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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Summer is many things to many people, and while spring may turn our thoughts to love, summer here in the Pacific Northwest usually means shopping for a new car. When the clouds part and the sun comes out, it brings all the cool cars and motorcycles with it. This endless parade of beautiful machinery makes the enthusiast's heart wander. Never one to resist an offer to take a test drive, I've spent a bit of time behind the wheel of some mega machinery, even though I drive a relatively modest car myself; a black BMW M235i.

Getting out of the latest iteration of Porsche 911, I found myself thinking about what it did regarding being an icon, but regarding sheer performance, a base 911 (that will set you back about \$110,000 with few options) doesn't terribly outperform my little car from Munich. Ditto for the other cars I drove. While I came away with tremendous respect for these German, Italian and American marvels of technology, I wasn't itching to mortgage my future that day. Fortunately, you don't need a sunny day to test drive a new amplifier or pair of speakers, though it might help make the unloading process easier.

Something similar is going on in the world of hi-fi. This issue, we feature the Monaco 2.0 turntable from Grand Prix Audio. At about \$50k, with a decent arm and cartridge, perhaps a little more, this turntable outperforms anything I've had the opportunity to listen to, at any price. The only thing it doesn't do is be a six figure turntable. If you want the status and the bling, by all means, go for the gusto. I'll never be the one to tell you not to buy it. Or that 911, for that matter.

Equally enthralling is the new Foundation series from Audio Research that graces our cover.



The performance provided by this \$30,000 stack of components (DAC, Phono, Linestage and Power Amplifier) rivals stuff costing a lot more, even from the Minnesota manufacturer. ARC has put so much engineering prowess in these four boxes, if you only need 80 watts per channel, you might never need a bigger amplifier. Add the \$35,000 pair of Paradigm Persona 9F speakers that will be in our next issue, and you've got a \$125k system that takes no prisoners. Those only requiring a digital or analog source could do this for considerably less money.

I'm not talking "glimpse of what the good stuff offers" here, I'm talking about sound that's as good as it gets. You could spend \$125k on wire alone on a cost no object system.

We've reviewed some great components at the lower end of the price scale from Rega, Vandersteen, Simaudio, and PrimaLuna, just to name a few. These \$1,000 - \$4,000 boxes deliver performance that would have cost a lot more only years ago, so if you don't have a briefcase full of dead presidents lying about, you can still have a blast.

Regardless of available spending money, I guarantee that there's something fun to listen to out there with your name on it. Put the top down, head over to your nearest audio salon, and take a test drive.

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FEATURE

FEATURE

THE KLIPSCH LASCALA

A Work in Progress

By Jeff Dorgay





Seemingly Dan once said in a song, “you go back Jack, do it again...” Did you ever do something you knew was bad, but you did it again anyway? You don’t have to fess up, but I’m guilty as charged, especially when it comes to vintage cars and vintage hi-fi. Just like with Alfa Romeos, I’ve had dreadful luck with vintage Klipsch speakers. But when I walked into see my pal Kurt Doslu at Echo Audio, and those unfinished mid-70s Klipsch LaScalas were staring me down, I knew I had to have them in a Wayne’s World kind of way.

Oh yes, they were mine. The next question was how to get the damn things back to the TONE studio. At 24 x 24 x 38 inches and weighing around 100 pounds each, I could not fit both of them in my i3 at once, so on this day, it would be two trips to Echo Audio to bring the booty home. Decoding the production codes reveals that they were made in January of my senior year in high school, just about the time I was getting thrown out of the local hi-fi store for wanting to crank Pink Floyd on a new pair of LaScalas. Ironic.

With a sensitivity rating of 105db/1 watt, you don’t need a lot of power to make the LaScalas rock, but you do need high-quality power. I suspect this is why Klipsch horns got a bad rap at the beginning of the hard core audiophile movement. Garbage in – garbage out was never more relevant than it is with these speakers. I’ve never heard a more amplifier sensitive speaker. *(continued)*



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FEATURE

But when you get it right, you'll be jumping around your listening room like Snoopy in A Charlie Brown Christmas. In this case, the perfect match proves to be the 20-watt per channel Nagra 300i amplifier we've been using as a reference for a long time.

What's in the box, doc?

Inside the massive plywood cabinet, lurks three drivers: a 15-inch woofer, a horn midrange, and a horn tweeter – the same ones used in the full sized Klipschorns. In 2006, the LaScala was updated to LaScala II status, swapping the ¾" birch ply, utilitarian cabinet for a 1" MDF veneered cabinet. The new ones are prettier, but they weigh almost twice as much. Klipsch claims the new model to offer better sound, but vintage hi-fi forums will argue this point forever.

The smaller folded horn design combined with the 15-inch woofer does not go as deep as the full sized Klipschorn, and though they are only spec'd at 50 – 17,000hz, these specs are somewhat deceiving. And this is a speaker that you can pick up a lot of room gain moving them closer to the wall.

Around back lurks the crossover network, with oil filled capacitors and a few inductors. Again, this is another point of major contention, and as is the LaScalas in compared to a pair of current "audiophile" speakers can sound a bit veiled, but it's not hateful. *(continued)*





Weighing this against all the virtues they do offer and the effortless dynamics, it's up to you whether to enjoy them as is, upgrade to current crossover components, or go for new crossovers entirely. Do you rebuild the LS7 in your Chevelle SS or do you buy a new, crate motor? Decisions like this make the hobby fun. We will probably update the crossovers somewhat and report back at a future date, so stay tuned.

If you really wanna rock

Hitting peaks over 105 dB reveal the Nagra's power output meter is hanging around .2 watts per channel, occasionally bouncing up to 2 watts per channel. That's not a typo. These speakers will pin you to the wall with ten watts per channel if you can even stand it that loud. The LaScalas deliver mega dynamic swings, even at low volume. The Ella Fitzgerald classic, "Miss Otis Regrets" pulls you in at the soft beginning of the track, but just might have you reaching for the volume control near the end, as does Shelby Lynne's "Just a Little Loving." The LaScalas kind of sneak up on you.

Trust me; you'll never have nearly as much fun with a \$200,000 pair of Wilson XLFs as you'll have with a pair of \$1,500 vintage LaScalas. Whether you're an aging boomer trying to relive your youthful glory, a young newcomer to the audio world, or somewhere in between, a pair of these speakers are a must. I'd consider them a right of passage component. ●

NEW RELEASES

ALGIERS



THE UNDERSIDE OF POWER

Algiers

The Underside of Power
Matador, 2LP or CD

America, 1971. Soul singer Marvin Gaye released *What's Going On*, the pop-music equivalent of a breaking news alert. Racism, poverty, war: Gaye brought a personal and groove-laden touch to monumental topics, creating a work that decades later still feels urgent. Two years prior, and seemingly a musical universe away, the MC5 issued what served as a rock n' roll call to a revolution with *Kick Out the Jams*.

Cut to Los Angeles, 1988, when N.W.A amplified the most aggressively volatile aspects of modern hip-hop with *Straight Outta Compton*, a record that for all its controversial language presaged what has become decades of anti-police sentiment. Then, last year, Southern rockers the Drive-By Truckers tried to make sense of an increasingly divisive political and cultural landscape with *American Band*, a set that meshes blues, folk, and blazingly hot guitar riffs while tackling, with nuance, everything from the Black Lives Matter movement to debates surrounding the use of the Confederate flag.

In summer 2017, all the aforementioned albums feel decidedly of-the-moment. Consider: The trial surrounding the death of Philando Castile at the hands of a Minnesota police officer, the recent stealth removals of Confederacy-honoring statues in New Orleans, or any of the inflammatory rhetoric coming out of our nation's capital. And now, Algiers, a band with roots in Atlanta but now spread among multiple continents, has in *The Underside of Power* an album uniquely built for our still-troubled times.

With debts equally owed to the come-together spirituality of gospel, humanity of soul, fists-clenched rebelliousness of punk rock, and telling-it-like-it-is realism of hip-hop, *The Underside of Power* doubles as a cultural melting pot that builds on all the progressive sounds that came before it—and then some. Hyper-literate—in track-by-track descriptors released by Matador, band members cite underground artists, the speeches of Black Panther activist Fred Hampton, and 80s cartoons with equal reverence—*The Underside of Power* goes deep on what its members see as ailing a nation.

Adventurous, risk-taking, and one of 2017's must-hear statements, *The Underside of Power* also stands as the sort of collection that can inspire people

to think music can change the world. While that's too much pressure to put on any compendium of songs, you get the sense Algiers believe it. Explosively opening with "Walk Like a Panther," a song that quotes Hampton, the record launches with a protest march of an anthem that in three minutes links decades of socially conscious music. Is it hip-hop? Is it dance? Is it funk? Is it punk? It's all the above. Coarse and slightly industrial, "Walk Like a Panther" sounds like a riot, as much as it may want to avoid one. Creating an inspirational ode for the have-nots against the haves, singer Franklin James Fisher asks for the ear of those in power and warns if it isn't granted, "it's the hand of the people that's getting tenser now."

Expanding on while also

diving deeper into the gospel influences of the band's self-titled 2015 debut, *The Underside of Power* is best described as a modern soul record—one restless and relentless in the manners in which it moves through styles and current events. "Cry of the Martyrs" takes Fisher's church-ready passion and places it inside a bleak, sci-fi landscape. "Cleveland" goes one step further, slicing up a gospel choir amid rapid-fire electro beats. The song samples Rev. James Cleveland's spiritual "Peace Be Still" but puts it inside a warzone, resulting in an approach that ricochets between the bleak and the hopeful. "Innocence is alive and it's coming back one day," sings Fisher, giving voice to victims of police shootings and believed-to-be hate crimes. *(continued)*





Algiers, whose three core members—Fisher, Ryan Mahan, and Lee Tesche—met in suburban Atlanta before scattering to pursue various graduate degrees, now split time between Europe and New York. No surprise, then, the musicians, in their mid-30s, reference last year's presidential election and Brexit movement for coloring the album. *The Underside of Power* often feels like a panic-attack reaction to both. It's dedicated to activity and forward momentum, as evidenced by such vastly different tunes as the elastic Public Image Ltd-meets-Southern blues of "Death March" and slow-burning "Mme Rieux," where a classical piano shares space with reverberating guitars and digital effects that flicker like a raging torch.

A diverse string of collaborators, including Adrian Utley of electronic act Portishead and experimental hard-rock producer Randall Dunn, flesh out the varied elements. More than any genre or literature influence (the group cites Albert Camus' *The Plague* for leading to "Mme Rieux"), *The Underside of Power* proves irresistible because of its lived-in topicality. Fisher,

for instance, works at a posh New York nightclub checking coats. The job is certainly beneath his literature degree but allows him to witness casual, everyday elements of classism and racism—in part due to the mostly white clientele celebrating music that documents the black experience.

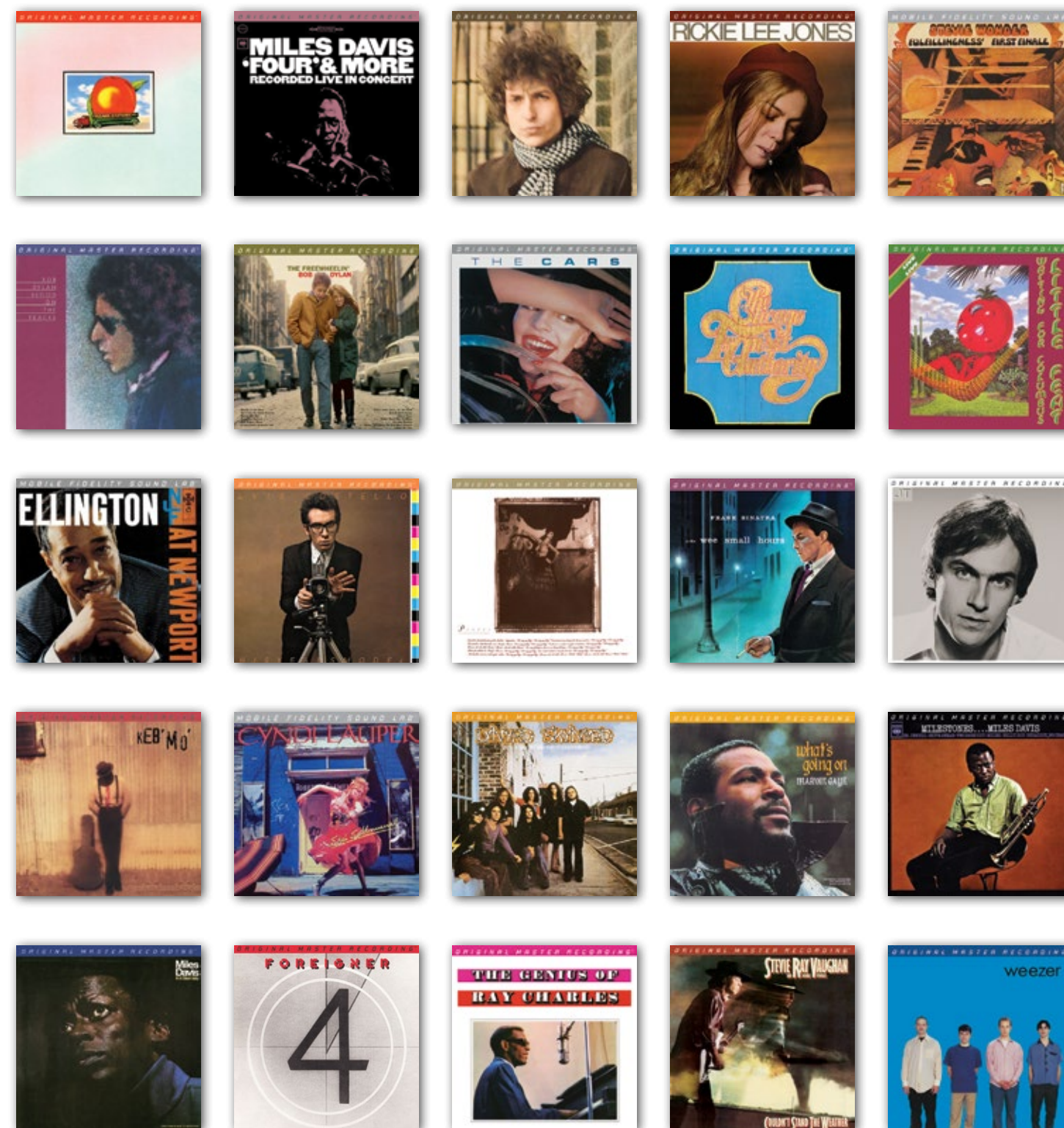
As *The Underside of Power* winds down, it slows down, with some songs approaching lament status. The fiery anger of the title track ultimately leads to a place of confusion, wondering if a way forward exists from this mixed-up, muddled and acrimonious moment in history. The solitary and hauntingly repetitive piano of "A Hymn for An Average Man" twists and turns until it resembles a horror-film soundtrack, the tune condemning not questionable leaders but those who gave the misguided their power, urging them to see "the mess that you have made."

Ultimately, it serves as an optimistic moment, for this is not an album of us versus them. Rather, *The Underside of Power* wants everyone to open their eyes and see we're all in this together. —**Todd Martens**

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Jason Isbell goes home on the remarkable *The Nashville Sound*. While the notion of place has always played a considerable role in the singer/guitarist's music, the comfort, grounding, and direction it provides on his sixth studio album have never been greater. Economically concise and conversationally poetic, this a record on which Isbell lets us see the prairie grass shift in the breeze, hear the gentle rustling of wind, stare at the big sky overhead, smell the sweetness of ripening corn, and feel the settled dirt on the ground of the very spaces he holds dear. He and his 400 Unit backing band invite everyone to take it all in with deep, patient, relaxing breaths. In a time rife with social and political turmoil in the US and abroad, the work comes on as a reminder of what really matters and how to locate inner peace amidst tumult.

As has become his trademark, Isbell stocks the album with candid albeit profound morsels of lived-in advice and logical reflections.

By now, Isbell's colorful biography, recovery, and rise to Grammy-winning stardom are well documented, with 2013's autobiographical *Southeastern* and, to an extent, 2015's *Something More Than Free* chronicling his life cycle. Here, the Alabama native continues to turn his focus away from himself and towards relatable characters and everyday themes addressed with deceiving straightforwardness. "I've sung enough about myself," the 38-year-old states on "Hope the High Road," the words tucked into a verse like a crisp t-shirt concealed under a sweater and stuffed into a pair of dress jeans. The line is so modest, and passes so quickly, it almost begs to remain unnoticed. Yet the lyrics prove illustrative in terms of approach and substance. Not only does Isbell extend a remarkable songwriting streak, he again displays growth and an ongoing desire to advance the craft.

The protagonists on *The Nashville Sound*—the title a winking dig at the predominant commercial pop style currently associated with the city, and one oceans apart from the roots-based sonics embraced by Isbell and company—could seemingly coexist on the pages of classic Southern and Midwestern novels. Their faces and backgrounds take shape in the span of just one or two lines, their circumstances and concerns plainly laid out, devoid of ornamentation or excess. Isbell's steady, calm, reassuring voice underscores their unassuming nature and unpretentious demeanor. The group's spare, no-frills playing and organic tones complete the settings via illuminating accents and soulful shading. Every note pairs in a seamless fashion, from Isbell's ace slide-guitar passages to Chad Gamble's unobtrusive drumming. (Go-to producer and longtime collaborator Dave Cobb again manned the boards and recorded everything at RCA's Studio A.)

As they have ever since Isbell bowed on the scene in 2003 with "Decoration Day" while a member of the Drive-By Truckers, poignancy, dignity, and sincerity inform his empathetic writing and, in his context of a person's worth, count for far more



Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit

The Nashville Sound

Thirty Tigers, LP or CD

than flaws or digressions. On the opening "Last of My Kind," a rustic tune so cozy it yearns to be played beside a crackling fireplace, the rural-loving narrator wonders aloud as to whether he fits in anywhere as Isbell's finger-picked acoustic guitar stitches together shimmering, sympathetic scenery suggestive of wide-open fields. A girl, the promise of escape, and fact "ain't no one from here will follow" provide reasons why the principal in "Tupelo" is Mississippi-bound. Musically, the dust-broom sweep of the easy rhythm and country-inspired melody underscore the relief at hand. Sometimes, a locale's longed-for identity remains lost to time. The slash-and-burn scrape of "Cumberland Gap" details a lineage of hard drinking, ruinous commercialism, and mind-numbing vices that stand in for former values and traditions. "Remember when we could see the mountain's peak," Isbell sings, recalling better days while attempting to hold fast to customs now as faded as the sun-beaten roof of an old Pontiac. *(continued)*

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MUSIC



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Indeed, Isbell reminds us the past ever fully goes away. It doesn't necessarily haunt or determine current decisions, yet has a say in defining one's individuality. On the clever, jaunty, and humorous "Chaos and Clothes," history assumes the form of ex-lovers and the associated baggage left behind hiding in the subconscious. During the sturm-und-drang of "Anxiety," the past rears its head as constant worry—a claustrophobia-causing menace looming over pleasure, disrupting sleep, and threatening isolation. Here, even amidst hurricane-force riffs and subterranean bass lines, Isbell again equates home and place with comfort. Throughout the swampy "White Man's World," among the most fearless

and topical works of Isbell's career, history involves ugly truths, shaken faiths, and traumatic displacement. But it also leads to a self-awareness and cautious optimism that part the clouds.

Similar strains of mercy and hope emerge throughout *The Nashville Sound*, most affectingly on the heartfelt ballad "If We Were Vampires" and, most revealingly, on the two closing tracks. On the former, a striking duet between Isbell and his wife/violinist/400 Unit secret weapon Amanda Shires, the couple pledges their love as they acknowledge one partner will likely die before the other all the while imagining how less traumatic the process would be if they were undead beasts. For the fist-pump-

ing "Hope the High Road" and whirling barn dance "Something to Love," Isbell aims at sentiments just as serious and lasting.

Arriving at related conclusions in different manners, each song speaks to the importance of not giving up, maintaining bearings, and finding happiness in what you pursue. For Isbell, such solace encompasses home, family, honesty, and simplicity—tenets sturdy enough to withstand almost anything life throws in our path. On *The Nashville Sound*, Isbell and the 400 Unit give us the front porch, star-strewn sky, sweet harmonies, and memorable songs needed to make the same fulfilling choices. It's up to us to put it them all to good use. —**Bob Gendron**

S

teve Earle is an esteemed musical veteran, but there was a time when the Texas troubadour was the new kid on the block. He first landed in Nashville in 1974 at the age of 19, just in time to see the outlaw movement break wide open with Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson leading the way. Earle's new *So You Wannabe An Outlaw* serves a salute to the artists of that era—and the beloved firebrands who shaped Earle's own aesthetic of raw country-rock rave-ups and wounded balladry. He even dedicates the album to the late Jennings, who passed away in 2002.



Steve Earle

So You Wannabe An Outlaw
Warner Bros. Records, 2LP or CD

Lone Star singer-songwriter Guy Clark, a roughhewn Shakespeare of the plains who died last year, remained chief among Earle's early mentors. Earle salutes his late friend and teacher on "Goodbye Michelangelo." The delicately picked acoustic number comes loaded with conflicted goodbyes such as "I'm bound to follow you some day/You have always shown the way." Earle's tobacco-and-whiskey scarred vocals emerge like well-earned personal trademarks—an appropriate trait given his elder-statesman status.

Akin to his outlaw forefathers, Earle is man enough to show his tender side. The aforementioned Clark tribute ranks among the slower material here, joining the effecting rootsy ballads "The Girl on the Mountain" and "News from Colorado." Then there's the raucous material. "Fixin' to Die" finds the gritty sweet spot between metal and roots rock. Earle's scorched-earth voice cries out from a cauldron of sound that recalls a marriage of Blue Oyster Cult and the Georgia Satellites.



Indeed, Earle has never made a bad record, and plenty of strong material informs *So You Wannabe An Outlaw*. He gets able backing from his longtime band the Dukes: guitarist Chris Masterson and fiddler Eleanor Whitmore (a husband-and-wife team who also have their own career as the duo the Mastersons); bassist Kelley Looney; and two new members, drummer Brad Pemberton and pedal-steel guitarist Ricky Ray Jackson. The group bangs out a sturdy beat and chiming electric-guitar riffs on the hard honky-tonk number "The Firebreak Line" and creates an infectious galloping rhythm for "Lookin' for a Woman."

Earle also entertains several duets. He teams with country star Miranda Lambert for their co-write "This Is How It Ends," a rousing country-rocker with Tex-Mex accents. The vintage two-stepping ditty "Walkin' In L.A." features a guest spot from the venerable Johnny Bush, lauded country singer and songwriter of the classic "Whiskey River." At 82, Bush shows his years with a thin vocal, but the performance feels undeniably touching.

Kudos to Earle for bringing the legend back into the studio. It's a fitting moment on an album on which Earle pays homage to his heroes and simultaneously accepts the torch from them. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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MUSIC



Fleet Foxes

Crack-Up

Nonesuch, 2LP or CD



I am all that I need.” These are the words that greet the listener at the start of Fleet Foxes’ *Crack-Up*, the group’s first album in six years. It’s a phrase that immediately seems to shut out the eavesdropper, and you must strain to hear it. Singer/band architect Robin Pecknold appears buried in the shadows of some deep-toned, echo-filled acoustic guitar notes, sounding as if he doesn’t really want to be found. And maybe he doesn’t: During varying points throughout the unfolding, three-part suite of a song, he disappears into a whisper.

Anyone familiar with Fleet Foxes’ history may want to set aside memories of past albums when experiencing *Crack-Up*—if not forget them altogether. What had been an increasingly ornate and fanciful folk-pop style gets largely left behind here. Consider this a reset.

Indeed, after an initial listen or two, listeners even may be tempted to define *Crack-Up* as a work of introspection, especially based on the album’s opening line and general low-key tone. But the collection is also obtuse and its arrangements erratic, characteristics that lend a sense of coldness. As the name implies, *Crack-Up* signifies something of an emotional mess, a post-existential crisis of an album full of split personalities and sonic detours, and yet one where such manic tendencies feel obsessively organized. If a loose concept ties these songs together, consider it one of trying to maintain composure in times of stress. Or, you know, life in 2017.

The Seattle-bred quintet—all members are billed as multi-instrumentalists—takes largely experimental approaches throughout. A song may begin with the soft hum of a synthesizer and in moments be met by light accoutrements such as a gently strummed guitar. Arrangements then often come up against imaginary concrete walls, forcing songs to suddenly shift direction and swell in scope and size with harmonies and lush acoustic instrumentation or calming strings. The latter serve as the sort of beautiful moments for which Fleet Foxes are known, but Pecknold and longtime musical collaborator Skyler Skjelset ultimately keep the listener at arm’s length, preferring a less-straightforward approach.

(continued)



©Photo by Shawn Brackbill

Fleet Foxes still qualify as folksy, yet instead of possessing the woodsy charm of the band's first two albums, *Crack-Up* embraces a classical approach. In other words, this is music that would work in a chamber hall. See the alternating, mournful piano notes that launch "Kept Woman" or the lonely, dirge-like "On Another Ocean (January / June)," where the beat flutters with the tick-tock of a stuttering, broken clock and orchestral flourishes crest and fall like ocean waves. On "Mearcstapa," plucked strings created an underlying hypnotic feel that soon yields to contrasting notes—a more urgent bass, a rhythm with all the smoothness of a rickshaw ride, and watery, nearly indecipherable symphonic instruments.

With the album's title sharing the same name as a 1936 essay from F. Scott Fitzgerald, a fellow soul-searching confessional, Pecknold aptly adopts thoughtful, slightly imaginative lyrical devices. "I move like blood, like fire and flood," he sings on "Fool's Errand," a jaunty ditty made weirder by the shape-shifting instrumentation that seems to bend as if reflected in a curved mirror. On the oddly punctuated "Cassius, —," Pecknold presents a vision of society breaking down, in which men steal from beggars and violence occurs with no relief in sight. "Red and blue, the useless sirens scream," he sings in an unaffected manner, at least in the opening moments. Akin to many tunes on *Crack-Up*, "Cassius, —" soon unspools into at least three different parts, where wavering

synths give way to lightly brushed guitars.

Egyptian Gods and references to the Civil War clash in "I Should See Memphis," a spare number in which a strummed guitar rushes ahead of a sweetened violin. History and literature meet again in the title track, which builds to a horn-infused march only to dissolve into near-nothingness. Any evident drama remains hidden behind lines like, "The tighter the fist, the looser the sand," lending the narrative some English lit-worthy classicism.

By going more philosophical than personal, Fleet Foxes have produced a meticulously designed but oddly aloof collection—one admirable yet difficult to embrace. It's almost as if *Crack-Up* is intended to be studied rather than heard.
—**Todd Martens**

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Jim Lauderdale

London Southern
Proper Records, CD

I first interviewed Jim Lauderdale 20 years ago. During the course of our conversation, we went to the Nashville music club the Station Inn. He was eager to catch a set by his dear pal and mentor, bluegrass icon Ralph Stanley. Lauderdale drove a nondescript late-model car—functional, but nothing fancy. With his shag hair, suit trousers, and plain western shirt, he seemed as low-key as his vehicle. If you didn't know his backstory, you could easily miss the fact that he reigned as one of the most commercially successful songwriters in Nashville.

Indeed, Lauderdale boasts a fascinating history. As a solo artist, he has recorded many projects for myriad labels over the course of a modest but vibrant career. As a stellar tune-smith, however, he's won the mailbox money lottery, penning material for a plethora of artists including hits for trad-country singers Patty Loveless and the great George Jones. Lauderdale's songs are also all over George Strait's watershed *Pure Country* soundtrack.

On his own recordings, Lauderdale freely follows his muse. Equally at home in bluegrass, rock n' roll, folk and blues, he's an artist steeped in country's hallowed past as well as its most progressive innovations. For his newest album, *London Southern*, Lauderdale combines his deep love for vintage soul and R&B with classic 60s pop.

He gets smart assistance from Neil Brockbank, a producer-engineer best known for his lengthy collaboration with British pop legend Nick Lowe. Lauderdale also enlisted the latter's touring band to back him in the studio. This stellar crew proves an inspired choice

to bring the material to life—the musicianship is first-rate, the energy crisp and alive.

A tinkling piano and walking bass line pulse through the soulful plea "Sweet Time," a marriage between a Ray Price shuffle and the Fats Domino hit "Blueberry Hill." The satin-smooth "I Love You More" comes across as vintage pre-rock orchestral pop, a quiet storm of shimmering strings and yearning vocals. As a singer, Lauderdale's crackly but light voice has deepened and grown more assured with age. The lyrics to "If I Can't Resist" feel simple—the song's narrator is a besotted wannabe Romeo begging his prospective lover for a kiss and "amore." Singing against a sultry bossa nova beat, Lauderdale aches with desire. "My world is in your hands," he confesses, his emotions laid bare.

Lauderdale also knows his history. He evinces a deep penchant for vintage soul and rhythm and blues, evoking legends such as Marvin Gaye and Wilson Pickett on the steamy slow-burn "Different Kind of Groove Some Time." Tooting horns and jazzy guitar licks

punctuate "You Came to Get Me," a dollop of breezy and effortless pop. The vocal owes a debt to Irish icon Van Morrison.

Lauderdale sounds equally effective on "What Have You Got to Lose," an upbeat gospel-influenced number that harks back to the call-and-response harmonies of the Staple Singers. By extension, "Don't Shut Me Down" gets infused with the classic Bakersfield Sound, right down to the chicken-pickin' Fender guitars. It serves as a mighty homage to Merle Haggard and Buck Owens, the style's most famous pioneers.

"We've only got so much time here," Lauderdale sings on the song of the same name. "Life's going by like a race/ And I hope I'm not too late." In terms of his output, the prolific Lauderdale need not worry. *London Southern* makes for a fine entry in a well-spent career that shows no sign of letting up. —**Chrissie Dickinson**



Girlpool

Powerplant

Anti- Records, 45RPM LP or CD

When Harmony Tividad and Cleo Tucker formally appeared as Girlpool in late 2014, the then-Los Angeles-based duo penned songs that felt like private conversations between teenagers. Their tunes were the sort of works that unfolded like handwritten notes discretely passed in a classroom. Their dual vocals owed as much to harmonizing as answering each other's sentences.

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Deeply personal, surprisingly sarcastic, and offhandedly blunt, Girlpool could be curiously frank when it came to talk of sex and gender identity, but also awkwardly sincere on matters of the heart. When the two sang, "Dear Nora, there's a lot that's changed this year" on 2015's *Before the World Was Big*, the musicians referred to growing up too fast—not nostalgia.

With just two voices and often, acoustic guitars, Girlpool epitomized the fragility of youth even as the women looked ahead to adulthood. There's something rather punk about the debut record's folksy emotional nakedness that recalled the coarse, do-it-yourself aesthetic of early Elliott Smith and Bright Eyes. Rather than going to college, the band continues to lead a soft, earnest resurgence that includes the likes of Julien Baker and Frankie Cosmos. The tandem has even won the heart of Los Angeles singer/songwriter royalty like Jenny Lewis and keeps a connection to underground venues such as the Smell.

Yet Girlpool should really be considered a noise-rock duo without the noise, preferring the candid power of words instead of distortion. On *Poweplant*, Girlpool continues to educate listeners with minimal arrangements that don't say more than they need to—or, rather, let us infer what's left unsaid. Recorded for hip indie imprint Anti- Records, an off-shoot of punk stalwart Epitaph, *Powerplant* presents 12 songs in under 30 minutes, some of them needing just four or five stanzas. *(continued)*

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Sonically, *Girlpool* beefs up its sound with drums. Miles Wintner's percussion adds an explosive jolt that heightens the drama. Newcomers and older fans alike will simply appreciate the way album-opener "123" shifts course at about the 50-second mark, where a calming lullaby of interlocking guitars bursts wide open. And if Tividad and Tucker are poetically abstract in their lyrical approach, they're also suspicious.

"While the moth doesn't talk/But in the dress the holes you saw," they sing.

Such anxious wordplay dots the work. "I live in a gallery that no one's ever seen," the duo sings on "Sleepless." On the dreamy and dreary "Soup," an even more biting statement—"You have lots of potential, can you feel it?"—emerges. The fuller arrangements don't persuade *Girlpool* to get louder. *Powerplant* remains relatively assured in its pop guise.

"Corner Store" owns a bright and peppy circular groove, and "Your Heart" lets a deeply confident bass push the song forward. The wistful vocals of "Kiss and Burn" contrast with themes of loneliness, and Tividad and Tucker let the listener hear each twist, strum, and brush of the guitars. Detail is the key throughout.

Indeed, everything about *Girlpool* radiates closeness, be it in the chiming urgency of "She Goes By" or slow-evolving, Sunday-morning feel of "It Gets More Blue," on which the pair sings, "The nihilist tells you that nothing is true/I said I faked global warming just to get close to you."

The things some of us do for intimacy. —**Todd Martens**



©Photo by Sarah O'Driscoll



JOHN MORELAND / BIG BAD LUV

John Moreland

Big Bad Luv
4AD, LP or CD

When John Moreland appeared on “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert” in 2016, the Americana singer-songwriter delivered a hushed tour de force with the solo acoustic ballad “Break My Heart Sweetly.” The performance earned an ecstatic response from the audience—no mean feat given Moreland doesn’t fit the typical matinee-idol frontman mold.

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Oversized and heavily bearded, outfitted with a ball cap and big glasses, and his arms covered with tattoos, Moreland looks more like one of the “back row kids” photojournalist Chris Arnade sensitively chronicles in word and picture. They are poverty-stricken and working-class Americans who—despite living in decaying urban neighborhoods and collapsing small towns—display depth, insight, and a wounded albeit persevering sense of humanity. Moreland’s gravelly vocals recall several blue-collar rockers who hail from the Rust Belt (Bob Seger), factory town (Bruce Springsteen), and farming heartland (John Mellencamp).

It’s only fitting that Moreland carries forward the venerable troubadour torch. On his fourth solo album, *Big Bad Luv*, the music takes the form of earthy uptempo rockers and disconsolate ballads. In both gears, Moreland sounds down-to-the-bone authentic. The bracing blues-rocker “Sallisaw Blue” rides along on waves of honking harmonica, woozy guitar, cascading piano, and a slapping beat. “Let’s get wrecked and bruised and battered,” he sings. His scorched-earth voice careens between joy and gallows humor as he references slumming down I-40 and sipping cold medicine.



©Photo by Joey Kneiser

“Love’s a violent word,” he opines on the pulsing heart-breaker “Old Wounds.” The sentiment informs many songs here, on which affairs of the heart are doomed from the start or sadly contemplated through a rearview mirror. And like a masochist who can’t resist the punishment, Moreland seems inexorably drawn to heartache like a moth to a flame. “I guess I’m dying to let you ruin me,” he sings on “Every Kind of Wrong.” Relationships inevitably involve troubling detours. The beautifully produced “Love Is Not an Answer” is filled with throaty organ chords and a sensuous swaying beat. But the bittersweet words grapple with the vagaries of

desire: “Love is not an answer/I don’t need an answer/I need you.”

Big Bad Luv sounds lovely throughout, punctuated by addictive melodies and thoughtful arrangements. A solo finger-picked acoustic guitar and Moreland’s lone voice carry the melancholy “No Glory in Regret.” “Slow Down Easy” steadies itself on a stately gospel-influenced groove. Washes of echoing electric guitar and tinkling piano notes cascade around crisp drums on “Lies I Chose to Believe.” Lyrics throw shadows across the sun-dappled landscape as Moreland sings the lines “You were a lie I chose to believe” and “Love

ain’t a sickness, though I once thought it was.”

As a writer, Moreland stocks songs with shards of perception and carefully wrought turns of phrase. Unfortunately, his lyrics also include some head-scratching images too abstract for their own good. References to an “Armageddon jury” and “a guilty sky” feel more clumsy and confusing than illuminating.

Yet Moreland’s appealingly unvarnished voice and memorable tunes more than make up for occasional lyrical missteps. Best of all, his songs embrace the ragged edges of the heart rather than run from them.

—**Chrissie Dickinson**


She-Devils
She-Devils

Secretly Canadian, LP or CD

S ometime in the early-to-mid 80s, a bunch of would-be adventurers helped resurrect the tiki-bar craze. Still thriving today, tiki bars confuse reality and fantasy, providing purveyors with colorfully ridiculous representations of a relaxed island life all while peddling debauchery in the form of high-proof rum-drenched drinks. Little truth can be found inside tiki bars, as their representations of Polynesian life are based upon outsiders' nostalgia for a past that never existed. No matter. For many, the entirely modern creation offers a cheery albeit sinful escape into a make-believe vintage world.

Montreal's She-Devils chase a like-minded sort of getaway on their debut.

Surf-rock guitars and baroque-pop variations suggest a beachfront lifestyle. Plenty of depravity exists as well, arriving in the form of the words that often probe varying degrees of lust. Throughout, vocalist Ann Boucher musical partner Kyle Jukka construct songs out of seemingly found parts. Arrangements feel cobbled together from guitar bits and abstract concepts left behind at a swanky lounge once frequented by Andy Warhol. Think of the project as Quentin Tarantino with a synthesizer. She-Devils' pastiches are of the moment, but made to sound as if from another era.

While parts of the album certainly come off as postcards from the 60s, the She-Devils aren't dedicated to the art of resurrection. *(continued)*

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A toy-like playfulness pervades the arrangements and makes the duo sound more like kids rummaging through mom and dad's attic, picking up and discarding styles as if they're only to be worn for as long as it takes to create an Instagram post. The go-go dancing strut, sultry come-ons, and outer-space buzz of "Hey Boy"? Snap. The Nancy Sinatra swagger, pinpoint guitars, and bachelor-pad psychedelics on "Darling"? Snap. The alien static, flowery balladry, and woozy yearning of "How Do You Feel"? Snap.

All this is to say that when it comes to surface style, She-Devils got it. Boucher functions an oddly appealing vocalist. However untrained, she sings with a detached, Nico-like coolness (snap!). She carries the hula-meets-Western strum of "Never Let Me Go" (snap!) and steers the take-it-slow tale of "Blooming," in which a thick, Beach Boys-like bass line delivers what could be the

rejection letter in response to "Wouldn't It Be Nice" (snap!).

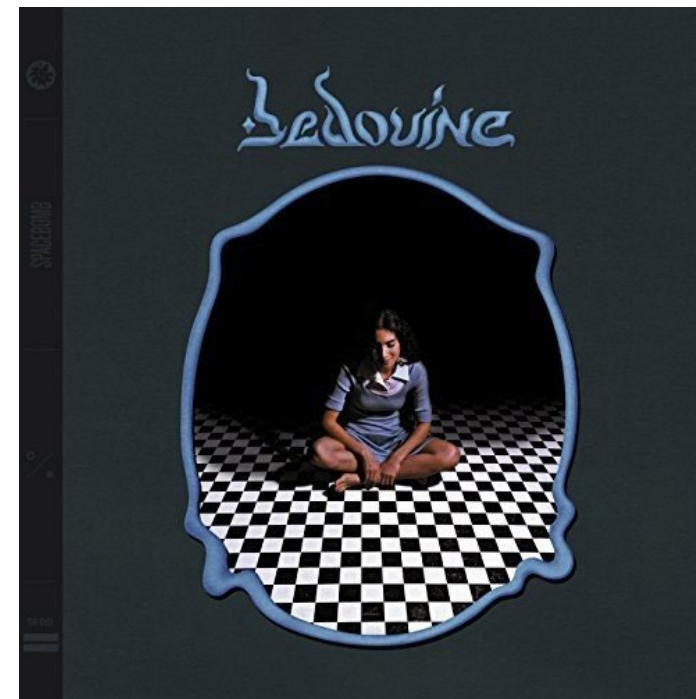
Throughout, ambient noises flutter in and out, as if to remind us that She-Devils exist in 2017 and not 1967. But they are like filters that we apply on a photo to make it more palatable for social media, here and there giving the She-Devils a brief, tech-savvy makeover. We're left with a collection of scenes—a visit to the past that's one more chic than studious. The songs are a trip down memory lane, but an imagined one—a cultural mash-up that doubles as a tiki-bar recreation of a history no one ever really lived.

Or, to use a more modern metaphor, consider *She-Devils* the musical equivalent of a clever photo op for our app-driven age. She-Devils know how to get our attention, but still have to work on holding it.

—Todd Martens



©Photo by Polly Antonia Barrowman

**Bedouine***Bedouine*

Spacebomb Records, LP or CD

Azniv Korkejian, who performs under the name Bedouine, has followed a nomadic path in both her life and music. A singer-songwriter of Armenian heritage, she was born in Aleppo, Syria, and raised in Saudi Arabia before relocating to the United States with her parents. Continuing her wandering ways, she spent time in Boston, Houston, Los Angeles, Lexington, Austin, and Savannah. Along the way, she earned a degree in sound design. Korkejian finally ended up back in Los Angeles, finding kindred artistic spirits among the hipster habitués of Echo Park.

Produced by Gus Seyffert, her self-titled debut serves as a striking introduction to a unique performer. The opening "Nice and Quiet" sets the tone with dreamy and sleek atmospherics. With her alluring and cottony-soft vocals, Korkejian at times sounds like a doppelganger of Astrud Gilberto, the legendary bossa-nova singer best known for the classic 1964 hit "The Girl from Ipanema."

Korkejian's songwriting proves both oddball and arresting, her words frequently taking unexpected turns they create a remarkable frisson. On "Back to You," she sings, "Like a lamp in the light of day/Drowning in summer rays/I can hardly feel unrequited." Equally striking, "You Kill Me" features shimmering strings and the vocalist planning to get in her car and drive nowhere in the night. Such mysterious images and scenarios get tucked inside sweet songs like so many pieces of fine chocolate hidden behind the tiny doors of an Advent calendar.

Romantic desire also percolates through her restrained tales. On the slow and esoteric R&B number "Dusty Eyes," the yearning narrator confesses that lampposts burning in the night "don't come close to the way I feel about you." The spare, folky "Solitary Daughter" finds Korkejian observing "I am a lake/I don't need to be watered" as her voice dips into old-school recitation. A subdued country outlaw groove undergirds "One of These Days," which sleepily glides along on a warm, insistent walking bass line. A plaint about lopsided love with one person holding out hope her lover will one day reciprocate her feelings, the music recalls vintage Waylon Jennings, with Korkejian's breezy albeit bittersweet voice standing in for the soulful Jessi Colter. "It's stunning, honey, how love has some delays," she intones in an intimate near-whisper.

Occasionally, Korkejian's lyrics seem obtuse or abstract, as on the eerie and impenetrable "Summer Cold." But that's a minor quibble. *Bedouine* makes for a lovely debut. It's best to sit back, close your eyes, enter her singular world, and enjoy the journey. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

**Dasher**

Sodium
Jagjaguwar, LP or CD

Dasher leader Kylee Kimbrough said in a recent interview that one of her favorite things about her time spent living in Bloomington, Indiana, relates to the fact that most of the houses in the city have basements. The Atlanta native's love of the subterranean should be relatively apparent after one spends a few moments with *Sodium*, the debut from her all-loud, all-the-time punk outfit.

The opening "We Know So" launches with the kind of industrial-sounding wailing one would expect to hear on the decks of a shipping barge. A crush of rhythms and an aggressively dominant rush of guitars follow. And that says nothing of Kimbrough's vocals—the sort that almost makes your voice hoarse just by listening to them. One immediately may feel sorry for Kimbrough's neighbors. The singer/drummer doesn't need a basement to contain this noise; she needs a bunker.

Sodium proves an old punk rock adage: furiously passionate frustration never goes out of style. Offering 11 songs in about 30 minutes, *Sodium* speeds by and requires close listening to get a grapple on Kimbrough's personal, stream-of-conscious-like lyrics. She claims many chronicle her experience living with a then-undiagnosed case of high-functioning autism.

Throughout, the quartet seems more intent on capturing a frantic, feverish emotional state over anything resembling clear communication. Often, you can only pick up slivers of Kimbrough's verses. At times, they're existential ("I see the eyes in the back of my head and I know it's not me," she growls on "Go Rambo"), and at other moments, she hits more directly, upping the anxiety factor by delivering the lines like someone pulling out their hair: "Don't you. Know that. I still. Love you," she sings on "Eye See," slicing a sentence into panicked fragments.

It comes across as hard rock that feels just out of center, the sonic equivalent of straining to see the tiny lines of random text on an eye exam chart. Such an effect is carried out via the echo-like effects placed on Kimbrough's delivery, which allow the words to essentially hover over the brash, distorted guitars of Steve Garcia and Derek McCain. As a reference point, think of early Hole, but with more of a machine-like, thrashy presence. *(continued)*

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But don't always expect to know where to focus. Varying the pace is one of Dasher's strengths. "Soviet" opens with the sound of what could be a jet powering down, only to pick back up again with Kimbrough's accelerating drums. Rhythms work like blades burrowing into thick icebergs. Aptly, the guitars feel wickedly cold on "Teeth," a song that, before it comes to a sludgy end, hits multiple highs and lows while jerking forward and back without warning. "Trespass" gets fancy around Gary Magilla's cavernous bass, with Kimbrough channeling her inner dragon and letting Garcia and McCain doodle at will.

By contrast, "Resume" goes old school, beginning with a straightforward drive sure to please anyone with a leather jacket full of patches nodding to late-70s New York and London bands. But it gets louder, bolder and hazier as it unfolds, and eventually, Kimbrough's indecipherable vocals become a raspy, reverberating instrument. You may not know what, precisely, the song has to do with a resume, but you will likely want to get out of the way. Or turn it up. —**Todd Martens**

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— Mark Henninger, *AVS*

Visually, the Reference offers a strikingly beautiful upgrade to the classic Triton styling, with a gorgeous hand-rubbed piano gloss-black lacquer finished one-piece monocoque cabinet. Sleek, statuesque and refined, the Reference is simply an elegantly gorgeous statement piece that will excite listeners with its dynamic visual presence, as well as its extraordinary sonic performance.

Sonically, the Reference has been engineered to perform with a dramatic and authoritative voice, comparable to speakers that sell for ten and more times its surprisingly affordable price. T Refs completely disappear, with superb three-dimensional imaging that will open up your room, stretching from wall to wall and beyond, and depth that makes the wall behind them seem to vanish. The astonishing bass is rock-solid, with low-frequency performance that is tight, quick, highly impactful and musical with extension flat to 20Hz and below. Another GoldenEar signature is a silky smooth high end that extends to 35 kHz with a lifelike sheen but no trace of fatiguing hardness, sibilance or stridency so common with lesser tweeters. Tremendous time and energy has been put into the voicing of the speaker and the seamless blending of the drivers, for unmatched musicality with all types of music, and home theater perfection. Rarely do speakers excel at both, but with their world-class neutrality, the Reference absolutely does. A special bonus is the Reference's extremely high 93.25 dB sensitivity, which gives them tremendous dynamic range and allows use with almost any high-quality amplifier. You must experience T Ref for yourself!

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Triton Reference
\$4249 ea.

Atoll Electronique IN100se Integrated Amplifier

By Rob Johnson

Based in the Normandy region of France, Atoll Electronique started from humble roots in 1997. Two brothers, Stéphane & Emmanuel Dubreuil, had a specific goal in mind. They wished to design marvelous audio components at price points in the reach of most audiophiles. Over the course of the next two decades, Atoll Electronique has continued its effort to expand and refine their product lines. Their IN100se solid-state integrated amplifier has remained an ongoing fan favorite since its release in 2000. This is amazing longevity in audiophile world.



FEATURE



The IN100se is straightforward in appearance, following their philosophy of sonic prowess as the priority over encasing electronics in audio jewelry. For those like me who enjoy the most bang for their audio buck, I applaud Atoll for striking an important balance here. Externals do look nice, but sonics are paramount among most budget conscious audio fans. Still, this Atoll offers an understated elegance with a thick aluminum faceplate anodized in either black or silver. Matte black steel sheets bent perfectly into the needed shape comprise the rest of the case. Subtleties like the hourglass-shaped grouping of drilled vent holes on the top and the button layout on the front panel indicate Atoll's attention to style and detail.

The most prominent feature on the IN100's faceplate is the large volume knob in the center, flanked on the left by Atoll's logo, and on the right by the few control buttons. Two pencil-width buttons stacked atop each other allow the owner to toggle up and down

through the various input sources. When depressed, a corresponding green LED marks the input chosen. The LEDs themselves are placed into a crescent shape offering a nice visual contrast to right angles dictated by the case. A similarly sized button controls power-up, as indicated by another LED. When in standby, the power LED glows orange. In that scenario, standby mode keeps critical internal circuitry warm, and at the ready. When powered up, that LED changes color. Like a traffic light, green means go!

Ins and outs

At 10 Kg, the IN100 reveals the heft of the large internal transformer at its heart. Dimensions of 440 x 90 x 270mm give this integrated amp a shelf-friendly size while ensuring the needed real estate on the back panel to feature a wealth of RCA ins and outs. *(continued)*

FEATURE



The single-ended topology offers its owner flexible options for use in a stereo environment or as part of a home theater setup. Four sets of inputs are pre-labeled as Aux, CD, Tuner, and DVD.

Another big bonus with this Atoll is the built-in headphone amplifier accessible on the front plate though a 1/4" plug. Experimenting with several headphones including the Sony MDR-7506, Sennheiser HD650, and Audeze LCD-X, the IN100 demonstrates plenty of power to drive 'cans with authority. Those with headphones requiring a mini-jack 1/8" input will need an adapter.

The IN100 also offers a few other handy features. RCA tape loop ins and outs and a home theater bypass allow the IN100 additional flexibility as part of a larger, or multi-purpose audio system. Rounding out these options, a pair of preamp outs are another welcome feature. First, those with powered subwoofers can use these outputs to route lower frequencies. Secondly, should the Atoll owner purchase a standalone amp

at some point, he or she can decouple the IN100's amp section, and use the IN100 as a line stage preamplifier only. While there is not a phono stage built into the Atoll, the many input options certainly make room for a phono stage of the owner's choice to utilize the Aux input, alongside other connected sources.

A set of five-way binding posts makes speaker cable connections easy with spades, bananas, pins or bare wire. Despite the budget consciousness of the IN100's build, the connectors offer another positive surprise. They are made of metal rather than cheap plastic. Indentations around the circumference of the binding posts make it easy to tighten them down on the speaker cables using only one's fingers. However, if spade-terminated cables dangle downward from an IN100 placed at the rear edge of an audio rack, it is a good idea to use a post wrench to apply a little more torque and ensure the cables do not work their way loose over time. *(continued)*

FEATURE

Under the hood

As the name suggests, the IN100se offers 100 watts into 8 Ohm speaker loads, and 140 watts into 4 Ohm, giving it plenty of juice to fuel a broad range of speakers. Those seeking more oomph may consider the IN100's more powerful sibling, the IN200. However, the IN100 did a solid job of controlling the GamuT RS3i speakers used during testing, offering plenty of punch at normal listening levels.

The Atoll is designed to deliver a frequency range of 5 Hz – 100 kHz, exceeding the range of human hearing on both ends of the spectrum. Without specialized testing equipment, or a bat and an elephant onsite to share their perspective on the claims, we will need to take Atoll's word for that. Based on the frequencies the human ear can distinguish though, the amplifier does a very competent job delivering music with a seemingly neutral voice that does not over-emphasize portions of the frequency spectrum.

Listening

After about a week of burn-in, the Atoll's voice develops fully, so be sure not to make any sonic judgments before it has time to deliver all of that it is capable. It is capable of a lot! At first listen, the music emitted belies the IN100's modest price point. One cannot expect the world for \$1,650 yet the Atoll offers many welcome surprises.

The IN100se's sound staging capability is extremely proficient. It places music well outside the speaker bodies when the music dictates it. Akin to a third-row seat at a concert, vocals are upfront in the soundstage. Instruments to the right left, and rear of the soundstage have substantial presence and layering. Yes, more expensive gear can project greater detail with a more tactile, defined form to each musical element. If you wish to discern the sound of each saxophone key snapping



FEATURE

back into position after a musician's finger releases it, it is not fair to expect the IN100 to do that. Through the Atoll, though, minute sonic tradeoffs are easy to forget in exchange for the bigger musical picture. The musicality and smoothness of the musical portrayal encourage the listener sink in and enjoy music without nitpicking shortcomings in gear projecting it. If your speakers need a bit more life and sparkle, the N100 might be just the ticket.

Yes, this integrated can rock. Through it, Green Day's "Holiday" maintains the energy and speed of the performance, with plenty of tightly-rendered punch. There's nothing syrupy about the presentation. However, those listeners who spend most time enjoying hard rock, and who crave a bombastically rendered, hefty portrayal, may find the IN100se just a touch to the polite, bright side. At the same time, the nuances of the IN100's voice gives it much agility among musical genres.

For an amp at its power rating, the IN100 proves its ability to retrieve bass frequencies with a tuneful heft, especially notable when a set of the Atoll's preamp outs route that information to subwoofers. Even without subwoofers, the IN100 delivers a solid grip on the speakers it sings through, capturing deep bass passages.

On the other end of the audio spectrum, highs come through with clarity, but without the addition of unpleasant sibilance or stridency. The IN100se does not pull any punches with poor recordings, so if there's a shrillness in a captured vocal performance, you cannot escape it. On an overly-revealing system, performances like Elle King's on "Ex's and Oh's", can give the ol' ears a little sizzle during vocal crescendos. The Atoll tames those edges a bit, but without sacrificing details or pacing that make the performance exciting. *(continued)*



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Summing up

My experience with the IN100 shows how well it meets – and exceeds – the design goals set forth by the Dubreuil brothers. There is much to love from a price-performance perspective. First and foremost, the IN100se delivers beautiful sound. The home theater bypass functionality allows this stereo amplifier to blend seamlessly into a larger multi-channel setup, and the built-in headphone amplifier offers a big bonus to those who enjoy personal fidelity but may not have the budget for a dedicated headphone amplifier. Finally, the ability to de-couple the preamp section means the IN100se can retire into a different role in a two-channel setup if the owner wants to add a different, more powerful amp at any point in the future. The IN100se is the kind of product that has staying power due to its versatility. Once an owner buys it, it can serve many different roles over its lifetime. The Atoll Electronique IN100se, it is a stellar option for price-performance value, offering musicality you will enjoy for years to come.

Further Listening – by Jeff Dorgay

After living with some smaller Atoll components for the better part of a year now, I've love this brand for their combination of sound, understated style and value. I also like the ability to expand the IN100. There is an additional slot that allows you to configure your IN100 with either a phono preamplifier should you be more analog, or a DAC/Streamer should you be more digitally inclined. The DAC board is \$300 and the streamer option \$430.

I used the streamer board to good effect, and it is a decent DAC, commensurate with the price asked, plus the form factor of not having to buy and cable another component more than makes up for it. Those lacking a ton of room for their system will appreciate this option. However, the real bonus for this analog lover is the ability to add a phono stage. Atoll offers a P50 phono board which costs \$130, and the one tested here, the P100, which costs a bit more (\$190), offering MM and MC capabilities. Keep in mind, you can only add one optional board, so choose the one that best suits your needs.

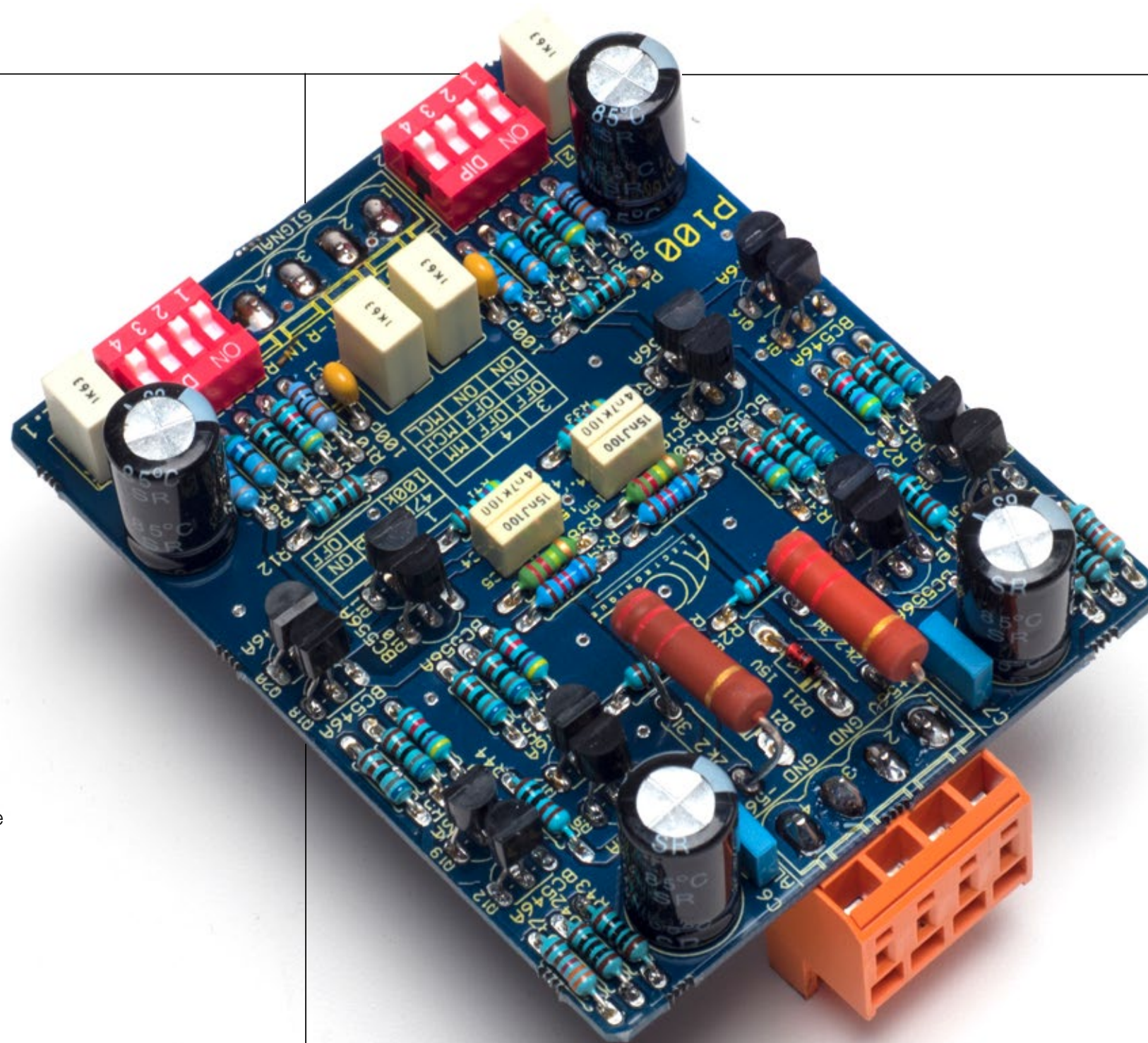
The P100 phono, combined with the recent Rega Planar 3 and Elys 2 cartridge was a fantastic combination, as it was with the VPI Classic 1 and an Ortofon 2M Bronze. Again, just what you'd pay for a set of moderately priced interconnects easily offsets the cost of the phono board and for the moderately invested analog user, this makes adding a turntable so much easier to consider.

For US customers, it's worth mentioning that the remote is standard, adding even further to the value. And the IN100 features dual mono circuitry all the way through, featuring discrete components – there are no op amps in the signal path. These amplifiers are hand assembled in house with all EU sourced components. Finally, every amplifier gets a final, hands on playback, assuring all inputs and outputs work as they should. That's standard operating procedure with a \$15,000 Audio Research component, but awfully impressive for a \$1,650 integrated.

The internal phono is dynamic and smooth, but most of all, extremely quiet. For anyone adding a table in the \$500 - \$1,000 range, this will fill the bill nicely. Though I didn't hear the P50, I'm going to stick my neck out and tell you to go for the MC, just because there are a number of great budget MC carts like the Denon 103 and the Ortofon Quintet, that will make this well worth your while.

At the end of the day, this is another fantastic amplifier from Atoll Electronique. This understated, elegant little amplifier provides way more musical performance than its modest price suggests, and I am happy to give it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2017. ●

**Atoll Electronique IN100se
Integrated Amplifier
MSRP: \$1,650**



FEATURE



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AUDIOPHILE PRESSINGS

By Jeff Dorgay



The Knack
Get the Knack
 MoFi, hybrid SACD

In the day of audiophiles falling over themselves to review yet another dreadfully boring female vocal record, no one else but MoFi would be as irreverent or as cool to release an SACD copy of the 1979 classic, *Get the Knack*. Many associate power pop with the Knack, who were as popular as Cheap Trick, XTC, and Big Star. Armed with hits “My Sharona,” named after lead singer’s girlfriend, and “Good Girls Don’t,” these wacky guys hit the road. Taking more than a little visual license from the Beatles, neatly dressed with a sparse stage full of VOX amplifiers, and flaunting a playful attitude, the band enjoyed a short but powerful run of success.

Produced in a couple of weeks by Mike Chapman, the man behind Blondie’s *Parallel Lines*, on a tight budget, *Get the Knack* went on to sell ten million copies, making many fans and enemies in the process. Much like so many of the original Fab Four’s albums released on Capitol records, revisiting my early pressing of this record reveals similar, mediocre sonics.

Sliding the MoFi SACD into the new PS Audio Memory Player and accompanying DAC reveals both the DSD and Redbook layers to be clean and punchy, where the original LP is flat, dull, and constricted. To rip off more than one music critic, “this is the Knack like you’ve never heard them.” The drumming now has the frantic energy it deserves. The harmonies are clear, revealing all the voices instead of just sounding like one big, fat vocal track, and the bottom end of this disc finally has some weight, filling out the performance.

You know the songs, and you either love or hate this one. If you’re in the former camp, you owe it to yourself to grab a copy. And again, kudos to MoFi for thinking outside the box. Please, please, please give us more of this kind of thing!



The Beatles

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band:
50th Anniversary Edition
Capitol, multiple formats

There is nothing I can say about *Sgt. Pepper's* that hasn't been said by far more insightful music critics than myself. Yeah, I saw them on Ed Sullivan back in the 60s, yet I must confess to the heresy of not being a major Beatles fan. That's neither here nor there, but I am assuming those of you with greater enthusiasm for these guys either have or will get one of the new versions of this record sooner rather than later.

Word on the street is polarized, pretty much between the "I can't believe they've changed it" to "I love what they've done with it." (We'll just eliminate the lunatic fringe that talks about the rim shot at 1:47 that should be at 1:48, blah, blah, blah.)

Long story short, if you enjoyed the production values of the Beatles' *Love*, you are probably going to delight in this version of *Sgt. Pepper's*. The vocals have a lot more separation, making it so much easier to dig into the harmonies. Next, the soundstage is expanded in all dimensions—again, forgetting the argument about whether the mono or stereo mixes were better. Like *Love*, *Sgt. Pepper's* now sounds like a modern record, and I love it. Finally, Paul McCartney's bass line is solid, with much better separation from the drums.

The alternate takes don't turn my crank, but will probably be catnip to Beatlephiles. I did, however, enjoy the process used for this album applied to "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Penny Lane," great tracks from *Magical Mystery Tour*. (Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know it wasn't a real album.)

This is the best-sounding Beatles platter ever. The whole catalog produced like this would make me a convert. Who knows?





The Pretenders
The Pretenders
 MoFi, 180g LP

Some people have multiple copies of *Dark Side of the Moon*, *Sgt. Pepper's*, or the first Hawkwind album. With the addition of this MoFi version, I now have nine, count 'em, nine copies of the first Pretenders album. It seemed like yesterday, working in the hi-fi store when our manager ran in the door with a huge grin on his face, proclaiming "you all have to hear this!" As we heard Chrissie Hynde's gravelly voice for the first time and she sang "I shot my mouth off and he showed me what that hole was for" (clearing out the store in the process), we knew we were on to something big.

Comparing an original Sire, and slightly later Brazilian, Canadian and US pressings, reveal a similar compressed, rolled-off sound that feels more like a cassette dub of a table radio, and the Sire cassette doesn't sound far off. All bad, these are records best left to playing loud on a low-resolution system. But wasn't that what punk was all about anyway?

1982 brought an audiophile reissue on the Nautilus label, showing great promise, with increased dynamic range and upper-end sparkle, along with a wider soundstage. Today, a decent, opened copy brings about \$40-\$50 and might have been a good value had this new release from MoFi not come out. It's like two girls wearing the same dress to the prom, and it's painfully obvious which one wears it better.

Like a spirit finally put to rest after a long wait, this classic finally sounds as it should 35 years later thanks to Kreig Wunderlich and Rob LoVerde. Dynamics are explosive, expanding the soundstage well beyond speaker boundaries and there's an abundance of low-level detail. The slower tracks like "Private Life," "Stop Your Sobbing," and "Lovers of Today" are awash with lost vocal decay and texture, while the rest of the record rocks harder than ever. "Precious" has never sounded better.

So whether you are discovering this record for the first time or reliving your youth, this is the quintessential Pretenders record. Here's hoping the MoFi team gets its hands on *Pretenders 2*. ●

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WINO

By Monique Meadows

It's In the Can.

Wine, good ones at that, make it to the aluminum can.



Four for the cooler: Because it's summer, it's fun, and yes, these are splendid.

I admit I was skeptical. Wine in cans? It's not like this is new, but now it seems to be a trend and one that may stay. Film director turned wine producer Francis Ford Coppola put his sparkling Blanc de Blanc "Sofia," named after his film director daughter, in a mini can for her wedding. "Sofia Mini" became a hit. That was 2004. He had single servings in mind. Fast forward to a few years ago when artisan craft beer brewers started embracing the aluminum can which has inspired an increasing amount of wine producers to do the same. Research from the Brewer's Association — a "Passionate Voice for Craft Brewer's" shows that the gap between can versus bottle use in beer packaging is closing. The number of small craft brewers using cans is increasing, at a faster rate than with the large brewers. The association states, "the percentage rise isn't because of a decline in bottle sales (which have continued to climb), but simply because growth in can sales has been faster than the increase in bottle sales."

There's a hipster element to the surge in demand, but reasons for the gravitation to can use cited by brewers speak to winemakers as well: the convenient can lets in no light, provides a tighter seal for the wine's freshness, and the eco-friendly 100% recyclable can chills faster. What works for a hopped-ale in this scenario is just as good for a Provençal rosé. And the eco-friendly can is 100% recyclable. (So are bottles you say, but it seems In the U.S., we recycle our bottles about 25% of the time while aluminum cans are finding a recycled life 45% of the time.) But what is truly driving the sales? Trend and hipster factor notwithstanding, vendors are offering great wine in portable packaging.

Inexpensive box wine has been around a long time, and then the Tetra-Pak, in various sizes, arrived but to minimal, if any, fanfare. Putting a table wine in a can seemed to have gained momentum last year. A few years before that, Oregon's Union Wine company put its Underwood wines, a Pinot Noir and a Pinot Gris in 375 ml cans. Colorado Winery, The Infinite Monkey Theorem, launched cans in 2011 though didn't see wine drinkers embracing it concept until 2014. New additions to the canned wine scene creating demand this summer are debuting in slimmer cans with colorful packaging, one producer's website showing millennials enjoying the wine with a straw in the can.



These new cans have a lining, so this is not wine directly on aluminum and the producer of Lila wines explaining that the protective coating has been specifically developed to protect the wine's freshness and varietal character.

Canned wine is not meant to be aged in the cellar as are some bottled wines. The intent is for immediate enjoyment and fresh flavor. The portability factor makes these modern designed cans appealing. Think beach, boating, camping, backpacking, golf, and concerts.

Here are four wines in cans hitting the market that are worthy of chilling time in your favorite ice cooler. Though I enjoy the site of fresh bottles of rosé every spring, with their various hues of salmon or deep pink shimmering in the glass, or a Pinot Noir showing a glint of ruby color in the bottle, my four canned wine picks surprised in their quality and purity. This lineup is a modern take on the famous wine cooler of the 1980's. This new version, made by a celebrated NYC sommelier and wine company owner, and made with organic Sicilian grapes and juice, delivered in some of the brightest flavors and most eye-catching packaging I've seen. Bottle snobs, it is time for a diversion. Here are four wines in cans to chill and pop the tab on:

Lila Rosé

Provence, France, Latitude Beverage Co.,
8.4 oz can \$13 4-pack



Lila was the first canned premium wine to get my attention, and that the wine inside the artfully packaged aluminum can was actually from Provence, and tasted like a Provence rosé Grenache blend, had me try the whole Lila lineup. Latitude Beverage Company, creators of the 90+ Cellars wines, has taken the time to create canned wines that are authentic in grape varietal, region, and character. The company was founded in 2007 and was the inspiration for the 90+ line of wines that sourced already produced from top producers around the globe, repackaged as 90+ Cellars and marketed at affordable prices without consumer knowledge of the originating source estate—a fun mystery game and savings to the wine drinker's wallet. The Lila rosé is from France's Côtes de Provence appellation, the Sauvignon Blanc is sourced from Marlborough, New Zealand, and the Pinot Grigio and their sparkling Vino Frizzante—are from Trento, Italy, the Veneto region. According to PR Newswire, these are the "the first and only canned versions of the popular wine varietals". Since that statement, Lila has some competition in this new market genre, though I haven't seen another French rosé.

The name Lila, derived from the ancient Sanskrit word for "play like the gods," explains the Lila message, is a reference to the brand's desire to evoke a playfulness in enjoying wine, and thus adorn the cans in playful pop art graphics. The 8.4 oz. Aluminum can is sold in a pack of four, containing "33% more wine", than the normal 750 ml bottle. Always a good thing when the wine is good. Chill and open a can of this rosé, and you'll enjoy a taste of southern France in a dry and refreshing rosé with aromas and tastes of those summer watermelon and strawberries fruits, a touch of minerality that one hopes for in a Provence rosé, and the beckoning for another glass. In this case, another ready-chilled can. For a refreshing white wine for your summer, the Lila Pinot Grigio is a fun, easy-drinking pick. The fact that it hails from the cooler hills of Northern Italy, instead of a big production plant in California's hot Central Valley, is a big home run.

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Because summer and rosé go hand in hand, I've picked two cans of pink. This one, an American rosé made from California's classic grape variety, Zinfandel. While not as sweet as "White Zinfandel", and not as dry as the Lila Provence rosé, RUZA proudly has just a touch of sweetness and a slight spritz to make this one a fun sip. A room full of wine geeks and hipster restaurant and wine people drinking RUZA at a recent industry event I attended, seemed to seal the canned wine's cool status. The wine is from small-lot farmed grapes from California's Lodi region, home to some of the best and oldest Zinfandel vines. The grapes for RUZA are farmed specifically with rosé in mind –meaning here picking the grapes early in the season to capture good acidity, flavor and color. The grape skins spend just a short time with the pressed juice, in a method used by the French for their rosés, keeping tannins, and that drying feeling to the mouth, low. The result is a fresh wine with the prettiest kiss of color.

RUZA is made by Winc, a wine company and online wine club founded in 2012 with a desire to make wines "more accessible and easier to enjoy." The wine, also available in a 750 ml bottle, is a "passion project" by Winc co-founder vintner Brian Smith, and sommelier-restaurateur Aaron Forman, two longtime friends with a big love for wine. With RUZA, their aim is to introduce a distinctly American rosé in a wine market flush with Provençal rosés. When it's not cool to admit you like the taste of "White Zinfandel," RUZA has you covered. And it's so much more — pure Lodi, California Zinfandel fruit, with aromas and flavors of fresh, bright, raspberry, strawberry and cherry –a rosé trifecta, delivered with unexpected, and admittedly enjoyable, effervescence. This is a very fun sip. You can go back to your serious wine on a cold, rainy, contemplate-one's-life kind of blustery day. This one wants to be part of your summer. The can's instructions: to "chill, pop, repeat," not hard to do with a fizzy well made blush Zin with a flip-top.



RUZA Sparkling Rosé

Wine Company, Lodi, California
250 ml. can, \$20 4-pack



The Great Oregon Wine Company

Pinot Noir, Oregon 187 ml can, \$14 4-pack

Winemaker Matt Chechovic was born and raised in Indiana, moved to Colorado armed with a degree in biology from Perdue University and caught the wine spirit working in a small wine shop. And after a trip to Willamette Valley, Oregon, he moved to the “We love dreamers” state and with a winemaking degree and did early work as a harvest intern. Working along side him today in creating wines is Sommelier Brett Zimmerman, a top restaurant veteran and a Master Sommelier, one of only 230 people worldwide with the title. In 1996, The Great Oregon Wine Company, based in McMinnville, Oregon, was founded. Creators of the award-winning Rascal line of wines, the men source grapes from relationships with small growers and farmers in both Oregon and Washington State, including Vercingetorix Vineyards, Willamette Farms, Demesne Ste. Bride Vineyards and Scharf Vineyards. The same attention that goes into their Rascal line goes into the Great Oregon Wine Company can wines.

Their Oregon Pinot Noir, debuting as their first canned wine this past March, is made in small batches, in this case, 2,400 six-pack cases. The box of four 187ml cans equals a 750 ml bottle of wine. The wine is made from Pommard and Dijon clone (genetic roots to France’s Burgundy regions) Pinot Noir grapes and barrel-aged for 16 months. The taste is pure Oregon Pinot Noir. The oak presence is balanced and lets the tart cherry and boysenberry fruit notes and earthy Pinot quality shine. There is surprising complexity to this wine, and tasting as though it was made with a gentle hand. Describing the company’s bottled Willamette Valley Pinot Noir, Wine Enthusiast noted the wine’s finesse: “Holding the massive bottle in your hand, you’d rightly expect the wine inside to be a bit of a monster. But instead, it’s a light, almost delicate effort, with pretty cherry fruit edged in a smoky toast. There is nothing to indicate either vineyard or winemaking facility, but someone has a nice elegant touch.” The canned version of their Pinot Noir is not purely Willamette Valley fruit, as it includes grapes sourced from several vineyards in Oregon. But the wine has a purity I wasn’t expecting after tasting several canned red wines. Job well done, guys.



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“It's wine, but cooler,” states the Ramona marketing. And it is. The wine cooler of the 80's has gone artisanal with Ramona Fizz. And Organic. The remix here, the brain-child of Belus Wines founder Jordan Salcito, is a blend of organic Sicilian white wine mixed with natural ruby grapefruit, packaged boldly in a slim 250 ml aluminum can wrapped with eye-popping graphics designed by Creative Director Claudia Wu of indie magazine Cherry Bombe.

Salcito, a Master Sommelier candidate, knows wine. She'd worked numerous harvests at top wineries in France, Italy, Argentina and California, and is Wine Director for the Momfuko restaurant group. Under her wine guidance, two of the group's restaurants have made it on past Wine Enthusiast magazine's America's 100 Best Wine Restaurants lists, and she was included among the magazine's “Top 40 Under 40 tastemakers of 2016”. So why is this wine dignitary giving some love to the wine cooler? Because she remembers them and wanted to recreate an “updated version” of the '80's wine/sugar/bubble hybrid. And she has the right vineyard sources to bring to the project. With Bellus Wines, which she founded in 2011, she partners with wineries in Central and Southern Italy, as well as in California. With a connection to these sustainably farmed grapes, she brings that juice to her Ramona Fizz, blending organic Sicilian Zibibbo Grapes, also known as Muscat of Alexandra, fresh organic grapefruit juice and a dash of cane sugar. A nice fizz adds to the party. Ramona is a fun, modern wine cooler to chill in the summer ice bucket. ●

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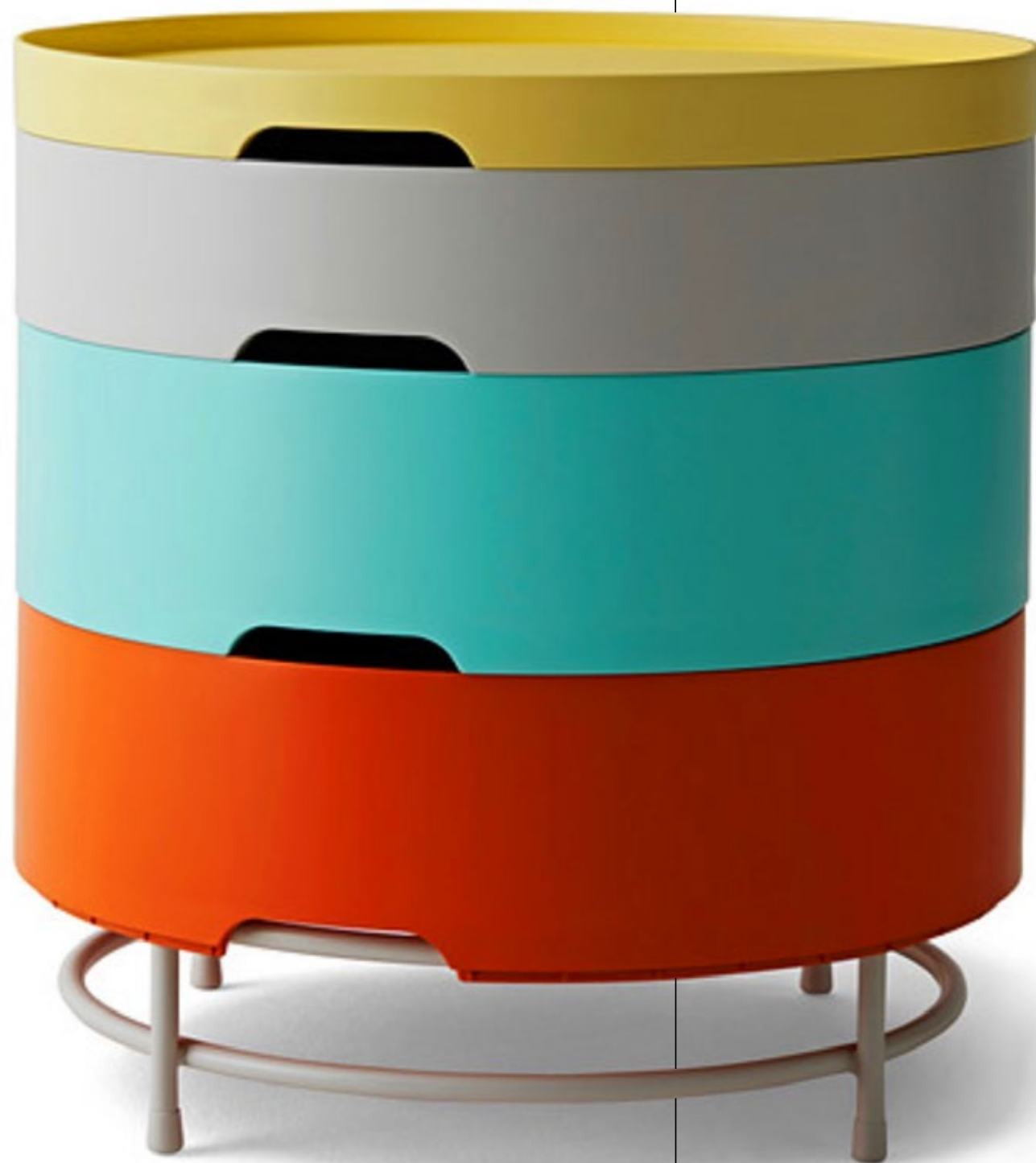
\$30 www.shopbmw.com

Not just any mouse, the Genuine BMW M Motorsport mouse is sure to get your heart pumping. It doesn't have a 500 horsepower V-10 under the hood, but it is pretty sleek, has a carbon fiber look, and it works with Windows and Mac. Zoom zoom.

IKEA PS 2014

\$69 www.ikea.com

The IKEA naming device must have run out of names for this one, but it's incredibly handy. Just the perfect height to rest a laptop for surfing your favorite music sharing service or a gaggle of remote controls. The three vividly colored drawers are perfect for keeping a gentle curve on interconnect cables, so you always have them at the ready. And, unlike most IKEA products, this one requires *no* assembly, so the little IKEA dude has the day off. Pull it out of the box, decide which order to put the shelves and set them on the base. A perfect addition to your funhouse!



Ischia Swim Trunks

\$100 www.fedelicashmere.com

Come on, it's summer. Shut the hifi off, stop arguing about pressings and jump in the pool! Or better yet, bring your Zeppelin or Sonos poolside, queue up a mega playlist and have a pool party. But you're gonna need some coolio swim trunks.

Add a little bit of Euro style from Fedeli. Available in "American sizes" from S to XXXL and with about 20 outstanding colors like the Pistachio you see here to raspberry, moth, lichen and of course gray, there's a color for everyone. As the Monkees said, "I'll bring the chips, the dips, and the root beer." We want to see your picture on Facebook.

Radio Shack Digital Infrared Thermometer

\$32.99

www.radioshack.com/products/radioshack-waterproof-pocket-ir-thermometer

Whether you're keeping an eye on vacuum tube temperature, the heatsinks on your solid-state amplifiers, or just trying to make sure the waffle iron is heating consistently, this is a handy tool to have in your arsenal. We've been surprised at just how hot (or not) things have been around here. It's sure to keep your inner geek curiosity satisfied.



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Porsche Design P 8478 Sunglasses

\$500 www.porsche-design.us

The classic Porsche Design aviators from 1978 are back, with the interchangeable lenses, as they always were. Considering how much abuse your shades can get, not having to trash a pair of \$500 glasses is a lovely thing. More money to spend on records or petrol. And if these aren't your fancy, Porsche Design has expanded their eyewear repertoire considerably since the days of the 930 turbo.

The "beta-titanium" frames now come in a multitude of color and lens option along with the original hard shell case. Perfect to fit comfortably inside the dash of whatever high performance car you happen to be driving.

The Manual Playlist

\$89 www.wearewellmade.com

These clever craftspeople were able to successfully Kickstarter fund the one and two record jacket wide versions of this product, along with a desktop version earlier this year, and they are selling like hotcakes. Based in Chicago, they also make custom picture frames with a similar aesthetic.

Available in walnut, oak and black finish, these “visible vinyl” mini racks, attach to your wall effortlessly and they even include the necessary hardware. Even those with the most basic skills just need a Phillips bit for their drill and a level to make a professional install of one or more of these. Well Made claims

a “furniture grade” finish, but they are indeed modest. It’s more like a Herman Miller grade finish. These are cut and finished crisply and look like they came from Design Within Reach, not IKEA. (No disrespect to either.)

They all look and work great, but the three record model is especially nice, for those long listening sessions. It’s easy to grab a few of your favorite records, and keep the jackets ready easy access when done. And there’s something more engaging about seeing the records you’re listening too, right up on the wall, giving them the respect they deserve.





ModMic 5

\$69 www.modmic.com

The ModMic 5 surprises on many counts. Intended as a microphone to be used in tandem with your headphones, it features a modular cable system to attach to nearly any set of headphones with ease. Perfect for those of you using your phone or computer for higher quality audio - and it's fantastic for those of you on SKYPE regularly.

Like a Tootsie Roll pop, there's a surprise in the middle. It's two mics in one; a unidirectional mic and a high quality omnidirectional mic that is

perfect for recording vocals. Combined with your smartphone (except iPhone 7s) or digital camera, the quality is way beyond what you'd expect for \$69. We've heard \$300-\$400 mics that don't capture voice this well.

Best of all, the ModMic 5 comes in a handy, semi hard case with a range of adaptors and an extension cable. Even if you only have an occasional need to record vocals, this is a tool you should not be without. And if you spend a lot of time on SKYPE, the ModMic 5 is a must.



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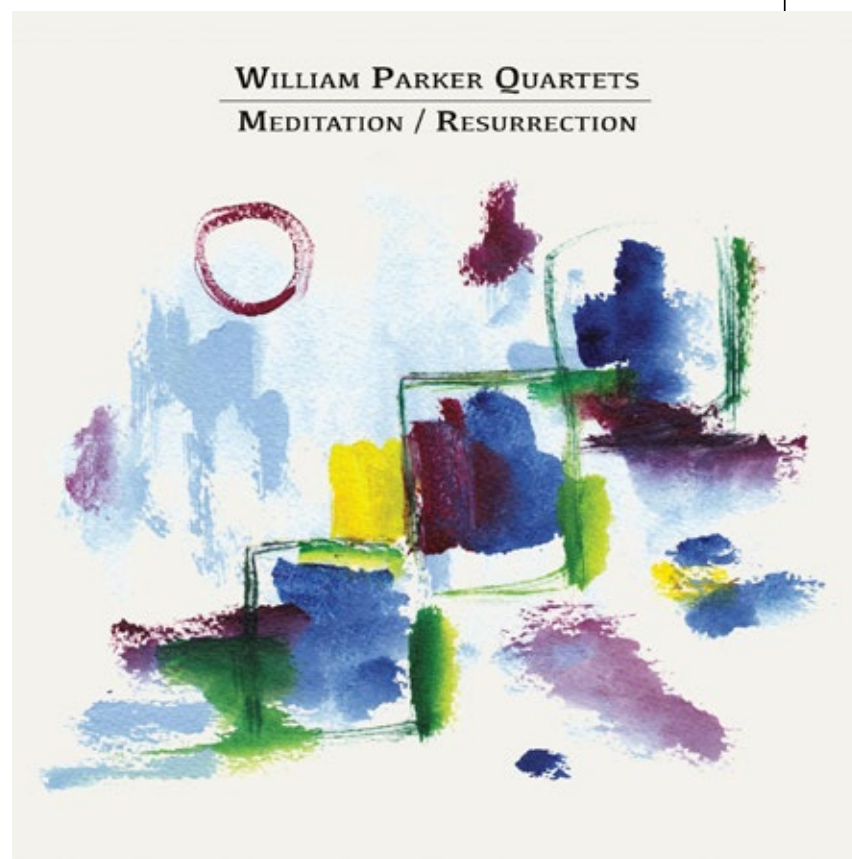
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JAZZ & BLUES



William Parker
Meditation / Resurrection
 AUM Fidelity, 2CD

Whenever I see William Parker in action, I'm reminded of the first time I watched him play, at New York's Sweet Basil as part of Cecil Taylor's band in the early 80s. Thirty-five years later, he's an icon of the NYC experimental-improv scene and a reliably physical jazz bassist who can make a fierce thump come from his instrument whenever need be. The same fervor the 65-year-old used to parallel the density of Taylor's attack so long ago remains a key element of his current art.

Parker works in numerous groups. Last week, I caught him with Farmers By Nature at NYC's Vision Festival, and the same volition that marked his earliest work actively resonated from his corner of the bandstand. Of course, Parker is just as adept at lithe rumination and tactful agility as he is at thickening any given ensemble passage. If you want to learn more about how he pulls it all off, his new double album *Meditation / Resurrection* finds him helming a pair of bands and deploying a wealth of gambits. For a few reasons—the legibility of the tunes, say, or the eloquence of he and his confreres—it stands as one of his most entertaining discs.



©Photo by Peter Gannushkin

The honking and swinging of a foursome bent on making a statement drives the joyous freebop of "Criminals in the White House." The first disc's music is created by the William Parker Quartet, and from his longtime mate Rob Brown on alto to his new associate Jalalu-Kalvert Nelson on trumpet, the chemistry at hand proves fetching. The two front-line players flipping back and forth conjure memories of the exuberance that fueled early Black Saint albums like Frank Lowe's *Exotic Heartbreak* and Julius Hemphill's *Flat-Out Jump Suite*.

Parker's flexibility is remarkable. "Handsome Lake" comes across as wiry and off-hand; the bassist says the tune arrived as a "full thought" and wrote it in five minutes. Compared to the decidedly more elaborate pieces on 2015's *For Those Who Are, Still*, it borders on elementary. Like "Rodney's Resurrection," the piece virtually prances as it dispenses its info. A twirl of brass and reeds, some fluid rustles from the rhythm section. (Hamid Drake, who the leader calls the band's "connecting force," mans the drums on both discs.). The exchanges are mercurial and engrossing, especially when everything gets sparse and Parker trades his bass for a tarota, a double-reed folk instrument from Spain, on "Horace Silver Part 2." (*continued*)



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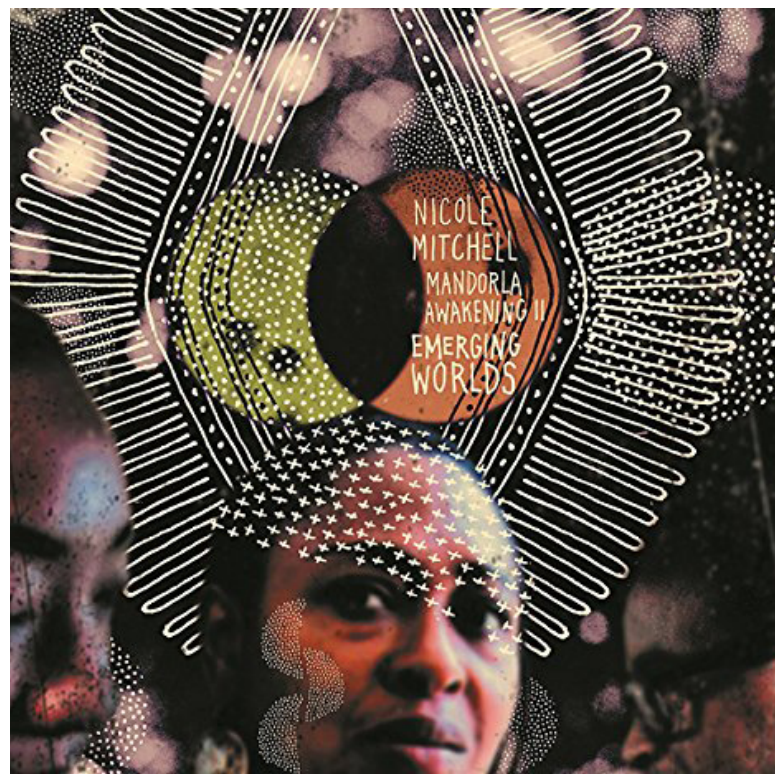
©Photo by Peter Gannushkin

Parker's group on the second disc goes by the name *In Order To Survive*. It's a trio with Cooper-Moore on piano rather than Nelson on horn. Here, the music gets a bit gnarlier, but in some ways its effervescence increases as well. The pianist provides sprawls of notes on "Some Lake Oliver," and Brown's articulation leans toward the Jimmy Lyons realm: A torrent of abstraction that manages to be earthy, precise, and engaging.

Romanticism sometimes takes on an odd character in Parker's work, and his use of a bow occasionally signals his dramatic side being called into action. On "Sunrise in East Harlem," he spends the first few minutes waxing sentimental with his bow as the group lightly pores over a pulse that gives everyone solo space. It's

sparse, effective, and perhaps a smidge formulaic. But by the time it concludes, a feeling of catharsis fills the air, as if the particulars of a genuine event marshaled themselves towards some kind of transitional experience.

Ultimately, *Meditation / Resurrection* illuminates Parker's personality. This is very candid music made from an activist's mindset. But anyone stymied by the meaning of these collaborative efforts can have their curiosity easily sated. One of the most illustrative parts of the package relate to six sentences from Parker's notes: "Listen to the music; if you have any questions call me, write me, I will tell what it is. What do you think it is? Do you like it? Hate it? Love it? Let's Talk." —**Jim Macnie**



Nicole Mitchell

Mandorla Awakening II: Emerging Worlds
FPE Records, LP or CD

Composer and flute virtuoso Nicole Mitchell now teaches in Southern California, but her music remains rooted in Chicago, where she recorded *Mandorla Awakening II: Emerging Worlds* with hometown colleagues. As a former president of the city's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), she reserves the right to draw on any music that interests her, remaking it in her own image, as artists everywhere so often do. She touches on styles from all over; cross-culturalism is part of this album's subject. Mitchell is fascinated by Afrofuturist science fiction, a tradition ever mindful of how the Middle Passage informs myriad disruptive alien-abduction and time-travel narratives. So it goes with *Emerging Worlds*, which posits a clash between two cultures on a single planet: one violent and economically stratified, the other (island nation Mandorla) utopian and at peace with nature.



©Photo by Lauren Deutsch

The setup functions as more backstory than enacted narrative—the three pieces with lyrics don't advance the plot—even as the material expresses a parallel contrast. This eight-instrumentalist edition of her Black Earth Ensemble—with violinist Renee Baker and cellist Tomeka Reid as a pocket string section—adds Japanese instruments and inflections to the mix. To pair off with Mitchell, Kojiro Umezaki plays shakuhachi, improvising in a manner informed by that bamboo flute's traditions. Chicago bassist Tatsu Aoki also mans the thundering taiko drum and the

three-string plucked shamisen, alongside the western strings. (To keep the world-strings theme going, guitarist Alex Wing occasionally doubles on the Egyptian oud and Reid plucks a few notes on banjo. JoVia Armstrong plays drums and percussion.) The ways Eastern and Western instruments either blend or celebrate their differences offer hope we can all get along.

Mitchell loves textural, timbral, and stylistic variety; she has her experimental and populist sides. Raucous collective improvisations contrast

with poppy melodies and chugging cello bass lines; an upward surging chord progression suggests a measure of optimism. A single composition may travel from one sonic state to another. On the opening "Egoes War," ceremonial gongs give way to 70s Miles-style funk, with Wing's guitar in wailing post-Hendrix territory. (He has other voices: a front-loaded jazz-guitar attack; funky James Brown scratching.) And in the middle of all that density, a slow melody emerges, voiced in agreeably loose unison by violin and two flutes. *(continued)*



©Photo by Lauren Deutsch

Some flautists baby the instrument, and peel back the accompaniment to be easily heard. But Mitchell plays with such force (and uses amplification so deftly), her bands don't need to restrain themselves. Her liquid sound remains clear as spring water. She'll sing through the metal pipe to harmonize with herself (like umpteen other flute players), yet the high notes she nails with her voice give her multiphonics a lighter quality than Rahsaan Roland Kirk's influential shrieks. Along the way you'll encounter a couple of echoes of Chicago Afrofuturist Sun Ra's space music: thin cosmic textures and a

simulated rocket launch.

On three tracks on the album's back half, singer/poet avery r young declaims Mitchell's lyrics with great animation and plenty of repetition—like a preacher feeling the spirit. On “Staircase Struggle” he repeats the line “we keep doing the same thing over and over again” for three minutes, fusing form and content. Testifying on “Shiny Divider,” he name-checks Baltimore, Ferguson, Chicago, and Nepal—just in case anyone was in doubt regarding which conflicted planet Mitchell is talking about. —**Kevin Whitehead**



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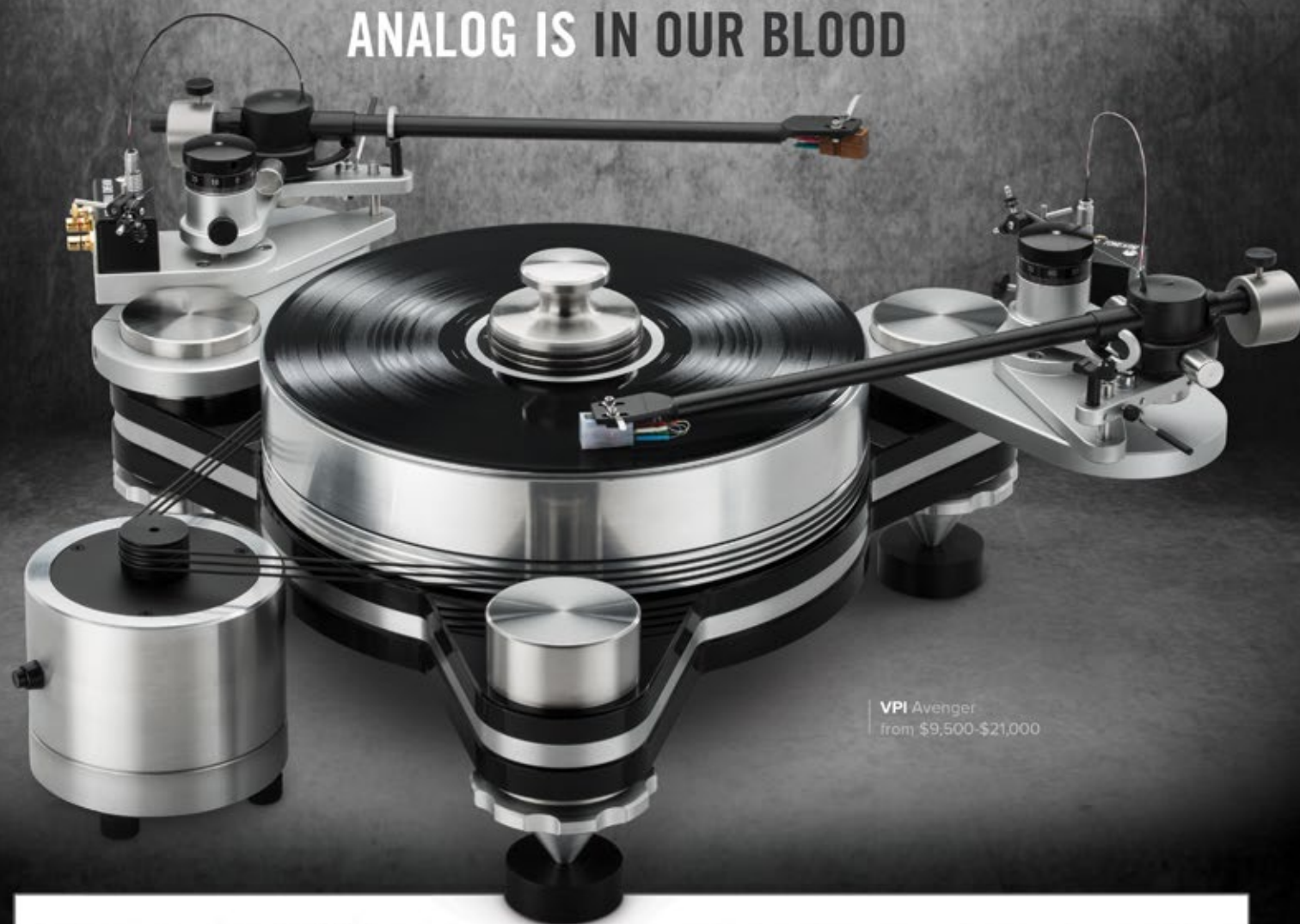


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CUIDADO MADAME

Arto Lindsay

Cuidado Madame
Northern Spy, LP or CD

Arto Lindsay believes, for the most part, we're pretty damn good at multitasking. So when his Ambitious Lovers outfit began fusing shards of dissonance with comely melodies on its somewhat neglected trio of albums *Envy*, *Greed*, and *Lust* in the 80s, the unholy blend made sense to those who could not only process—but enjoy—opposing elements bound by a cosmopolitan pop sensibility.

With the oft-lauded DNA, Lindsay, who may be to no wave what Bill Monroe is to bluegrass, brought a frenzied erudition to the fractious nature of East Village noise-prov back in the 70s. But thanks to a Brazilian childhood (a baby-boomer son of missionary parents), he has long had a major yen for the sweet sounds of the country's native songforms. From the Ambitious Lovers canon to his string of discs for Rykodisc and Righteous Babe in 90s and 00s, the artsy guitarist-singer has conflated samba and skronk, funk and forró, Tropicália and trip-hop—always aiming for a sensual result built on shifting textures and abstract poesy.

Those solo albums feature a song design that conflates abstruse eroticism and nuanced irritability, and when the dust settles, it also appreciates earworms as much as Max Martin does. The fact Lindsay doesn't fret over his guitar adhering to any conventional tuning, primarily using it as a cranky percussion instrument, is part of a post-modern charm that gets a kaleidoscopic kick when things fire on all cylinders—often the case. Absorbing the first ten seconds of "Predigo" from 2002's *Invoke* is akin to being airdropped into the middle of an explosive jam by Miles Davis' Pangea band.

He takes a tad more curvaceous route on the new *Cuidado Madame*. As usual, its strengths lie in the friction between the rhythmic élan, chunks of string shrapnel, and supple vocals, sung in both English and Portuguese. Momentum is key. Chattering drums mark the streamlined "Ilha Dos Prazeres," and if they weren't so tightly locked-in with the synth punctuations, it might seem each could be part of two separate tracks. A rat-a-tat groove, flecked with the wise funk lines of bassist Melvin Gibbs, propels "Tangles" as well.



"There's a lot I don't recognize in here," coos Lindsay at one point, but as the music unfolds, everything becomes quite cozy.

Cuidado Madame bows as Lindsay's first song-based solo disc in 13 years, and percussion is part of its inspiration. The Rio de Janeiro resident has long been interested in the Candomblé religion and its music rituals. Fittingly, many songs on *Cuidado Madame* are fueled by pulsing and percolating atabaque hand drums. The singer has said part of their job is to "induce trances." They just might accomplish that goal at certain points, but they also stimulate in the traditional sense. "Grain By Grain" feels dreamy, but gets kicked along by all kinds of beats. Saucy whispers remain a Lindsay signature. Carnal matters are often close at hand, and whether backing up pillow talk or bolstering more overt sexual allusions, the drums are often there to help things veer towards the flirtatious.

On *Cuidado Madame*, the nexus of all the aforementioned elements arrives with a nod to Emily Dickinson and a trip through the guitarist's most maniacal soloing of the program (after all, the album is named after the Julio Bressane film about housemaids who murder their bosses). The Brazilian Tropicália movement of the 60s has appreciably informed Lindsay's efforts, and the momentary shit storm, complete with churchy Hammond organ swells, comes on as an experimental episode that somehow marries Caetano Veloso's suave side, Tom Zé's entertaining quirks, and the kind of noxious spuzz that was often pointed directly at CBGB patrons. Each aggressively vies for your attention, but any sharp multitasker will find a way to balance it out. —**Jim Macnie**

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Cuong Vu 4tet

Ballet (The Music of Michael Gibbs)
RareNoise, LP or CD

Ballet, by trumpeter Cuong Vu's 4tet with guitarist Bill Frisell, functions as sort of a double sequel. In 2015, Cuneiform released *Michael Gibbs & The NDR Bigband Play a Bill Frisell Set List*: Gibbs arrangements of tunes Frisell composed or played. This short set of Gibbs compositions returns the favor. It was captured in January 2016 at the University of Washington, where Frisell teaches and Vu heads the Jazz and Improvised Music program. Not long after *Ballet* was recorded, Nonesuch issued *Cuong Vu Trio Meets Pat Metheny* with a parallel instrumentation. Ted Poor drums on both albums; on *Ballet*, the electric bassist is Luke Bergman. The new fans the Metheny album brought the trumpeter should stick around for this one.

Mike Gibbs is a true jazz cosmopolitan. Born in 1937 in what is now Zimbabwe, he was schooled in Boston, where he began composing in earnest, supplying a few tunes to vibraphonist chum Gary Burton. Gibbs' own recordings include sprawling roundups of London jazz and rock musicians from the early 70s, completed before he returned to Boston to teach at Berklee. Nowadays he's best known as an arranger for big bands, folding Mingus and Gil Evans influences into a personal style. The five Gibbs pieces on *Ballet* stem from his breakthrough 60s years—Burton recorded four of them back then (and the other was dedicated to him). I suspect

Frisell first encountered them as a student of Gibbs' during the 70s.

You can hear why folks took to his music. The ballad "Feelings and Things" mixes a plaintive melody with subtle, complex harmony that calls on improvisers to do some fancy weaving and yet gives them time to absorb its logic. (It also reminds us how much inspiration 60s composers drew from Bill Evans' "Blue in Green.") The music's catnip for players like these, who look out for the odd notes anyway. Throw in a bright medium tempo and they'll happily romp awhile. "And on the Third Day" doesn't wear thin at 12 minutes, given how well the players pace it all. On the heads, Vu and

Frisell may phrase as one, keeping their tones distinct or melding them into a single voice. (Vu can swell his sound to mimic Frisell's volume pedal.) Composer Gibbs was in the house, and the 4tet does right by his evergreens.

Frisell remains rightly esteemed for his ability to change up his tone and style and still sound instantly identifiable. (His hot streak continues with his other new album on ECM, *Small Town*, duets with telepathic bassist Thomas Morgan, on which they play music by Lee Konitz, Paul Motian, Fats Domino, and the Carter Family—plus "Goldfinger.") Cuong Vu's malleable trumpet sound proves a good match.

Beginning his solo on "Sweet Rain," his pensive horn sounds oddly like a viola.

Most of the time, Vu lets you hear the brass. As on the Metheny disc, the trumpeter shows his range—from growls, streaky long tones, and whooshing air at one end to majestic pealing in the lyrical mode at the other. He stretches out to excellent effect on "Blue Comedy," where his solo slowly builds to the same kind of complexity as the tricky, boppish melody, his triplet phrases tumbling over the beat. The band is right there with him. These Seattleites stick together. —**Kevin Whitehead**

©Photo by Steve Korn

FEATURE

The Hagerman Cornet 3

American Know How at its Finest

By Jerold O'Brien

Our publisher used to have a Hagerman Trumpet phonostage. A wacky wood box that stood upright and wouldn't fit on any rack, but it sounded great. Big, open soundstage and killer dynamics. Even though it had eight tubes, it was solid-state quiet. Jim Hagerman is a cool cat that never goes to any of the hi-fi shows. He'd rather hang out at home, which is Honolulu. Good choice, I say. Listen to grumpy audiophiles that never buy anything or watch the surf and chill.

What started out as a kit on Kickstarter a while back is now a full blown, off the rack component you can buy. Costs a few bucks more, but I'm guessing even on his worst day Mr. Hagerman can probably do a better job at assembling anything electronic than I can, and I've done more than my share of DIY projects. Knowing you can pull it out of the box and it will work properly – priceless. I'm getting too old for the drama of hoping things I built will work.



FEATURE

Quite the value

If you're a music lover on a bit of a budget, want way more performance than you'd expect for just under \$500, and only need MM capability, don't even bother reading the rest of the review. Go to the Hagerman Audio Labs website and order this little jewel. Jim Hagerman is even kind enough to provide free shipping anywhere in the world. Pretty chill I say.

And chill you will when you put the first record on your turntable. My first selection for auditioning the Cornet happened to be the Brand X's prog classic, *Moroccan Roll*. Full of time changes and perky percussion, the Cornet keeps the pace locked down. Much like that Trumpet I remember, this tiny, see-through phonostage is quiet and that makes the analog experience so much better.

There's just something cool about tubes and analog that just go together like chocolate and peanut butter. The Cornet has a smoothness about it, yet it never sounds like vintage tube gear; slow or stodgy. Your favorite vocal and acoustic tracks will be done justice, yet everything is crisp enough to make the heaviest rock records come to life too.

Gliding through Deep Purple's *Made in Japan*, Richie Blackmore's crunchy lead guitar in "Smoke on the Water" never sounded better from a budget phono preamp. Even in the context of a vintage system, should you have a 70s integrated or receiver, this is an incredible step up. Using the TONE Dual 1229 and Shure V15 via a Marantz 2275 and some Altec 19s went from being flat and reserved via the on-board phono to a true audiophile experience. *(continued)*

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FEATURE



A modern rig proves equally enthralling. Having purchased a Technics SL-1200G of my own after the review here, I've been running an Ortofon 2M Black with excellent results and it really sings with the Coronet3. This is a combination I could easily live with, if I didn't already have the Decware phonostage. (Another great American audio artisan) Thanks to the Technics removable headshells, substituting a few other MM carts was easy and offered equally enticing results. The Ortofon 2M Red (\$99) and Bronze (\$299) both work well with the Coronet3.

This phonostage is an excellent example of well implemented, modern tube design. It offers just

enough of the three-dimensional palpability that comes with tubes, yet the sound is quiet, dynamic and engaging. Classical and solo acoustic music is easily enjoyed, with no tube hiss coming through to dampen the enthusiasm. What stuck me the most clearly was the level of sonic refinement the Coronet3 offers. There's a delicacy to the reproduction you just don't get for \$500 anywhere.

Cute, cool, and compact

The tiny acrylic enclosure looks more like a Lego project (which I kind of like) with banks of little blue capacitors and three tubes poking out. Hagerman doesn't chintz out on the tubes either, a

pair of 12AX7 and a 12U7 Mullard reissue are included with the package. A quick perusal of Music Direct's website reveals that this is about \$60 worth of tubes. I've seen far better components with buck a pop crapola Chinese rejects under the hood.

Kudos to Hagerman for getting great sound out of readily available, decent quality tubes. Should you be obsessed though, and towards the higher end of the MM food chain, an investment in some great NOS tubes will offer up a little more musicality, but defeats the economy of this phono stage. But I know how some of you can be, so yes, exotic tubes will give you still more. *(continued)*

FEATURE



FEATURE

However, you can't upgrade the external power supply, but the best news is that you won't be swapping power cords. Less anxiety again. A 9v wall wart powers an onboard "boost converter" that generates the necessary high voltage to power the tubes. The whole process takes about 30 sec, and three little yellow LEDs light in succession as the party starts. Once up to power, the Coronet3 takes about 20 minutes for the tubes to fully warm up as they would in any vacuum tube powered device.

While the low cost, compact enclosure saves a ton of money in build cost, there is no mechanical shielding, so a bit of care is required in placement. Don't put the Coronet3 right next to the power transformer of a big power amp, or too close to the wall and you'll be just fine. Like it's ancestor, this phonostage is quiet.

What are you waiting for?

The Hagerman Labs Coronet3 is darling in every way, and regarding sheer sound quality, it reveals as much music as units costing 2-3 times as much. By taking advantage of an artisan manufacturer that builds like a major, skipping elaborate casework and eliminating the dealer chain, the music aficionado on a budget benefits tremendously here. Hagerman's been around for a long time, and his products have earned a great reputation for sound and build quality.

Our publisher agrees that this is an Exceptional Value Award winner, and as I said at the beginning of this review if you want an awesome MM phono, put the Hagerman Coronet3 at the top of your list. I can't give it a more enthusiastic recommendation. ●

www.haglabs.com



Gold Note Donatello MC Cartridge

\$1,070
www.goldnote.it

We've been using a trio of Gold Note cartridges for some time now and they are all fantastic performers as well as excellent values. Unlike the Machiavelli we just reviewed, which is a high output MC cartridge, the Donatello is a more traditional low-output cartridge. With an output of .5mv, and a suggested load of 470 ohms, it is compatible with any MC phono stage.

So far, it has proved a reliable daily driver and at \$1,070, delivers a level of musical retrieval and natural tonality beyond most of what we've heard at this price. Gold Note has been a very popular company in Europe and are now making the rest of the world aware of their products. Put this one at the top of your list if on the lookout for a cartridge upgrade in this price range.



Coincident Dynamite Speakers

\$2,995/pair
www.coincidentspeaker.com

All of the Coincident electronics we've experienced have been world class performers at reasonable prices, so being that the company is actually called Coincident Loudspeakers, it comes as no surprise that their Dynamite speakers continue the tradition set by the electronics.

These compact and stylish floorstanders combine a pair of 5.25" woofers and a 1" silk dome tweeter in a uniquely shaped cabinet to deliver a mega sonic experience. Fit and finish is well above what you'd expect from a \$2,999 pair of speakers and when paired with the Coincident Dynamo Mk. II amplifier that we just reviewed, makes for an incredibly involving music system that will only set you back what you'd spend on lattes at Starbucks for about 18 months. I know what I'd choose.

Pairing your Dynamite speakers with other than Coincident electronics is a breeze thanks to a 90db/1 watt sensitivity rating and a crossover network that doesn't gobble up amplifier power. Running them through their paces with a wide variety of amplifiers, whether solid state or vacuum tube is easy. We couldn't find an amplifier that *didn't* work well with these little Canadian marvels.

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PREVIEW



SVS SB-16 Ultra/PB-16 Ultra

\$1,999.99/\$2,499.99
www.svsound.com

PREVIEW

The only thing crazier than the SB-16 Ultra is that they make an even *bigger* model, the PB-16. But we love performance, and excessive performance rules the day. When it comes to kick ass bass, with more than enough resolution to satisfy even the snootiest audiophile, SVS is the top value proposition going.

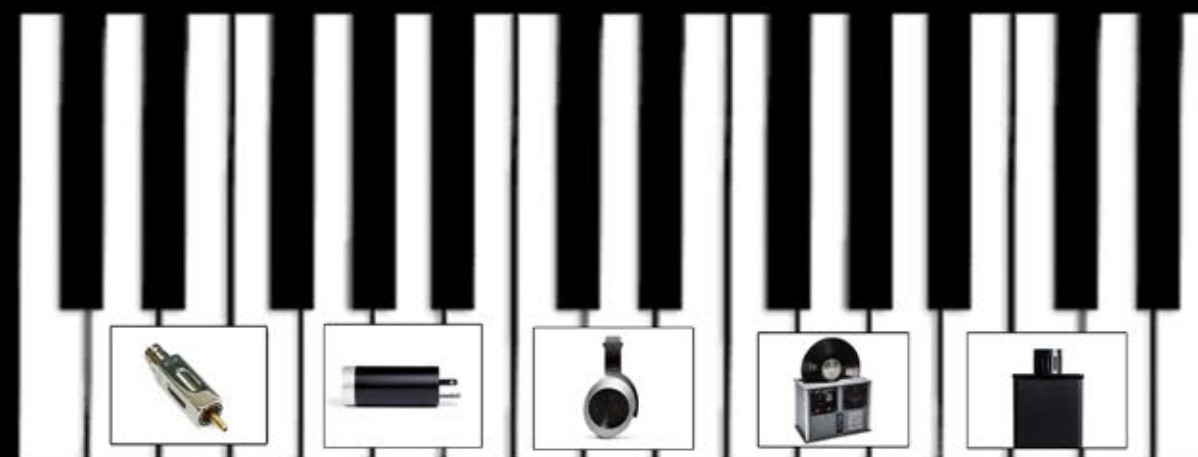
The SB-16 subs are not one note, boom boxes – we even got the SB to mate with a pair of miniscule Graham LS3/5s with impressive results, as well as a few pairs of ESLs. Throw in DSP room correction, set by your smartphone and you've got a monster subwoofer that's a breeze to set up. If a -3db point at 16hz still isn't enough for you, there's only one more option – the PB-16, that goes down to 13hz! Watch for our full review on the SB-16 very soon!

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A TONEAUDIO FIRST

The Audio Research Foundation Series

By Jeff Dorgay

Typically, our methodology is to only change one component in a system at a time for evaluation. Yet, with the complete stack of Foundation series components from Audio Research, it just seemed to make sense to dive right in. Normally, I would never condone this kind of behavior from one of our staff, but being that I've been using Audio Research components for about 35 years now, I felt comfortable to deviate from standard operating procedure, at least to start.

Audio Research still encloses a note printed on yellow paper informing you that their components need approximately 600 hours to sound their best. Because these components lack the massive capacitors present in the Reference series, 200 – 300 hours will get you 95% of the way there, and they sound amazingly good right out of the box. You will not be disappointed in the least. ARC also claims tube life of 2000 – 4000 hours, but my experience has been better than that, especially with signal tubes as opposed to output tubes.

The force is strong with this 47+ year old company from Minneapolis. Where many others constantly toot their horn about how “tubes rule,” or “analog rules,” or whatever, ARC goes quietly about their business of building some of the world's finest vacuum tube amplifiers (both from a sonic and reliability standpoint) and constantly improves them. Nothing is willy nilly at Audio Research. Having grown up in the Midwestern United States, I not only grasp this philosophy, but appreciate it earnestly. With so many new audio companies at every show claiming to be the latest, greatest – ARC has more than paid their dues. This is a company you can count on.

As with writing about automobiles or any other luxury item, it's often the flagship models that receive all the accolades. ARC's Reference components have won the hearts of reviewers and consumers all over the world and the praise is more than justified. Thanks to the economies of scale that ARC enjoys, their REF series components are all exceptional values and would cost double or triple what they do if built by a more boutique company forced to build in a more bespoke manner. That they can build a series like the Foundation components at nearly half the price by making strategic omissions is a testament to their engineering and procurement skills.

Another aspect of the Foundation series that makes them such a tremendous value is that they are built on the same production line, by the same highly skilled technicians that build the Reference series. The same amount of care is put into every aspect of their construction; each one is built by hand, with multiple quality checks along the way, culminating in the finished units powered up and listened to (both for quality and functionality) before being boxed and sent to your Audio Research dealer.

Enter the Foundation series

The new Foundation series consists of four components: The LS28 linestage, The DAC9, and PH9 phonostage all tip the scales at \$7,500 each, while the VT80 power amplifier is slightly more expensive, at \$8,000. While these components are only about half the price of equivalent REF components, I've been amazed at how much of the ARC house sound, sheer sonic purity, and refinement of the REF series carries through to these more affordable components. The Foundation series also takes full advantage of the styling upgrades that began with the GS series of ARC components.

Yes, the REF components still reveal more music than the Foundation series, but it's more like comparing a standard 987 series Porsche Cayman to the fully realized GT4. While the highly optimized GT4 delivers a more compelling performance on a racetrack, or smooth road in the middle of nowhere, the standard Cayman does not fail to engage on a standard freeway jaunt. And the lineage between cars is never in question – the same can be said comparing Foundation components to REF components.

Here's the bottom line, and I'm giving the punch line away early in the review. After living with the Foundation series for a few months now, they all deliver top of class performance, and each offers exceptional value, judged alone. Yet, should you want to build an amazing \$40,000 - \$100,000 hifi system around the Foundation series (perhaps less if you only need a digital or analog source, not both) that will give you such a huge helping of what the money no object gear offers, you might not even lust after REF gear after you've heard



these. Add a great turntable, and pair of speakers to a stack of Foundation components and live happily ever after. While the nerdy audiophile will never be satisfied, the true music lover will appreciate how much REF DNA lurks inside each one of these components.

We also have an individual, in-depth review of each of these components on the TONE website, so feel free to stop by the gear section and read more, or click on the handy links we've provided. This review will be more of an overview, touching on the high points of the series. It goes without saying that the synergy with the entire stack is fantastic, yet as with other ARC components we've owned, used, and reviewed, they always play well with others, (as well as vintage ARC bits) so even if you are just looking for a solitary component, you will be well served by the Foundation series. If you are new to Audio Research, any one of these components is a great introduction to the brand.

The source components: PH9 and DAC9

Many audiophiles argue that building a great system starts with the source. For those subscribing to this philosophy, the PH9 phonostage and DAC9 digital to analog converters are great front ends for any system. After using nearly every one of the PH series phonostages (PH3, PH3SE, PH5, PH6 and PH8) it's easy to see and hear the lineage, but it's also easy to see the massive step forward the PH9 has taken. Borrowing Jerold O'Brien's REF Phono 2 (not the SE model) and my old PH3SE back for some quick comparisons, it's easy to see how things have changed.

(continued)



Where the PH3/SE began the hybrid JFET and vacuum tube marriage that has proved successful for decades now, the PH3 and PH5 utilized 6922 tubes, where the PH6 and PH8 stepped up to the 6H30, which is the current staple. The PH7 and PH8 also borrow from the power supply design used in the REF Phono 2 and 3, with an additional 6H30 and 6550 tube as voltage regulators.

This trend continues with the PH9, featuring three 6H30s in the gain stage and an even bigger power supply, resulting in more dynamic range. The amount of resolution that the current model now offers is light

years ahead of the humble beginnings in my PH3SE. According to Savings.org's inflation calculator, the \$3,500 that my PH3SE fetched back in 1997 would be about \$5,300 in today's dollars. The new PH9 is without question 50% more phonostage. 250% would be more like it, but that's the way they do it at Audio Research – constant evolution.

Still a single input phonostage; the 10 pound PH3SE gives way to the 15.6 pound PH9 but the familiar rack handles that have been a trademark at ARC for decades remain. Given an aesthetic update by

the Italian division of The Macintosh Group (of which ARC is now an integral part), the PH9 looks more 21st century. The old, easily damaged paddle switches are now smooth, round buttons, all microprocessor controlled for consistency and long life. All functions are available via the green fluorescent display front and center, mirrored by the remote control.

With 58db of gain on tap and a near invisible noise floor, the PH9 works harmoniously with most MC cartridges offering about .5mv output and up. Loading can be set to 100, 200, 500, 1000 or 47k ohms.

Moving the PH3SE aside for the last generation REF Phono 2, it's staggering how close these two pieces are sonically. Tonal gradation and saturation are almost identical, to the point where the two boxes are tough to tell apart. With nearly every other parameter, the then \$13,000 REF Phono 2 doesn't leap out in front of the PH9: it offers two inputs instead of one and a high gain (68db single ended/74db balanced) option that the PH9 does not. The REF Phono 2 also offers a fully balanced topology, making it the more versatile performer.

Yet, should you only have a sin-

gle turntable and want to have the same visual cues throughout your system, the PH9 is the way to roll.

Though never really on the top of the list when thinking of premium DACs, ARC again quietly goes about their business, producing a great performer with the DAC9. While the Reference CD9/DAC makes use of four 6H30 tubes in the output stage and a vacuum tube regulated power supply, the DAC9 uses only two and a solid-state power supply throughout. Much like the difference between the CD6 and CD9 topologies.

(continued)



Yet unlike the CD6 and CD9, the DAC9 does offer the ability to decode DSD files (up to 2x DSD) and all PCM files are either handled at their native resolution or upsampled to 384kHz/24bit resolution and filtered thusly. We can argue this point forever, our experience has always been implementation over technology, and in this case, the DAC9 works brilliantly. It offers a level of tonality and dynamics not terribly far from our reference dCS and Gryphon DACs, costing considerably more. This one is a true bargain for \$7,500.

Where something like the dCS surpasses the DAC9 is in its ability to be upgraded as all digital decoding and filtering is software based. This will also prevent the DAC9 from decoding MQA files (at least for now) and this is not a deal breaker for this reviewer.

Despite some scuttlebutt on the internet, the DAC9 had no problems mating to my Mac Mini and Mac Book Pro. It worked equally flawlessly with the Dell XPS 27 (windows) computer and a number of different devices; a Simaudio 260D CD player used as a disc transport, the Pro-Ject MaiA CD player (also used as a disc transport), a Meridian MS200 server and the Aurender W20.

Thanks to a wide range of inputs (toslink, USB, RCA, Coax and XLR) making the DAC9 your digital hub couldn't be easier, and it is all accessed by your remote. It would be nice to see the DAC10 feature this versatility controlled by an app via pad or smartphone, but it's not a deal breaker.

The real key to the DAC9 is the high level of audio performance it offers. If you want more functionality, something else might be a better choice, but if you are a music lover that doesn't fiddle with things as much and truly loves to listen, the DAC9 is an outstanding value. Much like everything else that ARC does, their success does not lie in embracing the latest trend in anything, but the ultimate refinement of known parameters. This is why 30 year old ARC components still sound awesome. There is more than enough file capability to make this DAC future proof for some time. *(continued)*



Linestage: LS28

The LS28 is the portal that ties everything together and is smartly designed to match the rest of the components in the series. With four balanced XLR and four single ended RCA inputs, you should be able to easily integrate everything in your system. And like the past REF preamplifiers we've used, the LS28 is golden in the sense that performance is equally good with balanced or single ended inputs and outputs. Using identical 20-foot runs of Cardas Clear cable, there is no sonic difference running to the VT80 power amplifier with either choice. This versatility makes the LS28 an exciting choice for those not having an all Audio Research system or one needing to combine both balanced and single ended sources.

As with the other components in this series, the LS28 sounds great out of the box, becoming more expansive, dynamic and natural after a few hundred hours. A compliment of four 6H30 tubes take care of amplification. This level of drive is what was available in the previous REF 5/REF 5SE linestages – the main difference being the LS28 having a solid-state power supply to keep costs more inline.

However, the LS28 succeeds brilliantly, with a level of power and finesse hinting at what Audio Research has learned between the last generation of linestages and now. A recent visit to the factory, with ARC's Warren Gehl reveals nothing has been left unturned. Even the coating on the printed

circuit boards and the wire going from the board to the input and output connectors has been re-evaluated and improved, providing more sonic purity in the process.

In the past there was a bigger gap in just how much more music the REF components reveal compared to the LS series. Of course the new REF6 has taken a big leap with 6 6H30s for current drive and a bigger, beefier power supply, but this LS28 is an outstanding performer in its own right. Like the PH9, a quick comparison to a borrowed REF 2SE and LS27, shows the LS28 much more in REF territory now.

The biggest change is that of sheer transparency. Where some manufacturers of tube gear espouse a "tube sound," Audio Research continues in a direction of no sound at all – this preamplifier merely reveals the music sent to it. If it has two outstanding characteristics, it's an ability to retrieve even the smallest details in any recording, and immense sonic drive. Whether you like music that is small and intimate, or over the top and bombastic, the LS28 expands or contracts accordingly. Extended listening sessions are a true joy, with no listener fatigue whatsoever.

Does the new REF6 reveal more music? Of course it does, but the sonic footprint of the LS28 is such that you won't long for a REF if your budget won't allow it, like you might have in the past. And compared to others similarly priced, the LS28 is tough to beat. *(continued)*

Power Amplifier: VT80

Exciting as the rest of this series is, when I saw the pics of the VT80 right before its release, I was salivating. With no disrespect to the big ARC REF power amplifiers, there has always been a certain magic to their power amplifiers sporting a single pair of output tubes that is very special. The D-79, the REF 75SE and now the VT80 are indeed all cut from the same cloth. There is a purity of signal that the VT80 offers that almost defies definition, and though 75 watts per channel won't serve everyone, if you *can* work with this power range, the VT80 is sheer delight.

We put it through its paces with speakers from Focal, Graham, MartinLogan, Quad, Sonus faber and just recently the new Paradigm Persona 9s, which have a 96db/1watt sensitivity. This \$35,000 pair of speakers, combined with the VT80 and the rest of the Foundation series components, cabled with Tellurium-Q Silver Diamond cables is very near the best sound we've heard *at any price*. The system synergy is unbelievably good, and whether I was listening to Beethoven, the Beatles or Beyonce, the VT80 delivers the power, control and fine detail that you expect from Audio Research's finest.

According to Audio Research, the VT80 shares power and output transformers with the REF 75SE, along with a lot of core circuitry, though it does not have quite as much reserve power supply capability as the larger and more costly REF model. A unique twist with the VT80



is its new auto biasing system, allowing multiple output tubes to be used. Our in-depth review of the VT80 will offer more insight about this exciting feature.

The VT80 is easier to use than older ARC models because individual tube biasing is a thing of the past. Anyone remember trying to bias a VT100? While ARC still suggests getting a matched set of tubes, this is not as critical as it used to be, and the auto bias gives you the option of using 6550, KT88, KT120 or KT150 output tubes. Careful observation reveals the VT80 arriving with KT120 tubes, where the original prototypes were sporting KT150s. ARCs Warren Gehl points out that they had to go with the KT120 to reach the target price of \$8,000. Each tube sounds slightly different and it's nice that you now have the option of making a swap to fine tune the voicing of your VT80. Unlike some other amplifiers, the VT80 does not produce more power with the KT150 tube and at around \$200 each, it may be an option for later. It does sound great with the stock KT120s, so don't feel as if you are missing out if you don't install a set.

Of course, the suggested pre-amplifier is the matching Foundation series LS28, but should you have someone else's preamplifier or even a vintage Audio Research preamplifier (my SP-11 made a lovely match as well), unlike the REF series amplifiers, the VT80 is compatible with single ended preamplifiers at the flick of the switch on the rear panel. Perhaps your Audio Research journey can begin with this amplifier? *(continued)*

Epilogue: Six months down the road

Having had the privilege of living with the entire Foundation series for nearly six months now, I'm even more impressed with this stack of components than when they first arrived. Call it bias, familiarity, or both; I've been living with Audio Research components since 1979, and there have been some I've loved and a few not so much. A large portion of enthusiasm for audio is the journey, as well as the mixing and matching of different components to achieve a certain something, whatever that might be for you.

However, in today's time challenged world, I am tempted to tell you to just get off the merry go round, buy a stack of Foundation components, add your favorite speakers and turntable and call it a day. There will always be something bigger, better, with more capacity for *something*. The sonic and aesthetic synergy that these four components provide far exceeds the price asked. Those wanting a more in-depth review of these components, look no further than the review section of our website. By the time you read this, they will all be posted.

These are four very special components. ●



Audio Research
Foundation Series:
LS28, DAC9, PH9 and VT80
MSRP: VT-80, \$8,000
all others \$7,500

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Grado Statement 1

Speakers Focal Sopra no.
2, MartinLogan Expression
13A, Quad 2812, Paradigm
Persona 9H

Cable Cardas Clear,
Tellurium Q Black Diamond

THE MCINTOSH MP1100

Maximum Flexibility

By Jeff Dorgay

What's better than a great phonostage with two inputs? One with three inputs and an on-board analog-to-digital (ADC) converter, so you can digitize your favorite vinyl to 24/96 or 24/192 high resolution digital files. While that might seem counterintuitive to analog devotees that don't enjoy digital, but for the rest of us, it's fantastic. Those of you that are with me, who love your vinyl collection, but a: like to take it with you and b: just can't *find* everything you have on vinyl on Tidal or any other streaming service will enjoy the MP1100 tremendously for this feature alone.

Having just finished a visit to the McIntosh factory in Binghamton, NY, the level of quality that goes into every McIntosh component is still freshly burned in my memory. Watching the entire McIntosh crew in action, seeing their components go from raw materials to finish products is truly amazing. They do it all under one roof, bending their own chassis, cutting the glass faceplates to every aspect of final assembly. This level of hands on manufacturing means your MP1100 will not only be able to be repaired decades from now, McIntosh will be able to cut you a new front panel, should the movers drop it. Another great reason to consider McIntosh a long-term audio investment.





Settings and more

Personally, I love the MP1100 because it sounds great and offers three inputs, perfect for my Technics SL1100/SL1200 collection. It's so much fun to be able to plug in all three and switch between them on a whim when the mood strikes – variation is one of the most intriguing parts of a vinyl collection. Mono records, 78s, older records with different EQ curves, the MP1100 is equipped for every option you can think of. Which

makes an incredible tool for evaluating cartridges and turntables along with whatever different records you find when perusing the bins. It's the perfect component for major analog geeks.

All three inputs can be configured as MM (40db and 46db gain settings) or MC (52db, 58db and 64db gain settings) with a range of seven capacitance settings, eight MC loading settings, and four different EQ settings as well; RIAA, NAB, AES, and 78.

This made for a quick run for some very old Ella Fitzgerald 78s, all handled rather nicely. It also comes pre-configured for the McIntosh MT5 or MT10 turntables, so if you happen to be building an all McIntosh system, it's another nice touch. Best of all, most settings can be adjusted from the comfort of your listening chair, making it easier to optimize your setup. When finished, you can customize the alphanumeric display to list your turntables or

cartridges in order, so you don't lose track of what you're listening to. As McIntosh head honcho Charlie Randall is fond of telling me, "we like to make our gear as user friendly as possible." They've certainly hit a home run here. (But don't ask me how to program an AV processor!)

The higher end McIntosh preamplifiers all have on-board phono capability, and every one we've tested has been excellent, but the MP1100 takes it all to

the next level. This is a serious stand-alone phonostage, regardless of what's in the rest of your system. Should you have a McIntosh preamplifier and add the MP1100, you can have 5 turntables in your system, woo hoo!

All tubes, all good

Using a pair of 12AX7s for MM phono and overall gain, with a second pair to provide the additional gain for MC cartridges, the MP1100 is quiet. *(continued)*



Perhaps one of the quietest all tube phonostages we've heard. We had a similar experience with the C1100 control preamplifier. That's where 60-plus years of experience makes the difference. Those looking closely will find a pair of op amps under the cover, but they are not in the *gain* path. A recent visit to McIntosh, where I had the good fortune to get some clarification from Chuck Hinton, reveals the op amps are used as phase splitters to provide fully balanced operation.

Much like other current McIntosh components we've auditioned, using the MP1100 with the stock tubes is a safe bet. McIntosh carefully tests and grades their

tubes to keep noise down and musicality high. Those craving the last few molecules of performance can shell out for some hand sorted NOS 12AX7s, but it's going to cost a *lot* more. A really amazing set of four NOS 12AX7s will set you back about a thousand bucks these days, and if you're going this route, you really need a second set because sometimes bad things happen to good tubes. 98% of you can rest assured that you'll have a blast listening to the MP1100 just as it comes from the factory, and the other 2% of you (you know who you are) will be pulling out the telefunken and bugle boys. *(continued)*

$$\sum \left(\text{future proof} + \text{benchmark performance} + \text{superlative sound} \right) = \text{Rossini}$$



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ONLY THE MUSIC

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An analog yoga master

Those with extensive vinyl collections and multiple turntables know the key to analog happiness is flexibility. The MP1100 has more moves than your yoga instructor. In addition to all the gain, loading and capacitance settings, it features three RCA inputs, with the third configurable as a balanced input, for those of you so equipped. All great stuff, but McIntosh hits it out of the park by offering four, separate tonearm ground posts. Once you go beyond two turntables, it gets tricky keeping everything connected and grounded. What seems like a minor complaint, is a fairly big hassle, when you pull one wire out and the other two go with it. Having a separate grounding lug for each tonearm you use makes the process so much easier. The only other manufacturer I've seen do this is Pass Labs, so hats off to McIntosh for this.

The more time spent in and out of the listening chair, swapping turntables and cartridges, the more I appreciate the flexibility of the MP1100. In the context of the room two system, centered around the Quad 2812 ESLs and the PrimaLuna DiaLogue HP Integrated (with KT150s) amplifier, the McIntosh is both a sonic and stylistic match. And the handy remote makes it easy to make minor tweaks from the comfort of the listening spot.

(continued)



In case you've run out of analog inputs, the MP1100 has a switchable analog input – a perfect place to add a tape deck if you are so inclined. The only thing missing is a fixed level output, but it was easy to pop a pair of Cardas XLR adaptors in the balanced outputs and jack my trusty TEAC 2300sx into the MP1100 and make a mix tape or two. I had just as much fun making mix tapes as I did digitizing obscure albums. Awesome!

The proof is in the listening

Gliding through CAN's trippy "Cascade Waltz," the voluminous sound stage and gentle, yet refined tonality of the MP1100 comes through immediately. Every tube has a sonic signature, and this preamplifier is no exception. Where the Audio Research PH9 (also in for review), which has an architecture based around the 6H30 tube has a markedly different feel, with the McIntosh feeling a bit more organic and the ARC slightly more dynamic. To clarify, the MP1100 doesn't feel soft, slow, gooey, or vintage, but there is a warmer, more saturated tonality with the Mc, where the ARC is a purpose built high performance machine, with a single input and more resolution. Though similarly priced, these two excellent phonostages will appeal to completely different customers.

The rest of the musical range is equally well represented. I'll hand the MP1100 8 out of 10 on frequency extension and dynamic range, a 9 for tonality and a 9.5 for low background noise, which is as good as it gets for a tube phonostage. With ARC, CJ and Nagra here to compare to, the MP1100 is as quiet as any of the premium (i.e. *more expensive*) tube phonostages I have on hand. *(continued)*



A MASTERPIECE OF DESIGN AND ENGINEERING



Renaissance ESL 15A represents a major evolution in electrostatic design. A 15-inch Curvilinear Line Source (CLS™) XStat™ vacuum-bonded electrostatic transducer with advanced MicroPerf™ stator technology and ultra-rigid AirFrame™ Blade construction provide the heart of this exceptional loudspeaker.

A powerfully dynamic low-frequency experience is rendered with unflinching accuracy and authority courtesy of dual 12-inch low-distortion aluminum cone woofers. Each woofer is independently powered by a 500-watt Class-D amplifier, and controlled by a 24-Bit Vojtko™ DSP Engine featuring Anthem Room Correction (ARC™) technology. Hear it today at your local dealer.

There's a body that the MP1100 possesses, (some call it the McIntosh sound) that works wonders with average recordings. Perhaps this is embellishing ever so slightly, but I didn't hear a record that I didn't like through the MP1100. Yet when listening to the T-Rex classic, *Electric Warrior*, all the layers and overdubs came through clearly. The MP1100 was equally beguiling with solo vocals, be it Shelby Lynne or Johnny Cash.

Because the MP1100 is so good overall, you don't notice what it doesn't do until you step up to something like the Lyra Etna, or Clearaudio Goldfinger, but these are cartridges that cost more than the MP1100. If you are working with cartridges in the \$500 - \$3,000 range, I feel confident that you will find the level of music revealed by the MP1100 to be just lovely.

Gotta have one

After many hours of listening, recording, and watching those blue meters bounce, I liked the MP1100 enough to purchase it as a reviewing tool here at TONEAudio. The MP1100's input and output flexibility makes it a must have for a multiple turntable guy like me. At \$8,500 it may be a bit overkill for someone with only a single turntable, especially if you have no interest in digitizing your vinyl, but for someone wanting a reasonably priced, all-encompassing vinyl playback and archiving workstation with multiple turntables, the MP1100 is without peer.

As McIntosh's CEO Charlie Randall is fond of saying, "We make extremely user-friendly gear for music lovers wanting a high degree of connectivity." The McIntosh MP1100 isn't an analog crescent wrench, it's an analog space station. You can dock and play everything with it. So if this is what you've been looking for to integrate your collection of analog toys and recordings, take one for a test drive. I think you'll be as excited about it as I am. Happy listening. ●

McIntosh
MP1100 Phonostage
MSRP \$8,500

MANUFACTURER
McIntosh Labs

CONTACT
www.mcintoshlabs.com/us/Products/pages/ProductDetails.aspx?CategoryId=phonopreamplifiers&ProductId=MP1100

PERIPHERALS

Turntables

Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 w/tri-planar and Lyra Etna, AVID Acutus Reference SE w/SME V and Clearaudio Goldfinger, Technics SL-1200 GAE, 1200 mk.2, and SL-1100

Amplifier

PrimaLuna DiaLogue HP Integrated, Audio Research LS-29/VT80

Speakers

Quad 2812, Graham LS5/9, Graham LS3/5

Cable

Cardas Clear

Power

Equi-Tech 1800

Yeah, It's the Best...

THE GRAND PRIX AUDIO MONACO 2.0 TURNTABLE

By Jeff Dorgay

After reading hifi magazines for about 40 years now, and writing about hifi for the last 15 of those years. I've been a good Smurf and haven't baited my loyal readers with the B word – hardly ever as a matter of fact.

This time I'm compelled to put my foot down, or perhaps the tonearm down is more like it. I've listened to the big shit, crazy money turntables like the Continuum, the Clearaudio Statement, Goldmund, Transrotor, Tech Das, blah, blah, blah. All six figure tables and not a single one of them worth the price asked. For the last five years, I've hung my hat on the AVID Acutus Reference SP, and it's a fantastic table – one that I still love dearly. (So if you have one, don't sell it, it's not rubbish; read my article [here](#).)

Now and then, something comes along that resets the paradigm, and the Grand Prix Audio Monaco 2.0 does just that. I think it's the world's best turntable and with a TriPlanar arm and Lyra Etna cartridge, the whole rig will only set you back about \$55,000. I know many of you will freak out at the thought of combining "only" and "\$55,000" in the same sentence. But imagine if you could get a car that outperformed a Ferrari 458 or a Porsche GT3 for \$55,000? That's what the Grand Prix Monaco 2.0 does. It eclipses everything I've ever heard, regardless of price.

So, for the average music lover, 55 grand is still crazy money. But for the music lover that was going to drop 2-4 times this on the ultimate turntable, on their final analog destination, 55 large is a deal and a half, baby. Not to mention all the money you're going to lose going through a few 10-30 thousand dollar turntables to reach the grail. Half of all the price of a Monaco 2.0 will evaporate on Audiogon just figuring out what you *don't* want.

Here's the analog paradox; you could go through about five or ten tables in the 10 – 40 thousand dollar range, lose at least five G on each one and then buy a Monaco 2.0. You might appreciate the Monaco more if you did that. Or you could go straight past GO, and just graduate to the Monaco from wherever you are now and save a lot of agony. It will depend on just how OCD you are. Take my advice; this is the table you want as your final analog destination.

Forget the rest.

At 58, my hearing is supposed to be getting worse, right? Careful as I've been going to concerts, mowing the lawn and such, I know my hearing can't be as good

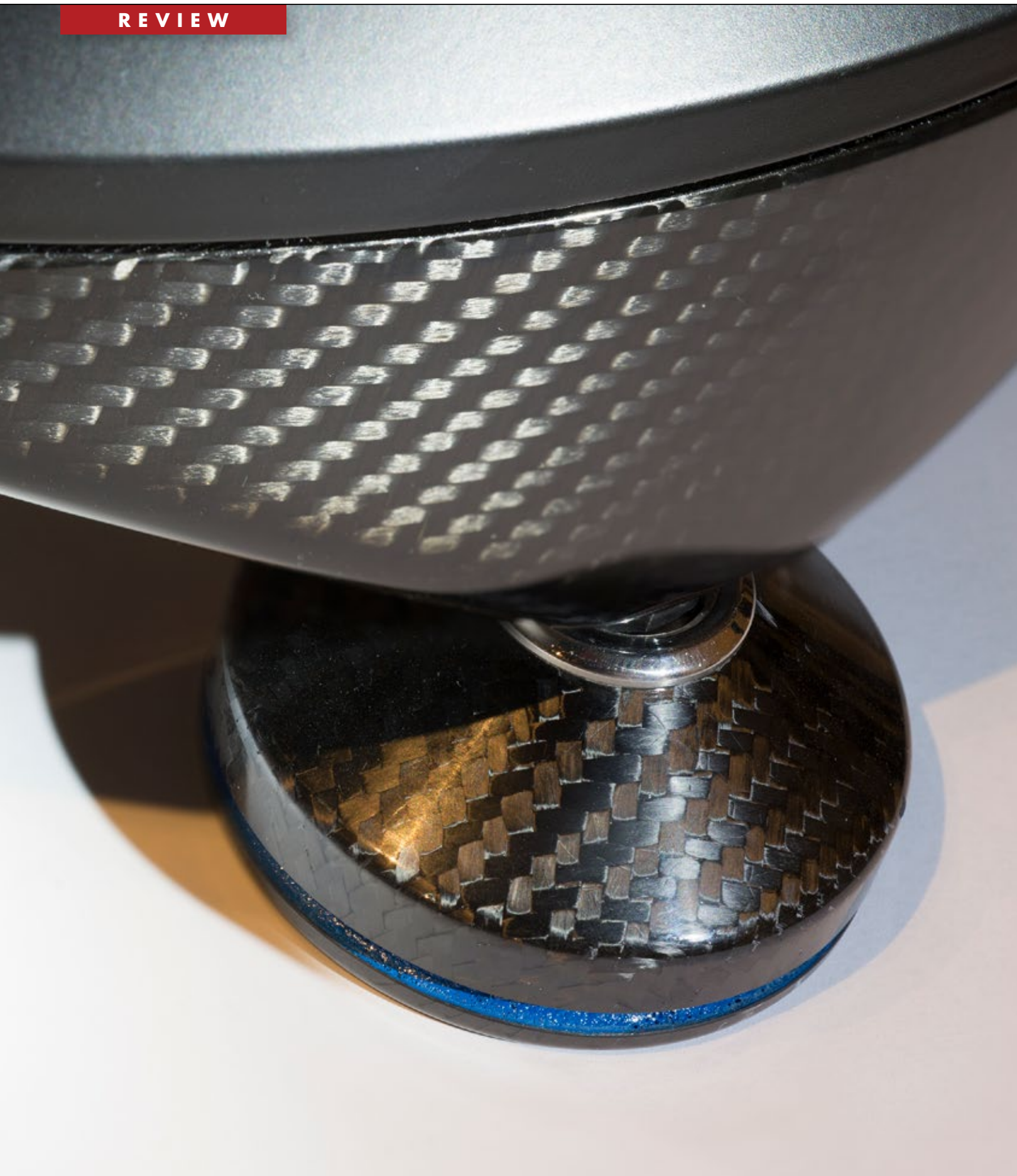


as it was in my 20s. I can still hear the horizontal transformer in Mr. O'Brien's tube TV set, so I guess I still hear up to about 16kHz. But I profess not to have canine ears.

The second Grand Prix Audio's Jesse Luna dropped the tonearm down on my copy of the *Superfly* soundtrack (a major guilty pleasure, and a record I've been listening to since age 14) I heard stuff I never heard before on this record. A lot of stuff. Layering, texture, extra vocal overdubs and the bongos just sat there locked in space in a way they never have before. I'm not supposed to be hearing this kind of detail from this crappy record, and I'm probably not supposed to be hearing this kind of detail at my age. But I am.

About 100 records later, the Monaco 2.0 proves a serious threat to productivity. In nearly 700 audio reviews, a component has never grabbed me like this. Every time I put on a record with the thought of listening passively, the Monaco's gravitational pull sucks me right to the couch. For hours. No escape. I could go on and on in detail about minutia about this track or that track, but chances are you don't listen to the same music I do anyway.

The Monaco 2.0 reveals more music in every way. Bigger soundstage in all three dimensions, check. Deeper, more solid bass, check. More low-level resolution, check. More dynamic range and tonal contrast. Yep, that too. On every record, I managed to listen too, and in the same way that my dCS Rossini DAC and clock extracts more musical information out of even the worst recordings I have, making so many of them much more listenable, the Monaco 2.0 does the same. *(continued)*



I'm guessing you probably have your own bin of moderately listenable records, which you put up with because you love the music contained in the grooves.

Because the Monaco 2.0 extracts so much more music, You will be surprised at how many marginal records in your collection reveal more than they ever did before. Even *Kiss, Alive!* sounds better than it ever has on the Monaco 2.0 and that has to be one of the worst sounding records ever made. Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley's layered vocals now have very distinct space between them. Firehouse, woo!

We're about at the point in the review where I'm supposed to say, "The only thing that makes me grumpy about the Monaco 2.0 is..." but there isn't. I love this turntable. It's amazing. There are no downsides. It's simple, elegant, reveals more music than anything I've ever heard and it's carbon fiber. Mmmmm.

Carbon fiber is catnip to me, but it must be functional. GPA founder and designer Alvin Lloyd is no stranger to carbon fiber bits, having been a principal at Swift Engineering. (for you non-racing fans the Swift 006 and 007 carbon fiber chassis was a revolution in the CART racing series) You can read all the white papers and tech briefs at the GPA site here.

Accuracy is the secret weapon

These articles will tell you more than you want to know about the why and how of the Monaco 2.0, but you only need to listen for about 60 seconds to get it. The real secret is its speed accuracy. The Monaco 2.0 holds such a tight grip on speed accuracy with its proprietary direct drive system (.0001% peak deviation, 20 parts per billion average) consisting of a 75,000 line encoder makes for a new definition of the term "gapless motor." *(continued)*

Combining this with a record clamp that tells you when you've achieved the perfect amount of clamping force with a little green LED in the middle, it makes for a better record to platter interface, or at least a more consistent platter to record interface than possible before.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, I am not blessed with perfect pitch. Those I know that do find analog nearly unlistenable because they claim that even the best belt drive tables have speed inaccuracies that send them out of the room screaming for mercy and prefer digital because of the perfect speed accuracy.

While I don't hear this group of anomalies, playing the same records simultaneously on the Monaco 2.0 and any of my other tables, there is moderate to severe smearing of imaging information and a lack of immediacy and impact by comparison. The Monaco 2.0 reveals that speed accuracy that you love from your favorite digital recordings, combined with the magic, palpability, tonal saturation, or whatever else you want to call it that the finest analog recordings bring to the party. In short – it's the best of both worlds. Testing my hypothesis out on a couple of perfect pitch/canine hearing buddies, they were all impressed and commented on the perfect speed accuracy that the Monaco 2.0 offers.

Out of the pits in a hurry

Racing teaches you that races are often won and lost in the pits, all other things being equal. I'm not interested in turntables that take the manufacturer's tech a whole day to set up (the Continuum). I'm an average turntable setup



guy at best, and I have no bones telling you that. Every time I review another great table, I learn a little more about the intricacies of analog setup, but I am not a Jedi master by any means.

I can't tell you how impressed I was that GPA's Jesse Luna had the Monaco 2.0 up and rocking in about 15 minutes. When I swapped tonearms from the longer Tri-Planar arm to the standard length one of mine, it only took me about 20 minutes to get things dialed in. Being that this is such a high-performance table, I still suggest having your dealer do it or getting one of the Jedi's to make sure you are getting all of the performance you are paying for. You don't take your Ferarri to the corner tire store for an alignment, do you?

Many turntables later

I've owned a lot of turntables over the years. I love turntables, even if I'm at a point in my life with music that I'm just as happy listening to digital as analog. Rather than hang my hat on one mega turntable, which I couldn't realistically compare to anything else, just as I couldn't really compare other cars to a Ferrari 458 or Porsche GT3 objectively, I still own quite a few tables – about 14 at last count. Everything from a lowly Dual 1229 up to the AVID Acutus Reference SP. It makes the job a lot easier to compare a review table to a reference table or two that is comparably priced than to just brag about my mega table that nothing else compares to. So, I might just jump off the cliff for a Monaco. Stay tuned and keep an eye on the reference components section.

(continued)



If you're a new TONEAudio reader, you might be thinking this is just like other hifi magazines, where a new "best" is declared practically monthly, only to be superseded when the next bauble is unraveled. Not here. Let the record state that this is the finest turntable I've experienced, at any price. If you want to spend more money on another turntable for whatever reason, I won't poke fun at you. But you won't hear more music. The Monaco 2.0 can be your final analog destination if extracting the maximum amount of information out of those delicate grooves is your goal.

Even if you aren't in the market for a \$50,000 turntable, the GPA guys are at a lot of the shows, and they are offered in a number of good dealers. I highly suggest taking a test drive/listen if you can. And I hope that you enjoy listening to it as much as I do. That's the ultimate test. ●

**Grand Prix Audio
Monaco 2.0 Turntable**

MSRP: \$37,000 without tonearm

MANUFACTURER

Grand Prix Audio

CONTACT

www.grandprixaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Cartridges

Lyra Etna, Grado Statement 2

Phonostage

Pass XS Phono,
Audio Research REF 3 Phono

Preamplifier

Pass XS Pre

Power Amplifier

Pass XS 300 Monoblocks

Cable

Cardas Clear

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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Pass Labs XA200.8 Monoblocks

Closer to the Top

By Greg Petan

Over the past 20 years, it remains exciting to review such a range of products from so many unique audio manufacturers. Each new component provides a narrative of where the designer is in their creative process. Changing out components from one manufacturer to another is like changing the channel from one show to another featuring a whole new cast and a whole new plot line. Following the career of Nelson Pass, and his unique outlook always makes for engaging listening.

Though my first experience with Mr. Pass' channel as a reviewer was with the X2.5 preamplifier, followed by the X350, X600, X350.5, XA200.5 amplifiers, the XP20 preamp, and finally the subject of this review. The Threshold SA150 power amplifier and FET 9 preamplifier were the first true high-end components I wrote a check for back in the early 1990s.



A Man With a Plan

If you follow Pass' timeline, you realize he does not slap a new face plate on a modestly tweaked amp, jack up the price and call it a new model. A true innovator; Nelson Pass does not create a new product or range of products until he and his team have produced substantial sonic improvement.

Unafraid to explore and embrace different designs and topologies, Pass created the popular Aleph series in the late 1990's to considerable acclaim. More recently the First Watt components, the X, XA and XS lines each offering keen insight into differing approaches, and sonic priorities. It was the introduction of the X series amplifiers, however, featuring the super-symmetry circuit in the X-1000 mono blocks in 1998 that launched Pass Labs into the forefront of modern amplifier design, hinting at what was yet to come.

The XA200.8 takes up a good deal of space. At 19" wide, 11" tall, 27.5" deep and weighing 157lbs each, plan your system layout accordingly. Operating in class A up to 400 watts, the XA200.8s get warm but never blisteringly so. The new porthole style bias meter and simply beveled face plate have a clarity of design that escaped the fussier XA200.5. There are single-ended inputs which I have never used on any Pass amp and a pair of XLR inputs. There are two sets of great wing-nut style binding posts ideal for bi-wiring. The master power switch on the back brings the amp to life, and the large spring loaded button on the face plate brings the amp out of standby. *(continued)*



The Biggest .8

With the XA200.8s, the most powerful of the .8 series and right below the reference XS series, Nelson has reached a plateau occupied by those of the great classical sculptures. The ability to remove all the unnecessary material that surrounds the subject revealing the ideal hidden form defined the art of the day. As Michelangelo said; "I saw the Angel in the stone and carved until I set it free." With this principle in mind, the XA200.8s embody this ideal to a greater degree than any Pass amp I have yet heard. Distortion is removed to such an extent; music is effortlessly rendered. That's not to say there is no personality whatsoever, and all great artists have a recognizable touch. The indelible hallmarks of Nelson Pass's designs are so artfully integrated into the XA200.8s that they no longer stick out separately from the music. Control, definition, smoothness and a tinge of tonal color let you know in the best way possible this is a Pass amp through and through.

I'm not sure why but it seemed to take longer for the XA200.8s to come into full voice than past Pass amps I have lived with; we are talking months. Perhaps my day to day responsibilities has cut into listening time protracting the process. Once readied, the XA200.8s impart a confidence that whatever music thrown its way will be handled with great ease. You will never hear someone say this or that genre of music sounds better than another through the XA200.8. Everything sounds great, all forms of music are presented completely just as they should be with little lacking, added, or otherwise deviant in the reproduction. *(continued)*

Appearances can be deceptive.



Rega products are elegantly simple in appearance. Deceptively so, in fact. Everything is straightforward to setup, easy to use and utterly consistent in performance.

Yet underneath that apparent simplicity lies some of the most radical thinking, advanced engineering and innovative materials development you'll find anywhere.

Based on 40 years of continuous research and unwavering commitment to UK manufacturing, everything Rega does is there for one reason alone.

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

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

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



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Steadfast composer with such low levels of distortion and a seemingly infinitely scaled dynamic range paints a masterpiece of music reproduction allowing the listener to completely sink into the performance, freeing the mind to soak in more musical meaning.

Like the Pass amplifiers that came before, control and composer are terms that keep coming to mind in defining the XA200.8s. I made a mistake early in the review process of not dialing back the volume knob of the D'agostino Master Audio pre-amp when I switched from the lower level of my Triangle Art turntable and my D'Agostino phono preamp to the higher output Macintosh MB50 Streamer. I hit play on Disturbed's "The Infection," and a literal explosion of sound ripped through the Sonus Faber Liium speakers. I freakin jumped out of my skin, like a cartoon skeleton popping through my flesh but quickly realized the sound remained coherent within the mayhem. The soundstage remained clearly defined as did the timbre and texture of the instruments. It was way louder than I should ever listen if I hope to hang on to what's left of my hearing yet the XA200.8s showed no ceiling to their competence, no limit to what they could handle.

For me, this is the big difference between the older XA200.5s and the new .8 version. Bass is tighter, faster and more clearly defined when stressed with the XA200.8. The entire musical spectrum has more "pop" with greater dynamic control and more sparkle and contrast where the XA200.5 was softer,

with slightly less focus. I could live with the XA200.5 happily, but there is no doubt, the XA200.8 is the better amp.

Difference in the Details

There are several modern high-powered amps that approach the level of speaker control the XA200.8s provide, but few can spin as many sonic plates at once as the XA200.8s. With all the furry the XA200.8 is capable of so comes the grace and purity. Wonderfully rendered tonal color and subtly preserved transients particularly in the treble gives music the life and spontaneity of a lower powered single ended tube amp. The cymbals on Tommy Flanagan's *Sea Changes* are entirely grainless and complex as I have heard from a recording. Getting this right requires an extremely low noise floor and lack of electronic haze and glare. Pass amps have always been pretty good in this regard, particularly the XA.5 series. The XA200.8s seems to have taken the smoothness of the XA200.5s and add a degree of sparkle and openness allowing for greater detail, illumination, and air.

The same level of improvements carries through the mid-band. Grainless, smooth, yet naturally textured and focused. Vocals and mid-band rich instruments of all stripes are locked in and stable. Always presented in perfect size and proportion within the stage, images are not too broad, not too small. Of course, image size and shape is recording dependent, but with familiar source material I can attest, the XA200.8s get it spot on. *(continued)*





The mid-bass and low-bass balance is an area many amps either lean out in favor of definition and articulation or bloats in favor of a spreading warmth. This can be appealing at first but grows tiresome as an omnipresent coloration. Here the XA200.8s strut its neutrality, never draining the baby with the bathwater. From Stanley Clark playing a variety of bass instruments on East Riverside Drive to George Mraz exquisite phrasing on another Tommy Flanagan chestnut Nights At the Vanguard, the XA200.8s never gives themselves away, never imparting any lack of confidence that the amplifier is getting in the way of the music.

So What Makes Them Special?

Everything described above goes a long way to defining greatness. Sitting

in the sweet spot soaking it all up is a wonderful treat, indeed. However, a recent experience listening way off axis, at my drafting board, working on a creation of my own re-contextualized my expectations. "December 1963 (Oh What A Night)" by the Four Seasons came on via the McIntosh MB50 streamer catching me off guard. This has always been a real favorite of mine, so the fact that I would enjoy this classic is not news. But After the first couple of notes, I stopped dead, dropped my pen and started to choke up, my voice cracking as I began belting out the lyrics. No imaging, no soundstage, none of the audiophile checklist items to speak of, just.... Music- Soul stirring music. Can I attribute this magic moment directly to the XA200.8s? Yes, I can. *(continued)*

Clear Reflection

The geometry of Golden Reference.
The technology of Clear.



cardas.com/reflection



These amplifiers don't care where you are sitting, standing, dancing or otherwise. Their superb tonal balance and ease with which they pass the signal and their ability to control the speakers is beyond reproach and offer an intense connection to music regardless of your proximity to the system.

Priced at \$44K per pair, one should expect excellence in the XA200.8 amplifiers. There is excellence, and there is excellence. With all the wonderful attributes mentioned above comes the fact that not one Pass product in all the years of my ham-fisted ambivalence, have I been able to abuse one into failure. Those who know me can attest that if a component is not seriously over engineered, I will find a way to choke the life out of it. Reliability or the lack thereof is a point not driven home enough in reviews, particular reviews of components as expensive as this. Nothing is more frustrating than a costly component biting the dust. In this regard, Pass Labs' steadfast reliability is without peer.

Without hesitation, I could go the rest of my life and never feel the need to upgrade from the Pass XA200.8 amplifiers. That's not to say I will never review another amplifier; it is my job after all. And it's also not to say that I will never find another amplifier enjoyable. But if I were to get out of the biz of swapping gear and had to lay down my hard earned cash for a forever amplifier? I could not imagine another manufacturer more deserving of my business and another component worthier of my respect.



Further Thoughts by Jeff Dorgay

There's not much more that I can add in sheer enthusiasm here. My ownership and enjoyment of Pass gear go back a bit further; I bought my first Threshold 400A power amplifier in 1982. I've been using Pass power amplifiers as reference components for about eight years now, but my experience has never been the same – I've yet to have a Pass component break on my watch. I don't think I know anyone else that has either.

Having used the XS300 monos as my personal reference since they came on the scene, I must admit the new .8 series is beginning to close the gap; it's not quite the chasm it used to be. For my money, if you have the dough, the XS300s are a lot better (as they should be) but where the XS300 left the 200.5s in the dust, There's a lot more horsepower and finesse inside the .8 version. If you don't have world class everything, you won't regret your decision to get a pair of XA200.8s. And Pass mentions their products having about a seven-year lifespan, so it wouldn't surprise me in a couple of years if Mr. Pass comes up with something even more musical than the XS amplifiers to open that gap back up.

Comparing the 200.8s to the XS monos is one thing, comparing the 200.8s to everything else in their price category is another. You might dig that tiny extra bit of tubey-ness that a pair of tube monoblocks will give you, but it's ever, ever so slight. I say this as a guy that has more than a few

tube amplifiers here. I love the 200.8s because they give me all that lovely tonal saturation that I would get from a great tube amplifier, with all the grip and dynamics of a solid-state amp – without having to hunt down tubes. And for me, that will always be the awesomeness of Pass amplifiers, or as Nelson Pass has said more than once, "the sound of tubes without the hassle."

It's worth mentioning how well the 200.8s work with any source. I've used these monoblocks with about two dozen different sources, balanced and single ended with no problem. Using the Pass XS Pre and the Audio Research REF 6 (the only preamplifiers I have that sound equally good through the RCA and XLR outputs) with 20-foot runs of Cardas Clear cable, I could not notice any difference in sound quality. So rest assured, whatever your source it will partner up with these amps perfectly.

And it's the same for the output. Whether using the most power hungry Magnepans, treacherous ESLs, etc., there was no speaker that the 200.8s had the least bit of difficulty with. I've never used an amplifier more benign in that sense than any of the Pass products. They are impervious to speaker and cable differences, making it all that much easier to hear said nuances. This is why I love using their amplifiers as a reference – they let everything else through.

The bottom line: another out of the ballpark hit for Pass Labs. ●

Pass Labs XA200.8 Monoblocks
MSRP \$44,000 per pair

MANUFACTURER
Pass Labs

CONTACT
www.passlabs.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source
Triangle Art Signature/
Osiris Arm/Ortofon
Cadenza Black

Preamplifier
Pass Labs XP-25

Power Amplifier
Pass Labs XA200.8

Cable MIT

SONNETEER ALABASTER INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

A Price-Performance Prince

By Rob Johnson

Sonneteer is a new name to many, admittedly including me. In the 1980s, college friends Haider Bahrani and Remo Casade discovered their shared passion for live music and audio recording. After years envisioning products for their own use, and leaning on their backgrounds in electrical engineering, the two solidified their collaboration in 1994 with the founding of UK-based Sonneteer. Why name the company Sonneteer you ask? In addition to his design skills, Bahrani enjoyed poetry. The name serves as an homage to those sonnet writers who inspired him. As such, their Alabaster Integrated Amplifier received its moniker from 16th-century poet William Alabaster.





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"The new GamuT RS3 stand-mounted two-way. Finished in beautiful cabinetry with integral stands, the \$19,000 RS3 was one of the show's musical highlights, with a spacious yet focused presentation, natural timbres, and engaging musicality."

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



REVIEW



Appearance

The Alabaster integrated amp sports a traditional and understated appearance. Our review sample with a black anodized aluminum facade does little to hint at the electronic prowess within. The front panel offers a purist complement of controls, with three knobs managing input source selection, adjust volume, and power. That is it. While the Alabaster may not win any beauty awards for modern elegance, the build quality is solid; with controls and switches that feel substantial when operated. For a very reasonable price around \$2,400, this integrated earns a high score for price-performance. Looks are always a plus, but of course, that kind of facelift would drive up production cost. I applaud Sonneteer's tradeoff, focusing on sound quality over flashy looks.

Weighing 26.5lbs. with dimensions of 12" deep x 17" wide x 3.5" high only hints

at the hefty transformer coils, steel bracing, and circuitry within. The unit pushes 55 watts into eight ohms, and roughly double that into four ohms. With a new website on the way, the manual will now be downloadable.

With all respect intended to the straightforward design, the Alabaster has one major functional limitation - the lack of a remote control. Those like me who listen to a variety of artists or songs in a single sitting recognize that music is not always rendered at the same volume without software intervention. Depending on your audio setup, and your tolerance for volume swings between songs, this reality can lead to several tedious trips to the volume knob for small adjustments. As the North American importer is quick to point out, "The Alabaster is good for upping the step count on your Fitbit." *(continued)*

The ins and outs

The rear panel features a utilitarian look similar to the faceplate. Speaker binding posts at the far left and right of the unit body sandwich in between them a series of five single-ended stereo inputs, plus a set of RCA line outputs. Among the line inputs, the Alabaster comes standard with one MM phono input, giving the owner extra flexibility. Those seeking balanced connections are out of luck, but those with a single ended system will find this Sonneteer a perfect companion for the rest of its brethren residing on the audio rack.

The speaker binding posts meet European safety standards, the plastic shield covers each post ensures stray cables cannot connect inadvertently. Safety is a good thing, and these posts make connections to banana terminations or bare wire easy. Connecting spades requires sliding the cable termination into the shield from the underside. Due to the shield, there is no way to thread spades in from the top, so the Alabaster must sit against the back edge of the audio rack so that spade-terminated cables can dangle downward. If your speaker cables prove problematic in this regard, high-quality banana adapters may prove a saving grace.

The Alabaster's straightforward connection options make setup very easy, and in a matter of a few minutes, this silver-tongued poet finds itself prepared to speak.

When powered on, a small blue LED over the input selector comes to life indicating readiness. As a solid-state design, the Alabaster deserves several days of break-in to achieve the musicality it is designed to deliver.

Sound

Some characterize a "British" component sound as one that is voiced to prioritize warmth over stark transparency, politeness over detail, and relaxation over speed. Yes, those elements do serve well as broad brushstroke descriptors for the sonic signature this amplifier. Music portrayal is forgiving, perhaps akin to that heard several rows back in an auditorium where cymbal crashes and brass instrument blasts lose their bite as part of the bigger musical picture. At the same time, clinging to those generalizations would not do the Alabaster justice. These audible characteristics do make the Alabaster a joy to settle into for long, fatigue-free listening sessions. However, the sum of its sound is not bound to those overly-simplified descriptors. For example, listening to Bill Laswell and Jah Wobble's dub-inspired collaboration Radioaxiom, the Alabaster reproduces low bass notes with solidity, musicality and drive which create the illusion of control by a more powerful amplifier. Those 100 watts never pull punches when needed. *(continued)*

Through the Sonneteer, the soundstage is substantial, organizing musical elements accurately from left-to-right across the soundstage. The front-to-back layering of musical elements is good, but when a complex array of vocals and instruments litter the soundstage, the Sonneteer tends to compress that picture a bit in comparison with some high-end gear I have experienced. The nitpick is minor, however, since the Alabaster does so much so well.

The complex harmonics of cymbal crashes or triangle strikes, like those captured on Ben Harper's *Burn to Shine*, preserve most of the impact, reverberation and decay a listener should hear. Similarly, vocals offer the emotion of the performance without uncomfortable stridency or sibilance. For instance, Adele's "Rolling in the Deep" reveals itself through the Alabaster with the powerful crescendos one wants to experience from her recordings, but without the wince factor that accompanies it on some overly-revealing gear.

While the Alabaster cannot be expected to deliver the sound of separate components many times its price, it certainly offers an incredible amount of musical satisfaction. Higher-end components can exceed the Alabaster's ability with a broader and better-layered soundstage, a greater sense of realism, and more detailed presentation, especially at the higher end of the frequency spectrum. However, when compared more fairly to components in its price range, the Alabaster's accomplishments are stellar indeed. The Sonneteer is a component any music lover will be proud to own. The team at



Sonneteer deserves some serious accolades for making an amplifier that sounds this good, at a dollar figure accessible to many who prioritize the joy of music in their lives.

Conclusions

Simply put, the Sonneteer Alabaster is a price-performance wonder. For its very reasonable cost under \$2,500 USD, it delivers excellent sound. The Alabaster might not unseat single purpose amps and preamps several times its price, may not be ideal for those who prefer a highly-detailed component which exposes every nuance in a recording. However, the Alabaster's sound is beguiling, and this integrated amp is piece of gear to be enjoyed for many years to come. The warmth of its sonic character will help it mate well with many sources. If a prospective buyer does not require bells and whistles like a built-in DAC, networking connectivity, variable outputs for a subwoofer, or a remote control, this may be the integrated amplifier he or she has been seeking. I recommend it wholeheartedly, and it handily deserves a 2017 TONEAUDIO Exceptional Value Award.

Sonneteer has a substantial dealer network in Europe, and has a growing number of North American dealers. If the Alabaster piques your interest, be sure to visit your Sonneteer dealer to hear it for yourself. For what it is designed to do, it performs those tasks extremely well. Sonically, it is a flat-out bargain for its modest price tag. Were William Alabaster alive today, I think he would enthusiastically approve of his namesake.

Additional Listening – Jeff Dorgay

I couldn't agree with Rob more that the Alabaster deserves an Exceptional Value Award. This integrated reminds me so much on one level of my reference, the PrimaLuna HP – it's pure sound quality with basic functionality. With simple yet understated casework, all the value goes into the circuit and for the true music lover, this is a sonic treat.

Where something like the Simaudio ACE offers more functionality, the Alabaster offers a higher level of sonic prowess; if you can get by with 55 watts per channel and have the need for an excellent MM phono stage, it's one of the best (if not the best) choice you can make.

Staying mostly in the British groove, with a slight detour to France and a trip across the pond to the US, I used the Alabaster with four different sets of speakers. Listening began with the lovely Graham LS5/9s, moved on to the Focal Sopra no.3s in my main system (which cost nearly ten times the Alabaster's MSRP) and the vintage Klipsch LaScalas written about in this issue before settling back in on the Quad 2812s in room two. All delivered cracking performances.

What I'm the most excited about is the quality of the MM phonostage. Utilizing the new Gold Note Machiavelli high output MC (again, more expensive than the Alabaster) the level of refinement here is astounding, with a level of resolution I wasn't prepared for.

In the context of some fairly expensive speakers, and using the PS Audio DirectStream DAC and memory player as a source, digital files were just as engaging as analog, and I suspect that a lot of Alabaster users will pair this \$2,395 integrated with modest speakers and sources, never really knowing just how damn good this amplifier truly is. If it had thicker, more elaborately machined casework and a fancy remote, they could easily ask \$6k for this baby and you'd still be getting a bargain. So if you are a true music lover that is ever so slightly frugal, the Sonneteer Alabaster is your slice of heaven.

It's certainly one of my favorites. You must hear one to believe it. ●

**Sonneteer Alabaster
Integrated Amplifier**
Approximately \$2,399 USD

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The Graham Chartwell LS3/5

The Student Exceeds the Master

By Jeff Dorgay

Even though they won't go to 11, it seems fitting to start breaking in the Graham LS3/5 speakers with Spinal Tap's black album. Originally doing duty on my desktop, between a 27" iMac, streaming a lot of Tidal tracks, powered by the Nagra 300i, this was an intimate way to listen to music, in a small room, nearfield. After having this experience, I don't think I can listen to headphones terribly seriously anymore – the LS3/5s in tight quarters feel like being inside a pair of headphones that should be on one of the heads at Mount Rushmore – the presentation is massive. "Heavy Duty" never sounded better or more fun.

In the middle of my giddiness, Mr. O'Brien popped by to pick up a few things and being overzealous with the volume control on Keith Richards' "Wicked as it Seems" he nods his head saying, "yeah, that's where you would have blown the originals." No kidding. If you're a fan of the LS3/5a, you know the originals definitely can't go to 11. The new Chartwell LS3/5s get close to ten in a small room. This is no small achievement.

For those of you that just think these speakers look like a mega overpriced pair of little monitors, they are not only special but worth every penny asked. And they come with a rich history. In the service of keeping this review brief, here's a link to nearly everything you need to know about the mighty mini British monitor: <http://www.g4dco.uk/ls35a/library.html>

Why no "A"?

Originally developed by Dudley Harwood (who would eventually go on to start Harbeth) and his BBC team in the mid-70s, the goal for the LS3/5 was to produce what was essentially a portable, console top monitor offering reasonable dynamic range with an emphasis on vocal neutrality. Unfortunately, once the design was finalized and orders placed for the second batch, the drivers had changed slightly, and the speaker had to be adjusted accordingly. Hence, the LS3/5a was born. But Graham has reproduced the early LS3/5, offering the increased extension and dynamic range of the original, non-A version.

Comparing it to a few early LS3/5a examples, thanks to Kurt Doslu at Echo Audio, it's easy to see that the contemporary version is a winner. While I haven't heard the original BBC 001/002 pair that Ken Kessler discusses in his comparison from 2005, I had held the original prototypes when on a tour of the now demoed Kingswood Warren BBC facility, as well as being able to pour over some of the research that led to its final design. A tremendous amount of work went into bringing this diminutive and precise monitor to life.



The little speaker that can

To get the most out of the LS3/5, you need to play to its strengths. First, the better quality of the electronics driving them, the better the sonic result. This is a high quality, high-resolution speaker. Faithful to the heritage of the original, the Graham speaker is assembled with extreme care and attention to detail. Don't let the small size fool you.

Small it is. Barely a foot tall, a little under seven inches wide and just a bit more than 7 inches deep, this is the speaker that defined "mini-monitor." Sporting a 4.3-inch woofer and .73-inch dome tweeter

in a tight configuration, fans of the speaker will immediately notice the difference in construction from the originals. Where the front panel on original LS3/5as are blackish with a big felt square surround around the tweeter, today's Chartwell looks more like current Harbeth designs with front and rear panels that screw in. However, they keep to the BBC standard (and these are fully licensed BBC editions) of the thin wall cabinet for sound that is faithful to the original.

Out of respect, we did not push the Rogers 15 ohm LS3/5as

on loan from Echo, because the original tweeters are now unobtainable and this pair had a \$2,400 price tag. Cranking them would be disrespectful.

The horns at the beginning of Thomas Dolby's "Dissidents," from *The Flat Earth* are just sublime, the way they float, gently off to the left of the soundstage, as the typewriter bell, pops in from time to time. Where the original is slightly rolled off and soft, the Chartwells have all the allure of the originals, yet both ends of the frequency spectrum are better resolved and extended. *(continued)*

A similar result is achieved with long-time favorite *The K&D Sessions*. While there are not a lot of acoustic references to check for tonal correctness, this Dub classic paints a large acoustic space, and the LS3/5s deliver a surprising amount of LF energy as well.

Desktop

As hinted at earlier in this review, the Chartwell LS3/5s are beyond holographic in tight quarters on a desktop. If you can strike the perfect balance between room and desk gain, the amount of bass will fool you. A high-quality amplifier goes a long way at bringing more bass to the mix as well. Jacking the new iMac Retina through the USB port on the Simaudio NEO Ace delivers incredible results, and its high-current solid state amplifier section takes control of the Chartwell woofers with authority. It feels like I've taken my Quad ESLs and shrunk them down to desk size and added more dynamic punch.

Listening to David Grisman's *Hot Dawg* is an otherworldly experience, with texture and nuance that you don't always get in \$50k/pair speakers. Upgrading the system from the already excellent Ace to my reference Robert Koda K-10 preamplifier and the Nagra 300 power amplifier cabled with Cardas Clear, the sound blasts off to another galaxy entirely.

While horribly counterintuitive using a \$3,000 pair of speakers with nearly \$50,000 worth of



ancillaries might seem a little wacky, but it proves one thing: the amount of music these speakers reveal is nothing short of amazing.

Small room

Using the Graham LS3s nearfield in a small room is equally breathtaking. Placed well out in the middle of a 10 x 12-foot room in a tight equilateral triangle with the listening chair is only slightly less intoxicating from a depth perspective than it was in the desktop system. Now with walls about three feet from the speaker edges, left to right imaging becomes wider, along with the front to back. While the sound field created is slightly more diffuse, it is considerably bigger.

Placed solidly on a pair of filled Sound Anchor stands, coupled with a bit of blu-tack, bass response remains charming in this small room. The layered vocals in Aimee Mann's *Batchelor no.2*, combined with the rest of the instruments in the mix is so precise, I feel as if I'm sitting at a recording console. So I guess the BBC engineers were pretty clever after all. On the same note, swapping speaker cables between Cardas, Nordost, Tellurium-Q and a few others instantly reveals the character of each, making the LS3/5 a contemporary tool for anyone trying to get a read on how a particular component or cable changes the sonic picture of their system. *(continued)*



“In the end, everything is subjective, but in my humble opinion there is no better brand out there for innovative design, military spec like build quality and outstanding sound performance. In this case, if you also consider the astonishing value realized when compared to the best, we have something very very special.”

Robert S. Youman

INT-60 Review
Positive-Feedback Issue 79

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Possible heresy

While some LS3/5 owners might object to the idea of adding a subwoofer to these miniature marvels, I can understand in the context of a pair of vintage originals – they don’t have nearly the amount of dynamic oomph of the Grammys. Should you think about going down this path, the smallest sub you can find, carefully integrated into the sound will surprise you. I used an older 8" REL and the full system was spectacular.

At moderate volume, the amount of low end this adds to popular and rock recordings will probably outweigh whatever issues you might have about subwoofers. As with the amplification and cables, this isn’t about size; it’s about quality.

In the end

Whether you use the LS3/5s as intended (without a sub) or take the plunge in a small room or desktop system, I suspect that they will be the start of a very long musical love affair. Few speakers match the sheer musicality that these speakers offer. Much like the Porsche 911 or the Eames Lounge Chair, a product with this kind of longevity is indeed special.

Regardless of where you are on your audio journey, even if you don’t plan on buying a pair of these, I can’t recommend giving them a listen. The LS3/5 is a big part of audio history. And they just might reel you in... ●

REVIEW

Graham Chartwell LS3/5
MSRP: \$3,200/pair

MANUFACTURER
Graham Audio USA

CONTACT
www.grahamaudiousa.com/ls35/

PERIPHERALS
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Power amplifier
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Cable Cardas Clear

Power Equi-Tech 1800

Conrad-Johnson Classic Sixty Two SE Amplifier

A Golden Child

By Rob Johnson

Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson have worked together for over 40 years, consistently producing products which represent a high level of sonic performance for the dollar. At the same time, they've pushed the boundaries in tube audio design, investing countless hours of engineering experiments, testing, and tweaking before releasing new components. Their amplifiers and preamplifiers have won numerous awards over the years and the company has a very loyal following.



TONEAudio has reviewed many C-J amps over the years, including both of their recent solid-state designs, the MF2275SE and the MF2550SE; fantastic amplifiers in their own right. Our publisher has owned numerous C-J products and makes no bones about being a fan of the marque. Among their latest tube amplifier iterations is the Classic Sixty Two Special Edition (CL62SE), an evolution of the previous Classic Sixty SE (CL60SE) released nearly a decade ago. And like the CL60, there is a standard and SE version, with the latter featuring upgraded components and in particular a full compliment of CJD Teflon capacitors in critical circuit areas.

The Classic series is aimed solidly at those wanting to experience the magic of vacuum tubes at a more accessible price point than their top of the line ART components. While C-J considers the Classic line entry level, for me it reflects an important benchmark for great sonics. Still rated at 60 watts per channel as the CL60, lessons learned from the ART power amplifiers have trickled down to the Classic series.



Rated at 60 watts per channel as the name implies, the CL62SE reviewed here represents an evolution of the circuitry found in its older brother the CL60SE. Despite the numerical designation, I dare say it is more than two better. Conrad-Johnson went through the amp design with a fine-toothed comb, seeking out anything which could benefit from an upgrade. Some trickle-down technology from their latest flagship ART amplifier encouraged a few key differences in the new CL62SE. Among other changes like the use of metal foil resistors, the tube complement shifted slightly. The CL60SE utilizes four KT120 output tubes, along with a pair of 6922 variants, and a single 6189. In the newer CL62SE

design, the 6189 is replaced with another 6922.

Appearance

As with many C-J products, the amp retains the classic gold color and a humble, boxy form factor. The hefty transformers rise from the rear of the base, with the tubes residing up front. A vented, black powder coated cage surrounds the tubes to avoid inadvertent skin contact. Those tubes get hot indeed! However, if you do not have children or pets who may be drawn to the tantalizing tubes while you are not there to supervise, it is fun to remove the cage and watch the subtle glow unobstructed. The CL62SE front offers a toggle switch

for power, and a small red LED to indicate power up. It is rather apropos, though, since something called the *Classic Sixty Two* should take on a classic, minimalist form factor, right?

Similar to the front-facing appearance of the amp, the rear panel layout remains equally spartan. Two single-ended inputs accept the connection from a preamp, and a single pair of metal 5-way binding posts get a tight grip on speaker cables. As a tube amp, there is no “standby” power mode as seen in many solid-state designs. Controlled by the switch on the front, the 62 is either *on* or *off*. Saving tube life is a good thing, however. With power ap-

plied, the amp needs about 30 minutes of warm-up time to sound its best. If you listen to morning music like I do, make the amp your first stop after getting out of bed. Two cups of coffee later, you are ready to rock.

Setup and tube bias

Unlike a solid-state amp prepared for use right out of the box, the CL62SE takes a bit of extra setup due to the tube complement. First off, you will need a long, standard screwdriver to remove the protective grille and gain access to the tube sockets. With the cage removed, the second order of business is unpacking all the valves and loading them firmly into the correct sockets.

The final step is biasing the tubes using the included plastic screwdriver. Biasing serves two purposes: First, it ensures the tubes are adjusted to deliver equal power into the left and right channels. Secondly, it helps increase the life of the tubes by setting them at the point where they are accomplishing their role in kicking all the needed electrons to the internal plates, but not going beyond that required call of duty. Each tube has a finite number of electrons to move, so conserving the stream encourages valve longevity. According to the CL62SE manual, a tube complement should last at least two years if used as directed, but as the saying goes, “your mileage may vary”. *(continued)*

Often the tubes last longer, especially when the owner takes care to shut down the amp when not in use.

C-J makes the biasing process surprisingly simple. After power up, four small red LEDs next to the four KT120s indicate each valve's bias status. If the light is on, the biasing screw next to it needs to be twisted counter-clockwise a bit – just barely enough to turn off the LED. Conversely, if the LED next to each tube is off already, an owner will want to double-check them. Twist the biasing screw clockwise until the LED turns on, then reverse direction very slowly until the LED turns off. C-J recommends this process be repeated after about 30 minutes of use, and maybe every six months after that. Down the road, when new valves join the amp, the process must be completed again. C-J notes that after biasing is complete, LEDs may flicker just a bit when the amp is in heavy use driving speakers. I did not notice that during my time with the CL62SE, but don't worry if you encounter it.

After the 62's requisite warm-up period, with volume all the way down, I put an ear to each speaker to get a sense of background noise and tube hiss. As it turns out, it is hard to distinguish any. One can hear the pings and ticks of the tubes during warm up, but after that process, the C-J is nearly silent – even more so than most solid-state designs I have experienced.

Listening

Admittedly, I have never owned a tube amp and always appreciated the simple nature and bass heft of a great solid-state amp coupled with a tube preamp. Unfortunately for my wallet, I may now be a convert.

Listening to music interpreted by the CL62SE, there are two characteristics which stand out immediately. First, the soundstage of this amp not only extends to the far left and right of the speakers. It also widens well above and behind the speakers – and accomplishes a trick I have heard with few amps – extends the sound stage well in front of the speakers toward the listening seat.

The CL62SE regularly pushed musical elements so far to the left and right of the soundstage, my ears perked from the unexpected, but very welcome, experience. Yes, there are plenty of amps out there that have a wide soundstage, but this C-J generated one of the most expansive and immersive ones experienced in my listening space.

The second surprise in sonics is the way the 62 portrays instruments and vocals. There is not only a very transparent and organic ease to the music, each musical element is exceptionally well defined, even in a very crowded soundstage which overlaps instruments and vocals. Indeed, vocal performances have a level of detail and palpability making them eerily real.



Ambient cues, “air”, and sparkle around various musical instruments compounds the miraculous illusion, floating around the room with ease and grace. I had not expected the magnitude of these characteristics and found myself listening for hours to favorite albums. Sometimes, the subtleties make all the difference.

Despite the extreme level of detail, revelation, and a very energetic presentation, there is no stridency to the sound. Soprano vocals, horns, cymbals and other musical elements can have the potential to spark the eardrums. The C-J pours forth all the detail, but without nasty artifacts that sometimes accompany it. This beguiling nature will glue you to the listening seat longer than you might realize.

My concerns about limited, mushy bass quelled quickly as well. The 62 offers quite a bit of muscle despite its modest power rating. Deep bass notes rendered with taught accuracy pour out in a very natural way. Solid state amps can truly excel in the delivery of tight, weighty, and low bass reproduction. Moreover, there is something highly satisfying about punchy bass when one just wants to rock! After re-adjusting my ears to the tubed 62, I did not miss it though. Forget ideas of old-school tube designs with mushy bass and overly-romanticized sound. The 62SE is proof to the contrary. Those listeners who enjoy power over nuance may still prefer a solid-state design, but they are likely to be surprised at what the CL62SE is capable. Despite the “Classic” name, this tube amp is a clear result of modern engineering. *(continued)*



Conclusions

If it is not apparent by now, let me say it plainly. The Classic Sixty Two SE is a stellar amp. Conrad-Johnson's "entry level" tube amp represents a pinnacle of value at its \$5,750 MSRP. If you need more power, C-J offers the CL120SE monoblock version. For those with a tight budget, the standard version of the CL62 sells for \$4,250, offering much of the SE sonic prowess.

If this amplifier investment is within your budget, those audio fans who love tube gear – and even those who prefer solid state – should make a point of visiting their local Conrad-Johnson dealer to hear the Classic Sixty Two for themselves. Yes, tube amps do take a little more nurturing over their lifetime, and new valves are needed periodically. C-J offers a full set of replacement tubes for about \$500. However, a CL62SE owner will be rewarded in spades for that minimal level of maintenance.

Conrad-Johnson
Classic Sixty Two SE Amplifier
MSRP: \$ 5,750 (SE version)
\$4,250 (Standard version)

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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

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

that something is missing. That something is the distortion of the original signal that leads to the inevitable feeling audiophiles experience called "upgrade-itis." Yes, moving up the Vandersteen line always offers more performance and ever greater musical pleasure, as will any other true upgrade to your system. But owning Vandersteens and upgrading **because you love the way your music sounds** is so much better than swapping out your gear because you *can't stand* the way your music sounds.

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\$1,499 www.coincidentspeaker.com

The 8-watt per channel Dynamo 34SE MK. II is quite possibly the most enjoyable 8 watts per channel you will ever experience. But don't let the price tag fool you, this is not a budget amplifier in any stretch of the imagination. From the massive power supply you don't see to the beautifully polished chassis that you do, the Mk. II rocks.

Thanks to that overbuilt power supply, the MK. II serves up a healthy dose of dynamic range, so it drives a lot of speakers that you might not suspect would be a successful marriage with a low power amp. And should you be a single driver or Klipschorn enthusiast, this is your desert island amplifier. You don't need to spend crazy money to get great sound, and few do it better than the folks at Coincident.

Please peruse our review here. ●

FROM THE WEB



Exogal Comet Plus DAC

\$3,500 www.exogal.com

Wadia Digital made some major advances in digital sound in the 90s and 2000s, so when this “new” company popped up with a few of their expats, we had a feeling the results were going to be pretty good. And we were not disappointed.

The Comet Plus, with its upgraded power supply (the standard Comet is \$500 less) renders digital files with a precision and ease, that if you didn’t know any better you might just think you were listening to the black discs instead of the silver ones. Add a high precision digital volume control, line stage and a headphone amp, and you’re rocking the casbah.

Sound exciting? We thought enough to give it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for the year and keep it around as a reference component. Read more here. ●

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PHONITOR E — Headphone Amplifier



PHONOS — RIAA Phono Preamplifier



PERFORMER S800 — Stereo Power Amplifier



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STOP Fake Auto Bias

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



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

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

So what have we done in 2016? Wait till you see! We’re the only company that **takes you on a tour inside** our products. Go to www.primaluna-usa.com and learn why audio critics and experts from around the world use PrimaLuna as their personal reference.

info@primaluna-usa.com 909.931.0219



Akiko Audio Corelli Power Conditioner

\$1,995 www.akikoaudio.com

Legacy TONE readers know we aren’t big on tweeky, geeky things that look like magic crystals or coat racks that claim to make your system sound better. We’ve tried most of them, and they don’t. Not that we won’t try and talk you into a \$10,000 phono cartridge now and again, but truly we’ve tried to leave accessories that cost as much as a used Ducati out of our repertoire.

However, keeping an open mind means wading through as much of this stuff as time permits. Like a terrier not wanting to let you have his chew toy, we resisted this new power conditioner from Akiko Audio, but it did, in the end prove to be futile. Their North American importer was so passionate about this, we took it for a spin and were startled, in a good way at the results.

This one will freak you out. Our full review is right here. ●

BARGAINS

SLUMMIN'



Audio Research EC-1 Electronic Crossover

\$400 Fred's Sound of Music, Portland, OR

\$400 is way beyond what I usually spend on Slummin' column items, but on one level, this piece still qualifies, because it was languishing away in a corner, and out on the secondary market, these usually go for upwards of \$1,000.



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Pop, Rock & Country

Audiophile Pressings

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.

Algiers

The Underside of Power

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Algiers-The-Underside-of-Power-\(Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Algiers-The-Underside-of-Power-(Vinyl-LP))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/75144373>

Bedouine

Bedouine

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Bedouine-Bedouine-\(Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Bedouine-Bedouine-(Vinyl-LP))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/72461887>

Dasher

Sodium

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/73804680>

Steve Earle

So You Wannabe An Outlaw

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Steve-Earle-and-The-Dukes-So-You-Wannabe-an-Outlaw-\(Vinyl-2LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Steve-Earle-and-The-Dukes-So-You-Wannabe-an-Outlaw-(Vinyl-2LP))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/74716181>

Fleet Foxes

Crack-Up

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Fleet-Foxes-Crack-Up-\(Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Fleet-Foxes-Crack-Up-(Vinyl-LP))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/74777930>

Girlpool

Powerplant

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Girlpool-Powerplant-\(45RPM-Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Girlpool-Powerplant-(45RPM-Vinyl-LP))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/73360746>

Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit

The Nashville Sound

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/jason-isbell-and-the-400-unit-live-from-alabama-vinyl-lp>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/36809694>

Jim Lauderdale

London Southern

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/72947900>

John Moreland

Big Bad Luv

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/John-Moreland-Big-Bad-Luv-\(Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/John-Moreland-Big-Bad-Luv-(Vinyl-LP))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/73299483>

She-Devils

She-Devils

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/She-Devils-She-Devils-\(Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/She-Devils-She-Devils-(Vinyl-LP))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/73023643>

The Beatles

Sargent Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band: 50th Anniversary Edition

Purchase LP from Music Direct
[https://www.musicdirect.com/optical-disc/The-Beatles-Sgt-Peppers-Lonely-Hearts-Club-Band-Super-Deluxe-Ed-\(4CD--plus--DVD--plus--Blu-Ray-Box-Set\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/optical-disc/The-Beatles-Sgt-Peppers-Lonely-Hearts-Club-Band-Super-Deluxe-Ed-(4CD--plus--DVD--plus--Blu-Ray-Box-Set))

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/track/74161272>

The Knack

Get the Knack

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/optical-disc/the-knack-get-the-knack-strictly-limited-to-2000-numbered-edition-hybrid-sacd>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/1747027>

The Pretenders

The Pretenders

Purchase LP from Music Direct
<https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/the-pretenders-the-pretenders-numbered-limited-edition-180g-vinyl-lp>

Stream in 16/44.1 from Tidal
<https://listen.tidal.com/album/68737200>

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pono
primaluna
pro-ject
ps audio
quadraspire
rega
richard gray
sonos
soundsmith
stillpoints
unison research
woo audio

Manufacturers Links

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

BAT: www.balanced.com

Brinkmann Audio: www.brinkmann-audio.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

VANA Ltd: www.vanaltD.com

VPI: www.vpiindustries.com