, delivered with such heart, beauty, and conviction. The song serves as a reminder that we are very lucky to be living in an age when Loretta Lynn continues to make vital music. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Black Mountain

IV

Jagjaguwar, 2LP or CD

Hard rock, in the hands of Black Mountain, gets a mystical and cosmic makeover on *IV*. Guitar riffs abound, but alien synthesizers and camp-fire acoustics keep the surprises coming. Still, the greatest revelation on *IV*, Black Mountain's first proper album in six years, is that the band conjures such a coherent vision. The universe here doubles as a hippie utopia gone doom-and-gloom—a mantra laid out in the eight-and-a-half-minute opening track, “Mothers of the Sun.” It comes on as an epic slow build, one where analog electronics speak in Morse code and guitars arrive only to go all fire and brimstone. Toss in a vaguely church-like organ and choir, and borderline cultish lyrics, and you get the picture.

While Black Mountain's pace often varies, “Mothers of the Sun” serves as a tone-setter. On *IV*, illicit acts occur in a graveyard in one song, ghostly chains rattle in another, and death and suicide make multiple appearances. It's dark, and at times heavy, but never feels oppressive. Like it did on 2010's *Wilderness Heart*, Black Mountain delivers a heady dose of psychedelics with Sabbath-meets-Zeppelin-meets-Roxy Music influences. Occasionally, the ensemble comes off like a folk band. On the fast-rush of “Florian Saucer Attack,” the British Columbia-bred collective takes on the form of a punk band from outer space.

Since the bulk of Black Mountain's five members remain involved in a myriad of other projects—vocalist/guitarist Stephen McBean leads the harder-edged, L.A.-based Pink Mountaintops, for instance—albums come slowly. But the time away did the band well. With each passing work, Black Mountain sounds less and less steeped in nostalgia and more and more coated in weirdness.



©Photo by Magdalena Wosinska

Check the fuzzy, buzzy “You Can Dream,” which sounds as if it was recorded in a beehive outfitted with disco trappings. Electronics tip and tap before going full video game, and heavily layered vocals assume hypnotic, circuitous routes. On the opposite end of the spectrum is “Line Them All Up,” as wide-open as a Western at its start as it is lush and operatic in its middle.

Increasingly, Black Mountain's not-so-secret weapon arrives courtesy of the dual vocals of McBean and Amber Webber. They each approach Black Mountain as if fronting two completely different groups. He is a bit stern—a little no-nonsense, if you will—and she more arms-wide-open and free. When the two play give-and-take, the songs spark with trippy, inescapable tension. “Deflector,” driven by Colin Cowan's funk-like bass, alternates between a slinky, sinister vibe in its verses and Webber's more approachable,

flower-power strength on choruses. Hand-claps and choral-tinged background vocals split the difference. The combination instills a foreboding, for-whom-the-bell-tolls nature to “Cemetery Bleeding,” while the serene acoustics, scattered rhythms, and hovering keyboards add up to create a pleadingly melancholic tale in “Crucify Me.”

While not quite escaping its “Dark Side of the Moon” tendencies, “Space to Bakersfield” creates a starry-eyed lullaby, with slippery guitar notes and barely-there harmonies drifting in and out. Is there anybody else out there, the band wonders, only occasionally seeming interested in the answer. “Don't get out of your head,” Webber warns on “Constellations.” “We're off losing our minds.”

Someone, after all, needs to stay closer to earth. —**Todd Martens**



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

Why does anyone start a loudspeaker company?

Good question. Ignoring the obvious answer (because they're nuts), it might just be because they felt compelled to.

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.

At Dali the company motto states, 'In admiration of music.'

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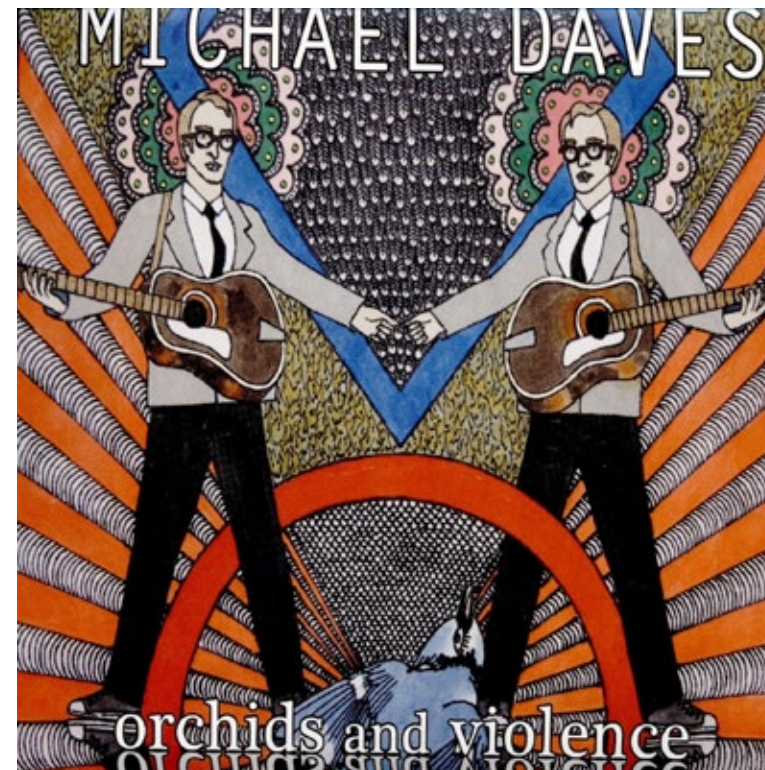
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MUSIC



Michael Daves

Orchids and Violence
Nonesuch, 2CD

There's never been a shortage of artists that think it's a really cool idea to record rocked-out versions of decidedly non-rock material. The mixed results range from cartoonish yet weirdly compelling psychodrama (Sid Vicious' epic mauling of Frank Sinatra's "My Way") to underwhelming ego exercise (Sonic Youth's cover of the Carpenters' "Superstar"). Michael Daves throws his hat into the ring as the latest contender to take up this challenge. A Grammy-nominated guitarist and singer that has collaborated with mandolin wiz Chris Thile, Daves is a key figure on New York's bluegrass scene.

His self-produced double album *Orchids and Violence* arrives as a project with a gimmicky concept. The first disc contains traditional acoustic versions of 12 songs, mostly classics drawn from bluegrass and country canons. The second disc features the exact same fare rendered as post-punk electric numbers, all roughed-up to emphasize every squall of distortion and feedback.

On the acoustic set, Daves enjoys backing from a lineup of young roots-music hotshots—banjo player Noam Pikelny and mandolinist-singer Sarah Jarosz included. For the electric takes, Daves heads a band that counts his bassist wife Jessi Carter and drummer Kid Millions as participants. The acoustic sides are played with blistering precision. Daves prevails as a genuinely gifted picker with a cutting voice best suited for the high, lonesome sound of songs like "Pretty Polly" and "Dark Angel."

But when Daves tries to innovate on electric tracks, he relies almost exclusively on grungy effects and an overcooked hipster aestheticism. His decision to run iconic hillbilly tunes through a too-cool-for-school filter quickly gets old. Most of these versions feel unnecessary, like the culmination of a garage band messing around on a Saturday afternoon. *(continued)*



©Photo by Wendy George

The production also takes on an unvarying tact: Turn the distortion to 11, drench every instrumental note with a patina of distress, and alternately plod and wank away. Thin and homogenous, it stamps the entire disc with enervating sameness.

To wit, "June Apple" sounds peppy and crisp in its acoustic form. When souped-up, the song becomes a long trudge through stuttering fuzzy guitar and primitive drums. "The Dirt That You Throw" proves equally dense. Its mournful undertow would be better served by a quieter atmospheric take. The low point comes with both covers of "A Good

Year for the Roses," George Jones' tragic opera hit. Daves lacks the gravitas as a frontman to convey the narrator's emotional devastation. The bluegrass version seems competent but pales in the face of the countrypolitan beauty of the original. Worse, the electric attempt crashes about as a flat, loud, and graceless performance.

Daves possesses an array of undeniable talents, but re-framing bluegrass and country evergreens as distorted post-punk songs does not count as one of them. When it comes to this double album, less by half truly would have been more.
—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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Truth in Sound



Operators

Blue Wave

Last Gang Records, LP or CD

The Operators sound ready for a revolution. At least some of the time. Mix jagged guitars with aggressive synthesizers, and add in Dan Boeckner's out-of-breath snarl, and this music feels ripe for a protest—or the protest after-party, to be more accurate. One moment, Boeckner sings of election fatigue. During another, he's practically demanding an execution. An 80s new-wave bent underlies it all, but the retro dance grooves get filtered through a combat-boot march that dreams of better days to come. "Maybe someday soon everything will be possible," Boeckner pleads on "Evil," just before a faint glimmer of handclaps strikes a note of optimism.

Blue Wave serves the debut from a band of familiar faces. Boeckner's best-known group, indie rockers Wolf Parade, recently reunited, but Operators have more in common with another of his acts—the Handsome Furs, a group he shared with his ex-wife, Alexei Perry Cox. Handsome Furs may have ended more or less in divorce, but the duo's 2011 record *Sound Kapital* moved in a heightened political direction. *Blue Wave* doesn't quite pick up where the Handsome Furs left off. Lyrically, there's a more personal touch here, and there's a broader anything-goes musical approach that occasionally proves detrimental. Overall, however, the set projects a punk-meets-nightclub attitude.

Drummer Sam Brown, a collaborator with Boeckner in the Divine Fits, lends a garage-hewn, DIY-feel to the rhythms. Meanwhile, electronic musician Devojka concocts primitive, digital landscapes. "Rome" begins with a dark-eyeliner rumble, expands into something out of a horror soundtrack, and finally settles into a more comfortable guitar rush. The computers get more candy-coated on "Control," at least until Boeckner sings of living in a "world of destruction." The song zigs and zags its way around neon-hued beats and serrated riffs.

All told, it comes across as one part *Blade Runner* and one part "Clash City Rockers": There may be a desolate future vision, but there's also a call to arms. It's not all so angry. "Nobody" functions as an anti-love anthem that feels ripped from a John Hughes film. "Cold Wave" shimmies akin to a lost New Order cut from circa 1989.

Operators suffer when the band thinks it's more experimental than its sound suggests. The lovelorn title track goes haywire when a saxophone saunters into the mix. "Mission Creep," likewise, goes overboard with horns, as the back-and-forth dissonance between the streaking brass notes and on-the-fritz electronics becomes uncomfortable. After a strong start, the album drags at the midpoint. Things pick back up after the boxy, buzzing "Shape of Things."

Think of "Bring Me the Head" as a polygraph gone playful, as razor-thin robotics skip all over the verses. Then there's the rock ballad "Space Needle," which ends the set with a forceful, topical exclamation point. "You've got rights," sings Boeckner as keyboards create a skyward lightshow. It's as much a wake-up call as it is an excuse to hug your neighbor.

—**Todd Martens**





TIMBRE TANTRUM

By Cat Parkay

Like many office workers in the knowledge economy, I find myself at a desk trying to get projects out the door before the weekend. As any functioning procrastinator would tell you, there's nothing like an impending head-on collision with a deadline to spark action. Pair with a driving beat and I'm launched into my own world of blazing productivity. Conspicuously large headphones help thwart would-be interruptions and transform me into a productivity machine.

Sound card swindle

But with any modestly up-graded headphones, office workers everywhere encounter the sad limitations of computer audio. Company-issued laptops make permanent modifications impractical or impossible, and upgrading personal computers gets expensive and tiresome. Like me, you are most likely listening on the go and at home across a variety of devices with sound cards that hobble the highest of resolution and negate any investments in improved headphones and speakers. Fortunately, the Emotiva Big Ego portable DAC can function across all of these scenarios to yield substantial improvements in sound quality for very little coin.

Down to earth with a good sense of humor

When I first got the Big Ego I admit I giggled at the name. Would this "big ego" help me confront the slings and arrows of the harsh world? The copy on the packaging was satisfyingly cheeky and irreverent, even hinting at the big egos of snobbish audiophiles. Tee hee, OK, you've got my attention. The packaging, user manual, and product itself are perfectly suited to give everyday listeners an accessible on-ramp to enjoying today's hi-res audio downloads without the expectation that everyone must become hifi aficionados.

The Big Ego is part of a trend towards democratization of hifi enjoyment. Don't we all deserve to reap the benefits of the hi-res streaming subscriptions we're paying for? Do we not deserve to see what our fancy new studio headphones are truly capable of?

All of that counts for nada if the device is a hassle to use. My test for user friendliness and intuitive design is to see how far I can get without referencing the user manual. And when I do, how quickly can I skim to identify the information I need? In this case, I immediately discovered the driverless mode which was by far the fastest, easiest way to get up and running straight from the box. If the "filter select button" were labeled on the device itself as "driverless mode" I wouldn't have needed the manual at all, but it's easy enough to remember – simply hold the button as you plug into any



computer's USB port and voilà – greatly improved sound! It's that simple to use the Big Ego with a Mac as no drivers are required. Because it's possible to stream higher resolution audio files on a Mac, this would be the ideal setup; however, PC users like me will hardly be disappointed. Besides, we're used to installing drivers and calling IT...



Driver, take me to Funkytown, please

Next up was getting the Big Ego firing on all cylinders so I could listen to files beyond 96k. Finding and installing the correct driver took less than five minutes. I get a bit nervous when installing things on my work computer at my non-audio oriented day job and occasionally encounter limitations with various “administrative rights.” For example, I can’t save documents to a thumb drive because the buggers are locked down. Bah, the injustice! But fortunately for my ears, sanity, and IT department, the Emotiva driver is a cinch!

What I love about the construction and design of the Big Ego is its quality feel and portable size, yet it’s powerful enough to do double duty for a proper, stay-at-home hifi system. This makes it a great value for anyone looking to affordably raise the bar across all listening platforms. The anodized finish feels slick without being flashy, and the indicator lights showing the sample rate is a nice touch of geek chic. A camera converter makes it compatible with my iPhone, and I could easily see myself carrying this around in my handbag for improved listening on the go or in flight. And the black, rectangular shape

means that, from a distance, it looks like just another laptop charger which would minimize curious glances and potential thievery around the office. Of the three headphones I tested it with, one had a right-angle plug which had a tendency to pull out of the recessed jack. I’d recommend a straight plug or adapter to ensure a reliable, fuss-free connection, especially on the go. I’d also love to see a volume knob on the device, but to do so would jack up the price to another level and affect the lightweight portability.

Warning, may cause swagger

Let’s talk sound. The biggest difference in any mode was definitely volume – more of it, lots more. Switching back and forth between my computer’s regular audio jack and the Big Ego I have to take my headphones off and adjust the volume to avoid blasting my eardrums. More importantly, with added volume comes more energy and expansiveness. Every genre sounds more exciting with less distortion at rock-out levels. After adjusting the volume, I can tell the difference in sound quality at lower levels too, confirming it isn’t just my desire to turn everything up to eleven talking.

Even with standard-issue iPhone earbuds the differences are notable with richer, fuller sound – about as much as cheap-o buds can muster. Step up to a pair of Sennheiser earbuds and there is a clear difference in staging and clarity. With my go-to office headgear (noise cancelling Beats) the full bass I love is significantly tighter and even more fun with the definition and texture Dre’s been criticized for lacking. The side-by-side comparison makes me keenly aware of just how compressed everything sounds from my computer. Eww. I don’t know if I can go back, which may be the only real downside. That and the fact that my enthusiastic head-bobbing and toe-tapping has become a distraction around the office.

The Big Ego takes my usual GSD (get shit done) playlist and boosts its ability to kick my butt and launch my productivity into overdrive (as evidenced by my completing this article and retaining my day job – phew!).

Overall, Emotiva nails it with an affordable and reliable piece of hardware that will delight a wide range of listeners. Unlike most “big egos,” this one isn’t fragile or easily threatened. Now get back to work! ●

www.emotiva.com \$219



FEATURE

A Welcome Addition to the Fleet

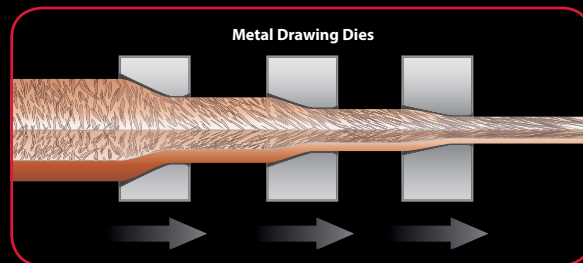
Paradigm's Prestige 75F Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

The Prestige series is new to Paradigm, replacing the popular and respected Studio Reference line. Wiping the slate clean from past designs, the most obvious design change is the aluminum woofer cones. Long term fans of the marque will also notice that the Prestige lineup features a more traditional, rectangular cabinet design; absent is the teardrop design of old. Those not familiar with Paradigm take note: every speck of the Prestige 75F, including the drivers, is built in its Canadian facility. Paradigm has one of North America's largest anechoic chambers and a crack group of engineers to interpret said data. They look far more expensive than their list price of \$2,999 per pair.



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

The Prestige 75F sounds both new and familiar. A clean midband, extended high frequencies and wide dynamic range remain intact, yet this new speaker fleshes out the lower frequency range, both in the upper and lower bass regions in a way that past designs have not. Fourplay's debut album, with its combination of club jazz riffs and hints of funk, fills every crevice of the listening space, with the energetic track "Bali Run" pressurizing the room with bass, clearly illustrating the sheer weight now on tap.

Thanks to three 5.5 inch drivers, embodying Paradigm's new X-PAL design, featuring ribbed surrounds, and etched aluminum cones mated to 1.5-inch high temperature voice coils, the Prestige 75F can negotiate the toughest passages with ease. The two bottom drivers control the bass frequencies, with the top driver covering the midrange. Finally, the high frequencies are delivered via a 1-inch X-PAL metal dome sporting a protective lens cap with seven circular rows of holes getting ever smaller before a solid center; its main job is to act as a plug, blocking out-of-phase frequencies. It succeeds brilliantly, and a quick comparison to my Studio 40v4 and 60v5 leaves the older speakers sounding forward in comparison, where the new speaker is open and smooth – refinement at its best! *(continued)*



FEATURE

Superb sound and stylish too

If you've been following current trends in the plethora of home renovation shows on your favorite cable network, you can see how the Prestige 75F will easily fit into a wide range of current styling themes. Our review pair beautifully combines the dark walnut cabinet with the brushed aluminum of the drivers. If your taste leans more towards traditional furnishings, you may prefer the black grilles on for a more understated look. Sans grille, the aluminum cones look right at home next to your favorite mid-century piece from Herman Miller. An informal poll of guests' spouses all gave these handsome speakers the thumbs up, for what that's worth – not always an easy feat.

Starting with the Cardas Golden Ratio setup scheme (basically an equilateral triangle) careful optimization took a bit over an hour, but was well worth it. Ultimately, the 75Fs find their magic about four inches out from the suggested placement with a few extra degrees of toe-in, adding the last bit of dimensionality to the soundstage. The upper and lower rear ports perform best some 38 inches from the back wall in my 9x12 foot listening space, with GIK 242 panels behind and to the sides of the speakers further clarifying the sonic experience.

The keyboard solo in Claire Martin's "The Man Who Sold the World" is warm, strong and

resonant, highlighting her Latin influences, yet the 75F handles these complex passages while keeping the bass, violin and percussion all distinct. No easy task, especially at high volume. Moving to a larger 15 x 19 room and changing the program to classic rock, Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* proves even more immersive and expansive.

Thanks in part to a high sensitivity rating of 92dB (into 8 ohms), the 75Fs are incredibly easy to drive with any amplification and they don't require a ton of power to sing. Even those starting their hifi journey with a vintage receiver can expect great results. After spending time in both small and medium rooms, the 75Fs paint a larger sonic picture in a larger room. But should your listening room be on the smallish side, perhaps one of the smaller Prestige models might be in order. Your Paradigm dealer will be able to get you sorted out.

Good regardless of program

An engaging speaker will have you perusing your music collection to find its limit. While my Harbeth Compact 7s offer a bit more fairy dust through the midband, the Paradigms are a much better all-rounder, with solid bass down to 30hz and a level of dynamic punch that the Brit monitors can't come close to matching, so as always it becomes a matter of personal taste. Because the 75Fs are so dynamic, a multichannel system built around these speakers seems equally intriguing. *(continued)*

FEATURE



FEATURE



A number of late night listening sessions transported me from Sunflower Bean's psychedelic sound to the more traditional vocal musings of Rita Wilson. Where the Sunflower Bean album better illustrated the Paradigm's ability to produce a big, wide soundstage, and the ability to give depth to a fairly dense mix, Wilson's rendition of "Wichita Lineman" showed off a solid, clean, solo vocal character. Ok, I had to listen to some Indigo Girls too, yet I was equally impressed with the opulent tone in country crooner Don Williams's whiskey laden baritone vocal. The nuances provided by all four artists were portrayed with ease via these speakers, regardless of volume level.

Muhsinah and a little bit of Deadmau5 showcased the low frequency grunt the 75Fs can provide. Pushing the volume had a few things in the listening room not nailed down moving nearly as much

as the woofer cones. And that's a good thing. While the 75F is a great all-around speaker, its greatest strength is its ability to play really big and keep its composure. The melancholy horns filling up both the horizontal and vertical space in "I'm Torn Up" by St. Paul and the Broken Bones do just that, while their tune "Call Me" casts a different light on the presentation, offering pinpoint clarity in this mix, still retaining the punch and weight from the track before.

Even as a longtime Paradigm owner, I wasn't prepared for the performance their newest offering delivers. The Prestige 75F escalates past Paradigm strengths, adding a level of resolution and refinement that is rarely available at this price. Add major factory and dealer support and that adds up to a winner. This one's easy to hand one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016 to. Bravo!

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WINO

By Monique Meadows

Riesling!

YES, RIESLING —
THE MISUNDERSTOOD,
SENSATIONAL WINE.




4 MODERN GERMAN RIESLINGS TO GET YOU REACQUAINTED

The world has had a love-hate relationship with Riesling wine. Wine critics and those passionate about Rieslings describe the wines using words like “sumptuous,” “luminous,” “translucent,” and “mouth-watering.”

But listening to many wine drinkers, what you will usually hear said about Riesling is “I hate Riesling” and that it’s “too sweet.”

Riesling is not the go-to wine that Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc have both become; that “s” becomes a “z” and not a wine name on everyone’s must-grab list for Friday night. “Reece-ling,” exclaims acclaimed British wine writer and critic Jancis Robinson, “must be the world’s most misunderstood, and mispronounced, grape variety.” Back in the 1970s and ’80s, the U.S. market was filled with very sweet styles of German Riesling, one popular brand in a blue bottle with nuns on the label, another with an arched black cat. It’s the only white wine I remember my father bringing out at the dinner table on certain occasions and possibly on “ham and macaroni & cheese” night. My father knew good wine, but before the 1990s, the Rieslings in the marketplace were very sweet and mass-produced for the American consumer. Riesling was that tall, elegant bottle in an era of jug wines.



The American wine scene has changed and, often with the help of local wine shops, consumers are being reintroduced to Riesling and its many expressions of the famous grape. While Riesling is planted around the world – in Austria’s Wachau region, the Alsace region of France, the Clare and Eden Valleys in Australia, and in the states of New York and Washington – it is in Germany where the grape and the wine are the dominant focus, the passion and the star. Riesling is its most famous and most widely planted grape.

In Germany’s colder climate, top vineyard sites are planted on the south facing steep slopes of key rivers to take full advantage of any ray of sunshine and warmth, from the sun and from reflection off the river, to ripen the grapes. Riesling is a hardy grape, ripens late and in Germany is harvested at different times for sufficient sugar levels to produce a range of styles of Riesling: Qualitätswein, Kabinett, Spätlese, Auslese, Beerenauslese and Trockenbeerenauslese. Styles range from simple quaffing wines to exemplary, cellar-worthy bottles; from completely dry Riesling table wines to the sweet dessert wines from late harvest grapes. Because of Riesling’s high acidity and bold, expressive flavors, many quality bottles are able to cellar age for years and develop into extraordinary wines brimming with a fine-tuned balance of that

“mouth-watering” acidity, rich body and captivating aromas and flavors – descriptions of apples, lime, peach and even orange marmalade. And a prominent mineral profile: “wet stone,” a tinge of “lit match,” with a “diesel” edge on some, depending on the vineyard’s soil – such as the famous blue slate of Mosel region. Riesling is a sip like no other. “Riesling is so digitally precise,” exudes wine importer and writer Therry Theise, in his book *Reading Between the Wines*, “so finely articulate, so pixilated and pointillist in detail that other wines seem almost mute by comparison.”

It’s an absolutely versatile wine that can not only shine and seduce on its own in the glass, pulling you in to a symphony of aromas and flavors, but also be the perfect match with more than Chinese takeout or sauerkraut. Riesling will magnificently pair with roasted fresh snapper with citrus and jalapeño to fish tacos, from a curry tinged in lime zest to barbecued pork. Think of dishes with tricky, spicy or out-of-the box flavors and chances are a Riesling will not only be the perfect match but also transform the meal to something pretty exciting.

Here are four Riesling picks – all from Germany – all of them easy on the wallet, ready for your glass, and ready for summer. Serve it chilled and with friends.

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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Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound - October 2015

"GamuT's RS3 standmount monitors are one of the two finest loudspeakers I've ever had in my home. I've prized the time I've spent with them because, in very many ways, they've shown me a way forward toward higher levels of performance that I thought possible"

Chris Martens, Hi-Fi+, September 2015

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

Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio - THE SHOW, Newport 2015

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

John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014



TONE STYLE

NIK WEIS SELECTIONS

Urban Riesling,
Mosel 2014 \$12

Nik Weis is a third generation wine-maker and owner of Weingut St. Urbans-Hof, one of the prominent wineries in the famed Mosel region. Sourcing exceptional wine from neighbor vineyards, he produces his "Urban" Riesling in a modern, fresh style. It's all here in a tremendous value of a wine: Mosel blue slate mineral, exuberant acidity, fruit and floral aromas and ripe fruit flavors. Urban is produced from Riesling grapes grown in vineyards in Mehring. Nik's father-in-law is a grape grower in the town, with friends with equally superior vineyard sites along the Mosel River where the vines enjoy perfect conditions on steep slopes to catch the sunlight. The soil there is made up of decomposed blue slate rock, the stone that gives this wine its fantastic minerality all the way to the lovely finish.

The name "Urban", while calling up images of a city lifestyle, is actually a nod to Saint Urban of Langres, a bishop of Langres, France, in the late 300s – a French saint who later became the patron saint of vintners because of his affection for the vineyard workers and vintners, and they for him.

"I wanted my URBAN Riesling to be a true Mosel wine," states Weis. "I wanted it to be the best ambassador for the Mosel region: Honest, authentic, with a true origin. That means that it has a complex, smoky and floral nose, a juicy, fruity elegant mouthfeel with a minerality that finishes off dry and leaves a desire for the next sip. In a way, the URBAN Riesling is the gateway or the window to my world of wine."

WEINGUT GUNDERLOCH Jean-Baptiste Riesling
Kabinett, Rheinhessen 2013 \$19

Begun by banker Carl Gunderloch in the late 1800s, Weingut Gunderloch is one of the most highly regarded wine estates in Germany's Rheinhessen appellation. Gunderloch invested in what are considered some of the best vineyard sites of the "Rote Hang" (red slope) area. Fritz Hasselbach, the fifth generation, took charge of the cellar in the mid-1980s and drew critical acclaim to the estate after it received 100 point scores from Wine Spectator magazine for their TBA (Trokenbeer-enauslese) dessert wines in 1992, 1996 and 2001 – the only estate in the world to claim the achievement of multiple-year perfect scores.

The estate is located in Nackenheim, a small village on the banks of the Rhine River where it sits at the bottom of the famous Rothenberg hillside vineyard site. Their Grand Cru "Große Gewächse" – a new vineyard classification in Germany – vineyards, the Nackenheimer Rothenberg and the Niersteiner Pettenthal, sit atop soils of the distinctive iron-rich red slate. The estate-bottled Prädikatswein "Jean Baptiste" Kabinett is a medium-dry wine showing a light sweetness that is balanced beautifully with bright acidity and minerality. It is the estate's only classic medium-dry Kabinett wine. An array of exciting aromas jump on the nose – lime and grapefruit mingling with vibrant peach and a touch of herb. Strokes of juicy citrus fruit and white pepper spice follow with a mineral streak into a lengthy, flavor-rich finish.

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MUSICAL ECSTASY

SYBILLE KUNTZ Riesling Trocken, Mosel 2012 \$26

A female winemaker and winery chairman in a male-dominated German wine industry, Sybille Kuntz has been making estate Rieslings for over 30 years and has garnered recognition for her refined, drier style of Riesling. She is referred to as a “celebrated pioneer of full-bodied dry Mosel Rieslings” by acclaimed British wine writer and critic Jancis Robinson. In 2011 Kuntz and husband Markus added five wines to their Riesling offerings to include wines representing the traditional full spectrum of German winemaking styles, including a Trockenbeerenauslese – the sweetest level. Situated in the Mosel region, Sybille decided to focus exclusively on Riesling and is inspired by the dry white wine of her European neighbors. “I wanted to concentrate myself on the specialty of our region,” she explains, “and, for me, that meant growing Riesling only. My Riesling would have to be of the highest quality, of course, grown as naturally as possible; however, as opposed to the traditional light and sweetish style of Mosel Rieslings of the 1980s, it had to be dry. After all, my taste and my ideas about wine quality had been honed by the great dry wines of France and Italy.”

Practicing organic farming since the '90s, Sybille and Markus achieved the “Bio-Weingut” Organic Certification in 2013. Their vines average 45–80 years old and many of the grapes used come from their Niederberg-Helden vineyard in the town of Lieser located in what is considered a prized site of the “Middle Mosel.” Their oldest vines here were planted in the 1920s on the estate’s best and steepest slopes. This crisp, dry “Trocken” Riesling is produced from grapes growing on Blue Devonian Slate soil. The wine is a Qualitätswein, picked at the beginning of the harvest and is a thrilling Riesling with bracing acidity.

This sensational dry Riesling offers up expressive stone aromatics on the nose leading into crisp, vivacious citrus flavors that carry through the long finish.

TONE STYLE





GUSTAV ADOLF SCHMITT

Niersteiner Gutes Domtal
Riesling Spätlese,
Rheinhessen 2014 **\$14**

A pioneer in introducing German wines to overseas markets, the Gustav Adolf Schmitt winery has been making wines from some of the best vineyards around the famous town of Nierstein in the Rheinhessen region since 1618. Nierstein enjoys a prime location on the Rhine River. Today a modern winery, Gustav Adolf Schmitt has since become a part of producer Bernkastel-Kues with almost 250 acres of vineyards.

This nice example of a Spätlese Riesling comes from vineyards of an area known as the Gutes Domtal Grosslage. It is a wine rich in body with juicy fruit flavors of citrus, fresh orange and peach in full harmony with its brimming acidity. A Spätlese, the grapes are picked later in the season for good ripeness and sufficient sugar level, showing expressive floral and fruit aromas and a delicious long finish loaded with fruit flavor. In addition to spicy and rich dishes, try this with blue cheese. The match of the slightly sweet wine with the sharp and pungent personality of the cheese is material for swooning.

The next classic.



Impressive performance capabilities, highlighted by its detailed high frequency resolution, incredible transparency, powerful dynamics and remarkably deep bass extension make the X18 ideal for small to medium sized rooms and simply one of the finest compact loudspeakers Dynaudio has ever developed.

Hamster Maturity

The Kia Soul with Harman/Infinity Sound

By Jeff Dorgay



Remember those cute Kia ads with the hip hop hamsters singing “you can get a this, or you can get a that”? The Kia Soul redefined the mini crossover

market (which as a bona fide car enthusiast, I didn’t even know *existed* five years ago) with a shape that was less boxy than the Scion and a much cooler interior, that was dedicated to in-car entertainment. It featured a big subwoofer in the rear compartment that was mostly boom, and color-adjustable lighting in the cabin that could be set for various moods or to pulse in time with the music.

Don’t laugh – the last S-Class Mercedes we auditioned with a full Burmester sound also lets you turn your car into a mobile discoteque, so perhaps the hamsters at Kia are onto something. The car itself was pretty primitive, with a dinky 1.6 liter four-cylinder motor, mooshy suspension and a three-speed autobox that defined pokey. But when you’re rocking out, who cares?

tone style

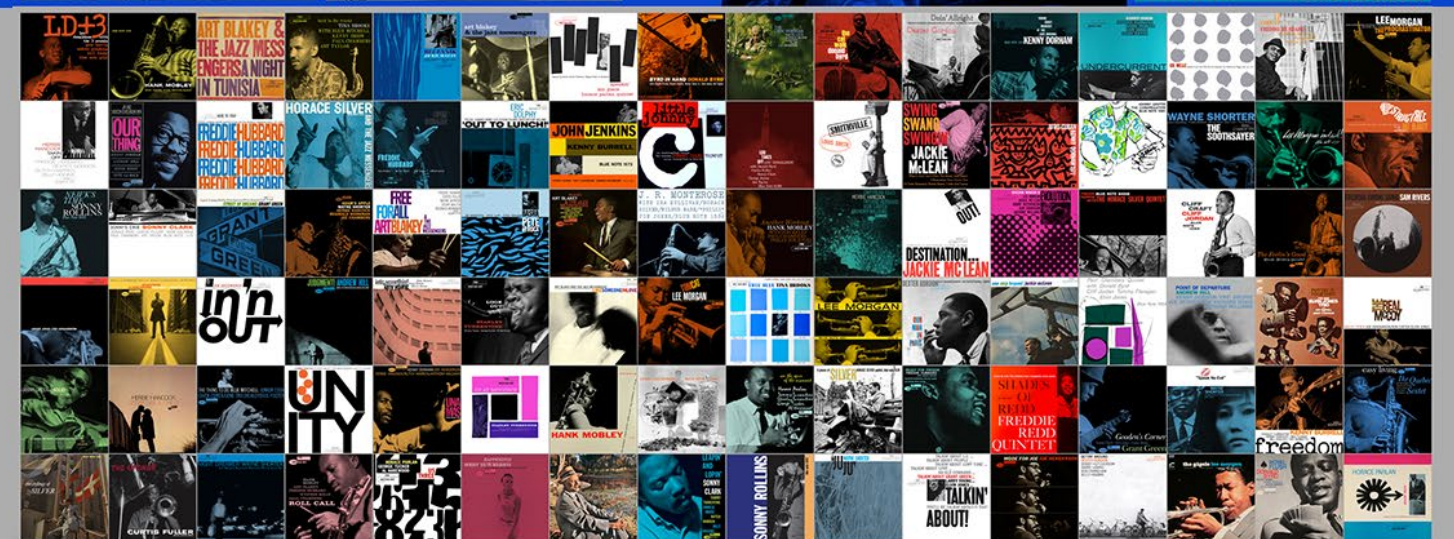
The only way you can't rock out with the Soul is via your CD collection. Boomers beware, this car is aimed squarely at the Millennials; there's no CD drive to be found. Considering how harsh the mobile environment is, this is probably a decision for the best. USB, Bluetooth and the Aux jack rule the day with the Soul, and to take advantage of streaming your favorite Tidal tracks, your smartphone must be connected via USB as well.

Neither the Kia nor the Infinity websites tell us much more than that the car has eight speakers and a subwoofer installed with "an external amplifier," so it's impossible to really know how much power is on tap. Getting the upgraded system, which sounds miles better than the standard system, will set you back \$1,800 as part of the Audio Package that includes a larger control screen, lit speakers, a voice-activated nav system and a few other goodies. Of course, you'll probably want that stuff anyway; it's just a shame you have to be held hostage to buy a nav system to get better sound.

Running through a wide range of tunes, the Soul has plenty of soul on tap. Whether blasting Pink Floyd, Courtney Barnett or the Superfly soundtrack (which is kind of fun with the purple lights pulsing on a late-night drive), this system rocks. Judging by everything else we've had the pleasure to sample, there are probably at least a few hundred watts on tap. Where something like the top Burmester or Meridian systems appear to have bottomless power on tap, the Soul runs out of steam when asked to play EDM or hip hop tracks at ridiculously high volumes. But that would just distract from your driving anyway, right? *(continued)*



gr thysel



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NAGRA
Swiss Made

tone style

Comparing the Soul side-by-side with a friend's new Porsche 911 with a Burmester upgrade, it's easy to see where the Infinity system's limits are. Highs are slightly more brittle and upper mids have a boominess that the tone controls won't address; however, in fairness, it does add a bit of warmth for those listening via MP3 files. The best sound quality is available via the AUX input, streaming 24/96 files from an early Astell & Kern player, with the output of the Apple iPod Classic streaming 16/44 not too far behind. Each offers a level of clarity that MP3 and even Tidal can't, because to get the best (i.e. least glitch) Tidal playback in my neck of the woods requires streaming at 320kb/sec. Those in other areas may be able to stream at a higher rate, so by all means investigate!

The car itself is a major update. Five g more expensive buys you a completely redesigned vehicle from top to bottom, with a cabin that is light years ahead of the first gen model. I suspect someone at KIA has been studying the Audi playbook pretty heavily. Where the original Soul feels cheap and tinny, the current model is posh. That's right, posh. This baby has three grades of leather better than what's available in my new BMW Z4, and said seats are heated *and* cooled. You don't get that in BMW world until you spend about 70 grand. (continued)





This level of finish is carried to the rest of the interior, with lovely padding on the doors and dash, and substantial switches where the earlier ones were prone to breakage. The only part of the Soul that feels a bit cheesy is the door handles, stamped out of a relatively lightweight silver plastic. Rumor has it that years ago Dan D'Agostino of Krell had the same problem with his Porsche 911 and machined some in his shop from billet aluminum. After-market manufacturers, take note.

Out on the road, the new 164 hp, 2.0 liter engine mated to a six-speed automatic won't break any land speed records, but is vigorous enough to mingle with traffic, where the other was lackluster. The little four is smooth in operation and doesn't draw any attention to itself until you mash the go pedal down. At that moment you realize where the hamsters went; they're under the hood.

Suspension is still a bit on the comfy/mooshy side, and again, as a cruisemobile, you'll appreciate the comfort, but the Soul doesn't have the handling prowess of a BMW X1 with M suspension. And maybe it doesn't have to. Thanks to those comfy chairs and a very quiet interior, you will be having so much fun jamming out, you won't want to drive fast.

If you're looking for a great grocery getter/airport limo that won't break the bank or take all the garage space, consider the Kia Soul. And if you're a music lover, be sure to tick the box for the Infinity system. You'll regret it if you don't. ●

www.kia.com



Vintage Mic Showerhead

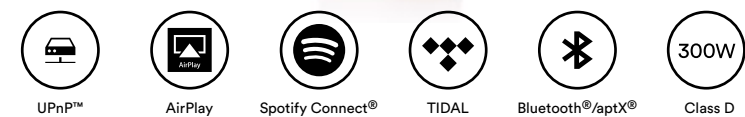
\$17.99
www.amazon.com

We have a saying around here that goes like this: “Those who can’t sing shouldn’t, and those who still insist on doing so should limit it to the shower.” Regardless of vocal skills, here’s the ultimate prop to enrich your singing while wet. Of course, it’s at Amazon....

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Apple Pencil for iPad Pro

\$99

www.apple.com

We're big Apple fans here at *TONEAudio*, and many years ago our publisher was a huge fan of the Wacom pressure sensitive tablet. As an early adopter of the original Apple Newton, the Apple Pencil is the match made in heaven that many of us have hoped for.

With amazing pressure sensitivity and a wide range of functions: to annotate existing files, edit photos or just as a finger substitute, the Pencil is a great addition to your pad productivity. However there are a couple of caveats. First, the instructions are nearly impossible to find. If you've just purchased one and find yourself perplexed, click here to get up to speed quickly. <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT205236>

Unlike most Apple products that arrive charged so you can use them immediately, the Pencil does not. Fortunately, it only needs to be plugged into your iPad for 30 seconds to get 15 minutes of drawing time. About an hour is required for full charge, either with a USB adaptor, or by plugging into the bottom of your phone or pad. This is somewhat precarious – with this large, skinny thing sticking out of your iPad, be sure to place it on a flat surface out of the way and be super careful as to where you put the end cap.

After trying a number of writing/drawing apps with the iPad Pro, Viet Tran's *Notes Plus* is a great all-rounder with a number of drawing functions. A wide range of paper stock, including graph paper, makes note and sketch pads a thing of the past, allowing you to easily upload or mail your latest doodles with ease. Best of all, the promise of handwriting recognition is finally realized. This should prove a blessing to travelers taking an iPad instead of a laptop on business trips. Scribbling down your ideas to translate later has never been easier. If only Siri understood voice commands this well.

Regardless of which apps you decide to pair your Pencil with, provided you have a good way to keep the Pencil close at hand, this is one of those accessories you'll be wondering how you ever did without.



Base Qi micro SD adaptor

\$24.99

www.amazon.com

Need more storage for your MacBook? Add a 200GB micro SD card (Amazon, \$79, of course...) and you've got it. Made from aluminum, the Base Qi is a lifesaver on a long trip, or for the power user who's already got their MacBook maxed out. You can always add an SD card adaptor via your USB port, not giving up photo functionality. There's no better way to add a second SSD to your Mac, and best of all, you don't have to crack the case.

Green Tea Kit Kat

\$8.99/bag

www.amazon.com

The eternal dilemma is how to snack on things that are at least somewhat healthy. Leave it to the Japanese to come up with a chocolatey, green tea coating for their Kit Kat bars! Definitely an acquired taste, but only a third of the nasties in the standard milk chocolate version. 65 calories in the green ones, 210 in the chocolate model and 4 grams of fat for the green vs. 12 for chocolate. So if you love the crunchy taste of Kit Kat and can get past the color, these might be your new favorite snack!



Atomic Audio Mac Mini Platform

\$350

www.atomicaudiolabs.com



The Atomic Audio Labs platform is just the ticket for those seeking to get all the details they can from their Mac-based computer audio, or who simply want to give their Mac a highly refined visual presentation. AAL specializes in creating elegant and sonically effective isolation platforms for the Mac Mini and Apple laptops, as well as larger audio components.



Atomic's Mike Galea describes their team's goal and process of finalizing their platform design thusly; "Engineering was mastered through materials performance analysis related to the Mac Mini resonance characteristics. The platform provides environmental decoupling as well as tuning for the exact internal resonances of the media server to achieve a maximized contribution to the Mac Mini signal."

The platform is composed of a single piece of clear Lucite, with special features machined into it. First off, several wells sealed inside the stand's body harbor steel shot to add extra weight and stability to the stand. Underneath, the stand features three drilled holes that allow the included spikes to be threaded and adjusted as needed for leveling purposes. Your Mac Mini fits perfectly into the circular indentation in the top face.

With the Atomic in place, expect more extension on both ends of the frequency spectrum with a bit more expanse. Soundstage depth and width are presented simultaneously with a little more expansiveness. Everything seems slightly more crisp, as it feels when you focus a camera or projector the last bit. This is not a component level upgrade, but it is noticeable. And if you've taken your Mac Mini setup as far as you can, this will get you to 11.

McIntosh RS100 Wireless Speakers

\$2,000/pair
www.mcintoshlabs.com

There are plenty of powered speakers out there, and most are less expensive than the McIntosh RS100s. But there's no question that these are the coolest ones you can buy. Featuring DTS Play-Fi technology, you can access the RS100s with any mobile device and stream to your heart's content, and you can have up to 8 pairs of these in your home or office, accessing your music library. Configured thusly, everyone in the house can listen to their own music too. More traditional audiophiles can connect up via an RCA input, and the RS100 also offers a subwoofer output, for increased LF capability, making it incredibly flexible for a small room, bedroom or office system with a minimal footprint.

But of course, the best part of the RS100 is the big blue meters, monitoring the 60 watts per channel of power that is on tap, via a 4-inch woofer and 3/4-inch titanium dome tweeter. Whether this is your entry into the World of McIntosh, or a great way to keep your house all Mac, the RS100 offers a new level of refinement and finesse to desktop audio.



Kangaroo Pro Portable PC

\$199
www.kangaroo.cc/kangaroo-mobile-desktop-pro/



Yeah, you can get one of these at Amazon too. But, seriously, if you only use a PC occasionally, or put on a lot of presentations that require Windows and you don't want to put your daily driver PC at risk, the Kangaroo Pro is a lifesaver.

Barely twice the size of a couple of iPods taped together, the Kangaroo Pro is mega flexible, running Windows 10 and offering up multiple ports (2 USB 2.0, 1 HDMI, 1 RJ-45 ethernet port *and* VGA) as well as a dock that can hold a 2.5" hard drive.

So far, this is the least pokey micro PC we've had the opportunity to use, with a 1.44GHZ Intel Atom processor, Intel HD Graphics Gen8 and the usual Wi-Fi along with Bluetooth capability. Whether you need a spare PC now and then or just want to expand your capabilities, the Kangaroo Pro is awesome. This is the best \$199 you'll ever spend in Windows world. Watch for more copy on this little jewel soon.

FEATURE

Get Ready to Rock

The Cardas A8 Ear Speakers

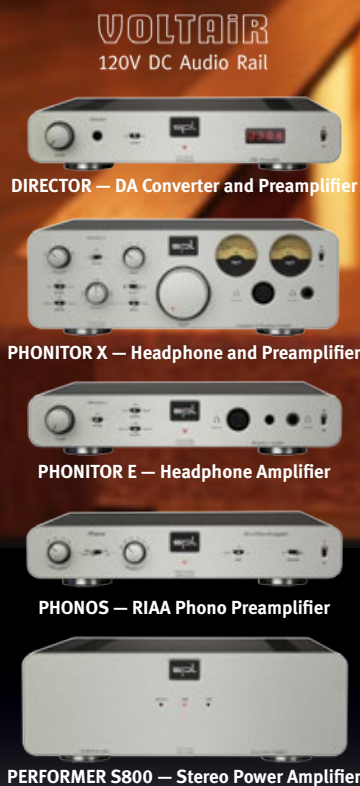
By Rob Johnson

Known best for manufacturing great cables, the team at Cardas Audio continues to diversify its product portfolio. With its foray into the world of in-ear monitors about a year ago with the EM5813, Cardas has produced a second, slightly less expensive model, the A8.

Cardas IEMs are not a one-size-fits-all proposition. The IEM bodies come with a variety of interchangeable rubber-like plugs to best fit the ear canal of an A8 owner. Everyone should find at least one set that offers a comfortably snug fit. Some users may prefer the feel of smooth adapters, and others may prefer the multi-flanged plugs for a little tighter grip. A good seal in the ear canal is important to achieve the best bass response with the A8s, so take your time and find the set that offers you the greatest combination of comfort and performance.



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FEATURE

Heavy metal

The A8's milled brass body wears an external jacket of blue rubberized material. Inside, there's a complex array of components that Cardas calls an "Ultra Linear, Contour Field, Dual Magnet Driver" delivering detailed and dynamic music reproduction. These substantial magnets contribute to the overall weight of the A8. Whatever technology they use inside, the overall design produces some very nice sound indeed.

As you would expect from a Cardas product, these IEMs come tethered with some mighty fine cables. The A8's unique blue cable uses the same helical wound, golden ratio design that graces all of their designs. They almost look like the Clear cable that our publisher uses in his reference system.

Combined with a nylon braided sheath, the cables remain largely tangle free, even with heavy use. Left and right ears' wires are color coded, with blue signifying the right ear, and grey representing the left. Standard issue A8 cables terminate in a stereo 1/8" mini-jack, with two other options available as an off-the-shelf add-on from Cardas. For instance, if you use a Pono player or a special balanced plug for the Astell & Kern AK240, Cardas has you covered. Cardas also includes a soft-walled, zippered case for storing the A8s while not in use. Of course if you have custom cable needs, you've come to the right place. Just call the friendly folks at Cardas to discuss.



FEATURE

**Sing to me**

In my own experience, the seal of IEMs into the ear canal helps achieve very substantial bass presence and the A8s are no exception. As advertised, bass is deep and well-articulated. Pitch Black's "Flex" opens with deep bass notes foreshadowing the ominous nature of the track. Here the A8s demonstrate their prowess at with taut, defined notes. Through these IEMs, each guitar pluck offers ample tangibility, but not to such an extent that the eardrums feel like a punching bag.

Vocals stand forward in the perceived soundstage. Highs prove dynamic, but never into the realm of stridency, and Sia's cover of "I Go To Sleep" allowed me the freedom to relax into the music despite powerful vocal crescendos. While some high frequencies, like those portrayed in the nuances of cymbal crashes, rides and decays, sound a bit recessed and rolled off, IEMs must strike a fine balance while embedded in one's ears. If voiced too far to the warm side, detail can be lost. If the sound profile is too detailed, it's often accompanied with artifacts that make long-term listening sessions uncomfortable. The A8s strike an excellent compromise between the extremes. They certainly live in the warmer end of the spectrum, yet never limited to any specific musical genre for enjoyment.

Through these IEMs, Dada's "Baby Really Loves Me" is reproduced with the energy and excitement of the live performance.

FEATURE

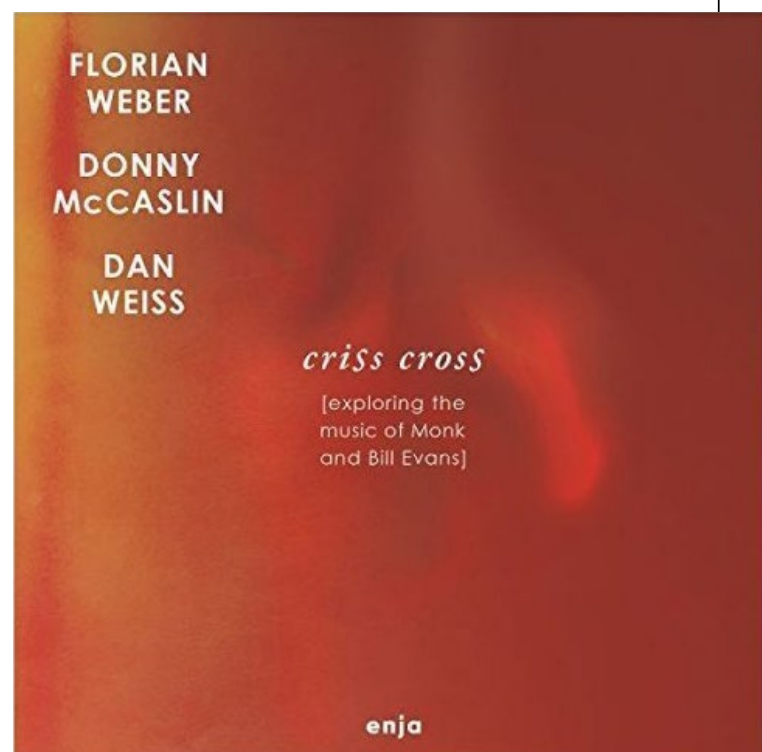
While musical elements panned to the far left and right may not have the illusion of width some traditional headphone designs are capable of, drums, guitars and vocals have ample separation, creating a well-established soundstage through the plane of the listener's head. The A8s also do a very nice job of revealing the subtle cues of air around instruments and vocals.

The hefty metal A8 enclosures may not be ideal for those seeking featherweight earphones to run a marathon with. However, for potential owners who most commonly listen at home, the office, on mass transit or a long plane flight, these can be your ticket to ride.

Do the A8s meet the capability of custom IEMs like the Ultimate Ears UE18 or the JH Audio JH16? No, but that's an unfair comparison since the customs are three times the price of the A8s. At \$300, the Cardas A8s are a small investment to take their owner a very high level of musical reproduction indeed. If portable sound is a priority to you, these IEMs demonstrate a lot of value at their price point. With great sonics, tank-like build, and a well-established company behind them, an owner can expect many years of musical enjoyment from the Cardas A8.

Cardas A8 Ear Speakers
MSRP: \$299
www.cardas.com

JAZZ & BLUES

**Florian Weber Trio**

Criss Cross
Enja, CD

Pianist Florian Weber is concerned with dualities. He'll play high-level bebop with master saxophonist Lee Konitz and layer his poly-rhythms over guitarist Lionel Loueke's (on Weber's *Biosphere*). Trained in classical music and then jazz, Weber divides his time between his native Germany and New York. On *Criss Cross*, he sometimes plays piano and electric piano simultaneously (while turned away from one of them). The idea, he says, is to play one consciously, the other not; he'll play different rhythms with either hand on piano, too. The album is mostly devoted to tunes by two major inspirations that are poles apart: Bill Evans, the master of subtle touch and refined harmony; and Thelonious Monk, whose clanging attacks and crunchy dissonances are equally deep but can sound subtle as a thrown brick.

The band is a bass-less trio, with David Bowie's last bandleader Donny McCaslin on tenor saxophone and Dan Weiss on drums. While nothing new—Bud Freeman recorded with that lineup in 1938—the untypical instrumentation allows for harmonic and rhythmic ambiguity. Weber can alter a complex beat pattern on the fly, knowing Weiss will follow. The drummer specializes in making compound meters swing. Bill Evans' "T.T.T.T. (Twelve Tone Tune Too)" springs from a bonafide serial tone row: All 12 chromatic notes, no repeats.



©Photo by Juergin Bindrim

Weber gives it a fiendish rhythm to fit—a boogieing 11/8 with a 16th-note hiccup sometimes to throw that lopsided beat further off plumb. They play it at a frisky tempo. McCaslin's tone has some of that hard-edged Michael Brecker quality that was once ubiquitous among younger tenors, and now sounds rather retro.

Weber studied mathematics as well as music—another duality—and the deployment of musicians is permutative. There are five tunes for trio, two piano-tenor duets (with and without electric piano), two piano-drum duets, and five pieces where Weber plays only acoustic piano and five where he mans both keyboards, including a solo piece. That makes for six different combinations over ten tracks. Weber and McCaslin bring out the poignancy in Evans' "Time Remembered" and

"Spring Is Here"—that latter actually by Richard Rodgers, though an Evans favorite. (The other ringer tune is a riffy take on Lady Gaga's power-pop pounder "Judas.") The saxophonist's quavery pitch and careful note choices add a mournful quality—he sneaks a quote from "Holiday for Strings" into "Time Remembered" without wrecking the mood—and the pianist shows off Evans-esque attention to delicate detail. One more duality: Weber may use electric piano as a music-boxy sweetener, as on his solo "Since We Met," where he turns Evans' waltz into a rubato ballad. But on raucous numbers, he'll utilize it to add another layer of rolling rhythm or to beef up the bottom end.

Weber bridges the compositional divide by giving Monk's "Round Midnight" and "Ruby, My

Dear" the gossamer Evans treatment, highlighting their sublime changes. The other three Monk tunes are already rhythmically complex, and the trio only has to follow Monk's nose on a choogling "Evidence" or knotted-up "Four in One." "On "Criss Cross"—a tune so abstract even Monk let it lie for years—McCaslin plays the scrappy melody straight, while Weber and Weiss slide around another odd-meter-plus-hiccup below. Weber's broken time in his solo and behind bumptious tenor show what he gets from percussive pianists like Monk. You can almost hear Cecil Taylor's 1962 sax/piano/drums trio behind it.

Criss Cross is a mite uneven, but unpredictability is part of its allure. Extreme contrasts are all in the game. — **Kevin Whitehead**



Julian Lage
Arclight
 Mack Avenue, CD

Don't be scratching your head with this new electric album: Julian Lage flagged his scope for us from the get-go. When the guitarist's debut arrived in 2009, it contained light-hearted spins on jazz nuggets like "All Blues" as well as plucky exchanges with newgrass banjo ace Bela Fleck. Some pieces used trad swing and blues grammar. A few blended saxophone and cello while prancing like a miniature version of the Paul Winter Consort. Several opted for a folksy spin on Americana, pasteled and pulse-driven. Then 21, with a Gary Burton seal of approval on his forehead, Lage was rightly pegged a key new voice in the ever-expanding jazz firmament.



Since, he's recorded with pianist Fred Hersch and guitarist Nels Cline, both cagey sensei who know as much about left-of-center antics as they do mainstream beauty. Last year, Lage made a bluegrass record with one of the Punch Brothers and dropped a solo acoustic date divorced from jazz orthodoxy that feels more like an unholy mix of Russ Barenberg, Tony Rice, and John Miller. The finesse he's brought to the unplugged realm runs deep. So now that he has amped up on this new trio disc—his first playing electric guitar exclusively—you can't act surprised. Dude wants to go everywhere.

Arclight finds Lage grabbing bassist Scott Colley and drummer Kenny Wollesen (players that have worked, respectively, at the sides of Jim Hall and Bill Frisell, two of the guitarist's string heroes) and putting a bit more oomph behind the kind of insta-catchy melodies that are proving essential to his signature sound. It takes a sec to grok some of the gambits driving the action on this pithy little instrumental album. Longtime Lage fans might even find the sonic leap a bit jarring at first. But the dedication to breezy moods, bittersweet themes, and pop clarity—even when things get purposefully jumbled or spacey—remains quickly identifiable. *(continued)*

©Photo by Justin Camerer

MUSIC



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As such, the longest track here clocks in at 4:02. Producer Jesse Harris, he of the celebrated Brooklyn squad that refined the folk-jazz nexus for which Norah Jones became a poster girl back at the start of the millennium, keeps everything moving. From the spirited romp through “Persian Rug” (take a sec to YouTube the R. Crumb version) to the crispy groove of WC Handy’s “Harlem Blues,” spry vibes course throughout the program.

Touch is everything in Lage’s acoustic playing. The solo shows I’ve caught have been remarkable due to his skill at feathering into a lick and applying a convincing emotional weight to a phrase. That particular pleasure gets lost a bit in these more aggressive statements, but it makes sense that listeners

would have to recalibrate their ears when approaching this kind of shift. Lage doesn’t skimp on dynamics, however. “Nocturne” waxes wistful before it gets raucous for a chorus, and “Supera” swerves all over the place while marking its territory. Things morph from track to track. “Stop Go Start” could be a Sun Ra outtake featuring Larry Coryell, “Prospero” revels in its own pummeling volition, and “I’ll Be Seeing You,” the only overt standard here, gets played in a customary jazz trio manner that sees interplay high on the to-do list.

The 28-year-old California native isn’t the first guitarist to conflate twang, groove, swing, and other roots music. Jim Campilongo (another Harris cohort) has been on the case for years, and his

work isn’t to be missed. And, of course, Frisell’s breadth of interest continues to lead him in similar directions. But there’s something enticing in the way this trio operates, pushing towards a spot that bands like John Scofield’s Bar Talk trio reached during its zenith. There’s a guy up front talking, but those around him have plenty to say.

Lage has confessed his love for the Fender Telecaster that distinguishes *Arclight*, and he certainly steps out to milk it for all the variety he can. When the chipper strumming of “Presley” swiftly glides into a flourish of upper-register barn burning, it’s pretty obvious this virtuoso has entered a fruitful new part of his trek. —**Jim Macnie**



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A

vishai Cohen has a ravishing trumpet sound, and rare control, and knows what to do with all that technique. Soloing on “Behind the Broken Glass” from his quartet/quintet’s *Into the Silence*, he steps or leaps from the low end of his horn’s range to the top. He plays precarious lines up there, ascending to an altissimo peak for the close, without splitting a note. It’s the kind of technique Sousa-band cornetists reserve for showcase cadenzas.

But this chopsy display doesn’t seem so boastful in context. It’s tempered by Cohen’s feathery timing and reined-in dynamics. Earlier albums by the Tel Aviv-born New Yorker, like *Triveni II*, are charmingly brash, showing a puckish, Don Cherry-like sensibility. The restraint this time out is partly due to the material—a suite of pieces for Cohen’s recently deceased father—and partly because this is an ECM album. Like other established musicians who come to the label, he brings music best served by the imprint’s vaunted, spacious production style. The trumpeter has written and played slow touching numbers before, notably on *Flood*. But this program leaves more open space to let the sound resonate. His long tones can take on the ceremonial power of a shofar. *(continued)*

Avishai Cohen Into The Silence

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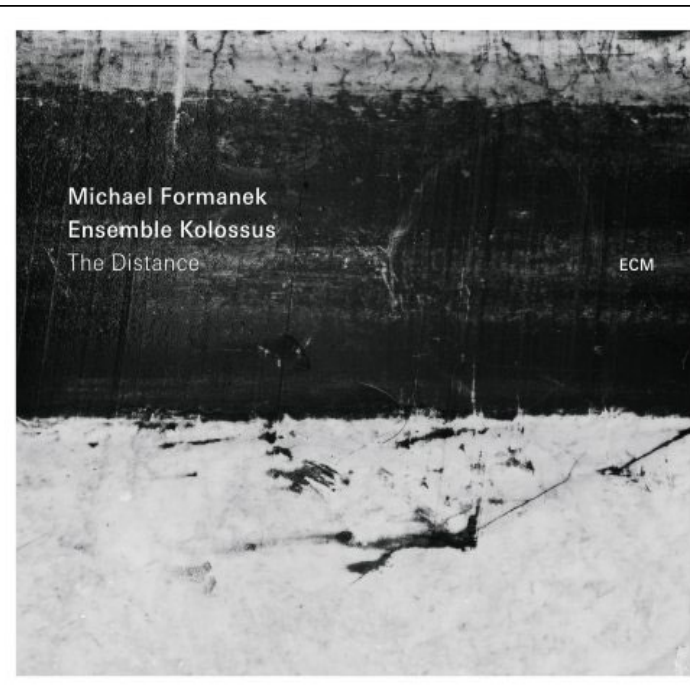


Cohen's conceptual model here is not avant-bugler Cherry but Miles Davis, to whose world there are occasional nods. A thin, piercing trumpet sound recalls the B side of *Sketches of Spain*; Yonathan Avishai plays a few Bill Evans-y piano voicings on "Life and Death"; Nasheet Waits' drum tattoo on "Into the Silence" echoes *Bitches Brew*'s "Spanish Key." We hear a few aphoristic bits of melody à la Wayne Shorter too, but the Miles school's influence is so well digested, you could miss all those markers. On the leadoff "Life and Death," Cohen's spare style and harmon mute make direct comparisons hard to avoid. But in no time he makes you hear that pressurized, plaintive muted timbre as his own voice. Open horn, a different personality comes out, fuller at the bottom end, closer to Enrico Rava.

Tempos tend to be languid, but change-ups exist. At the end of that long opening ballad, there's a sort of surprise track. After a brief pause, and over a tick-tock rhythm, trumpet and piano briskly recapitulate the melody in unison, making it sound like a whole other piece. (That theme comes back once more, in the album's solo piano coda.) A hint of that motoric rhythm also surfaces

in "Quiescence," which pivots on a recurring drop of a minor third that doesn't immediately suggest Willie Dixon's blues "Spoonful." The peppier second half of "Dreams Like a Child" is anchored by a rise-and-fall three-note bass ostinato. Yonathan Avishai tosses off a few Abdullah Ibrahim hammer-on chords to get the players grooving.

Drummer Waits, who plays with Cohen in the trio Triveni, has performed with bassist Eric Revis in lineups from Tarbaby to a Peter Brötzmann trio. They have the music's breathing, expandable sense of time down, even as they're ever-ready to tighten it all up within a beat or two. Cohen and Yonathan Avishai have known each other since school days, and the pianist understands the trumpeter's timing and harmonic sense so well, and can shadow him so closely, it's a marvel he never steps on Cohen's lines. On three pieces the quartet adds tenor saxophonist Bill McHenry, who has his own complementary dark voice and a smoke-rings melodic sense as soloist. He twines around the trumpeter in the collectives, and melds so seamlessly with him on the heads, their merged overtones pop out. Everyone's in tune in every sense. —Kevin Whitehead



Michael Formanek's Ensemble Kolossus
The Distance
 ECM, CD

It was near impossible to mistake the heft of Michael Formanek's Ensemble Kolossus when it played at New York's Winter JazzFest in mid-January. The shape of the music, the locomotion it accrued, the density calculated for each discrete section: Together, the traits defined the bearing of this new(ish) outfit as it worked its way through the leader's "Exoskeleton" suite. Each element, from the churning glide of the rhythm section to the punchy bray of the brass and reeds, was essential to the imposing performance. One of the annual gathering's most potent and varied, I'll happily add.

Anyone who has followed the bassist's work could probably guess helming a big band would inspire him. His first forays as a leader, on a string of 90s discs for the Enja label, relied on the agility of quintets. But Formanek arranged his pieces so that sections shifted and instruments could play more than one role. The charts were fluid, and always a little meatier than they might've seemed on paper.



The interwoven lines of "Thick Skin/Dangerous Crustaceans" (from 1997's *Nature of the Beast*) shined a spotlight on the future: Things are going to get a bit more elaborate. By the time Formanek truly refined the approach on 2014's *Small Places*, he had a foursome of Craig Taborn, Tim Berne, and Gerald Cleaver bringing orchestral implications on protracted pieces such as "Parting Ways" and "Seeds and Birdman." Dude was in the construction business and he dug having his skyscrapers jut up into the clouds.

Small Places (as well as its predecessor, *The Rub and Spare Change*) earned plenty of critical cred. That must've helped when it came for ECM to green-light *The Distance*. Not every composer gets to trot an 18-piece band into the studio in this budget-sensitive era. Smart move by the label, which of late has broadened its reach when it comes to presenting US musicians—especially those of the Brooklyn variety. Formanek is a Baltimore man these days, and his latest opus is by turns raucous, sleek, ornery, clever, joyous, pensive, and confrontational. The nine-part "Exoskeleton" lasts over an hour, a near-cinematic salute to several stages of evolution. An epic tone poem regarding our collective crawl towards civilization? To some degree, Formanek extends the canon that Charles Mingus kicked off with the girth and combustion of "Pithecanthropus Erectus"—surely one of Team Kolossus' more resonant ancestors. (*continued*)

MUSIC



Grace is at the center of the way the program unfolds. Just listen to the bassist's poised solo against the eerie coo of reeds during the prelude, the cracking punch of the band behind saxophonist Loren Stillman's lyrical caw during "Impenetrable," and the gentle agitation of both trombonist Alan Ferber and guitarist Mary Halverson as "Echoes" turns into "Without Regrets." The inner balance of these episodes, and the emotional logic bridging them, proves just as engaging as the particulars of the playing itself. A rainbow of hues crops up along the way. Formanek's decision to go big only enhances the tiny flash points that carry their own unique personalities.

There's a buzzy bari and bass clarinet combo at the tail end of the prelude, a marimba-flavored pulse pumping blood to trombonist Ben Gerstein's

sputtering poesy in "@heart," and a Bernard Herrmann echo that flares up during the kick off of "Echoes." Each fleeting, each memorable. Conductor Mark Helias, himself a heralded bassist, binds all these micro events into a series of smooth transitions, one of the performance's fortes. Moments of fluctuation abound, but Helias' organizing skills corral any overly wayward notions.

The bandleader's charts deserve such TLC. Formanek has written a handful of themes that grow more enticing with each go-round. "Echoes" swerves sideways and chases its own tail. "Shucking While Jiving" integrates two threads a with a hypnotic vamp. "Beneath the Shell" moves from a bluesy swag into an ethereal sputtering of ideas. You get the feeling the bassist is looking into a carnival mirror as a way to examine his own growth. The album's title cut, which

opens the disc and checks in as the only non-"Exoskeleton" track, functions as an irresistible bit of grandeur that comes off as an aging romantic doing an evening's worth of reflection.

Formanek is a graying baby boomer with big chunk of accumulated wisdom under his belt (he currently teaches at Peabody Conservatory). There's a chance that he has never sounded so fully in control of his capabilities as he does here. Like Carla Bley's maneuvers with her Social Studies ensemble, Henry Threadgill during his days leading Very Very Circus, or Mingus himself guiding the majestic punch of *Let My Children Hear Music*, Formanek sets his tumultuous squad on a mission: Finding ways to balance overtly daring ideas with a good dose of old-school beauty. With almost every turn, and there are many of them, he succeeds in spades. —**Jim Macnie**



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Marc Copland
Zenith

InnerVoice Jazz, CD

The quartet on pianist Marc Copland's *Zenith* is new to record but has a tangle of interrelationships behind it. Copland and drummer Joey Baron played on one of 2015's best records, the Gary Peacock trio's *Now This*. Bassist Drew Gress has been in Copland's groups for more than two decades; Gress and trumpeter Ralph Alessi regularly perform on each other's albums. That history makes this horn-and-rhythm combo sound both fresh and confident.

You can judge how well they gel by the album's centerpiece, the 14-minute collective improvisation "Air We've Never Breathed," which flows through myriad coherent, contrasting episodes. Bass enters first, to banter with trumpet for a minute or so, before it slows to an ending, under which piano enters in the same ruminative vein.

When Copland starts feathering a succession of chaste chords, bass and drums extract a line and tempo from that, and off the trio go, laying down an inviting backdrop for a solo. Alessi quickly takes the bait. Piano chords tumble out. The trumpeter pulls a skittering melody out of that harmony, and takes that as his new text, as bass fills in with a supportive counter-melody. At one point, the four players seem to pull back on the tempo at the same moment. Later, still, Baron takes a two-minute cymbal solo in two rhythms at once—one fast and tight, the other slow and splashy—before trumpet and piano rejoin him in sleepwalk tempo for a long coda. Bass never returns. Sometimes not playing is the bold smart choice.

We linger on that play-by-play to sketch the ensemble give and take—accent on the give. Alessi is the son and grandson of classical trumpet virtuosos, and his tone as usual is thin and precise—a sharp blade. There was a time when his formidable technique could get the better of him. But here, his short lines

and darting phrases leave plenty of air in the music, so anyone can dive in with a new idea. As much room as the players give each other, they keep things moving, swingers at heart. Copland's solos typically possess a strong sense of internal momentum, owing to both the rhythm chords with which he backs his improvised line and repeated notes played in patterned time. For two rhythm aces that were all over New York's downtown scene at a certain moment, Gress and Baron seldom meet up on record. But the bassist and drummer boast a similarly light touch—when called for—and insinuate themselves into the structures.

Copland writes good tunes, individually stamped. "Hurricane" relies on a repeated-note motif that rises and falls with the rippling chord changes. On "Sun at the Zenith," it's the hypnotic bass figure that rides the harmonies, under a meandering line for peeling trumpet. "Waterfalls" leads with its catchiest phrase. "Best Bet," a slow waltz with pretty changes, embeds its fetching hook in

the middle. The melody is so good, the musicians bring it back mid-performance, between solos—but not at the end, where you'd expect it.

Still, the best tune here is Duke Ellington's atypical, well-titled "Mystery Song" from 1930—Copland's kind of composition, with a spare melody draped over mostly descending chords. (He and Gress first recorded it in 1992, for an album by drummer Tony Martucci.) Duke's groove is so infectious, it just about plays itself. But Baron pushes just the same, using the low end of his tubs: bass drum and tom-toms, and snare drum with snares down. Like other numbers on *Zenith*, it ends with a long rideout on which everybody can surf the wave. It's just the kind of material this quartet was born to play.

—**Kevin Whitehead**

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We've reviewed or owned nearly every MartinLogan ESL speaker ever made and to say we are a fan of the marque is an understatement; and the CLX was a reference speaker here for a few years. Wonderful as they are, they need a lot of room to sing and don't take kindly to being moved much.

The flagship Neolith takes everything ML has learned producing pure and hybrid ESL designs, creating something that resembles their earlier Summit, scaled up in a major way. Everywhere the Neolith has played, the audience response has been overwhelmingly good, so watch for our take on this spectacular design from MartinLogan.



PREVIEW

C1100 Preamplifier

www.mcintosh.com
\$13,000

The latest control preamplifier from McIntosh is a beauty, inside and out. Where the older C1000 gave you the choice of a solid state or tube amplification stage, this two box unit uses 6 12AT7 and 6 12AX7 tubes in a fully balanced, dual mono configuration. It's quiet, quiet, quiet; McIntosh claims it's the quietest preamplifier they've ever produced. And, it's gorgeous, with those tubes front and center so you can bask in the glow while enjoying your favorite music.

Like all Mac preamplifiers, the C1100 has a plethora of inputs and outputs, so you can connect and control damn near everything! They've upped the level of visual appeal as well, with thicker polished stainless steel and black titanium stainless steel surfaces. While we can't verify this, the front faceplates look thicker and richer than Macs past, if you can imagine that.



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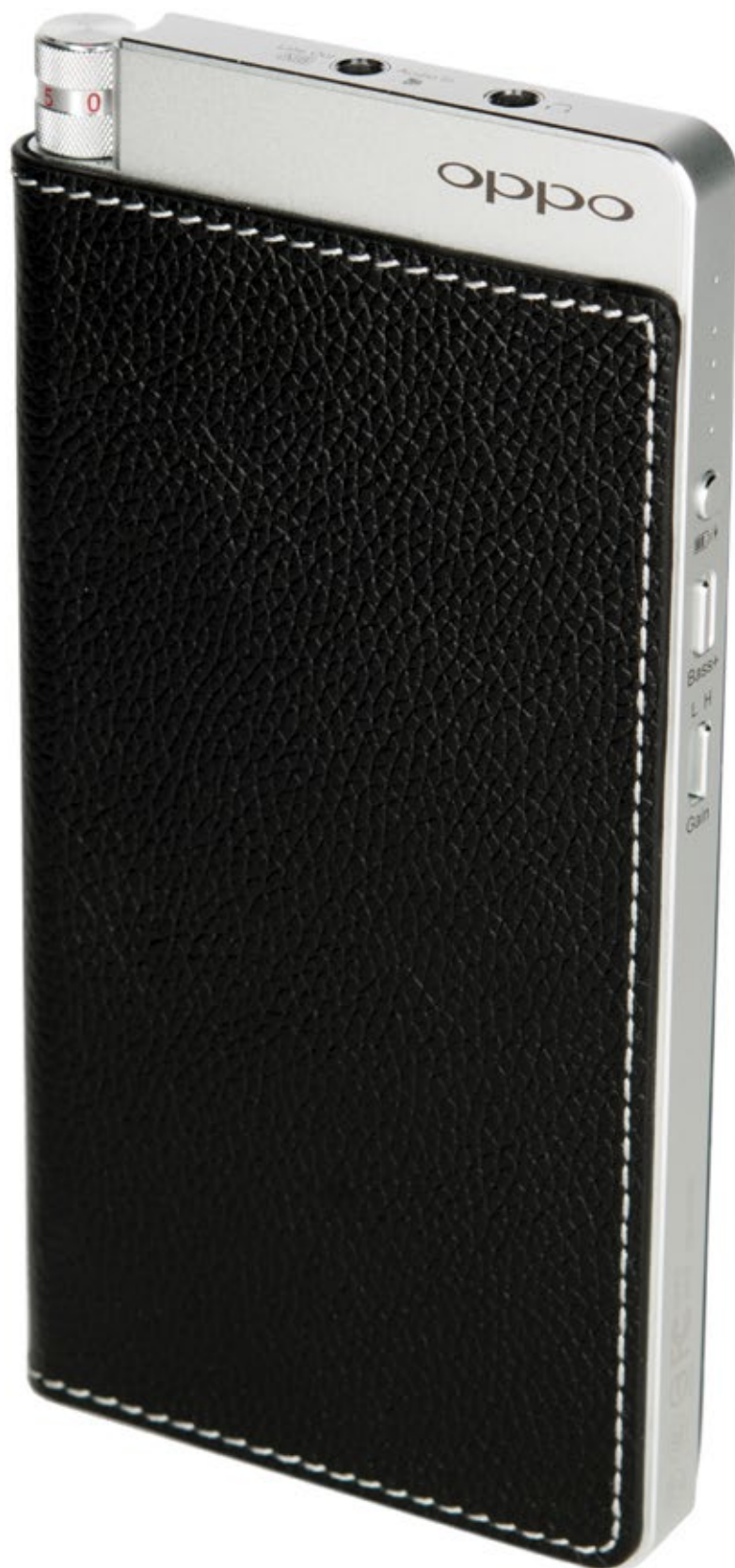
www.rega.co.uk

After decades, Rega's 3-series has come full circle. Starting as the Planar 3, then becoming the P3, and the RP3, the current version returns to its roots and is the Planar 3 once again.

With good reason. Though it looks similar to 3s past on the outside, only two parts are shared with the current model and the latest iteration of the tonearm, now called the RB330 is all new as well. What are the two parts shared with the old RP3? You'll just have to stay tuned for our upcoming review to find out.

But, we will spoil the surprise; the new Planar 3 is much, much better. A direct comparison to past models proves the new deck lives up to the marketing departments claims. And in typical Rega fashion, they've barely raised the price. Job well done.





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PREVIEW



Meridian 818v3 Reference Audio Core

www.meridianaudio.com
\$16,000

Meridian has ditched the disc transport with their latest 800 series controller, which decodes everything, and we mean *everything*, as this baby was designed by the creator of MQA, Bob Stuart. In addition to file fluency, the 818v3 has a dedicated Sooloos input, as well as speaker link outputs to use with Meridian's powered speakers.

The Audiophile Apartment called the 818v3, paired with Meridian's awesome 7200.2 powered speakers and a touch PC for Sooloos access "the ultimate apartment system," but it works well anywhere. Non Meridian users, fear not; the 818v3 is an outstanding DAC and full function line stage with six line level analog inputs, along with RCA and XLR outputs, working well with any of the other components you might have.

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PREVIEW



Pass Xs Phono

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We've been using the Pass Xs 300 monoblock amplifiers for some time as an ultimate reference and they remain breathtaking. An equally exciting review was written of the Xs Pre (now also a TONE reference) so to complete the trifecta with the Xs Phono proves very exciting to say the least.

Not for everyone, the Xs Phono throws everything they know about phonostage design at Pass Labs and takes it to its ultimate end. Not satisfied with merely doing a three input selector, the Xs Phono is actually three separate discreet phonostages inside a big chassis. Both power supply and amplification stages are massive, overbuilt, dual mono designs. How awesome is it? Stay tuned!



dCS Rossini

Raising the Bar

By Jeff Dorgay

The subtle growl in Plastikman's "Mind Encode" rolls out into my listening room in such a sinister, encompassing way, it's almost frightening. It instantly reminds me of the aural magic that its much more expensive sibling, the four box Vivaldi, which until now was the only digital playback system capable of being this visceral. Much like that six figure star of the dCS lineup, the \$23,999 Rossini DAC raises the goose bumps in a similar way, but to be honest the \$7,499 Rossini clock is also part of the mix. For those of you still spinning silver discs, we'll talk about transports later.



Tracking through the rest of Plastikman's *Closer* album reveals so much nuance and low level detail via such a broad, multi dimensional sonic landscape, it feels as if my Big Gulp has been spiked with something hallucinogenic. Granted, this is not "real music," with a string quartet full of easily recognizable acoustic instruments, yet this recording is so full of spatial and ambient information that on a lesser player, it comes across as merely one dimensional and can be easily written off as low-fi. The Rossini handily reveals the amount of aural craftsmanship present, calling for a re-audition of a fair number of discs once considered mediocre. Playback via the Rossini changes my perspective.

Tell the average music consumer that you just spent the cost of a really nice car on a digital player and they will think you've lost your marbles. But a music lover that also happens to appreciate high performance audio understands your quest. Yes, \$31,500 is a lot of money to spend on a digital player, but like an equally expensive analog front end, you probably didn't just walk out the door and buy a similarly priced analog rig, you worked your way up to it; listening, upgrading, listening more carefully and repeating the process multiple times. So I'll stick my neck out and venture that you aren't headed from a \$500 DAC to the Rossini. And quite

honestly, you shouldn't, even if there's plenty of room on your Platinum Card. It would be like going from a Vespa to a Ducati 1098, the massive increase in performance might overwhelm you.

Better everywhere

Good as the four box dCS Paganini that I've been listening to for the last few years is, the Vivaldi proved to be an exponential jump in every aspect of music playback, revealing considerably more musical information than previously experienced. While I still feel the Vivaldi is worth every penny asked, it was alas, out of reach. There's no shame in that for any of us. (continued)

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dCS is just like any other company making high performance goods. Canon, Apple and Audi all take what they learn out on the ragged edges of research and development and apply it to the products they sell every day. Though Audi sells every \$200,000 R8 plus they can build, they sell a ton of S4s too. And this is what the dCS Rossini reminds me of, a fully loaded Audi S4. It's no slouch in the performance department, but a \$60,000 car, though expensive, still has a much wider potential audience than a \$200,000 car does. And so it goes with the Rossini. Where the Rossini is perfectly at home in a cost no object system, it will probably make its way to a lot of \$100,000 to \$300,000 systems, where the Vivaldi will probably migrate to much more expensive systems.

Of course, dCS nails all the engineering fundamentals, and pays meticulous attention to every part of the analog, digital and mechanical aspects of their components. Much like a Formula 1 car, where this level of engineering prowess adds five horsepower here and five more there, adding up to a machine with hyper performance, nothing is left unaccounted for under the hood. Important as all these steps are, a big part of the dCS performance edge is their patented Ring DAC technology, which performs all digital functions in software, rather than just taking off the shelf DAC chips and tweaking them somewhat.

Because nearly every parameter is upgradable with software, this makes a dCS player a great long term investment. Just like my Paganini that has been upgraded multiple times over

the years, most dCS upgrades merely require uploading new software and firmware. The last time this was done to the Paganini, it was a solid, component level upgrade, all for the time it took to upload and reboot the new software. When you are making this level of investment, you *don't* want a limited lifespan product. Those wanting a more in depth analysis of dCS' Ring DAC approach can click here:

www.dcsLtd.co.uk/reviews/shelf-life-how-and-why-dcs-does-dacs-differently/

In addition to all the circuitry improvements, the Rossini now shares the same level of casework and finish that the Vivaldi introduced. The display is elegant and easy to read. The buttons are still small, in the interest of tasteful design, and unfortunately somewhat hard to read for some. Selfishly speaking, I'd still take the small buttons and elegance over large buttons and a clunky display!

While this writer is not a fan of DSD per se, dCS has always offered exceptional DSD performance, and the Rossini is no exception. However, the past Paganini offered the ability to upsample redbook files to DSD resolution, and the Rossini can upsample to DSD or DXD resolutions internally without the need for a separate, outboard upsampler, and this can be controlled via the dCS Rossini App from your smartphone or tablet.

One of the most fun aspects of owning a dCS player is the amount of options and flexibility they give you; upsampling and a range of digital filters, all easily accessed. *(continued)*

This will either be joy or purgatory for you, depending on how OCD you might be. I enjoyed DSD upsampling on the Paganini, but having the two formats to compare with the Rossini has me leaning towards DXD, which feels slightly more relaxed and natural. Of course, your mileage may vary.

Adding the Rossini Clock

The first two months of listening took place without the Rossini Clock in place, and even without it the Rossini still offers a slight improvement over the exemplary performance of the four box Paganini- especially in the area of low level detail and its ability to be used without a standalone preamplifier.

To grasp the effects of the Clock with the Paganini, dCS's John Quick was kind enough to pay me a visit and set the system up a box at a time, starting with the DAC by itself, then adding the Upsampler, and lastly, the Clock. The effect of the Clock with the Paganini and Vivaldi DACs is anything but subtle, and the Rossini follows suit. dCS even mentions on their website that "listening tests show there is no substitute for a high quality, dedicated master Clock."

Initial listening proved excellent, yet once the Clock was in place and switched on, the soundstage increased in all three dimensions markedly, but the level of refinement takes a major jump. It's definitely enough to be an "a-ha" moment, but even more flabbergasting when the Clock is removed – everything just seems to collapse slightly. While the Rossini DAC is excellent without the Clock, the improvement offered is a significant upgrade, and once you've heard it, it will be tough to go back.



A quick note for those that are sans vinyl

Many of us enjoy and embrace vinyl, yet we seem to meet more and more music lovers that have no investment in the analog disc. Should you be in the latter camp, the Rossini DAC is an even better value, or should I say, bargain. All dCS products from the original Elgar on have had variable outputs, but when the Vivaldi came along, the quality of the analog output stage made a marked improvement.

Where the Paganini was acceptable as a source run direct, the Vivaldi really eliminates the need for a preamp if you don't have a phonostage, or other components requiring a line level pre-amplifier. Paired with certain power amplifiers, the Paganini could sound thin and slightly lacking in dynamics. The Rossini carries on the performance benchmark set by the Vivaldi in this respect.

Considering that this DAC/Clock combination means that you don't need a \$10,000 or possibly more expensive linestage, along with the necessary interconnects and mains cable, the Rossini could be considered a steal. I'm sure this will generate a fair amount of angry email, but it's true.

Plugging the Rossini directly into the Audio Research GS150, Conrad Johnson LP125sa+, the Nagra 300i and Pass Xs300 power amplifiers at my disposal- all proved heavenly, though providing different presentations unique to each amplifier's sonic signature. *(continued)*

DIFFERENT CLASS

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REVIEW



The three world class preamplifiers at my disposal did not improve or subtract from the sound of the Rossini; you will only need one if you must integrate analog sources into your system. While I hate to tell others how to do their job, the addition of a solitary analog input would make this the perfect preamplifier.

Not only is this cost effective for the strictly digital music enthusiast, it makes for a lot simpler system configuration. It's worth mentioning that where the Paganini and Vivaldi needed about a dozen signal cables to connect all four boxes together, the Rossini DAC and Clock only requires two 75 ohm cables to go between the Clock to the DAC. As with past dCS players in my system, this task is handled by a Nordost Frey 2 cable.

And for those still embracing the silver disc...

Should you be a music lover with a large collection of discs- that does not want to deal with a

NAS, and all the labor associated with that- you may want to consider the one box Rossini Player, which at \$28,499 incorporates a CD transport. dCS does not make a standalone transport for the Rossini, though a used Paganini or Scarlatti Transport is a great option, just requiring a few more cables. Should you have a large collection of SACD discs, this will be your only all-dCS option besides the \$41,999 Vivaldi Transport, as the Rossini Player does not play SACD.

Both the Paganini and Vivaldi systems produced a slightly more lifelike, more natural recreation of the digital data when playing files back from the optical disc- even comparing a ripped file of the same disc- in my system. Yet endless comparisons of disc vs. file with my Paganini Transport into the Rossini DAC revealed the gap has closed so dramatically with the Rossini that it's probably a moot point. However, the Transport is still pretty handy to have around in case of network

gremlins! That said as more and more music becomes available in high resolution formats, the need for a traditional Transport will probably lessen further.

Go direct if you can

Probably the biggest reason for closing the gap between disc and file playback is the Rossini's ability to work directly with your NAS or even USB drives. A laptop or Mac Mini is a pretty noisy device no matter how you tweak or isolate it- but with the Rossini, you merely plug a network cable in the back panel, download the dCS App and roll.

In addition to being a basic music player, the Rossini App allows you to control all of the DAC's functions from your listening chair, making it a lot handier to change inputs, digital filters, upsampling and phase. This can be especially handy when trying to hear subtle differences, vs. getting in and out of the chair to adjust. *(continued)*



The Rossini App is Tidal ready, so those of you with large Tidal libraries will have an easy go of it, searching as you normally do and saving to your “favorites.” The dCS App does the rest, sorting by artist, album or track. When investigating a lot of music, or if you plan on adding a fairly large number of albums to your favorites list, this will go a lot faster than browsing Tidal on your laptop and adding favorites there. They will instantly appear in the favorites section of the phone/pad App.

While the dCS App does not have the GUI or functionality of a Sooloos or Roon player, dCS are “Roon Ready” partners, and at some point in the near-future the

Rossini will be a Roon endpoint, meaning you can stream to the Rossini directly from your Roon Core system by Ethernet. When this happens, the Rossini will be the ultimate musical death star, combining phenomenal playback capability, with an interface worthy of its musical performance. Watch for a follow up review, the minute this becomes available.

Interface aside, the audio performance aspect of eliminating the outboard computer is a wonderful thing. Comparing the same tracks played back via Mac Mini and USB pales in comparison to going network direct. Even Sique Sique Sputnik’s “Love Missile F1-11” sounds great rendered

directly through the Rossini. I was very surprised at how much better recordings I thought were poor to marginal sounded when going directly into the Rossini via network. Again, moving to high resolution content widens the gap dramatically.

A new level of excellence

Up to now, the emphasis has been on 16/44.1 playback, and the Rossini shines there, bringing new life to legacy files, but that’s only part of the story. Just like a great analog front end that takes you to another dimension with great pressings, the Rossini provides an equally immersive journey when fueled with great digital recordings.

Whatever your favorite music might be, it’s like going from a five dollar yard sale pressing to a first stamper imported pressing.

That monster bass riff at the beginning of McCartney’s “Let Me Roll It” is spectacular; this is another instance where the 24/96 digital version is so lovely, you find yourself wondering if you really need a turntable after all. Not only is the level of detail and resolution that the Rossini provides stunning, this model has made a quantum leap in the ease by which it presents music, much as the Vivaldi before it did. Long gone is the age old phrase, “this sounds really good for digital,” music is as involving through the Rossini as it is on any

platform, provided the recording is up to task.

In the end, dCS Rossini is a winner, not only in terms of the sheer performance delivered, but in its timeless physical and electronic design along with an architecture that will be easily upgraded in the years to come. Like the nearly 20 year old Elgar that we revisited on page 40, I suspect that the Rossini will still sound fantastic 20 years from now. Combining all of this with the fact that digital-only music lovers no longer need a preamplifier to build a high performance system, I feel the Rossini is more than worthy of one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016. ●

The dCS Rossini DAC/
Clock
\$23,999 (DAC)
\$28,499 (Player, not
reviewed)
\$7,499 (Clock)

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Preamplifier
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Amplifier
Pass Xs 300

Speakers
Gamut RS5i

Cable
Tellurium Q Silver
Diamond

1 Big Box, Big Sound

The Rotel RB-1590 Power Amplifier

By Jerold O'Brien

Unloading the recent shipment of Rotel goodies, we were taken back spying the “heavy goods” sticker on the box from UPS with 100 pounds penned in. Yikes, Rotel, 100 pounds, what gives? A pretty major power amplifier as it turns out. We expect boxes weighing 100+ from Audio Research and Pass, so this was a bit of a surprise. Staffer Mark Marcantonio was the lucky one; he got to review the *preamp*. That was last issue, and we were all highly impressed at how much performance and functionality Rotel offers for under two grand with the RC-1590 preamplifier.

Rotel has always been synonymous with value, but the RC and RB-1590 redefine the category. For less than what some manufacturers charge for a power cord, you can have a full-function control preamplifier and a 350-watt per channel, class AB power amplifier. Matching the RC-1590's aesthetic perfectly, the RB-1590 is available in black as well as the stylish silver you see here. Dig that.



HPA-1

- All Discrete
- Class A Design
- Pass Labs Sound
- Smaller Package



With immediate torture-testing of this amplifier with a pair of Magnepan 3.7s and playing a bevy of heavy rock tracks, there's no question that the RB-1590 can deliver plenty of power while keeping its composure. A vintage MoFi version of Robin Trower's *Bridge of Sighs* makes for a great presentation with the power hungry Magnepans. Even at high volume, the soundstage does not collapse as it does on lesser amplifiers called on to work beyond their capacity.

Next on the list, the new B&W 803 D3 speakers that we have just received for review: again, a fantastic match. B&Ws Diamond speakers are highly revealing and show no mercy with whatever amplifier they

are mated with. Mediocre amplifier, mediocre sound and vice versa. It's tough to believe a \$3,000 power amplifier is driving this \$17,000 pair of speakers with so much ease and finesse.

The program is switched to solo vocals from Johnny Cash, Tom Jones and a bit of Shelby Lynne for good measure. This combination delivers plenty of air, control, sustain and palpability with both genders. The initial drum "thumps" at the beginning of "Just a Little Lovin" have the required jump factor and again, everyone listening to the Rotel amplifier, not knowing exactly what it is, guesses much higher on the price tag. *(continued)*



Power begats power

A quick peek inside the RB-1590 reveals all the right ingredients in place: a monstrous dual-toroidal power transformer along with a bank of eight big power supply capacitors (slit-foil British capacitors, which claim to reduce internal eddy currents, resulting in more transparent sound) and enormous heat sinks for the output stages.

The RB-1590 draws less than a watt of power in standby mode, but can draw 800 watts at full power, so you can leave it on without fretting over excess electricity usage. Once playing, it takes about 20 minutes to fully stabilize and remains moderately warm with heavy use, though nothing like the heat generated by a full class-A power amplifier! *(continued)*

Weekend Pro-Ject



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Perfect for limited spaces, desktop audio, as a second system in a vacation home or office. MaiA represents the high performance, high value design philosophy music lovers have come to expect from Pro-Ject.

Not every weekend project has to come from a to-do list.



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Around back, you have the switchable option of RCA or balanced inputs, and there are two pairs of binding posts per channel. Fit, finish, parts choice and execution inside and out are much better than you would expect for a \$3,000 amplifier. If this baby had a Krell badge on it, it would probably tip the scale at about 15 grand.

Getting down to business

After a few days at our publisher's studio, the RB-1590 paired with the new B&Ws proves enjoyable, but in reviewer-speak, I had to hear 'em in my own system to pass final judgement. Because my Vandersteen 5s have internal, powered woofers, I couldn't run this amplifier out of juice no matter how hard I tried. My Vandersteens have a passive crossover point at 80Hz, so running the mighty Rotel thusly didn't even make it warm at brain damage levels. I've probably never listened to Frank Marino and Mahogany Rush this loud, ever.

If you are a fan of large scale orchestral music, heavy rock or electronic/dance music, it's going to be a very short courtship with the RB-1590. You're going to want to take it home sooner than later, and you'll never go back to a 35 watt tube amp again. Unless you have super sensitive speakers, rocking out in a natural or electronically assisted way needs *power*.

The extra dynamic range you get as a result of that extra power and headroom brings another dimension to listening that you don't realize you were missing until you've heard it, and once you do, there's no turning back. Taking the RB-1590 over to a good friend's house with a pair of new Wilson Audio Sophia 3s for a night of Slayer and Metallica creates smiles and a bit of ringing in the ears all around, but you just can't really get into this kind of music without a lot of power.

Best of all the RB-1590 does not lack dimension. Often, inexpensive solid-state amplifiers can muster more than their share of drive and bass control, but they fall short in the finesse department. Again, this amplifier conjures up a wonderful three-dimensional image and, to its credit, plays well at low volume, something that many solid-state amplifiers struggle with.

Should the "just the facts, Ma'am" presentation of the RB-1590/RC-1590 combination be a little too truthful, adding a tube preamplifier to the mix can add that little extra warmth that you might require. Mating the RB-1590 with my recently restored Audio Research SP-11 really made this vintage-loving audiophile happy. But that's your call. Regardless of how you want to play the front end with the RB-1590, this one's a winner. Highly recommended.



Additional listening

We've all been really excited about these Rotel components because they offer the music lover who wants to make a few steps above entry-level gear a legitimate look at what the big bucks gear offers at an attainable price. The matching preamp is a no-brainer, and chances are good your local Rotel dealer will carry B&W speakers as well, so you can walk out the door with a complete system, with rack and cables for well under 10 grand.

Should you be more of a mix-and-match audio enthusiast, rest easy. The RB-1590 is one of the most friendly amplifiers I've ever used. Thanks to balanced and unbalanced inputs and *tons* of power, you can hook it up to anything. I tried Magnepans, vintage and current ESL speakers, a pair of JBL L-100s and my reference GamuT RS5is. Nothing threw the RB-1590 a curveball.

In the context of similarly priced gear, I can't remember anything that comes close in recent review that holds a candle to the RB-1590. There are a few smaller amplifiers that offer a bit more finesse and resolution, but most of them have about 40 watts per channel, and that won't do for most inefficient speakers. And I just can't cozy up to class D yet, guilty as charged for being somewhat biased against these designs.

If you want a natural sounding, high-powered amplifier that comes from a company with a long reputation for greatness, Rotel's RB-1590 is my first choice. Like its companion, the RC-1590 we reviewed last issue, I can't *not* award this amplifier an Exceptional Value Award. It is without peer at the price. — **Jeff Dorgay**

**The Rotel RB-1590
Power Amplifier**
\$2,999

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Rotel

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www.rotel.com

PERIPHERALS
Analog Source
Linn LP12, Shure vmxr

Digital Source
Mark Levinson no.39
(modded and updated)

Preamplifier
Rotel RC-1590,
Audio Research REF 5,
Audio Research SP-11 mk. 2

Speakers
Vandersteen 5A,
Magnepan 3.7 and
various others

Cable
Cardas Golden Reference



Time Flies!

The ModWright SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition

By Jeff Dorgay

T racking through Radiohead's newest album, *A Moon Shaped Pool*, the sonic landscape painted by ModWright's *entry* preamplifier is impressive – even after I've just removed a big-bucks preamplifier from a system consisting of a CJ LP125sa+ power amplifier, the dCS Rossini DAC featured on our cover and my reference GamuT RS5i speakers, all cabled with Cardas Clear. Yep, this \$2,900 preamp is getting the job done in good company.

Thanks to Tidal, running through 20 or 30 familiar favorite tracks requires much less time than when the original 9.0 arrived 13 years ago. Oddly, one of the things that impressed me most about the original ModWright preamp was Wright's labeling the inputs both right-side up and upside down, making it easier to peek behind your equipment rack and facilitate connections. A small attention to detail, but one that convinced me that this guy had some insight.



A lot has transpired in 13 years. A quick drive up to Amboy, Washington proves fruitful, picking up one of the first SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition preamplifiers from Dan Wright. The original SWL 9.0 (named for the 9.0 pound birth weight of his son Spencer) was Wright's first product 13 years ago, after a four-year career of modding other people's gear for higher performance.

That original preamplifier was well thought out revealing a lot of sound for the \$1,999 asking price. At the time, tube moguls Conrad-Johnson, Audio Research, BAT and McIntosh didn't have anything in this price range, and the ModWright compared favorably with a few of their more expensive offerings. But Wright was a young manufacturer

with only a few years under his belt and relatively low overhead. Yet now with a manufacturing facility, employees and considerably more inventory, he's managed to not only grow, but also stay lean and keep prices in line.

Fast forward to now

Today, Wright has earned his stripes, proving himself in an industry that isn't always easy to compete in, and over 400 units of the original SWL 9.0 were produced. When one occasionally pops up on the secondary market, it is usually snapped up rather quickly, proving that this initial product is still very desirable. Those still possessing the original, take note: the mother ship can still service these preamplifiers.



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STOP Fake Auto Bias

Most music lovers crave a tube amplifier but are overwhelmed by the task of biasing output tubes. So they buy an amp they think is “auto bias” when most are actually **cathode bias**: An inexpensive design usually found in **budget guitar amps**. Cathode-bias amps are **cheaper to build**, plus they **lose about 30% of the tube’s power** as heat. Many run in **Class A**, which means **shorter tube life**.



In 2003, PrimaLuna engineers rocked the audio world with the first ever truly **Adaptive AutoBias** system which not only **eliminates biasing**, but **compensates for aging tubes**. Adaptive AutoBias is **not in the signal path** and **dramatically improves sound quality** by lowering distortion over 50%.

In 2009, we went even further. If Adaptive AutoBias senses a tube failure, it tells the user which one with a **Bad Tube Indicator LED** and puts the amplifier into Protection Mode. **No guesswork, blown resistors, trips to the shop, or to UPS**. True plug and play. Plus, Adaptive AutoBias enables users to switch between **EL34** and **6550, KT88, KT120**, or even **KT150** tubes.... **it’s like Five Amps in One!**

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REVIEW



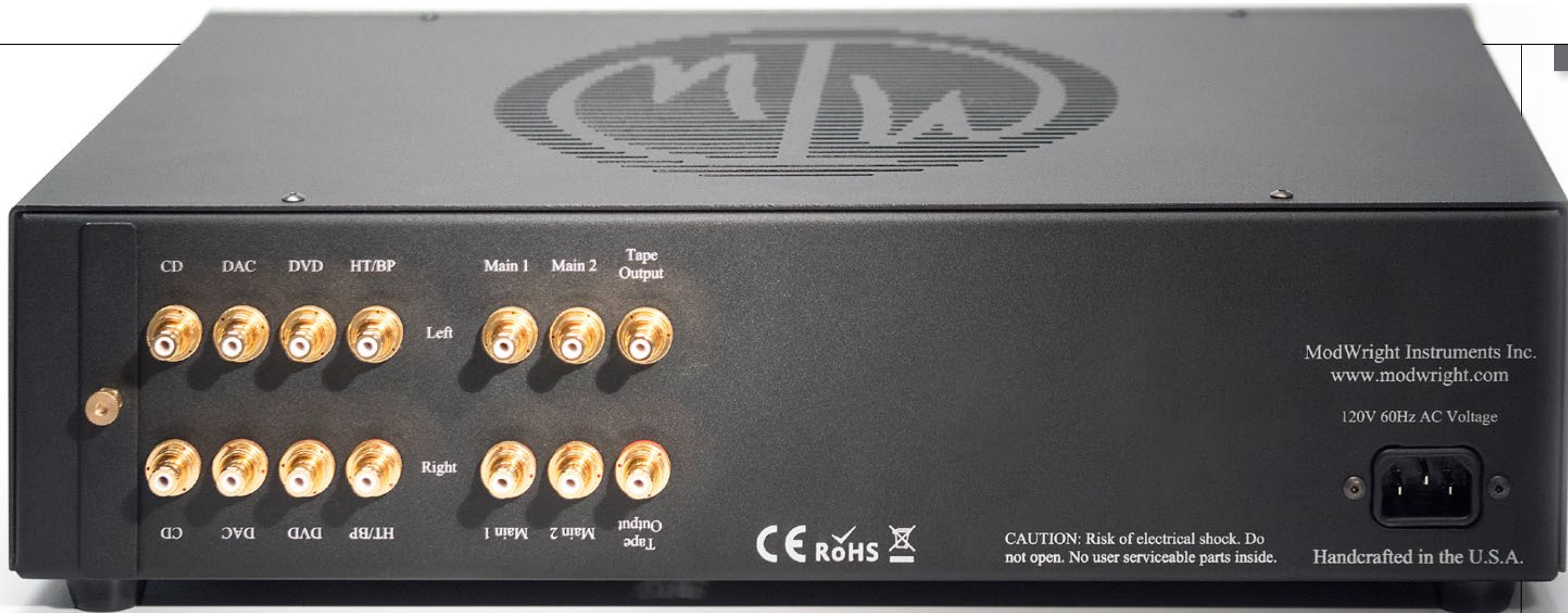
Like the BMW 3-series, Wright’s products are evolutionary, rather than changing direction every couple years. They just keep getting a little better, sonically and visually, with every iteration. In his office, Wright jokes about how much he’s learned about shipping as well. While the case-work of the SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition has been simplified somewhat to hit the price point, the machined aluminum top plate from the more expensive models has been tastefully replaced by a stamped piece of metal, and the faceplate is still thick, with equally robust control knobs, all machined with care. Carefully placed in an equipment rack, you’ll never know the difference and this

is a great example of putting the money invested where it counts – in the sound quality. Also gone, much for the better, are the paddle switches of old, now replaced with gentle push buttons. I remember breaking one of the switches on my original 9.0, just as I did on my Audio Research and BAT preamplifiers of similar vintage, so this is a nice touch. The 9.0 SWL Anniversary feels like a far more expensive pre-amplifier, especially when you pick it up. This thing has to weigh about 25 or 30 pounds.

Nothing unessential

The SWL 9.0 Anniversary is a model of simplicity. Inputs on the left, volume on the right. Just like the original, it still

“goes to 11,” so we can see that success hasn’t gone to Wright’s head and dissolved his sense of humor – though you’d never turn it up that far. About 12 o’clock was all any of my single-ended power amplifiers needed to achieve full output. Running a wide range of amplifiers, from a vintage, restored SAE 2200 amplifier all the way up to the Pass Xs300 monoblocks that are my current reference, compatibility is superb. It’s worth noting that this preamplifier easily drives a 20-foot pair of interconnects without sonic degradation, a plus for the audiophile in a more compact space who wants to segregate a power amplifier from the rest of the system.



Around back are four sets of RCA high level inputs and a pair of variable level outputs along with a fixed level output for those of you using a tape or digital recorder. I took the time to connect my VPI Classic 1/Lyra Kleos and Rega phonostage along with a Revox B77 to make a mix tape and can assure those who love to make their own recordings that the SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition performs flawlessly in this capacity as well. While not ready yet, Wright has mentioned that in the future, the SWL 9.0 Anniversary will be available with a built-in, solid-state MM phono option for \$300. And of course, you'll be able to upgrade it if you purchased without initially.

The original circuit of the SWL 9.0 was a hybrid Mu stage and the current version still takes advantage of the 5687 tube, which Wright likes for its "linear and dynamic sound." However, today's SWL 9.0 Anniversary is a pure tube design with no solid-state devices in the signal path. Only the headphone amp relies on discrete MOSFETs in the output.

Initial listening was done as a drop-in with my main reference system, yet the smiles were equally huge in the context of a bit more reasonable system. Final listening was done with a Pass XA30.8 amplifier and the Simaudio 260D CD player/DAC, all cabled with Cardas Clear Reflection cable. Both the

Rogers LS5/9s and the Quad 2812s were used as reference speakers.

who00-- Keeps the pace

Extended listening keeps bringing one thing to the forefront with the SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition; it has exceptional pace. Whether listening to something flawlessly mastered, or something dense and compressed like my favorite Monkees tracks, this preamplifier keeps the beat nailed down, never wavering. The bottom end is strong – neither overbearing nor thin – and the overall sound feels somewhere between natural and a few molecules on the warm side of the spectrum, but barely so. As it was thirteen years

ago, the SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition adds precious little sonic signature to the music presented and that's a good thing.

It has enough depth and inner detail to convince you that this is not a solid-state preamplifier, but it is never overly warm, tubey, or euphonic. You won't be confused that it might be a vintage tube preamp either.

Head-fi friendly

In addition to the sonic and aesthetic improvements, the biggest change to the SWL 9.0 Anniversary is the addition of a headphone amplifier. Considering that even a so-so headphone amplifier is going to set you back at least \$400–\$500, the cost of this

preamplifier has really only gone up about \$400 in over ten years. Not bad, considering how much Wright's organization has grown.

Wright claims the on board headphone stage should be able to drive anything and mentions he used Mr. Speakers Ethers to voice this part of the circuit. It sailed through driving the Audeze LCD-2s and my Oppo PM-1s with ease. While not the last word in headphone amplification, this should more than do the job for the moderate headphone listener who doesn't want to spend \$400–\$600 on an outboard headphone amp, the necessary interconnect and power cord. *(continued)*

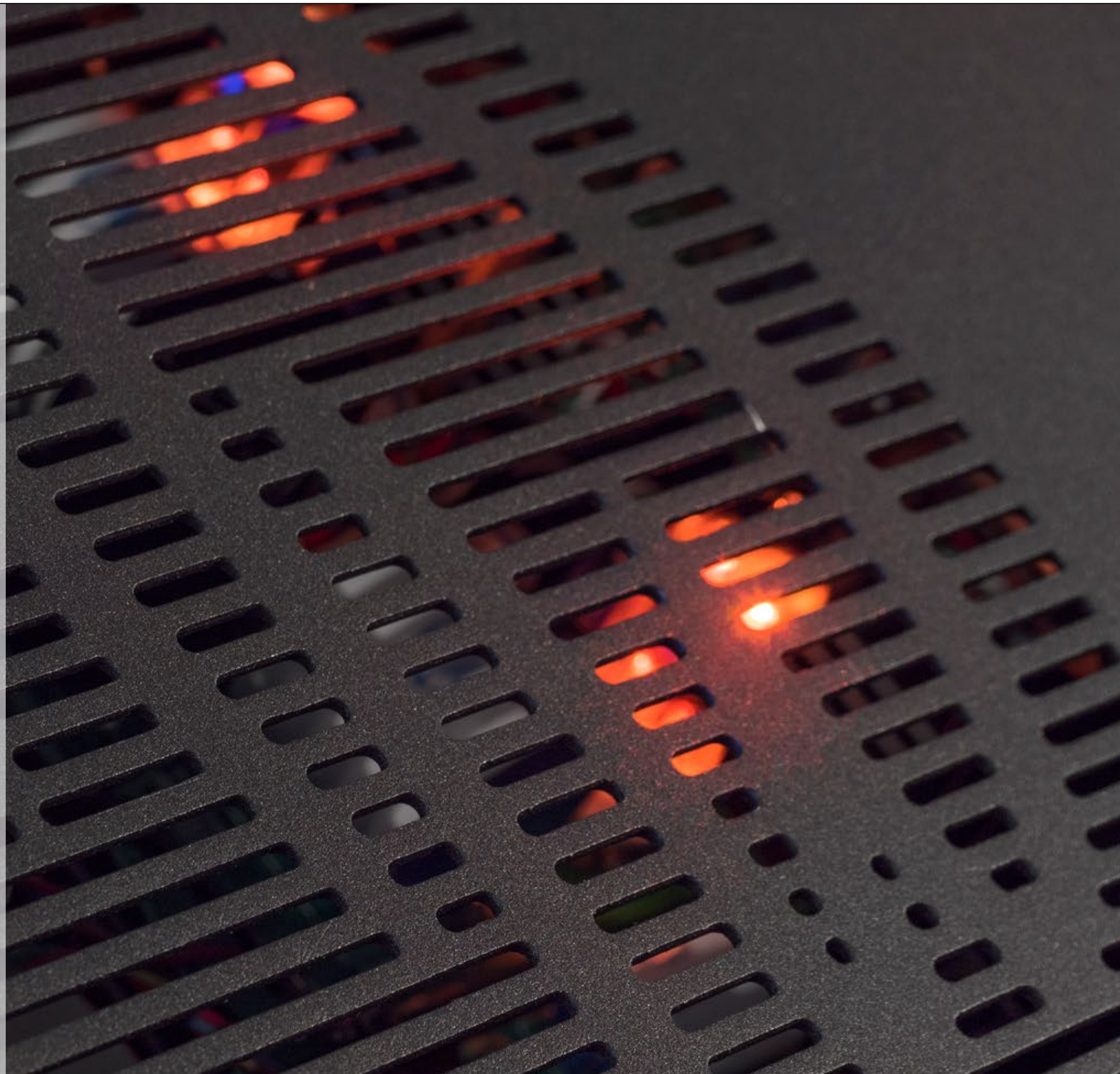
Personally, in the tradition of the best vintage preamplifiers, I really like having a good phono stage and headphone amp all on the same chassis. This will serve 90–95% of the users perfectly. And it makes this preamp even more of a killer value.

Hard core head fi-er's will of course want to take things further, but that's not the point here; what is important is that like the optional phono stage, Modwright has made this all inclusive and has given you more than enough to start your headphone journey. Should you get bitten really hard by the vinyl or the headphone bugs, you can ring him up for an outboard headphone amp or phono stage to take things further. The fact that both of these can be included on a \$3,200 preamplifier is outstanding.

Yes, we have a winner

Investing ten to twenty thousand dollars in *anything*, whether an automobile or a music system is still somewhat of a luxury in today's world. Some of the most intriguing audio systems I've heard over the years have fallen in this price range, because if you want great sound at this price point, great care is required both in system setup and component choice. I can't think of a better preamplifier to round out a system in this price point than the ModWright SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition and am happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016.

The five-figure preamplifiers still reveal more music, as they should. But the ModWright SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition preamplifier nails all of the musical fundamentals, giving you a large enough portion of what the high end is all about. Unless you've got buckets of cash to spend, you can spend the rest of your life with this baby and not want for more. I'm certainly going to write Mr. Wright a check for one; half for old times' sake and half to use as a reference in this neck of the woods. Here's to thirteen more years. These days Spencer is tipping the scale at 100 pounds. Time flies indeed. ●



ModWright SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition Preamplifier

\$2,900 (phono stage \$300 additional)

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ModWright Instruments, Inc.

CONTACT

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PERIPHERALS

Digital Source

dCS Rossini DAC
w/Rossini Clock and
Paganini Transport

Amplifier

Pass XA 30.8

Speakers

Graham LS5/9 and
Quad 2812

Cable

Cardas Clear

Power

Running Springs Dmitri

Exceeding the previous mark

ZYX's UNlverse Premium Cartridge

By Richard H. Mak

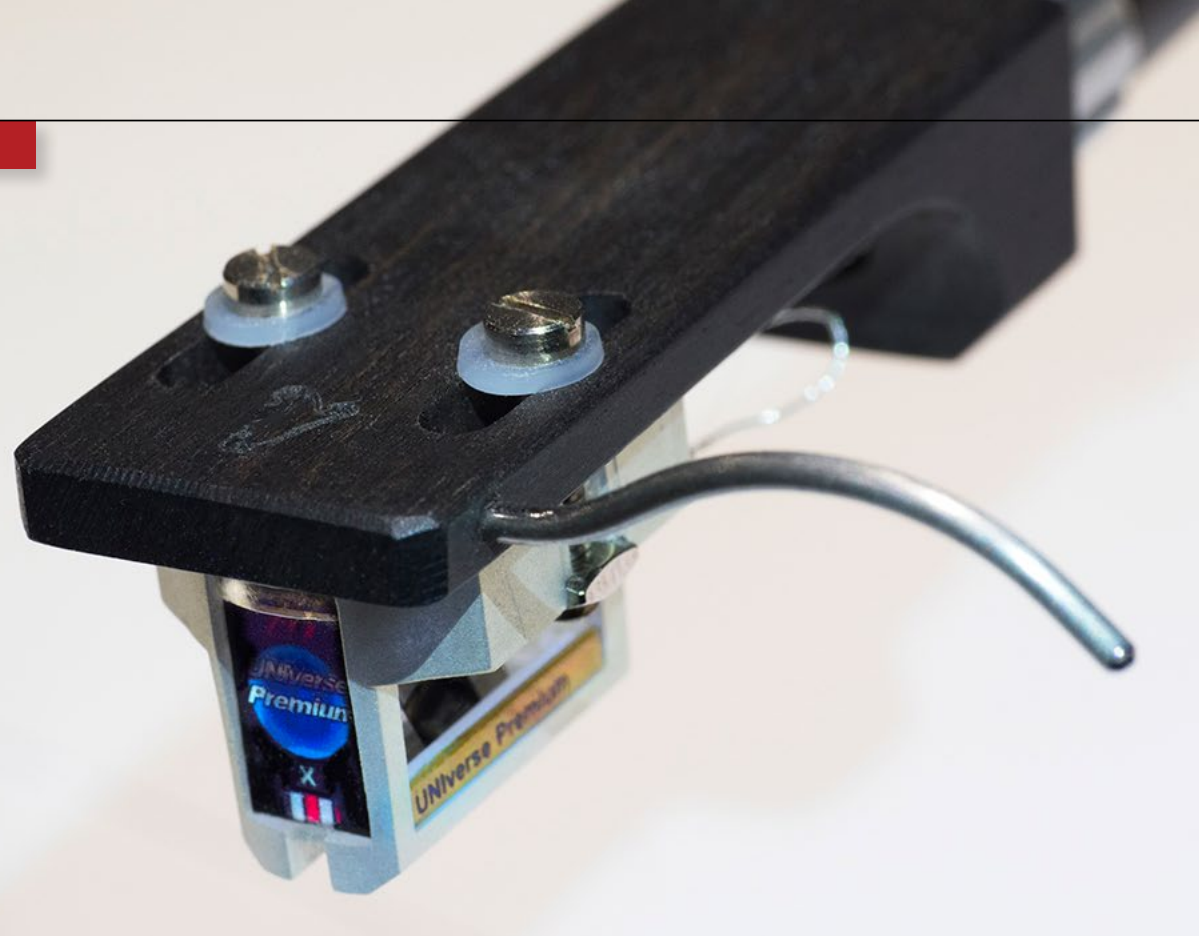
The UNlverse Premium, the latest masterpiece of ZYX's chief designer Hisayoshi Nakatsuka, is a statement product culminating from 50 years of experience in cartridge design, representing his best cartridge ever. Nakatsuka, is a rather private individual, avoiding the spotlight as much as possible. As far as we know, *TONEAudio* is the only North American publication to which he has ever granted an interview (issue 63). He remains as tight lipped as ever with his latest creation, divulging very little information other than telling me to "go with the sound, and you will see. Forget everything else." I felt like I was talking to Yoda.

The UNlverse Premium is a model exclusive to SORAsound and is uniquely different from all other ZYX models. The design of the UNlverse Premium follows Nakatsuka's lifelong philosophy of strongly emphasizing accurate signal retrieval with no added sonic subjectivity. The specification of the UNlverse Premium follows that of the UNlverse II, with the same choice of the use of copper or silver coils, at 0.24mV or 0.48mV output, with an internal impedance of 4 and 8 ohms respectively. These are efficient electrical generators with very few windings within the internal coils.

The UNlverse II has changed from transparent acrylic to a pearl white colored material, about which Nakatsuka also remains coy. All three Universe cartridges carry almost identical specifications, meaning sonic differences must stem from something other than pure technical data. The biggest difference is the price: MSRP has gone from \$8,500 to a steep \$15,000, which makes the UNlverse Premium to be the only cartridge, together with the Clearaudio Goldfinger (\$15,000), the LYRA Olympos (\$10,000), LYRA Atlas (\$ 11,995), and the newly released Air-Tight Opus-1 (\$15,000) to cross the \$10,000 mark.

Getting down to business

Our review sample is the low-output copper-coiled version. As with all ZYX cartridges, setup is a breeze as the cantilever is clearly visible and unobstructed by the body. Torque on the mounting screws is set at 0.65 in./lbs., and tracking force is optimized at 1.932g. The tracking force number should never be taken as gospel, as all cartridges are handmade and each will require a slight variation, but should you purchase one for your analog front end, this is an excellent starting point. *(continued)*



Fear not, there is a dramatic difference between the Universe II and the Premium, and within a few LP sides, it is clear that the new model reveals much more music.

The difference is not so much a change in tonality, but a further improvement of the qualities making the Universe line of cartridges unique. Where the original Universe II lacks a bit of body and weight in the mid to low frequencies, the UNlverse Premium retains the near limitless top end extension and airiness of the Universe II, further adding definition, richness and body to the mid to low frequencies in a manner similar to the difference between the UNlverse I and II, but by a far greater degree of contrast. Also improved is the ability to retrieve minute details and definition down to the lowest level, delivering them with a lighting fast

transient response in a polite, silky, and elegant fashion. The Premium may very well be the most tonally balanced cartridge I have experienced.

The superiority of the UNlverse Premium is well demonstrated on Saint-Saens' "Dance Macabre" in RCA Living Stereo's infamous *Witches' Brew* album (LSC-2225). Mastered by the legendary recording engineer Kenneth Wilkinson, the performance is nothing short of a dynamic orchestral *tour de force*. On the first listen, the high frequencies appear relatively less extended versus the Universe II. But upon heightened scrutiny, the top end extension and sonic ambience are actually all there, offering the same well-defined spatial extension and instrument separation as the Universe II. The added richness to the mid to low frequencies renders the

upper notes less prominent – not missing, but better balanced in their rightful place, resulting in tonality with near-perfect balance.

LF definition is better when rendered by the UNlverse Premium: from the plucking of double bass strings, to the decay on powerful bass drums, the UNlverse Premium simply delivers an incredibly balanced combination of extension combined with an astonishing level of texture and definition. This becomes even clearer listening to Wong Ka Wai's movie soundtrack *The Grand-master*: its mix of piano, chamber music, and electronic instruments in the thunderous opening track fully demonstrates the super wide dynamic range and contrast this model is capable of portraying. It is at a level simply unattainable by all previous models of ZYX cartridges. (continued)



LS5/9



LS5/8

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Equally remarkable is the holographic image projected in acoustical space – the soundstage is deep, wide, and well-layered with proper instrument separation and sharpness, all of which is presented with just the right amount of sharpness and contrast.

Some quick comparisons

To fully appreciate the UNlverse Premium, two other big guns were brought to the table: the Goldfinger Statement and the Lyra Olympos. Favorites that I am well familiar with, all three were mounted on the same turntable with the same phonostage to keep the playing field level.

Spinning “Dog Days Are Over” from Florence and the Machine’s *LUNGS* album, the UNlverse Premium renders the most minute details on the plucking of harp strings in the beginning of the track with ease. The ambience gives the impression that Florence is performing in a church setting reminiscent of the Cowboy Junkies’ *Trinity Sessions*. Switching to the Goldfinger Statement, the venue becomes more like a jazz lounge, with less hall ambience and airiness, but at the same time the strings are plucked with a more commanding sense of weight and control. The Lyra Olympos offers the least amount of ambience and top-end extension, but it is rendered with a greater

sense of realism, as if a thin veil has been lifted from the picture.

Florence Welch’s voice is the most polite, carrying a more feminine tone on the UNlverse Premium, while the other two cartridges project more assertiveness to her voice, with the whole presentation via the ZYX darker and weightier. Volume also appears to be higher on the other two cartridges versus the Universe Premium despite the fact that it has been carefully matched with a decibel meter. Soundstage is the most forward with the Goldfinger and the furthest back with the Universe Premium, but all are equally deep, wide, and well-layered. Tough choices!

Further listening

One must be grateful to Analogphonic of Germany for re-releasing the next recording, because the original Deutsch Grammophone album is fetching over a thousand dollars on eBay. With Enrico Mainardi’s Violoncello album featuring Schumann, Gluck, Schubert and Chopin (DGG LPEM 19054), the UNlverse Premium displays the lightest touch on the bow as the strings glide across Mainardi’s cello. The accompanying piano feels lighter, but with more finesse and agility. The Goldfinger and the Olympos feel slightly weightier

with a bit higher contrast, making the piano stand out more, where the reverse is true with the ZYX, as the cello stands out more than the piano. It also renders the highest amount of low level information embedded in the tracks, allowing the listener to decipher every minute detail down to the nuances of background noise or imperfections of the track. These same qualities are displayed in Arthur Grmiaux’s *To My Friends, Best-Loved Encores* album, with the Goldfinger and Olympos projecting more weight on the violin bow, and heavier strokes on the piano. The Universe Premium offers a lighter presentation, more clarity and faster transient response on the violin strings, as well as the fragmentation of the tone emanating from tone with each strike of the velvet hammer on the wires of the piano.

When each of these cartridges is played individually, one would be hard pressed to find fault with any of them. They differ only in sonic characters, and not in strength or weakness over one another. Although the UNlverse Premium may be the most reserved and polite sounding of the three, it is only polite on a *relative* basis. Do not for a second mistake the UNlverse Premium to be bland sounding or lacking in dynamic contrast. *(continued)*

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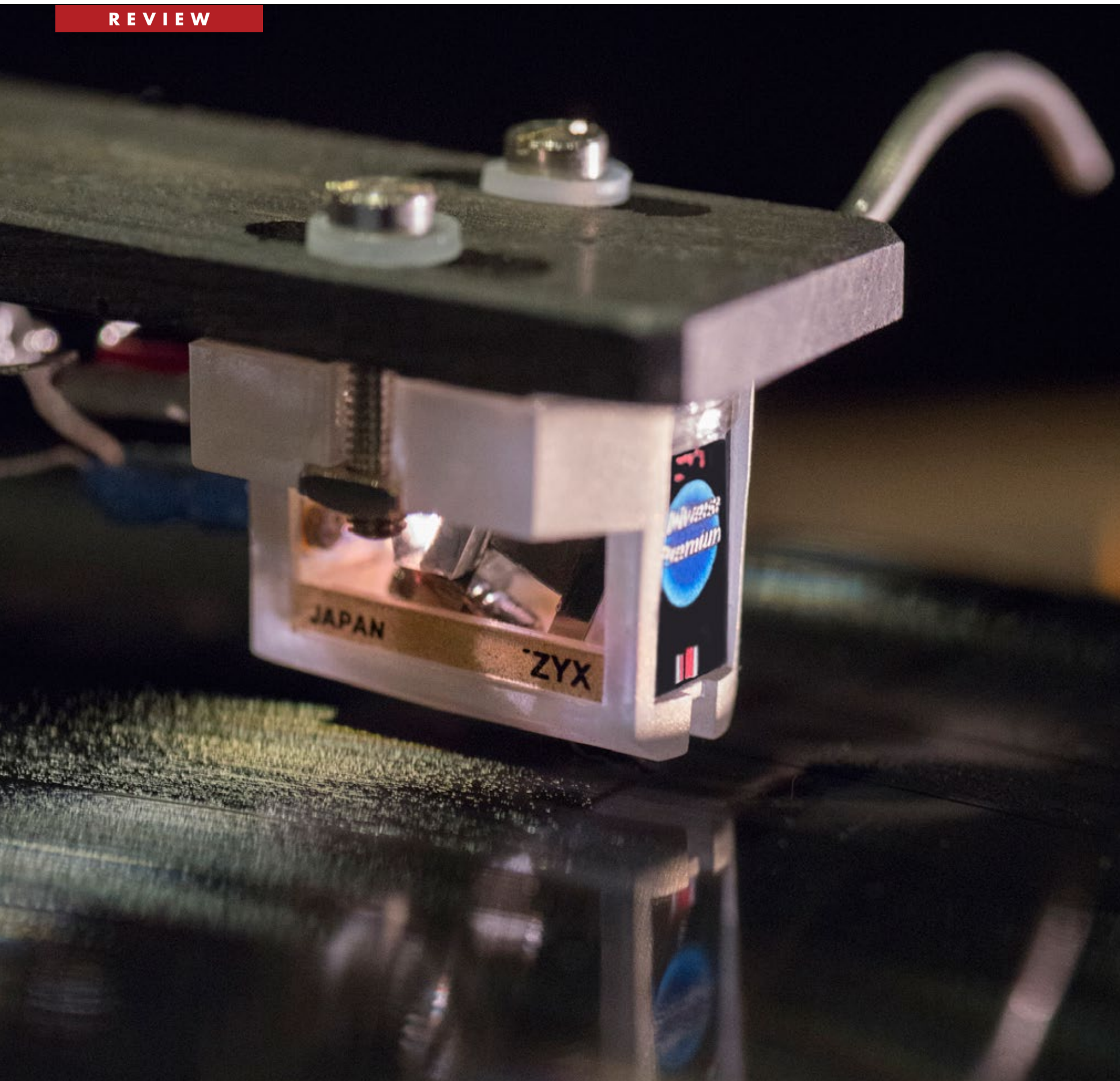
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This is best demonstrated on the newly released *Mad Max: Fury Road* soundtrack (which if you haven't already owned, buy it quickly on Amazon before the limited run is gone). Think Metallica's *Master of Puppets*, add onto it Hans Zimmer's *Superman* soundtrack, and perhaps a bit of Dvorak's *From The New World* mixed all together, and the result will resemble Junkie XL's intense and gripping show of force. This is one of only a handful of albums which I'm reluctant to play with a lesser cartridge, which will render it into a two-hour ordeal of trashy, chest-pounding aggressive noise. Not so with the UNlverse Premium, the composition becomes a carefully orchestrated show of elegant dynamism. Even with the volume blasting in excess of 100 decibels, every instrument which would otherwise be jammed together can be identified and discernible in the complex acoustic space. The Universe Premium does what few cartridges can: it maintains control in the most complex of passages without the slightest hint of congestion, losing focus or distorting the acoustic image. No matter how loud and ferocious the performance becomes, the sound coming out of the UNlverse Premium is never aggressive, hard, or abrasive, making it my favorite cartridge for this dynamically charged and yet difficult recording.

As with ZYX's predecessors, the Universe line of cartridges easily retains the title of one of the most detailed cartridges, with the best top end extension going. The added dynamic contrast, low-level detail and low-end extension of the UNlverse Premium, vaults the ZYX name into a space previously occupied only by the world's handful of the very best

cartridges. The ZYX UNlverse Premium has achieved tonal perfection, with no identifiable weakness whatsoever.

At the very top level of the premium cartridge podium, there resides few competitors. If budget is not an issue, then the buying decision can be a relatively easy one because there are simply very few alternatives. If you want to own the very best, perhaps it is time to add the ZYX UNlverse Premium to your arsenal. ●

ZYX UNlverse Premium Cartridge
MSRP \$15,000

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Lyra Olympos / Schroder Reference 12" Ebony

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TW Raven AC w/ Full Copper Platter

Phono Preamp: Tenor Phono 1, CH Precision P1

Preamp

McIntosh C1000T/C1000C

PowerAmp

McIntosh MC2301, MC2KW, MC3500

Speakers

Dynaudio Temptations

Cables

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STUNNING SIMPLICITY

MOON by Simaudio Neo 280D Streaming DSD DAC

By Andre Marc

Simaudio is the rare position of being thought of as one of the top tier purveyors of luxury home audio goods that do everything well. Their power amplifiers, preamps, phono stages, integrated amps, CD players, and transports continuously receive numerous positive reviews and awards. However, most recently, their Digital Audio Converters and streamers have been in the headlines for their cutting edge design, versatility, and outstanding sound quality. Justifiably so.

Simaudio also has the reputation of providing a solid upgrade path for their customers, while constantly seeking to improve their products. They do not, however churn product lines, only introducing new models if significant improvements have can be offered. Simaudio also makes optional state of the art outboard power supplies for many of their products, further increasing their performance without having to buy a new box.

280D DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTER



280D DIGITAL-TO-ANALOG CONVERTER

In the digital realm, Simaudio covers all the bases. I reviewed the Moon Neo 380D DAC with the built in Moon MiND ethernet streamer and it enjoyed long term status as my digital reference. Their stable consists of the stand alone Moon MiND 180D streamer, the Neo 230 HAD headphone amp and DSD DAC, the Neo 260D CD transport and DAC, the updated Neo 380D DAC, now with DSD capability, the Moon Evolution 650A and 750A CD transports/converters, and the new flagship Evolution 780D DSD DAC. (which has also been recently reviewed here at TONE) Simaudio also has a number of integrated

amplifiers that can be ordered with onboard DAC modules. Their newest product, the ACE is an all in one streaming amp that only requires speakers to complete your system.

The Moon Neo 280D Streaming DSD DAC, was introduced early last year, and is priced at \$2,200. The optional Moon MiND streaming module is an additional \$600. With an impressive feature set featuring seven digital inputs including AES/EBU, Coaxial, TosLink, asynchronous USB, aptX® based Bluetooth®, and Ethernet for the MiND streamer (WiFi can be used as well), the 280D supports virtually

all known formats, including DSD256 via the USB input. The analog stage is a fully balanced differential circuit, which Simaudio says is designed with exceptional transparency in mind, much like the ones gracing their flagship Evolution series.

The Neo 280D is distinct in appearance, and follows in the Simaudio tradition of exceptional industrial design. The elegant curves make it an attractive addition to any system. The build quality is off the charts, and the product exudes quality and pride of ownership. Note, it is available in black, silver, or two tone finishes.

The Neo 280D is put through it's paces in a system consisting of a Bryston BDP-2 file player, a Rogue RP-5 preamp, Audio Research VS55 and Rotel RB-1590 power amps, a pair of recently reviewed Bryston Mini T three way monitors, and a JL Audio Dominion subwoofer. Analog cabling is all ZenWave audio, with digital links from DH Labs and iFi Audio. The Bryston file player is used with both the Neo 280D's AES/EBU and USB input, with the music library stored on a remote networked attached storage device. *(continued)*

Optimized or Compromised?



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REVIEW



Half way into David Bowie's *Five Years* box set (24/192 FLAC), it became obvious the 280D was a world class DAC. These high resolution remasters are highly transparent, bringing Bowie's early catalog into the 21st century with fresh appeal. The Neo 280D gets the acoustic guitars, piano, bass, drums, and fuzzed out guitars into focus to the point of being startling in the immediacy of the presentation, with Bowie's voice rendered in the most sublime way, shedding new light on what a superb vocalist he was.

The Neo 280D is equally superb with DSD material. Sifting through dozens of DSF files ripped from SACD discs is an immersive experience. The same holds true for DSD downloads like Shelby Lynne's *Just A Little Lovin'*, the Muddy Waters classic *Folk Singer*, and the Blood, Sweat & Tears self titled album.

Even more impressive to these ears is DSD128, such as Quiles & Cloud's lovely *Seminole Star*. It is clearly the analog like quality and sense of continuousness that makes DSD very appealing, and the Neo 280D brings out the best attributes of this format.

Redbook playback via the Neo 280D is some of the best I've heard in my reference system. Since the bulk of the music library resides in this resolution, it is vital that a DAC can shine here. And the Neo 280D does, big time. Cycling through dozens FLAC rips across multiple genres makes it easy to determine that the Neo 280D offers up a vibrancy, pleasing tonality, and a sense of musical flow that one seeks in the very best DAC models.

Arbouretum's *Coming Out Of The Fog*, is a wonderful mix of pastoral leanings, and modern psychedelia, reminiscent of The Band. (continued)



It sounds utterly exhilarating through the Neo 280D, with the angular guitar riffs, jagged melodies, and the sense of drama in the songs beautifully framed. In fact, there are moments where the guitars leap out of the speakers, and the different shades of dark and light the band employs are fully on display.

A brand new release that has been in rotation is *Porto Bohemica*, by avant-garde chanteuse Trixie Whitley. The free-form songwriting is an interesting melange of mid-period Joni Mitchell and John Martyn-like meditations. The album is filled with echoing keyboards, chiming guitars, and a lot of ambience. The Neo 280D brought me right back to the club where I saw Whitley perform recently. Her voice was rendered wonderfully, with all the emotion in her delivery intact.

As noted, the Neo 280D is equipped with the optional Moon MiND module for the purpose of this review. I have previously spent quite a bit of time with the MiND, integrated with the Simaudio's Neo 380D DAC and with the stand-alone Moon MiND 180D outboard unit. Having the Moon MiND module in the Neo 280D is a pure joy. No digital cables required, no additional boxes, and no fussing. All that is required is a networked library, and an Ethernet connection, or WiFi. I use Ethernet exclusively, with my library on a networked computer running MiniMServer, with an iPad Air used as a control point.

Having reviewed dozens of streaming products over the last few years, here again the Moon MiND is among the very best

experienced, offering a rich, full-bodied presentation that makes long listening sessions highly rewarding. I feel the Neo 280D with the Moon MiND integrated module better than other streamers connected via USB or AES/EBU. This may be due to the elimination of cabling, but, whatever the reason, it is a favorite.

The MiND iOS control app is total winner. It is fast, smooth, ultra-responsive, and aesthetically pleasing. Creating playlists and navigating libraries is a cinch, and the newest version offers Tidal integration. Simaudio has allocated a lot of resources into creating the app, allowing for total control over the quality of the MiND experience and it shows. You can, however, use other control apps if you desire. (continued)

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super speaker? \$13,900/pr.? What about \$62,000/pr.? What makes a super speaker? When a speaker at any price point is loaded with so much more technology and sounds that much better, it's a **real super speaker**.

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“...one of the biggest high-end speaker bargains out there...”

—Roy Gregory, The Audio Beat

The **Treo** (\$6,900/pr.) is a modern-day version of the Model 2 that's **beautiful to look at**, but **over-engineered** to be as silent as the enclosures of today's most exotic super speakers regardless of cost.

“My new reference speakers.” —Anthony Cordesman, The Absolute Sound

The **Model 5A Carbon** at \$29,900/pr. features an advanced carbon tweeter and the patented Perfect-Piston™ carbon midrange from the Model Seven Mk II, plus **BIG powered bass with a 400-watt powered subwoofer with 11-band room EQ**.

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The **Model Seven Mk II** (\$62,000/pr.) is the ultimate expression of Richard Vandersteen's design philosophies, a radically advanced take on long held

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

Dual 8,” 300-Watt Powered Subwoofers w/11-Band Room EQ In Each Speaker For Perfect Bass in Virtually Any Room

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.

Vandersteen's Quatro Wood CT at \$13,900/pr. is a real-world super speaker. It's loaded with Vandersteen's most meaningful technologies including powered bass with room EQ for “perfect bass in virtually any room,” Vandersteen's patented aerodynamic midrange, a naturally airy Carbon Tweeter and much more. A ton of speaker!

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REVIEW



A nice feature Simaudio included with the Neo 280D is aptX enabled Bluetooth capability. Banish any audiophile prejudices against Bluetooth, as it is absolutely enjoyable, fun, and convenient. Case in point, connecting the iPad Air via Bluetooth and streaming Spotify to sample current releases was a gas. Any bluetooth enabled device will work, and the connection is immediate, and trouble free. While Bluetooth is not going to better the Neo 280D's other inputs, it is by no means a throw away add on. And it's a perfect way for your friends to get involved with the party when getting together. Now everyone can easily link their mobile device to your system and rock out!

The Neo 280D is an exceptional digital component visually and aurally, checking all the feature boxes as well. What ever flavor of digital connection, format, or resolution you desire, it is all included. In addition, the optional Moon MiND streaming module is too convenient and too good sounding to pass up. That, coupled with excellent styling and build, and the Moon by Simaudio Neo 280D Streaming DSD DAC deserves our highest current recommendation for sub \$3,000 digital front ends. ●

The Simaudio MOON Neo 280D
MSRP: \$2,200

MANUFACTURER

Simaudio Ltd.

CONTACT

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PERIPHERALS

File Player/Streamer

Bryston BDP-2, SOtM sMS-100

Preamplifier

Rogue RP-5, Aric Audio Expression

Power Amplifier

Audio Research VS55, Rotel RB-1590, CLONES Audio 25p

Speakers

Bryston Mini T, Magnepan MMG, Spondor S35R, JL Audio Dominion D108

Cables

Transparent, Stager Sound, Acoustic Zen, SVS, DH Labs

Accessories

Bryston BIT-15, Audience aR6, Symposium, Shakti

JL Audio Dominion d110 Subwoofers

Low Down (In a good way)

By Rob Johnson

Florida's JL Audio began its corporate journey in the 1970s with roots in the car audio market. Since then, new and improved designs have led JL Audio into the home audio market, producing subwoofers that compete among the best available today. Their current offerings vie for the top place among – and we mean this in the most complimentary sense – the lowest of the low.

JL Audio currently offers four home subwoofer lines for home audio. After their flagship Gotham v2 subwoofer, the Fathom v2 and the E-Sub follow as more budget friendly options. The Dominion sub, the topic of this review, rounds out their lineup as JL's entry level product. It sells in the neighborhood of \$1,000 depending on size and finish. Because the Dominion in E-Subs are available from JL Audio directly, they can offer very cost-effective solutions without additional dealer markup. An owner can choose a matte finish or, for an extra \$100, upgrade to a black gloss finish.



The compact Dominion subs are available with either 8- or 10-inch drivers with the larger d110 reviewed here. While the subwoofers provide an extra layer of visceral sound and texture when used in a home theater configuration, they are equally useful in a two-channel music system. The small size and modest price of the Dominion subs make it easy to go for a pair, augmenting any speakers with limited low-frequency reproduction.

As a night owl living in an apartment, the ability to adjust the amount of bass in my listening space makes me a much better neighbor. Because low-frequency wavelengths are longer than their higher frequency counterparts, these signals penetrate walls more readily. Close neighbors don't always appreciate these

low frequencies, so adding a subwoofer (or a pair of them) allows this part of the music and movie soundtrack to remain below the sonic annoyance threshold during hours when others might prefer to sleep, then easily re-adjust on the fly for more bass output during daylight hours.

A wolf in sheep's clothing

Considering the size of the woofer driver within, Dominion's internals reside within a fairly compact form factor. The 10-inch driver is encased in a hefty, MDF enclosure measuring 12 inches (305mm) wide, 15.86 inches (403mm) deep, and 13.4 inches (340mm) tall including the isolation footers beneath. The package weighs in at a substantial 38 pounds (17.3Kg). *(continued)*



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

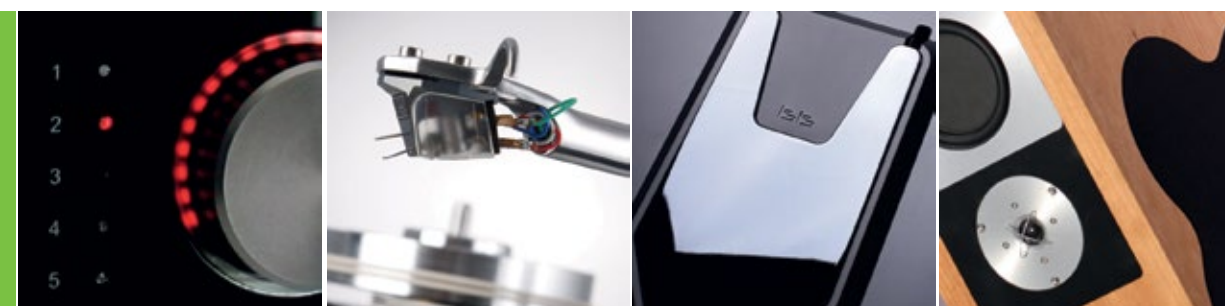
Rega's view is that hifi's simply a tool for listening to your music.

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A foam grille, with a subtle JL Audio logo at the bottom, covers the sub's front for extra woofer protection. The back of the subwoofer is where things get interesting. As active subs, Dominions require their own power cords. A large patch of heat sinks project from the rear, providing cooling for a 750-watt amplifier. As a Class D design, despite the power rating, the amp section remains remarkably energy friendly. Dominions have no power switch. When the sub detects a music signal the red standby light turns green and the subs ready themselves for music. The reverse is also true. When music shuts off, the sub drops itself into standby mode, sipping less than half a watt. To fully disengage the subs, simply unplug them.

Dominion subs offer several other adjustments. In addition to the bass volume knob, Dominion's crossover point can be set anywhere from 130 to 25Hz. Another knob lets the user manually set the phase to help the sub blend in with the singing speakers they supplement. A small switch engages a low pass filter, activating the onboard active crossover. Another switch toggles between a grounded or isolated power mode. A final switch enables reversed polarity if needed.

Ins and outs

Dominion owners will vary in their choices of equipment fleshing out their stereo or home theater system, so JL Audio provides a few connection options. The Dominions offer RCA inputs as well as speaker-type connectors for users with this as their only option. With our pair of subs, connections are made easy by using the second set of preamplifier main outs. Employing long interconnects, the left and right subs receive their respective cables providing supplemental bass in stereo. Should an owner desire to ditch the RCA cables, the JLink™ wireless transmitter and receiver can be added for \$199, allowing Dominion subwoofers to be placed anywhere in the room as long as they are in reach of a power outlet.

Patience required

The biggest challenge of the Dominion setup is integrating it with the main speakers. When optimized to work together, the extended bass blends in seamlessly as part of the overall musical picture; get it wrong and the subwoofers immediately draw attention to themselves. Those with minimal or no subwoofer setup experience will do well reading through JL's manual completely. They offer a lot of setup and placement tips which will get you close quickly. The rest will have to be done by ear with careful experimentation, and having a friend to move ever so slightly while you listen carefully, will accelerate the process.

Lacking the Automatic Room Optimization tool that the higher priced JL subs feature will save you money for more records and sharpen your subwoofer ninja skills, so take it not as a curse, but as a blessing. The reward will be worth it. Approach setting up a subwoofer just as you would your main loudspeakers; go for the best blend of low and mid frequencies in the room and make incremental movements when you get close.

As the manual suggests, the tuning process begins with a crossover point set at 80Hz, the filter on, and the phase adjustment at zero degrees. Using audio tracks featuring low bass, and the main speakers off, funk, reggae, dub and electronic music become valuable allies. Adjusting one sub at a time, this music test allows for final checks on placement and avoidance of unwanted wall and room interaction. With both subs on after their independent adjustments, music also proves helpful to ensure the subs do not fight against one another.

Once satisfied with the subwoofer placement, the task of crossover point and phase adjustment represent the remaining hurdles. The GamuT RS3 standmount speakers, on hand for testing alongside the Dominions, extend down to an already-deep 35Hz, so the Dominion crossover adjusted to 25 Hz is a good starting point, inching it up from there. It's a bit challeng-

ing to increase manually the sub crossover point to the low end of a monitor speaker's range without overlap that might deteriorate sound in the combined frequency region. Persevere to find the sweet spot.

Adjusting for proper phase and timing alignment with the main speakers is the final step. Slowly twisting the knob and listening carefully to one sub at a time eventually identifies the point where the sub's sound waves integrate most seamlessly with the other speakers, not drawing attention to the sub as a separate entity, but experiencing its low-end augmentation as an extension of the overall musical experience.

Get ready to rumble

Unlike most speakers we review, subs are obviously designed to reproduce a limited set of frequencies, and those low notes are much less directional than high-frequency notes projected toward the listener from a tweeter. In judging a subwoofer, desired capabilities include seamless speaker augmentation as discussed above, and tight, tuneful reproduction of music to supplement a bass-shy speaker setup. The Dominions are extremely capable.

With the Dominions powered up, movies are much more engaging, with action sequences, car chases, crashes, explosions, and other dramatic sound effects rumbling the sofa with ease. *(continued)*

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Robert Harley — The Absolute Sound

Music is equally enhanced; even a time-worn track like Enya's "Watermark" reveal surprisingly deep bass. This newfound low-frequency extension kept me up for many late night listening sessions re-exploring my music collection.

It's clear that JL Audio's design team has taken great care to provide owners a lot of musicality along with the extra oomph. No matter how hard these subs are pushed, they never exhibit strain. The clearly articulated low-frequency augmentation is certainly addictive, and songs like "Angel" from Massive Attack sound, well, massive indeed. On other electronic music tracks with fast bass beats, the Dominion's capability truly shines through taut notes that come and go without unwanted artifacts like soundstage

smearing and bloat. Kudos to the JL Audio team for bringing that level of low-end prowess at such a reasonable price.

For those who crave the depth, growl, and tangibility of low frequencies, a Dominion subwoofer may be a perfect partner for your beloved, but bass-challenged speaker. At about \$1,000 each, the Dominions do a marvelous job, even when mated with main speakers several times their price. Those with larger rooms, main speakers or budgets will probably want to consider a Gotham or Fathom, but there are no sonic compromises with the Dominion subwoofers. We are very pleased to award the Dominion d110 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016. ●



REVIEW

JL Audio
 Dominion d110 Subwoofer
\$999.99 - \$1,099.99
(finish dependent, mfr. Direct)

MANUFACTURER
JL Audio, Inc.

CONTACT
www.jlaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source
SME Model 10 with SME V and Model 10 tonearms. Dynavector 17D3 and Denon DL-103R cartridges

Digital Sources
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Amplification
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Preamplification
Coffman Labs G1-B

Speakers
Gamut RS3, Sonus faber Olympica III

Cables
Jena Labs

Power
Torus AVR 15 Plus, RSA Mongoose power cords

Accessories
ASC tube traps, Mapleshade Samson audio racks, Coffman Labs Equipment Footers, AudioQuest Jitterbug, Atomic Audio Labs Mac Mini stand

Beyond Bitchin!

A Marvel from PrimaLuna

By Jeff Dorgay

Do any of you know someone who knows what you want, even before you know you want it? Kevin Deal of Upscale Audio and PrimaLuna US is that kind of guy. Known the world over as a top purveyor of vacuum tubes, he and Herman Van den Dungen started

PrimaLuna about 13 years ago with a humble integrated amplifier for \$995 that changed what we could all expect from a small tube amplifier.

Unlike the Dynaco's of the '60s, the PrimaLuna ProLogue 1 is robustly built, beautifully finished, and as I said in *The Absolute Sound*, it sounds bitchin'. The product line has grown from there, and PrimaLuna has added a higher scale DiaLogue series alongside of the ever-evolving ProLogue series. Most of the two output tube per channel PrimaLuna integrated amplifiers produce about 40 watts per channel.



And now for something completely different

Kevin Deal knows that a lot of us love the lush, tonally saturated sound of the EL34 output tube and that's what he sent me for review; the new DiaLogue HP Integrated with eight of them under the hood. Wow. Yes, you can (and I did) run the HP with KT-88s or even KT-120s for a bit more power and that may indeed be your cup of tea. Swapping the EL-34s for a set of KT-120s proves interesting, driving my Quad 2812s, changing the vibe.

Listening to more bass-heavy tracks, I notice that the KT-120 tubes offer slightly more control down deep than the EL-34s. Swapping speakers from the Quads to the GamuT RS5is, which have more bass extension, this is more noticeable than through the Quads. Tracking through Yo Gotti's *Art of the Hustle* went from a polite presentation with the EL-34s to hard-hitting beats with the KT-120s in place.

A touch of midrange and upper high frequency delicacy is lost with the bigger tubes, but the extra power and control is tough to ignore. Again, it will depend on your speakers and listening tastes, but it's so cool that you can fine tune this amplifier to this degree, especially considering how many of us fall in and out of love with certain speakers.

According to the spec sheet, the HP produces 70 watts per channel in ultralinear mode with EL-34s and 85 per channel with KT-120s. Deal says that the HP will even produce 96 watts per channel with the new KT-150 tubes, making it one of the world's most powerful tube integrations. Keep in mind, KT-150s are about \$100 each, so this will add a few bucks to either the retail price or a casual retube. The HP stands for "high power" and "headphones," but we'll address that later. I'll also go further into depth with tube rolling after I've spent a few months with this beauty, so please stay tuned. *(continued)*

Deal advises me to “not even listen to the amp until it’s been on for at least five days,” but journalistic curiosity gets the best of me and I begin listening right after the photo session. Right out of the box it sounds seriously good, but as the tube master advised, at about the hundred hour mark, the HP opens up in a major way. Each day’s listening session starts with the same track, Jean-Michel Jarre’s “Diva” from the *Zoolook* album. This track sounds big and airy, with Laurie Anderson’s reverse tracked vocals bouncing back and forth between the Quads as it should, but on the sixth day, it sounds like she is sitting in my lap, whispering in one ear, then the other. The effect is cool, in a hallucinogenic way, but almost scary at times. That’s what great sound is all about! Should you buy an HP for your room, take the advice; just let it play for a week and then prepare to be impressed.

Choices

Unlike the Prologue Premium integrated, which only operates in ultralinear mode, the DiaLogue Premium HP can operate in both ultralinear and triode mode. Like a totally ’80s dude’s mullet, the HP has two very distinct personalities. Choose triode to be mellow (business in the front) and ultralinear to rock the house (party in the back).

Triode mode is available at the flip of a switch, delivering 40 wpc and 50 wpc, respectfully, depending on your tube choice. If you haven’t experimented with triode mode yet, you’re in for a surprise, hopefully a pleasant one. While the lower bass notes have slightly less grip,



the midrange takes on more luster, and you will either be seduced by it or not. Those loving smaller scale music, jazz and anything acoustic, will be in for a lovely experience in triode mode. It’s worth noting that triode mode has slightly less gain, but considering the 2–4 volt output of most modern DACs and phono-stages, this will not be an issue for 99.99% of all users.

The extra power provided by eight power tubes is what really gives triode mode in the HP extra punch; 40–50 watts per channel is so much more useful than the 20–25 watts per channel that an amplifier with a single pair of output tubes per channel usually delivers, again making the HP so versatile. On many levels, the higher output of the KT120 tubes in triode mode is a near-perfect compromise, yet the EL34s in triode mode are closer to that vintage Marantz/McIntosh tube sound many tube lovers grew up with — it’s tough to choose. Just like all the other PrimaLuna amps I’ve used, if you really want to head down the vintage path further, you can swap the power tubes out for 6L6GTs. This gives the amp an even warmer sound, reminiscent of the Dynaco Stereo 70, so this might not be for everyone.

Thanks to the latest version of PrimaLuna’s Adaptive Auto Bias, swapping power tubes is a snap, and you don’t have to fiddle with anything. They’ve incorporated some other handy features over the years, including at “Bad Tube Circuit” that shuts the amp down in the event of tube failure, so no damage will come to the output transformers or other components. *(continued)*



A few of my favorite amps from other manufacturers have required a service call due to a bad tube. The two times I have had output tubes fail in my own PrimaLuna amplifiers, the LED came on without drama. A quick tube replacement and the music was back in action. There are two other levels of protection to protect the valuable output transformers as well, so these amplifiers just don't fail. Talking to a number of PrimaLuna owners over the years never turns to component failure. The only aspect of the company I can't comment on is their service department; I don't know of one that's ever needed service!

Back to the listening chair

Dusty Springfield, Shelby Lynne and Ella Fitzgerald prove stunning through the Quads in triode mode, coming through with a sultry silkiness that embodies every romantic notion you could ever have about an amplifier full of glowing bottles. Dim, the lights, queue up your most beloved tracks and add a bit of whatever adult beverage you enjoy; this is your ticket to audio nirvana. In the context of a system using the Quads at \$12k/pair and the \$3,000 Simaudio Neo 260D CD player/DAC, the level of musicality the HP delivers is quite unbelievable. Everyone unfamiliar with PrimaLuna thought this was a much more expensive amplifier.

Swapping the Sim for the \$30,000 dCS Rossini DAC

(though probably counterintuitive for someone building a system around a \$4,300 integrated), the DiaLogue has the necessary resolution to allow this premium DAC to shine. Bottom line: the HP is either an amp you can really grow with, or for many people, a destination product. After swapping multiple, mega-expensive amp/preamp combinations, I never found myself feeling left out with the HP in place.

As the amplifier finishes breaking in, the aspects of its initial sound are only further reinforced. There are no compromises here. Both ends of the frequency spectrum are reproduced with uncanny realism, and this amplifier has some of the most realistic lower end control I've ever experienced with a tube amplifier, regardless of pedigree. While we don't take the time to put our test subjects on the test bench, a few other editors who have gone to this length have all remarked on the incredibly accurate square wave response of the HP, which illustrates its ability to reproduce transients with incredible accuracy.

Techie stuff aside, the HP strikes (for me anyway) a perfect balance of providing the airiness, additional textural feel and tonal saturation that you would expect out of a fantastic tube amplifier, without any hint of coloration, transient smear or sluggishness. That's a tall order indeed. This is an amplifier that begs to be listened to for hours on end.

(continued)



The ins and outs of things

Around back, the HP has five line level RCA inputs, a complete home theater bypass and a variable level mono output for those wanting to integrate a powered sub. This proved helpful when evaluating the latest Dominion sub from JLAudio (which was a perfect match for the Quads, btw) and will make this amplifier a lot handier for someone pairing it up with speakers that could use a little extra help on the lower end.

Choosing ultralinear or triode mode couldn't be easier; you merely push a button on the remote and it's done. A pair of tiny LEDs on the front panel (green on the left, red on the right) keep you posted. Again, the constant refinement at PrimaLuna is at work here as well. Past models had a slight click during mode change, encouraging having the volume all the way down. This is a thing of the past with the HP. Now, only

the volume changes because of the gain difference.

As mentioned earlier, this amplifier is made for tube rolling; input and output. Optimizing the HP for various output tubes is facilitated by the handy switch on the right side of the chassis. One setting for EL-34s, the other for the KT88/KT120 tubes. Right next to it is the headphone/speaker switch.

Head trip

Awesome as the HP is as an integrated amplifier, it's pretty amazing as a headphone amplifier, too. A quick throwback to the '70s with some Iron Butterfly and Pink Floyd along with the Flaming Lips to keep it in this century — all via the Audeze LCD-2s — is breathtaking. Sampling about ten different phones makes it clear that the HP is not only a world class integrated amplifier, it's a world class headphone amp as well. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

Everything in our headphone arsenal was driven with ease, so true head fi's can rest at ease; the HP will drive the range of your can collection. This is grain-free, tubey goodness at its best, providing a few very long, non-fatiguing headphone listening sessions.

Revisiting familiar headphone tracks underlines the HP's ability to paint a massive sonic landscape that, like some of the world's finest headphone amplifiers, simply makes the headphones disappear, getting you further into the music. So when you consider that PrimaLuna is pretty much throwing in a \$2,000 headphone amp with the deal, the HP becomes an even better bargain.

More to come

The PrimaLuna DiaLogue Premium HP integrated amplifier not only dishes up some of the best sound we've heard at any price, it's beautifully crafted and well thought out in terms of functionality. If you've ever been on the fence about trying a tube amplifier, look no further. PrimaLuna has eliminated any obstacles, making the HP a breeze to operate.

Like a software release, you have to draw a line in the sand and get the release out the door. But the HP is going to be sticking around here for a while, perhaps permanently, so look forward to some more comments as I combine it with a wider range of speakers and cables, and do a little more tube rolling.

For now, if you need an integrated amp, or even have a pair of separates you've been thinking of upgrading, I can't suggest the HP highly enough. You could pay \$4,300 for a pair of interconnects to connect your amp and preamp together and you won't need it with the HP. This is one of the most incredible bargains in high end audio today. ●



REVIEW

PrimaLuna
DiaLogue Premium HP
\$4,300

MANUFACTURER
PrimaLuna USA

CONTACT
www.primaluna-usa.com

Analog Source
AVID Volvere SP w/SME V
and Lyra Atlas

Phonostage
Simaudio 610 LP

Digital Source
Gryphon Kalliope DAC

Speakers
Quad 2812, GamuT RS5i,
Graham LS5/9

Cable
Cardas Clear Reflection

Power
Torus TOT w/Nordost Frey 2
power cords

MQA—The Future for High Res?

www.mqa.co.uk

Meridian's Bob Stuart has broken from the main office to embark on his latest mission, perfecting the digital bitstream. This new format, if you will, is called MQA, or Master Authenticated Audio; aptly named because the files rendered thusly are true to the master tape or file.

Stuart's creation eliminates the digital fingerprint present in the recording chain, and also eliminates the pre and post "ringing" associated with the digital conversion process, that he attributes to the timing errors and resulting harshness. Then, the MQA processed file is folded down to be barely larger than a standard CD resolution digital file, making it much easier to distribute and stream.

With Warner Brothers signing on as a major content provider, this will not be an "audiophile only" thing, you will be able to hear a lot of the music you know and love in this format, making it so much more valid than DSD and the like. Files processed in MQA still sound cleaner even without being decoded, but come alive like an analog master tape when given the full MQA treatment.

We've got a much longer article on our website here, as well as a spirited conversation with Mr. Stuart and Morten Lindgerg from 2L records.

● We invite you to [click here](#) and investigate further.



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FROM THE WEB

Tellurium Q Silver Diamond Speaker Cables

\$7,500 (2m pair)
www.telluriumq.com (manufacturer)
www.fidelisav.com (US outlet)

Cable curmudgeons that we are here, everyone (audiophile and non) that experienced these cables not only heard the same effect, but agreed that they are well worth the asking price, in terms of performance delivered. Our publisher compared it as a “bigger jump than going from a \$3,000 Lyra Kleos to the \$11,000 Lyra Atlas.”

Tellurium Q is relatively unknown in the US right now, but our friends across the pond know them better. We will be investigating their interconnects very soon and can then evaluate their cable in the context of a full system next. Stay tuned for some interesting results.

● You can read our highly enthusiastic review right here.

FROM THE WEB

Melco N1-a

www.soundorg.com
\$1,999

With almost too many choices at your disposal for dispensing digital music, the Melco N1-a is a breath of fresh air. With 4TB of onboard music storage, USB and Ethernet access to more, you should never run out of space. Somehow using a digital library always seems to be an 88% proposition, and the Melco, like everything else is no different. With no native app firmly in place, you will have to rely on a third party to serve up your sounds, and Tidal integration is not yet directly available.

The Melco's strength is it's playback quality, and it's ability to free up your laptop for something else, combining a renderer and NAS all in one box, for those with a USB DAC, but it's major strength is for audiophiles using a network connection to playback music via a NAS drive. Think of the Melco as a high performance, purpose built, audiophile grade NAS. This is one of those little goodies you didn't know you needed, but you do.

● Read all about it right here.

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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

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Adcom GCD-700

\$20 — eBay

With streaming and mega playlists easily at your fingertips, the CD changer seems more like a dinosaur than anything else in the audio realm, but still irresistible. Nothing like five mix CDs worth of your favorite tunes in the garage or workshop to keep you motivated, eh?

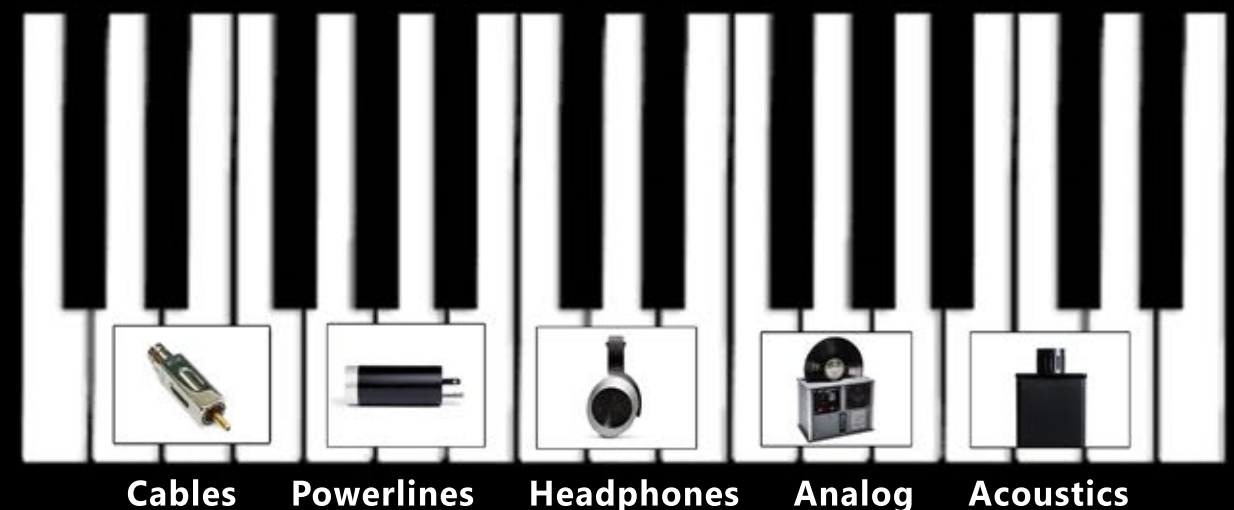
When released, the GCD-700 was about \$600 and featured state of the art digital converters. Adcom was producing some great budget audiophile gear, and though the GCD-700 was somewhat of an audiophile oddity, it did produce reasonably good sound when it worked; the changers were somewhat failure prone. ●

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

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

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

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

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Robbie Fulks *Upland Stories*

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Holy Fuck *Congrats*

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The Jayhawks *Paging Mr. Proust*

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Tidal Bonus Tracks:
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Tidal Bonus Tracks: Instrumentals
<http://listen.tidal.com/album/58716150>

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Various Artists *Day of the Dead*

Purchase LP from Music Direct
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LINKS

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Avishai Cohen *Into the Silence*

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Manufacturers Links

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

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Rega: www.soundorg.com

Rogers HiFi: www.rogershighfidelity.com

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VPI: www.vpiindustries.com