



NO.113

NEW in HA!

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OLD SCHOOL: Ken Kessler
ponders the MC2300

Phono pre's from Pass Labs,
Backert Labs, and LSA

Random music and playlists

American Muscle:

**Amazing tube amplifiers
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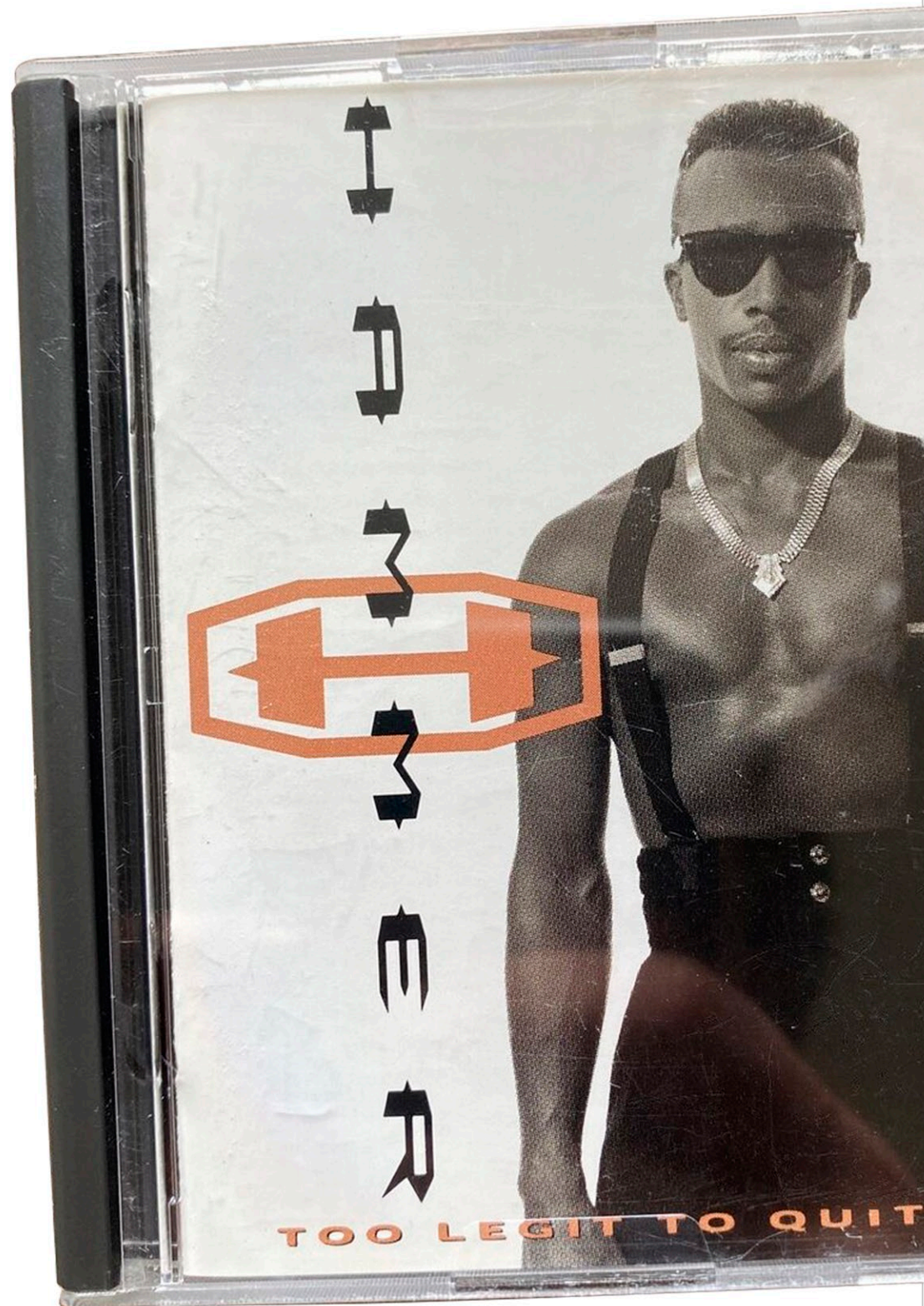


SVSSound.com

Now that I have an MD player in my 80s car, I can't stop listening to music in this format, regardless of whether I love it or not.

But somehow, seeing this at the Goodwill for five bucks just seemed to make perfect sense.

Silly as it is, it's a great way to start the issue.



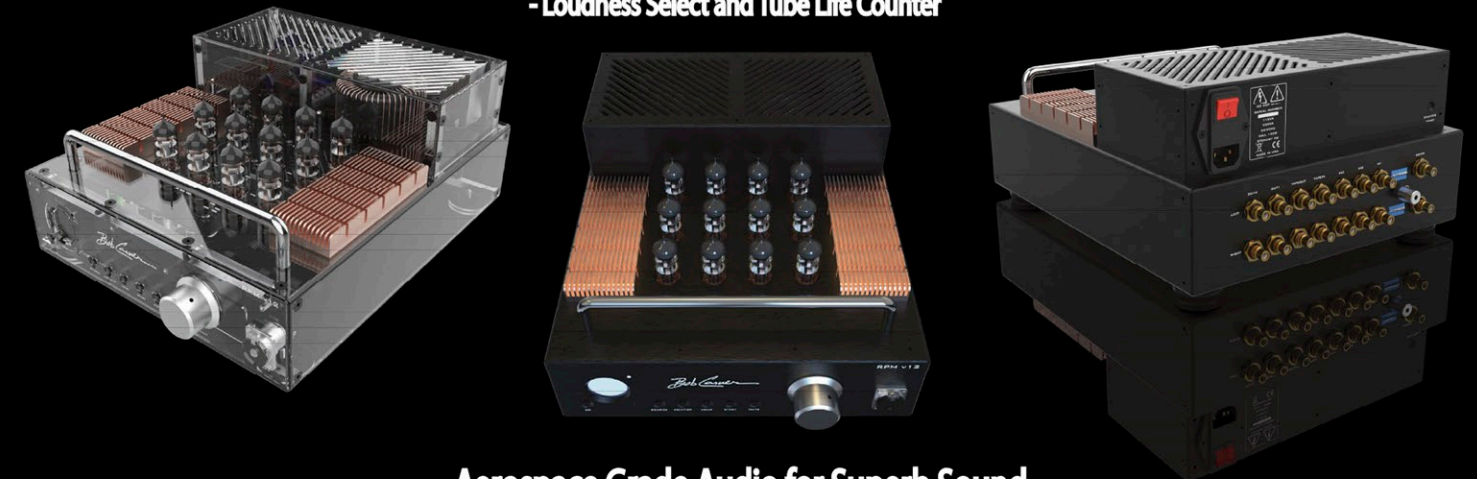
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When John Atkinson came to measure, I insisted he listen...
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and the absence of reproductive artifacts were remarkable.
It's what this hobby/pursuit is all about.

Michael Fremer, Stereophile, May 2020



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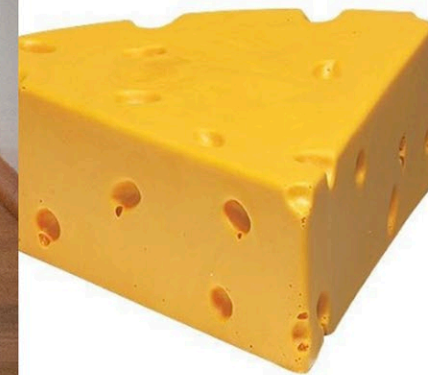
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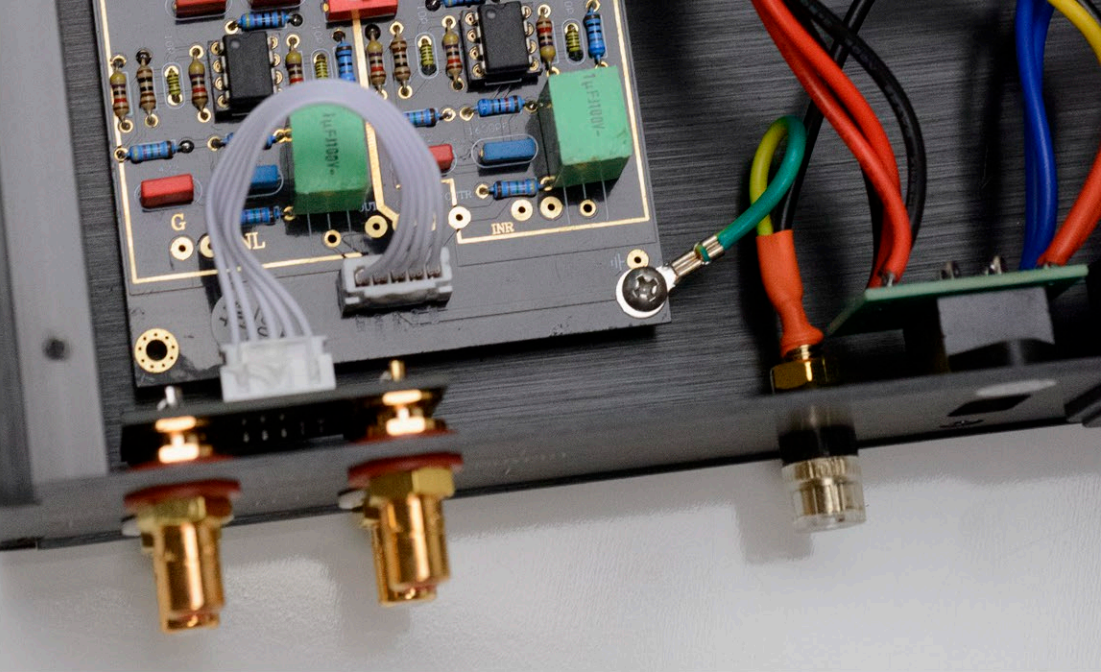
PARASOUND's P6 preamplifier is perfect for compact spaces, thanks to a built-in headphone amplifier, DAC, and phono pre!



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1095 - Gear for about a G

Killer low-budget phono from LSA. (\$249! yeah)



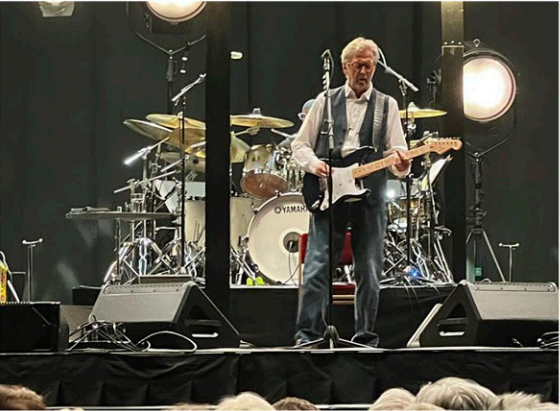
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28 Headphone Arts

With a crisis on our hands, we find an alternative source for ear pads, and it's a fantastic one!



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what's inside:



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Journeyman Audiophile
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Old School...

The legendary Ken Kessler looks back at the legendary McIntosh MC2300 power amplifier. Earlier this year, Jerry Garcia's stage amplifier went for a precious sum at auction.

While many think of McIntosh for being "the sound that powered Woodstock," this is the amplifier that went everywhere Jerry went.



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musical performance.

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Friend Todd Cooperider was kind enough to drop us a
great photo from his recent travels, attending part of Eric
Clapton's European Tour. We'll have the full setlist and some
other info for you on page 56.





Cover Shot:

It's no big secret, we love tube amplifiers here. However, there's always something special about the ones that don't produce massive power.

Image captured with Sony Alpha 6000,
7 Artisans 50mm f0.95 lens. 10 sec.
@f2.8, ISO 100



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no.113

P u b l i s h e r ' s L e t t e r

As promised, this issue is quickly on the tail of our last one, in our efforts to be caught up and back on schedule by the end of 2022. That still sounds weird coming out of anyone's mouth – 2022. Those damn flying cars would be pretty awesome right about now.

Nearly three years into the COVID crisis, it has become less frightening, but is still with us nonetheless. Several people that attended the Munich show this summer got sick, but no one from the Seattle show succumbed to the best of my knowledge. Newcomer Greg Weaver was kind enough to give us a report and some pictures. (And didn't get cooties) As he's a big "showguy," we'll be seeing more from him, and his insights in that regard going forward. It's always a pleasure to catch up with Greg and get his take on all things audio.

Looking back, I remember talking to a friend that's a doc at the Mayo Clinic in late January of 2020 as the news of COVID was just breaking. "Cancel your plans for the next two or three years, it's going to suck." Wow. And here we are. Many of you have either had a battery of shots, have had COVID, or both. For those of you that I've talked to either on the phone, or via various web portals, I'm glad you're all still here. Me, I've hunkered down like a hermit and other than a few trips to the shop to get an oil change or two and stopping by Echo Audio to pick up a piece of vintage gear for the Old School column, have stayed close to home. Im getting a little edgy.

Needless to say, I've become fairly close to the baristas at my local Dutch Bros coffee drive through. Grocery store and Costco runs have been a 15 minute before closing dash, and I haven't been to a record store or a live music event since the fall of 2019. I'm curious how many of you have become more hermit like these days.

Unfortunately, our industry has lost another nice guy – Chris Sommovigo of Black Cat Cable. While I didn't know Chris terribly well, he was always a pleasure to chat with as he had a wide range of interests outside of audio. We had a lot of great discussions over the years about everything but audio. I'll miss him. He leaves behind his wife and two daughters. 54 years old – scary.

So again, I thank you for reading and staying engaged with us.



Richard Colburn, and industry vet, never passes up a chance to riff out on his bass, and like most musicians - tend to key in on the part of a tune that they they play. Here's some of his favorite bass laden tracks...



Jack Casady of the Jefferson Airplane, “The Other Side Of This Life” from *Bless Its Pointed Little Head*

Les Claypool of Primus, “Bob’s Party Time” from *Rhinoplasty*

Jaco Pastorius of Weather Report, “Teen Town” from *Heavy Weather*

Rocco Prestia of Tower Of Power, “What is Hip?” from *Tower Of Power*

Paul McCartney of The Beatles, “Rain” from *Mono Masters*

Dexter Redding of The Reddings, “The Awakening” from *The Awakening*

John Wetton of King Crimson, “Providence” from *Red*

Stanley Clarke, “Lopsy Lu” from *Stanley Clarke*

Anthony Jackson, “Alive” from *Hiromi The Trio Project*

Verdine White, (Earth, Wind, and Fire) “Serpentine Fire” from *All ‘n All*

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McIntosh MC2300 Power Amplifier

Big and Brutal.

\$3,000 - sky's the limit (current market price)

While McIntosh's big news – literally – this year is the release of the massive MC3500 Mk II, the world outside of audiophilia took note of another Mac powerhouse: the near-mythical MC2300. What happened is, as far as I can tell, a “first” in hi-fi, in which a piece of vintage audio equipment sold for used-Rolux-level money because of a celebrity attachment.

First, some context. Aside from universally-coveted classics such as JBL's Paragon and Marantz's original tube units, or inexplicable flukes like early BBC LS3/5As commanding \$10,000 in the Far East, used audio gear never attains the appreciating values associated with other vintage items, certainly not electric guitars, Leica cameras, nor wristwatches. If anything, values plummet. Just check out sites like Audiogon to see how badly high-end audio gear depreciates.

While great news for impoverished audiophiles, enjoying enormous savings on pre-owned hardware as new as two-years-old, it's hardly an endorsement of the “luxury” status of high-end gear. Thus, when a deep-pocketed Dead-head paid \$378,000 for Jerry Garcia's “Budman” McIntosh MC2300 at Sotheby's on October 14, 2021, it set a precedent for other celebrities' hardware. How so? I suspect that an MC2300 without such provenance would, despite the rarity, normally sell for \$3000-\$10,000 depending on condition, the latter indicating “mint and boxed.”

Photos courtesy of Audio Classics and Stereobuyers - thank you.

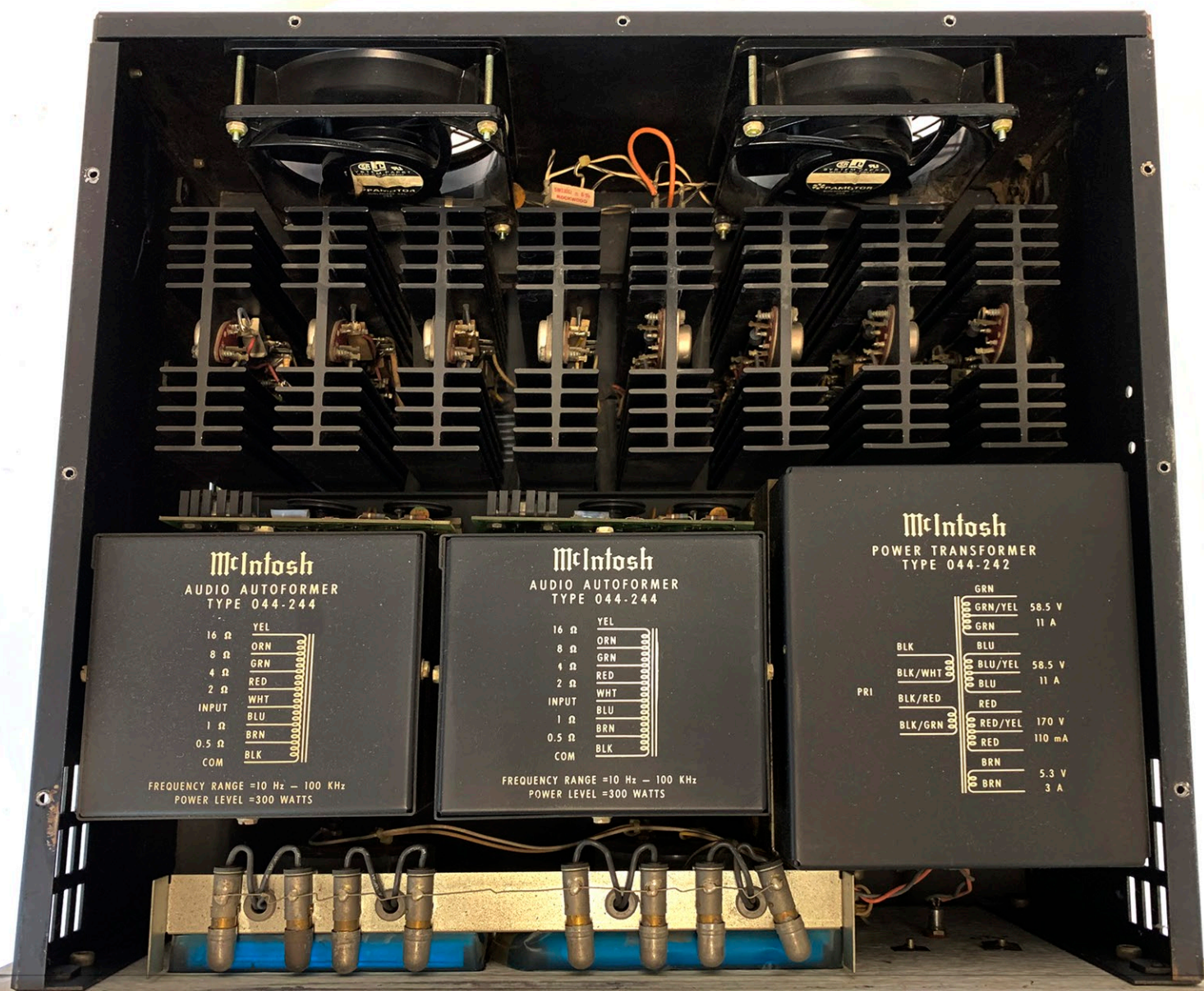
TONE113.016-Old School



Garcia's amp was his personal unit from the Grateful Dead's legendary Wall of Sound PA system. It took a feed from Garcia's Fender Twins, according to crew member "Big" Steve Parish, who said, "When the MC2300 power amp came out, we bought 70 of them, and put them throughout the system, but this is the one that Jerry liked the best and he played through it for years. It really made that [Fender] Twin sound huge and became part of his signature tone at the time. At some point, Ram Rod stuck that Budweiser BudMan sticker on it one day and it's instantly recognizable as Jerry's."

While MC2300s can be found online within the price range cited above, the auction dispatched seven more Wall of Sound MC2300s for between \$25,200-\$94,500 apiece. Amusingly – I'll get to the value of provenance later – this didn't cause a blip in second-hand values, unlike the sale of Paul Newman's own Rolex Cosmograph for circa \$15m, which overnight doubled or even trebled the price of identical examples without the added value of his ownership.

As for the MC2300, it's hugely desirable, an ex-Dead unit or not. Produced from 1971-1980, McIntosh offered it to the Dead when the band showed an interest in buying a huge quantity of the MC3500 tube monoblocks. All solid-state and rated at 300W/ch or 600W in mono mode, the MC2300 was recommended for reliability, given that the Dead's amps would go "on the road" and suffer the ills of being in transit.



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According to the late Dave O'Brien, who ran McIntosh's fondly-remembered "clinics," the Grateful Dead "called the factory, and they wanted to buy some MC3500s, the 350W mono tube unit. But tubes were in trouble even then, and we weren't going to make any more, and they talked to one of our engineers, and he said, 'Well, why don't you buy the MC2300. We've got this all-transistor unit, brand new.'

"So they said OK, and they got one to try out, and they liked it so well that in one week they bought every MC2300 that dealers had on the West Coast. I remember this one dealer telling me that they called him and they actually told the dealer, 'Bring it to us' wherever they were in Northern California, 'Bring it on a plane.' So, they bought him a ticket and a ticket for the amplifier, and they strapped it into the seat next to him."

As audiophile-leaning Dead fans, the Wall of Sound's equipment roster consisted of McIntosh MC2300s driving JBL 15-inch, 12-inch or 5-inch speakers or ElectroVoice tweeters. (For the full story, see McIntosh ... "for the love of music", available from McIntosh.) They proved more reliable than the MC3500, as used to power the sound system at Woodstock, and found

favor with other musicians, including country and western giant George Strait, who travelled with nine MC2300s in his mobile system.

While I am sure that hardy audiophiles of 50 years ago might have acquired these for use in domestic systems, the thought of installing them would have been daunting. An MC2300 weighed 128lbs. Clearly optimized for rack mounting, the front panel measures 19in/48.26cm wide by 10½in/26.67cm high. The chassis behind that glorious stood 17in/43.18cm by 10in/25.4cm high by 17in/43.18cm deep, including connectors. Add a couple of inches to the front if you were a road warrior.

Its front panel contained two power meters in the upper section, the controls below it containing rotaries for left gain, right/mono gain, and meter range, with a rocker switch for power on/off. At the back, it was screw tags for speakers covering a huge range of impedance values (it was said to cope with 0.5 ohms), phono sockets for signal-in, fan exhaust, the mono/stereo selector and AC input. Sound was rock-solid, fast, with tight bass and – obviously – not lack of grunt.

AN open letter to McIntosh's Charlie Randall: If the MC3500 Mk II is a smash hit, and solid-state is as healthy as their tube activity, the MC2300 just begs to be offered as a Mk II in a "Grateful Dead Commemorative Edition" of 50 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Wall of Sound in 2024, and 60 for the 60th anniversary of the band's founding in 2025. An MC2300 Mk II could offer balanced operation and multi-way binding posts.

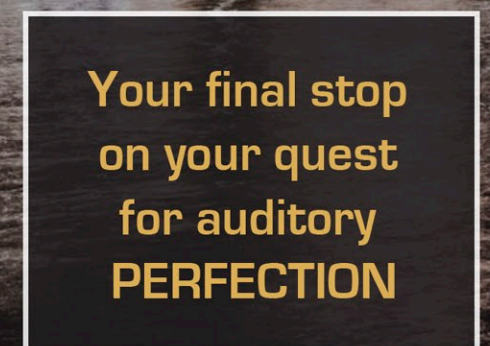
Jerry's MC2300 selling for \$378,000 begs a few questions. What would Brian Wilson's McIntosh MC240 fetch? The Beatles' McIntosh/Altec system from their NYC visit? Jimi Hendrix's Garrard 301 or B&O Beogram 1000 turntables, or his Leak amplifier? Even Eric Clapton's Dansette record player would vastly exceed the £50 one might pay for that LP chewer.

Think I'm crazy? Elvis Presley's Perpetuum Ebner Musical 5v Luxus record player sold for £4,400 at auction in 2013. With the "Garcia MC2300" prizing six figures from a bidder, maybe its real mark in audio history is that of elevating vintage hi-fi closer to the level of prestige it deserves.



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These days, 1,600 dollars won't buy a power cord from a number of places, but here's Parasound, with their P6 preamplifier that includes an impressive MM/MC phonostage, headphone amplifier and kick-butt DAC. There's even a front panel level control for a subwoofer.

Is a zero missing?

Nope. Parasound has built a reputation on creating high value components that deliver mega performance at mini prices. Even their \$18,998/pair JC1+ monoblocks hold their own with amplifiers costing a lot more. I can't think of a better place to start your serious audiophile journey. The P6 has everything you need to get started, regardless of what format you enjoy.



Looking around the back of the P6 reveals a tidy, but densely filled space. Up top is a pair of balanced XLR inputs and outputs, with a single balanced output for a .1 sub channel. The RCA analog outputs both have switchable crossovers (from 20Hz to 140Hz) with high and low pass filters. As they used to say on TV, “but that’s not all.” Yep. They also offer theater bypass and a fixed level tape output.



Five analog RCA inputs should handle everything else you can possibly think of connecting to your P6. The phono stage allows MM and MC with a pretty standard loading of 100 ohms for MC. However, Parasound gives you the option to using several moving iron cartridges on the market that only have output in the .8-2mV range and still require 47k loading. Needless to say, the phono section of the P6 works wonderfully well with my two Grado MI cartridges.

That’s as many inputs as a \$15k McIntosh preamplifier. Oh wait, \$1,600 in McWorld will only get you an empty box with a logo and enough change for a couple of sandwiches from Door Dash. I’m the grumpy, curmudgey guy on the staff, so when I get excited, I get really, really, really excited. Much as our publisher shies away from the B (best) word, I’ll take the caning. This is the best full-function preamp you can buy for \$1,600. Nothing else going offers the level of functionality, build quality, and sonic ability that this little Parasound does.

And this is great stuff if you’re getting serious about hifi, but just can’t spend six figures on a system right now. (Or ever, for that matter) The P6 looks and feels just like the top components in the Parasound lineup. They keep it simple, offering it in silver or black, to match whatever Parasound amp you might choose, or nearly any other component.



Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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

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A rocking system

While some might complain that everything on a single chassis limits your expandability, let's get real. Not everyone has a near constant urge to upgrade. Just as there are some of us of a certain age that still have our full function preamplifiers from the 70s and 80s, I see the P6 as a similar device. With similar longevity. It's worth noting that the P6 is more than a good enough line stage for the asking price, if you really had to get a better DAC or phono section, you'll still be well served keeping the P6 as your system anchor.

For those of you merely wanting to assemble a great sounding system for \$5k-\$10k, set it up and just listen to music, you could keep the P6 forever. Add your laptop or a budget streamer, a decent turntable, amp and speakers and call it good. To keep this audition in context of the Audiophile Apartment theme, I did just that. Adding a Pro-Ject S2 Stream box (\$750) a pair of used pair of MartinLogan Aeries I's (\$1,200), Technics SL-1500 with Denon 103r cartridge (\$1,600) and a PrimaLuna EVO100 tube power amp, rounding out the system with Black II cables from Tellurium Q (about \$800 all in) and was able to stay well under the \$10k total, even after stopping at Echo Audio to buy a nice used Nakamichi cassette deck for \$500.



The synergy with the P6 and the Prima Luna is off the chart good, but I've always been a guy that loves a half tube/half solid-state amplification chain. Digging out a few other amplifiers from the closet of various vintage proves this preamplifier is equally at home driving a vintage Nakamichi 610, Audio Research D-76, CJ MV-50, and a Pass Aleph 3. Or you could just buy a Parasound power amp while you're at it! Taking the P6 over to TONE HQ for photos, we hooked it up to the JC1+ monos and it does not make a bad showing at all.

Overall sonics and function

Again, setup is but a few minutes because everything is built in. Anyone wanting a high-performance audio system without a loom of cables will really appreciate the P6 more and more as time goes by. Being solid-state and only having a maximum power draw of 15 Watts, you can leave it on forever. Once powered up, the P6 settles into its sound quickly, and after about 48 hours, does not change character. A good kind of character.

It seems to be more common than not these days to compare components to reference components costing ten or twenty times more than the one under review, and then feigning disappointment. Yes, the P6 is a little lacking when put up against the Pass XS Pre or my ARC REF 6, but that's not the point. Considering for a latte less than \$1,600, you're getting a full functioning line preamplifier, DAC, phono stage, headphone amp, and electronic crossover – the P6 is fantastic.

Putting it in context with like-minded/priced components in the quest to build a system it is equally fantastic.

Enjoy the Experience



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Some vintage tube preamplifiers offer a sound that is perhaps lusher and more romantic, the P 6 is straightforwardly neutral. And that's a great thing, because personally, I don't want to fine-tune my system at the preamplifier stage. Putting it in the context of our publisher's reference system, to truly just evaluate the P 6, it creates a fairly large left to right soundstage with moderate depth. Its overall noise floor is incredibly low, even compared to some five figure preamps on hand, and its dynamic drive is very good. If you enjoy the most thumping techno music or perhaps large-scale orchestral music at concert hall volume, the P 6 might come across as slightly limiting. (But remember the price point). Another fantastic aspect of the P 6s performance is the lack of grain it delivers. It is decidedly un-solid-state sounding, and if you've auditioned any of Parasound's other components, this is a hallmark of the brand.

Admittedly, I've always been a vinyl enthusiast, looking at digital and streaming more as a replacement of the FM tuner of the 70s and 80s, I do not possess a tremendous amount of high-resolution digital files. Concentrating on 16/44 digital performance, the P 6 is a winner, taking advantage of Sabre chips to accomplish decoding and a well thought out analog section.

Having the excellent Parasound Z Phono in one of my other systems, I wouldn't be surprised if there's a lot of this DNA inside the P 6. Input loading is limited to 100 ohms, which means compatibility with a lot of MC cartridges on the market.

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The key here is a very silent and dynamic phono section. Switching to MM for a vintage Shure V15 III with Jico stylus is equally compelling.

One thing not mentioned until now is the bass and treble controls on the front panel! You'll either welcome or spurn these two most controversial knobs, but if in the former group, will appreciate their light but effective touch. When swapping the Martin Logans for Klipsch LaScalas, which can be a little too much of a good thing on some forward tipped recordings, the treble control really came in handy. Tracking through some old Todd Rundgren albums and a few American Beatles' records – both notoriously thin on bass, made the ability to give things a little nudge on the bottom end a wonderful thing.



Let's face it, at the beginning of the audiophile journey, sometimes we're less jaded and biased to what is later viewed as blasphemy. Should you retain your enthusiasm, you'll feel right at home with the P 6.

A perfect partner

With so many available options and functions, the Parasound P 6 required a lot of listening time, just to take advantage of all it has to offer. Though my REL T9i subs don't require line level outs to do their business, the system I've built around a pair of Vandersteen 2s and their subwoofer, that is meant to be crossed over at about 80Hz is a perfect fit for the Parasound. Incidentally, this would be another set of speakers (either the 1s or 2s) I'd pair with a system built around the P 6. The rear level crossover controls easily allow a perfect fit between satellite and subwoofer, eliminating another set of boxes and cables inbetween. See why I like this pre so much?

As a solitary guy, I rarely use headphones, so on the way home from the photo shoot, I managed to snag a couple pairs from the JD's listening room to investigate. From a neophyte headphone listeners perspective, the P 6 provides more than enough performance to get you excited about listening to headphones. Those living in more compact spaces, needing to wear cans now and then may find that the on-board amplifier is more than enough to accommodate your favorite pair of modestly xpriced phones.

The key to the Parasound P 6s excellence is a high level of performance in every area it covers. Nothing feels like an afterthought, and this one will spoil you, should you become more obsessed with audio. Definitely a keeper and an Exceptional Value Award winner. I'll say it again, for those of you that only scroll down to the last paragraph. This is the best \$1,600 preamplifier going.

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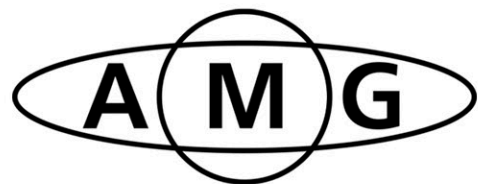
The exact price boundary of this column has been pushed a couple of times, usually to the positive side, including something for \$1,195 or \$1,295 because it was so keeping with the ethos of the column – to find components well above the level of performance that normally accompanies this price point.

But this time we have something very different indeed – we're way below the target set for this column with the LSA .5 phono stage. It retails for \$249. That's right. The last time we heard a phono stage this incredible for such a low price was about ten years ago, when we reviewed the Lounge LCR.

If you're new to analog listening, even if you have a modest turntable in the \$250 - \$600 range, as you add more records to your collection, thoughts of getting more sound will probably enter your conscious or unconscious mind. A better phono cartridge, and adding an outboard phono stage will probably reveal more musical nuance for \$249 than just getting a different turntable and leaving everything else the same.

If you're plugging into an integrated amplifier (especially one more on the budget side of the fence), I'm betting that adding this \$249 device to your system is really going to make a massive improvement. And, it's good enough that should you then decide to upgrade your turntable a notch or two, won't need to be replaced. It's a slippery slope indeed – once you get hooked on analog.





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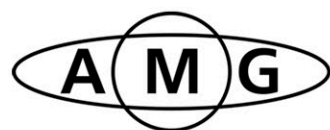
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1095

Listening begins with a female vocal favorite – Anja Garbarek’s “Her Room.” Garbarek’s big, spacious, dreamy lead vocal takes on a life of its own in my room – full of texture and nuance. Finally able to spend more time with a few box sets from Joni Mitchell and George Harrison that haven’t been able to get enough airplay, and again, the .5 Phono does not fail to serve up a lot of musical information from these familiar classics.

Mega value

More often than not, budget phono stages based on Op Amplifiers have a familiar flatness to the sound, and at this price, it’s tough to design a winner. One of the most exciting aspects of evaluating inexpensive components is observing the design process. When you’re building a component retailing for \$249, every 50 cents spent is reflected in the final product. There’s no room for error. And just like the Lounge we enjoyed so much, the LSA .5 enjoys a similar advantage because it is sold direct only. At \$249, there just isn’t enough margin for everyone to keep the lights on, and that’s why most \$249 phono stages are full of air when you open the case, or sound dreadful. It’s just the game.

A peek inside the LSA .5 Phono reveals a big power transformer, an extremely tidy circuit layout, a pair of premium Op Amps (that are often seen in much more expensive pieces from Denon, Marantz, and the like) and an incredibly nice case for this price. Fortunately, it does not use an external wall wart power supply. Bad for sound and bad for people like me that lose these things all the time.

This phono stage has an openness about it, that feels like units designed with discrete components. Tonally, it is neutral and engaging. Acoustic instruments have a lot of transient snap, and the lower frequencies offer serious resolution as well. Again, this is where nearly all phono stages at this point fall down – the bass becomes just a one-note thud. Tracking through some Stanley Clarke and Jaco Pastorius favorites proves the .5 Phono can keep up with the pace.



TONE113.025-1095

MM and MC

The .5 Phono has a single set of RCA input jacks, so you must remove the top panel to set the gain from MM to MC position. MM is set up for a standard 47k ohm load with 45dB of gain and the MC offers 100 ohm loading with 60dB of gain. This will work with a very wide range of cartridges. The 60dB setting is a bit on the low side for an extremely low output cartridge like the Denon DL-103r (.25mV output) but if your preamplifier has enough gain, it will still work.

I had no problem using this combination with the Conrad Johnson PV-12 preamplifier (26dB overall gain) but it was a little bit weak for the Mark Levinson no.26 preamplifier that I'm currently using with only 6dB of gain.

A real favorite with the .5 Phono is Ortofon's Quintet Red MC. At only \$359, it works great with 100 ohm loading and with .5mV of output, should mate well with whatever system you plug it into. Combined with a vintage Technics SL-1200 mk.5 This setup also stays in line with where it might be paired in the real world.

Switching between the onboard phono stage of the current Technics SL-1500C (reviewed last issue) sporting an Ortofon Concorde cartridge is a major jump up in every aspect of analog performance – bigger dynamics, lower noise floor and much better imaging. Considering how many tables are available from Audio Technica, Pro-Ject, Technics and others, with built in phono sections, this is a serious upgrade indeed. Regardless of cartridge or music chosen, the .5 Phono has the basics you need to get into some seriously engaging listening sessions.

Award worthy

The LSA .5 Phono truly defines what we mean with our Exceptional Value Award. A few premium LPs expenditure will take you to another world entirely. For everyone building a system for the first time, this is a Lego you're never going to want to trade.



1095



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Late Night Garage Playlist
-Jeff Dorgay

Now that a couple of real 80s classic cars are tucked away in my garage, it really feels good to go back to that era of MTV, shoulder pads and Miami Vice...



Don Johnson - Heartbeat

Glenn Frey - The Heat is On

Huey Lewis & The News - If This is It

Jeff Beck/Rod Stewart - People Get Ready

The Tubes - She's a Beauty

Tim Curry - Working on my Tan

Michael Jackson - Billy Jean

Level 42 - Lessons in Love

Tears For Fears - Woman in Chains

'Til Tuesday - Voices Carry

Jan Hammer - Miami Vice Theme

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See that cute English Bull Terrier on the right hand side of the page?

That's Lucy. Nothing pisses me off more than seeing hifi reviewers showing off pictures of their cat sitting on a five-figure amplifier, or even worse, a turntable. Drives me crazy that anyone would be that disrespectful of someone else's gear. So my listening rooms are off-limits to my pups. I said pups with an s. Lucy has a sister, Ricki, who is equally into chomping things. If you've ever seen the Matt Groening series *Futurama*, think of Nibbler, the space pet that eats everything in sight.

But as Elvis Costello once said, accidents will happen. Especially when you get attacked from multiple vectors. As fate would have it the other day, the phone and doorbell rang at the same time. In the five minutes it took to have a quick conversation with our friendly FedEx Ground guy, a quick look back at the studio door revealed that A; it was not closed securely, B: someone had bum rushed their way in, and C: the usual failsafe 2 x 4 foot sheet of 15/16" plywood that is set up between the office and listening room was not in place.

Ruh roh.



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Hear what they heard, when they recorded it. Feel what they felt. Like it's happening right now.



HeadphoneArts



Fearing the worst, thinking she'd munched the corner of a speaker, or digested a pair of expensive cables, I found Lucy with her snout stuck in a small bag of Cheddar Rap Snacks potato chips found in the waste bin.

Tail wagging, I figured I got off easy until later that day. You can see where this went. Thank goodness I just sent staffer Shanon McKellar the set of Focal Stellias, that were right next to the Clear Mg's you see here.

You can see that the robust construction of the Focal phones is somewhat dog proof. (again, luck was on my side, as the cables were disconnected to take photos for Cardas to make a custom set.)

But the right ear cushion was no more.



HeadphoneArts

Now what? A quick internet search reveals that a replacement set of Focal pads will set me back about \$229. But no one has them - anywhere. I'm guessing that as new as the current crop of Focal phones are, they didn't suspect needing replacements yet, but that's just conjecture. Maybe it's that devil "supply chain issues." Nevertheless, there were none to be found.

These days it seems like Amazon has everything, so typing "Focal headphone pads" has results, just as easy as if I had asked for paper towels. Ha. Directed to the Dekoni store, and finding out that it would still be ten days to get pads, going to dekoniaudio.com and making a phone call (old school as that might seem) made for excellent results.

They were friendly, and promised the pads I ordered would be here on Monday. (It was Thursday, at about 1:30 EST. Saturday morning, the box arrives ahead of schedule, and nicely packaged. Impressive.

Dekoni offers multiple pad options, for a wide variety of phones.

They currently support about 20 different manufacturers, in a range of materials and textures.

I know Focal claims that the material chosen for their phones is integral to the sound, and when a factory set does arrive, we'll do a comparison.

But for now, Dekoni delivers the goods.

Skip Amazon Prime and go straight to their store.

Product quality: A+
Service: A+

Highly recommended. And remember, keep your headphones away from your doggos.



The Luxman L-507Z Amplifier

The Next Generation of Awesome.

\$8,995

luxmanamerica.com

Relaxing with Elvis Costello's *Painted From Memory* on the turntable, it's almost tough to believe that the source is an integrated amplifier, not a \$100k rack full of separate components and a \$30k loom of mega cables. When music lovers that want high performance yet do not want a rack full of gear, a pile of cables, or the inconvenience of vacuum tubes, ask me what to buy, my answer is always Luxman. There are a few others I'm fond of, but if you want the phono on board and prefer to keep your DAC as a separate component, Luxman is my personal favorite. And Luxman offers a few incredible digital boxes to keep it all in the family.

There are a few other excellent brands that I enjoy as much, but what makes Luxman integrated amplifiers so special is the combination. The combination of every section, performing at an equally high level, to be precise. Coming up on its 100th birthday in a few years, Luxman is a company of constant refinement and engineering excellence. Everything they improve is purposeful, and the new products always outperform the old, leaving you thinking, "how did they do that?"



External beauty

Weighing 25.4kg/60 pounds makes the L-507Z big but not unyielding for a single person to unbox and carry. I suggest some gloves; just because that front panel is finished to such a high standard, you wouldn't want to scratch it. As with every other Luxman piece that's been through here, you don't realize just how lovely this amplifier is until it's sitting on the shelf/rack of your choice. It's much like examining a high-resolution photo captured with a high-quality digital camera. The more you zoom in, the more you can see the fine details and level of finish. Perhaps it's my imagination, but it seems like Luxman has refined their already excellent level of finish on the L-507Z.

This product is beautiful to behold and contributes significantly to the pride of ownership and happiness with writing the check. I've only seen this level of fine finish on Burmester and Boulder gear – both cost a lot more than Luxman.

All the usual controls you expect from a Luxman amplifier are here and in the same place they always reside, so the level of familiarity is a great thing. However, a few new features are clearly apparent. In between the output level meters, a seven-segment LED numeric readout resides, letting you know at a glance from across the room how high the volume level is.



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– Jon Myles, HiFi World

"The differences were stunning.....What I can state is that the Ultra Black II cables are currently the best I have heard in my system."

– Ian Ringstead, Hifipig.com

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The tone controls are still present; if you're a complete purist, ignore this paragraph. If you long for a bit of boost or cut at the frequency spectrum extremes, Luxman's implementation is perfect.

The bass and treble controls are gentle in their effect but very handy on a flat or tinkly record. It's also convenient for headphone listening – especially if you have a collection of headphones. The tone controls go a long way at adjusting minor differences to make your personal listening that much more enjoyable. There is also a new 4.4mm "Pentaconn" (1/8") jack on the front panel that Luxman says allows "quasi-balanced" operation because of its separate right and left channel grounds, resulting in better left to right separation. Unfortunately, we didn't have a pair of phones wired this way, so we were unable to fully investigate. Here is some more information about the Pentaconn connector:

<https://www.ndics.com/en/products/pentaconn/>

However, our usual stable of phones from Audeze, Grado, Sendy, HiFi Man, and Focal all worked well, indicating a substantial amount of current drive from the L-507Zs head phone amplifier section.

Around the back, in addition to the analog phono input, there are four RCA, line-level inputs, and two XLR

inputs. Luxman allows you to invert the phase of these inputs in case you have an external source that doesn't use the standard pin configuration. (like Burmester and a few others) For the first time in a long time, 12V trigger and control jacks are available for anyone needing to blend their L-507Z with home automation.



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Subtle smoothness

With only one class-A amplifier in the lineup (at least for now), Luxman is further embracing class-AB topologies, no doubt, in an effort to be more green. Yet, the level of smoothness and refinement always associated with their class-A amplifiers is here at a nearly equal level. The class-A Luxman amplifiers, particularly the L-590II, is slightly warmer but also somewhat less dynamic. A fine distinction but one to be aware of.

Connected to a pair of Dynaudio Confidence 20 speakers and a six-pack of REL 510 subwoofers, the combination is stunning. Because the REL subwoofers perform their best when connected to the speaker level connections, the Luxman's L-507Z's front panel speaker switch is incredibly handy. Being able to switch the subwoofers in and out like this makes setting them up that much quicker. It also made A/B comparisons here very easy to accomplish.

With 110 Watts per channel (into 8 ohms, and 210 per channel into 4 ohms), precious few speakers are off limits. Trying them with everything from the (86dB/1-Watt) Harbeth Monitor 40XD's, to a pair of (96db/1-Watt) Heretic 614s, Magnepans, and vintage Acoustat ESLs was a breeze. Everything on the list was able to be played as loud as I'd ever need to listen to music. Even the notoriously power-hungry Magnepans delivered an excellent performance.

The lower octave, with or without subs, is solid, with texture and finesse. Starting with the Supreme Beings of Leisure's *11i* (which has notoriously floppy, whumpy bass) and transitioning to Kruder & Dorfmeister, finishing up with some Neu! all were engaging and powerful.

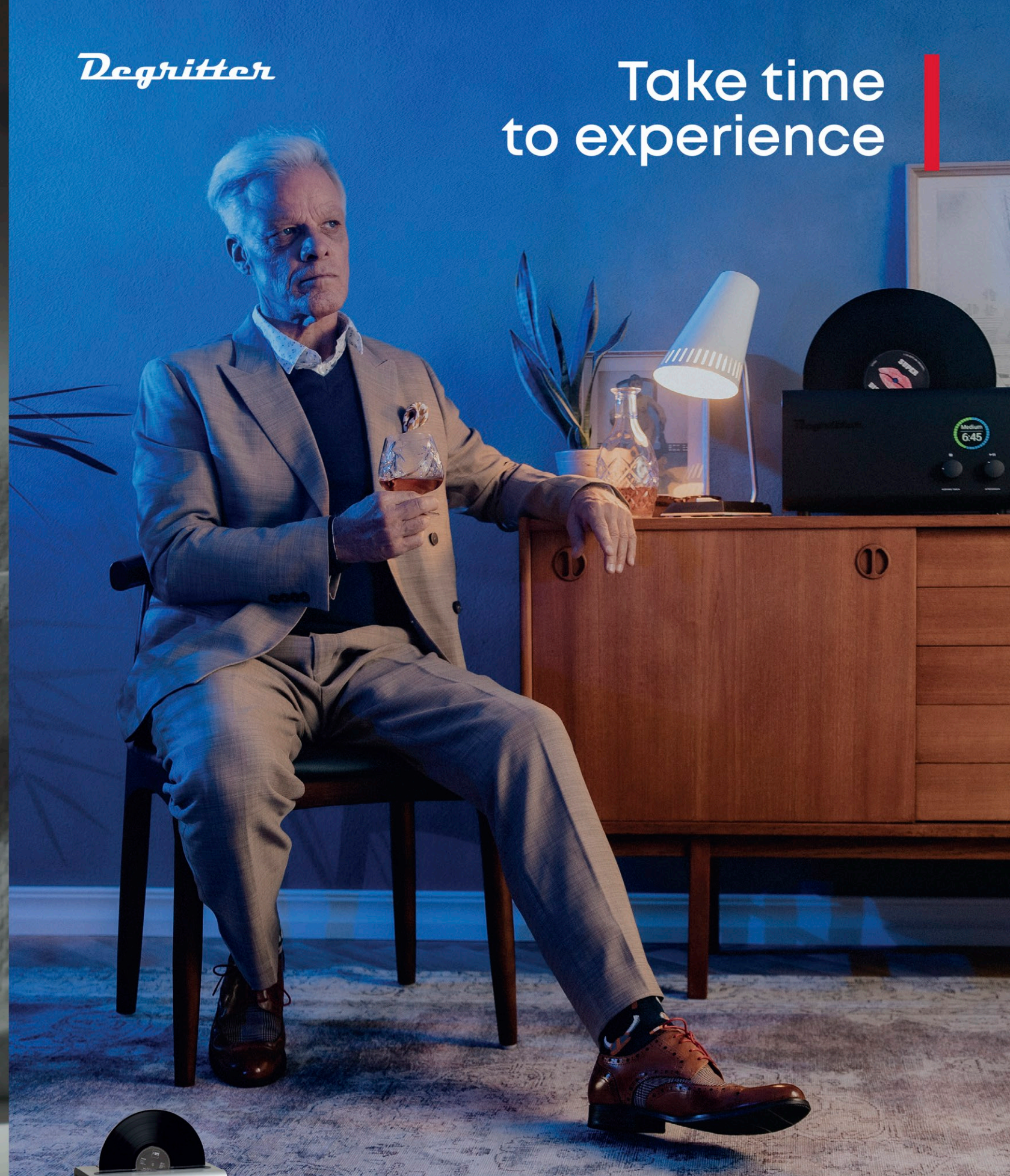
Subtle details

Luxman products personify the "greater than the sum of their parts" philosophy. Building on the technologies that have made their components so well known in the first place with a new 88-step Lecua 1000 attenuator circuit (also used in their top separate components), along with improvements to power supply design and even the circuit board layout all adds up to higher performance.

Where many of the technological improvements will be apparent the minute you turn on your L-507Z, most of them are inside, where you can't see them. The new LIFES (Luxman Integrated Feedback Engine System) replaces the previous ODNF circuitry and cuts the low amount of distortion in half of earlier models. Again, the technology from their separates is converging in the L-507Z – there's a level of musicality here that you might associate with a much higher price tag.

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You don't notice this quite as much when pushing the power output needles into the red playing Slayer, but it's instantly obvious when switching the faire to something more subtle like acoustic instruments. A few reasonably long listening sessions comprised of solo piano, violin, and acoustic guitar had me wondering if this was not a class-A amplifier after all. Good as this amplifier is, the midrange integration with acoustic instruments is very good.

The most significant difference is in the shadows or the quiet passages. Where the outgoing L-507uX also produced 110 Watts per channel, this amplifier is not only more silent, it has more low-level resolution. Fine details fade more gently into the backgrounds, with a greater sense of the information at your disposal. Whether listening to analog or digital sources, you'll hear more.

Fantastic phono

Luxman claims an improved phono section in the 507Z, and again, I can't help but agree. With a .3mV/100 ohm spec, the Luxman integrats have always been perfect for a Denon 103R cartridge, as well as the Dynavector 17DX Carat. Both proved to be a great matches, and it's a *perfect* match for Luxman's new LMC-5 MC cartridge. We'll have a full review shortly. Setting the stylus of the 17DX down on Al DiMeola's new *Saturday Night in San Francisco* is breathtaking. Hearing these three guitar virtuosos come to life in front of me again has me wondering if I'm listening to an integrated.

Good as past models have been, this is another step up. Again, putting the L-507Z in the context of a \$20k - \$50k (or even maybe a little more expensive) system as its hub, I can easily see pairing this withan excellent \$3-10k turntable setup and calling it a day.

Always a joy

In nearly 15 years, I never tire of unboxing a Luxman product. The care in the build that extends all the way to the packaging is a wonderful thing, in this age of ambivalence we live in. The balance of cost, features, aesthetics, and performance are top shelf. Just as McIntosh and Naim have feverishly dedicated to the brand supporters, Luxman is no different. If the combination provided by the L-507Z ticks all the boxes on your list, there's no better choice.

I only have one complaint about the L-507Z; it's both selfish and personal, so it probably won't apply to most of you. Since Luxman offers an MM and MC phono option, I truly wish they would offer two phono inputs – one MM and one MC. Come on, there are two headphone outputs on the front panel. That would truly make a 99.9% product 100% perfect.

Keep in mind this is the first of the new Z series integrats from Luxman, so it will be interesting to see how they roll out the lineup. Based on the past Luxman models we've owned and reviewed, I'll bet they will be equally fantastic. Stay tuned.



Setlist

Value City Arena - Columbus, Ohio September 8, 2022 Photo by Todd Cooperider

Respectfully, Eric Clapton began his set in Columbus, Ohio with “God Save The Queen,” adding a few comments on his memories of the passed monarch. A nice touch. His band included Doyle Bramhall II, Nathan East, Sonny Emory, Chris Stainton, and Paul Carrack, with Sharon White on backing vocals.

Rock’s elder statement showed no sign of slowing down, with an acoustic set in the middle of two electric sets, closing with an encore of Bo Diddley’s “Before You Accuse Me,” Backed up by Jimmie Vaughn.

Electric Set 1:

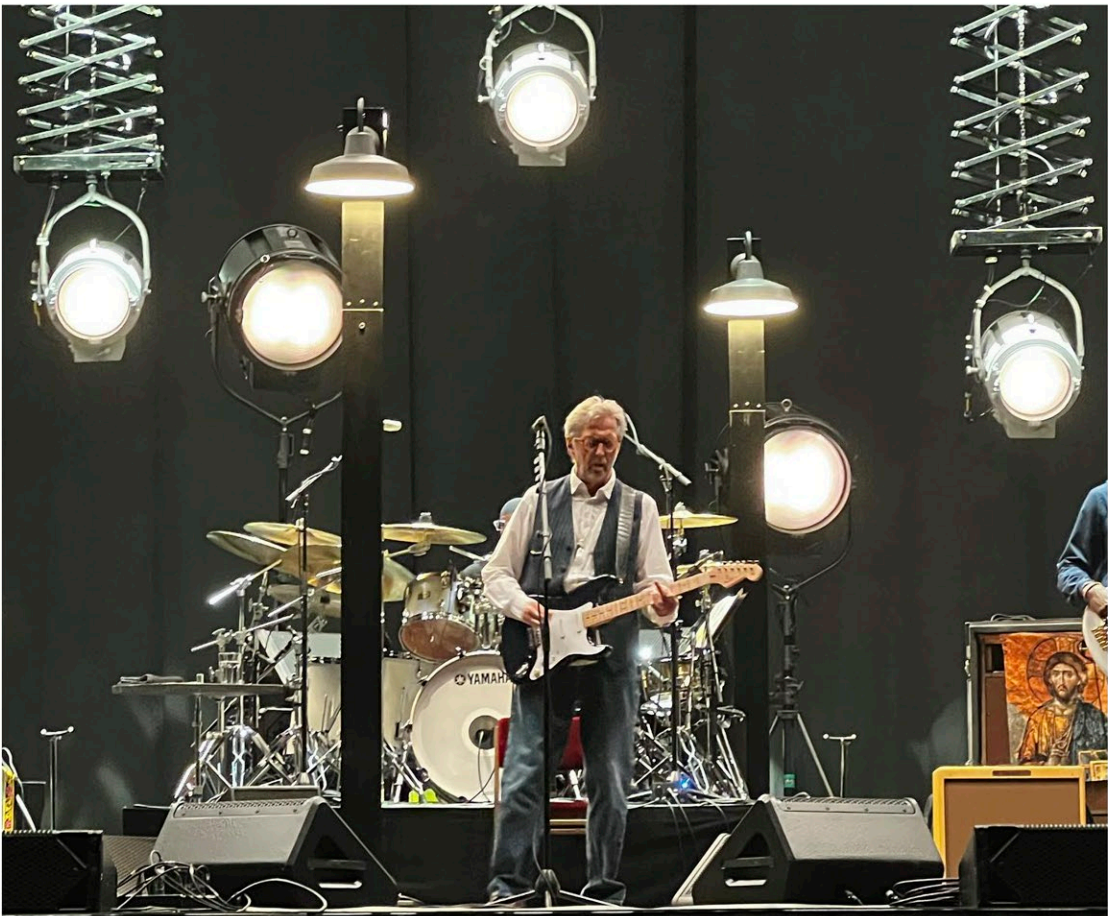
- God Save the Queen
- Tearing us Apart
- Key to the Highway
- River of Tears
- I’m Your Hoochie Coochie Man
- I Shot the Sheriff

Acoustic Set:

- Driftin’ Blues
- After Midnight
- Nobody Knows You
- When You’re Down & Out
- Layla
- Tears in Heaven

Electric Set 2/Encore:

- Badge
- Wonderful Tonight
- Cross Road Blues
- The Sky is Crying
- Cocaine
- Before You Accuse me



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Neil Gader
The Absolute Sound Magazine, Issue 325
reviewing the **Audience frontRow cables**.

2022
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AWARDS

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Produced in 1969 for Koss, by Polhman studios, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin - hometown of Koss, this big haired woman's picture was in every hifi shop you went into. Not to mention every head shop I remember from college, a decade later.

Still popular today, fairly wrinkled copies are fetching over \$200 on various auction sites.

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On With The Show!

By Greg Weaver
(photos by Greg Weaver, and Angela Cardas

The Inaugural Pacific Audio Fest: A New Star

It was November of 2019, as the last Capital Audiofest held before the Covid-19 Pandemic forced us to reimagine our world was winding down, that Lou Hinkley, the owner, designer, and craftsman behind Daedalus Audio Loudspeakers of Ferndale, WA, first let the cat out of the bag. He had been thinking about and planning to establish a new, consumer-based audio show, one that would be the first of its kind to ever take place in Seattle. The only question was, WHEN!

Initially slated to run at the end of July 2021, by min-April, just three and a half months before it was to launch, once it had become obvious that the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions would prevail, Lou disappointingly – and prudently - announced that the inaugural event would be postponed; it would be rescheduled for the end of July 2022.

While I did not doubt that Lou, in partnership with Capital Audiofest founder and organizer, Gary Gill, bolstered by further supplemental support from the now-defunct Rocky Mountain Audio Fest’s own remarkable Marjorie Baumert, would pull off anything less than a first-class event, PAF 2022 proved to be not only a stellar maiden outing, but one of the most engaging shows I’ve attended in recent years!

The hotel is sprawling. The original section of the hotel, the two-floored, extended wings to either side of the open section housing the pool and spa, to the north of the main halls and the tower, were built in the late 1960s on the original wetlands of the nearby spring-fed Bow Lake Reservoir, resulting in some portions having been erected on structural pylons. The tower section, fourteen floors high, was added to the south end of the main wings in the mid-nineteen seventies, housing the main entrance, primary ballrooms and meeting rooms, which occupy the main and second floors.



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On With The Show!

One of the major contributing factors to a successful vendor show is overall sonic quality. Everyone I talked to agreed just how bloody good the bulk of the exhibits set up in Wings Two and Seven, sounded. (Which are typically sleeping rooms.) I suspect the native sonic advantages offered by these standard hotel rooms, not the banquet, ballroom, and meeting rooms, were a result of a combination of their construction methods, materials, along with their sheer size. Combined with a lack of built-in, non-removable furnishings, made for some of the best sounding rooms many of us have heard in recent years.

Yet another extremely important attribute that helps underwrite such an event's success is its overall vibe and feel; its TONE, if you'll forgive the pun. Where most shows tend to be more impersonal, frenetic, rushed, or even haggard, the mood and attitudes here were almost ubiquitously particularly upbeat and welcoming, culminating in a manifestly friendly, accessible, and pleasurable atmosphere, fostering a great sense of community.

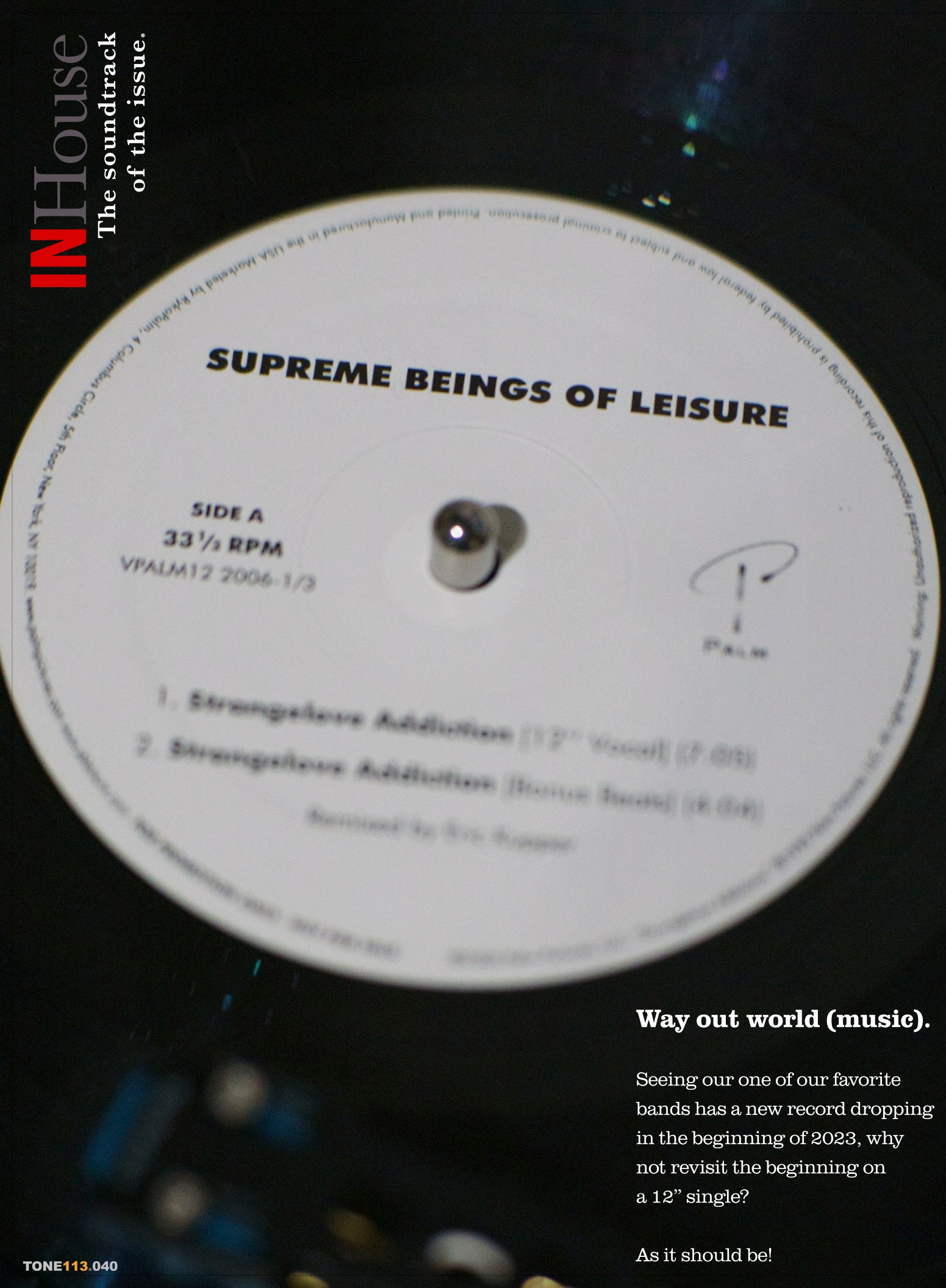
In this sense, this initial PAF was remarkably reminiscent of the recently defunct and sorely missed Rocky Mountain Audio Fest, as this prevailingly communal attitude was something that Marjorie Baumert had so successfully cultivated, especially with the earlier shows. I'd suggest that her near omnipresence here, meeting, greeting, and helping everyone she spoke with, so willingly and enthusiastically contributing to its accessible and welcoming demeanor, was an indisputable contributing factor to the shows overwhelming success. It was as if the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest baton was being officially passed to Lou and Gary, as if signaling her endorsement of this new and highly promising show.

Finally, this show was of a more manageable size! With a total of fifty-two rooms and twenty-eight table vendors, representing nearly two hundred distinct brands, it was possible to stop by every exhibit over its three days of operation.

Were there some missteps and hiccups along the way? Of course! But I'd suggest that it is at best an odd rarity that any first-time event this ambitious and gratifying comes off without a hitch, or three! Yet its combination of overall extremely good-sounding rooms, the welcoming, engaging vibe, and the overall manageable size, that contributed to producing one of the most exciting and gratifying new events on our annual show calendar.

I wouldn't dream of missing next year's Pacific Audio Fest. I hope to see you there joining in all the fun!





Way out world (music).

Seeing our one of our favorite bands has a new record dropping in the beginning of 2023, why not revisit the beginning on a 12" single?

As it should be!



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Enjoy a better-class experience of the music, radio, podcasts and TV you love. The premium Mu-so Wood Edition wireless speaker system combines almost 50 years of authentic audio expertise with the latest music-streaming technology and easy playback from all your devices. Crafted from expertly lacquered, sustainable hardwood, with a unique woven speaker grille, it's the natural choice for exceptional sound and styling in your home.

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Mu-so for Bentley
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Pro-Ject VC-E Record Cleaner

An excellent start.

\$499
project-audio.com

Record cleaning has become big business. Roughly a decade ago, analog enthusiasts had a few options to clean vinyl, with the time-tested brush serving as the most common manual/DIY method and VPI's trusty HW-16.5 standing tall as the most popular automatic machine catering to audiophiles. My, how things have changed.

Paralleling the ever-onward march of prices attached to audio equipment, top-of-the-line cleaning machines now command upwards of \$5,000. Meanwhile, after more than 30 years of continuous production, HW-16.5 remains available for \$799 while enjoying a long reign as the go-to standard in the sub-\$1k field. However, a changing of the guard may be underway courtesy of the \$499 Pro-Ject VC-E

Built in the Czech Republic, and adorned with sturdy aluminum composite panels, VC-E provides quick, easy LP cleaning with as few as one forward rotation and one backward rotation. Dramatically quieter than HW-16.5, VC-E uses a provided clamp to protect the record label from being damaged by any applied fluid, relies on a moveable metal arm for suction, and includes a protective plate to prevent exhausted air from blowing on the cleaned album. A half-liter tank stores spent fluid, and operation, which involves 30RPM speed (about three seconds per rotation), couldn't be much simpler. (Pro-Ject's \$699 VC-S2 ALU primarily mirrors its smaller sibling but adds a larger, 2.5-liter tank and slightly elevated build quality.).

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CHORD ELECTRONICS-CLASSÉ AUDIO-CRITICAL MASS SYSTEMS-DEGRITTER-ENGLISH ELECTRIC-ESOTERIC-FOCAL-FRANCO SERBLIN-FURUTECH-FYNE AUDIO-HARBETH SPEAKERS-HEGEL
HIFIMAN-IFI-INTEGRITYHIFI-ISOACOUSTICS-JVC-KRONOS AUDIO KUZMA-KHARMA-KOETSU-LUMIN-LUXMAN-MAGICO LOUDSPEAKERS-MOON BY SIMAUDIO-MSB TECHNOLOGY-MBL AUDIO
MY SONIC LAB-NAIM-NORDOST-ORTOFON-PASS LABS-QUADRASPIRE-REGA-SHUNYATA RESEARCH-SOUND ANCHORS-STEIN MUSIC-STILLPOINTS-TAIKO AUDIO-TONTRAGER-TRINNOV
VAC AUDIO-VAN DEN HUL-VICOUSTIC-VIVA-VIVID AUDIO-VPI INDUSTRIES-WIREWORLD

PREMIERE FLORIDA DEALER

Put an LP on the platter, screw on the clamp, drizzle fluid on the record, grab a brush to disperse it, drop the arm over the LP, select forward or reverse via a push button, activate suction via another button, let it ride, power off, and you're done. Repeat the same process on the flip side and move on to the next LP. Pro-Ject's claim of requiring just one forward and one backward rotation theoretically holds true for vinyl that hasn't been in the hands of a careless owner (or, say, doubled as a perch for a cat). For dirtier records, you'll need to perform a few passes, which also help with drying. (Like many cleaning machines, VC-E requires an optional kit to clean seven-inch vinyl.)

Yes, VC-E lacks the high-tech bells and whistles of its expensive brethren. If you seek ultra-luxe looks, ultrasonic cleaning, no-flip versatility, higher power, sensor monitoring, and a smorgasbord of settings, VC-E ain't your bag. Then again, the relatively compact 10.5 x 12.2 x 8.3-inch unit isn't devised to satiate all such desires. What it accomplishes, and does extremely well, is remove dust, fingerprints, hair, and related grime from LPs to a degree that makes sullied used vinyl playable and far quieter. Plus, because of its budget-friendly cost, it allows you plenty of extra money for more records or a different system upgrade. What a concept.



What is the best sound? What is the “absolute sound?” What sound do you love?

Now we’re getting somewhere.

One of the toughest things about this HiFi game, being that we all perceive sound a bit differently, and we all have certain things that really turn us on - even more if you play an instrument or two, is to find and assemble a system you love, and try to give some advice based on what we love.

However, if they can land a satellite on a moving asteroid, I think we can figure it out if we all work together.

Here’s two great tube amplifiers from two great American companies, representing state-of-the-art design and execution. This is NOT a shootout.

This is taking two fantastic amplifiers for a test drive. It’s truly impressive how great they both are. Enjoy.



TONE113.042



SCULPTURE A



LE PHONO SE

Working strictly as a class A single ended device with no feedback, our phonostage uses only solid state components (no op-amps) with the shortest signal path circuit possible.



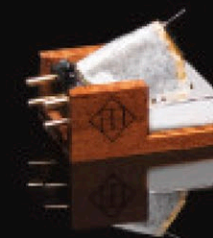
Tailor built for your cartridge with carefully selected and matched high end components, it works with any MC cartridge from 0.1mV (74dB of gain) up to 2.5mV.

Le Phono SE, a solid-state design without the usual issues of tube electronics.

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A.4 Silver



A.3



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A.3 & A.4 SCULPTURE A PHONO CARTRIDGES

Already awarded by French press with a « Remarquable » award, the A.3 and A.4 phono cartridges display a minimum tracking of 90 micron @300Hz lateral that will allow you to get the full definition of your records. For this we have developed a specific damper and use only boron cantilevers with dedicated geometry diamond tips.

With outputs from 0.1mV to 0.3mV with either silver or copper coils and impedances between 3 to 40 ohms.

It is the perfect companion of our Le Phono Single Ended phonostage and others.

With a compliance of 12 @100hz and three bodies, mixing impregnated wood with pure brass, copper, silver or gold, we are able to fine tune the weight and fine tune the sound of your cartridge to match perfectly the mechanics of your tonearm.

The A.3 is a fixed characteristic design, the A.4 is a tailor made cartridge up to your requests.



retip

Our insights on cartridge “repairs”

What if each cartridge was restored as unique artefact ? We do not believe that glueing a cantilever and diamond tip is enough. Aging has an effect on your cartridge as well as usage wear, dust, hygrometry and UV.

Cartridge service : your cartridge does not sound as good as you remember ? The damper might have been tampered with, the azimuth of your diamond tip is starting to be off or maybe the piano wire is getting loose ?

We can check it out and get back the original parameters without altering the parts of your cartridge.

Fine-repair : we are able to completely rebuild Neumann DST (or Lumière), Clément cartridges and most MC cartridges available. Open coils ? Stiff damper ? Broken cantilever ? We know how to deal with these issues and will do our best to get your cartridge as close to its original status, even though we can certainly alter your cartridge up to your requests.



Audio Research Reference 80S

As it should be done.

\$16,000
audioresearch.com

When you open the box to install the Audio Research REF 80S amplifier tubes, you'll notice things are still done as they always have been at ARC. The corners of the enclosures have been rounded over the last six years or so, but they don't cut any corners in the manufacturing. Who knows, had CEO Trent Suggs not rescued ARC from the McIntosh Group last year, we might be looking at empty boxes with the ARC logo on them for three grand a pop. Thank goodness we still have these glorious REF amps instead.

As a native Midwesterner and someone who's been buying ARC components since 1980, it's nice to see this level of care in a product. I've been to the ARC factory a few times over the last 15 years, and they still build it all from the ground up by hand. No surface mount technology is done on a wave solder machine, no op-amps anywhere. All the tubes are hand matched for quality and consistency. They even have their own paint shop now and build those cool, see-through meters in-house. The legacy of their founder William Johnson is more than alive and well; it's thriving.

This care and attention to detail is part of what you pay \$15,000 for. The rest goes to constant research and development, along with maintaining a few million dollars of parts inventory, so your ten-year-old REF 80S will be able to be repaired should something happen to it. And a company that takes good care of their employees. There's a lot to be said for that in the year 2022. That's why 30-year-old Audio Research components are worth nearly what they sold for new still command the same price. Some even more.



The middle of the D-79 range (the D-79B) had an MSRP of \$4,495 in 1981. In today's dollars, that shakes out to almost \$14,400. Also, considering today what life's basics cost vs. then, one can hardly accuse ARC of this amplifier being "overpriced." A BMW 320i with a modest complement of options was about \$14,000 in 1981. The same car today is about \$45,000. Time flies when you're spinning records.

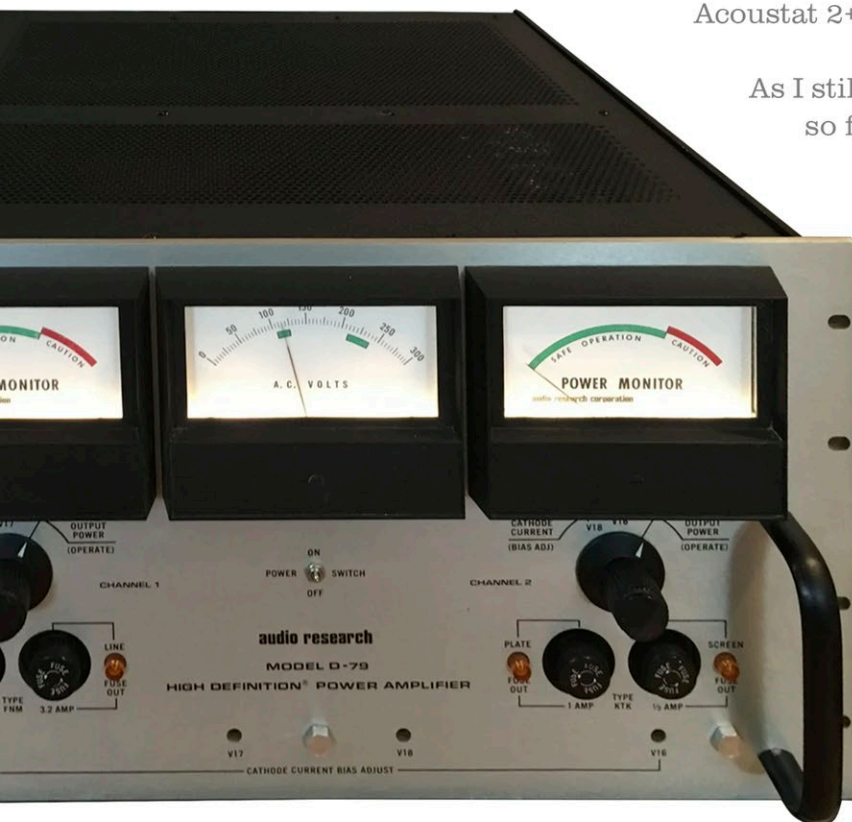
Even though we've had great experiences with the 160S and the 160M amplifiers, the REF 80S is exciting because it's a lower-powered amplifier and more approachable financially. That has always been something incredible – something slightly magic about the ARC power amplifiers sporting a single pair of output tubes per channel. This goes back to a trend that began with the legendary D-79 – long a favorite around here.

Putting the gloves on, so to speak, and installing the tubes is a long-awaited ritual. You'll notice that each tube is carefully marked for placing in the corresponding socket on the chassis, along with measurement numbers on the power tubes. Though it rarely happens because of the extensive pre-build testing and matching, should an ARC power tube fail prematurely, you merely read the numbers to someone in service, and they can send you a matching tube.

Lots of Listening

After 30+ years since I first laid hands on a D-79, what better way to kick off the REF 80S audition than with the title track from Alice Cooper's *Hey Stoopid*? Ironically, the first track I played on my D-79. The good friend I purchased it from told me to "ease into the amplifier, play some chamber music for a day." Nah. I had just returned from my local record shop with a copy of Cooper's latest CD, and why not aggravate the neighbors? The D-79 delivered the goods, powering my Acoustat 2+2s to then un-reached levels of greatness.

As I still have a pair hanging around, and we get so few chances to re-live our youth without looking stupid, I was ready to rock. The Acoustats had been long powered up and after an hour of AliceFest, (with no disappointments) I moved on to another longtime favorite. Pat Metheny's "Forward March," from his *Full Circle* album is big and bombastic. Even streaming this from Qobuz, the REF 80S oozes texture in that big bass drum, with just the right amount of punch and no overhang. This is a tough feat for any tube amplifier to accomplish, yet the REF 80S sails through.



Switching back to the Kim's and tracking through the Supreme Beings of Leisure's new single, "Full Circle," the days listening is tied up rather nicely. While this isn't terribly tech-y, the REF 80S sounds way bigger than you'd expect a 70 Watt per channel amplifier to sound. The same thing that whacked me on the side of the head when I first plugged the D-79 in so many years ago. I was using a big, solid-state Bryston amp rated at 400 Watts per channel, yet the ARC amp was more dynamic and engaging.

Even the relatively inefficient Harbeth Monitor 40.3XD (86dB/1-watt) deliver a stunning performance with the REF 80S, though unless you are only listening to somewhat small scale music or at very low level, you'll probably want to stay out of triode mode here.

I don't subscribe to the audiophile legend that "tube Watts are bigger Watts than solid-state Watts." It's all about circuit design, power supply design, and reserve power. The D-79 weighs nearly 90 pounds, sports massive transformers, and a huge bank of filter capacitors. Today, caps have become more efficient, but the large transformers remain. The REF 80S is still hefty at 62 pounds though. That's part of what gives the REF 80S the big, big sound.

After plenty of time rocking out, changing the faire to jazz, Herbie Hancock's sound track to the film *Blow Up* clearly illustrates the other side of the REF 80S's personality. In addition to being large and dynamic, it does small and subtle equally well. Continuing in this vein with *Empyrean Isles*, and *Inventions & Dimensions* are equally exciting. Still bop-ish in his style on these two albums, this amplifier delivers the delicacy and glide that makes this era of Hancock's playing so memorable.

The REF 80S has a high level of sonic balance. Many products often hang their sound on one specific parameter. Some have magic midrange, others have killer bass, while still others image in an out of this world fashion. The magic of the REF 80S is the way it delivers all these musical attributes in a similar fashion. Whether listening to a string quartet, a vocal soloist, or a wall of Marshall amplifiers, it all feels engaging. This is a very un-electronic sounding component.

Setup basics

Though the REF 80S only draws 420 watts at full output, and 280 in triode mode, ARC still uses a 20A IEC power connector on the rear panel. A more solid connection equals better power transfer. Again, those little things that all add up to an amplifier that is much more than the sum of its parts.

Around back, there are switched inputs for balanced XLR inputs and RCA inputs as well. The high-quality binding posts offer taps for 4, 8, and 16 ohms. There's a handy digital counter that keeps track of of hours played. ARC suggests the 6H30s be replaced around 4,000 hours and the KT150s at about 3,000. Fortunately, with two pairs of KT150s and a pair of 6H30s, this amplifier won't require pulling equity out of your house to re-tube. Because of the time spent sorting tubes, I suggest just buying a replacement set from ARC when you can and put them up on a shelf for a rainy day. There is also a switch on the rear panel to set the fan speed to high or low. It's important to mention how much progress has been made here – these are silent fans!

The owners manual mentions that KT120, KT88, and 6550 tubes can be used in place of the KT150s, though delivering less power. These days, the urge to tube roll just doesn't strike like it used to.

I stared at a quartet of NOS 6550s, a pile of KT88s, and some KT120s. Nope. Just didn't bother going there. Though it is comforting knowing that if I didn't have a spare set of KT150s, I could still listen to music should something inconvenient happens.

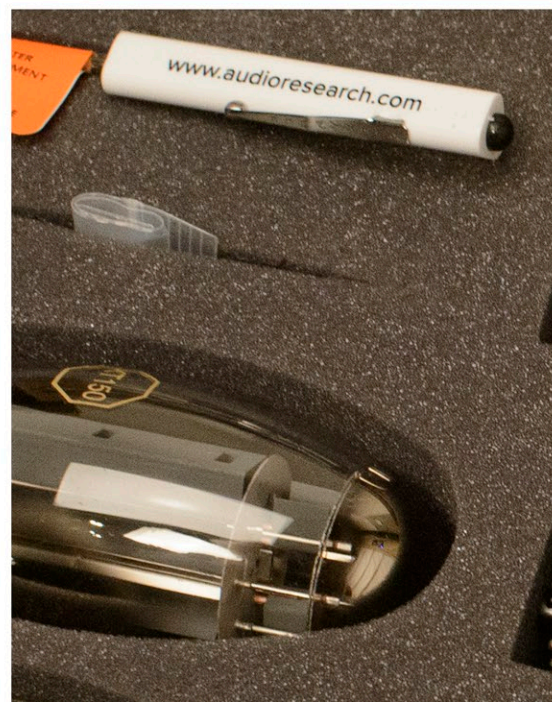
The front panel offers up the power switch, a button to monitor the tubes, an oh-so awesome button to switch this amplifier between ultralinear (green light) and triode (blue light) mode, and a three-position switch for illuminating those meters. Grousing purists will be happy they can be turned off, but again, these meters are such an engineering triumph why would you shut them off? However, if you've got pets, keep them as far away from this amplifier as possible because A: your cat should never be sitting on an expensive amplifier in the first place, and B: these lovely meters are dust magnets.

Seriously, this is my only complaint about this amplifier. But most things of rare beauty require a little extra maintenance. Normally, many of the components I review spend some time in the living room system, but now that I've got a pair of Bull Terriers that shed little, tiny fur fragments, there's no way I could even let the girls near this amplifier. Ha.

Finally, gone are the days when you need to set the bias on the output tubes. The REF 80S uses ARC's current auto-bias circuitry, so your tubes will always sound their best. This also maximizes tube life – a great thing. Also gone from the box is the sheet of paper alerting you that your amplifier will need 600 hours of playback time to sound its best. The REF 80S sounds great right out of the box, though we did notice some improvement around 100 hours. However, this was nowhere near as dramatic as it's been in years past.

Most listening was split 50/50 with our reference Pass Labs XS Pre and the new ARC LS28SE linestages, both in balanced mode, with a full complement of Cardas Clear cable. It's not always about raw horsepower

The big ARC REF amps are certainly engineering triumphs in their own right. Making high power tube amplifiers requires a lot of expertise, but let's face it, most of us aren't listening at anywhere near close to the levels a 200 – 500 watt per channel amplifier can deliver, and KT150s are getting more expensive every year.



While the big amplifiers (or the high horsepower car) make for better bragging rights, This amplifier is all about nuance, inner detail, and delicacy. Regardless of all the talk about the first watt, (which the REF 80S delivers the goods) this amplifier sounds fantastic when you can crank it up and see those coolio see-through meters do their dance. Mated to my Team Fink Kim speakers, I was able to play music comfortably loud, with plenty of headroom left for the most demanding peaks. As the Kim's sport a Heil tweeter (i.e. extended HF) switching to triode mode and redlining this amplifier makes for one of the most immersive experiences I've ever had with ARC amplifiers. Gutsy as the D-79 is, the new REF 80 has all of that with a quantum leap in resolution and spatial ability.

When the G series amplifiers came out almost a decade ago, I used to tease Audio Research's Dave Gordon that the GS 150 (another all-time fave amp) sounded like a quart of REF sound with a few ounces of classic conrad-johnson warmth mixed in. The REF 75 and 75SE were more resolving and analytical than the GS 150, but this amplifier pushes the sonic boundaries even further. It has just enough saturation, so there is no mistaking that it is a vacuum tube design, but all the grain, grunge, and electronic artifacts are gone.

Leaning on all the classic audiophile clichés like "holographic imaging," "inky-black back grounds," and such don't pay this amplifier the necessary compliments it deserves. The presentation is so natural it's easy to forget. Very few amplifiers I've owned and auditioned over the years do such a fantastic job of simply serving the music played – no more, no less.



The D-79 Reincarnated?

Nah. The REF 80S is better. Truly it is. Every time I take my BMW E30 out for a spin, I marvel at how far ahead of its time this car was. And how much fun it still is to drive. But arguably, a new M2 Competition is a better car. It's a similar testament to ARC's engineering prowess that the D-79 still stands up today (and that it betters a lot of new stuff still) delivering a high level of performance that it does. If you've ever had a chance to hear a refreshed D-79, you know what I'm talking about. And if you ever get the chance to take a BMW E30 that's been completely refreshed out for a long, curvy drive on a sunny day, don't pass it up – no matter how much you think you need a 700-horsepower car.

However, the REF 80S pays homage to ARC's past, showcasing everything they've learned since. It doesn't get any better than this. Many will want/need more than 70 Watts per channel, so this will not be the amplifier for you. If your system can thrive on this level of power, the REF 80S could be the sweetest modern ARC amp yet. As Nelson Pass is fond of saying, "simple circuits are best." There's something truly special going on with the REF 80S.

Is this the best Audio Research amplifier ever? Maybe. Is it my personal favorite? Definitely. Do I need one? Probably. A quick chat with Warren Gehl, the man at ARC who is the final say on sound reveals my observations are in the ballpark. "Yeah, a D-79 is a little softer and slower by comparison," Gehl says when we both carry on about this legendary amplifier. Before the subject changes to cars (as it always does when we have a long chat) Gill admits that he's bought one for his personal system – high praise from the man who can have anything ARC makes in his home.

I'm often asked why I always compare audio equipment to cars. Now that I've been collecting automobiles and audio gear for decades, one of the most intriguing aspects is watching a manufacturer's legacy unfold. Just when you think Porsche can't squeeze another 20 horsepower out of an engine or shave a few seconds from their lap time around the world-famous Nurburgring circuit, they do. Similarly, just when you think ARC can't take their designs further, they build an amplifier like this that reveals even more music, without compromise. (And without a major price increase, I might add.)

It's a great time to be an audio enthusiast.

Peripherals

Analog Sources Rega P10w/Apheta 3 MC, Rega P9w/Luxman cart

Phono Preamp Nagra Classic Phono

Digital Source dCS Vivaldi ONE with Vivaldi Clock

Preamplifier Pass XS Phono, ARC LS-28SE, Nagra Classic

Speakers Sonus faber Stradiveri, Dynaudio Confidence 20, Team Fink Kim

Cable Cardas Clear



Balanced Audio Technology REX 3 Power Amplifier

Big Audio Dynamite.

\$20,000
[balanced.com](https://www.balanced.com)

Listening to the big bass riff at the beginning of Paul McCartney's "Let Me Roll It" growl out of my speakers is more than convincing. It's captivating, especially swapping cables from one of my long-time references, the BAT VK-56SE; still no slouch in any sense of the word. In case you didn't know, all BAT tube power amplifiers run in triode mode continuously. Where some amplifiers, like my PrimaLuna EVO400s, can be switched to triode mode, they lose some of their ultimate grip when run this way. This is never an issue with BAT power amplifiers.

The smaller BAT amplifier, utilizing the same quartet of 6C33 power tubes, produces 55 Watts per channel, underscoring just how vital power supply design is. The VK-56SE is heavy, but the REX 3 is BIG. The chassis holds three large transformers for the power supply and output stages and an increased tube count. The REX 3 defies the "simple circuits are better" line of thought, with three times the driver and low-level tubes of the VK-56SE. But it all works brilliantly.

Rather than get to the end of the review and say something vague like, "Is the REX 3 worth the lofty price tag? I don't know...." Let's call a REX a REX (or, in this case, a REX 3). Hell yeah, this amplifier is worth 20k. You may prefer a different flavor for the price asked. Still, in terms of sheer musicality and engagement, the REX 3 is in an exalted group of amplifiers that offer a level of sonic excellence that requires writing the big check. And budget another \$1,500 for a replacement tube set while you're at it. Still not crazy, considering my \$5,500 PrimaLuna amp uses \$1,000 worth of tubes. It's the way of the world.



Big, big sound

That's not a terribly flowery or esoteric description, but ironically, it was the word that fell out of everyone's mouth when hearing the REX 3 for the first time. "Wow, the sound is so big..." Like hanging out at a stoner convention or something. Dude.

But seriously, staying in the McCartney groove, ROON chooses "Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey" as the next track, and it's interesting how this tune engages as it never has before. While big is the simple answer, the way that the REX 3 creates a soundfield that can scale from tiny to nearly infinite when the music warrants it is perhaps its go-to feature. If this amplifier were set up at a HiFi show in a good room, that would probably grab you even in the denseness of a HiFi event or a dealer demo. Too much activity pulls at you to get to the presentation's nuance.

Yet, that's where the real fun is. The purity of McCartney's voice here is incredible. As good as the 24/96 digital files sound, this one gets the tip for some analog bliss. Intrigued by all the digital details, the continuous tones of the vinyl are so compelling it's like playing a long game of Pokemon Go. You just want to keep searching, and wherever you turn, there's more to uncover. It's always shocking (in a good way) coming back to the REX 3 after listening to something else.



EDITORS NOTE: Our test amplifier arrived in silver, but it is also available in black. More sinister, eh? Black pics courtesy of MoFi Distribution.

Quite a few other amplifiers have been in and out of my system, with several different speakers, from the \$149,000/pair Focal Stella Utopia EM EVOs, the Sonus Faber Stradiveris, to the \$5,500/pair Eggleston Nicos, with a side trip to some vintage Acoustat 2+2 ESLs. All delivered the goods in a way that no other amplifier I've used has done.

I've also had the opportunity to use the REX 3 along with the current REX 3 Preamplifier, the Nagra Classic Pre (with Classic Power Supply), ARC's new LS-28SE, and my current reference, the Pass XS Pre. Again, all produce the same core, enormous sound, but the REX 3 power is full of nuance, revealing the character of everything in front of it. As you might suspect, the entire BAT combination is the tastiest and most tonally engaging. How can it not, will all those damn tubes? The Nagra is slightly smaller and more polite, whereas the Pass is equally dynamic, but when going back and forth between the REX 3 pre and the XS Pre, the big Pass pre is quieter but slightly more electronic sounding. And we're splitting some thin hairs.

In addition to this amplifier's sheer sonic size, it can play the smallest music with an equal amount of delicacy and control. Pick your favorite solo vocal track, string quartet, or blues guy playing an acoustic guitar in a church, and revel in the detail and control that the REX 3 delivers from beginning to end. Yet, when you really want to rock, there's plenty of power at your disposal. Though this amplifier is only rated at 80 Watts per channel, thanks to that enormous power supply, there's a lot of reserve bandwidth on tap.

Where so many audiophiles love to chat about "tube Watts vs. transistor Watts," it's more about amplifiers with enormous power supplies than those that don't. Reserve power allows an amplifier to reproduce large dynamic swings that might only last for a fraction of a second – there's that big sound thing again. The REX 3 breathes when playing music, bringing whatever you are listening to alive in a way I'm betting you haven't heard before.

Finesse is what you pay for

Cueing up a test pressing of Aimee Mann's *Lost in Space* again delivers the tiniest bits in a more defined, exciting way than previously enjoyed – and I've played this track a lot. I could go on and on for hours pointing out this bit and that bit – depending on your musical taste, that might mean a lot, and it might mean nothing.

But after over a thousand hours of listening to the REX 3 power amplifier, it's the same story. There's a level of sheer refinement and voice here that you don't get in a \$5k amp or even a \$10k amplifier. Refinement takes time and time costs money. I'll stick my neck out and guess that Victor Khomenko, the man designing all the BAT gear, spent way less time designing the VK-56SE because he has the basic circuit in his head. The sheer time it takes to build more prototypes, experimenting with more variations on the theme for every part, and fine-tune the circuit layout on an amplifier like the REX 3 has to be staggering.



This all leads back to the way this amplifier handles frequency extremes. Bass is robust, powerful, tight, and defined. Not what you usually expect from a tube amplifier, even the best ones. An expansive midrange is a given with tube amps, yet when going from the mids to the high frequencies, this amplifier really stands out, especially when swapping the cables to the VK-56SE back forth, is the additional gradation. There's a continuous tonality that I don't notice as much of when returning to the VK-56SE, as good as it is.

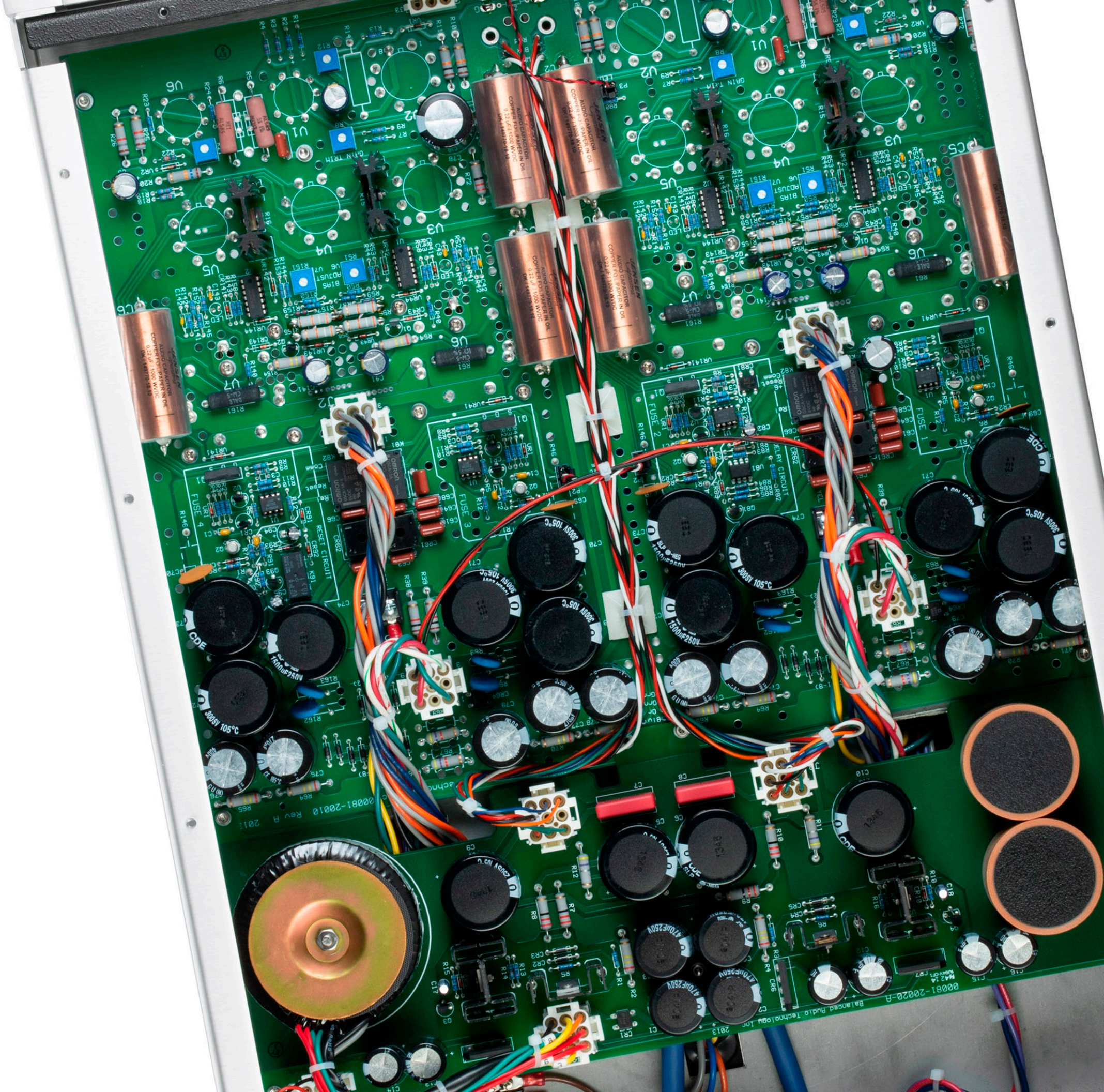
It's not about whether the REX 3 is worth twice as much as any of the \$10k amplifiers I've heard. The sound is unlike anything I've yet experienced, and this is what the experience costs. And I've listened to plenty of amplifiers costing way more that are nowhere near as enticing. Yet nearly a year later, I'm much more excited about this amplifier than the day I unboxed it.

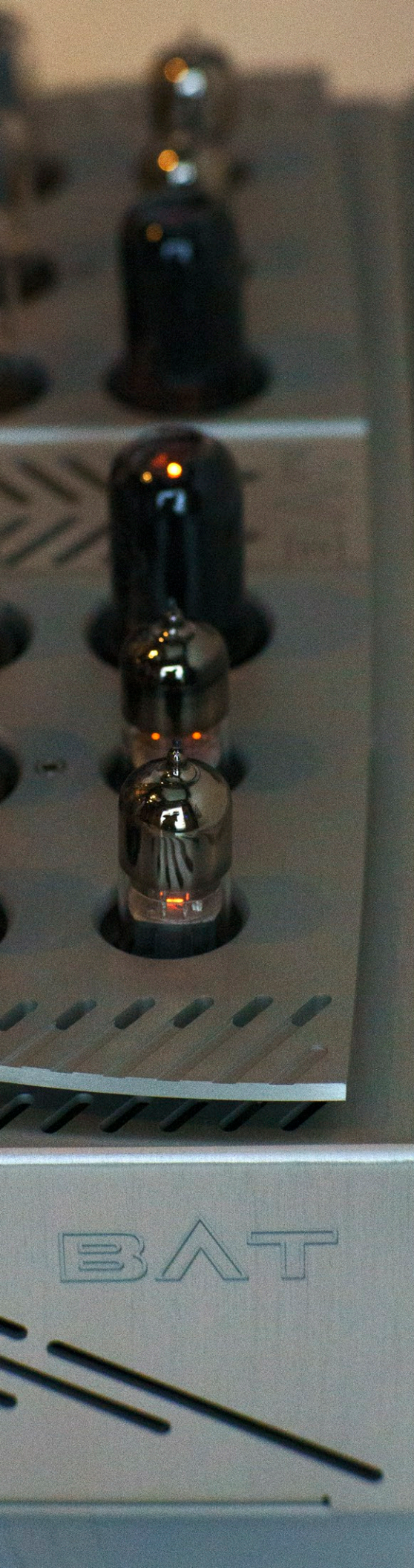
Beyond even that, there's a level of construction finesse that rarely comes in all but the world's most expensive amplifiers. The level of machining, anodizing, and the bead blasted finish on the transformer covers is incredible. While that power switch might look like something from a Godzilla movie, it's an extremely robust, high current switch, and BAT has mounted it on the rear panel. While it always reminds me of the spoiler on a Porsche 993, that handle on the back is a lifesaver when you have to move the REX 3.

Even the screws holding the chassis together are all stainless steel, hex screws. Where regular, inexpensive Phillips screws cost about .10 each, these screws are about \$1.25ea at my local hardware store. And finally, the precision by which everything on the back panel lines up squarely – the IEC socket, binding posts, and jacks are not haphazardly (i.e. crookedly) mounted to the rear panel. Little things, yes – but these are the kind of little things that make you happy about writing the big check.

Finally, it's about flavor

That's the paradox of tubes. It's easy to make a decent tube amp, but it's a ton of work to build a masterpiece. And perhaps even harder to build an amplifier like the REX 3 that does all the audiophile stuff, (yep, all those damn cliches apply here) yet is so incredibly musical and natural in its sound.





If you've been in the audiophile game long enough that a \$20k (or more) power amplifier makes perfect sense, you're probably in one of two camps. You're chasing "the absolute sound" and leaning more towards the Boulder, or Constellation, high resolution, complete lack of embellishment sound, and there's nothing wrong with that. Or the other camp, where you are chasing a specific sound. There's a groove you're after, and you'll never be happy until you find it. (and I'm telling you this from an "it takes one to know one" perspective) This is what the REX 3 delivers.

The world's finest products offer a level of intimacy and involvement that sets them apart from the rest. That's what the REX 3 delivers – a level of sonic intimacy that you won't want to let it go if it grabs you. And you won't find it anywhere else.

Truly a fantastic experience.

Peripherals

Analog Source Thrax Yatrus turntable, Koetsu Onyx Platinum

Digital Source dCS Vivaldi ONE w/Vivaldi Clock, Aqua Formula xHD/LaDiva

Preamplifier Pass XS Pre, BAT REX 3, Nagra Classic w/HD Power Supply

Speakers Focal Stella Utopia EM, Sonus Faber Stradiveri w/REL 25 subs

Cable Cardas Clear



Audience Front Row Cables

A lovely surprise.

\$5,000 and up
audience-av.com

There are times in audio when unexpected things happen. My introduction to Audience Cables is one of the times. As part of a retail dealer's event, I arrived to help with setup and make a few presentations during the event. During the setup process, it was evident that something good was happening in this space that I had not experienced before. After completing the setup of the couple systems I would soon use to make my presentations, it became apparent that the common aspect of both systems was that they were using Audience's Front Row cables. Fast forward a few months, and the next thing I knew, I was talking with John McDonald of Audience, receiving information about their design philosophy, and coordinating a shipment of a complete loom of cables to audition firsthand in my home system.

A few weeks later, two large boxes arrived on my doorstep. I now realize how many cables are in my system. I suppose over time, I had upgraded each category of power cables, interconnects, a pair of tonearm leads, and speaker cables, one at a time, without paying attention to their total. My initial thought of swapping a few cables and getting the break-in process started needed some adjustment. With a couple of hours now blocked out, I pulled my cables out of the system and neatly stacked them in a case in the garage. I want to mention the retail cost of the cables I pulled only compared to Front Row. My existing loom of cables weighs in at a threshold of six figures+, whereas the new Front Row cable loom is just over half that much. While not inexpensive, Front Row does show great value within the realm of high-end cable options.

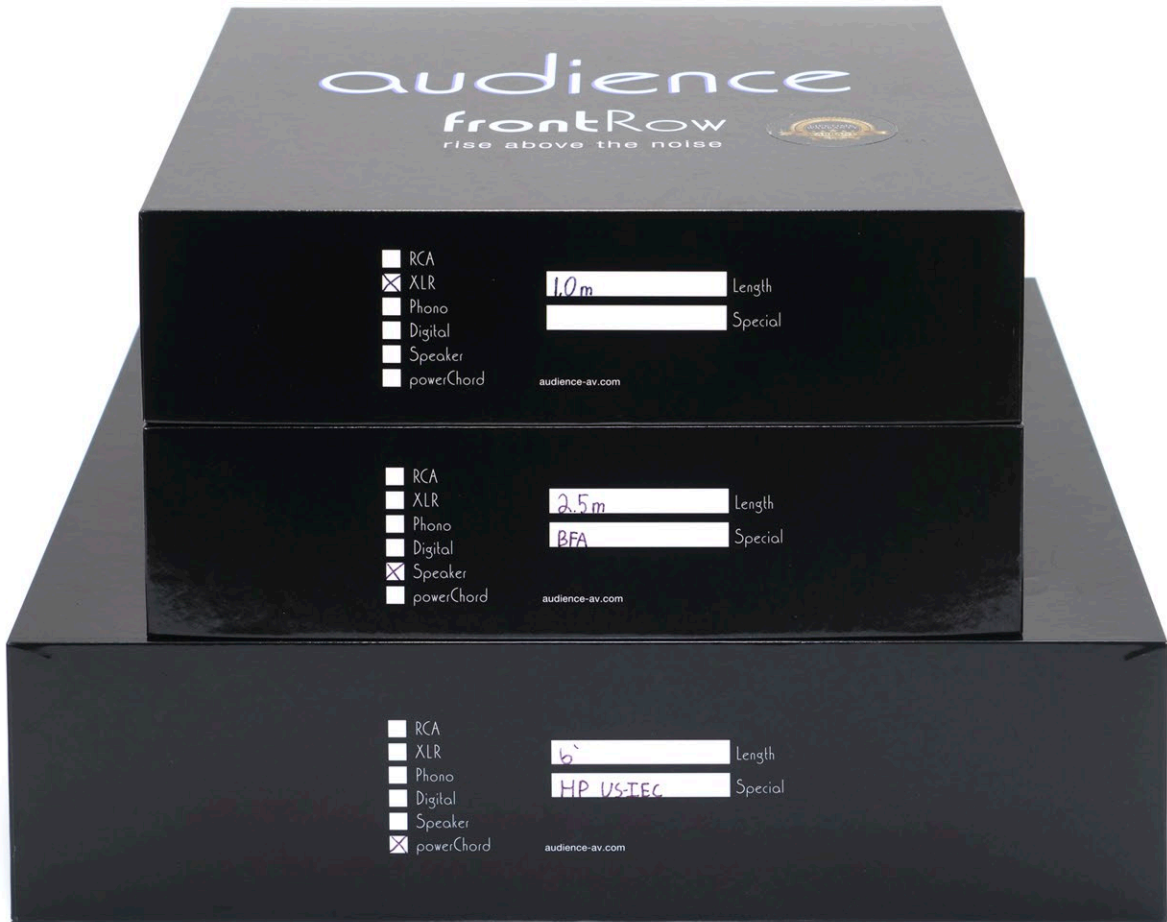


A grand unboxing

Though it’s unnecessary, I started the installation with the tonearm leads, followed by the interconnects, and then power cables saving the speaker cables for last. The packaging for the interconnects is very nice. Once you open the outer box, you are met with a certificate of authenticity. Under this is a nylon zippered case for the actual cables. The interconnect jacket is a smart braided wrap with beautiful carbon fiber/polished brass connectors. Each category of cables in Front Row has a similar high-quality, high-end presentation.

The power cables require further description. Unpacking the power cables follows the same process, only these are much larger. I believe in having all power cables the same length to optimize ground consistency, so each cable I’m using is 2.0m throughout. This is a lot of large, heavy cables. One additional but not minor detail is that within Front Row, Audience has optimized the designs around source/preamp components and high-current amplifier components. These are labeled Medium-Current and High-Current, respectively.

Finally, I arrived at the point where I thought John sent the wrong cables – the speaker cables. All that remains of unopened boxes is a small box roughly the size of each interconnect box. This cannot be right. On closer examination, the label says “Speaker Cables,” so much to my surprise, there is a pair of spade-lugged, 3.0m speaker cables. Given the size of both interconnects and power cables, my experience imagined speaker cables that were the size of my forearm. Not these. These are not much larger than a heavy gauge extension cord wrapped in a nice braid. At this point, I remembered the conversation with John about speaker cables and where Audience has their own, distinct methodology.



According to Audience, while there are advantages of using larger gauge cables for speaker connections, there is a point where you achieve diminishing returns. Once a cable design gets too large, things will deteriorate sonically due to eddy currents and other challenges with the metals and geometry. For Front Row, Audience uses Ohno Continuous Cast (OCC) copper throughout, and for the speaker cables, they use a geometry they call a “Double Cylindrical Perfect Lay.” The result is a relatively modest-looking cable, though still quite attractive. A special note regarding all Front Row cables: Audience uses Morre (Musically Optimized Reduction of Resistive Energy) technologies in Front Row. Morre includes special attention to metallurgies, geometries, dielectrics, etc., each one is implemented on a cable type by cable type basis. Each cable design is optimized to pass signal with the least amount of interference, thus preserving the musical experience.

Getting down to the music

With everything now connected, I’m finally able to take a first listen. All Front Row cables are broken-in at the factory using super high voltage for three to five days. This extra step in manufacturing providing an immediate and wonderful experience. Immediately, the complete Front Row loom sounds great. As a believer in the proper setup of a system after changing significant components, of which I believe a complete cable loom qualifies, the immediate good results mean that I can get on with making fine adjustments to speaker positioning taking advantage of the different presentation. Given how neutral these cables are, these fine adjustments get me to the fun part of listening faster than expected. Immediately, there’s a richness and control apparent from the first note.

As I didn’t expect to begin listing critically so quickly, I had something I had just been listening to on the turntable and was going to use for some break-in. But why not spin it

immediately? So up to speed comes Nina Simone’s self-titled first album from 1957. The last song on the first side, “My Baby Just Cares For Me,” had me questioning all my previous setups. Nina’s left had had the perfect balance of power while her right had just flowed. Of course, early stereo recordings can sometimes get positioning off. However, the tonal quality and rhythmic sense fills the room. The richness of her voice is intoxicating. The combination of Nina’s voice, Jimmy Bard’s bass, and Albert “Tootsie” Heath’s drumming hit just the right balance between swinging and having a bit of fun.

Shifting gears completely, I throw on Chris Stapleton’s fantastic 2017 LP, *From A Room Vol. 1*. This album helped generate another Grammy for the leathery-voiced country master. The interplay between Stapleton’s singing and his guitar work on “I Was Wrong” is particularly interesting. Right off the top, J.T. Crane’s walking bass line throughout this song is a wonder in its modesty and significant contribution. However, what impresses me most about my system with Front Row is its ability to track each musical element while holding them together as a whole.

From these first couple of pieces, mix it up with a bit of rock in the form of Bowie’s famed *Hunky Dory*. This is one of my favorite albums in my collection. When this album was released, we should have known from the start, with “Changes” leading to “Oh! You Pretty Things” to “Eight Line Poem,” that Bowie was going to bend music to whatever he wanted. With the first three songs down, there is no place else to go but to the end of the album with “The Bewlay Brothers.” Aside from the flipping of side one to side two, there was no break in the musical drive with Front Row cables. More impressive, the tonal and rhythmic balance is right on track (no pun intended). Front Row delivers music with authority and authenticity.



While Front Row cables are not inexpensive, in the current realm of stratospheric reference cable prices, they represent a tremendous value. I'm not sure what the math is for cables today. "Back in the day," we used to use the ten to twenty percent should be allocated to cables rule. This arbitrary figure was based on interconnects and speaker cables. I suppose this was before the time we knew that power cables made a difference. Regardless of price, if you have a reference system and are looking for a commensurate cable solution, these are worthy of an audition.

Of course, if you decide, as I have, that these cables hit the right balance tonally, dynamically, and rhythmically, you may also be surprised by their inherent value. Perhaps the money you save can be used for more records. Highly recommended.

Peripherals

Speakers	Wilson Audio Sasha 2
Amplifier	Audio Research REF 160S
Preamplifier	Audio Research REF 6SE
Phono stage	Audio Research REF PHONO 3SE
Turntable	Dr. Feickert Analog – Firebird
Tonearms	Acoustical Systems 12" Axiom and 10" Aguilar
Cartridges	Koetsu Onyx Platinum Signature, Lyra Titan Mono
Digital	Linn Klimax

Additional Listening: Jeff Dorgay

I have to confess to not being a major cable swapping kind of guy, however when one of our writers, or a good friend lands on something exciting, I'll always jump in. Kevin mentioned how much he enjoyed the Front Row cables – and as we've always had great luck with their products in the past, this became a great listening experience.

Audience's John McDonald sent an abbreviated set of wire here for me to photograph, and I have an abbreviated setup for evaluating cable. A T+A2500 integrated, the matching SACD player/DAC/Streamer and the Acora Acoustics SRC-1 floorstanders. My logic being one set of interconnects, and one set of speaker cables is easy to swap things around and hear a difference immediately. Trying the power cord in both components made a bigger change (as I suspected) with the integrated amplifier, and that being said, even further improvement would surely be had if both components would have used a Front Row PC.

Because many pieces of equipment interact with cable differently, we don't really do cable comparisons as an absolute. What I'm listening for is an overall tonal character (or lack of character, if that's the case). If you're an audio enthusiast that looks to your cables as a tone control, or something to give your system its final voice, I probably can't help you with any of my analysis.

On many levels, not being a physicist or engineer, I can't speak to you as intelligently as I'd like to about differences in cable, all I can relay is what I hear in the context of my system. First and foremost, when auditioning cable for use in my own systems, I'm looking for as little tonal alteration as possible first and foremost, and secondly a coherence that many refer to as pace and timing. Where some cables can be ultra revealing, they lose me at their inability to preserve the coherence that a real musical event possesses.

Kevin mentions this heavily in his review and I concur. What I enjoyed the best about the Front Row cable, was its ability to dojust this. If this makes sense, my favorite digital recordings sounded more like analog, with less electrical noise and artifacts of the kind that distract you from listening deeply into digitally delivered music. This is very impressive.





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In my main reference system, I was only able to swap the one pair of interconnects between the Pass XS Pre and the dCS Vivaldi One with Vivaldi Clock, and the speaker cables. Amp and Pre are connected via a 20 foot balanced link of Cardas Clear Beyond, so I couldn't do a full apples to apples comparison. However, the direction things went was similar to what happened in the smaller system with all Front Row cable. There was a real clarity with these cables that is very enjoyable.

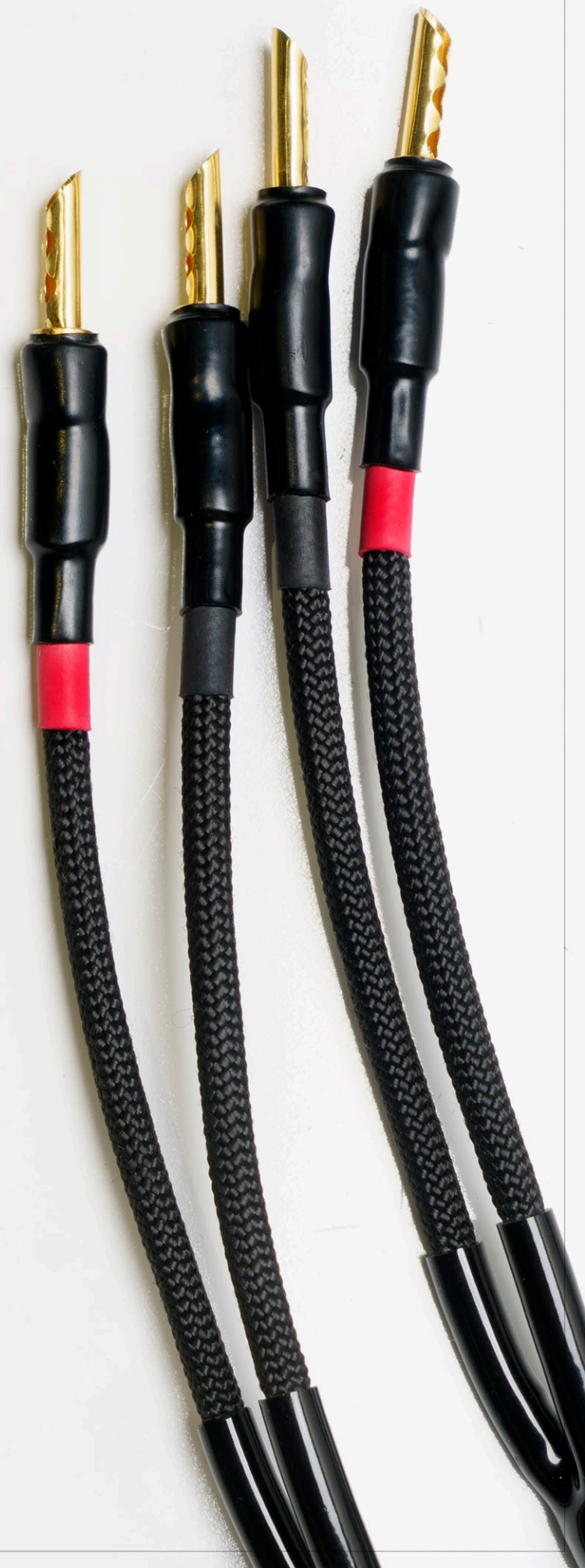
The toughest part of evaluating cable is the cost of said cable. Some are not always happy about the cost of premium wire; my response is if it works it works, the cost is justified. I also look at cost of cable versus total system cost as a percentage. As all of these cables are worth about \$5,500 – ish each, I probably wouldn't install over \$20,000 worth of wire in a \$50,000 system. But Mr. McDonald is going to be sending me a full set of their Studio One cables to try in this system in the near future.

In my main system, using a \$5,500 interconnect between the \$95,000 dCS Vivaldi One and the \$38,000 Pass XS Pre makes a lot more sense, and the performance certainly warrants the improvement. Premium cables in a fine audio system are so much like premium tires on a high performance car – they provide the final link in the interface, creating your experience. The tires' job is not to alter the way the car drives (at least to me) but to transmit as much of the road feedback to the driver, and allow the brakes and suspension to deliver as much performance as they were designed to give. It's the same with audio cables – to me the best cable delivers the most musical information as accurately as possible.

To this end, in a system capable of resolving what the Front Row cables can deliver, I think you will be very satisfied, and justified in the expense.

Audience has a great dealer network that will be able to guide you through this task, and especially with something as personal and critical as cable, essential to getting the maximum experience.

Very highly recommended.



Pass Labs XP-27

Two boxes are better than one.

\$12,000
passlabs.com

Over the past two decades, I have owned nearly every phono preamplifier that Wayne Colburn has designed for Nelson Pass. When it comes to releasing a new product and, as is the case of the new XP-27 phono stage, Pass Labs does so only when it represents a significant step up from its predecessors. According to the Pass Labs XP-27 product brochure, “The new design uses double shielded low noise toroidal transformers in external supply connected via aviation grade circular connectors using silver over oxygen-free copper. The power supply is dual mono with two transformers with lower radiated and mechanical noise.” It also notes that this new preamp’s input and gain circuitry are like those found in the Pass flagship XS Phono Preamplifier so “switching and loading is done at higher signal levels, minimizing noise and improving low level performance.”

Unboxing

My main turntable, a VPI HW-40 direct-drive Anniversary model, has been connected to a Pass Labs XS phono preamplifier for the past two years. My other ‘table, a vintage VPI TNT HRX model, has been hooked up to a Pass Labs XP-15 phono preamp for a decade that was now replaced with the new XP-27 phono preamp. Like the XS Phono preamp, the XP-27 phono preamp has two chassis. One holds the power supply while the other contains analog gain circuits, input switching, loading for phono cartridge impedance and capacitance matching.





Both chassis have an attractive brushed aluminum front panels with an engraved logo, small blue power indicator lights and are connected at their rear panels by a nine-conductor umbilical cable. The rear panel of the power supply also has a standard power cord receptacle and an on-off switch.

The control unit's rear panel has a ground post, inputs for two turntables and a pair of XLR and RCA outputs. The control unit's front panel has one knob offering seven resistance settings ranging from 30 Ω to 47K Ω , a second knob giving five capacitance choices from 100 pf to 750 pf, and third with gain selections: 53dB, 66dB and 76dB. The three buttons on the right of the front panel can select input, install a high-pass (low cut) filter or mute the unit.

Variations on the theme

My VPI TNT HRX has a pair of Nordost-wired JMW Memorial 12.7 tonearms equipped Hana ML Stereo and SL Mono cartridges. Other equipment used in the review include a Pass XS line stage, a pair of Pass XS 150 monobloc amps, and a pair of MartinLogan CLX speakers with a pair of BalancedForce 212 subwoofers.

The Hana MC cartridges provide optimum results with the 66dB gain setting and the XP-27 delivers the most music via a balanced connection to the XS line stage. (Nordost alhalla V1 cable used here.) A Nordost Heimdall V2 completes the path between the VPI HRX and XP-27. Of the XP-27's nine loading settings, I settled on the 160 Ω load and 320 Ω load for stereo and mono cartridges respectively.


Spinning some licorice pizzas

There are loads of remastered recordings being released every month and are a great means to evaluate playback equipment. The 3-LP set of Madeleine Peyroux's *Careless Love: Deluxe Edition* (Craft Recordings) opens with a soulful cover of Leonard Cohen's "Dance Me to the End of Love."

The VPI HRX with the Hana stereo cartridge, works well with the XP-27 clearly revealing plenty of body, warmth and detail in Peyroux's vocals. The accompanying acoustic guitar, keyboards, bass, percussion, guitar, and trumpet offer a lush mix.

Next, the Speakers Corner remake of Janos Starker's historic 1966 Mercury recording of the *Bach: Suites for Unaccompanied Cello Complete*. The opening Praeludium of the Suite No.1 like all the following cuts conveys the sense of the spacious hotel ballroom that Mercury Records' Bob Fine used as a recording studio. The bowing on the cello and Starker's intermittent breaths are extraordinarily lifelike, making it easy to locate the soloist as being slightly to the right of center stage.

Plenty of "hi-fi" mono recordings have a surprising amount of depth and "spread." The advantage of using a mono cartridge for playback of mono records is that it avoids the vertical plane noise generated by a stereo cartridge. A recent mono find was a remastered version of Helen Merrill's 1955 LP (Emarcy/Analogue Productions) with an outstanding backup group including Clifford Brown on trumpet, and arrangements by Quincy Jones. The opening cut, "Don't Explain" finds Merrill's warm, expressive voice caressing your ears and belies the obvious hurt in the song's lyrics. The voice and trumpet reproduction on this recording was incredibly clear in another great Bob Fine recording: *Ella and Louis* appears as a remastered 4-sided 45 rpm set (Verve/Analogue Productions). "Can't We Be Friends," becomes an ironic duet with Ella's smooth vocals contrasting sharply with Louis's unique raspy voice as the presence of both voices in the room was astonishing for a 1956 mono recording.



From massive orchestral music like Das Rheingold’s “Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla” (Georg Solti: The Golden Ring on The Decca Sound) to the more intimate sounds of a solo piano—Vladimir Horowitz’s rendition of Chopin’s “Polonaise Fantasie” (Columbia Records)—the XP-27 phono stage allowed the music to come through unfettered and uncolored.

In case you are curious, I did hook up the XP-27 to the VPI HW-40 ‘table outfitted with a Clearaudio Goldfinger Statement cartridge and played the same selections. While this cartridge alone costs \$5000.00 more than the phono stage, the XP-27 let much of the audio magic be heard as was produced by the XS-phono stage that it temporarily replaced.

Don’t pass this one up

At \$11,500.00, the Pass XP-27 is not cheap but if, like me, you own a sizeable vinyl collection, you have already spent a lot of money on records and, you will have to spend a lot more than this phono stage costs to get better sounds from your platters. The XP-27 provides much of the sonic performance of the XS Phono Stage at one-fourth of that flagship model’s price. It is dead quiet and allows the details and nuances of well-recorded discs to shine through. The front panel provides nearly all the set-up flexibility of its big brother and should be able to handle most of the many good phono cartridges out there. For vinyl enthusiasts seeking to upgrade their current phono stages, the Pass Labs XP-27 is an easy top recommendation and should likely become the last one they will ever need to buy.

Additional listening: Jeff Dorgay

Once again, Mr. Devoe and I line up on another product. As with Lawrence, I also use the Pass XS Phono as a main reference, and was instantly curious how close Pass would be able to get to the top dog, \$45k unit. To put them in proper perspective, much the XS’s cost is that it is actually three separate phono preamplifiers in one box. (instead of one preamplifier merely switching between inputs. So, to the “why so expensive” crowd, that’s why.

If you are a music aficionado with three top cartridges mounted to three top tonearms (and you have the extra \$34k, of course) the XS still extracts more information from said cartridges than anything we’ve yet encountered. Music lovers that can live with one or two clicks less of performance only having two tonearm/cartridge combinations will still be incredibly well served by the XP-27. Seriously, anyone will be well served by this phonostage.

The diff

Curious audio friends ask how much difference exists between the two. Everything else being equal in your system and record collection, the XS is bigger and quieter, with a finer resolution of detail. Tonally and texturally, the XP-27 is top shelf and if you never hear it side by side with the XS, you might not ever miss it.

Input

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The overall tonality of the XP-27 is very neutral/natural with the smallest bit of warmth. It is not etched in any way, but it does not crank up the tonal saturation in a way that you might mistake it for a tube amplifier.

The top end of the XP-27 is open and unrestrained, again with very natural tone. There is no sense of feeling like the music is passing through electronics. That is the highest compliment I can pay the XP-27. When it comes to extreme low-level sources, personally as much as I love tubes, I still prefer solid-state for my own main reference, because I never have to worry about losing a tube in the middle of a critical review.

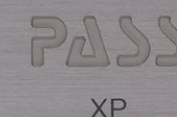
The XP-27 paints is large and panoramic sonic landscape. That famous cliché that the soundstage extends well beyond the speakers truly applies here, and it's worth mentioning that the XP-27 does a fantastic job recreating height and spatial relationships incredibly well. Some components only produce a massive sonic picture (think early Magnepan Tympani's here...) making everything big. The XP-27 reproduces smaller instruments in their proper scale yet has the ability to recreate a large sonic swing when required. Not all great components do this, yet the XP-27 sails through.

Having never had a problem with a Pass product in the last 40 years, the bulletproof nature of the XP-27 is very appealing. In addition, with the relatively low current draw of a solid-state preamplifier, you can leave this one on and forget it. While it opens up slightly after about a week of constant play, much of that can be attributed from the thermal stability of being constantly powered up.

Finally, cool as microprocessor gain and loading, adjustable from your listening chair is, I appreciate the functionality of the Pass. You will have to reset it (and keep notes) when you swap inputs, but that setup produces less noise. Pick the feature and functionality set you want and choose accordingly. At my age, I can imagine an XP-27 outliving Lawrence or I, and that's pretty exciting.

This one's a personal favorite. #toneaudioapproved.

**Pass has created
another massive
winner with the
XP-27.**



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FIVE SPOT BLUES

**Thelonius Monk -
Monk's Dream**

This is one of those classic top Jazz LPs that everyone should have in their collection. Right up there with *Kind of Blue*.

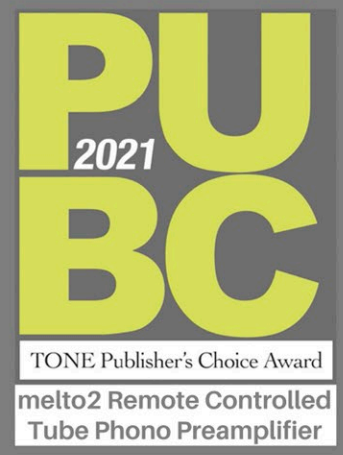
While KOB gets all the attention, this Impex pressing is awfully good, available and easily attainable. As great music should be.

LAB 12

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The experts agree.



Backert Labs Rhumba XPhono 1.1

Another stroke of genius from Pennsylvania

\$7,500
backertlabs.com

Listening to the quietest moments of Al DiMeola, John McLaughlin, and Paco DeLucia's recent *Saturday Night in San Francisco* immediately establishes the Rhumba Xphono as a top phono preamplifier. On one level, nothing is more convincing than a great acoustic performance that happens to be live, when it's served up with this level of realism. Trying to be a coolio DJ kind of guy, the next disc up is the soundtrack from *Saturday Night Live*, featuring the music of the disco-era Bee Gees, and an average recording even on a good day – yet the Rhumba Xphono manages to pull every bit of information from this mediocre disc. Getting back to the audiophile trip with Peggy Lee and Elvis' versions of "Fever" gives male and female vocals equal footing. Again, the result is stunning.

There are two types of great audio components. Great for the money, and great, period. Backert Labs delivers another masterpiece with the Rhumba Xphono 1.1. At \$7,500 it's priced nowhere near what the crazy expensive phono stages are, yet because Backert Labs only makes preamplifiers, they have a tight focus.



Right on the money

\$7,500 is an interesting price point. It's serious analog enthusiast money, but not out of reach analog money. Backert calls the Rhumba Xphono a two-input phono stage. Kinda. It does have two distinct inputs, however one is MC and the other MM. Seriously, if you need the second MC, you can always add a step-up transformer to the MM input. (Which we did with excellent success with our Quadratic MC-1 step up transformer) And this is no disrespect to Backert at all, as the Nagra Classic Phono at three times the price requires you to do the exact same thing, or add an additional MC board (also using step up transformers).

Most likely, this will not be your first phono stage. If it is, you may not appreciate just how much the Backert offers. Vinyl, like so many other interesting pursuits, often requires being part of a suite of interests. Those with unlimited check cashing capabilities might buy something with more sneech appeal just because they can, but this phonostage doesn't leave much on the table in comparison to the super mega ultra boxes.

I hate to mention digital (gasp) in the context of an analog review, but years of reviewing has led me to the same discovery. Just as the world's finest DACs take you to a point where you stop thinking about the gear and are captivated, the same can be said for analog. And Backert's Rhumba Xphono takes you there. Just across the line of demarcation from the rest of the herd that sounds good enough, the Rhumba has that fleeting thing that takes you on a magic carpet ride.

What you do and don't get

It's near perfect combination of low-level detail resolution, dynamic drive, low noise, and sonic accuracy. Containing four vacuum tubes, it also serves up a slight bit of tonal saturation to help make your vinyl come alive. Where the Nagra Classic paints a larger, bolder picture, the ARC REF Phono 6SE a more clinical, resolving picture, and the VAC Renaissance delivers a warmer, more romantic picture, the Backert achieves incredible balance. Again, please keep in mind all the just mentioned phono stages have an MSRP of nearly 2-3 times the Backert. (More if you add the Classic power supply to the Nagra)

While we don't do product shootouts per se, it is always important to try and put products in perspective. The ARC delivers a pair of inputs that can be setup as MM or MC, and the comfort of adjusting gain and loading from the comfort of your listening chair. The only other tube phono that we recall doing this for anywhere near this price is the recently reviewed LAB12 Melto2 (which to its credit, offers three phono inputs, as does the VAC).

Which leads us to another aspect of the Rhumba – the tubes. My tube reference phono stage, the now discontinued BAT VK-12SE/Super Pak, lovely though it is, needs a dozen tubes when it's time to re-tube. That's starting to get expensive. Though I might seem a little biased, I really appreciate Backert building this phono stage around four 12AT7s.

It's still a very easy tube to source. Four of these aren't going to require you to eat ramen for a week at re-tube time, and they are plentiful, no matter what level you prefer to tube roll at, if that's part of the way you achieve your audio joy.

Backert also offers something I've never seen before in a preamplifier – auto bias. They claim a bias supply that automatically adjusts itself to deliver the correct bias voltage to whatever tube is installed, delivers the best sonic result possible, and extends tube life because tubes' bias requirements begin to wander as they age. This setup works well in the Audio Research, BAT, and PrimaLuna power amplifiers we've used, so why not here? It is impossible to completely tell without a version of the Rhumba Xphono without auto bias on hand for a side-by-side comparison. But it is worth mentioning, dropping in different tubes goes without a hitch. In addition, the XPhono has separate, independently regulated power supplies for each of its gain stages.

The sum of all these details adds up to a \$7,500 phono preamplifier that is in the same league of stratospheric components. Now, if they'd just ditch those paddle switches. Warning: be extremely careful when you unbag your Rhumba. It's carefully and tightly wrapped, but if you pull it off with too much enthusiasm, you just might break one of those paddles off. This is my only complaint about the Rhumba Xphono (and the Rhumba linestage)



Playing with others

I've had the Rhumba Xphono here quite some time and have used it with about a dozen phono cartridges. In context, it's been used in a system comprised of Pass Labs amplification (XA200.8 power amps, the XS Pre and the XS Phono for comparison) and Cardas Clear cables from start to finish. Listening begins with the power cord supplied in the box, later swapped for a Cardas Clear Power cord. I'm matchy, matchy that way. Because the Rhumba Xphono offers balanced outputs as well as single ended RCA outputs, both were tried, with equally good result. Getting incredibly granular, the XLR outputs sound a tiny bit softer, rounder, and quieter than the RCA outputs. I suspect some high-quality transformers here a work, especially with the minimal tube compliment. Again, Backert is in great company – BAT uses transformer output coupling with their new VK-90 phono stage too.

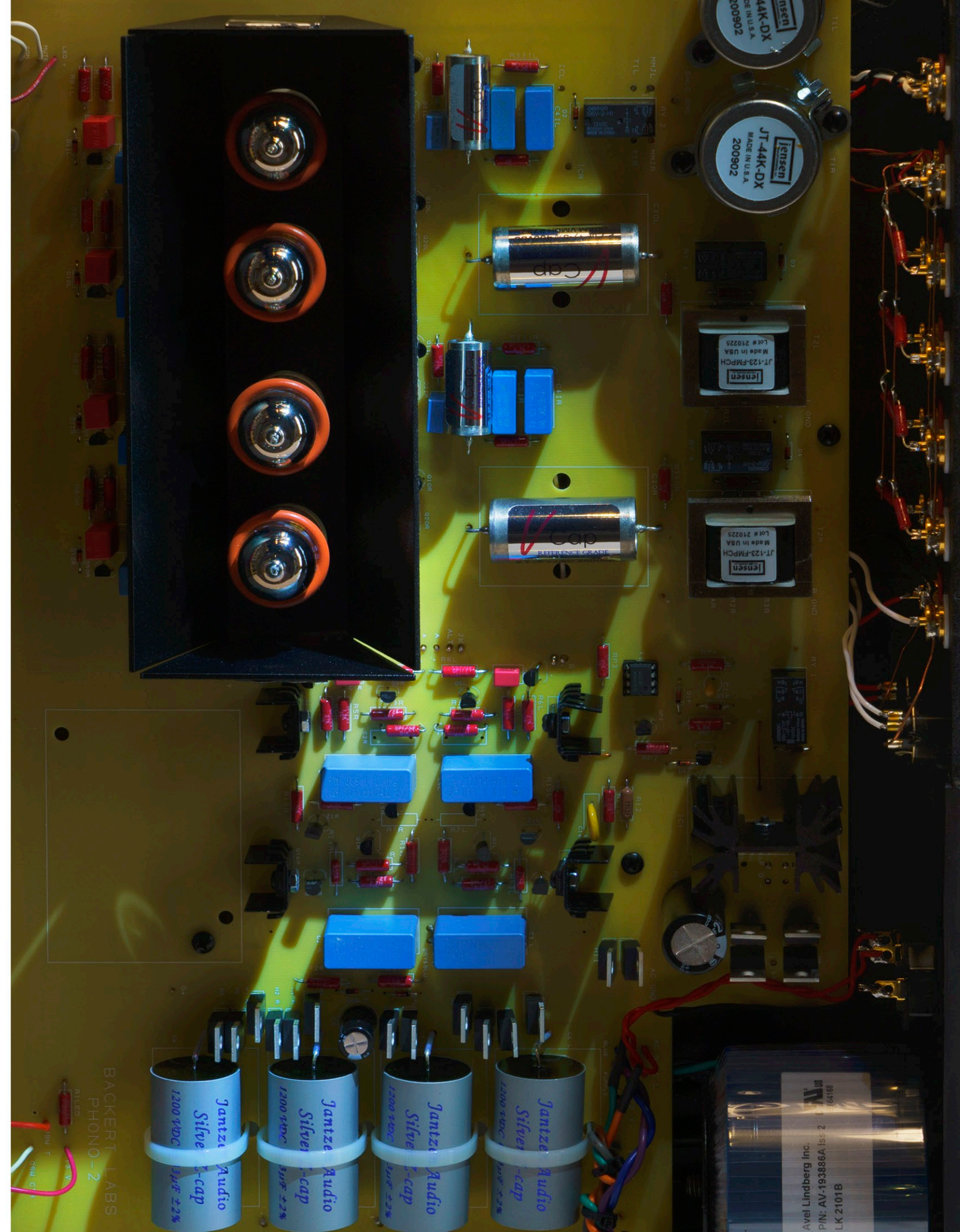
Going from standby to operate does not cause any clicks, pops, transients, or other potentially speaker (and ear) damaging sounds.

Neither does changing phono loading with everything on, but it's probably best to engage the mute button. The front panel has a red LED that is on when the preamp is muted, including the first 45 seconds after you turn the unit on, extinguishing itself and enabling the analog outputs when the tubes have warmed. This is somewhat confusing too – it would be nice to see a color change from standby to operate modes. Again, this is minor stuff.

Switching from MM to MC is available on the front panel. This adds 6dB of additional gain in both modes, offering up 61 or 67 dB in MC mode, or 41/47dB in MM. Eschewing the complexity, cost, and additional potential for the noise of a microprocessor switching array, Backert lets you change loading by moving the RCA plugs around on the rear panel. These plugs are provided, and are of very high quality, so keep them handy! If you don't swap cartridges all the time, you won't even notice this aspect of the Rhumba Xphonos' functionality. And it's nowhere near as inconvenient as fiddling with jumper switches. (Especially if you must remove a cover or get at loading from under the chassis).



TONE113.062





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and the other advantages of Acora Acoustics
Visit <http://www.acoraacoustics.com>

More listening

All the techy stuff doesn't matter once you're into the first track of whatever you're listening to. The Rhumba Xphono sounds great out of the box, and it will improve slightly (but not Earth shatteringly) with time. Regardless of program material chosen, the Rhumba delivers a degree of refinement that keeps you stuck to your listening chair, waiting for the next track. It's very involving.

Without boring you with track after track minutiae, suffice to say that the Backert phono excels at low level detail retrieval, exciting dynamics, and the ability to create a large sonic field within your listening space. All the reasons you like vinyl in the first place. As mentioned earlier, the tonal rendition is very natural, with the slightest bit of added sonic saturation. You won't mistake this phono stage for a solid-state unit, but it's not overly romantic either [deleted a period there] (i.e. not super warm, gooey, and slow sounding). [added a period]

Both ends of the audio spectrum are exciting, but again natural. Acoustic instruments like piano, violin, and guitars sound correct. Nylon strings sound as they should, and there's more than enough resolution here to hear the difference between various instrument types, and even amplification, if electric guitars are your bag. And worth noting, the Backert phono does an incredible job at decoding and unwinding lousy recordings, thanks to everything mentioned above. This is not a preamplifier that only shows its best side with audiophile approved recordings – again making it much easier to justify the purchase.

Finally, it is extremely quiet, and I'm guessing that has a lot to do with the extensive attention to detail paid to power supply design and regulation. When listening to solo acoustic or vocal pieces, the music played feels CD quiet, yet if this makes sense there's a fine gradation from very soft tones to a complete absence of sound giving things a lot of presence. Pick your favorite audiophile cliché, it's that good.

Wait for it

Comparing this phono stage to a few of the crazy money phono stages is like comparing 1500 grit sandpaper to 800 and 3000 grit paper. There isn't nearly as much difference between the two finest grained papers but going back to 800 will require more work. All but the fussiest of money no object vinyl enthusiasts should be able to live happily ever after with this one.

At \$7,500, the Backert Labs Rhumba XPhono 1.1 delivers tremendous value for the price asked. Sonics and build are top shelf, and it reveals as much music as others costing more. If you sniff around the internet a bit, you'll see that Backert gear tends to stay in the hands of its owners – it's nearly impossible to find their stuff for sale used. That speaks volumes.

If it meets the outlined criteria for your music system, this one's a winner. Final listening ended with the Dee Gees Hail Satan, keeping in the groove that this began.





CABASSE
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A three-way, coaxial mid-tweeter passive speaker with two 7" woofers, offering Cabasse's signature dynamic, highly realistic sound.



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w/ Kuzma Stogi 9"
\$6,395

An Upscale employee favorite! Neutral and dynamic with huge bass retrieval capabilities. Dead quiet, and comes with a legendary tonearm. We offer free expert setup!



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A connected tri-coaxial speaker that looks good in any room. Add a second to create a knock-your-socks-off high-fidelity stereo system without the rack and unsightly cables!



JBL
SA750
Streaming Integrated Amplifier
\$3,000

1970 on the outside, 2022 on the inside! This 120 W class-G high-res music player has DIRAC room correction and is Roon Ready. With an MM/MC phono stage.



SPL
Phonitor xe
Headphone Amplifier
\$2,199

A top-tier solid-state head amp, with a reference neutral tuning that is liquid smooth and open sounding. Combine pro-audio build quality and features with hifi sound!



FOCAL
Clear Mg
Headphones
\$1,499

Made in France! These open-backs with magnesium dome drivers deliver a dynamic sound that's neutral but airy and detailed. Built with aluminum, leather, and microfiber.



SOUNDSMITH
Otello ES
Moving Iron Cartridge
\$399

An affordable pathway into the world of high-performance moving iron, offering speed and dynamic range like no other. Warm and rich, and completely rebuildable.



Free Expert Setup

Just check a box and have a leading analog expert set up and test your turntable! We will install and align the cartridge, set up and align the tonearm, test and adjust speed, top up bearing oil, and more. Our experts use high-tech tools, but always do final testing by ear. All settings are documented and labeled to make it easy to unpack your table and get you rocking.

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TO WATCH OUR PROCESS!

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FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...



CH Precision i1 Integrated Amplifier

\$38,000 and up (config. dependent)
ch-precision.com

This might be the most intriguing product from CH, because they've brought their technological might to a high-quality, one-chassis solution.

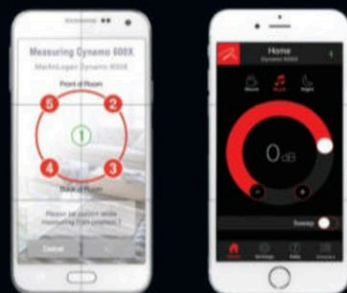
Exciting indeed.



Elegant. With a side of Muscle.

MartinLogan's latest generation of Dynamo™ subwoofers. Five models engineered to deliver an intensely tactile bass experience. They feature new technology, bold construction, and the power to reveal the *Truth in Sound*: fast response, accurate detail and realistic impact. New smartphone App control, and ARC Room Correction, give you the ultimate control, and optimal bass in any listening space. For music or cinema, Dynamo brings the performance home. Visit martinlogan.com for more information, and to find an authorized dealer near you.

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FUTURE TENSE Reviews in our immediate future...

Pass Labs XP-12 Line Stage

\$6,100
passlabs.com

After using Pass' flagship preamplifier for some time now, seeing just how much of the big box makes it into their single chassis unit looks to be very exiting.

Even at this price, the XP-12 offers a pair of balanced XLR inputs and a single balanced output. The casework is the same level of quality as every other Pass product.

So, what don't you get for \$6,100? We'll have the story soon.



A New Classic.

The new Mini, A612, and A614 speakers from Heretic will take you back to a friendlier day.

Modern re-imagining of a classic design takes these compact monitors to a place that will make you smile.

Read the full story here.

www.thehereticspeaker.com



FUTURE

TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

Bigger tubes bigger sound...

\$2,995
underwoodhifi.com

Everyone was very excited about the 35 Wpc VT-70 from LSA Audio a few months ago. Jerold O'Brien bought the review sample for his office, but his recently returned to home from college daughter poached it immediately.

The new VT-150 uses a quartet of KT-88 tubes for up to 80 Watts per channel, and it can also take advantage of the KT-150 tubes for up to 100 Watts per channel. Mono mode also available.

LSA has really had a gaggle of new, interesting products lately, so we'll have a full review shortly.



QUTEST SYSTEM

DESKTOP AUDIO
REDEFINED



The Qutest range distils more than 30 years of award-winning British design, engineering and craftsmanship into a compact home audio system for the modern age.



FUTURE

TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

Focal Bathys Wireless Phones

\$795
focal.com

It's really cool that Focal has joined the wireless game with their new Bathys phones.

We can't wait to get a set in for review!

Everyone is an Audiophile



I/50
integrated

www.audioresearch.com

FUTURE TENSE Reviews in our immediate future...

conrad-johnson
ART 88 Preamplifier

\$28,000
conradjohnson.com

C-J has been a big part of our publisher's system since 1980, starting with the PV-1. TONE's first reference system was based around the ACT 2, and we still use the GAT 2, so we're anxious to see the advancements that have been made with the new ART 88.

Photo courtesy of conrad-johnson.





FATHOM® v2

f110v2 IN-ROOM POWERED SUBWOOFER

“Replacing the excellent low end of the (main speakers) with the tautly controlled f110v2 more completely disambiguated the sound of the guitar’s lowest strings from that of the wood, without diminishing the warmth and weight of either.”

- Kal Robinson, *Stereophile*

“Every Impact was realistic, with a visceral quality that I felt in my chest.”

- David Vaughn, *Sound & Vision*

“The JL f110v2 is a mighty-mite of a sub, conceding little to its larger brothers.”

- Kal Robinson, *Stereophile*

“But do they ROCK?
The answer to that question is YES!”

- Jeff Dorgay, *TONEAudio*



JL AUDIO® | How we play.®

© 2020 JL AUDIO, Inc. For more information on our complete line of subwoofers, please visit your local authorized dealer or www.jlaudio.com.
Authorized JL Audio Dealers do not sell via the Internet. Subwoofers pictured with grilles removed.

FUTURE TENSE

Reviews in our immediate future...

Parasound Zphono XRM

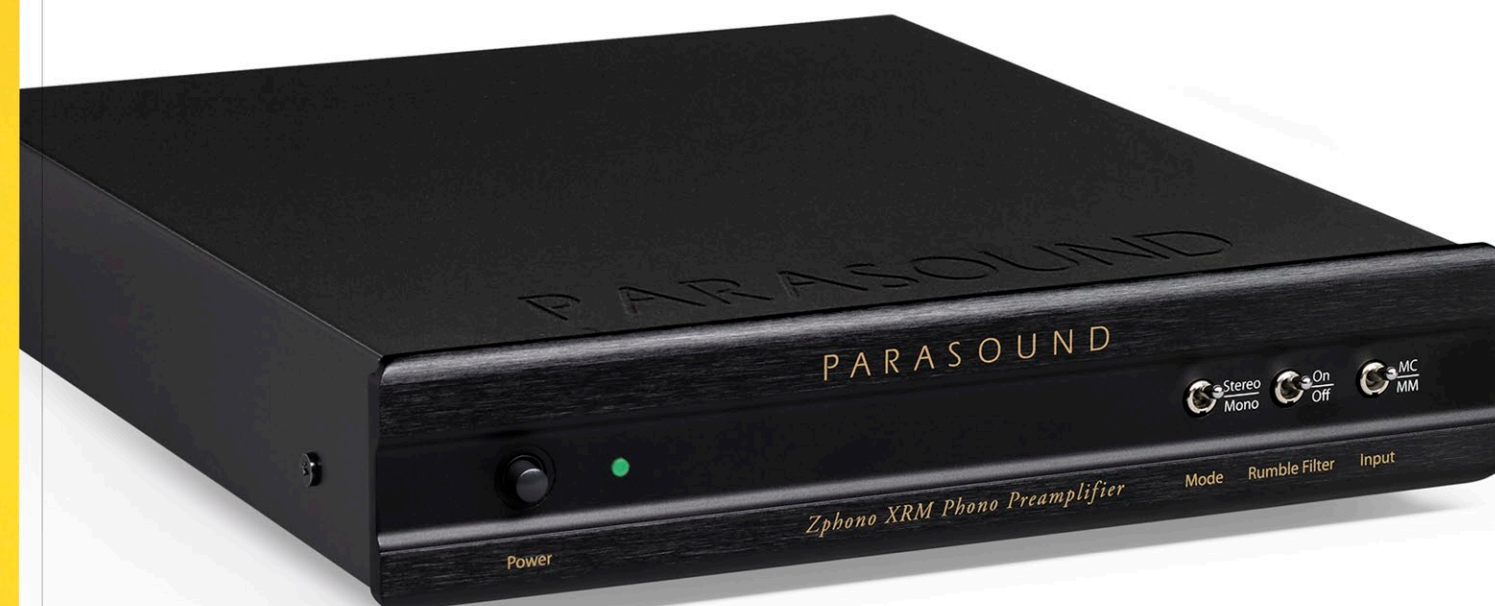
\$499

parasound.com.

The Parasound Z-line has been out for quite some time and these products deliver incredible performance at a very reasonable cost.

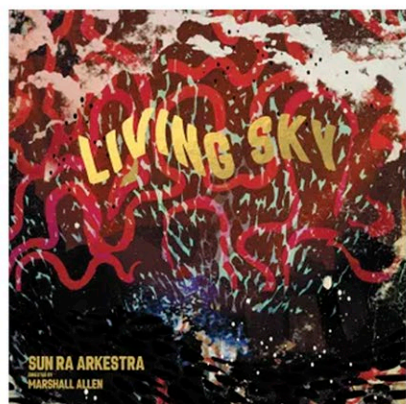
We’ve been on a quest for great budget phono preamplifiers, and the ZPhono has always been a favorite. With MM and MC capabilities, (47k and 100 ohm, respectively) the Zphono offers a lot of flexibility to get you rocking.

Jerold O’Brien has been using his for quite a few years now, and like all of the other Parasound products we’ve owned, there has been a zero failure rate. So stepping up to the ZRM is going to be a lot of fun.



This time we're doing something a little different. Here's nine new titles released just recently that we've been listening to. As always, we suggest giving them a spin on your favorite streaming service to vet them first.

Especially with the price of gas these days!



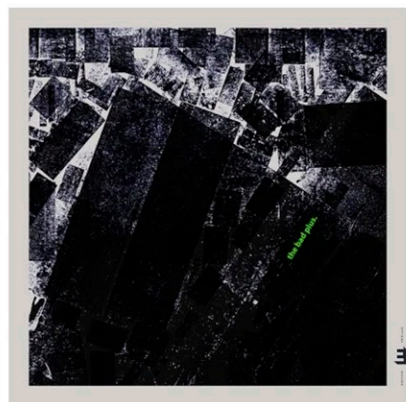
Amazing for a 98 y.o. legend



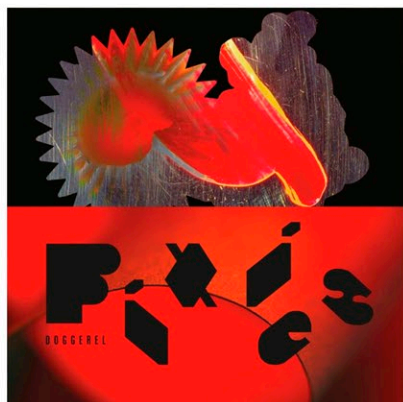
Groovy as ever...



Freaky as ever...



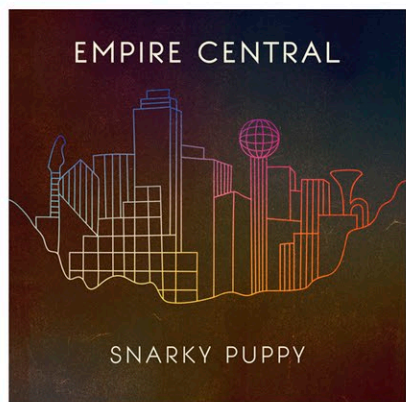
Their third self-titled



They've still got it!



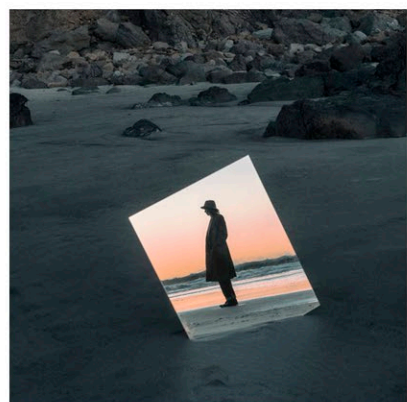
From his last European tour



Perky and obtuse...

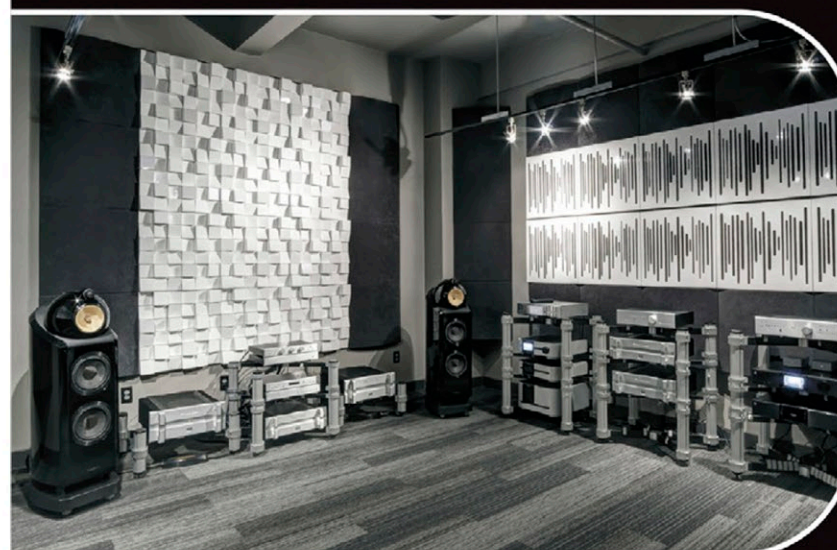
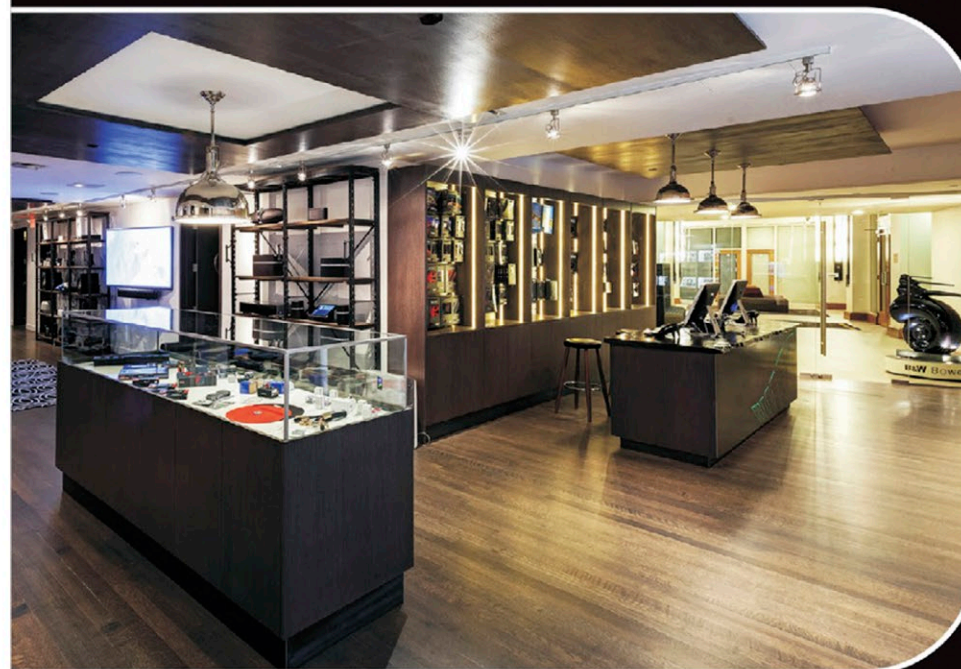


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TEXT by Cam VanDerHorst PHOTOS by Bethany Grace VanDerHorst



You don't have to follow NASCAR to know who Dale Earnhardt Jr. is. He entered the sport right as its popularity boomed in the early 2000s, quickly establishing himself as a leading personality. At one point, he was downright ubiquitous in popular culture, with cameo appearances in music videos, an episode of *MTV Cribs*, and even a profile in *Rolling Stone*. He won the Daytona 500 twice and was voted as NASCAR's Most Popular Driver a record fifteen times in a row.

After stepping away from the driver's seat at the conclusion of the 2017 season, you might have expected him to enjoy a quiet retirement with his family on his 300-acre ranch in Mooresville, North Carolina. Instead, he's stayed around the sport as a broadcaster, team owner, and historian, as well as pursuing business ventures outside of racing. Far be it from us to expect a racing driver to slow down.

NASCAR and liquor are inextricably linked; the sport got its start when moonshine runners, who had hot-rodded large American sedans to carry copious amounts of alcohol and outrun the law, got together to determine who was the fastest. It shouldn't come as any surprise, then, that Dale and his wife Amy have gotten into the liquor business. Their newest venture, High Rock Vodka, is made from a base of corn and Great Smoky Mountain water, distilled seven times before being triple filtered using the Lincoln County Process, which is typically used for famous Tennessee whiskeys. This process uses sugar maple charcoal to filter the vodka and remove impurities.

TONE113.071

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SERIES

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Founder is no ordinary loudspeaker. We've treated every part, large and small, as if it were the most crucial piece of the whole. Every component has been thoroughly researched, designed, engineered, and tested. Not only are the drivers completely new, so is their mounting hardware, the cabinet's internal structure and shape, and even the feet. By leaving no element unaddressed, we've created something that is much greater than the sum of its parts.



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Crafted in Canada,** by people
who love great audio (*just like you*).



Shown: Founder 120H

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*"No reason to mince words: this is the best
headphone amplifier I have ever used..."*

Ken Kessler, Hi-Fi News

*"It's rare that you come
across something that
is so totally different.
It's a beautiful design,
flush with fun options
that make it an
absolute joy to play
with, and it sounds
absolutely fantastic to
boot!"*

Dave Hanson,
EnjoyTheMusic.com



*"...the Absolute is probably the
most flexible headphone amplifier
I've ever encountered..."*

Grover Neville, InnerFidelity

*"Fit and finish is impeccable,
as I have come to expect
from Manley..."*

Al Chieng, Positive Feedback

"An absolute joy to use."

Steven Stone, HiFi+

*"It does what an audiophile amplifier is
supposed to do...to say it is musical is to
barely scratch the surface."*

Gary Alan Barker, Headphone.guru

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Legal Stuff: While we all enjoy consuming adult
beverages, (if you're of legal age, of course) TONE
and Cardas Audio ask you to be responsible...



The result, according to High Rock, is a vodka that is "undeniably smooth and pure." I'm happy to report that it lives up to that promise and more. Not only is it smooth and crisp, it's got a hint of sugary sweetness to it that I haven't tasted in any other vodka I've tried. It should be noted that, while I may be known in these pages for my beer reviews, vodka is my one true love.

I've tried quite a few over the years, and High Rock may honestly be my new favorite. It's the first "artisanal" vodka I've tried that actually has a unique and distinct taste – most are good, but taste more or less like better, more refined versions of Absolut. High Rock, on the other hand, actually tastes like something special.

High Rock's delicious combination of flavor and smoothness makes it an ideal candidate for mixed drinks. That subtle sweetness knocks the hard edge off your screwdrivers and makes your John Dalys a bit more refreshing. My personal favorite? A drink I invented in college, the Dewdriver (also known as a Mount 'n Screw), a combination of vodka and, you guessed it, Mountain Dew.

Hey, don't knock it 'til you've tried it. After all, if Mountain Dew was good enough to sponsor Dale Jr.'s race car, it's good enough to mix with my High Rock, right?

Welcome to MINE:

We're not just crazy about music and hi-fi here at TONE. While we can put many labels on our ethos, claiming to be music lovers, audiophiles, or perhaps even qualityphiles, that doesn't even cover it. Having met so many of our readers from all over the globe, our readers are playful and inquisitive to say the least.

You've told us you like automobiles, motorcycles, fine art, bicycles, toys, cameras... Well, you get the picture. Lumping this all under a banner labeled "Style" seems too limiting. Let's face it, we're all a little selfish when it comes to our stuff.

Let's call it what it is - MINE!
We'll be sharing more of our favorites as we go.



Cut the Cord...

\$119.00
cplay2air.com

For those of you with a car audio system not allowing a wireless connection to use Air Play, this little box makes life a lot easier.

It's also a cracking fix for aftermarket car receivers demanding a tethered connection.

The price is now reduced to 119, making this an even better value.

THE COMPONENTS OF EXCELLENCE: LASTING VALUE

Before you buy a new audio component, consider why some people would rather own a used McIntosh than a new anything else.



Made in the USA

"The best source I know 'for all things McIntosh' is Audio Classics in Vestal, New York. They do a lot of restoration work on McIntosh products and are an authorized McIntosh dealer and service center."

Jim Hannon, VP/Group Publisher & Senior Writer, *The Absolute Sound*

Timeless design. Legendary construction.
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MINE
it should be
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Nipper still lurks...

\$All over the map
[ebay.com](https://www.ebay.com)

Many analog enthusiasts still equate RCA's "Nipper" with the phonograph record, as a result of the famous painting from 1899.

For decades, Nipper statues were used as marketing promoitems in all shapes and sizes. If you look carefully, you can still find them. Some were three and four feet tall!

But how many of you remember Chipper?

Start your journey by scanning the QR code or contact your T+A concierge at:
concierge@ta-hifi.com



TONE113.074



T+A
Engineering Emotion

MINE
it should be YOURS

Takes major abuse...

\$9.99 for 3-pak
amazon.com

Somehow, we are always losing USB to lightning phone cables. Being that their primary purpose is to charge phones and tablets, we're not looking for outstanding audio performance.

These TAKAGI cables from Amazon are fantastic. They've held up to a lot of punishment, including wrestling them away from the dogs more than once.



— Formula xHD rev. 2 —



“MAGICAL EXPERIENCE”

“It's simply magnificent. It is revealing without being trying, lush but not bloomy, and above all capable of captivating musical sound.”

Review: Andrew Everard
Lab: Paul Miller

aquahifi.com

aqua
acoustic quality

MINE
it should be **YOURS**



Peace and Love Baby Yeah!

\$95
laeyeworks.com

You may be more familiar with LA Eyeworks for their fashion forward eye glass frames, but a recent visit to their site revealed these.

Looks like fun, and not a bad thing to keep close to your heart these days.

TONE113.075

We Are
Young.

We Are
Fun.

We Are
 **KIN Play**



 **Bluetooth**  **Qualcomm aptX HD**

TOTEM 
Discover yours
totemacoustic.com

Meet the wicked sounding Totem KIN Play all-in-one music system. Stream tunes from your phone, kick it old school with a turntable, connect your gaming console and a whole lot more!



Nerd Alert...

\$23 and up
starttrektour.com

If you were (or still are) a fan of the original Star Trek series, what better way to get the ultimate fan experience than some photos on a perfect re-creation of the bridge?

Get your captain's uniform on and beam over to Ticonderoga, New York. (Shatner's even going to be there in November!)

Bring a friend, but make them wear the red shirt.

Boulder

866 Integrated



200 Watts Per Channel

Roon Endpoint

3 Analog Inputs

Digital Inputs and
Streaming Capabilities

App Control

Designed & Built In
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Renowned and Awarded
Throughout the World



"This integrated amplifier
DAC/streamer is a triumph
of audio design and
engineering."
-Greg Petan
(Positive Feedback)

"When it comes to sound
quality, the main reason we
are all into this wonderful
hobby, the 866 Integrated is
fantastic."
-The Computer Audiophile

"This is an amplifier you
will keep... and enjoy!...
for the rest of your life."
-What Hi-Fi

MINE
it should be **YOURS**



Party Time...

\$149.99
igloocoolers.com

Ok, so maybe this sound system doesn't have pinpoint imaging, but after a few beers, who cares?

When you're out in the middle of nowhere, this will definitely beef up the sound of your mobile phone.

Unlike the original Kool Tunes, which required a cabled connection, the current model is now bluetooth, so just about anything can connect.

It is claimed to play 10 hours on a charge. After that, you're probably partied out anyway!



TONE113.077

Perfectly Balanced.



Announcing The New VK80i Integrated.

The warm glow of the quartet of 6C33 tubes distinguishes the VK80i as a pure Balanced Audio Technology design. Inside the stunning all-aluminum chassis is innovative technology and uncompromising audio quality. It's perfectly balanced for the discerning music lover.

BAT's proprietary *intelligent auto-bias and fuseless protection circuits* make this a tube amp that is easy to own and operate. You will always have optimal sound and total peace of mind. The balanced amplifier generates 55 watts-per-channel of *high current triode* power. This amplifier drives speakers with vigor due to the exceptional wide-bandwidth output transformers. With the VK80i, all you need to do is listen.

A Truly Balanced Approach.

For over 25 years, Victor Khomenko and the BAT team have been on a mission to build components that recreate music's natural beauty. When we started the company, we found that many products use complex designs to achieve unnatural perfection. There had to be a better balance.

BAT believes in the benefits of fully-balanced circuits to maintain the purity of the original signal. We use the fewest number of gain stages possible for the shortest signal path, and we go to great lengths to custom manufacture high-quality parts that meet our sound quality and reliability standards. Whether you choose one of our solid-state or tube designs, BAT components will give your system a "breath of life" that you've never heard before!

BAT

Contact your nearest BAT specialty retailer to audition this American-made powerhouse.

For more info visit Balanced.com
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Analog Imaging...

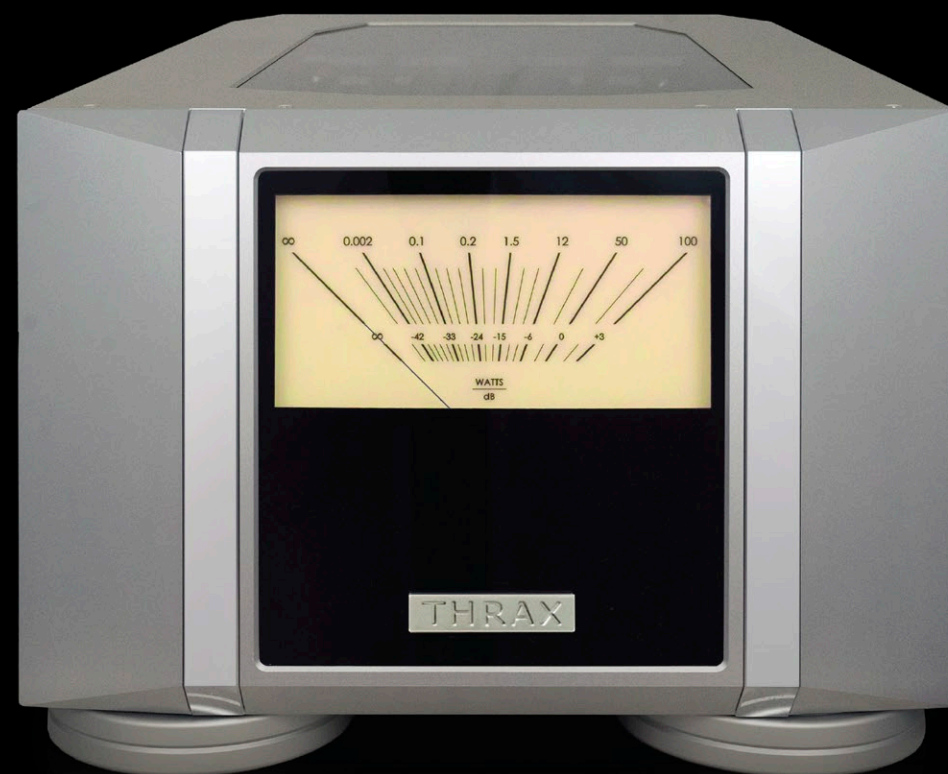
\$229
adorama.com

In today's digital imaging world, an incident light meter is about as old-school as it gets, yet pretty much the same light meter that Ansel Adams used to great effect is still available today.

And, to celebrate Sekonic's 70th anniversary, there will be a limited run of 700 anniversary L-398A's.
Note: the anniversary models are \$498.



A LEGEND REBORN!
"I AM SPARTACUS!"



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audioden.net

it should be **MINE**
YOURS



Forget Fruit Loops...

Snoop Loopz Cereal
TBD 2023
snooploopz.com

Hip Hop legends Snoop Dogg and Master P have teamed up to create Snoop Loopz, a cereal they claim is more fun, and healthier than the other loops.

More Marshmallows, and multi-grain. It's the shiznit.

TONE113.079

W WHARFEDALE

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At What Price Reality...

Nike Waffle Trainer 2
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nike.com

If you happen to be one of our readers that enjoys Porsches as much as hifi gear, you've probably seen those new, coolio Carrera 2.7 sneakers, that will set you back a cool \$911 a pair.

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TONE113.080

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TONE113.081

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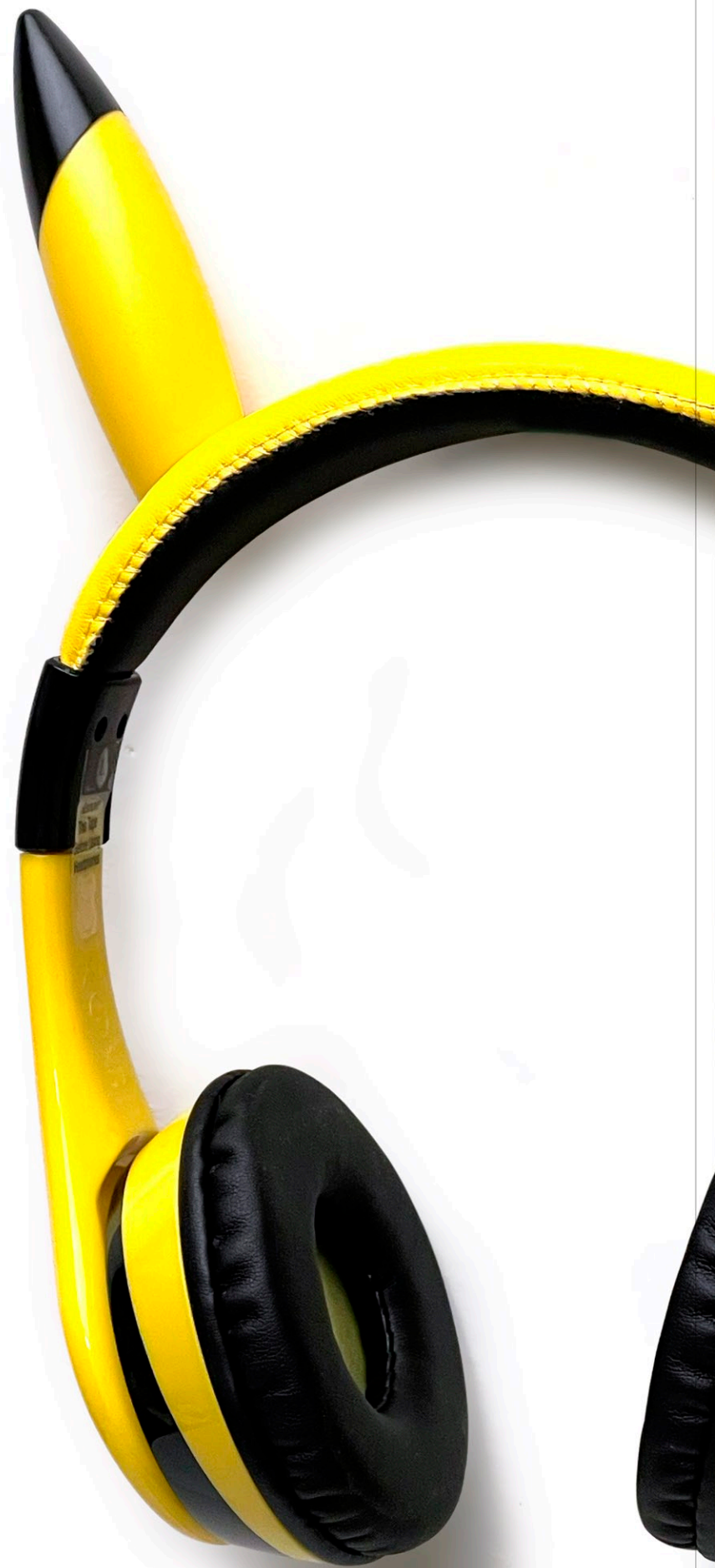
MINE
YOURS

Pika Pika...

\$29
amazon.com

Who says the fun headphones have to be for kids? These Picachu phones are sure to be an eye opener wherever you go.

Watch for one of us to be sporting a pair of these at CanJam next year.



Tone Imports

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But you can't have it...



Guitarist John Mayer is well known in horology circles as quite the collector, and now influencer.

His take on the madly popular Casio G-Shock 6900 is inspired by the colored buttons on the Casio keyboards of his younger days.

How cool is that? Even cooler is that this watch was going for a mere \$180 as a special edition over at hodinkee.com.

Like so many influencer products, it was gone before anyone could actually get one.

Horology aside, the price gouging whores on EBay are pushing this one towards the \$1,000 mark.

If you can live with a standard issue 6900, they are \$59 all day long at Amazon.



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America (Continents, Pt. 4): Live, Montreal
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Chick Corea -
America (Continents, Pt. 4
Live - Montreux Jazz Festival, 2006)

As this issue is coming to a close, impatience
got the best of us waiting for the vinyl. Times
like this it's nice to stream.

If you're a Chick Corea fan, give this stunning
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Jerold O'Brien - TONEAudio September 2021

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Greg Voth - Stereotimes September 2021



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Dealers That Mean Business

We've had this section at the back of TONE for some time now, and actually before we got hit with COVID, and it was easier to just pop in your favorite hifi store for a cursory visit, I was planning on an extended road trip to seek out great audio salons. I'm sorry to say that quest has been on hold for a while.

A few years later, times have changed, the landscape has changed somewhat, but the best dealers have adapted and are still thriving. Innovate or perish, as the saying goes. Most have gone to an appointments only model, which hasn't been all that much of a stretch, because many hifi shops had adopted this model, or at least a semi-appointment model before the current situation. Of course, stricter anti-cooties protocols have been engaged, and for the most part, customers have stayed in the retail game.

We've swapped a few people out here, but most of the dealers we were featuring are still doing well – we are truly glad for this. As it becomes easier and easier to travel again, I'll be back on the road seeking out more great dealers and attending events.

In the issues to come, we're also going to be featuring commentary from these dealers, telling their stories on how they've adjusted, and what, if anything they've learned and changed.

As we move into the year 2022 (which still feels weird saying) I still firmly believe the support from a great hifi dealer is essential to help you wade through the ever increasing complexity of audio, whether it be two channel, theater, or something in-between.

To recap what I've said here before: Nearly every audio system that has failed to achieve the greatness expected of it can be traced back to poor component choice and setup. I've heard a lot of systems all over the world, and it always falls back to these two factors.

The top retailers need our support now more than ever.

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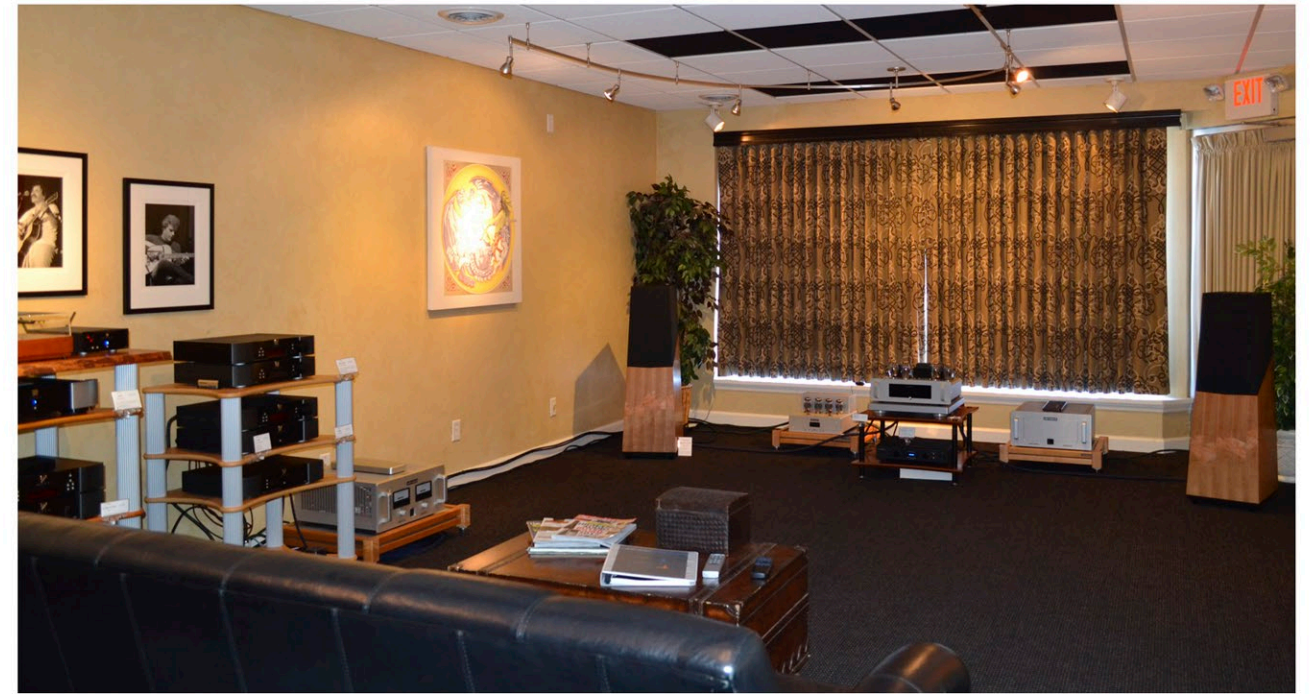
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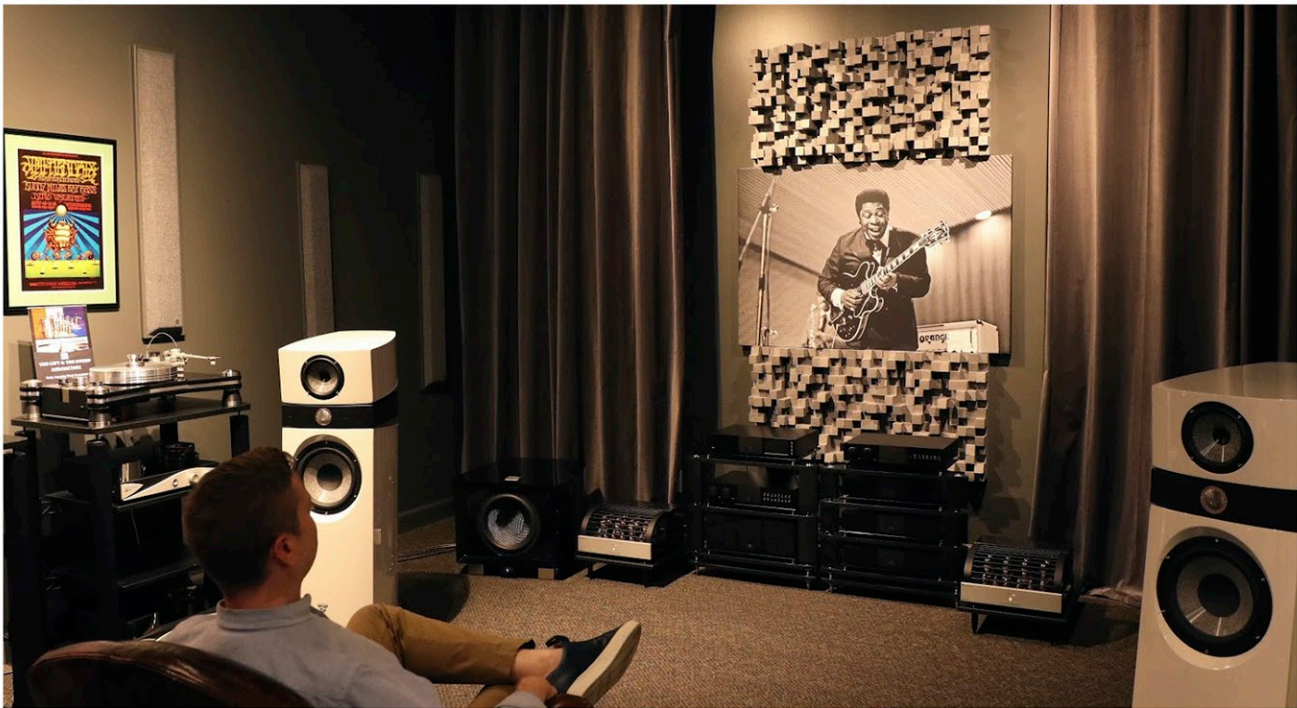
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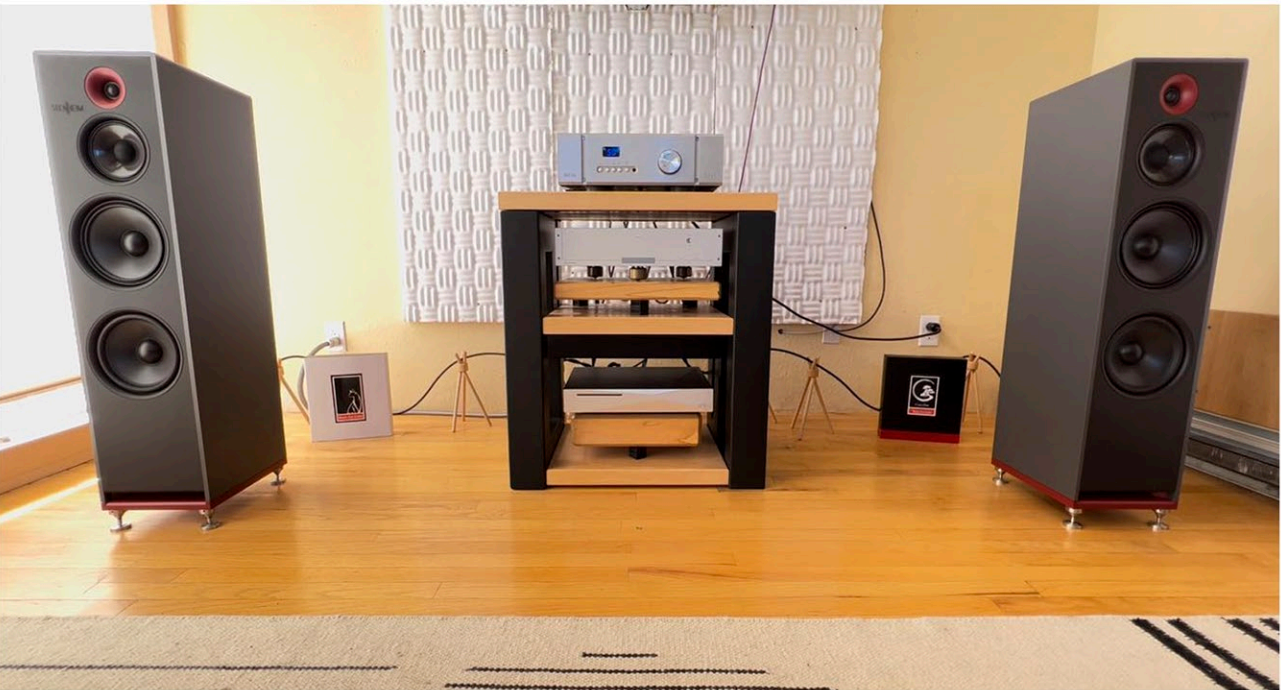
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Club Mix compilation expert, Scott Tetzlaff's theme for this playlist is la-la-la.

The idea is sometimes you just need to block out everything extraneous and focus on a good set of beats that will get you moving. Pretty much just fun.

Enjoy!



Natania - Real Thing

Jungle Fire - Firewalker

Chicha libre - Once Tejones

Lizzy Mercier Descloux - Fire

Yin Yin - One Inch Punch

Giovanni Damico - Italians in a Line

Feiertag - Encino Boogie

Tensnake - Coma Cat

Chet Faker, Soulwax - Whatever Tomorrow (Soulwax remix)

Chet Faker - No Diggity

Wild Belle - Keep You

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— Angela Cardas Meredith, Cardas Audio

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- Kevin Hayes, VAC

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- Jeremy Bryan, MBL North America



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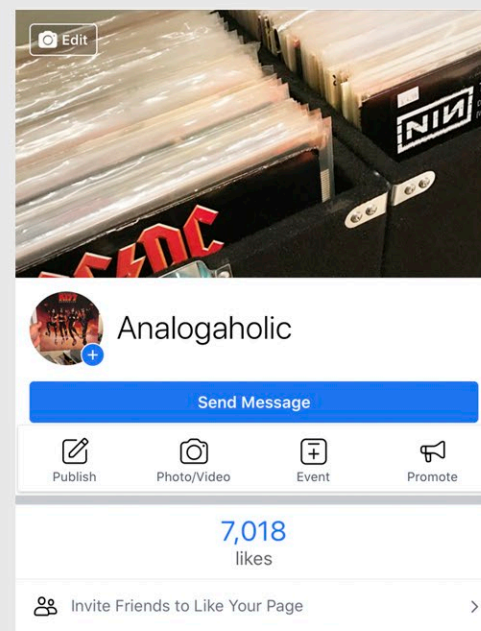
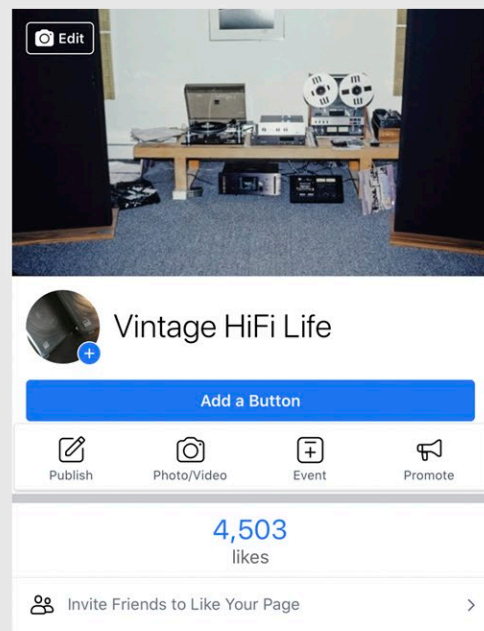
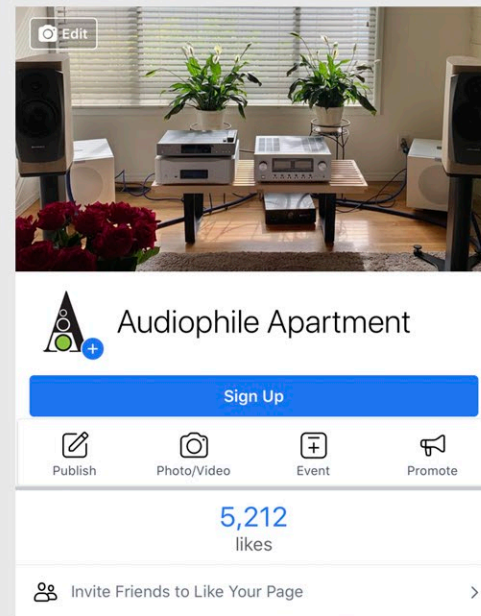
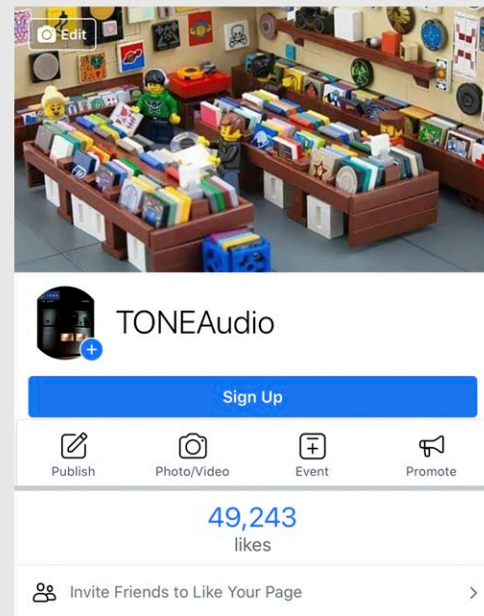
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LASTWord
our parting thought...



Who knew the last owner of my M Roadster would be an audiophile, and a PrimaLuna fan as well?

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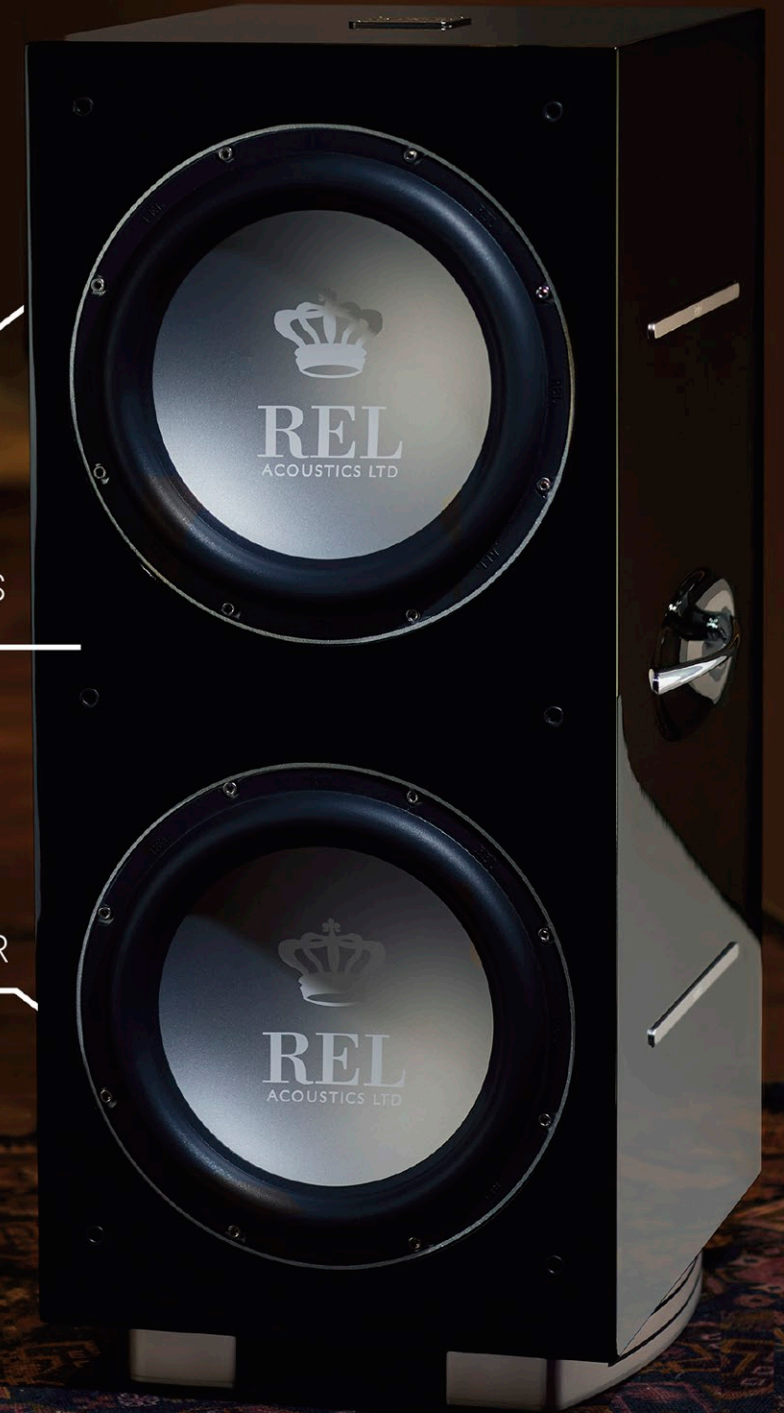
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Next issue, **114:**

Next issue...more mix.

With the gear floodgates opened back up, expect another varied issue, with more contributions from our newer writers. (come on you get tired of Jerold and I anyway, right?)

Stay tuned.

And as always, drop on by our Facebook page and let us know how you are...



TONE