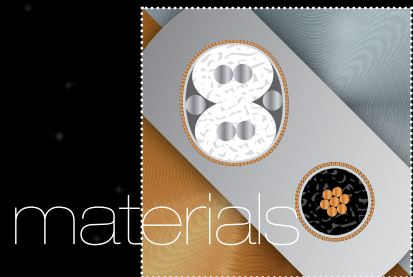


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No.79 October 2016



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Satisfaction: *The Rolling Stones in Mono* 16LP Box Set Reviewed

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CONTENTS



96

- 11. PUBLISHER'S LETTER
- 13. TONE TOON
By Liza Donnelly



82

features

- 14 Old School:
The B&W 803 Matrix Series 2
By Jeff Dorgay
- 56 Motorhead
Cranking Music (and the Throttle)
With Harley-Davidson's Boom! System
By Bob Gendron
- 62 Journeyman Audiophile:
Q Acoustics Concept 40 Mini Tower Speakers
By Mark Marcantonio
- 96 Personal Fidelity:
Woo Audio WA8
By Jeff Dorgay
- 116 995: **Sounds That Won't Break The Bank**
KEF Muo Wireless Speaker
By Rob Johnson

CONTENTS



68

tone style

- 68 Wino: "Prost!"
Four Modern Wines of Austria
By Monique Meadows
- 80 Beck 01
The Definitive Book of Jeff Beck
- 82 The Impossible Camera
Fun New Take on the Polaroid
- 83 Hong Kong Phooey T-Shirt
Find Your Favorite Toon Hero Swag
- 85 Mercedes USB Drive
Bling With 8GB to 128GB Storage
- 86 Mahabis Classic Slippers
The Last Slippers You'll Ever Need
- 88 Skross Universal Voltage Adaptor
Go Everywhere With Less Clutter

CONTENTS

music

- 20. SPIN THE BLACK CIRCLE:**
Reviews of New Pop/Rock
and Country Albums
*by Chrissie Dickinson, Bob Gendron,
Lyndsey Havens, and Todd Martens*
- 102. AUDIPHILE VINYL BOX SET:**
The Rolling Stones in Mono
by Bob Gendron
- 104. JAZZ & BLUES:**
Dave Douglas, Mat Ellertsen,
Nels Cline, and Uri Caine
*by Jim Macnie
and Kevin Whitehead*



102 *The Rolling Stones in Mono*



28 Lydia Loveless

CONTENTS

gear previews

- 124. G-Lab Block Amplifier**
- 126. Pear Audio Kid Howard Turntable**
- 128. Tellurium Q Silver
Diamond Interconnects**
- 130. Soulines Kubrick HDX Turntable**
- 132. VPI Prime Turntable**

gear reviews

- 134. B&W 803D3 Speakers**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 146. Naim Mu-so Qb Mini Player**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 154. SVS Ultra Bookshelf Speakers**
By Rob Johnson
- 162. MartinLogan Neolith Speakers**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 172. McIntosh C1100 Preamplifier**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 182. Sonus faber
Il Cremonese Speakers**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 192. JL Audio Fathom
In Wall Subwoofer**
By Jeff Dorgay



from the web

- 200. Yumi Kanto Powered Speakers**
- 202. Rega Planar 3** (with PS-TTU Power
Supply and Elys 2 Cartridge)
- 204. McIntosh MC52 Preamplifier
and MC301 Monoblocks**
- 206. Slummin'**
- 208. Music Links**
- 211. Manufacturer Links**



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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Fall is settling in, but it's still not too late to put the top down or get that motor-cycle out for a few last good rides. To celebrate that sentiment, music editor

Bob Gendron breaks our tradition of featuring a high-performance car and its matching audio system every year. A serious Harley-Davidson enthusiast, he gives us the lowdown on the latest sound system fitted to the new models, so I hope our Harley lovers in the audience will enjoy it.

Rounding out the issue, we've got some new components from Plinius, McIntosh, and Woo Audio, and a lot of speakers – from a pair of vintage ADS 400s rescued from eBay to the mighty MartinLogan Neoliths. And the crew has found some great things in-between as well.

Personally, I think speakers are the toughest part of the hi-fi equation because they interact with your environment more than any other component. For that reason, I always suggest falling in love with a pair of speakers and building a system around them. Other than a turntable, I can't think of a better reason for picking a hi-fi dealer with at least one person on staff who is a speaker wizard to unpack and set your speakers up correctly. As much practice as I've had over the years, I'm always impressed when the factory guys stop by to check my work and manage to eke out more performance from the speakers I've spent hours, sometimes days, trying to set up to perfection.

Once you've arrived at the perfect speaker for you (for now), then the rest of the process can proceed. Some speakers are more room dependent than others, while others are more sensitive to amplifier and cable interaction. Another great reason to patronize a great dealer: they can help you through the complexity of getting your speakers performing at their best.



While I can't speak for all customers and all dealers, if you're spending more than a thousand bucks, get the dealer to provide some setup assistance. Blame me if you have to.

As part of another ongoing *TONE* tradition, we try whenever possible to show you the progress a manufacturer has made over the years. Thanks to the staff at Bowers & Wilkins, in addition to our review of the current 803 D3, we have a pair of 803 Matrix series two speakers on hand for comparison as well. Personally, I always enjoy these comparisons in the same way I love driving a vintage model of a current classic car back-to-back with the current one. I find it fascinating to see how much of the initial design ethos carries through after years or even decades.

I feel confident in saying that the engineering and design staff at Bowers & Wilkins has stayed true to their initial vision and steadily improved the concept with time. In case their speakers are not your cup of tea, we had equally compelling experiences with the MartinLogan Neolith and the new II Cremonese from Sonus Faber. All exciting, yet all different in flavor and execution. Again, a big part of the fun when choosing a pair of speakers for your listening room.

So, put that top down, or your helmet on, and take a ride over to your favorite hi-fi dealer and audition something new. Maybe it's time for an early holiday season gift to yourself?

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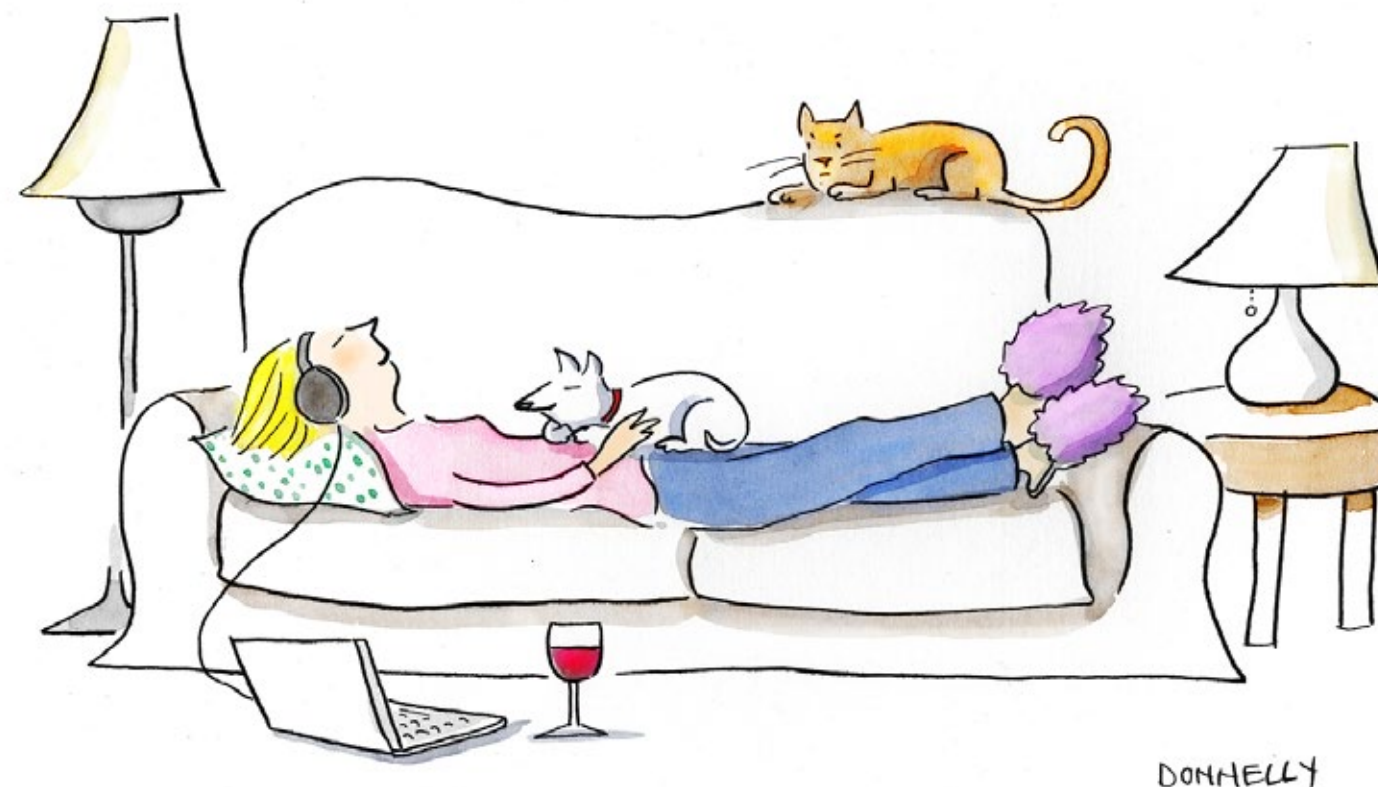
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Cartoonist Liza Donnelly is taking a break from covering the presidential debates and will return in our November issue.

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The B&W 803 Matrix Series 2

By Jeff Dorgay

W

ith a factory visit behind me, and a spanking new pair of 803D3s cozily breaking in, the search for an original pair of 803s to audition in the quest of chronicling this legendary British manufacturer's progress turns up an interesting set of speakers, indeed. We couldn't get our hands on a working pair of first generation 803s, but a pair of 803 Matrix Series 2s, only in need of a tweeter arrived courtesy of one of our readers wanting to know if "I might be interested in a pair of these old speakers." The pair you see here harken from mid-1996, commanding a retail price of \$2,995. Time flies, and today, the current 803D3s on page 150 fetch \$17,000 a pair.

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FEATURE

Thanks to the help of Stephen Baker, our tour guide to B&W's Worthing UK facility and B&W's Training Centre Manager, a pair of tweeters are located, and as he hands them over informs me that there are only "7 more of these, and then they are gone – forever." We make the decision that customs just might see these rare HF drive units as weapons of mass destruction and choose to have them shipped back to TONEAudio, instead of taking them along as carry-on luggage.

Behind the 6.5-inch woofers, the lineage is in place with the Matrix enclosure. The process has been updated, refined and automated, with better parts throughout, yet you can see where the brain trust at B&W began this journey in earnest. A quick swap back to the current speaker reveals more extension in the lower register, listening to Thomas Dolby's classic "She Blinded Me With Science," yet going back to the Matrix 2s the core sound of B&W is still intact. Their engineers were on the right track 20 years ago.

The Matrix 2s have a complement of 6.5-inch woofers with rubber surrounds, making these much more viable speakers on the used market than many of their contemporaries using foam surrounds. Even then, it's easy to see B&W's practical approach to speaker design and long-term value. A quick knuckle rap of the cabinet reveals brick-like solidity. *(continued)*



FEATURE

Panning up, we see the 6.5-inch Kevlar midrange, appearing for the first time, which would become a B&W signature until 2016, now replaced by their new Continuum material.

As with today's 800 series speakers, the tweeter is attached in pod-like fashion for easy service as well. The rear face of the cabinets reveals a pair of banana posts for bi-wiring and the black ash finish of our sample pair have stood the test of time, and no doubt multiple moves (the owner shipped them to us in the original boxes) well. These are indeed robust speakers.

Placing them alongside the current model instantly brings to light both how far B&W has come in terms sonically and aesthetically, but the Matrix 2s are still no slouch, providing very satisfying sound indeed. An extended listening session reminds me of the day I had the privilege of driving the first Porsche 911 and the current model back to back; though the current model offered far more performance, the original was still excellent.

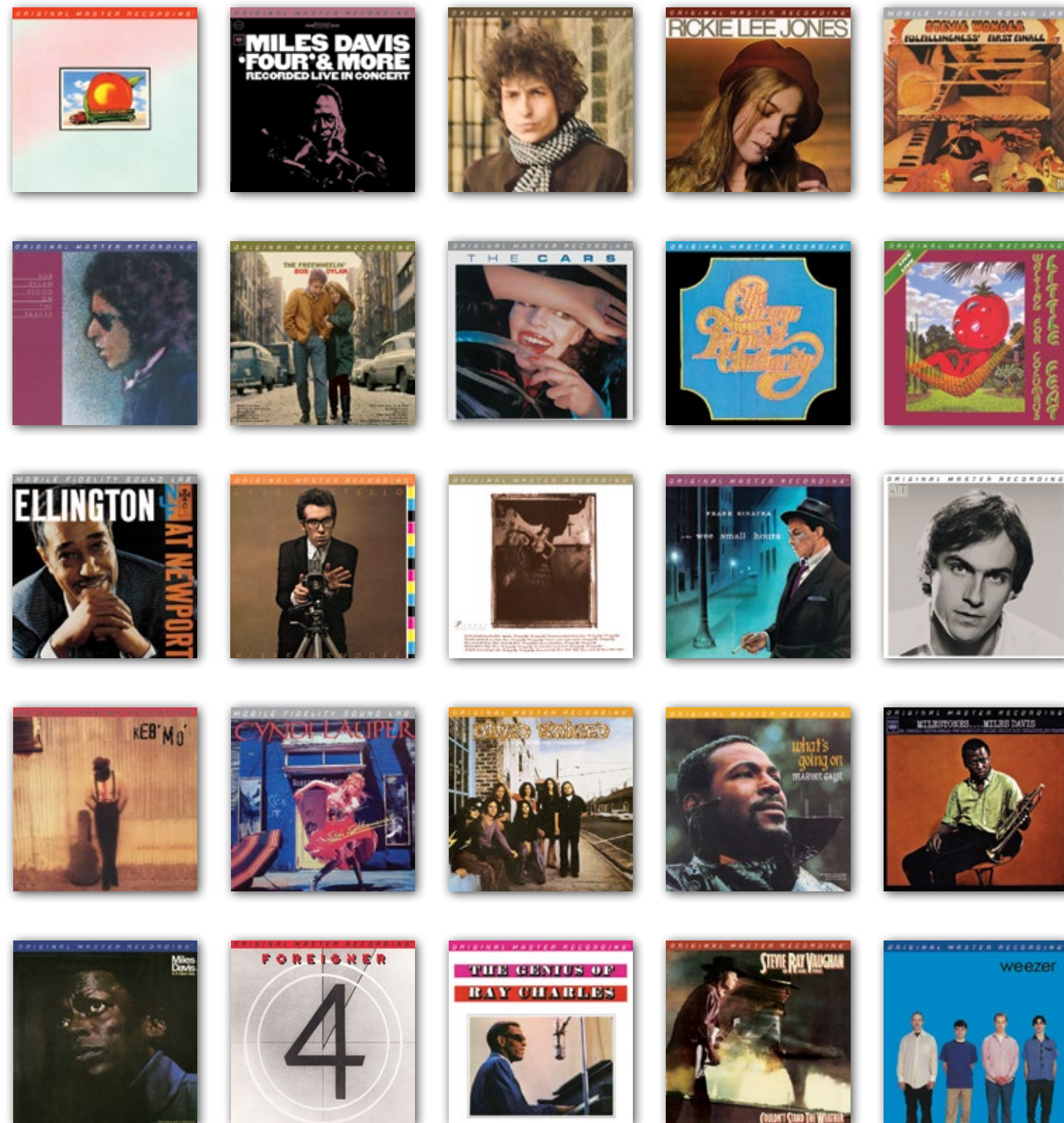
Should you have the good fortune to find a pair of 803 Matrix 2s at your local used hifi shop, or clunking around at a garage sale, don't hesitate. They tend to sell for about \$300 - \$400 a pair on Ebay, but remember one thing - there are only five tweeters left, so don't get too wacky with the volume control! ●



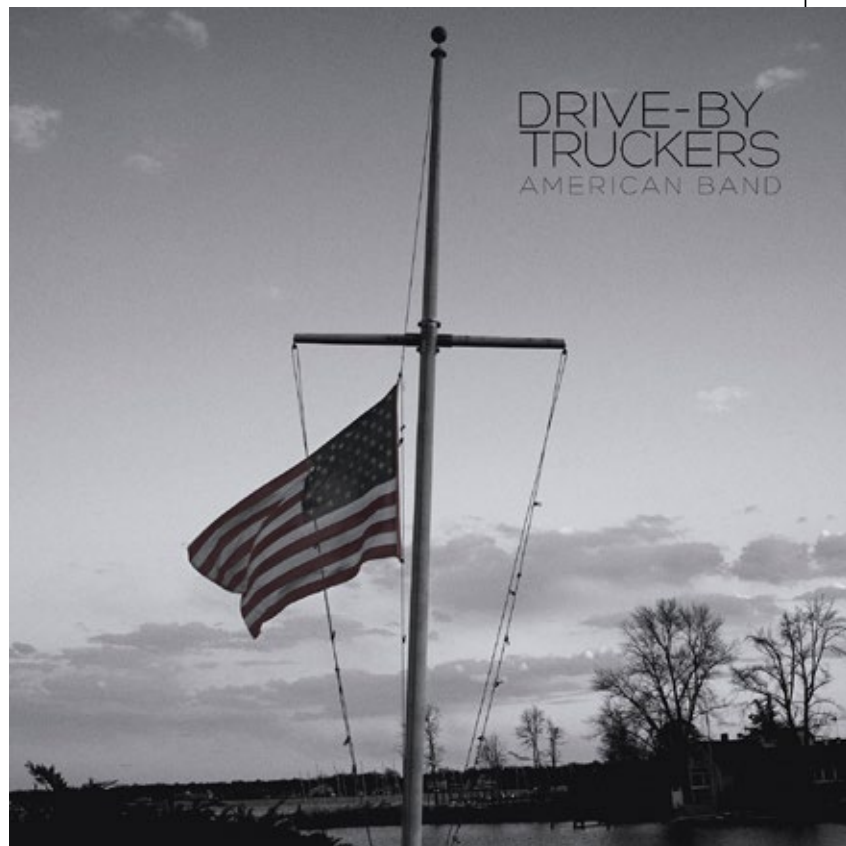
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NEW RELEASES



Drive-By Truckers
American Band
 ATO Records, LP or CD

The Drive-By Truckers have long strived to capture the pulse of Southern America. Yet despite the group's drawl and the blues-meets-country guitars, not to mention a breakout album in 2001's ambitiously sprawling *Southern Rock Opera*, the band has long had a broader focus on its mind.

Throughout its 20-year history, the group has crafted topical character studies that make small-town life feel like a microcosm of the country at large. Pregnant teens, underpaid working stiffs, romances as plain as a "primer coat," half-wit drug dealers, would-be tough-guy gangsters—the people we meet in a Drive-By Truckers album are those often overlooked—disregarded by politicians and pop culture alike. They're struggling, troubled, ugly, and full of faults. Drive-By Truckers' music is thus Southern rock served with a taste of occasional discomfort accompanied by telling-it-like-it-is honesty. No surprise, then, that the ensemble sounds energized during an election year.

©Photo by Danny Clinch



American Band is as much an album as it is an editorial page, a work designed to soundtrack an era in which peaceful protests of the National Anthem are viewed by some as a divisive political affront. The Black Lives Matter movement and gun control, in particular, figure heavily on *American Band*, an album that seeks to get to the heart of what it means to be patriotic at a time

when outrage trumps debate. Trust in symbols—and tradition—comes up in "Ever South," where a redemptive, church-like keyboard finds its place amid a creepy-crawly bass and quietly determined rhythm. "Kinky Hypocrite" has more fun, playing out like an anthem one should have heard long ago at a Western saloon, one no doubt where promiscuity thrived, all

while documenting the sins of the most righteous among us.

Despite the band's penchant for plugged-in guitars, consider *American Band* a modern folk record, an effort about people and emotions as much as of-the-moment issues. Anchored since 1996 by Mike Cooley and Patterson Hood, the Truckers here are equally angry and mournful. (*continued*)

MUSIC



"It's a morning like so many others, with breakfast and birthdays," Hood sings on the seductively relaxing strummer "Guns of Umpqua," as images of tranquility contrast with the horror of another school shooting. The warm piano-driven ballad of "When the Sun Don't Shine" finds solace in hard times, the sort hinted at in "Darkened Flags on the Cusp of Dawn." As one of the harder-edged songs, the latter features guitars conveying arms-folded stubbornness.

Lyrical and tonally, the band alternates the bold with the reflective. Cooley's "Ramon Casiano," with a jailbreak-like forward momentum, sets its sights squarely on the National Rifle Association—"a certain kind of men who need to feel the world's against them," he sings. The band has little interest in obscuring its politics, with Cooley even going so far to say in a press release that he isn't afraid to "piss off" certain members of the group's audience.

For the converted, the medicine goes down relatively easy, thanks in part to Jay Gonzalez's keyboards, which decorate songs

with everything from gospel tones to sporting-event heartiness. The Truckers, not immune to numerous lineup changes, have been relatively stable in recent years, and a blue-collar comfort now resides in the rhythm section of Brad Morgan and Mike Patton.

Yet like this election year of extremities, one's thoughts on *American Band* will likely come down to "What It Means," a track that feels as urgent as Beyonce's "Freedom" and as controversial as Dylan's early protest work. Racism, police violence, domestic assault, a pundit-driven media: The band covers a lot of ground in six-and-a-half minutes. "If you say it wasn't racial when they shot him in his tracks, well I guess that means that you ain't black," sings Hood as a guitar breezily trots along. The band at least doesn't sound like it's looking for a fight. Hood's rasp is more weary than livid. Politically alienating as it may be to some, it's a song, and an album, that feel courageous, especially for a band with roots in the red state of Alabama. This isn't activist bravado. *American Band* is one act's view of life in 2016.

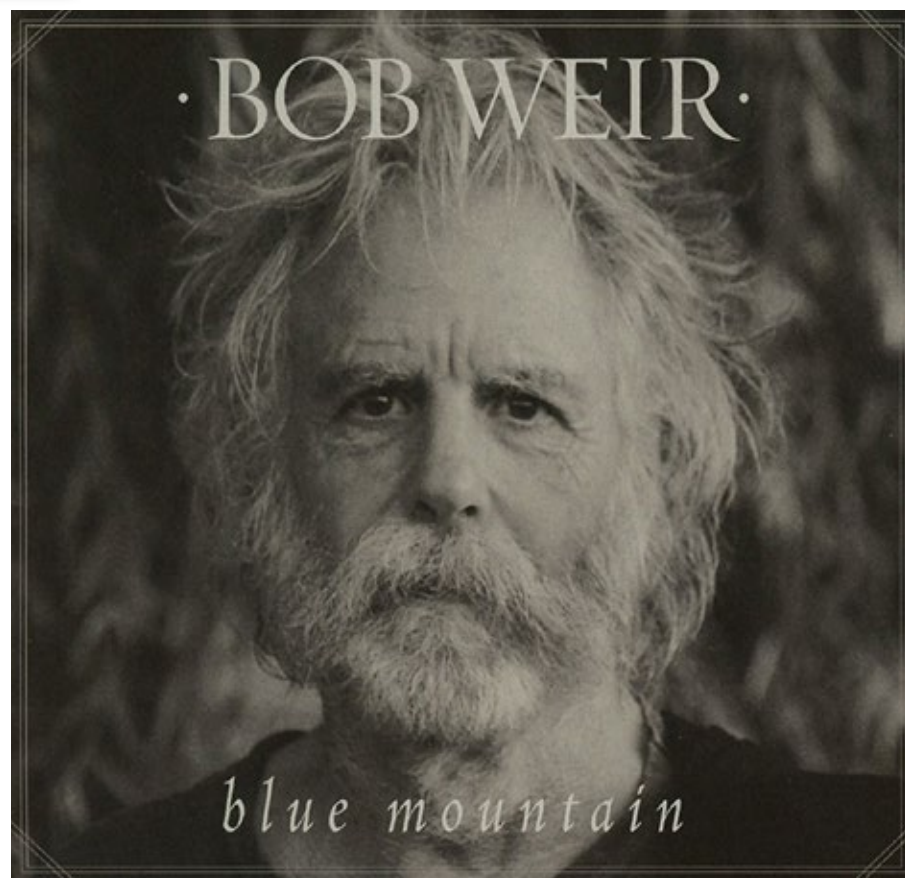
—**Todd Martens**

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Bob Weir
Blue Mountain

Columbia/Legacy/Roar, 2LP or CD

Bob Weir might get out from under the shadows cast by Jerry Garcia just yet. In the twilight of his career, the former Grateful Dead guitarist/vocalist has apparently found the fountain of youth—or at least stumbled upon an elixir that can be credited for a recent stretch in which he’s been embraced by indie-rock ensemble the National, commemorated in the acclaimed Netflix documentary *The Other One*, and celebrated with the rest of his former members on the exhaustive tribute set *Day of the Dead*. All these accomplishments, however, pale alongside *Blue Mountain*.

Weir’s first album of all-original material in more than 30 years both transcends the numerous half-baked effort released by individual members of the Dead cast since Garcia’s passing in 1995 and eclipses every solo-project effort associated with the San Francisco native save for 1972’s *Ace*, a Grateful Dead album in all but name. Featuring National instrumentalists Aaron Dessner, Bryce Dessner, and Scott Devendorf, and void of any Dead colleagues, *Blue Mountain* plays to Weir’s longtime strengths—off-key rhythms, measured paces, distinctive phrasing, scene-setting storytelling—and stays grounded via with songwriting. With the exception of the effects-smeared “Storm Country,” Weir adheres to simple devices, learned restraint, and stellar production.

Whereas the 69-year-old Californian’s previous efforts with Kingfish and Ratdog reach for pop glory, and feel dated and partially realized, *Blue Mountain* emerges as a steadfast, pointillist-textured portrait of Weir unavailable even on the Grateful Dead’s finer archival releases. Long-time Deadheads might even be surprised at the strong, self-assured, and sincere

nature of his dusky singing. Every note serves a particular purpose; each passage exists for a reason. Excess, as well as any desire to jam or improvise, are nowhere to be found. A majority of the other elements convey themes and structures familiar to Weir’s career—not the least of which relate to his lifelong fascination with plaintive folk and cowboy songs.

More than five decades removed from his decision to ditch school at 16 and form a band with then-banjo teacher Garcia, Weir remains an adventurous wanderer and reluctant outlaw. The dozen tracks here reveal an artist operating independent of the modern electronic age. He seeks solace in nature, connects to the land, champions the earth, and lives a matter-of-fact existence—traits conveyed in his broad-shouldered vocals. Weir sounds confident if slightly reserved, poignant albeit at ease, undaunted if unsure of what the future holds. Tempos take their time, hover overhead, and drift by like puffy clouds on a late June afternoon. A spare assortment of acoustic guitars, drums,

pianos, organs, and stand-up basses form the bedrock on which he stands. The Banana Splits, a female backing trio, provide tasteful vocal support and atmospheric color.

“I was born up in the mountains/Raised up in a desert town,” Weir announces seconds into the opening “Only a River,” establishing the geography and vibe carried throughout the record. Such rustic surroundings and Western motifs figure prominently in the first-person-dominant narratives. On the quietly sighing “Cottonwood Lullaby,” which calmly trots into a fading sunset, the clink of a boot spur hitting a horse’s stirrup come into full view. The balladic “Gallop on the Run” rides over vast plains illuminated by moonlight and the memories of a lost love. Plaintive, reverb-laden slide-guitar guitar passages and strummed chords press against a horizon as endless as the big Montana sky.

The cowpoke invitation “Ki-Yi Bossie,” during which Weir’s sly-grin rambunctiousness subtly surfaces, furthers the record’s pragmatic vibe and steadfast connection to roots traditions. *(continued)*

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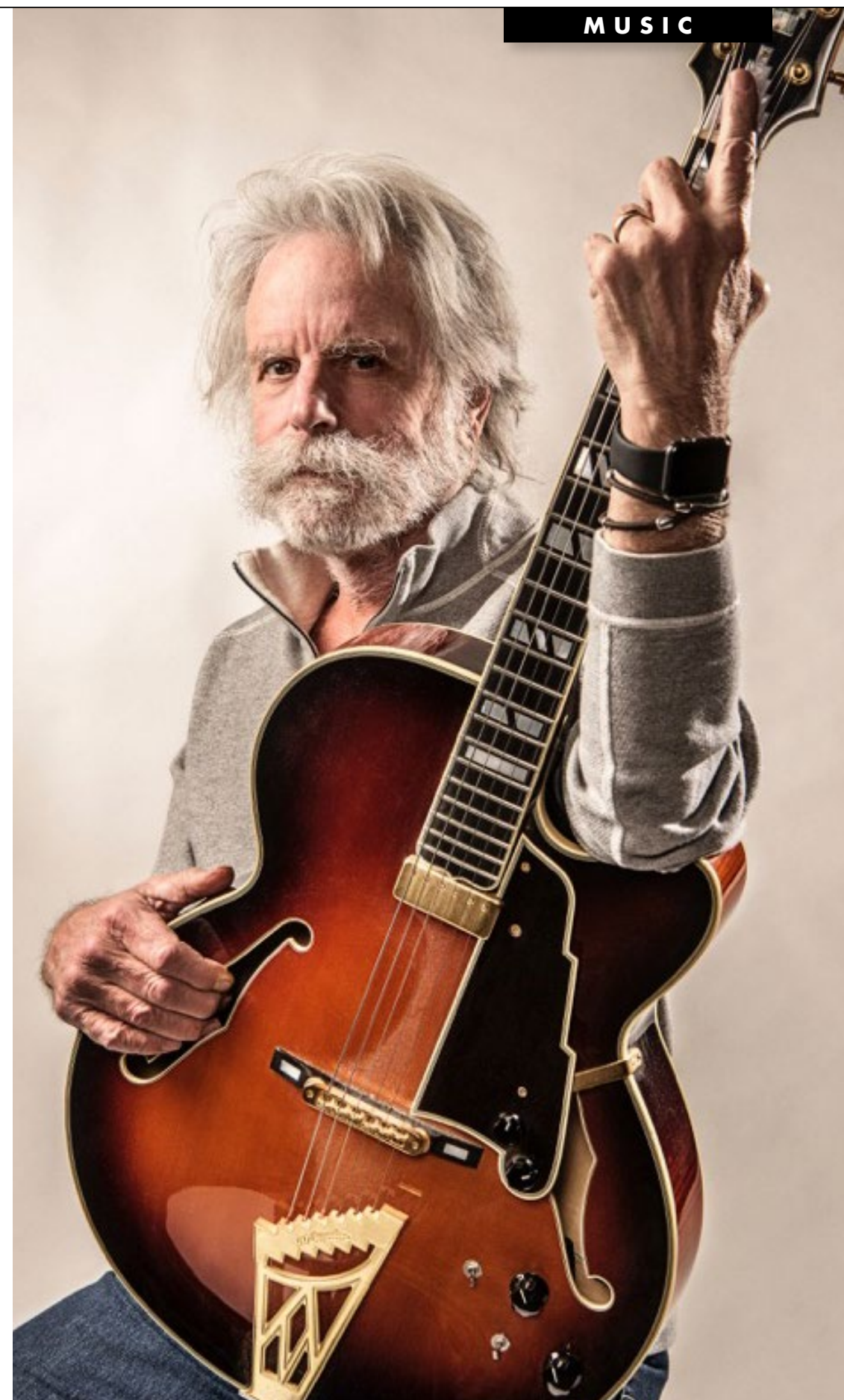
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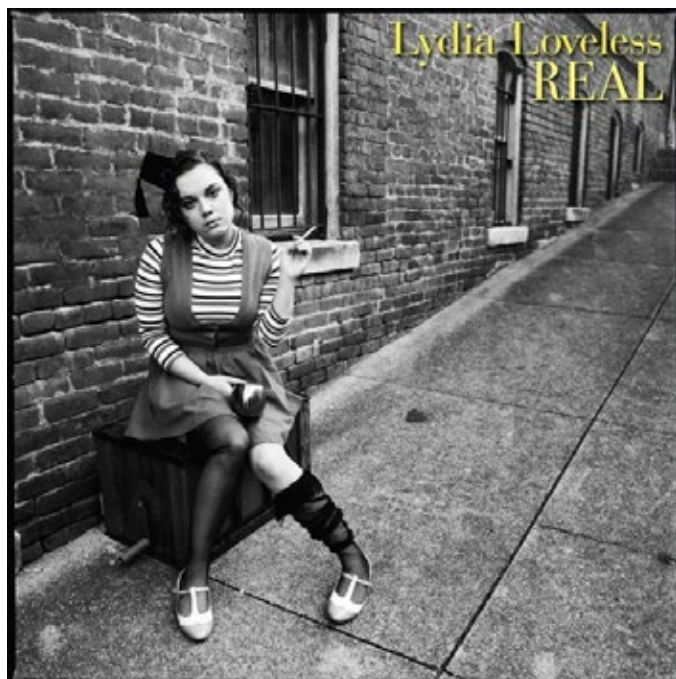
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Along with the economical title track, it comes across as the sort of folk-based restlessness-to-redemption tales that he and Garcia performed together in Palo Alto during their first meeting—and before the Grateful Dead began. Conscious or not, Weir's acknowledgements of the musical seeds of his past also crop up in the reflective lament "What Happened to Rose"—a beautiful country-and-western composition in which the subject's name and longing mirror those in Johnny Cash's "Give My Love to Rose"—and "Gonesville," a bluesy rave-up stirred with early rock n' roll twang, harmonica accents, hiccupped vocals, and woody tones.

Blue Mountain also reveals a courageous vulnerability, deep-seated spirituality, and decades-in-the-making peace of mind often absent from Weir's prior work. On the surface level, the accordion-laced "Darkest Hour" concerns accepting loss and confronting life's inevitable bitterness. But Weir views the despair as an opportunity to provide comfort and create an unbreakable bond, transforming the song into a declaration of undying love and companionship as meaningful as anything in his oeuvre. Somewhere, his best friend is smiling through a white beard from above.

—**Bob Gendron**





Lydia Loveless

Real

Bloodshot Records, LP or CD

Lydia Loveless isn't impressed by your record collection. She's also not easily wowed by your romanticism. Add television to the list of "Things Loveless is Skeptical About."

On *Real*, the country-leaning singer/songwriter finds high drama in familiarity, turning a caustic eye toward everyday romance—the kinds of ups, downs, and confusion that all feel strikingly relatable.

"You sure know the way to my heart, honey," she sneers when a boy suggests the two go watch the stars on "Midwestern Guys." Been there, done that, as Loveless makes it clear that she's aware it's simply an excuse to make a move. She also pokes a little fun at his Def Leppard albums. In short, Loveless knows how to hit a man where it hurts.

Here, on her fourth proper album, the 25-year-old Ohio native takes a grand leap toward maturity. That means some of the prior rough-around-the-edges guitars are toned down. Indeed, longtime fans may be initially aghast at how pristine Loveless and her band sound. Some of the grit is clearly missed. Whereas past works saw Loveless taking the spit out on religion or small-town gentrification, each of the 10 songs here more or less fits a more common theme, as *Real* witnesses Loveless relatively confined to matters of the heart. Thankfully, her characters don't spare themselves of criticism. Nor do the short-story-driven snapshots take on a fairytale approach. "If self control is what you want, I'd have to break all of my fingers off," she sings on "More Than Ever." Loveless may have refined and classed-up her sound, but she's as wicked as ever with a turn of phrase.

The album opens with a scorcher in "Same to You," a work in which obsession and fulfillment get tangled-up and frantic guitars anxiously crest around the singer. The production, by Loveless and frequent collaborator Joe Viers, expresses country-rock elegance. But the tone conveys pulling-out-your-hair nervousness. No other song on the album is quite as distraught—or as instantly gripping. *Real* instead places emphasis on Loveless' powerhouse of a voice and subtle, instrumental diversity. Nothing, for instance, in Loveless' prior albums necessarily hint a song like "Heaven" would be possible. It's a slinky, groovy number with crisp guitars that flirt with an ever-so-slight disco funk.

It works, mostly due to Loveless' voice, which turns in a moment's notice from deeply stern to upper-register vulnerable.

"Longer" sees Loveless going even more towards pop territory as wordless backing hooks grace the song's finale. Primarily working with the same band with which she started, including bassist/husband Ben Lamb, Loveless turns *Real* into a showcase for her novel-like eye for detail—be it the false artistic hopes of "Midwestern Guys" or clever way she tries to end an argument on "European," where the vocalist is equally twangy and angry. The latter arrangement never quite

matches the recklessness her voice suggests; *Real* seems a bit too intent on reigning in the unruliness.

Still, the singer is not above plain ol' bluntness: "Love turns into lust and milk turns into clumps," Loveless observes at one point. Compared to earlier Loveless works, close listening is important. A song like "More Than Ever" may feel like a sweet, midtempo country ditty, but don't be fooled. The singer separates herself from the mainstream pack by burying a host of repressed emotions beneath the surface. Loveless' strength remains her ability to drag them out. —**Todd Martens**

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MUSIC



Dwight Yoakam

Swimmin' Pools, Movie Stars...
Sugar Hill Records, LP or CD

Dwight Yoakam has been an American original from the get-go. Yoakam, Steve Earle, and Randy Travis all released their major-label debuts in 1986. Critics hailed each as part of country's influential new "Class of '86." And every one of those artists reinvigorated the genre in his own distinctive way. Earle played the role of the rough-hewn neo-outlaw. Travis served as the new traditionalist. And then there was Yoakam, born in Kentucky, raised in Ohio, and relocated to California, where he transformed into a sleek post-modern cowboy and became a crucial player in L.A.'s burgeoning cow-punk scene.

Following in the lyrical footsteps of Hank Williams and Merle Haggard, Yoakam's songs have always been hillbilly micro-operas built on themes of loneliness, loss, working-man pride, rural poverty, and big-city alienation—with the occasional bad-boy manifesto thrown in for good measure. In a nod to his mentor Buck Owens, Yoakam remains the modern exemplar of the Fender guitar-driven Bakersfield Sound. For his new *Swimmin' Pools, Movie Stars...*, Yoakam puts away the electric guitars and reworks a number of his songs into bluegrass arrangements. A few originals and covers fill in the cracks. The results feel as fresh as they do familiar.

Throughout, he surrounds himself with a group of instrumental all-stars including award-winning guitarist Bryan Sutton and veteran fiddler Stuart Duncan. Balancing world-class skill and artistic restraint, this crew produces infectious toe-tapping numbers intimate as a Sunday afternoon jam on the back porch. Yoakam's arresting voice orbits the center of the proceedings. His unique style includes subtle shades of Jimmie Rodgers' blue yodel and Buddy Holly's rock n' roll hiccup. His trademark nasal twang soars high on the mournful and stately "Sad, Sad Music." (*continued*)



An avid historian of all things Americana, Yoakam brings a deep understanding of the depth and breadth of roots music to every track here. The exquisite harmonies coloring "Listen" recall the glory days of A-Team vocal groups such as the Jordanares and the Anita Kerr Singers. Similarly evocative, the galloping "Gone" receives an uptempo treatment that conjures the vintage virtuosity of bluegrass greats Flatt and Scruggs.

Midway through the album, Yoakam hunkers down into a slower take on his blistering signature song "Guitars, Cadillacs." While the original remains a modern honky-tonk classic, this acoustic redux takes its time as it digs deep into an earthy beat and layers of stringed instruments. A story about "a naive fool who came to Babylon" and gets his heart broken in a "tinseled land of lost and wasted lives," it features the sort of shattering songcraft that puts Yoakam in a league with Merle Haggard.

One of the most powerful moments arrives via the sad waltz-time number "Two Doors Down." Here, Yoakam's lacerating cry of a voice remains a wonder. The devastating lyrics—written with veteran songwriter Kostas—feature among his best work. "Two doors down there's a bar stool that knows me by name/And we sit there together and wait for you/Two doors down there's a bottle where I take out my shame/And hold it up for the whole world to view."

A delicate cover of Prince's "Purple Rain" closes the record. The choice seems deeply personal. When Prince died last April, Yoakam tweeted about the "shockingly sad news" of the passing of his peer. His version is a heartfelt tribute to a legend gone too soon. It's also a reminder of just how many chances Yoakam has been taking since those long-ago freshman days of '86.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

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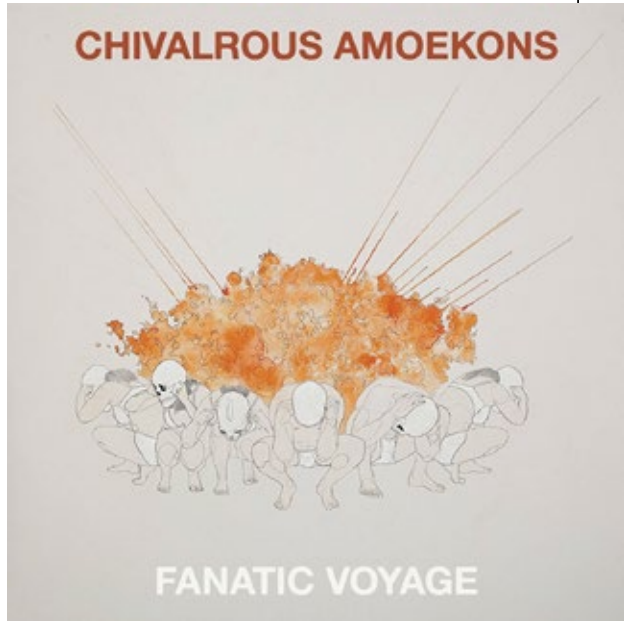
Existentialism
Bloodshot Records, CD

T

he Mekons are four decades into a career marked by near borderline obscurity. Is anyone still listening? A new project in *Existentialism*, as well as tribute album by a ragtag group of musicians calling themselves Chivalrous Amoekons, answers that question with a resounding yes.

It may have a weighty title, but the Mekons' latest—a combo book-album titled *Existentialism*—sounds like the greatest night one could ever possibly have at a corner bar. No doubt the hangover was brutal, but there's enough sobering reality in the Mekons' lyrics—politically focused and jovially panicked—to offer plenty of water-in-the-face clarity. This is the live album at its most independent, complete with all the sonic crudeness that phrase implies. Yet the emphasis isn't on the band's genre-hopping tendencies or musical rawness. Instead, *Existentialism* functions as a celebration of community—that of the Mekons itself and the anything-goes, participatory nature of punk rock at its best.

Over the years, the Chicago-via-Leeds, England-bred-group has proven itself to be a revolving, roving collective of musicians that rotate acoustic, electric, and symphonic instruments with ADD zeal. It's punk rock, but punk rock as an idea rather than a genre. Here, a guitar raver, a sea shanty, and a poetic mus-ing are all fair game—not to mention inklings of country, folk, and new wave. “Never Been In a Riot,” the Mekons declared in 1977, a rousing middle finger directed at the militaristic bravado of the Clash and its brethren. It's been 40 or so years of socially aware commentary since.

**Chivalrous Amoekons**

Fantastic Voyage
Sea Note/Palace/Drag City, LP or CD



Or, in the words of the band: “Magic, fear and superstition,” as if longevity came about as the result of some sort of dumb luck. These are the traits with which the act describes itself on “The Curse,” an early 90s honky-tonk barn-stormer of an anthem. It's also the song that opens Chivalrous Amoekons' *Fantastic Voyage* with a boots-on-the-ground swagger. Still, perhaps booze, sarcasm, and activism serve as more apt, direct adjectives to describe the Mekons and its fanbase.

Led, most consistently, by the stern-voiced but occasionally goofy Jon Langford, the exquisite Sally Timms, and the slapdash albeit cool Tom Greenhalgh, the Mekons are

alternately as heady as a PhD thesis and as sloppy as the town drunk. They remain art-school nerds and self-taught musicians, and boldly believe there is no style or sound that can't be Mekon-ized. *Existentialism* and, to a lesser extent, *Fantastic Voyage*, toy with the idea of a live album.

In the same way some acts use a studio as in instrument, the Mekons approach *Existentialism* as if the concert venue exists a vehicle to be played. The opening moments of “Flowers of Evil Part 2” take a chewy bass and Greenhalgh's distant-sounding vocals and let them reverberate around an airy room. *(continued)*



“O Money,” anchored by a seesawing harmonica, gallops through an evening’s worth of voices: A pub chorus, a feverishly shouted whisper, and verses that feel more like drink orders hollered over the din of a crowd. Taken as a whole, it’s a bit of a gauntlet thrown at the ears of the listener, making it clear *Existentialism* isn’t out to pretty-up the live performance. Recorded with just a single microphone at a bar in Brooklyn, N.Y., the quality is bootleg level. Yet it’s also just as immediate. It’s a wonder one doesn’t

hear someone falling over a table or a pint glass shattering to the floor.

Sure, for the uninitiated, the album can be a bit of a difficult listen, but the Mekons, whether writing a soundtrack to a pirate novel or a concept album about the commoditization of rock n’ roll, have never been about making things easy. Once you let your ears adjust to the coarseness of their universe, *Existentialism* becomes about the potentially reckless pleasure of the live concert experience, where a night of should-be sing-a-longs with

an audience takes precedence over the concept of performance.

As such, “Skintrade” emerges as a stomping joy, with Langford acting as a carnival barker as he leads a fiery guitar and snaky fiddle through the high-energy blast. There may be a tragedy in the house of ill repute, but the Mekons are going down swigging. “Bucket” gets dark and dirty, like a bar band doing “Les Misérables,” while “Fear and Beer” captures modern paranoia with a relaxing

piano that contrasts calm with howling screeches. “Travelling Alone” bounces to a reggae vibe as the Mekons poke fun at our dependence on pocket technology, while “Nude Hamlet” boasts a guitar as bawdy as our election year. “Simone on the Beach” is a slinky little pop nugget, one complete with a soaring violin, even though it hides more devilish themes. Later, “1848 Now!” breaks out as a call-and-response fist-raiser demanding a revolution. It’s all as energetic, and overwhelming, as the Mekons’ entire career. Change may never come, but *Existentialism* shows the band—and its audience—as angry for it as ever.

Like any other act with a cultish following, Mekons fans form a devoted lot. How else to explain Chivalrous Amoekons, an adoring collection of some of the Mekons’ more accessible work? Well, to a point, as the Chivalrous Amoekons still keep the off-the-wall yells of “ay yi iy” on “The Curse” and the sing-speak opening that begins “Chivalry,” an apologetic ode to lost nights and the screw-ups that define them. Occasionally, the guitars and drums seem to aggressively sync up, but a violin reminds everyone the song is one of an everyday tragedy.

The Chivalrous Amoekons—a sort-of indie supergroup anchored by the folk-rock stylings

of Bonnie Prince Billy (aka, Will Oldham) and scorcher Angel Olsen—are said to have recorded *Fantastic Voyage* back in 2012. Unlike *Existentialism*, Oldham and Co. strip the album of all aspects of live performance, putting the emphasis squarely on the band. The result shows an often less-heralded side of the Mekons: Their attention to songcraft.

“Big Zombie” materializes as a merging of punk rock and country before such a thing become fashionable, while “(Sometimes I Feel) Fletcher Christian” is a folk song with a cinematic appeal—the piano playfully haunting its verses like the score to a silent film as thoughts of revenge and rebellion get ever-so-delicately handled. “I Am Crazy” brings a chirpy effervescence to self-doubt. “Fantastic Voyage” transforms the upbeat original into a backyard heartbreaker.

Looseness defines both projects. A wild, last-night-of-the-revolution feel permeates *Existentialism* and a more intimate, sitting-around-the-fire tone graces *Fantastic Voyage*. Each also touts a similar end goal. To celebrate the Mekons and its fans, sure, but also to rejoice in the struggles of being human with guitar, fiddle, violin, and whatever else is available. —**Todd Martens**



Blackberry Smoke
Like an Arrow
 3 Legged Records, CD

In a sign of the musical times, long-running southern rock band Blackberry Smoke debuted at No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Country Albums chart with its 2015 release *Holding All the Roses*. The feat served as further proof that commercial country music has stretched its parameters, having already accommodated hard-rocking stars Jason Aldean and Eric Church as well as rootsy jammers the Zac Brown Band.

All are part of a wide-ranging southern family. Blackberry Smoke's touchstones include snarly forebears the Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd. Formed in 2001, the Atlanta quintet counts among its membership singer-guitarist and primary songwriter Charlie Starr, guitarist Paul Jackson, keyboardist Brandon Still, bassist Richard Turner, and drummer Brit Turner.

On the title track of the band's new album, Starr sings, "Take the straightest shot that you can/I won't move from where I stand." Where he often stands musically is smack dab in the center of the 1970s hard-rock scene. Blackberry Smoke's sound evokes black lights, bong smoke, and primo Bose 901 speakers.

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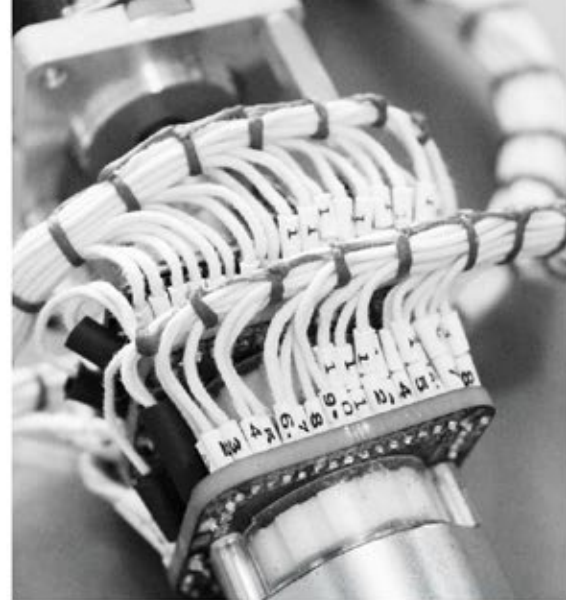
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Like the fare of veteran hard-rock long-hairs and kindred spirits Raging Slab, Blackberry Smoke's material features big fat melodies beneath a gale-force wail of crunchy distorted electric guitars and muscular drums. Sing-along choruses embedded in a number of songs appear custom-made for a rootsy headbanger's ball. Call *Like an Arrow* scruffy hilljack rock with the occasional shard of Megadeth-style speed metal.

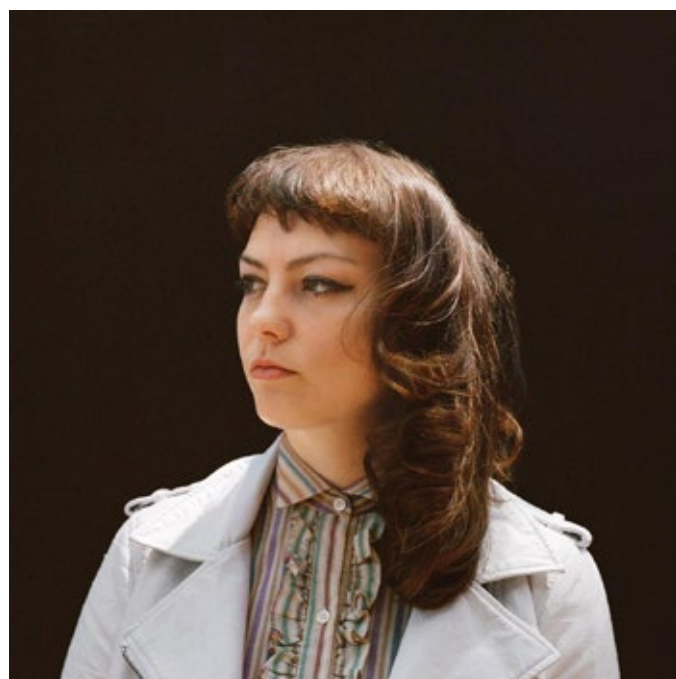
Lyricaly, the group's songs won't break any ground, but the scenarios depicted are heartfelt nonetheless. A man with no prospects dreams of torching his nowhere town on "Let It Burn." Despite the dark plot, an upbeat mix of sprightly roadhouse piano, buzzing guitars, and punchy beats infuse the track with a rebel spirit. "Ought to Know" emerges as a cautionary

tale about a reckless shooting star headed for a fall. "We watched you from the cheap seats with the whole world in your hand/Your time is running out now like so many grains of sand," Starr advises. On the bluesy cry-of-the-heart "Sunrise in Texas," the song's narrator lies in bed as he ponders "a world goin' on outside the world that I'm in."

Gregg Allman turns up for the final track, an organic cameo given he figures as one of the band's spiritual godfathers. "Free On the Wing" comes on as an ode to a freewheeling life lived in the shadow of an uncertain tomorrow. The song adeptly balances a contemporary sensibility with a deep love for the past. The same can be said for Blackberry Smoke.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**

A



Angel Olsen
My Woman
 Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

t the start of her third full-length album, Angel Olsen lay down a manifesto. “I just wanna be alive, make something real,” she sings, her voice ascending to angelic heights with a keyboard softly buzzing beneath her. But contradictions emerge. Images of unanswered phones, unwanted resumes, and unfulfilled desires abound. The synthesizers never take off, keeping the song low to the ground. It’s as if the world is on pause, forever stuck somewhere between longing and a mistake. Olsen writes about love—often, love about to go wrong—but does so from a point of view that feels as if time has been suspended, giving her work a wide-angle, 360-degree scope of the scene that surrounds her.

My Woman is Olsen’s boldest, loudest, and most emotionally aggressive record yet. The first half largely sees her exploring the vintage-tinged rock n’ roll with which she dabbled with in the past—a little Roy Orbison here, a little bit of a girl-group strut there. The latter half goes more ruminative, and while two songs stretch past the seven-minute mark, she’s largely abandoned the quiet, late-at-night folk stylings of earlier works. If *My Woman* isn’t as raw a collection as 2014’s *Burn Your Fire for No Witness*, it’s an effort that alternately feels more vibrant and more daring.



©Photo by Amanda Marsallis

Long since removed the hipster-folkie scene anchored by Bonnie “Prince” Billy, which whom she collaborated during her nascent days, Olsen has here crafted an album that matches the striking versatility of her voice.

She has become the sort of pop vocalist that sounds familiar but also has little in common with any of her peers. Incredibly flexible, Olsen can the shift the direction of a song from verse to verse—operatic one moment, Stevie Nicks-cool the next, and kiss-off tough when needed. *My Woman*, for which Olsen worked with producer Justin Raisen, a pop maestro best known for collaborating with the likes of Sky Ferreira, Santigold, and Charli XCX, certainly expands her sound (see the aforementioned synths of the opening track). But Olsen isn’t after trends.

Instead, *My Woman* aims for early rock n’ roll timelessness. Play it alongside albums from Dolly Parton, Nancy Sinatra, Any Winehouse, or even Patti Smith. There’s a punk attitude here, as well as a dash of country soul, but above all, these scrappy, guitar-led songs fit on any playlist that transcends eras.

“Never Be Mine” comes on as the sort of torch song that allowed the Everly Brothers and Ronettes to turn heads. Olsen amps up the drama with each verse. “I know the feeling,” she sings, a rare moment where her voice is soft and borderline pleading. But she then calls everything into question with the next line: “This time, I swear that I do.” “Shut Up Kiss Me” doubles as unrequited rock ‘n’ roll desire at its most hostile, with Olsen delivering the name of the song as if it’s a

singular word while barbed-wire guitar lines create havoc around her.

Sure, these are songs about love, yet Olsen writes how our own wants and expectations create crippling roadblocks. Vide, the soulfully dreamy “Heart Shaped Face,” where a groovy, patient bass adds a dash of anger to grass-is-always-green clichés. What’s more, no two songs share the same vibe. “Those Were the Days” features a soft, jazzy cabaret atmosphere, while “Give It Up” goes for a garage rock vibe to counter Olsen’s swaying vocal melody. Then there’s the twilight orchestral tone of “Woman,” where a Motown bass slow dances with a mournful guitar.

“I dare you to understand what makes me a woman,” Olsen sneers with a howl. And thus, she locks onto pop’s eternal appeal: Mystery.

—**Todd Martens**



Jack White

Jack White: Acoustic Recordings 1998-2016
Third Man, 180g 2LP or 2CD

Jack White is a workaholic. Whether managing his own Third Man Records, upholstering furniture, or finding inventive ways to nudge vinyl into the mainstream media (launching the first LP into space, among other stunts, for example), he never stops moving or making headlines. And even when he isn't recording new material, he seemingly figures out a way to release some anyway— a feat evidenced by *Jack White: Acoustic Recordings 1998-2016*.

The career-spanning album—comprised one previously unheard track and 25 songs that initially appeared as (primarily) fully arranged versions on previous albums from the White Stripes, Raconteurs, and White's own solo career—portrays a different side of White in that the record solely consists of acoustic material. Throughout, the restless artist sounds less like the Detroit-reared rocker of his past and much more like the Nashville folkie he has since become. Several songs showcase his twang and quick picking sensibilities. For its entire duration, the compilation simultaneously peels back one of White's multiple layers and contributes to his mystique. In turn, it reveals the root of his success: His undeniable skill as a songwriter and guitarist.

Stripped of reverb and distortion, these recordings focus on White's distinctive voice, which wails and wavers on tracks like "Forever for Her Is Over for Me" (originally from *Get Behind Me Satan*) and "Carolina Drama" (originally from *Consolers of the Lonely*). Other times, his singing softens and soothes ("You've Got Her In Your Pocket" off *Elephant* and "White Moon" from *Get Behind Me Satan*).

White transforms much of the fare by trying something he's normally unaccustomed to doing—less. This minimalist tactic trickles down to the tracklist, organized chronologically as opposed to artistically. Taken as a whole, the album unfolds with a DIY and lo-fi aesthetic largely foreign to White in the past decade. As intimated by his thickly layered and dense solo recordings, the 41-year-old entrepreneur enjoys polished product more than most. Even "Just One Drink," off *Lazaretto*, gets presented in bare-bones fashion here. *(continued)*

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Indeed, a majority of songs undergo metamorphosis to fit the acoustic mold or, in the case of "Top Yourself," a bluegrass motif. A handful of tracks originally cast as slow-burners—see "We're Going to Be Friends" off *White Blood Cells* or "You've Got Her In Your Pocket" off *Elephant*—sound similar to their original versions in that they lack much imagination or reworking. While largely overshadowed, they nonetheless fit into the overall concept.

"City Lights," a previously unreleased White Stripes song originally written for *Get Behind Me Satan*, looms as the standout. After he shelved it for years, White finally dusted off and finished it, resulting in the first "new" track from the dissolved duo two since 2008. In one of the verses, White sings of "a giant pile of distance" before questioning, "Always helping, always loving/But will you always be above me?" And while the line may or may not be a nod to White Stripes drummer and White's ex-wife Meg White—is he calling her an angel or deeming her a nagging ever-present witness?—the intricate strumming supported by nothing more than what sounds like the delicate shaking of maracas permits the pensive lyrics to take a front seat. This approach rings true for all the material on the record.

From the mundane and straightforward ("I'm Bound to Pack It Up" off *De Stijl*, "I Guess I Should Go to Sleep" off *Blunderbuss*) to the more esoteric and elusive, as best heard on "Want and Able"—a track that opens with cawing crows as White questions, "Who is the who/Telling who what to do?" and sounding as if he is reciting a Dr. Seuss poem—the lyrics speak even louder than his guitar chops. The ongoing duel between the two compelling components contributes to the wonderment, making *Jack White: Acoustic Recordings 1998-2016* White's most delicious—and raw—dish to date. —**Lyndsey Havens**





©Photo by Andreas Johansson

Goat*Requiem*

Sub Pop, 2LP or CD

Depending on your point of view, Goat either represents one of rock's great mysteries or one of its great hoaxes. Consider: Can it be true the act is part of an isolated Swedish commune—a small town dubbed Korpilombolo? If so, wouldn't musical archeologists have gone on a hunt for the real thing? Or is the band's wonky and kooky tribal music simply good enough where it is—specifically, at an arm's distance? After all, in this new era of confrontational protest music (see recent albums from Kendrick Lamar, Beyonce, Frank Ocean, PJ Harvey), are we really in need of a group of rock n' roll shamans? And can anyone take said shamans seriously if they sing such songs as "Try My Robe"?



Requiem, the third proper album from the secretive band of masked members, sounds as if it was recorded in a tie-dyed van with its multitude of members—some publicity photos depict more than a dozen—cramping together in tight quarters to party all the way to Burning Man. Global in scope and psychedelic in nature, *Requiem* is '60s-inspired flower-power zaniness at its most mobile. Here, one man's trash is another's lead instrument. So, bring on the flutes, and get ready to drum on any surface imaginable. There are plenty of guitars, but also what sound like wind-up toys, harpsichords, xylophones, violins, and kazoos. While there may or may not be a sitar, Goat certainly tries to play the guitar as if it is one. Call it nostalgia with a wink.

Or deem it oddness for the sake of oddness. But when Goat relaxes and finds a groove, *Requiem* lays on the fun. Take, for instance, "It's Not Me," a hypnotic chill-out with fuzzy guitars and woozy vocals. The beat feels fashioned out of wind chimes, and Goat harnesses its tendency to let songs drift to the seven-minute mark—often two or three minutes too long. "All Seeing Eye" arrives with a sharp, Mothers of Invention-like riff, and verses shimmy and shake like bead curtains on a windy day. If you can stand the piercingly bright vocals, it's good for a zone-out, especially with its melancholic closing moments. Despite featuring one whistle too many, "I Sing in Silence" gallops along with an instrument that evokes a hand crank. "Alarms," meanwhile, is the 60s at its most darkly cartoonish. Cheerily foreboding rattlesnake shivers and back-and-forth chants rise from a haze of instruments.

Cartoonish, however, is an operative word. "Trouble in the Streets" sounds more like a party in them, as synthesizers blast off as if leading a parade. Even the aforementioned "All Seeing Eye," despite its leather-jacket pose, wants nothing more than to spend your money and laugh about it later.

Requiem feels not like a journey into a tiny Swedish outpost, but a voyage to the past, where a longing for bygone optimism and adventurousness serves as reason enough for a lighthearted social gathering. This set, then, is less an album and more of a costume party. Hopefully, robes are optional.

—Todd Martens



St. Paul & the Broken Bones

Sea of Noise

Thirty Tigers, LP or CD

A

deep sense of homage exists at the core of retro-soul band St. Paul & the Broken Bones. A large ensemble that mines a throwback sound, the Birmingham, Alabama act consists of young men that look to older sources for inspiration. It's an interesting choice but not without flaws.

On their sophomore album *Sea of Noise*, there are nods to influential record labels Motown and Stax, as well as iconic musical hotbeds Memphis and Muscle Shoals. The lineup of vocalist Paul Janeway, bassist Jesse Phillips, guitarist Browan Lollar, drummer Andrew Lee, keyboardist Al Gamble and trumpeter Allen Branstetter is augmented by horn players Jason Mingledorff and Chad Fisher. Adding nuance, a string quartet and a vocal choir show up on several tracks.

The album opens with the ethereal "Crumbling Light Posts, Pt. 1," a short piece of music that features frontman Janeway testifying alongside an angelic choir. The music is emotionally moving but the lyrics never rise above awkward poetry. "We're just crumbling light in a sea of noise," Janeway declares. Soon enough the band segues into "Flow With It (You Got Me Feeling Like)," a sexy number that recalls a bit of the Temptations' funk period and Isaac Hayes' classic work on "Theme from Shaft."

The throwback influences don't stop there. When Janeway gooses his voice into high tenor on the chorus of "Midnight On Earth," he sounds like he's channeling KC and the Sunshine Band circa disco's golden era. At other times, the hallowed ghost of Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" hovers over the proceedings.

St. Paul & the Broken Bones are a talented crew and Janeway, a skilled vocalist. But on one crucial point, they fall far short of the giants they continually reference—their lyrics equate to a stew of unrealized ideas. *(continued)*

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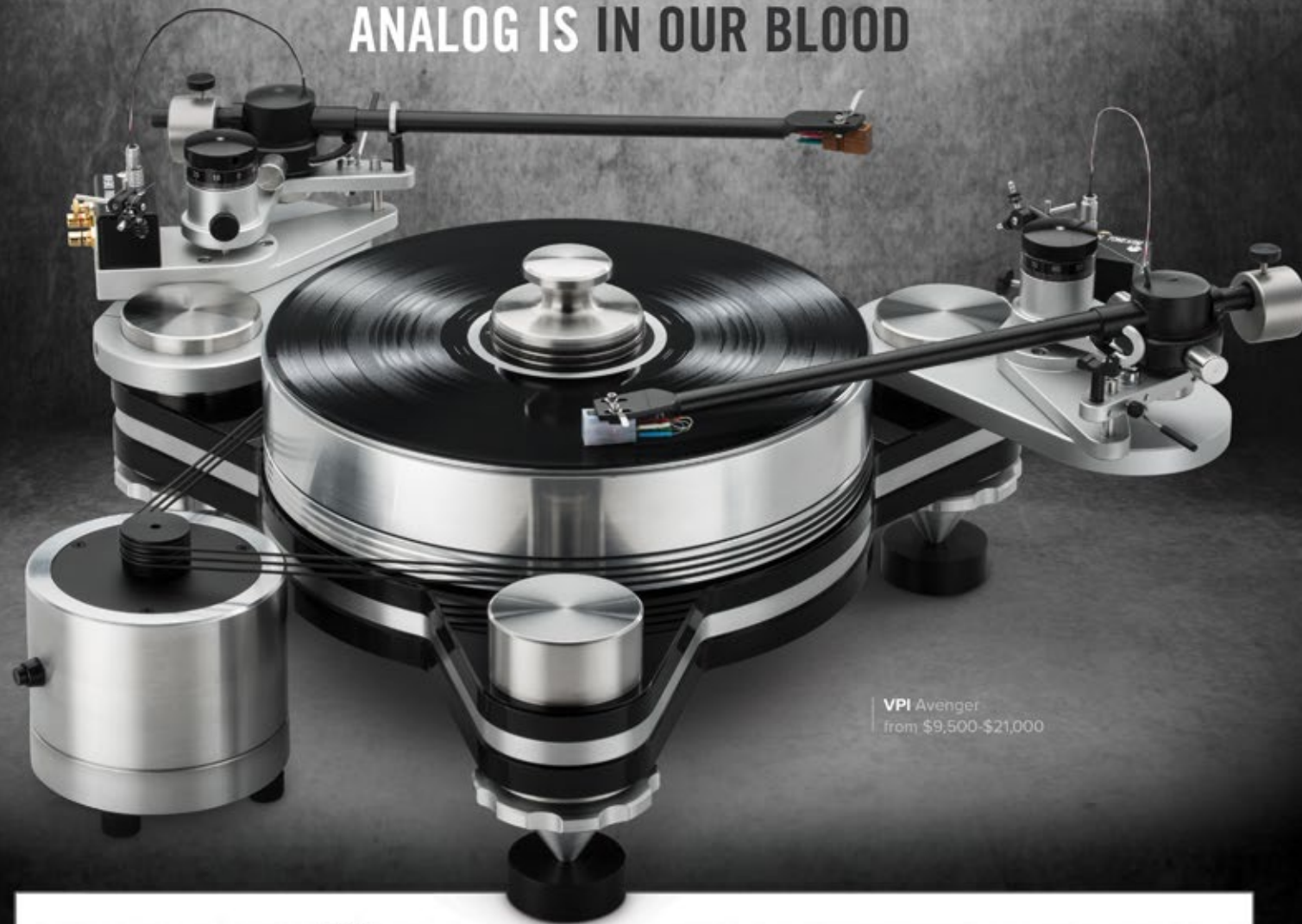
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MUSIC



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On many songs, the words tumble out in confusing stream of consciousness chunks. Some numbers are built on flimsy rhymes: "I can't seem to focus/I know it's all broken/Is it hell/Is it well/Can anyone even tell."

On "Waves," Janeway laments a violent world where "all the people they are praying but there ain't love no more." Here, the Tennessee Mass Choir raises its collective voice to exquisite effect. The sound is lovely but the overall sentiment unmemorable and messily expressed. The band could have knocked this out of the park as a transcendent anthem ala the Polyphonic Spree. Instead, it's hobbled to the earth by muddled writing.

In terms of a production, St. Paul & the Broken Bones have made a stellar-sounding collection. But sadly, these songs remain strewn with phrases that sound like rough notes torn from a work in progress. The band needs to up its game if it truly wants to honor its idols. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



©Photo by Mia Kirby

Warpaint's songs would be difficult to map. They are not, structurally speaking, easy to trace. Rather than have peaks and valleys, the tunes are circular, more reliant on moods and grooves than verses and choruses. On *Heads Up*, the third proper album from the Los Angeles quartet, the band solidifies its evolution from an atmospheric rock band to one designed to get people to move. As longtime Warpaint fans know, a subterranean-level darkness exists at times, but it's here offset with a free-flowing, casual vibe. *Heads Up* serves as Warpaint's loosest, most outwardly rhythm-focused work to date.

Always a bit of a critical favorite, a mainstream breakthrough has thus far eluded Warpaint despite working with A-list producers such as Flood (U2) and Nigel Godrich (Radiohead). But just as the pop world has grown more dance-prone, so has Warpaint.



Warpaint

Heads Up

Rough Trade, 2LP or CD

If prior albums nodded to the Cure, Joy Division and, yes, even Radiohead, *Heads Up* features moments of pure disco euphoria. Take "New Song," where the hook emerges as a squiggly synth that loops around Jenny Lee Lindberg's serpent-like bass and the plucky guitar of vocalist Theresa Wayman. It may just be the group's catchiest song to date, which says quite a bit, as Warpaint hasn't always been focused on catchy. Earlier standouts, such as 2013's "Love is to Die," for instance, hooked with hypnotic repetition.

Vocally, the band sounds more assertive on *Heads Up*. While the act's four voices still have a tendency to mix into one, Wayman more regularly acts as a sonic anchor. Rather than get caught in the momentum of "By Your Side," the track

orbits around her. Warpaint wears arrangements as if they're loose-fitting and baggy. Perfectly crafted, sure, but they feel as if they're shifting with the wind. An entire world breezes by in "By Your Side." Say hello to sci-fi-ready static guitars that emerge as if from underwater, horror-show pianos, and a beat from Stella Mozgawa that early on channels R&B at its most impatient and, later, becomes something more frantic and desperate.

The works are dense and require close listening to fully unpack. Approach a Warpaint album casually, and risk the collection sounding like one song due to the band's fluid-like nature. "The Stall" puts the emphasis on Wayman and Lindberg. It's a spare, plaintive plea that briefly hints at a smooth love jam before letting the rhythm section drill into more sinister territory. "So Good" takes an '80s-ready club beat before constantly twisting and turning around it with red-alert vocals and clanging guitars. "Dre" reveals the act's love of hip-hop with echoing, blocky beats—even if Wayman's calming voice suggests a ballad at hand. Harmonies come to the fore on the title track, a slinky, fast-moving low-to-the-ground number on which guitars draw all over the song as if they comprise a cross-stitch machine.

Somewhere, lurking beneath the quiet noise—the guitars that strike like violins, the rhythms that stutter, stop, and dance without warning—lurks a Warpaint album that feels more traditional. Judging by the direction of *Heads Up*, Warpaint could probably churn out a solid R&B effort. Thankfully, the band prefers a more elusive approach, commercial fame be damned. —**Todd Martens**



MOTORHEAD

Cranking Music (and the Throttle) With Harley-Davidson's Boom! System

By Bob Gendron

The big news in the world of Harley-Davidson for the 2017 model year has nothing to do with infotainment, one of the preeminent trends in the field of high-end touring motorcycles, and everything to do with the bike performance. By introducing in September its first new engine in 15 years, the Milwaukee Eight, the Wisconsin-based bike manufacturer responded to riders' desires for more power and torque—as well as smoother acceleration and cooler running temperatures. Harley-Davidson's decision to focus its attention on the core riding experience rather than snazzy peripherals implies the company views its current Boom! touchscreen infotainment and navigation system as operating at optimal levels. Literally and figuratively, it's a sound conclusion.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Harley-Davidson's closest rival in the heavyweight bikes field, Indian Motorcycles, apparently viewed Boom! to be working a little too much magic. While its longtime rival unveiled Milwaukee Eight, the Polaris-owned manufacturer concentrated its efforts on Ride Command—a similar navigation/audio/control display system meant to out-do the Bluetooth-friendly Boom! in practically every category. According to a fancy PR video on its website, Indian proudly touts its option “spans a full seven inches” compared to its competitor's 6.5-inch screen. Find a rider that gets super-excited about a ½-inch difference in a touchscreen, and I'll show you one more interested in trailering his or her bike rather than getting it out on the street.

Granted, after several failed resurrections, Indian again makes high-quality bikes even if the aesthetics of its larger models' fairings leave something to be desired. Certain aspects of Ride Command—quicker response time, pinch-to-zoom functionality—also genuinely improve features originally pioneered by Boom! Another major difference: Indian boosted the output of its audio system to 100 watts for its Chieftain and 200 watts for its flagship Roadmaster. (Not surprisingly, Indian conveniently omits to mention the true measurements are 50Wpc and 100Wpc, respectively, and negates to cite distortion numbers). By comparison, Harley-Davidson's Boom Box! offers 25Wpc at less than one-percent distortion and the capability of throwing 75Wpc with a separate external amplifier installed in the fairing.

As audiophiles know, big power numbers always look pretty on paper. But there's often more to the story. At \$28,999, Roadmaster lists for a full \$2,000 more than a top-of-the-line Ultra Limited. An auxiliary Harley-Davidson amplifier that increases the Boom! output to 75Wpc costs \$600. Do the math. While audio is obviously just one variation between the models, Indian posits its Ride Command as its “game-changer, your life-changer”—or, the number-one reason to invest in a 2017 touring bike built in the friendly confines of Spirit Lake, Iowa. (Ride Command cannot be added to previous-year Indian bikes or any of its other 2017 models besides Chieftain and Roadmaster.)

FEATURE

Beyond the mine-is-bigger-than-yours hype, the real question begging to be asked pertains to whether the additional power is actually necessary. Harley-Davidson's answer, judging by its concentration on the Milwaukee Eight and choice to leave Boom! the same as it was when it first appeared in 2014, intimates that the 25Wpc output—along with the relatively painless option of tripling it—serves most riders' needs. You can add me to that list.

On my bike, a 2016 Ultra Limited sumptuously painted in two-tone Blackberry Smoke/Purple Fire—and enhanced with Rinehart Classic Duals pipes, rider running boards, a Screamin' Eagle air cleaner, heated Hammock seat, and necessary Dyno tuning—Boom! delivers a level of sonic quality I never expected to hear on a motorcycle distinguished by the signature Harley-Davidson rumble. Talk about having your cake and eating it, too.

For years, I rode bikes unequipped with any sound system. The roar of the engine, the throaty growl of the idle, and ambient noise of the primarily Chicago-area jaunts I took with my 2009 Fat Bob and 2014 Softail Deluxe provided a very satisfying soundtrack—and allowed me to key in on potentially hazardous situations. The rides bestowed an inner peace and fostered deep-seated relaxation. Free of any aural distractions, the excursions became meditative journeys that helped me think and unwind.

Not that I didn't dream of what it might be like to experience tunes while hugging the contours of the pavement. When encountering a bagger on the street, or pulling up to one fueling up at a gas station, it became impossible to ignore the sound system—and the fact the rider got to enjoy music and liberating freedom that only comes from two wheels. You can get close in a convertible, but it's really apples (four wheels and a cage) to oranges (two wheels and no shell).



Still, as enticing as it seemed, the ability to crank Motorhead while twisting the throttle, however, wasn't enough to persuade me to make the jump. I could have easily mounted speakers on either of my previous bikes. Yet the black-and-chrome Fat Bob touted a chopper sensibility and the Deluxe, which I customized to resemble a 1950s-era ride, would've looked out of place with speakers.

Ultimately, the allure of long-haul comfort and storage—and, even more importantly, passenger coziness—led me to discover the pleasures of Boom! And once Harley-Davidson committed to the special, one-time-only, purple-themed color combination that resembles a classic Hot Wheels of my childhood and stands apart from the rest of the pack, I realized my days of only owning a smaller bike were over. Not to mention, Prince rode a purple bike and who can argue with that? But even he didn't have audio.

On non-highway rides, Boom! conveys enough decibels to make me second-guess the volume level when sitting at a spotlight. By nature, motorcycles exude look-at-me appeal, and when vibration-inducing high-voltage rock n' roll happens to be surrounding the rider, the effect gets dramatically magnified. Harley-Davidson's touchscreen allows easy, one-button control over everything. Want to change the radio station? Hit scan or pick any preset choice. A handy USB input further expands the options. Connect a smartphone or USB stick filled with music, and roll down the road with a customized playlist free of commercials or long-in-the-tooth fare that should've been retired decades ago. Boom! even recognizes artist, album, and song names. Like a modern server, it also displays album-cover art. Too cool.

FEATURE

When wearing a half helmet at speeds under 55MPH, at no time have I ever come close to maxing out the volume. The presence of front and rear speakers on the Ultra Limited engenders a surround effect that can be fine-tuned by adjusting the output levels to the rider's desires. Crave true stereo and no sound from the passenger speakers? Done in seconds. Indeed, the front speakers produce a very respectable soundstage and convincingly handle prized elements such as dynamics, detail, and tone. Is it the same aural involvement triggered by a dedicated home system or plugging a pair of audiophile 'phones into a headphone amp? Of course not. But remember, those experiences lack the rush that accompanies straddling a fused rocket of chrome, rubber, and steel while perusing the American landscape in unfettered fashion.

OK, so Boom! passes muster at temperate speeds. What happens when you hit the expressway and sail along at more than 70MPH—while wearing a helmet? Inevitably, the increased wind resistance plays a factor, but it's not enough to derail Boom! from its job. An even better solution also comes into play, at least for riders that wear a brain bucket. Attach the Boom! headset to your helmet and send the music through it, and you transform your bike stereo into a headphones-based setup that fully defeats loss associated with wind buffering. Your passenger can do the same while also reveling in complete control over their individual volume levels.

During a recent 220-mile day trip, I put Boom! to the test at highway speeds—and through a white-knuckle stretch of strong thunderstorms and gusty winds. To my surprise, *(continued)*

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FEATURE

I could still detect the unique inflections of Brittany Howard's voice on tracks from the Alabama Shakes' *Boys and Girls*. Listening to an authorized bootleg of a Bruce Springsteen show recorded earlier in Chicago this spring, Max Weinberg's drumming possessed noticeable body and weight. Jake Clemons' saxophone passages emerged with delicacy—and blustery bloom. Even ballads such as "Thunder Road" yielded a sharp degree of instrumental balance and separation that permitted the concert to unfold between and around my ears. Similarly impressive, the jet-propelled thrust of Bob Mould's guitar imparted requisite aggressiveness and decay during the entirety of his standout *Patch the Sky*.

Switching to FM, Boom! transmitted classic-rock favorites by the likes of Led Zeppelin ("The Ocean"), the Rolling Stones ("Gimme Shelter"), and Blue Oyster Cult ("Don't Fear the Reaper") with an alertness that held my attention even though I'd heard the warhorse songs thousands of times before. It also presented modern country hits with an exposing lyrical clarity that prompted me to want to switch back to my own playlist.

Needless to say, Harley-Davidson's heavy bikes go hand-in-hand with heavy metal. Back on city streets, blaring the aggressive title track from Judas Priest's *Painkiller* through all four speakers served as both an invigorating shot of caffeine as well as notice of my presence to drivers around me. With distracted driving at an all-time high—seriously, please put your phone down—riders need to take advantage of anything that increases visibility.

Boom! accomplishes that and more, enhancing the overall ride experience and changing what a Harley-Davidson adventure constitutes. Feeling the wind in your face as you cruise down a wide-open stretch of scenic roadway, all the while rocking out to personally curated music on a luxuriously appointed touring bike, begets sensations no high-end stereo can replicate. Ride hard, ride free, and ride loud. ●



FEATURE

Q Acoustics Concept 40 Mini Tower Speakers

By Mark Marcantonio

Getting the fundamentals right in any speaker is a tough challenge, even more so as price points plummet; compromises need to be made. Interestingly enough, upstart companies often have an advantage even though the economies of scale rule should apply. The lack of being bound by history opened the gate for British Q Acoustics in 2006.

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The white (or black) gloss 37.5"h x 11"d x 6.75"w curved-side Concept 40 mini tower took all of an owner-friendly 10 minutes to set up. Attach the fresh, triangular rocket-fin-shaped toughened glass outrigger rears to a grooved notch isolated by a rubber and metal plate. The dual sets of binding posts come with Allen wrench-style bars rather than typical flat metal connectors. Leaning heavily on the standard Cardas triangle for room placement, with some extra toe-in for good measure, the Concept 40s prove non-finicky in regards to initial placement. The included foam port plugs deliver tighter bass performance, yet in my room and setup, I preferred to go sans plugs and a more open soundstage. Other reviewers swear by the plug, so this is an easy option to investigate.

The overall soundstage seems more grandiose without the plugs, as evidenced by a spin of Issac Hayes's "Shaft" – the synthesizer and horns are wall-to-wall in my smaller, 9x12-foot listening room. The tambourine shimmers a good foot to the outside of the right speaker. The full complement of punchy horns with well-defined spacing between each instrument is indeed impressive. The funky synthesizer emphasizes the pleasant midrange as well. *(continued)*

FEATURE



FEATURE

An impressive little detail at this price point is how the Concept 40s dual LF drivers and dome tweeter mounted to an aluminum plate, and 4th order crossover can reproduce the slight pitch difference between Hayes's lower spoken voice versus his singing voice.

Getting the 8-ohm, 90dB rated Concept 40s jumping to "Shaft" didn't take a phenomenal amount of juice. A 60 wpc vintage receiver, 35 wpc of EL34 tube integrated, and 40 wpc of class D chip power all worked equally well. Good as they perform with a small amplifier, my reference Simaudio i7 with 150 wpc and significant current reserves makes them even more enjoyable. Bottom line: amplifier matching is a breeze with these mini towers.

Finding happiness with treble frequencies at this price point is tricky too. Q Acoustics goes with the softer voicing with great success. The breathy soprano of Jenni Potts in "Take This and Go" is slightly rounded off, avoiding the hard edge, yet keeping her unique signature sound intact. The Concept 40s handle the natural tonal quality of Keith Jarrett's relaxed, easygoing *Radiance* album. The key-striking energy comes up a bit short, but the effect of being transported to an intimate performance while dining is spot on.

Getting the right piano tonal quality includes a well-built cabinet. The Concept 40 uses MDF/Gelcore/MDF sandwich approach. Gelcore does not harden; therefore, it can absorb frequencies and, through the laws of physics, turn it into heat.

The knuckle rap test reveals a robust and inert enclosure.

The biggest surprise is how well full orchestra arrangements sound on the Concept 40s. The ability to play big is one key. With so many instruments, eliminating the congestion is half the battle. "The Sea and Sinbad's Ship" in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* is a terrific 11-minute movement for non-classical experts. Brass and string sections mix outside and above the speakers with ease. The violin solo at 4:40 comes from just in front and dead center between the speakers.

If home theater is a part of your main rig requirement, the Concept 40s make a nice choice for front speakers. The wide soundstage makes for a realistic audio/video experience. The dialogue in *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* is clear with sharp detail, making the South African accents much easier to understand. Some softer background sounds such as footsteps outdoors are a bit muted. The dramatic score, however, carry to all areas of the room.

Breaking out of the traditional British speaker design concept isn't always easy, yet Q Acoustics has taken a different path successfully, creating in the Concept 40s a mini tower that can image and create a big soundstage. Since apartment/condo living requires acoustic compromises, the fact that the Concept 40s aren't picky about placement makes them a practical option. And for \$1,199 a pair, you can't go wrong. Highly suggested! ●

FEATURE

WINO

By Monique Meadows

“Prost!”

Wines of Austria

Four Modern Austrian Wine Picks

Adashing young winemaker with sweeping blond hair and Bradley Cooper looks, Leo Hillinger took over his family’s winegrowing business in 1990. Combining new techniques with a state-of-the-art winery designed by architects Gerda and Andreas Gerner, a work of concrete art sunk into the earth on the banks of Lake Neusiedl. The above-ground glass cube offering an expansive view of the 110+ acres of vineyards that Hillinger expanded from his family’s original two acres is the icing on the cake.

10th generation winemaker Markus Huber, even more boyish in looks than Hillinger, took over 10 acres of vineyards that had been previously farmed to produce wines for the Huber family restaurant from his father in 2000, after interning with leading wineries in Australia and South Africa. While the original Huber winery began in 1648, today they are an internationally recognized, leading Austrian producer. Awards for his wines in both Austria and abroad, the 37-year-old Markus was elected Austria’s “Falstaff Winemaker of the Year” in 2015.

Both men are part of a new generation of winemakers delivering fresh and modern wines to the international market. After a wine scandal in 1985 that drastically hurt the country’s wine reputation, Austria’s winemakers have rebuilt the industry and the brand, combining the latest technology with serious creative vision. The country that gave us Mozart, Mahler, Hayden, Brahms, Beethoven, Schubert, and Strauss, not to mention Freud and Porsche, also delivers captivating wines and trailblazing winemakers, with a viticulture history dating back to Celtic influence in 700 BC.

TONE STYLE

Though Austria produces less than 1% of global wine production, passionate Austrian winemakers and their import partnerships have introduced world markets to their treasures, with grape varieties that include white grape Grüner Veltliner (Austria's varietal) and red varieties Zweigelt and Blaufränkisch. These grapes are as much fun to drink as they are to say, with 35 grapes in all permitted in Austria which include international varieties such as Sauvignon Blanc, Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Merlot. Grüner Veltliner is the star native grape, representing a third of the country's total wine production. Grüner Veltliner, as well as Riesling, has become in many ways the ambassador of Austrian wines.

Although Austrian Rieslings, wonderfully juicy and full of mineral expression, can take center stage in many Austrian wine offerings, it is Grüner Veltliner (pronounced "GROO-ner VELT-lee-ner"), Austria's distinct grape variety, that can become wines brimming in acidity, nuances of white flower, lime zest, and herbaceous pepper notes. Exciting and extremely food-friendly, the wine can be enchanting in its youth to compelling after a few years in a cellar.

Landlocked in Central Europe, Austria is a polliwog shaped country whose wine regions are situated at its eastern end, located at the same latitude of France and Germany. While white wines dominate the more northern of the country's wine regions, more southern and slightly warmer regions like that of Burgenland are producing delicious reds that can be simultaneously powerful yet elegant. Wine importer, writer and Austrian wine enthusiast Terry These describes the uniqueness of Austrian wines as "wines with great substance that nevertheless feel graceful and moderate-bodied on the palate."



TONE STYLE

In American cities with intense food and wine cultures, the allure of these wines has begun to catch on. The wine brings interesting new flavors, many with a nerve of freshness and energy. The wines tend to be slightly lower in alcohol than many of their California comparisons, making them extremely food friendly. I had the fortune of meeting Leo Hillinger's energetic and seemingly tireless assistant winemaker Michael Hoeffken last year, tasted through a full spectrum of the Hillinger wines, and later that evening enjoyed the wines at a wine-pairing dinner featuring the Hillinger wines. A pairing that especially surprised and thrilled was a rich, barrel-aged Hillinger Pinot Noir (the grape referred to as Spätburgunder in Austria, but labeled by Hillinger as Pinot Noir specifically for the U.S. market) paired with a sumptuous pastry-enrobed filet of white fish.

I have selected four wines that showcase just a fraction of what today's Austrian wines can deliver to your glass. Seek them and others at your local fine wine shop. Bring them to your table. I urge you to explore the possibilities—Grüner with seasonal vegetables and sashimi; Riesling with creative salads or Asian cuisine; Blaufränkisch with smoked meat, barbecue, sausages or a burger; Zweigelt with grilled chicken and lamb; Austrian sparkling (known as Sekt) with appetizers, smoked salmon or fried chicken. As wine is shared amongst friends and family, and a nod to each other and the clinking of glasses ensues, Austrians take a moment and say "Prost" to each other, a "to your health" kind of "cheers!" salutation. Here are four Austrian bottles that will put you in the clinking mood. *(continued)*

TONE STYLE

Markus Huber

Grüner Veltliner “Terrassen”
Traisental Valley 2015 \$17.99

Winemaker Markus Huber is from a family that has been tending vines in Traisental for over 200 years. The Huber Winery, a member of the “Traditionsweingüter Österreich” – Traditional Vineyards of Austria – is a leading producer with international acclaim in this valley. The region, rich in limestone, gravel soil, and minerals, sets the stage for producing exceptional Grüner Veltliner, the leading grape here, and Riesling with a mineral character. It is the soil of some of the world’s finest wines. The region sits at the same latitude as the Burgundian village of Beaune, France, where grapes enjoy a similar climate of the famous Burgundy wine region, that of warm days and cool nights. Traisental is one of Austria’s smallest and youngest wine regions, yet it produces some of the country’s most powerful wines.

Everything comes together at Huber to create an aromatic and distinctly spicy Grüner Veltliner, fresh wine that can be drunk now but with enough structure and acidity to allow cellaring a few years, as Markus Huber likes to enjoy them. Terrassen is fermented in stainless steel and kept on its lees for three months – contributing to its sleek texture. It has herb, pepper, and lime zest aromas, followed by citrus, pineapple and pepper notes on the palate. This is your sushi wine and a great sipping partner with fish, especially trout and salmon, spicy foods and Asian cuisine. Try this with your next Thai takeout. Terrassen grabbed 92 points from *Wine Enthusiast* and 90 from Austria’s *Falstaff Guide*. “Grüner” could become your next house wine.



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tone style

Leo Hillinger

Eveline Pinot Noir

Burgenland 2014 \$23.99

Weingut Leo Hillinger sits in the easternmost part of Austria in Burgenland, unofficially called the red wine quarter of Austria, away from the Alps that dominate its more western regions. The winery is in Jois, with an addition in the city of Rust, in the region's Neusiedlersee area. Since assuming the reigns from his father in the late '90s, Leo Hillinger has grown the small, original 2 1/2 acre family winery to over 100 acres of vines and a modern presence in production, architecture and brand. The vineyards sit next to Lake Neusiedl, Austria's largest, at the border with Hungary. A microclimate here of mild winters and long annual hours of sunshine gives the vines a strong growing season. Here, 60% of what Hillinger plants is the red grape varieties of Austria's Blaufränkisch, Zweigelt, St. Laurent, and Spätburgunder, along with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Syrah, all perfect choices for Burgenland's warmer climate, called "Pannonian," where conditions can produce full-bodied red wines. Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc, and Chardonnay make up their white grape plantings and interestingly enough, there isn't a vine of Gruner Veltliner in sight, leaving it to the cooler regions further north. The "Eveline" Pinot Noir, named after Leo's wife, is full of Pinot Noir's signature cherry and red berry fruits layered with warm spice notes of light vanilla and cinnamon from time in a barrel. There are more nutty nuances than earth on this modern, more international style of Pinot Noir, but there are good balance and depth, creating a smooth, and surprisingly rich, modern Pinot Noir.



TONE STYLE

Netzel

Classic Zweigelt

Carnuntum 2013 \$18.99

Located southeast of Vienna, one of Austria's leading wine producers is Weingut Franz & Christine Netzl, in the Carnuntum, a region that extends from Vienna to the Slovak Republic border and enjoys the Pannonian climate of dry summers and warm autumns encouraging the ripening of grapes. Christine and Franz Netzl are part of a family that has been making wine since 1920. Their children – Anne Marie, Tina and Peter, all in their early 30's – are part of today's Netzl team. This year, Netzl was named 2016 winner of the Falstaff Rotwein Guide Austria. Weingut Netzel, in the town of Göttlesbrunn, is considered one of the leading wineries creating the resurgence of the Austrian wine scene. While the Netzel vineyards plant both white and red grapes, the focus is on their red wines, making up 75% of their wine production. The Netzl classic Zweigelt is a blend of their best vineyards. Medium- to full-bodied, yet incredibly fresh, the wine has just the right amount of tannins surrounding notes of violets, black cherry, blueberry, and a touch of pepper spice that ends in a soft finish. *Wine Enthusiast* magazine awarded it 92 points, enthusiastically describing the wine as "understated and seductive."



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–Bob Ludwig, Gateway Mastering Studios



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TO NE STYLE

Anton Bauer

Wagram Cuvée

Wagram 2010 \$20.99

Born in 1971, 4th generation winemaker Anton Bauer did his wine studies in Krems, Austria, and then trained in France's Burgundy region, having been entranced by the French wine region as a 15-year-old on a student exchange program in Beaune. After France, he would train with a known Austrian winery before taking over his parent's winery in 1992. Last year, Bauer was awarded "Winemaker of the Year" by Austrian restaurant guide *Wirtshausführer Österreich*. While the original family winery is in the center of Feuersbrunn in the Wagram region, Bauer's wines are now produced outside the city in a modern new winery equipped with current technology. Austria's Wagram region, a ridge consisting of ancient gravel sediments from the Danube River, is a charming, quiet landscape of rolling hillsides in an area of almost 7000 acres of vineyards. While the most important grape in the Wagram region is undeniably Grüner Veltliner – of which Bauer makes several delicious and striking wines – indigenous red varietals of Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch, Blauburgunder, and international varietals Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot share the vineyard stage at Bauer. Their Wagram Cuvée showcases a blend of Zweigelt, Blaufränkisch, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot. All grapes are hand-picked, keeping with Bauer's philosophy that "things need time to develop and wine needs time as well." The wine is aged in large oak barrels and used barriques, smaller barrels also known as "Bordeaux barrels," for 16 months, giving the wine a luscious harmony of fruit, herb and spice notes, a palate of red cherry and dark berries, with a soft cocoa note and a touch of herb. At only 13.5 alcohol, this red is powerful yet elegant. This is a beautiful wine, with fine tannins making a refined, delicious match with roast meats. Prost!

You can follow Monique Meadows on
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Jeff Beck — *Beck 01*

£349 (about \$500 USD)

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If you love hot rods and the career of legendary guitarist Jeff Beck, this is the definitive book for your coffee table. No expense has been spared in producing this massive 11 x 12.5 inch tome; it's bound in Italian leather featuring a stamped license plate on the cover from the year Beck was born, and each of the 2000 copies is signed by the man himself.

But the best is on the inside. Pulled from Jeff Beck's extensive personal collection, there are tons of photos chronicling his life as a musician from day one – many of them unseen until now. And yes, there are plenty of pics of his car collection as well.

As they say on the QVC channel, act now before they are gone. This one is highly unlikely to end up on the bargain books table at your local book store (and Amazon's *not* carrying it.)



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Invented in 1948, made really popular in the '60s and '70s by Andy Warhol, the Polaroid instant camera, to many, was originally inspired by creator Edwin Land's daughter who "wanted to see the pictures right now" in a decidedly non-digital world. This iconic American company would meet its downfall in 2008, but thanks to The Impossible Project, founded by a group of engineers and investors from the Netherlands, the last of the Polaroid film production machinery was purchased and they have not only invented a wholly new line of instant films, but the Impossible Camera you see here.



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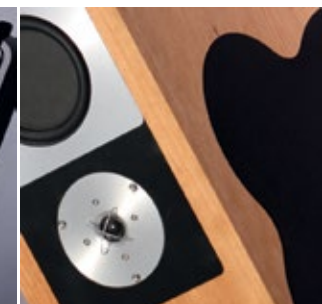
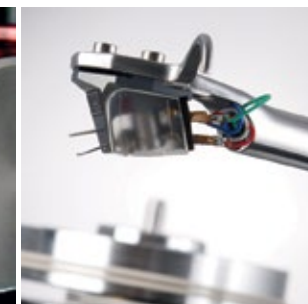
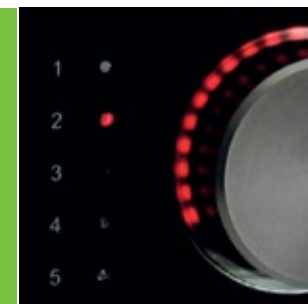
Quite simply, if it doesn’t sound better, it doesn’t happen. (If it does sound better, but is considered ‘impossible,’ they’ll figure out how to do it anyway. There’s a very good reason the company’s named Rega Research).

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Leave it to the Swiss to make the perfect voltage adaptor. Should your travels take you all over the world, you know that most places are 240 volts and that they all do it a bit differently. In the past, you had to take a number of different adaptors for a multi-country trip. Fortunately most portable electronics now have world wall warts that will adapt from 100 to 240 volts and accommodate 50 or 60 Hz power, but you still need the right plug for the right socket.

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The Rolling Stones

The Rolling Stones in Mono

ABKCO/Universal, 180g 16LP box set or 15CD box set

S

everal years after the Beatles and Bob Dylan got their just due in mono on audiophile vinyl, the Rolling Stones finally receive analog treatment worthy of their pivotal contributions to pop culture and rock n' roll's evolution.

Spanning the band's Decca output, and ranging from 1964's *The Rolling Stones* through 1969's *Let It Bleed*, the self-descriptive *The Rolling Stones in Mono* 16LP box set hits all the marks a reference archival release should. In short: For those wondering whether the trove—overseen by ABKCO audio engineer Teri Landi, cut at Abbey Road Studios by Sean Magee and Alex Wharton from new flat-master DSD files created by Bob Ludwig from the original analog mono master tapes, and pressed at GZ Media—is worth the roughly \$350 investment even if you already own these records, you'll get satisfaction. And much more. The anthology also again proves Phil Spector's beliefs correct, at least in stereo's nascent era.

As with the Fab Four pressings, some fans will undoubtedly pick nits with topics ranging from album-cover reproduction to whether "2000 Light Years from Home" sounds better on a U.K.-only LP last seen in an obscure dime store during the Lyndon Johnson presidency and now fetching outrageous sums on eBay. Let them. It's their loss. Similarly, some reviewers will sweat over acute nuances amidst eight different pressings and, simultaneously, insert themselves into the narrative while mistaking self-importance and self-promotion for comprehensiveness.



©Photo by Terry O'Neill

If you're seeking such a comparative shootout or thesis-worthy track-by-track commentary, go ahead and stop reading. *TONE's* purpose is more pragmatic and concise. Why? For one reason, practicality. Currently, the set is numbered and limited to 10,000 copies, meaning it could sell out while listeners sit on the sidelines waiting for a 3,000-word screed before deciding whether they should purchase it. Second, and more importantly: Fun. The thrills of a reissue as finely executed as *The Rolling Stones in Mono* relate to immediately experiencing songs you think you know inside-out from new perspectives made possible by freshly uncovered information, enhanced depth, and lifelike sonics that plop you down beside the band.

Such facets, and then some, are revealed moments after the needle hits the grooves of energetic platters like *The Rolling Stones Now!* and *Aftermath*. With the exception of *Beggars Banquet* and *Let It Bleed*, the mono mixes were given priority over their stereo counterparts—while the stereo versions of *England's Newest Hitmakers*, *12 x 5*, *The Rolling Stones Now!*, *December's Children (And Everybody's)*, and *Out Of*

Our Heads were all electronically processed. Just as notable, the mono sound mirrors how the Stones played in the studio—together, and at once, an approach that reflected the methodology of the blues and R&B legends that inspired them. Indeed, the environments and sensations delivered time and again by *The Rolling Stones in Mono* conjure that of intimate, sweaty, blues-filled juke joints during the 1950s/60s on the South Side of Chicago at which the musicians, needing to compensate for the din of the crowd and clanking of bottles, cranked up their amplifiers and channeled their sound into explosive, massive balls capable of penetrating even brick walls. Cue up “The Last Time” from *Out of Our Heads* (U.S. version) or “Around and Around” from *12 x 5*, and the intent is the same.

As a testament to the original producers and engineers, and to the quality of these dead-quiet pressings, the music that comes through *en masse* also features tremendous detail, depth, and spaciousness. These LPs convey the attack, decay, punch, pacing, power, and, most significantly, visceral directness more authoritatively and convincingly than even the long-out-of-print, exceptional-sounding SACDs

of the same material. Above all, the vinyl delivers an abundance of tone and body—both the sort associated with individual instruments as well as the rarer, harder-to-replicate type engendered by the interaction of guitars, drums, bass, vocals, and a room.

The halos of space around Mick Jagger's vocals; the pick-to-strings strum of Keith Richards' off-beat guitar chords; the scalpel-sharp bite of Brian Jones' blistering solos; the thrump of the foundation-setting rhythms poured by Charlie Watts and Bill Wyman. All here, all in invigorating, take-you-to-the-sessions fidelity. Wyman's bass and Watts' percussion, in particular, sound ready to burst out of the soundstage. The low frequencies and bass tautness on tracks such as “The Under Assistant West Coast Promo Man,” “We Love You,” and “Paint It, Black” achieve revelatory status. Equally remarkable: The acoustic signatures on electric/acoustic tracks (vide, “Jumpin' Jack Flash”) and weight, physicality, and presence of auxiliary accents (the marimba on “Under My Thumb,” tambura on “Mother's Little Helper,” Jagger's harmonica on the bevy of early blues-based fare). (continued)

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MUSIC

Cumulatively, the effects not only shed brighter light onto the Stones' works. They also trigger a deeper-seated appreciation for the songs and performances, and underline, more emphatically than before, how and why the quintet earned the title—and deserved it for quite a stretch—of the Greatest Rock & Roll Band in the World. Listen to *The Rolling Stones in Mono* and no further explanation is necessary. Forget all the memorabilia, documentaries, museum exhibits, biographies, recollections, videos, and tours. The grooves on these albums best represent the Stones' legacy and tell their story like nothing else.

Visually, the ABKCO/Universal set borrows a few pages from *The Beatles in Mono*. A sturdy, one-piece box with a flip-top magnetic cover contains all 16 LPs plus a 48-page book with a 5,000-word essay by David Fricke and rare Terry O'Neill photographs. The album jackets evoke those utilized by Music Matters and boast an attractive medium-gloss finish. Thick, re-sealable outer sleeves further indicate the care invested in the project.

Quibbles? The book should've been hardcover, and the cover art for *Stray Cats*—a 24-cut compilation of A- and B-sides and EP tracks—seems the only uninspired aspect of the set. It's of trivial consequence, however. *The Rolling Stones in Mono* gets everything else right.

—Bob Gendron



FEATURE

Woo Audio WA8

How Do You Want to Play It?

By Jeff Dorgay



FEATURE

For a minute, just forget about using the super cool Woo Audio WA8 Eclipse as the front end to your hi-fi system. Sure you could plug some headphones in, and you'd experience some of the best personal audio going. Battery power is intriguing because getting off the grid means lowering the noise floor and other gremlins occurring when converting AC power to DC. While this doesn't always come to fruition with amplifiers, low-powered components like DACs and preamplifiers do very well in this configuration. Forget that, let's use it as the front end to a six-figure, 2-channel hi-fi system.

Pondering why the WA8 didn't have a line output, like my Walkman Pro, which incidentally is about the same size, I went for broke and drove my \$85,000 Pass Xa 300 monoblocks directly from the headphone jack. As my favorite secret agent, Archer likes to say, "Why would I not?" Considering how much gain today's power amplifiers have, the 350MW output sounded like it just might get the job done.

FEATURE

Spinning the 40th anniversary edition of Jethro Tull's classic *Aqualung* via the dCS Paganini transport, the WA8 presents a huge soundstage, with Ian Anderson's flute locked in place as guitar, drums and percussion float everywhere, front and back. It's not an Audio Research REF6, but it's damn good and much better sonically than a lot of other preamplifiers with a similar price tag. None of them have an internal DAC.

These miniature tubes are available directly from Woo Audio, and as they are soldered directly to the PC board, you will have to send yours back for a service visit. As these amplifiers haven't been out that long, this hasn't happened yet, but with these tubes going for about \$10–\$20 each on Ebay, I can't imagine this will be a terribly expensive service. Sporadic listeners will probably go years before needing a tube replacement.

Unless a tube fails catastrophically, they usually fade out rather than fail. After about 5,000 hours you will notice a slight dulling of the sound, with the soundstage collapsing a bit, so that's when it's time to contact the folks at Woo and schedule a maintenance call.

For less than the price of some interconnect cables, you can make the WA8 the cornerstone of a versatile 2-channel system to use in your listening room or on the go. The rechargeable Lithium-Ion battery pack has a claimed playback time of 4 hours, which was usually exceeded by about 15 minutes.



FEATURE

This is the only disadvantage to using the WA8 as a linestage: you're looking at 3½ hour listening sessions max (the tubes take about 20–30 min. to come on full song). It will take about 2 ½ hours to recharge, so theoretically, you could listen all afternoon, forage for food, and return to listen for another four hours. Not bad at all.

The WA8 is an Amazing Line Level Preamplifier

Every past Woo product we've reviewed has always provided great sound, with a sonic signature, ever so slightly on the warm side of neutral. Not quite a vintage, classic sound, but nothing you'd ever mistake for transistors and op amps. Sonically, it reminds me a lot of the voice of the current line of McIntosh line preamplifiers, if that's any help.

Powering up the WA8, you notice a triplet of miniature tubes for which designer Jack Woo claims "more than 5,000 hours" of life. That's three hours of listening a day for four years straight, and you'll probably do better than that. This Class-A, single-ended miracle uses a pair of 6S31 tubes in "2-tube mode" adding a 6021 driver tube in "3-tube mode." Woo suggests using this to fine tune the amplifier's output to whatever headphones you might have at your disposal. Three-tube mode worked best for preamplifier duty. *(continued)*

FEATURE



FEATURE

Using an iPhone 6+ running TIDAL makes an ideal miniature digital playback system; as the WA8 is Apple compatible, so it just grabs the digital bitstream from your iDevice. The WA8's internal ESS DAC is what the big boys use, so again, expect the sound of a full-sized DAC here, all the way up to 24bit/384kHz files.

Hell yeah, I plugged a turntable in

Why not take the madness all the way and connect a turntable? Though this somewhat defeats the "compact" concept, those thinking about using their WA8 as a full-function preamplifier will not be disappointed. Now if only Mr. Woo would make a companion phono stage with an identical form factor.

Rega's new Planar 3/Elys 2 cartridge, paired with a Monk Audio phonostage (about \$1,200 each) makes for a particularly lovely way to enjoy records, revealing all the analog magic you could hope for. Most people won't need more than a turntable and a digital input, so this is pretty awesome stuff. Going back and forth between analog and high-resolution favorites drained the battery every time.

Headphone performance

The WA8 has been out for a while, so you can stop by Head-Fi or your favorite headphone site and read more minutiae than you could ever dream of wanting to know. These guys have more patience (and more pairs of headphones) than I do when it comes to trying every possible headphone under the sun with the WA8.

(continued)

Music From My Phone?

From that first day in June 2012 — as soon as our first remarkable little DragonFly started honoring music files as they had never been honored before — the number 1 question was “*What about playing music from my phone?*”

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- At any volume, Red sounds more powerful and spacious than DragonFly Black



BLACK

RED

audioquest



FEATURE

Suffice to say, with my reference Oppo and Au-deze phones, I was not only pleased with the spacious and dynamic sound of the WA8, I feel it is at the top of the price category in every way. Bass is deep and well defined – highs equally so – and this amplifier excels at low-level detail resolution. Add that little bit of extra sauce that tubes bring to the party, and the WA8 makes an incredibly non-fatiguing listening station.

Just like the current iPhones, you can get the Woo Audio WA8 Eclipse headphone amplifier/DAC in a variety of colors: black, space gray and gold. (Sorry, no pink – I mean rose gold – yet!!) Only 6.69 inches by 3.6 inches and 1.69 inches deep, it’s barely bigger than a paperback book. You remember those, don’t you?

Manufacturers who have the foresight to produce products giving headphone listeners an easy upgrade path to a 2-channel system when time and budget permit get major kudos in my book. It’s one thing to make a small portable headphone amp and DAC, but one that you can use as a serious line level preamplifier makes the already great Woo Audio WA8 my choice for Personal Fidelity Product of the Year in our next issue. You may never use it as a pre-amplifier as I did, but you can. And you’ll love it.

www.woaudio.com

JAZZ & BLUES

**Dave Douglas**

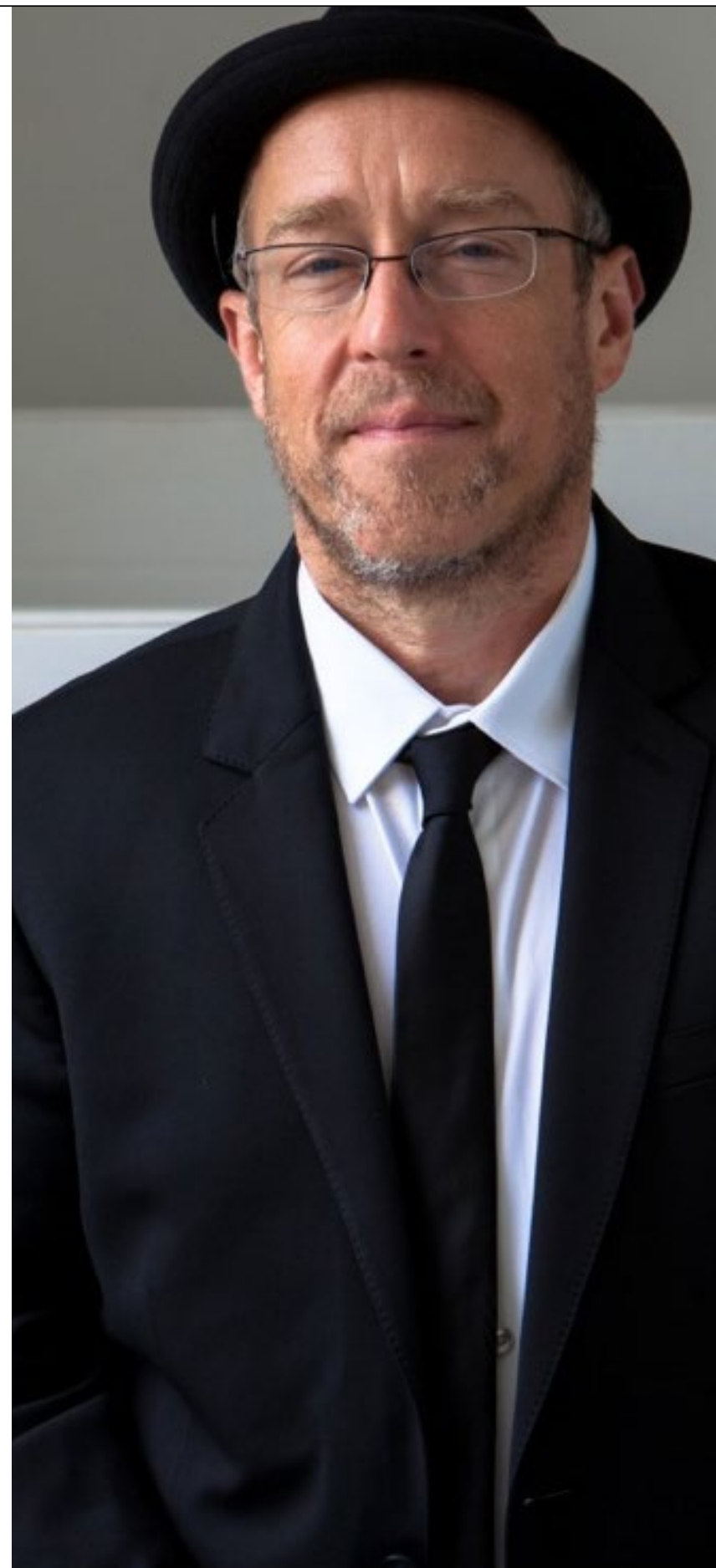
Dark Territory
Greenleaf, LP or CD

Partnerships can blossom in odd ways. In 2014, at a Red Bull Academy show in Manhattan, jazz trumpeter Dave Douglas met up with electronica producer Shigeto. The concert premise was unusual. A soloist takes the stage, waxes spontaneous, and after a few minutes, is joined by another improviser. They duet for a few minutes more and the first player exits, leaving his or her mate to await the arrival of the next foil. The action unfolds across 15 or so musicians—a round robin of ever-changing interaction. If you know Douglas, who has cut duet albums with both Martial Solal and Han Bennink, you know he's always up for traversing that kind of tightrope.

Douglas and Shigeto bonded after the gig, quickly forming the aptly named band High Risk with Groove Collective bassist Jonathan Maron and inventive drummer Mark Guiliana. Their self-titled debut stands as a jazztronica jewel focused on textures and momentum. Chopping each of those elements with precision, they navigate a shifting landscape that stretches from drum 'n' bass agitation to ethereal fantasias. People took notice because the music was so architecturally unique. At times it seems determined. Occasionally it feels nonchalant. The tracks that comprise *Dark Territory* were cut during the High Risk sessions, and are actually more impressive than those of its predecessor.

Segues remain crucial to these kinds of albums, where mood features just as much utility as solos, and interplay is a many-layered onion. *Dark Territory* moves from the graceful jitters of "Celine" to the monstrous pulse of "Loom Large." Along the way, it's tough to get a firm grip on the action—which is a compliment. The nuanced interplay seems perpetually morphing—the equivalent of a kaleidoscopic experience. At top volume—and it sounded superb shaking the rafters of my house on hot August afternoons—it's about authority tilting towards aggression. But the record works as a more benign affair as well.

Dial it down a bit and the ambient adventures start to meld their particulars, and each, including Guiliana's steely clatter and Shigeto's bruising synths, get presented as essential elements of a gauzy dreamscape. It's a neat trick, attempted and achieved to varying degrees by horn players such as Nils Petter Molvaer on *Solid Ether* and Nicholas Payton on *Sonic Trance*. Of course, the granddaddy of the sound—for trumpeters, at least—is Miles Davis. The fractious funk and churning



collage of pieces like "Rated X" and "Honky Tonk" from the early 70s formed the template for these modern gambits.

Douglas has had a knack for incorporating electronic instruments since 2003's *Freak In*, which flecked nu-bop with a mix of keybs, loops, and digital percussion. And his Keystone group found DJ Olive injecting some sonic info via turntables. But here, the mesh of Morrow's synth bass and Shigeto's software becomes much more defining. The latter's contributions can't be underestimated.

A jazz-savvy studio artist that has skills at playing a trap set (his instrument of choice during that round-robin show), Shigeto demonstrates eloquence at contouring distressed patterns that gives *Dark Territory* its defining personality. Previous tunes, like the Sun Hammer remix of his "Huron River Drive" or "Ritual Howl" from *No Better Time Than Now*, come across as bleep-a-delic grooves in search of a soloist. Several moments on *Dark Territory* emerge where it seems he's found an optimum mate in Douglas' evocative horn.

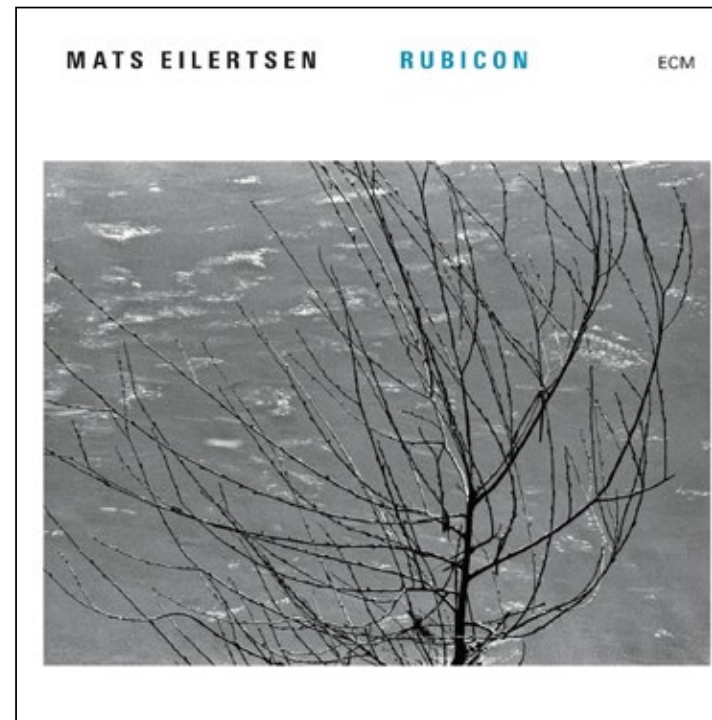
While the band's first album is dedicated to the heroic activists addressing our climate-change dilemma—high risk, indeed—this one is inspired by Douglas absorbing author Fred Kaplan's latest book, *Dark Territory: The Secret History of Cyber War*. Moments of steely dread bubble up here and there, but regardless of its tech origins, the music upends the chilling possibility of a dystopian future. Toggle between "Let's Get One Thing Straight," "Ridge Hill," and "All The Pretty Horsepower" for a dose of humanity. Like Kneebody's recent Daedelus collaboration or the warmest tracks by Oneohtrix Point Never and Mount Kimbie, *Dark Territory* suggests that a cluster of digital keystrokes can be twisted into a landscape of warmth.

Indeed, the trumpeter has said this band deals with the "dangers and challenges of technology." Along the way, the collective's electro-acoustic opus emits seductive designs and emotionally provocative missives. —**Jim Macnie**



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Mats Eilertsen
Rubicon
ECM, CD

By no coincidence, creative music in Scandinavia really took off in the late 1960s when multi-instrumentalist and global-music student Don Cherry alighted in Stockholm, and turned folks on to various songs of the south. Nordic jazz—for all the icy stereotypes—has warm West and South Asian influences. I’ve argued before that Dewey Redman’s wailing Asian double-reed, the shenai, echoes in the keening tenor sax of Jan Garbarek, who called one record *Ragas and Sagas* (ECM).

A few ethnic strains sing clearly on Norwegian bassist Mats Eilertsen’s *Rubicon*, partly due to tenor and soprano saxist Trygve Seim’s Garbarek-isms. Here and there, Seim evokes that nasal shenai tone—or the hollow quaver of a Persian or Turkish ney. Fellow reedist Eirik Hegdal, trading off on soprano, baritone, and clarinets, fits his line to Seim’s very well. Key into the wide turns they take, negotiating the ascending chant “BluBlue.” The loose unisons often heard in creeping-vine Euro-jazz may sound under-rehearsed, but here the broad strokes prove smearily effective. (There’s a little Gregorian chant in it, too.) Micro-tonal variances claim a billowy, woozy effect, and bring out the cry in “BluBlue”’s wayward melody.

Eilertsen can write a catchy tune. Atop a calm piano vamp, the sing-songy rising hook of “Reminiscent” seems almost too ingratiating but nicely frames Rob Waring’s glittering vibraphone. There’s a rough burr to the dark low-saxes blend on “March,” a line again bolstered by memorable slow ascents. Seim takes a bent-note tenor solo like a muezzin’s prayer call, and drummer Olavi Louhivuori echoes a Mideastern dumbek. Then they go into an equally restrained waltz, ending on quasi-baroque cadence for vibraphone. (Is it just me hearing the Modern Jazz Quartet’s influence these days?) It’s not so easy to make all that come together in a plausible way, as it does here. *(continued)*



©Photo by Andre Loyning

One could imagine the three aforementioned tunes played as rousing swingers, but *Rubicon* doesn't cross that line. This two horns/five rhythm lineup is really about careful blending, in the front line and the rear. Eilertsen, after two decades in the trenches, has been bumping into his colleagues here for years. Last to enter his circle was Dutch pianist Harmen Fraanje, whose deep ballad feeling and harmonic clarity are showcased in clarinetist and saxophonist Michael Moore's Fragile Quartet. Fraanje finds his spots in the ensemble, and gets a subdued solo number in featured position.

The five-strong rhythm section sounds mostly restrained, but full of wood and steel. Waring plays marimba too, and when is that not welcome? (There's a brief improvisation for bass, marimba, and clarinet.) Self-effacing guitarist Thomas Dahl emerges as a master of inconspicuous support, adding a halo of sound to Fraanje's piano, or merging with the horns. Early on "March," he scoops up from below to arrive precisely on pitch and on time behind Waring's bright vibraphone chords. Bass players love synchronized gestures like that: Little details that make the sound pop out. **—Kevin Whitehead**

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©Photo by Nathan West

The oddity of the situation attracts immediately. For the last four decades, Nels Cline has well-earned his rep as an experimentalist, partial to dissonance and expert at abstraction. One of our most respected guitarists, he often finds ways to use both, be it overtly, in rambunctious situations with the most intrepid improvisers of his generation, or, during the last 12 years with Wilco, in more nuanced ways. There he's helped shape some very clever pop, spackling the cracks and crevices of Jeff Tweedy's tunes with eloquent, occasionally askew, filigree. So when he began work on a flotilla of romantic songs from across the 20th century with the goal of sculpting an album that would hark to the "bachelor pad" records of the 50s, intrigued by melody and italicizing mood, ears perked up.

They can stay perked. *Lovers* is a pivot disc, a move by a cagey outlier that will certainly tickle Cline's fans while likely wooing those unfamiliar with his work. An extended opus built on a large ensemble's swoop and lilt, it moves through 18 vivid instrumentals that comfortably link into a suite of sorts. Some stress sentiment, others wax spectral. Several are sage in their ability to ease a vintage cocktail-music mentality into a modernist setting that manages to drift from a Sonic Youth valentine to a ditty from "The King and I" to a "Why Was I Born" that swings

with such antique grace, it seems lifted from a Woody Allen film. Along the way, routine aspects of the originals pick up an edge.

Even when Cline waxes genteel, his spin on torch songs and soundtrack interludes trades mush for mystery—advanced cosmopolitanism, 2016 style. As the music seeps forward, it becomes clear *Lovers* proves more of an orchestrator's album than a guitarist's disc. Cline sits up front and glides through several tender solos, but he's wise enough to share his vision with arranger-conductor Michael Leonhart.



Nels Cline

Lovers

Blue Note, 2LP or CD

The latter's charts seem built on a series of questions: Is it possible to conflate Esquivel and Eddie Sauter? Are there flickers of light in Elmer Bernstein's eeriest moments? What would happen if Martin Denny's "quiet village" had an ominous side?

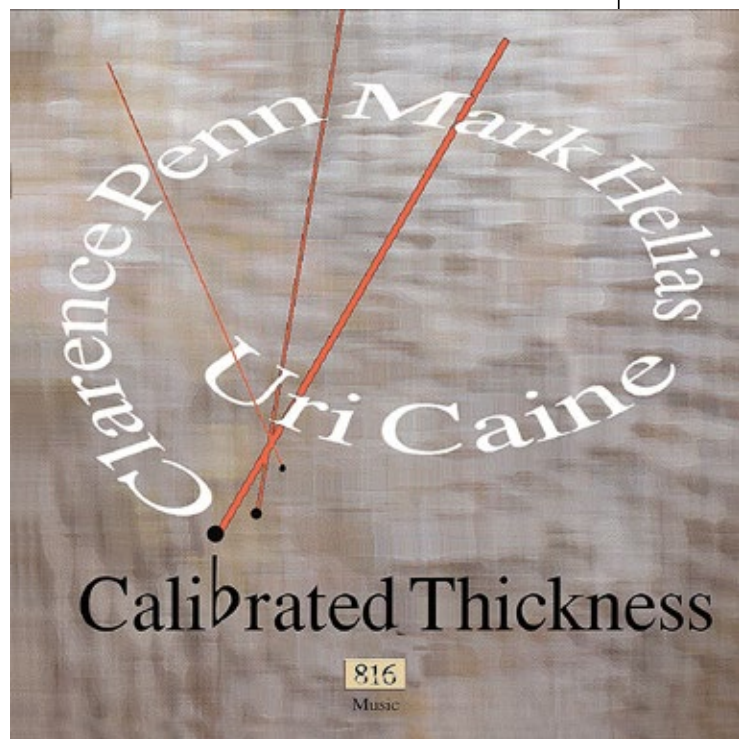
A wealth of improv-savvy musicians articulates the arrangements. Clarinetist Ben Goldberg, percussionist Kenny Wollesen, brass man Steven Bernstein, and harpist Zeena Parkins are among the ensemble members, filling Leonhart's umbral designs with all kinds of memorable particulars. A heartbreaking oboe motif pops up and fades away; a marimba sets a pulse and fosters a fleeting exotica. A tenor sax acts willowy for a second as the group hovers behind it. In Leonhart's hands, Ambitious Lovers "It Only Has to Happen Once" cops a vibe from "The Edge of Night" theme while Annette Peacock's "Touching" incorporates a spooky drone. Marshaling his charges in unsettling directions, the conductor demonstrates a way of keeping the music sparse but sumptuous. Meanwhile, producer David Breskin definitely assists his reed, brass, and string squads when it comes to waxing luminous.

Lovers does its business in the shadows. It reveals itself as an album that takes on more resonance at dusk. The handful of originals Cline brings to the program sustains this vibe. "The Bed We Made" feels jazzy but bittersweet. "You Noticed" gauzy and forlorn. "Hairpin & Hatbox" is heart-on-sleeve, but private enough to do it's sobbing alone. Whether he's plucking the strings in a fluid escapade or volume-pedaling his way down a bleak alleyway, Cline always interacts with Leonhart's delicate designs, a la Stan Getz and orchestra on Focus. At a few points, the music conjures thoughts of the Beach Boys' "Let's Go Away for Awhile"—if Brian Wilson had held Nino Rota in higher esteem than Phil Spector.

And don't let *Lovers'* orchestrator bent fool you into thinking the guitarist goes without any shimmer time here. Cline's start to Jimmy Giuffre's "Cry, Want" doubles as a fervent hush of phrases, and the wonderfully balanced stroll he takes on "Secret Love" prevails as the kind of subdued outing that his hero Jim Hall would appreciate. The liquid notes he delivers on "Max, Mon Amour" remain some of the album's most seductive moments. Cline is supple and supportive throughout, feeding on Leonhart's textural gambits and the group's sensitive rendering of same. *Lovers* works a less-is-more tack; from lap steel to Fender Jazzmaster, Cline remains part of the broader action, stepping out only to enhance the atmosphere. Like Miles Davis on *Sketches of Spain*, he uses poignancy and lyricism to make the orchestra's work glow.

If *Lovers* is meant to have a cinematic effect, "The Bond" comes on as the kind of closing-credits theme that offers a lit path out of some very dark woods. Echoes of Pat Metheny emerge in the way it lays tenderness on the table, but only a dullard would dismiss the power of its candor or mistake the beat of its heart. (Cline dedicates it to his sweetie, Yuka Honda, also part of the ensemble.) In LP form, each of *Lovers'* four sides has its own emotional arc, and this final-quarter denouement is ravishing, incorporating an obscure Mancini passage fraught with anxiety and finalizing with an overt tone of optimism. Who knew that revealing the underbelly of romance could be such a radiant experience?

—Jim Macnie



Uri Caine
Calibrated Thickness
 816 Music, CD

Pianist Uri Caine is celebrated for ambitious projects like *The Goldberg Variations* and *Uri Caine Ensemble Plays Mozart* (both on Winter & Winter) that bring together jazz, classical, and other musics with brio, imagination, and wit—and also display his wizardry on ancient and modern keyboards. He can serve up baroque figurations, Cuban montunos, gospel organ licks, and old Moog clichés with eerie fidelity. But he's mostly interested in those classic sounds for what he can do with them as a rounded improviser.

So it goes with his approach to the piano-bass-drums trio: One more tradition to honor and make his own. Chops like his need room to play the way a big happy dog does, and *Calibrated Thickness* gives him a long leash. Caine shows his learned range, but this music is not about checking off stylistic boxes. It's about having fun. He's had other good trios, but this one really sings out. Drummer Clarence Penn—the pianist's old bandmate in a Dave Douglas quintet—can place an accent anywhere and split the rhythms every which way. He'll calibrate his dynamics so subtly, to match Uri's sudden dips and peaks, you could miss that he's doing it at all. *(continued)*



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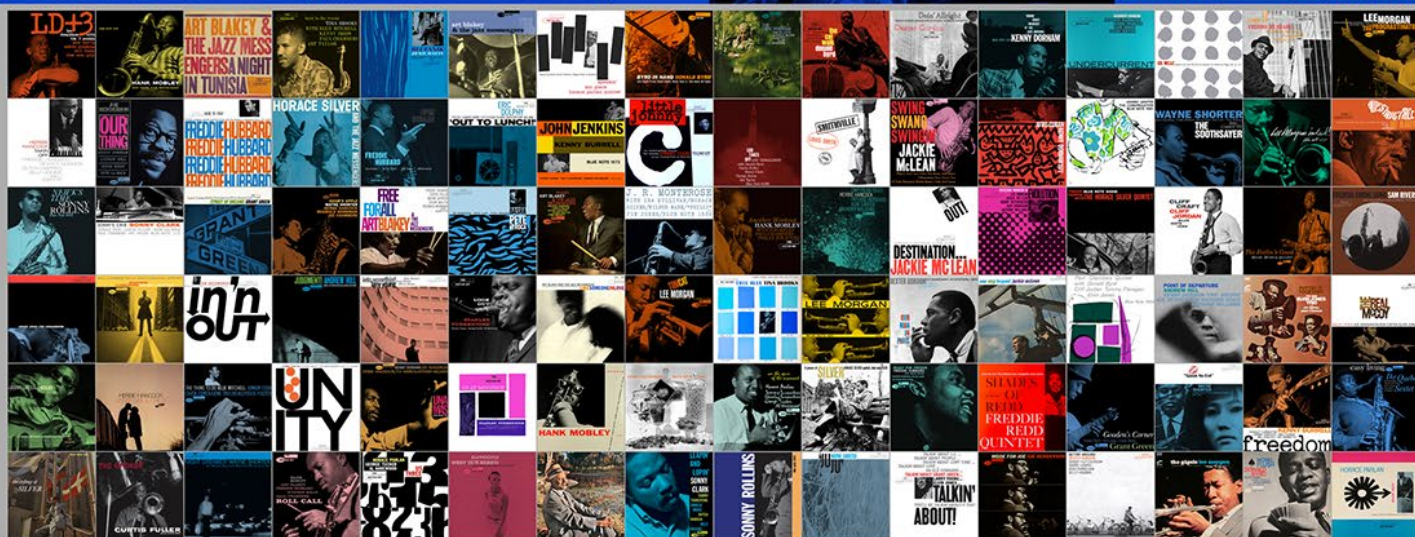
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MUSIC

Bassist Mark Helias, linchpin of dozens of downtown bands going back to the late 1970s, may not get enough credit for his all-around musicality: his clear projecting tone even way down on the E string; his dead-on accurate pitch and swingy timing all over the neck; his way of falling into an independent melodic line without compromising the bass' propulsive and harmonic functions. His bowing is aces as well.

The tunes are all credited to Caine—sweet balladry with greater or lesser neo-classical echoes (“He Said She,” “Bleeding Heart”), a free trialogue where the pianist slips in bluesy gestures (“Woke Up This Morning”). The aptly titled “Downward Spiral” describes the central motif Caine chews over

like a schnauzer with a steak. These players move back and forth between open time and hard swing in quick levitating transitions. “Sticks and Stones” starts with a Brubeck-simple seven-beat head (i.e., it’s easy to count) and a fetching keyboard hook to which Caine keeps returning, as all three players walk that line between freedom and interdependence. *Calibrated Thickness* comes across as one long balancing act.

Caine will slam out clusters too, but as a progressive, he’s a little old school. He claims a pre-Bad Plus trio sensibility: No rock tunes, no big candelabra melodies played in majestic octaves. He likes another kind of thunder. Vide, a few echoes (as on “Manahatta”) of a once-ubiq-

uitous influence now fading, that of fellow Philadelphian McCoy Tyner, with his billowing clouds of open chords. Caine remains a real two-handed pianist—he can keep the conversation going with separate lines for each. He has a firm, clear attack. Even on a ballad, you hear the hammers strike.

For variety, three tracks add new cornet star Kirk Knuffke. (Helias performs in his trio, too.) Knuffke plays a little less rambunctiously than he does elsewhere, with that lithe leaping, clear tone and non-extreme volume Caine likes from trumpet-ers. Those brass drop-ins are one more way to make a trio record that’s anything but ordinary.

—Kevin Whitehead



BLUE NOTE The Definitive 45 rpm Reissue Series
You listen, you look, you're there...

Music Matters, Ltd.

FEATURE

KEF Muo Wireless Speaker

Music Wherever You Want It

By Rob Johnson



FEATURE

KEF has been delivering great speakers for decades and we've sampled quite a few: from the tiny LS50 all the way up to the original, groundbreaking Muon at the KEF factory in the UK. The same brain trust that developed their patented, award winning Uni-Q drivers for the Muon and Blade have brought that technology down to the LS-50 and now the Muo. This tiny, battery-powered Bluetooth speaker rounds out their lineup, putting a lot of sound into the palm of its owner's hand. If you've read a mainstream hifi magazine in the last five years or so, you may have seen its sexy, curvy, aluminium shape which won both sound and design awards the world over.



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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



FEATURE

Externally, Muo combines a modern aesthetic into a durable frame, designed by Ross Lovegrove, the fellow behind the original Muon. While the Muo doesn't share the curvy shape, the front of the cabinet is drilled to mimic the shape of the Muon. Fashion conscious listeners will appreciate the Muo's color options: Horizon Gold, Storm Grey, Neptune Blue, Sunset Orange, Light Silver, and Brilliant Rose. Weighing in at 1.8 pounds (.8 Kg) within a wedge shape measuring only 3.1 x 8.3 x 2.3 inches (80 x 210 x 60mm), the Muo feels bulkier than it is, with the internal battery a heavy contributor to its heft. It takes about 3 hours to charge fully, then offering 12 hours of playback time – a pretty great deal.

With four tiny rubber feet on the bottom, the Muo is designed for horizontal operation. Sitting on a desk or table, the Muo's feet help angle the drivers upward toward the listener's ears. However, Muo can also stand vertically should an owner want to put it on a shelf with the driver pointed directly toward a listening seat.

On the exterior, Muo features minimalistic controls. Volume buttons, a power toggle, and a Bluetooth connection button are complemented by a USB charging port and a 3.5mm line input. That's it. Owners of phones with Nearfield Communication (NFC) capability will also appreciate the built-in ease of connection. *(continued)*



FEATURE

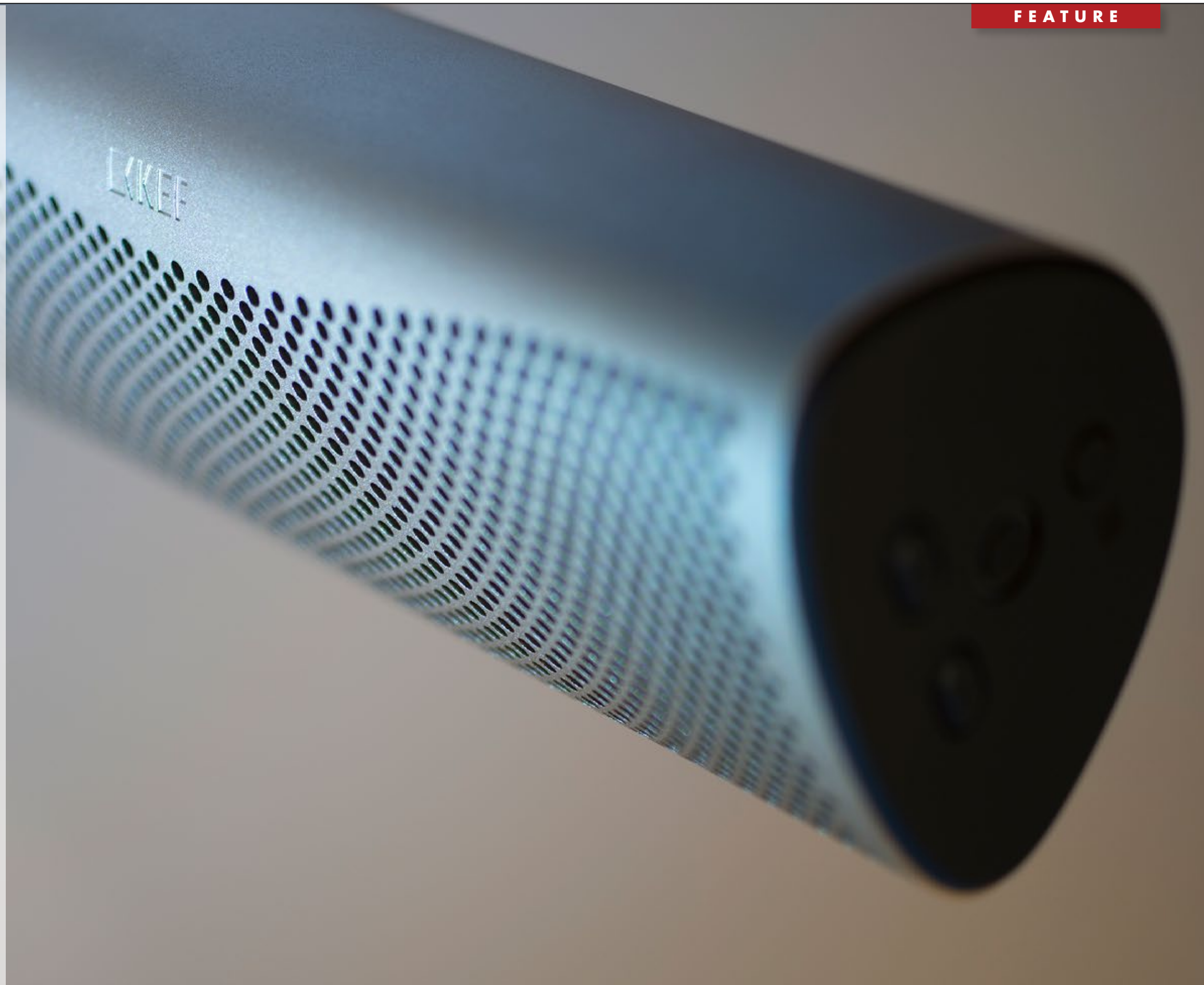
KEF offers a Muo app for both iPhone and Android devices. The app offers a helpful step-by-step guide for Muo setup, minimizing the need for a setup manual. While the app does work with the Muo for music playback, the iPhone's default music app will deliver sound just fine on its own.

The Muo is a mono speaker; however, this small speaker is quite capable of room-filling sound at substantial volume without distorting. With such a diminutive size, separation of music into left and right channels isn't very beneficial sonically. Instead, KEF builds into each Muo the ability to recognize a second Muo speaker and operate as a stereo pair. In this configuration, one speaker projects the left channel, and the other handles the right. Or, you can operate them in "Party Mode," sending the same mono signal to each speaker. In this setup, Muos can play the same music in different rooms, making the musical experience seamless for guests, as long as both speakers remain in Bluetooth transmission range.

While Muo's Bluetooth AptX connectivity makes it very convenient to pair one or two Muos with a mobile device and start streaming music, using the 3.5mm line-in jack can deliver a higher quality audio signal if the source content facilitates it.

For a device its size, the Muo delivers good sound indeed. An owner cannot expect the frequency extension that larger speakers are capable of delivering. Highs are plenty evident and detailed, but physics don't accommodate low bass notes with wavelengths potentially wider than the speaker. Muo's dual, full range 50mm "Uni-Q" drivers and Auxiliary Bass Radiator do their best to keep up. *(continued)*

FEATURE



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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FEATURE

The lineage to the much larger KEF models sharing this technology is still very apparent, even at this level. Mids are well rendered, clean, and present, and will do justice to whatever kind of music you enjoy most. Do keep in mind, though, that the Muo is made for convenience and portability. It’s not intended to be an audiophile’s dream speaker. For that kind of performance, KEF offers many other speaker options designed with sonic prowess as the absolute top priority.

At \$350, Muo is among the more expensive battery powered mini-speakers out there, yet it offers build and sound quality, along with decades of heritage to back it up. Whether your travels take you halfway around the world, or just down the hall to the den, the Muo may become your new favorite travel partner. ●

KEF Muo Wireless Speaker
MSRP: \$350
<http://us.kef.com/muo>





The G-Lab Block Amplifier

\$5,900

<http://wellroundedsound.com/products/g-lab-block-integrated-tube-amplifier>

This has to be one of the most intriguing integrated amplifiers we've ever seen. Anywhere. Utilizing a solitary EL-34 output tube in single ended triode mode, mustering 5.5 watts per channel this is an amplifier for someone with highly efficient speakers. Zu, Klipsch or Avante Guard owners looking for a mega conversation piece look no further.

The onboard MM phono stage is excellent, so pair this one with your favorite turntable, cool speakers and start an art gallery. Though not for everyone because of the low power, it is audibly and visually stunning. SET enthusiasts march to a different drum anyway, and this one is certainly unique.

PREVIEW

The Pear Audio Kid Howard Turntable

\$4,995 with Cornet 2 Tonearm

www.audioskies.com (NA Importer)
<http://pearaudio-analogue.com> (factory)

Brought to you by the same guys who bring the awesome GamuT speakers to North America, the Kid Howard has a lot of pedigree behind it. Each one of these tables is completely hand built by Peter Mezek, a major analog veteran, utilizing designs from the late Tom Fletcher, of Nottingham and Well Tempered fame.

The end result is a gorgeous, somewhat retro looking table that is musical beyond belief. Don't let the understated looks fool you. This is a table you just might want to make your last.



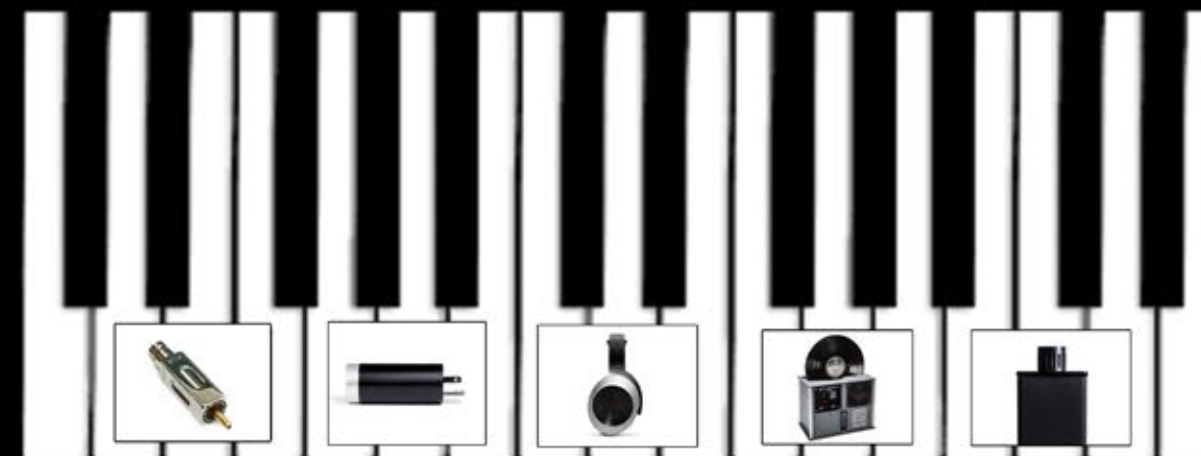
PREVIEW

WHATEVER YOU ARE INTO...



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Cables Powerlines Headphones Analog Acoustics

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Tellurium Q Silver Diamond Interconnects

\$2,900/1m pair

www.telluriumq.com/silver-diamond-speaker-cable

We went bonkers over the Tellurium Q Silver Diamond speaker cables a few issues ago, and TQ master, Geoff Merrigan sent us the interconnects to round out the system. Again, the change was as big as it was when we installed the speaker cables. Even with the Focal Sopra no.3's which are already highly revealing speakers, the Silver Diamonds did not push them over the cliff, making these speakers too much of a good thing. Instead, everything just got clearer. A *lot* clearer, with no sacrifices anywhere else.



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Paradigm

Soulines Kubrick HDX Turntable

\$4,000 without arm

www.adkav.com (US Importer)

www.soulines.com (factory)

Brought to the US by Jason Tavares at Adirondack Audio, these new turntables from Serbia are built with a level of detail usually reserved for more expensive decks. This refined, belt drive table can utilize Rega, SME and Jelco arms with ease, allowing a wide range of compatible tonearms. Our test table came pre fitted with a Rega arm board, RB1000 arm and the new Apheta 2 MC cartridge, making for a killer combination. Watch for more of the Soulines turntable family to be reviewed in our pages in the months to come!





VPI Prime Turntable

\$3,999 with 10" 3D printed tonearm

www.vpiindustries.com

Second generation turntable wizard, Mat Weisfeld knocks it out of the park with the Prime. This massive table comes bundled with a ten inch version of VPI's now famous tonearm, produced by 3D printing.

New and legacy VPI technology, combined with their experienced group of craftspeople and a contemporary look makes for a table that offers a lot for the MSRP. And like other VPI tables, there are a plethora of upgrades and accessories, so you can custom tailor your exactly the way you want it.



LS5/9

LS5/8

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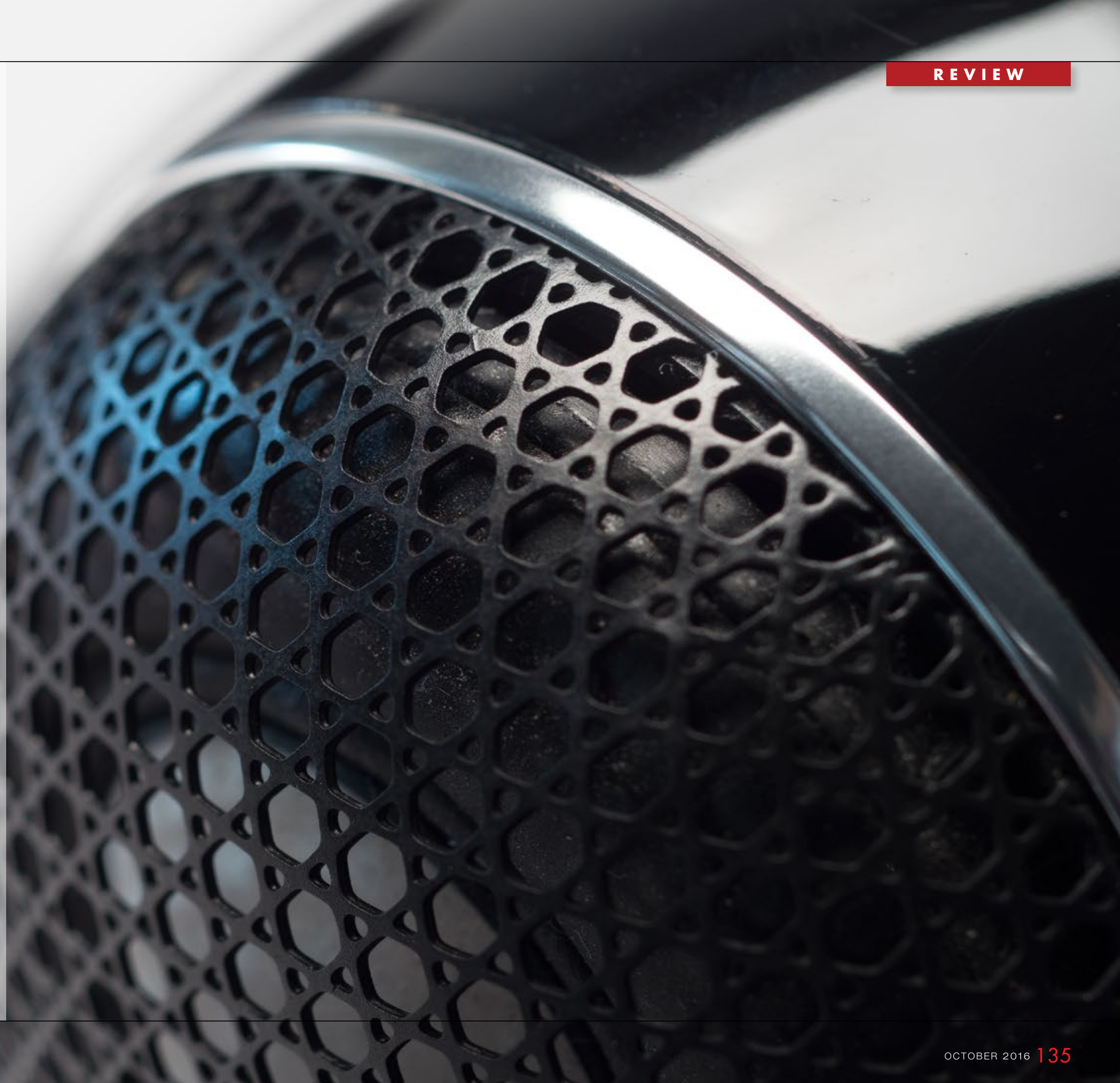
B&W 803D3

Billion Dollar Babies

By Jeff Dorgay

Fans of Bowers and Wilkins speakers will immediately notice two things that are *really* different about the new D3 speakers; the trademark Kevlar coned midrange driver is gone, replaced with their latest Continuum cone, made from an all new material that is lighter and less colored, resulting in a more immediate sound and a more seamless blend with the woofers and diamond tweeter. Winding up the massive Pass Labs Xs 300 monoblocks with Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," it's instantly clear these are special speakers. In look, feel and sound.

Used by arguably the world's most notable recording studio, London's Abbey Road, as monitors, B&W's 800 series has established a major reputation for accuracy. Straight out of the crates, the diamond tweeter is slightly edgy and harsh, but most of this goes away after the first 50 hours and the rest in another 50–100. Crank 'em up and let 'em play while you're at work and within a week, they will be awesome.





Pretties for you

We've managed to find a pair of 803 Matrix series 2s, circa 1996, to chronicle B&W's progress, and while the original model's core DNA (wide frequency response, great bass extension, natural midrange and good efficiency) is right there 30 years later, every aspect of the speaker has been improved. Listening to "Mantra" from Dave Grohl's *Sound City – Real to Reel*, brings this to bear immediately. Grohl's drumming is way out in front of the soundstage: every hit comes through with authority as bass and synthesizer waft in. Powered by the mighty Pass monoblocks, these substantial speakers disappear in the room like a pair of tiny BBC monitors, never drawing attention to themselves. Until you walk up close to inspect the gorgeous gloss black finish. Calling it piano black would be an insult to the craftsmen at Bowers & Wilkins – I've never seen a piano finished this exquisitely.

Giving the volume control a massive clockwise twist reveals what else has changed since the early 803s: the new 803D3s are capable of major dynamic swings, yet they play beautifully when quiet. Staying with Trent Reznor and sampling a full range of the Nine Inch Nails catalog, these speakers can seriously rock out. If you have enough power on tap, they will play as loud as you can imagine. Those not having a spare \$80k–\$100k lying

about, fear not. The 803D3s turned in a highly respectable performance with the Rotel RB-1590 we reviewed last issue will get the job done.

At \$17,000 per pair, the B&W 803D3s are one of the best values in high-end audio for a number of reasons. The fit and finish of these speakers alone puts a \$200,000 pair of Wilson speakers to shame. For that matter, they put the finish on a \$200,000 Porsche Twin Turbo S to shame.

From the Inside

While the difference between the original 803s and the current 803D3 is incredible, the changes between the current model and the D2 is equally stunning. On a recent factory tour of the Bowers & Wilkins facility in Worthing, England, the team that shows us around makes it a point to tell us more than once that the new 803D3 has "868 improvements over the prior model." (You can see the photos from that visit [here](#)...) However as much as they've done to improve the series 3 over the series 2, one of the things that might be most appreciated by all of us, review and end user alike, is the addition of a high density foam ramp to the packaging.

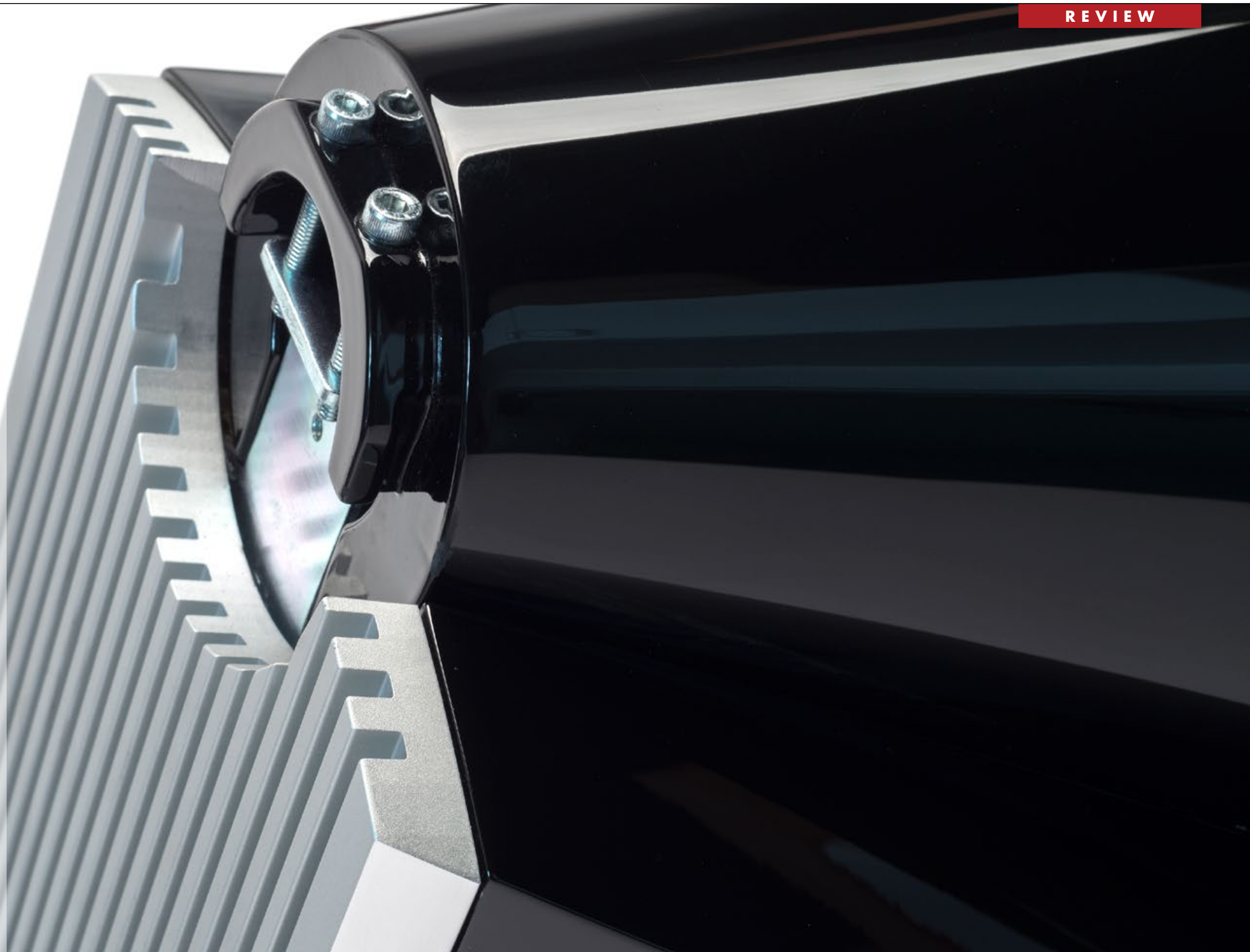
B&W doesn't leave a single stone unturned, even down to this minute detail that makes getting these 120-pound speakers out of their packing crates incredibly easy. *(continued)*



A small ramp is included, to make rolling them on wheels built into the base into your approximate listening position and get to business. The wheels cut the time it takes to jockey the 803D3s into place dramatically and easy to fuss a bit till you have it just right. Then screw down the spikes from the plinth, elevating the speakers off of the wheels. Enclosed in the accessories, along with a wrench to do so, is a set of jumpers in case you don't have speaker cables with bi-wired ends. Grilles are also included to cover the woofers. But why would you, unless you had prying dogs or toddlers.

However, the biggest visual change to the 803D3 is the shape of the cabinet from the curved enclosure with a flat front panel for the drivers, to the curved front panel with the crossover now on a flat rear panel. Behind that flat panel that goes the entire height of the speakers lurks a crossover network that is now easily removed and is chock full of the world's best parts. Mundorf caps, etc., and drivers that are much more field replaceable as well.

Staring into the blackness that is the 803D3, and again reminiscing on the paint shop version of the factory tour, I remember my guides telling me that "they talk to the guys at Rolls Royce on a regular basis," trading tips and tricks. Yeah. These speakers are finished more beautifully than any car I've ever seen at any price. I'm guessing the crew at Rolls has learned more from B&W than vice versa. As someone who has hand sanded and hand rubbed more lacquer than probably anyone in the hifi reviewing game, the finish on the 803D3s is as good as it gets. And though it costs nearly ten times as much to produce the gloss black finish over the standard wood, B&W does not charge extra for gloss black. Impressive. I keep hearing Nigel Tufnel in the background saying, "How much more black could this be? Answer: none." *(continued)*



REVIEW

Now if I could only convince them to produce these in the Ferrari red I see in a test sample 805D while I walk through the shop. “Yes, we produced a pair of Nautilus for a customer in this color and we had a little bit of paint left; it seemed a shame to let it go to waste,” our host proudly proclaims as he illuminates another critical part of their manufacturing process – baseline reference samples that *must* be adhered to. They have a habit of making them a different color so that the reference sample won’t accidentally get boxed as part of a working pair. Well played.

The level of quality on the outside is matched, if not exceeded, on the inside. The cabinet consists of 22 layers of wood pressed into the circular shape. Watching this raw shape that eventually becomes the enclosure being pressed with *tons* of pressure is an impressive site indeed. B&W designs and builds all of their drivers, so nothing here is off the shelf. Everything is checked for quality and adherence to a reference standard every step of the assembly process. As we watch the cabinet go down the assembly floor, eventually becoming a finished pair of 803D3s, we are told that from start to finish, a pair takes nearly three weeks – blurring the line between bespoke and off the rack – offering the attention to detail of the former, with the cost savings of the latter.

School’s out

After a long, interesting and informative tour, auditioning the top of the range 800D3 in the B&W listening room via a pair of floorstanding Levinson monoblocks reveals an upfront sound that seems more in your face than the prior 802D2s that were my reference for about four years. As the B&W engineers go through a handful of their favorite tracks, at relatively high volume, it’s clear that these new speakers are very dynamic and revealing. But the Levinson’s aren’t doing it for me. Too much of a good thing. *(continued)*



Weekend Pro-Ject.



MaiA My audiophile integrated Amplifier



MaiA is an all-in-one integrated amplifier, combining an XMOS-based true asynchronous USB DAC, a Pro-Ject quality phono stage, high performance headphone amp, aptX Bluetooth streaming, and remote control (via app or included IR remote). Listen to music from your phone, from your computer, from a turntable or a CD player, via speakers or headphones. With nine inputs, MaiA does it all.

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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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Upon return to my own listening room, with a bevy of power amplifiers at beck and call, I'm reminded why many rely on B&W speakers for monitoring duties. They are very revealing of anything downstream and that's just the way the B&W engineers like it. After trying about seven different amplifier/cable combinations, it was incredibly easy to hear the sonic characteristics of everything I plugged into them.

Guilty of liking a tonal balance that is ever so slightly on the romantic side, this effect is easily accomplished by moving back to the Pass Xs300 monoblocks and the Conrad-Johnson LP125sa+ amplifiers, both a touch on the warm side of the sonic spectrum. The chameleon 803D3s instantly comply, presenting a warmer balance without losing the dynamics and clarity enjoyed in the factory listening room. Though a different voice again, the 20 watt per channel Nagra 300i vacuum tube power amplifier turned in an incredible performance with these speakers, offering up the biggest soundstage of all, and played incredibly loud for a 20 watt tube amplifier, so this is indeed a versatile pair of speakers.

Yoko Ono's "Yes, I'm a Witch," a fairly compressed, forward and densely packed track, proves perfect to illuminate the differences between amplifiers and cable. Both tube and solid-state amplifiers manage to unravel this track, yet through the C-J, Ono's voice takes on more life and greater separation from Steve Steven's

blistering guitar backing her. The solid-state amplifiers provide a bit more control in the lower register, at the same time keeping the soundstage a bit more flattened. Paul Weller's latest release, *Saturn's Pattern*, is equally condensed, yet the 803D3s open it right up. Where you might view this recording as overly compressed on lesser speakers, the 803D3s render it beautifully.

That's what makes these speakers so intriguing; they accommodate your mood, whatever it might be. In that sense, the engineers at B&W have done a cracking job. Where some speakers can be somewhat forward, or quite the opposite, laid back, the 803D3s are right in the middle, maybe a few molecules on the forward/revealing side of neutral, depending on how you call it.

In addition to their exquisite tonality and dynamic contrast, the 803D3s render size correctly. Nothing sounds overblown, and the large soundstage painted, if you have a bit of room (they were a fantastic match in my 15 x 26 foot room on the short wall) and some power on tap, acoustic instruments, choral ensembles and string quartets sound as they would spatially if you had a few performers in your listening room. Yet big, overblown studio recordings sound equally bombastic. Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans* sounds as pretentious as it ever has. And The Beatles' catalog was mega fun too. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

Raise Your Fist and Yell

We can talk tech forever, and no matter how great the specs and measurements are, if you can't fall in love with a \$17,000 pair of speakers, it's game over. These are speakers you can keep for a long, long time – easily upgrading your system around them as you go. Thanks to their high resolution, you'll feel like you got an entirely new system every step of the way.

Cutting to the chase, the B&W 803D3s are a speaker that a smaller volume company would have to charge \$40k–\$60k to produce, and without B&W's engineering and production expertise might not measure up. I'm happy to award them one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016, and I'm sure 30 years from now they will be playing as well as the 803s I've got from 1996 are, if not better. With a wide range of B&W dealers around the world, investigating for yourself should be easy. I hope you enjoy the experience as much as I have. ●

B&W 803D3 Loudspeaker
\$17,000/pair

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Naim's Grand Illusion The Mu-so Qb

By Jeff Dorgay

Firing up Kings of Leon's "Walls," it's tough to believe that so much sound is coming out of this diminutive cube, barely bigger than a large stack of waffles. Unlike many of the compact music systems we've tried, Naim's Mu-so Qb actually throws a large, defined and deep soundstage. And it plays loud. Really loud.

We loved Naim's original Mu-so when it was introduced, offering form, function and Naim build quality in a do-it-all enclosure. It was reasonably priced for the level of performance offered, but because of the fairly large size, couldn't fit everywhere. Somehow, Naim's clever staff of engineers have managed to squeeze nearly all of the performance of the big Mu-so into the diminutive 8-inch (8.3 x 8.3 x 8.6 inches to be exact) cube. They've also squeezed the price down to \$999 – impressive.



Before listening could begin in earnest, the photos needed to be taken and during this time the argument ensued as to where the ultimate resting place of the Qb would be. It only took a few minutes of initial listening to decide this would be a keeper, so on one level, this review is stilted a bit towards that of a giddy fan. Cool as the original Mu-so is, we couldn't find a place for it at chez Dorgay. So back to our friends in Salisbury it went. But this little cube is too cute to ignore – and it packs a wallop.

Luxury throughout

When was the last time you had a major experience just turning a component on? You might think I'm crazy, but I highly suggest turning on your Qb in the dark the first time you power it up. Don't believe me? Click [here](#) for the experience. Wasn't that cool? Naim's app makes it easy to control from your smart phone, but you'll want to give that big, weighted volume control a spin. You'll want to get up, walk across the room and interact with the Qb, it's that cool.



Peel off the gorgeous, sculpted, three-panel grille (available in black, red, blue and the awesome orange you see here) and you see serious hardware inside and out. The front panel features a pair of soft dome tweeters and a pair of midrange drivers, both angled to achieve maximum stereo separation – each driven by its own 50-watt amplifier. The front-firing bass driver is given both a 100-watt amplifier and a pair of passive radiators on the

side panels – that's 300 watts total. This is where the low frequency grunt comes from.

The hardware is precisely screwed down to the aluminum frame with the same level of quality found in Naim's flagship components. The 32-bit DSP engine lurking inside is derived from what the company has learned supplying Bentley with their sound system, again underlining the quality that oozes from the tiny cube.





Any way you want it

All of this makes for great nerd fodder, which you won't care about the minute you play some music on the damn thing. And it won't take you long. Earlier Naim server products took a while to wade through the setup procedure, but the Mu-so is quick and easy. Download the app for whatever smart device you own and a quick menu walks you through things. With the iPhone, once you enter the color of the blinking indicator and your network password, it's rocking. The only setting you need to pay attention to *carefully* is the EQ setting – close to wall or out in room. Get this wrong and your Qb will either sound thin or boomy. Should your over-enthusiasm get the best of you, and it sounds naff, go back and double-check your work. Bluetooth is equally easy to pair; you're about 30 seconds away from using that mode to connect.

The Qb offers crazy connectivity. WiFi, Bluetooth/aptX, TIDAL, and Spotify Connect are just the beginning. A standard Ethernet port is also provided, and if you have a large collection of music on a NAS drive (especially if some of it is in high resolution), it's a good idea to cable the Qb to your network, as it does offer 24bit/192kHz capabilities.

If all that wireless connectivity weren't enough, an 1/8" analog jack is right there, begging for you to plug a turntable in. I dare you. Unable to resist the challenge, we spun some LPs via the new Rega Planar 3 we just reviewed, coupled via the Lehmann Black Cube and a WireWorld interconnect. Granted, adding a turntable and a phonostage to the mix goes somewhat

against the grain of the compact vibe the Qb presents, but if this is your main music system, it works brilliantly. I can't imagine someone who is space challenged coming up with a better choice than this to take advantage of their vinyl collection and their favorite digital tracks. Placed beneath a flat screen TV, it also makes for way better sound than those dreadful standard issue TV speakers too, making a Qb even easier to justify.

Rocking the casbah

Dialing up Lindsey Stirling's latest, *Brave Enough*, and turning the Qb up to 11 rattles my bathroom walls. Yeah, that's where it ended up so you-know-who could jam out during her morning ritual. But turnabout is fair play and just as that certain someone thought they were in for a peaceful morning bath, taking over the TIDAL app and swapping the current musical program for the alarm clocks in *Dark Side of the Moon* proved interesting to say the least. Should you purchase a Qb and wish to keep shenanigans to a minimum, log in with *your own* TIDAL account.

While the Qb nearly blew the windows out of our bathroom, it proves equally capable in a larger room. Sitting on top of a five-figure pile of mega gear, between the Sopra no.1 speakers that make up The Audiophile Apartment's reference system, the Qb throws a huge soundstage in all directions. Jean-Michel Jarre's *Equinoxe* fills the room with all the trippiness you expect from this disc. The extra LF power and definition gives it the extra oomph to make it feel like you are listening to a much bigger system.

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REVIEW



Regardless of program material and volume level, this tiny cube floored everyone who visited. It was beyond amusing to have the Qb sitting on top of my DAC and have a guest say, “what’s that little orange box for?” only to answer “that’s what you’re listening to.” Keep in mind the Bose Wave Radio II has an MSRP of \$100 *more* than the Naim Mu-so Qb, and it’s all plastic. It’s heresy to think that you might buy the former. If you have, unfriend me on Facebook right now, I don’t want to know you anymore.

It’s love at first and subsequent listens

With high-end audio being so daunting to so many, I can’t think of a better way to buy a great music system than the Naim Mu-so Qb. The price is right, the performance is off-the-chart good and you can connect it to just about anything. Best of all, you can move it around the house or office as you need it.

Should you be part of the audiophile world and need a second system, or if you are a

current Naim owner wondering if the Qb passes muster, the answer is “without question.” Best of all, it will sync up with your existing Naim Net system if you have one, so you can hear music everywhere in perfect sync.

Compact audio is enjoying some major success these days, with incredible offerings from a number of manufacturers, but the Naim Mu-so Qb is something special. I’ll let the cat out of the bag an issue early – you’ll be seeing this one in issue 80 when we announce our Product of the Year awards. Count on it. Should you wander to your Naim dealer for a demo, I hope you enjoy this one as much as I do. ●

The Naim Mu-so Qb
MSRP: \$999

www.naimaudio.com (factory)
www.audiopluservices.com
(North American Distributor)

SVS Ultra Bookshelf Speakers

Princes of Performance

By Rob Johnson

SVS may be a new name to some, and more familiar to others by their full line of subwoofers; this U.S.-based company has also been producing a full line of speakers for many years. Their ongoing goal is simple: delivering great speakers for a reasonable price. By limiting the number of product lines they offer, selling through global dealers as well as their own website, and offering stellar customer service, SVS has found a recipe for success.

SVS offers two lines of speakers, the Prime and the Ultra. Each line offers a wide range of speakers for two-channel stereo or multichannel home theater applications, offering floor-standers, satellites, center channels and, of course, subwoofers. The entry-level prime series ranges from the tiny, two-way Prime Satellite at \$135 each to the 3 ½ way floorstanding Prime Tower at \$500 each. Multichannel and home theater enthusiasts needing multiple speakers can take advantage of their package pricing for even greater savings.



SVS's top line Ultra speakers up the ante with higher quality drivers, crossover components and level of finish with the Ultra Bookshelf reviewed here for \$499.99 each, the Ultra Tower at \$999.99 each. Again, multichannel users can add the Ultra Center (\$699.99 each) and the Ultra Surround (\$599.99 each) to their shopping carts to round out their systems.

The Ultra Bookshelf is a two-way design, featuring a 6 1/2-inch glass fiber cone woofer and a one-inch aluminum dome tweeter. This rear-ported speaker has a claimed frequency response of 45Hz-32kHz (+/- 3dB). Beveling the front panel eliminates box boredom, and the cabinets come in a sleek gloss black, gloss white or black ash finish. As with anything shiny, gentle dusting with a microfiber cloth keeps them fingerprint-free, and SVS suggests applying any high-end car polish compatible with clear coat finish. Our publisher spiffed these up with a quick coat of the same Zymol wax he uses on his Porsche before sending them my way; they look fantastic and free of orange peel.

Just under 20 pounds each, the 15" x 8.5" x 10.9" Ultras can be set up with one person handily. As with any bookshelf/monitor speakers, the more massive the stand, the more bass reinforcement you can expect. SVS suggests at least 20 watts per channel, yet with an 87dB sensitivity rating, a little more power will probably serve you better. Two sets of gold plated binding posts (with jumpers included) allow for easy single- or bi-wiring.

Wide vertical dispersion and a resulting large sweet spot makes the Ultra Bookshelves easy to set up and



place within your listening room, delivering great results even when you can't completely optimize placement. Of course, each listening space has different acoustical properties, so it is worth investing the time and experimentation to find a location that optimizes the sound of the speakers, taking into account the room's interaction with them. SVS's placement guide is well written and will get you in the ballpark in no time.

After setting the Ultras atop stands putting tweeters at ear level, optimal speaker placement in my listening space gave the Ultras a temporary home about two feet from the rear and side walls, and about ten feet apart. That rear firing port needs a little room to exhale and integrate with the sound coming from the front of the speaker, so when you get the speakers too close to the wall, you will immediately notice a mid bass bump, possibly accompanied by some port huffing and puffing. Experimenting with toe-in, the Ultras are the most coherent facing directly forward. When incrementally pivoted inward toward the listener's head, detail increases, but with that targeting comes some stridency. This may prove too much for some listeners, again dependent on room, system and cable choices.

The Ultra bookshelf speakers offer a lot of bang for the buck. First, they do a very good job of left-to-right soundstaging. Chesky Records *Audiophile Test Disc Volume 3* puts the Ultras to the test, with sonic elements extending well beyond the outer edges of the speakers and projecting well into the room. (continued)

When listening to Adele's cover of "Lovesong," her voice is locked front and center, with acoustic guitars flanking her with convincing images to the left and right, and the sound never becoming congested.

Bass provided by the Ultras provide is of high quality and not "one note" by any means. As the specs hint, lower notes roll off around 50Hz, so music lovers on a heavy diet of music with a lot of LF energy will be well served taking advantage of the multiple speaker discount and adding an SVS sub to the package. We will be reviewing a couple models soon, so look for an addendum on this review down the road. Or if space permits, their floorstander might do equally well.

High frequencies are in keeping with the price tag, but this is where the big bucks speakers justify their cost: more refinement. In the context of other speakers similarly priced that we've reviewed, the Ultras are definitely in the top third. However, these budget speakers are resolving enough to reveal the difference between components, and this is where careful attention to speaker position and associated components will make for the optimum setup.

SVS takes customer service seriously. *Really* seriously. Through what SVS calls the "Customer Bill of Rights," they enumerate several ways they stand behind their customers' speaker investment. With a 45-day home trial period, you have nothing to lose and they cover return shipping should you not be satisfied with your purchase. They also offer a 60-day price match. In the event product prices drop, SVS will refund the difference. If the product becomes defective in the first 90 days, SVS will replace it with a new product. A final touch, should SVS make technical improvements to a model, they offer a one-year window for free update. And should you decide to move up the range in that year, full purchase price is applied to your new model. All impressive and confidence inspiring.



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Additional Listening

— Jeff Dorgay

Rob's comments on the SVS Ultras are spot-on. These are a great pair of \$1,000 speakers and they look like speakers costing considerably more. Trying them with a wide range of budget amplification, I suggest staying away from anything overly grainy or strident. That aluminum tweeter is slightly forward in its tonal character to begin with, so pairing them with the wrong amplifier or a relatively reflective room might leave you with a frowny face. Using them in a smaller listening room that is somewhat over-damped proved awesome. My home listening room is only 11' x 13' and makes a perfect semi-near field setup, powered by a vintage Conrad-Johnson PV-10 preamplifier and MV-50 power amplifier. Where the Ultras do not offer a ton of front-to-back soundstage dimension in my large room, they really come alive near field, so again, Rob's advice to consider an SVS sub is sound. Though a little big, these speakers also make for a killer pair of monitors for desktop audio. Powered by the new Simaudio Ace integrated amplifier, listening to music and editing video at my desk via the Ultras is very enjoyable.

Sound is a very personal thing, but the SVS Ultras give you a lot to love for \$1,000 a pair. Thanks to their money-back guarantee and free shipping, they make this as painless as possible, so I'd be surprised if they get many returns. For a music lover on a budget, these are a great anchor for your system.

SVS Ultra Bookshelf Speaker
\$499.99 ea

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PERIPHERALS

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

Digital Sources Mac Mini, Roon Music Service, dCS Debussy

Power Amplifier Burmester 911 mk3

Preamplifier Coffman Labs G1-B

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

Scaling the Top of the MartinLogan Mountain

The Mighty Neolith

By Jeff Dorgay

The good news is that after years of refinement, MartinLogan has nailed the integration of ESL panel and dynamic woofer to a level they have never done. I've owned nearly every version of ML speaker over the last 25 years and have loved them all. But these take the concept to perfection. Three minutes into the classic Robert Plant track "Sixes and Sevens," there's a tiny bell that sounds like a manual typewriter return and it hangs in space, crystal clear in a way that this well-worn classic rock track has never done. Even a fairly dense recording, like TV on the Radio's *Dear Science* is unlocked, revealing a plethora of new information. That's what you spend the big money on a pair of speakers for – and these are big money. Just a few nickels shy of \$80k.



Turning the volume control on the Pass Xs Pre further clockwise, closing my eyes and staying in that vein, a 45 rpm maxi single of AC/DC's "For Those About to Rock" pegs the meters on the Xs300 power amplifiers and I'm transported back to the front row of Milwaukee's Auditorium. The cannons blast, without the usual clipping and compression that plagues most systems I've heard, and it's 1981 again.

Other speakers I've been listening to sound small in comparison. You wouldn't think anything this big could possibly disappear in the room, yet these monstrous speakers completely vanish. Even with the lights on, they just fade out of view. The Neoliths don't just deliver holographic imaging, they turn your listening room *into* the holodeck. Where most other ESLs (some past ML models included) generate a luscious musical rendition, albeit with a small optimal listening spot, you can stretch out with the Neolith. Not only do they produce a couch-wide listening sweet spot, they sound pretty damn good when you're just sitting down on the floor or off somewhere to the side. This doesn't happen with any other ESL, period.

You might think an \$80 thousand pair of speakers would do everything, and on many levels the Neoliths do. But just like the world's most exotic cars, the mega speakers all have different personalities, some with greater strengths than others. Having spent a few years with the CLX as a reference speaker and reveling in its glory, it still did not represent mega speaker status to me. When set up *to perfection* it offered a glimpse into music that very few speakers at any price could match. But the CLX was not a full range speaker and required a great, actually a pair of great, subwoofers to really reveal all.

The Neolith is a different story entirely, featuring full range frequency response that doesn't require augmentation with subwoofers, and stepping out from past ML hybrid designs, the Neolith is fully passive, not incorporating internal amplifiers. These are mega speakers in every sense.

Redefining what can be

The journey that began with the Summits 11 years ago culminates in the Neolith, and on so many levels exceeds what I thought a panel speaker capable of. If you haven't been reading *TONEAudio* for a long time, I must confess a love for panel (primarily ESL) speakers and have owned a plethora of MartinLogan, Magnepan, Quad, Acoustat and Apogee speakers. But none of these speakers have proved captivating in the way the Neolith renders music.

Every time I review a pair of MartinLogan speakers I have to go back to "Tea in the Sahara" by the Police, from their *Synchronicity* album, because this is where my journey with the brand began almost 30 years ago. This sparsely recorded yet dynamic track with a quickly paced bass line is tough to get right on *any* speaker, yet hearing this for the first time on the legendary CLS was a revelation.

To refresh my memory, I spent a day with *TONE* staffer Jerold O'Brien, who just picked

up a pair of CLS IIzs with brand new ESL panels, combined with a Krell KSA-50 amplifier and highly modded early Levinson preamplifier. Add a lovingly restored Oracle Delphi series II and a Dynavector 17D3 cartridge and I'm nearly sitting on the same couch at Listen Up! in Denver, Colorado, again. Not to mention it makes for a great way to revisit my first MartinLogan experience.

As MartinLogan moved to their current hybrid designs, making their speakers more user friendly, some models have performed better than others. From the Summit and Vantage models introduced about six years ago, their design staff has been on a roll, integrating the ESL panel with the woofer in great fashion, each model getting a little better. Honestly, the Summit is still a speaker I could live with happily ever after with a combination of transparency and integration that is tough to fault.

The Neolith supersedes everything; it's an ESL hybrid that is without limits – at least not ones I could find. No matter what the program material, they never felt pushed, compressed or at any kind of disadvantage.

While the Neolith can handle any kind of program material with ease, its strength is that big ESL panel – 35% larger than even their Statement E2. (continued)



REVIEW

If there has ever been a speaker that music truly *flows* from, it's the Neolith. Other mega speakers like the Focal Grande Utopia EM, the GamuT Zodiac or the Sonus faber Aida all are equally mighty, but in this area none of them can match the Neolith. Spinning the title track from Traffic's *The Low Spark of High Heel Boys*, the gentle fade-in as the track begins, just seems to enter the listening space from nowhere. Then, as it reaches full volume, it's present everywhere.

No crossovers in the signal path, from 400Hz on up, makes this happen. As great as the world's best speaker manufacturers have become at driver, cabinet and crossover design, the interaction of different materials, the varied transient attack of different drivers still does not make for the seamless approach that one large driver with no crossover network dividing things up can offer.

It's much like comparing the performance of the latest Ferrari to the Tesla P85D. Both cars are nearly equally fast on paper, but the driving experience is completely different. When you put the pedal down in the Tesla, 100mph comes up in nearly the same time, but the experience is completely effortless, without shifting gears. You might say it's like butter.

You don't realize how effortless it is until you go back to a traditional speaker, perusing the same music. On another level, it's much like the seamless-ness you hear when listening to a great SET amplifier, and if you're like me, you might ponder "how can I get about 200 watts per channel of this?" While you can't get a 200-watt per channel SET, you can get the MartinLogan Neolith.



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This brings up another important aspect of the Neolith's performance. It's the most tube friendly speaker MartinLogan has yet produced. Where other models have been less than sparkly on the high end with some tube amplifiers, the Neolith turns in an exciting performance with our PrimaLuna HP integrated amplifier (configured with KT150 tubes for nearly 100 watts per channel), Conrad Johnson CA125sa+, and the Audio Research GS150. They even turn in a respectful performance with the 20-watt per channel Nagra 300p. Wrestling a few other tube amplifiers from friends yields similar results – bad tube sound could not be found with these speakers.

Yip Yap

A cursory look at terrorist chatter on the internet reveals a fair number of people biased against the Neolith, claiming underwhelming demos, and as someone who tries to not fund the terrorists whenever possible, I must agree. I too have heard some very underwhelming Neolith demos, just as I have heard disappointing demos of a handful of other mega speakers. The Neoliths need to be set up properly, with truly great components behind them to deliver the maximum experience. And once you hear them in that context, I guarantee you will be blown away.

Revisiting time-worn tracks provides a wealth of new information. These speakers dig deep, really deep. Going back to albums used as demo tracks for decades is a sheer blast. Unveiling the jewels that Brian Eno left for us to discover in Devo's *Q: Are We Not Men* is an auditory Easter egg hunt. The additional electronic pops in "Shrivel Up" and the extra vocal and guitar overdubs in the title tracks are simply hallucinogenic.

But it can't all be sex, drugs, and rock & roll (or can it?). The separation of the violins in Arnold Bax's *String Quintet in G* proves



equally enticing. The violin is such a tough instrument to get right, yet the Neoliths sail through this album with perfect tone and timbre. Unlike the big Magnepons, which paint a supersized picture of ten-foot-tall violins, the Neoliths keep the size of the instruments as they should be. My 16 x 25 foot room creates an image that feels as if those four players are sitting about eight feet in front of my couch – it's that holodeck thing again.

As user-friendly as a 385 pound speaker can be

It's always fun to see how much better a manufacturer is at setting their speaker up than I am, and as you might imagine, I've gotten pretty good at setting up MartinLogan speakers. Due to the weight of the Neoliths and the willingness of ML's Peter Soderberg to bring an associate and offer some extra muscle, I let him do the dirty work.

Once out of the crate, the preinstalled casters make short work of getting the Neolith into initial position. The front firing 12" woofer works full range up to the 400Hz crossover point, but the rear firing 15" woofer (with 4-inch voice coil) acts as a subwoofer, operating from 60Hz down. Jumper adjustments to attenuate the bass output by -4 or -8 dB, along with a "distance control" to optimize floor and panel interaction, made this the quickest and most precise Martin Logan setup I've ever experienced. The supplied spikes can then be installed to get the perfect rake and tighten up the last bit of LF energy.

Without these adjustments, I may not have been able to achieve the stunning results I did in my 16 x 25 foot listening room and after hearing the Neolith in a few larger rooms, I'd suggest the more space you can throw at these speakers, the better. An even bigger, more cohesive musical experience awaits you if you can give your Neoliths a little more room to breathe. (continued)

REVIEW

I'd go as far as to say that if your room is any *smaller than mine*, go for one of the smaller models for best results.

A quick sweep of test tones reveals solid bass response all the way to 20Hz. Playing a suite of EDM and hip hop tracks confirms the measurements; high volume of the initial bass line in Genesis's "Back in N.Y.C." would push the Maxell man's chair out of the room. The Neolith will punch you in the chest, hard.

Some big speakers can only play big, while some small speakers can only play small. The MartinLogan Neolith does it all. A solo vocalist or instrument is rendered just right, with the tiniest of musical nuances never blown out of proportion. Yet when you need to rock, they will blow you away. Few speakers at any price can do this, putting the Neolith into the rarefied air of the world's finest.

Faint of heart

The MartinLogan website says the Neolith is "not for the faint of heart." At \$79,995/pair, they are not for the faint of wallet either. And at 385 pounds each, unboxed, you won't be able to unpack these beauties if you are faint of bicep. The world's finest electronics will take you to a new solar system of sound, yet the ease with which these speakers mate to nearly any amplifier make these our choice for this year's Speaker of the Year. Watch for more gushing in issue 80.

If you love the portrait of music that panel loudspeakers create, there is no better embodiment of the genre than the MartinLogan Neolith. ●



REVIEW

MartinLogan Neolith
MSRP: \$79,995/pair

MANUFACTURER
MartinLogan Ltd.

CONTACT
www.martinlogan.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog source
Brinkmann Bardo turntable
w/Koetsu Jade cartridge

Digital source dCS
Rossini DAC, Rossini Clock
and Paganini Transport

Preamplifier Pass XSPre

Phonostage Pass
XSPhono

Amplifier Pass XS300
monoblocks

Cable Cardas Clear

Sometimes Less Is More

The McIntosh C1100 Preamplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

U

biquitous as the silhouette of the V-Twin engine on a Harley Davidson motorcycle, McIntosh Labs' top products all feature a pair of blue output level meters, joined by a bright green, backlit glow of the controls adorning the thick glass-front panel.

Today that blue and green glow is modulated by LED lighting (instead of the incandescent bulbs of vintage Macs), meticulously adjusted by factory technicians so all of your Mac components glow with equal intensity and color temperature. Sitting down to listen to music in a dimly lit room of McIntosh gear always feels like sitting in a dark stadium, with only the glow of the Marshall amps and effects racks, waiting for the band to take the stage; it's a visual celebration of audio in action.

THE SOURCE

AUDIO VIDEO DESIGN GROUP

THE ART OF DESIGN



Like their outgoing C1000 two-box preamplifier, the C1100 splits control and amplification functions across two chassis, offering higher performance and lower noise as a result of giving the power supply a bit of space from the sensitive gain stages. The C1000 took things further, offering the option of being configured with a solid-state or vacuum tube active stage, along with having the ability to control both! It had a whopping \$27,000 price tag to match.

When was the last time you went to buy a new car and the new model offered more performance at a lower price? I thought so. Yet that's exactly what McIntosh has done with the C1100. Dropping the price dramatically, now \$13,000, the casework on the new model is somewhat more straightforward, but there is no mistaking it for anything but a Mac—

though less visually embellished than the model it replaces. A chat with my favorite group of McIntosh enthusiasts finds them split right down the middle: half of them are put off by the simpler casework, feeling it doesn't differentiate the flagship enough from the rest of the herd, and the other half loves the fact that the new C1100 is that much more approachable.

Quick comparisons: new vs. new

Fortunately, the C52 preamplifier, which is the next product down the line from the C1100, just happens to be here for photography with new writer Greg Petan. A single box unit, the \$7,000 C52 has a built-in DAC and eight tone controls along with a phonostage; it is aimed squarely at an entirely different user. *(continued)*



1-310-534-9900



THESOURCEAV.COM

REVIEW

Having both side by side on the rack begs a head-to-head comparison providing an excellent opportunity to see what shakes out sonically for the extra dough. Though the C52 retains the slightly warm, tonally saturated sound that made McIntosh famous, it is all solid-state, so no glowing bottles here. While the C52 offers more functionality than the C1100, thanks to the onboard DAC, it's no match for the massive soundstage, dynamics and "reach out and touch it"-ness that the C1100 provides.

As with any such choice, you must decide what your budget, system and rack will allow. If massive flexibility is your top priority, save a few bucks and go for the C52. Purists with a "take no prisoners" performance attitude will prefer the C1100 – along with the three-rack spaces it and a separate DAC will require. However, once you hear it, it will be tough to go back.

New vs. old

When the past C1000 arrived configured as a tube preamplifier, it utilized eight 12AX7 tubes: four for the phono stage and four for the linestage. The C1000, like the new C1100 (which uses 6 12AU7 and 6 12AX7 tubes) is a fully balanced design, to drive McIntosh, or anyone else's balanced power amplifiers in that mode, but there is only one option – all tube. And for good reason – the current C1100 is quieter than even the solid-state version of the C1000. McIntosh's Ron Cornelius just smiles, saying, "It's the quietest preamplifier we've ever made, *period*. There just was no need to make two versions of this one." Damn, this thing is quiet. *(continued)*





A quick call to a couple of my Mcbuds still in possession of C1000s makes for another impromptu shootout. It doesn't take long for all to agree that the nod has to go to the newer piece in terms of overall sonics. The C1100 is a winner on every level. You'll have to listen carefully, but on your favorite tracks that are either more sparsely arranged or more acoustic in nature, the C1100 has an ease and freedom from cloudiness that the C1000 can't quite match. The three C1000 owners were on the fence concerning whether they would trade up, but all were intrigued and impressed with the C1100.

Extended listening

The more time spent with the C1100, the more you realize just how sonically unobtrusive this preamplifier is. Regardless of source and source configuration (RCA or XLR), it goes about its business quietly and confidently. Where its predecessor is a few molecules warmer tonally, the C1100, much like the current Sonus faber speakers, manages to achieve a similar feat of maintaining the depth and midrange palpability of legacy models, while exhibiting more dynamic impact and extension at both ends of the frequency spectrum.

Weaving through a number of solo male and female vocal tracks, this new preamplifier works its magic, doing better with subtle spatial cues as well, and those wanting to hear every bit of breath at the microphone will be highly impressed. McIntosh has really raised the bar on their gear in the last 5–7 years, steadily refining and improving the range. Thanks to the economy of the manufacturing scale they enjoy, their gear is much more reasonably priced compared to offerings from other manufacturers 30 years ago.

Not only is the lineage easily the equal of what else is available for \$8,000–\$10,000, the phonostage is also on par with what you'd probably pay \$3,000–\$5,000 for as well. But McIntosh is not, nor have they ever been, about the minimalist approach – this is a *control preamplifier* in every sense of the word. If you want HT bypass, have a pair of turntables and numerous line level sources on hand – the C1100 may be one of the only games in town. With 12 analog inputs, you will never be short an input.

Back in black (vinyl)

Should you be a maniacal vinyl lover with a turntable/tonearm/cartridge combo worth more than the C1100, you will most likely still want an outboard phonostage. However if you are a casual to journeyman analog enthusiast, with a MM or MC cartridge in the \$1,000–\$3,500 range, you will be more than satisfied with the performance of the C1100's internal phonostage. Of course there are exceptions to the rule, so resist the urge to press the argumentative email button *right now*.

Running the C1100 through its paces with a number of cartridges from the \$500 Rega Elys 2, all the way up to the Koetsu Jade Platinum, proves highly palatable. The best feature of the C1100's phonostage (in addition to the 79dB s/n ratio) is the loading options: 25, 50, 100, 200, 400 and 1000 ohms. A number of megabuck outboard phonostages don't offer this flexibility, and this additional adjustability is where the C1100 really shines, making it a perfect match for cartridges like the Rega Apheta/Apheta 2, which require loading in the 25–50 ohm range to give their best performance. *(continued)*

On that note, the Soulines HDX Kubrick/Rega RB1000/Apheta 2 combination in for review was a perfect mate for the C1100, with the Apheta 2 loaded to 25 ohms, delivering a silky smooth presentation. The additional MM input makes the C1100 perfect for those with two turntables or two tone-arms sporting an additional cartridge. The only limiting factor is 60dB of gain, which will eliminate the lowest output MC cartridges. Keep your cartridge's output above .4mv and everything will be just fine.

Those preferring MM cartridges can also adjust input capacitance from 50 to 800pf in 50pf steps. This is often overlooked, and fine-tuning this aspect of a MM cartridge will deliver stunning results. That cartridge that you thought might have been a little dull or slightly bright can now be adjusted to perfection. These small touches throughout the C1100 are what make it more than a sum of its parts.

Head trip

Those needing to escape to the world of personal audio from time to time will appreciate the care that went into the C1100's headphone amplifier. With an impedance selector for low (16–40 ohm), medium (40–150 ohm) and high (150–600 ohm) impedance headphones, everything you can think of can be accommodated. Running through about a dozen phones,



new and old, confirmed this claim. Whether I was listening to my ancient Koss Pro 4AAs or a pair of the latest planar magnetic from OPPO, the C1100 shines.

If you spend more than a few fleeting moments with headphones on, you'll appreciate the Headphone Crossfeed Director (HXD®), which can slightly blend the right and left channel of the amplifier's output, minimizing the "ping pong" effect that comes with some recordings. This one is strictly a "to taste" function, making the headphone delivery sound more like a pair of speakers in front of you, mimicking that imaging pattern.

Listening to the classic headphone favorite *Dark Side of the Moon* with HXD engaged keeps the soundstage more linear as promised, especially on "Time"; the alarm clocks stay more within a boundary, yet without, they appear to bounce all over the room. Tidy or trippy, that's the question. Fortunately, experimentation is only a button push away.

Every possible combination

If all of this weren't enough, perusing the excellent user manual reveals how truly flexible the C1100 is. Need home theater bypass? Got it. Want to trim all of your input sources so the volume level is the same? Got that too. And that's only

scratching the surface of what the C1100 is capable of.

The McIntosh C1100 handily offers sonic and build quality commensurate with the asking price, but what puts it in a category of its own is the convenience that it offers. Those wanting a volume control and power switch only will not be the least bit interested, but those with multiple sources wanting high quality playback for all with easy integration will be in hifi heaven. Don't forget those blue meters, either.

If you are new to the McIntosh tribe, looking for a step-up from what you currently have, or even looking at \$13K (or thereabouts) preamplifiers in other camps, the C1100 is outstanding. The phono-stage is incredible, as is the headphone amplifier. You'd be pretty hard-pressed to find a linestage, phonostage, or headphone amplifier along with two additional power cords and interconnects that would match the performance of the C1100, as well as the rack space the rest of this stuff would require for anywhere near \$13K.

Factor in reputation, dealer support and all the other things that make a Mac a Mac, and the C1100 is a fantastic preamplifier any way you look at it. Highly recommended if you are a lover of the brand, and if you aren't, this is the perfect piece to start your journey. ●

The McIntosh C1100 Preamplifier \$13,000

MANUFACTURER

McIntosh Laboratory, Inc.

CONTACTS

www.mcintoshlabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

Brinkman Bardo/Koetsu Jade Platinum, Soulines Kubrick/Rega Apheta 2, Rega Planar 3/Elys 2

Digital Source

Gryphon Kalliope DAC

Amplification

ARC GS150, CJ LP125sa+, Pass Xs 300 monoblocks

Speakers

GamuT RS5i, Quad 2812, MartinLogan Neolith

Cable

Tellurium Q Silver Diamond

IL CREMONESE

Loosely Translated: Beyond Reproach

By Jeff Dorgay

Tempting as Judas Priest's *Screaming for Vengeance* is, the recent remaster of XTC's *Skylarking* is the first record to hit the turntable platter, beginning the review of the lovely Il Cremonese speakers from Sonus faber. The bees buzzing around between the speakers on the opening track, "Summer's Cauldron," are so breathtakingly real, I'm looking for a net to capture them in. Ditto with the title track of Spiritualized's *Ladies and Gentlemen, We Are Floating in Space* – I feel like Major Tom doing an EVA looking for the tether. The soundfield is so big and spacey, just the way I like it. As the McIntosh Group's William Kline says after the speakers are set up to perfection in my listening room, "Some speakers are 15 minute speakers and some speakers are 15 hour speakers." The Il Cremonese's are rest of your life speakers. To his chagrin, I play the MoFi remaster of KC and The Sunshine Band's "That's the Way I Like It" at major volume before he heads back home.



REVIEW

After having the privilege of living with Sonus faber's top of the line Aida for a few months, it only takes about 90 seconds to see how much of the physical and electronic wonder of those \$125,000/pair speakers makes its way into the \$45,000/pair Il Cremonese. On many levels, the smaller speakers actually hook up to my room *better* than the Sonus faber flagship. Yes, the Aida offers up more extension at both extremes, and in a room about 2–3 times larger than my 16 x 25 foot listening room, will knock you dead with dynamics *and* subtlety. In my moderate sized room, the Il Cremoneses are just as breathtaking, perhaps more so.

Even more than meets the eye

In case you're wondering about the name, Cremonese is a tribute to the great Italian violin maker Antonio Stradivari and one of his most famous violins by the same name. The violin celebrated its 300th anniversary in 2015, but the Il Cremoneses are anything but relics. That's the beauty of the brand. Like no one else, they combine old world craftsmanship, fashion-forward Italian style and 21st century technology.

(continued)

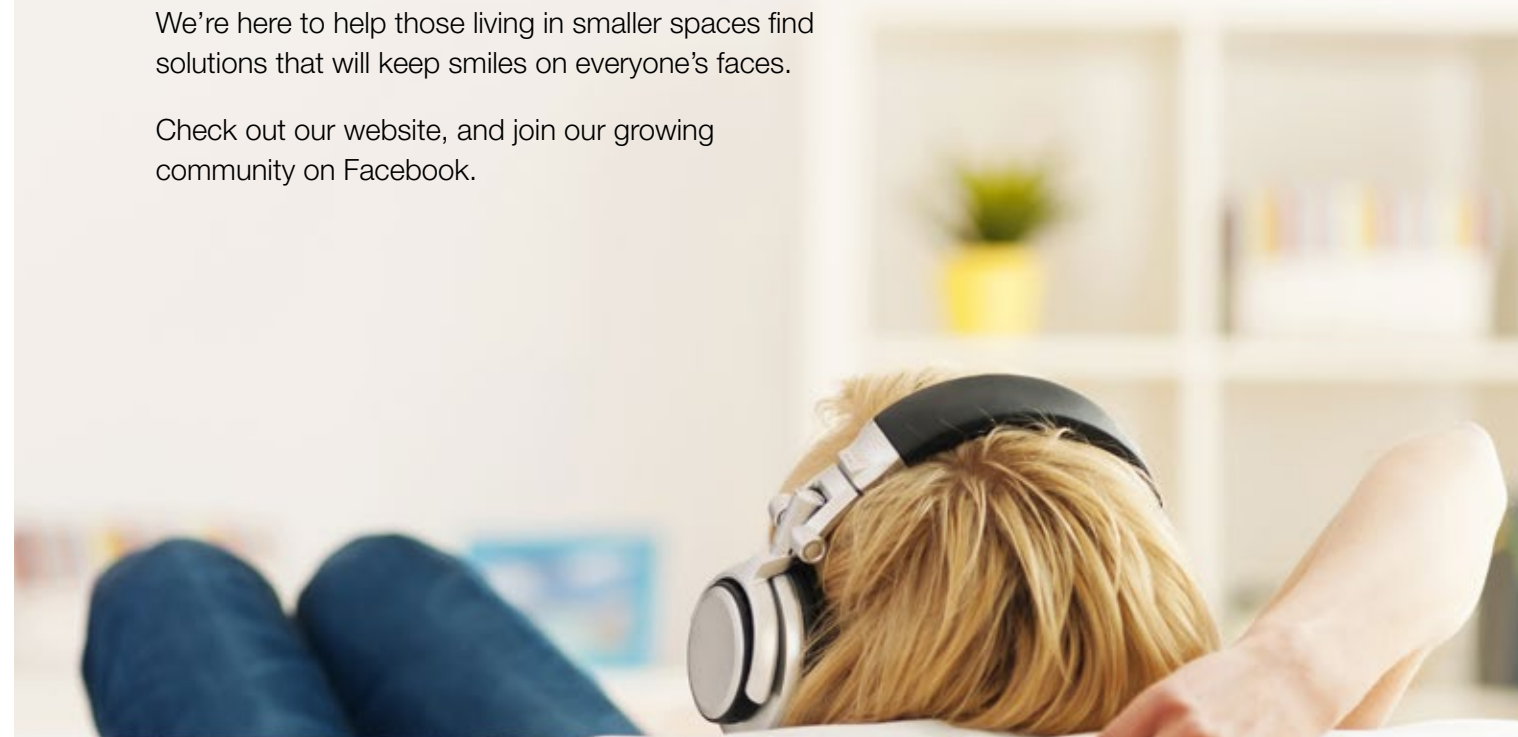


When super size won't do.

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.

We're here to help those living in smaller spaces find solutions that will keep smiles on everyone's faces.

Check out our website, and join our growing community on Facebook.



 **The Audiophile Apartment.**
Sonic solutions for small and stylish spaces.

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If you haven't listened to Sonus faber a while, you'll be in for a surprise – a big surprise. Always known for luscious midrange that some might consider colored, they have always been delightful, if a bit polite. That said, I couldn't ever remember music sounding bad through a pair of older Sonus faber speakers. In case you aren't a long-term reader, it's worth noting that I'll always forgive a speaker, component or system for erring on the warm side of neutral way before anything going the other way. I'm not a member of the "there's never too much resolution" school. And if you've never heard Sonus faber speakers, there's no better place to start your journey than auditioning the II Cremonese.

The current speakers, under the direction of Livio Cucuzza and Palo Tezzon, retain all the magic you remember from past designs, adding extension, dynamic range and a level of clarity that the old speakers just can't match. And they are unbelievably beautiful to boot – the II Cremoneses are a work of audible art. During a recent dinner with one of Sonus faber's competitors, he remarked, "Those are the speakers *my wife* wants in the living room."

However, it's way more than just wife acceptance factor. Every aspect of these speakers is executed to perfection, inside and out. Examining the crossover networks reveals the world's finest parts operating in harmony.

A few years ago, they created a limited run of massive speakers merely named "the Sonus faber." These massive \$200k/pair speakers delivered performance that was beyond reproach, and became the test bed for a number of technological breakthroughs that have now permeated the line of their Homage collection.

Yet you can't help but notice just how beautiful these speakers are. With layer upon layer of hand finished lacquer. All the technology inside is fantastic, but the II Cremonese is a wonder to behold. You don't need to park a motorcycle in your living room with these around. They steal the show all by themselves. Everyone that listened to them while they were here asked the same question: "Can I just *touch* them?" Even my most diehard, grumpy, "those guys spend too much money on the cabinet" audiophile buddies were helpless against their spell.

Which leads to the argument of form and function. Personally, I would rather have an incredibly beautiful pair of speakers in my environment than a pair of square boxes. And with the current Sonus faber speakers, no performance is being left on the table in the name of aesthetic beauty. Much like a Ducati or Ferrari, the II Cremonese is as much fun to observe as it is to listen to.



Quick to sing

The Sonus faber guys are some of the best when it comes to speaker setup, and Mr. Kline has the II Cremoneses set up to perfection in short order. When he left, I tried a few other placements in my room, and even for someone with average setup skills, they provide great sound even when not optimally placed.

Thanks to the five sided "Rhomboidal Diamond" design of the cabinet with driver placement, the solid "silent spikes" and the two infra-woofers, combined with the rear firing "stealth reflex" ports, these speakers don't interact (negatively) with the room in the same way as many others I've struggled with over the years. All of these features work together as a system to get the maximum performance out of the minimal footprint, again making these lovely speakers super user-friendly.

The II Cremonese is essentially a 3.5 way with subwoofer system, featuring a pair of 220 mm (8.66 inch) infra woofers that fire rearward, go from the lowest frequency range, gently blending to a pair of front firing 7-inch (180mm) woofers that play full range, handing off most of the midrange duties to a similar sized midrange driver covering the 250–2,500Hz range, leaving everything from 2,500Hz on up to a very sophisticated soft dome tweeter with an "arrow point" that acts as somewhat of a wave guide. Pictures from the SF website reveal nothing but the world's finest capacitors and inductors inside, but at the end of the day, it all combines with ESL-like coherence. One of the most impressive aspects of the II Cremonese is the way they disappear in the room like a mini monitor. Finally, set up properly, the level of width and depth these speakers generate when reproducing music is major. This adds further to the illusion of reality that they portray.

This coherence is a big part of what makes these speakers so easy to listen to for hours (days for that matter) on end. *(continued)*



The low level of distortion goes a long way too. Assuming that you've got the level of electronics and recordings to do justice to these speakers, you will be shocked at just how quickly these speakers handle transient attack with no overload or fatigue.

This came to the forefront listening to a lot of drum solos and the like. The way that the II Cremonese finesses the solid attack, sound and then release of a drumstick hitting a drumhead is spectacular. Same with mid bass – bass drums never sound bloated, yet still possess the necessary level of visceral impact.

Bass is deep, forceful and fast. Test tones revealed solid output to 25Hz, so playing Kraftwerk's "The Robots" could be done at club levels without strain. Like the violin it is named after, the key in the lower register, actually the entire audio range, is all about detail. You don't just get deep bass, you get bass with texture.

Ultimately versatile

Ultra wide frequency response and dynamic range means no music is off limits to the II Cremonese. Playing Afrika Bambaata's *Planet Rock* at a level that would cripple most speakers, they keep their poise. The spec sheet claims that they can handle 100–800 watts "without clipping," the meters on the Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks are barely moving from their center position. Thanks to a 92dB/1watt sensitivity, turning the volume control further isn't necessary, yet the extra power and range comes in handy when listening to large-scale musical pieces.

One interesting thing noticed about the II Cremonese compared to the Aida is in their ability to play quiet – even better than the Aida. Where the Aida reminded me of a high strung V8 car with a high horsepower, narrow power band (though they are glorious when they reach full song), the II Cremonese is much more like a modern twin turbo car, where the power starts strong from idle and just continues on right up to redline. *(continued)*

The only caveat with these speakers is that because of their low distortion, you might find yourself listening at high levels more often than you do. Whether I was listening to heavy rock, or large orchestral works, I never realized just how loud I was listening until someone came in to talk to me.

After auditioning the II Cremonese for some time with a wide range of amplification, these speakers are truly without flaw. They are full range speakers that play loud, play soft and best of all, *play it right*. I don't necessarily see the two speakers up in the Sonus faber range as being "better" than the II Cremonese, but more suited to progressively larger rooms. But that's between you and your Sonus faber dealer.

Now with plenty of hours on the clock and the entire reference chain well burned in, *Screaming for Vengeance* is the last album to be played through the II Cremonese, before we crate them up and send them home. It seems just right. These are fantastic speakers and they will be receiving a Publisher's Choice award in our next issue.

And I almost forgot; they come in walnut or a dark red. I like the red. ●

Sonus faber II Cremonese

MSRP: \$45,000/pair

MANUFACTURER

Sonus faber

CONTACT

www.sonusfaber.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog source

Brinkmann Bardo
w/Koetsu Jade

Phonostage

Pass Labs XsPhono

Digital source

dCS Rossini DAC and
Clock, Paganini transport

Linestage

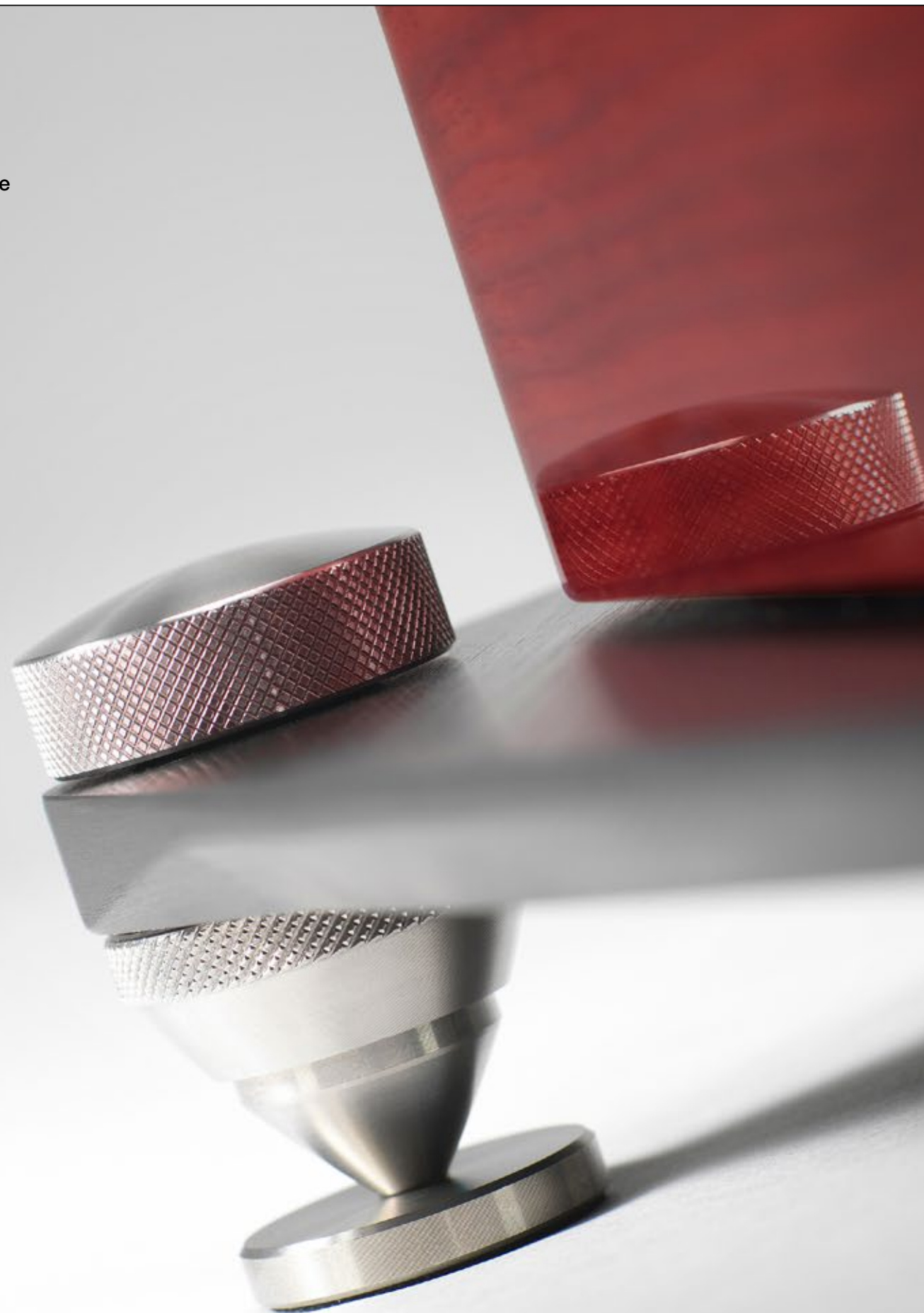
Pass Labs XsPre

Amplifiers

Pass Labs Xs300
Monoblocks

Cable

Tellurium Q
Black Diamond



How *do* they do it?

The JL Audio Fathom IWS

By Jeff Dorgay

Listening to the deep synth bass line in Paul Young's "I'm Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down," I realized how much I missed my Gotham subwoofer. The quality and quantity of bass that the top of the line JL Audio subwoofers produce is unmatched by anything else I've ever experienced. The late Steve Jobs once said during the opening address at Macworld "if we don't make technology as easy to use as putting a bagel in a toaster, no one will use it." That may be true for personal computers; it's never been truer than for subwoofers. Let's cut to the chase, when was the last time you heard a great subwoofer? Better yet, when did you hear a truly full range system with deep, powerful, tuneful, detailed bass that you didn't know a subwoofer was in the system? I'm guessing precious few that didn't have JL Audio subwoofers as part of the mix.

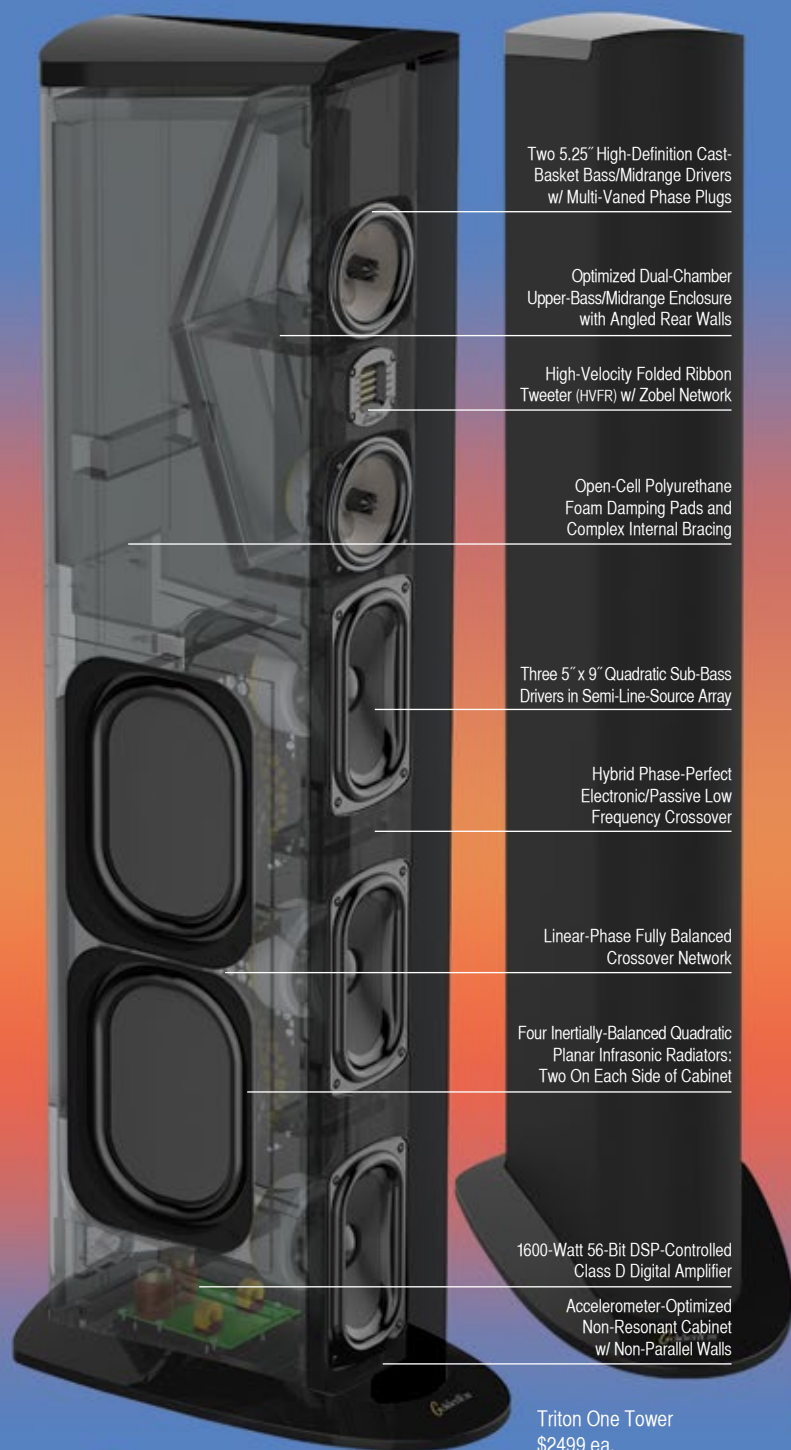


Getting more bass is simple. Integrating it seamlessly into your main system is usually easier said than done. Just like your main speakers, the place that the subs need to be to work properly isn't always the most aesthetically pleasing, or optimal for traffic flow. JL Audio's proprietary (Digital ARO, or automatic room optimization) takes care of about 98% of this right now. It features 18 bands of cut-only correction and level compensation. This is the reason that whenever someone asks me for a subwoofer recommendation, JL is at the top of my list. Their subs are child's play to set up.

But what if you just don't have room for one or more additional boxes in the living room, yet you crave more bass? JL's Fathom IWS (in wall subwoofer) is the way to roll. I suggest one or more IWS woofers either way. There's nothing better for this writer (and his better half) than concealing hardware in the living space. Whether you prefer your Fathom in a relatively compact box or as an IWS, the price is the same, \$4,500. Having owned a number of JL Audio subs over the years, as well as a few TONE staffers joining the party, they are built with care and worth every penny asked.

GoldenEar has Engineered Our New Triton One to Perform Like a \$20,000+ Super Speaker!

“Revelatory ... cosmically orgasmic ... astounding performance-vs-price ... these speakers absolutely embalm the competition” – Darryl Wilkinson, *Sound & Vision*



“Triton One shames some speakers costing ten times as much ... it is an absolute marvel”

– Caleb Denison, *Digital Trends*

“Best High-End Value at CES 2014 ... Sandy has created a speaker that defies its price point”

– John Sciacca, *Residential Systems*

“Best of CES 2014 ... stunning realism ... the sound was truly grand and majestic”

– Roger Kanno, *SoundStage*

“Best Sound for the Money at CES 2014”

– Jonathan Valin, Kirk Midskog and Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound*

Introducing Triton One, an evolutionary speaker that builds upon advanced technologies that have made Tritons mega-hits around the world. Stereophile called them, *“A Giant Killer Speaker”* and Robert Deutsch further added, *“it’s not unreasonable to compare the sound of the \$4998 Triton One with speakers costing tens of thousands of dollars more”*. This new top-of-the-line flagship was engineered to deliver even better dynamics and bass than the extraordinary Triton Two, along with further refinement of all aspects of sonic performance. How well have we succeeded? In the words of HD Living’s Dennis Burger, the Triton One delivers, *“... the sort of upper-echelon performance that normally only comes from speakers whose price tags rival a good luxury automobile”*.

Triton One “creates visceral, tangible waves of pure audio bliss”

– Dennis Burger, *HD Living*

Great sound is what it is all about and the Triton Ones deliver, as The Absolute Sound’s Anthony Cordesman wrote *“they provide sustained musical pleasure and exceptional realism ... extraordinary sound quality and value ... one of the best buys in speakers ... highly recommended”*. The Ones were specifically engineered to excel with all types of music as well as movies. Best of all, they offer previously unheard of value, as Brent Butterworth wrote in *Sound & Vision*, *“I heard a few people saying the Triton One sounded like some \$20,000-and-up high-end towers, but I disagree: I think they sounded better than most of them”*. Hi Fi+’s Chris Martens raved the Ones are, *“jaw-droppingly good ... one of the greatest high-end bargains of all time with a dazzling array of sonic characteristics”*. And Darryl Wilkinson summed them up best, *“A Masterpiece ... GoldenEar has fully ushered in the Golden Age of the Loudspeaker”*. Hear them for yourself and discover what all the excitement is about.

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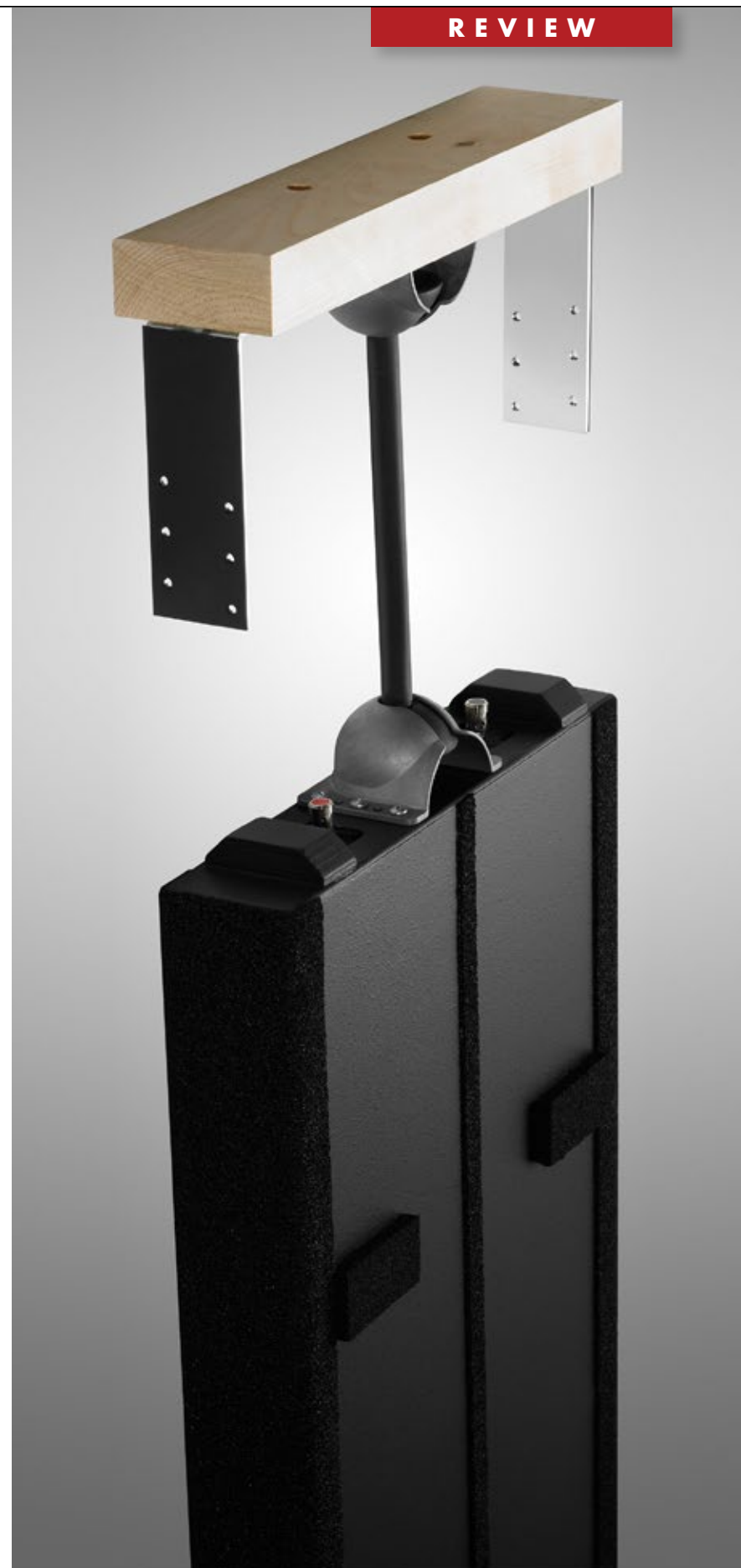
Easier than pie

Consult the JL Audio website to find out which of the four cabinet sizes you will need to fit inside your walls. Those in the middle of new construction will have an incredibly easy time of this, because you can set the two 2x4 or 2x6s to the exact dimension you need to float the IWS enclosure inside. That’s the magic of this woofer once installed, it floats in your wall, so there are no rattles anywhere. All that is visible is a small, square grille that can be painted to match your wall. To make the IWS more neighbor proof, especially if you are in an apartment or condo situation, I suggest sacrificing 4 inches of wall and building a wall in front of your existing wall. Installed thusly in the TONE studio, there’s no extra bass energy outside the structure. No matter how big the beats, my neighbors are none the wiser.

A few bits make up the IWS system: the enclosure, the woofer, a grille, the upper brace to suspend the cabinet and a big, black thing that goes between the enclosure and the bracket. Do not let your dog get this one, it looks like the worlds best dog toy ever and you’ll never see it back. It is essential that the enclosure float up from the wall to get maximum bass performance. There is also a roll of squishy gasket material to float the drywall that goes over the top of the enclosure. Also included is a 1000-watt amplifier with active crossover and the aforementioned ARO system. You can connect it to your preamplifier via balanced XLR (suggested) or single ended RCA interconnects. If you have one IWS, this will be a 1000-watt amplifier, if you’re running dual subs, a 2000-watt unit.

Should you need to connect via the RCA inputs, there is a handy switch on the back panel to float the ground and eliminate noise problems. We tried a 20-foot pair of RCA cables and did notice a slight background hum, which said switch eliminated handily. *(continued)*

REVIEW





If you are suspect of that 13.5-inch driver that is only a couple of inches thick, the JL manual is reassuring, “there is no need to lower your expectations, and this is a Fathom.” Masters of understatement, those JL Audio subwoofer elves. Truer words were never spoken.

Once it’s all installed, you’re only about five minutes away from LF nirvana. To see just how effective the ARO is, play your favorite bass heavy track via the IWS uncalibrated. With that aural snapshot in mind, place the calibrated microphone as close to where your head will be when listening, run the rumbly calibration track and repeat. Pretty amazing, eh?

Final touches

Running ARO with the default settings on the amplifiers control panel will get you about 90-95% of the way home, and it might even get you closer. However, after a few dozen familiar tracks, should it not be perfect, there are a few convenient options to adjust things as you’d like. Everyone has a different opinion on how a subwoofer should work and how it should add to your speakers’ performance. I prefer to start with main speakers that go as low as possible and cross the subwoofer over as low as possible, so it is truly a *sub* woofer.

The control amplifier for the IWS allows you to set subwoofer phase, crossover frequency and a 12 or 24db crossover slope. The 12db option is a bit smoother and probably better for speakers with less low frequency output and the 24 db option much sharper and less intrusive. As my reference GamuT RS5is have solid bass output down to about 28hz, dialing the IWS all the way down to 30hz with a 24 db slope proved perfect in my 16 x 25 foot room.

There are two other controls that will require your attention (or not). The master level control’s middle detent is 0db and with ev-

ery JL installation I’ve done, I’ve never needed to move it from this spot, but if you have a very low or very high gain situation, or your room has some tremendous response peaks or dips, you may need to adjust this somewhat. Think of the ELF (extremely low frequency) control as a super low bass control and use this one judiciously. If you’ve done everything else and you need to make a minor trim to lower bass output, this will get you the last few percent of the way there.

Ok let’s rock

Seriously, it takes longer to write

the process down than it does to complete it and JL’s instructions are crystal clear, with a comprehensive manual and videos illustrating installation and setup.

It may seem over simplified, but when you have the IWS perfectly optimized, you won’t notice it until you hear incredibly low frequency information. Those intimately familiar with their existing speakers will be amazed not only with the increased LF clarity, but how a great subwoofer, adds depth to the two-channel presentation, even at very modest listening levels. *(continued)*



Once you hear it, you won't want to live without it, and I'd go as far as to suggest that before you shell out for a bigger pair of mains, consider an IWS (or a pair of them) for your system.

As it's been with the other JL Audio subwoofers I've had the pleasure to use, the IWS Fathom adds so much more to my reference system, it's like having a completely new music collection. It's like updating the suspension in your car, you immediately head for the nearest curvy roads and see how much faster you can take those curves! I suspect that you will not only be revisiting favorite bass heavy tracks, but will notice how much more LF energy exists in music you've heard countless times.

Works with speakers large and small

The synergy with my GamuT RS5is is fantastic, yet pairing up the IWS with a number of other speakers offers equally excellent results, and this subwoofer is "fast" enough to mate with your favorite panel loudspeakers too. With Magnepans, the Quad 2812 ESLs and even a pair of vintage Acoustats, you can rest assured that this subwoofer system is capable of blending seamlessly with anything.

Yet the real torture test was crossing the IWS up a little bit higher. Combining it with the Rogers LS5/9s that we reviewed in issue 75 proved just as easy, with the crossover frequency now up to around 55hz. None of our test subjects knew there was a

sub in the system, and when we dialed the crossover frequency up even further with the tiny Rogers LS3/5as, everyone wanted to know how "those little speakers could make so much bass!"

Tidy and effective

Even if you have the room for a pair of subwoofers, I still suggest considering the IWS. After living with it for some time now, the tidiness that it brings to a subwoofer situation is freeing. And should you be building a home or sound room from scratch, what better way to integrate the whole thing.

I give the JL Audio Fathom IWS my highest recommendation. ●

The JL Audio Fathom IWS

MSRP: \$4,995

MANUFACTURER

JL Audio, Inc.

CONTACT

www.jlaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source

Brinkman Bardo Turntable w/ Koetsu Jade

Digital Source

dCS Rossini DAC, w/Rossini clock and Paganini Transport

Preamplifier Pass Labs Xs Pre

Phonostage Pass Labs Xs Phono

Power Amplifier

Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks

Speakers GamuT RS5i

Cable Tellurium Q Silver Diamond

Power Torus



Yumi Kanto Powered Speakers

\$449
www.kantoliving.com

The powered speaker market has certainly heated up, and the new Yumis from Kanto, are an exciting choice indeed. These small speakers utilize class AB amplification and come in a variety of cool colors, including the red one you see here. What's not to love?

With connections for USB and Bluetooth as well as traditional analog inputs, the Kantos can be connected to nearly anything and will certainly work well on your desktop or in a compact space. Click here to read Rob Johnson's enthusiastic report. ●

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Rega Planar 3 (With PS-TTU Power Supply and Elys 2 Cartridge)

\$1,145

www.rega.co.uk

www.soundorg.com

After more than 35 years of refining their basic design the current Rega Planar 3 is better than ever. All aspects of this iconic turntable have been rethought, reworked and redesigned. The only thing left untouched is the hinges that hold the dust cover in place.

Rega chalks most of this improvement to the lessons learned in their cost no object Naiad turntable, and the rest to manufacturing precision and efficiency. Recent visits to the Rega factory illustrate this clearly. As soon you lower the tonearm and play your first record you'll see what we mean. Our publisher has owned every variation on the Planar 3 theme, and has managed to rustle an original for comparison. Read all about it here. ●



McIntosh MC52 Preamplifier and MC301 Monoblocks

\$7,000 (MC52) \$5,000 (ea)
www.mcintoshlabs.com

The McIntosh MC52 is an exciting preamplifier because it does *everything*. This is a true preamplifier/control center in every sense of the word, with separate MM and MC phono sections, oodles of inputs and outputs both balanced and unbalanced, winding it up with a great headphone amplifier. It has a full function digital section as well, able to play any digital file you can throw at it.

There's no shortage of shiny knobs, blue meters and green backlighting either. With over 60 years of manufacturing experience under their belt, they just keep improving with age – still innovating after all these years. Full review here. ●

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“Better than some speakers I've heard that cost 20 times as much.”
–Jeff Dorgay, *TONEaudio*

Patented Aerodynamic “Reflection-Free” Midrange Driver Prevents Back Wave Distortion from Reaching Listener's Ears In Time w/ Music

Vandersteen Audio today offers a remarkable line of high-end super speakers in which each model shatters all expectations of what's possible anywhere near its price point. Because Richard

Vandersteen has always spent money on his speakers where it counts- on the drivers and crossovers that carry the delicate music signal- our entry-level floorstander the \$1,249/pr. 1Ci routinely **bullies bigger speakers costing two or three times as much**.

“...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**.

“Unbeatable powered bass.” –Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*

Advanced Cabinet-Within-A-Cabinet Construction Renders Enclosure As Inert & Sonically Invisible As Exotic Speakers Costing 10X More

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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SLUMMIN'

A/D/S L400 Bookshelf Speakers

Ebay, \$90



Analog and Digital Systems electronics and speakers were all the rage back in the 80s, and they created some incredibly good yet compact speakers for the home and car. Audiophiles in a more vintage state of mind still worship the large floorstanding L810. They made history with their “power plate” amplifiers and 300/320i speaker systems for the car, if not spearheading the high performance mobile audio world.

About \$400 a pair when new, a typical pair of these fetch about \$100 - \$150 on Ebay, and can occasionally be found at yard sales cheap. Often the chintzy speaker connectors are broken, with the metal grilles and cabinets worse for the wear.

Thanks to woofers with rubber surrounds, you won't need to recondition these.

Overall sound is somewhat polite but pleasant, the traditional “East Coast” sound, versus the “West Coast” sound of JBL and Cerwin-Vega, with boomier bass and tizzier highs. Yet today, they still stand up and are perfect for a desktop system, especially with a small subwoofer – the Audio Engine L8 is our go to suggestion.

The cabinets are easily refinished if you desire, but the metal grilles might be tougher, so try and find the cleanest ones you can. We're asking our local paintless dent guy if he can work his magic on these, but either way, these make for a great pair of \$100 speakers if you can find them.



Jazz

- Uri Caine**
Calibrated Thickness
Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/61825018>
- Nels Cline**
Lovers
Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/nels-cline-lovers-vinyl-2lp>
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- Dave Douglas**
Dark Territory
Purchase LP from Music Direct
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The Rolling Stones
The Rolling Stones in Mono
Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/The-Rolling-Stones---The-Rolling-Stones-In-Mono-\(Limited-Edition-180g-Import-Vinyl-16LP-Box-Set\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/The-Rolling-Stones---The-Rolling-Stones-In-Mono-(Limited-Edition-180g-Import-Vinyl-16LP-Box-Set))
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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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richard gray
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LINKS

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

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

BAT: www.balanced.com

The Cable Company: www.thecableco.com

Cambridge: www.audioplusservices.com

Dali: www.soundorg.com

dCS: www.dcsLtd.co.uk

Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com

Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com

GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com

Graham Audio: www.grahamaudioUSA.com

Focal: www.audioplusservices.com

MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com

Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com

Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com

Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com

Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com

Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com

Naim: www.audioplusservices.com

Nordost: www.nordost.com

OCTAVE: www.octave.de

Oppo: www.oppodigital.com

Paradigm: www.paradigm.com

Pass Labs: www.passlabs.com

Plinius: www.pliniusaudio.com

PrimaLuna: www.primaluna-usa.com

Primare: www.vanaltD.com

Rega: www.soundorg.com

Simaudio: www.simaudio.com

SPL: www.audioplusservices.com

Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com

Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com

Vandersteen: www.vandersteen.com

VPI: www.vpiindustries.com

Manufacturers Links