

TONE AUDIO

The Concierge of High-End Audio ®

A Brief History of the Box Set

Bob Gendron reports

The dCS Varese

Sell your LPs and get one...

REVIEWED:

YG Acoustics Vesper 3
Harbeth 40.5 XD
SVS Micro 3000 R | Evolution
Parasound JCM 250 Monos
FYNE Cubitt 5

Keep em' clean!

Audio Desk Systeme Glass vinyl cleaner premium

A $3,500 record clamp? *Have we lost our minds?*

PLAYLISTS *New music, our faves*

Old School *More JBL!*

New Format *more mobile friendly*

And more...

NO.127

SVS SOUND REVOLUTION

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Ultra Evolution Speakers

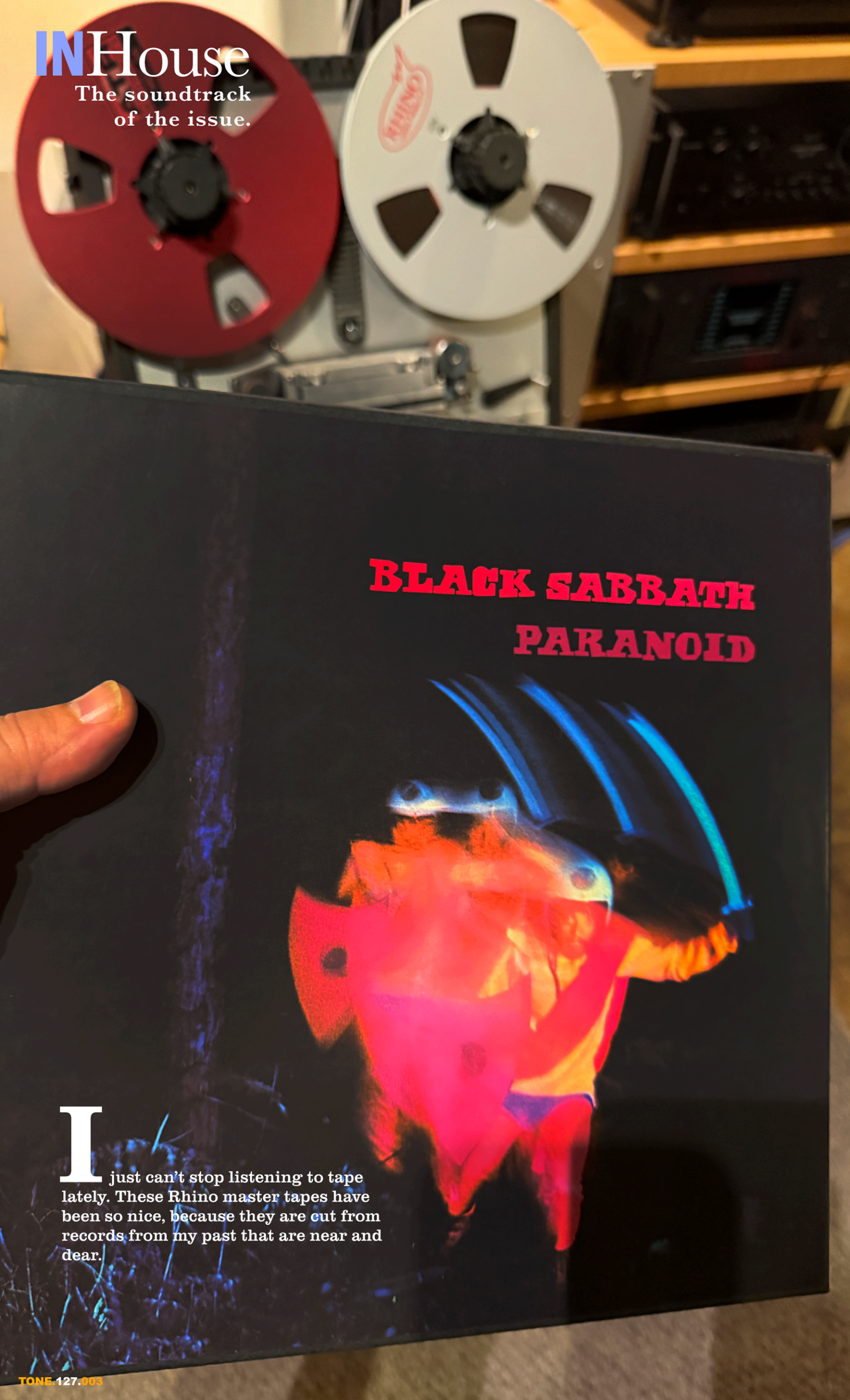
Groundbreaking audio engineering, revolutionary performance that transcends their class.

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INHouse

The soundtrack of the issue.



I just can't stop listening to tape lately. These Rhino master tapes have been so nice, because they are cut from records from my past that are near and dear.



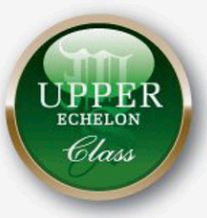
Formula xHD rev. 2











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Review: Andrew Everard
Lab: Paul Miller

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TONE TOC



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Playlists

Our readers, staff, and industry friends **share** what they are listening to with you.



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1095

Jerold O'Brien takes the new **Cubitt 5** from **FYNE Audio** everywhere.

We can't get them back.

Forget the KEF LS-50, there's a new sheriff in town.



03 (and on...)
IN House

Follow us through the issue to see how the soundtrack changes! And, reel to reel yeah.



39
The Audiophile Apartment

Jeff Dorgay proclaims the new 3000 Micro R | Evolution subwoofer from **SVS** to be "The best small sub going."



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Old School...

With so much attention paid to the classic JBL L-100 on the vintage market, (not the current L-100), the L-36 is often overlooked.

Yet if you aren't in the mood to spend up to $1,500 for a pair of L-100s, consider the L36, which uses the same midrange and tweeter from that famous speaker.

Maybe an undiscovered jewel?

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Reviews:

Here's what we've been listening to...

75
The Big Harbeths

The new 40.5 XD from **Harbeth** takes the big Brit sound to the max.



104
SHORT TAKE: Dohmann

We discover the best record clamp going. BAM!



83
YG: The Vesper 3

We've got the first North American review of the new Vesper 3 speakers from **YG Acoustics.**





66
dCS: Living with the 6-box Varese

It's crazy money, but it's crazy good. So crazy, we'd even give up vinyl for one.

6 months of living on the rabid edge of digital playback!

90
Audio Desk Systeme

Get your precious records cleaner than they have ever been.

The BEST RCM we've ever used, and we've used them all.



Columns:

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Current Classics - *sponsored by TMR Audio*

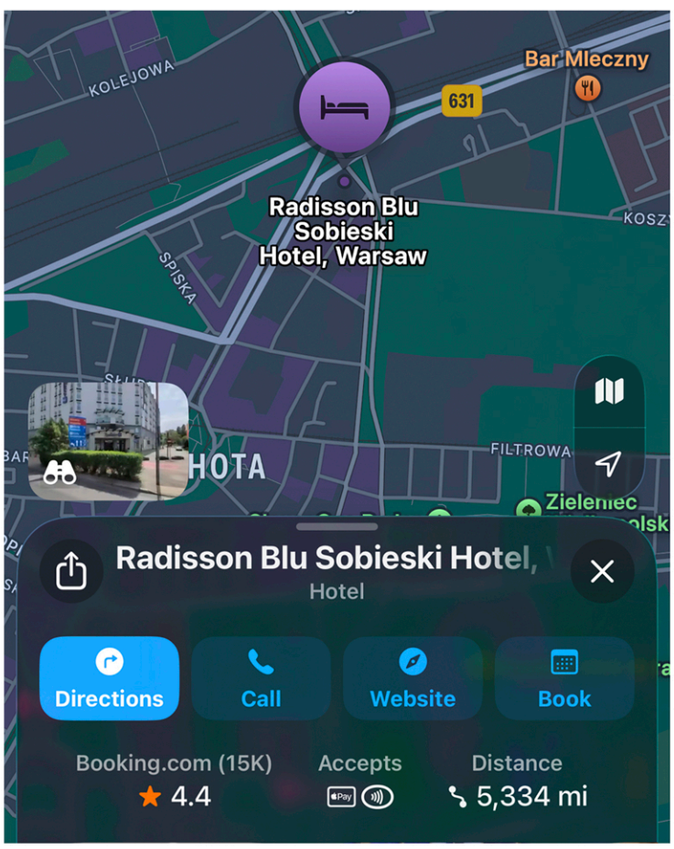
Great hifi alternatives that aren't quite vintage, but a great way to build a system for the more frugal audio enthusiast

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Journeyman Audiophile

Parasound's JCM 250 mnnoblocks are definite overachievers in our book. Pure refinement, no trickery.





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Stereo Stories

A 30 year trek finally comes to an end. And seriously, just down the street.

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The SACD Report
- sponsored by Mobile Fidelity Sound Labs

We share our love for the format with you....

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Tone Visits

We're out and about to San Francisco, Chicago and Warsaw, Poland. Crazy

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Gendron on Music:

Bob Gendron delivers a master thesis on the history of the box set.



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Misc-en-scene

Cover Shot:

This one was easy.

Being that Bob Gendron was the one responsible for getting me into the box set in the first place, this made for a quick and easy shot to take, though my collection pales in comparison to his.

If listening to records and perusing the album info is a true analog pleasure, flipping through all the material in a great box set has to be one of the ultimate pleasures of the format.

Shot with the iPhone 17 Pro Max, ISO 1000 1/40 sec/f1.7, 24mm lens.



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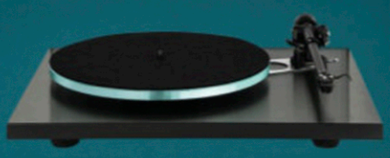
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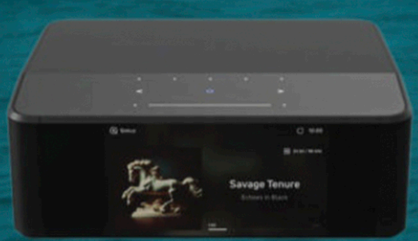
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Publisher's Letter

It's time to pull it out.

In almost 25 years and close to 3,000 reviews, we've maybe used it twice.

You know what I'm talking about, the B-word.

What I brought home from the Warsaw AV Show (along with COVID) was the realization that the current crop of YouTubers, for the most part, lacks experience and insight. Everything they put their hands on is "the best."

To be fair, that may be where they are in their hifi journey. I remember being there about 40 years ago. Every time I made a major component upgrade, my eyes were opened, and my ears were treated to a big jump in how much more music my system could reveal.

But I wasn't writing hifi reviews or trying to help people make purchase decisions. One of the toughest parts of this job is writing a fair, balanced review of a product you're really excited about. If you sound too much like a fanboy, you've failed the manufacturer and the potential buyer because they will both write you off. It's way better to audition the component, write a competent review, and have you drop me a note to say it surpassed your expectations.

"Best" always gets clicks. It always gets controversy. It always sparks arguments. I don't want to argue with you or anyone else. I want you to have the best hifi you can have. See how I got you there?

This time the planets lined up, and we have a few products I really think are the best going.. I'll stand in front of whatever higher power you believe in and defend that. We'll have more on the website shortly as a full list.

So here goes, I'm going to use the hell out of it this issue. Wow, that feels good after all these years. Imagine being on a 25-year-long road trip without peeing. It's like that.

Of course, there's a bunch of the regular stuff too, and Bob Gendron is back with an incredible piece on box sets. And he's the best music writer I know.

Hah.



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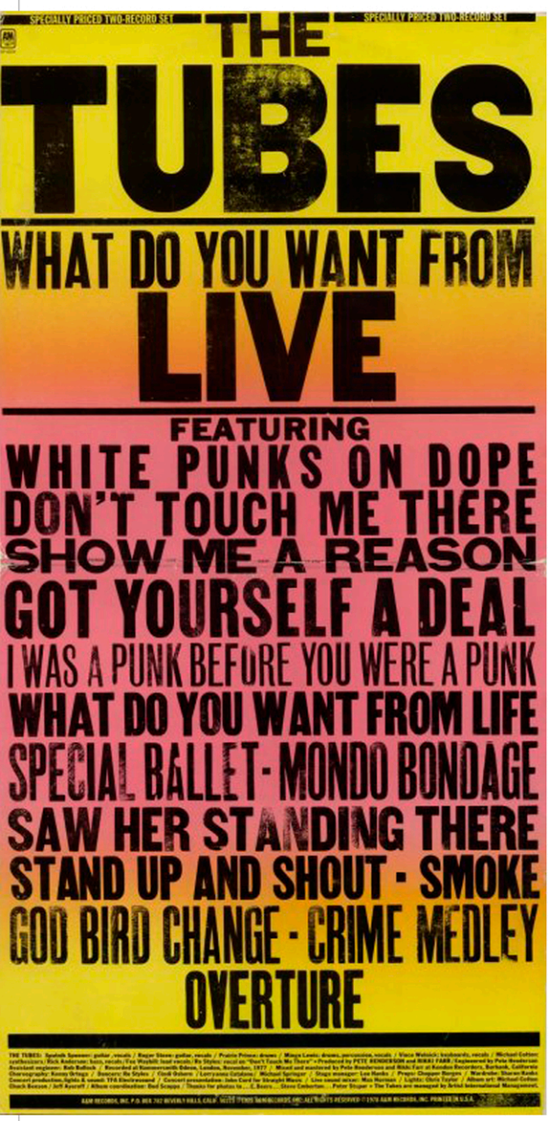


Playlist no. 1

Just recently, I spent an hour with the folks at Audio Vision San Francisco to play some music.

I warned the audience that this listening session would not consist of ANY audiophile tracks, but rather some fun music. Music that you'll never hear at a hifi gathering.

Four guys got up and walked out before I began. But those that stayed had a good time. Two gentlemen walked up to me after and said it was the most fun music they'd ever heard at an audio show. I don't know if I'm that awesome, but you can find the full playlist at Qobuz under AVSF.



Adrian Belew - I'm Down

Cheap Trick - *Day Tripper*

Utopia - *I Just Want to Touch You*

The Tubes - *I Saw Her Standing There*

Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach - *I'll Never Fall in Love Again*

Aimee Mann - *One*

Tom Jones - *Black Betty*

Meshell Ndegeocello - *If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)*

Pretenders - *Private Life*

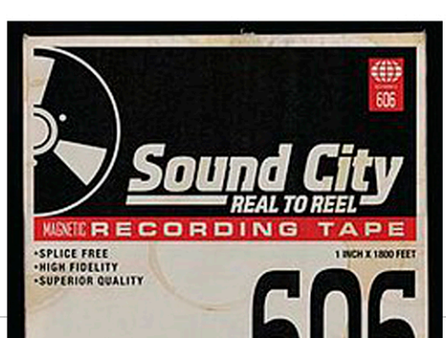
Lou Reed - *Vanishing Act*

Crash Test Dummies - *Superman's Song*

Paul McCartney - *Cut Me Some Slack*

Bee Gees - *How Deep is Your Love*

Graham Parker - *Tough on Clothes*



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Great sound for around a G...

By Jerold O'Brien

Fyne Audio
Cubitt 5 Active Speakers

Move over KEF LS-50!

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Our publisher and I have been on and off the bus since the original Audio Engine speakers. "Who'd want that?" was our initial response about 12 or 15 years ago, when we first saw them at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest.

But technology has improved and what was once a novelty to maybe use with your laptop is now serious hifi as an alternative to a soundbar, and a great entry level system. Better Bluetooth, wireless, and DSP than over a decade ago makes these Cubitt speakers from Fyne a tremendous improvement from what's come before.

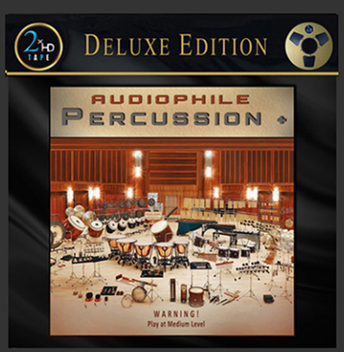
Why Cubitt 5? We're not sure. Perhaps because of the 5-inch driver, maybe because there are five inputs around back.

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HIFICRITIC



I think you'll find it hard not to be grabbed by the intimacy and enthusiasm of this set: It has that rare, but wonderful, 'you are there feel'.

Ricard.Obligatoire 11 févr. 2023

Holy cow, this pressing sounds absolutely fantastic!!! I used to have 80's Swedish reissue and there is no comparison. This mastering is so much more detailed and three dimensional! Both records are dead flat and dead quiet

HiFi音響 review

Jazz at the Pawnshop





Anthony Kershaw
So beautifully done. Dynamic, ultra analogue in timbre and as soon as the vibraphone enters, perfectly imaged, you know you're in for good audiophile (and musical time). Bravo René Laflamme 6/28/2023





1095



What matters is the sound

As Mike Myers used to be fond of saying on Saturday Night Live, "If it's not Scottish it's crap." This group of Scottspeople have created a line of speakers that's definitely not crap. And in a world of crappy $1,000 powered speakers and soundbars, the Cubitt 5s are definitely not crap. Actually they really rock.

While my review pair arrives in a light beige (the olive green is super cool, and would go well with my dark green MG Midget – which is crap) and should integrate well into any décor scheme.

After a quick unboxing, no I didn't upload it to Instagram, so you'll just have to imagine what it was like, taking two small speakers wrapped in white fabric out of a small box with foam end caps, they were placed in my back office, to start the break in process. Fortunately after about 24 hours of non stop playing the Bay City Rollers, I'm ready for serious listening.

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If you've listened to any of the larger FYNE speakers, you know what a fantastic job they've done with their IsoFlare and FyneFlute point source drivers. That's they've been able to harness that much of this voice into a desktop speaker is nothing short of incredible.

The audition begins with Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. A little cliché, but a standard nonetheless. Though this is somewhat audiophile like in nature, the sheer dynamics of Davis' horn is tough to get right, especially with small speakers. The Cubitts sail through,leading me to some heavier material.

Heading straight to Deep Purple's *Made in Japan* shows off the sheer grunt these little speakers are capable of. After circling through a wide range of different material, the Cubitt's strengths are: very accurate mids and incredible imaging. Even when you place them on a bookshelf instead of proper stands. They also work well on a pair of IsoAcoustics desktop stands for computer audio. With 240 watts of system power, they play much louder and bigger than you might expect such a diminutive speaker to be capable of.

Ins and outs

If you're a beginning music lover and audio enthusiast, the Cubitts give you plenty of room to grow. A built in 24/96 DAC, and MM phono input, along with a subwoofer output makes them a great anchor.

Trying them all, a $219 Pro-Ject S2 stream box makes the Cubitts Roon compatible (or you can USB em in from your laptop) and the onboard MM section delivers great results with my zillion year old Technics 1200 mk.II and a Shure V15III. There's even an HDMI input to connect your TV. In a more intimate space, these make a great upgrade from a soundbar for 2.1 listening.

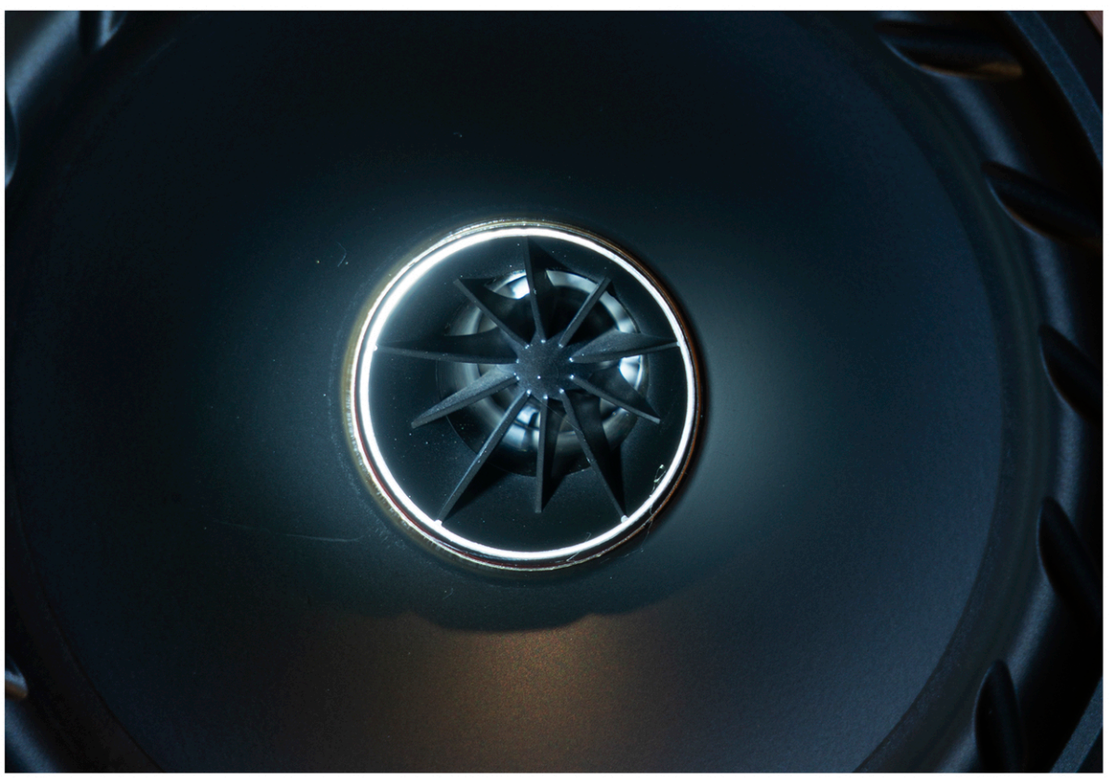
Speaking of 2.1 listening, I borrowed the SVS Micro 3000 R | Evolution sub that was over at TONE HQ (and also in this issue) at just under $1,000 it's an expensive upgrade, but the Cubitts are up to the task. If you're keeping it more on a budget tip, you can usually pick up the last generation of the 3000 used for about $400. Not bad at all, and it gives these speakers the extra weight to really fool you as to their size.

A single power cord to the wall and one proprietary cable going from the main powered speaker to the other passive one. 5 minutes to set up max.

That's that

Here at TONE over the years, we've had the Audio Engine (crap), Vanatoo (not crap), PMC (definitely not crap), Kanto (pretty crappy), KEF LS50s (not crap but way overrated) and a few other small powered speakers in a various state of crappiness. That's why I'm the staff curmudgeon after all.

These FYNE Cubitt 5s are not only not crap (at all) they sound incredible. Those Scotspeople are going to have to wrestle me to get them back. I live out in the woods, I'll see you coming. Highly recommended and our publisher has given me permission to say these are the best compact powered speakers under a thousand bucks going.



TRUMPET MC

“This third incarnation of the Trumpet MC Phono Stage is a musical blockbuster. With an amazing purity combined with near reference definition, the listener will be transported to the event as close as the vinyl allows. It has very good imaging and is better than anything at the price, or even substantially more. Soundstage was huge and deep, enhanced by jet-black spaces between images.”

Bob Levi, Positive Feedback

“The very bottom was solid and punchy, producing kick drums on most records that *rocked* with plenty of texture. If you luxuriate in Technicolor timbral riches and indulge in harmonic glorification and are looking to put some sock into your system, you will love this thing.“

Michael Fremer, Analog Planet



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Why we love the format

Arguably some of the best mastering going.



People often talk about "the first record they bought" out on various internet chats. This was the first LP in my collection, so when Mobile Fidelity brought it out on SACD, of course it was a go.

As you can see, the scratched cover shows a lot of play over the years. And after all this time, it still gets revisited. Sometimes to listen to vintage gear, and others just to remember where the journey has led.

Maybe it's no more than an indication of my generation, but "Frankenstein" always sounds great, turned up slightly louder than prudent.

A quick look at Discogs reveals a selling price of $60-250.

JBL L-36
Speakers

Greatness in the shadow of the L-100.



Listening to Rhino's release of Crosby, Stills, and Nash's debut album on tape, through a vintage Pioneer receiver and the JBL-36s in front of me, is about as close to going back in time as you can get.

When it comes to vintage JBL speakers, I've always been a fan. Back in the mid-70s, JBL's iconic L100 Century was one of the most recognizable speakers on the market. Leveraging the reputation of the 4310/4312, the studio version of this speaker, and the cooler than cool Quadrex foam grille, it was one of the best-selling home speakers going.

You can read about my L-100 adventure here. Though I often think I never should have sold those, they went to a very good friend and the best BMW tech I've ever met, so overall, a big win. He still has them, smartly.

https://www.tonepublications.com/old-school/jbl-l-100-century-loudspeakers/

Of course, as my sensibilities became more audiophile-like, I joined fellow snooty audiophiles, dismissing JBL as "junk but loud." But were they? Much like that other audio legend, the Technics SL-1200, revisiting vintage JBLs reveals strong engineering and a high degree of craftsmanship.

A high point of the L-100 was its accordion-pleated woofer surround, which does not degrade with time like the less expensive foam surround used in the L-26 and L-36 speakers. While the L-100s sold for $273 each for quite some time, the L-36 started at $199 each and eventually hit about $300 each at the end of their model run in 1977. Today a clean pair with replaced or refoamed woofers will set you back $600-$1,000.

Though they did not have the foam grilles, they came with an angular fabric grille in brown, orange, or blue like the L-100s. With quadraphonic sound so popular, it was not uncommon to see L-100s in the front speaker position, with the L-26 or L-36 bringing up the rear channels in a similar color.

The similarities do not end there. Where the L-100 used a 12-inch woofer, the L-36 uses a 10-inch woofer, with both speakers sharing the LE25 tweeter and LE5-2 midrange driver. Should you be lucky enough to have a pair of these, treat them with extreme care as NOS drivers are incredibly expensive and tough to come by. A few companies make replacement tweeters, but we have no experience with these and cannot comment on how different they sound from the originals.

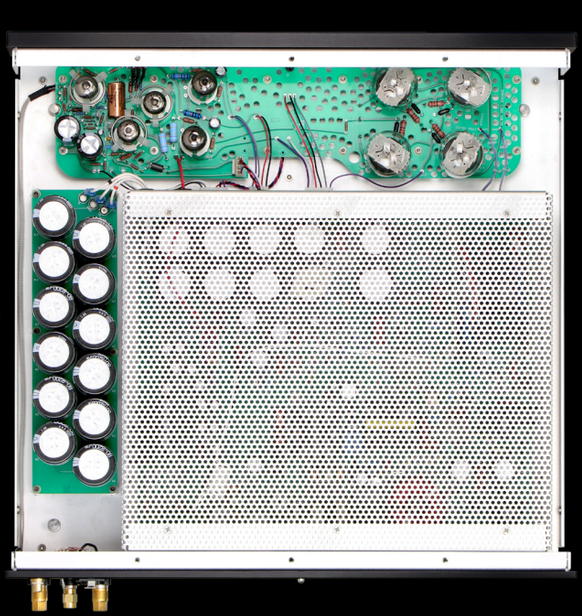
Many L-36s ended up perched on milk crates or produce crates, but if aesthetics were really your bag, you spent the extra $49 on JBL's wooden speaker risers, which angled the speakers up a few inches off the floor. Today, a pair of real ones, with the JBL logo burned into the front face of the stand, can cost $1,000. Crazy. If you want the look, several Etsy vendors make similar stands without the logo for about $150. If you'd like something bigger and more modern, consider the metal stands made by MoFi Distribution for their SourcePoint 10 loudspeakers. $300 here at Music Direct.

https://www.musicdirect.com/furniture/mofi-electronics-sourcepoint-10-low-slung-speaker-stands-pair/

And no, this is not an affiliate program purchase. Just trying to hook you up. However, having given the JBL originals to said friend with the L-100s, these have become my favorite stands.

The Century by LTA





The **Century** monoblock.

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Takoma Park, Maryland

LTA

lineartubeaudio.com

Revisiting these speakers after so many years reveals them being a little tipped on the high end, but well suited to the music of the day. The crossover networks are incredibly simple, really just a couple of capacitors and L-Pads to vary midrange and tweeter level. Even if yours don't possess that vintage, scratchy sound, fresh crossover bits from Parts Express will bring back a lot of transparency. Ha.

We didn't even know that word in 1977. As my tech Austin likes to say, "while you've got the hood up..." replace those 50-plus-year-old capacitors too, and you will be surprised at how much more natural these old speakers sound.

Not as dynamic or quite as extended as your favorite $2,500 pair of new speakers, but an exceptionally good overall tone and texture, makes the L-36 a speaker you can listen to for a long time.

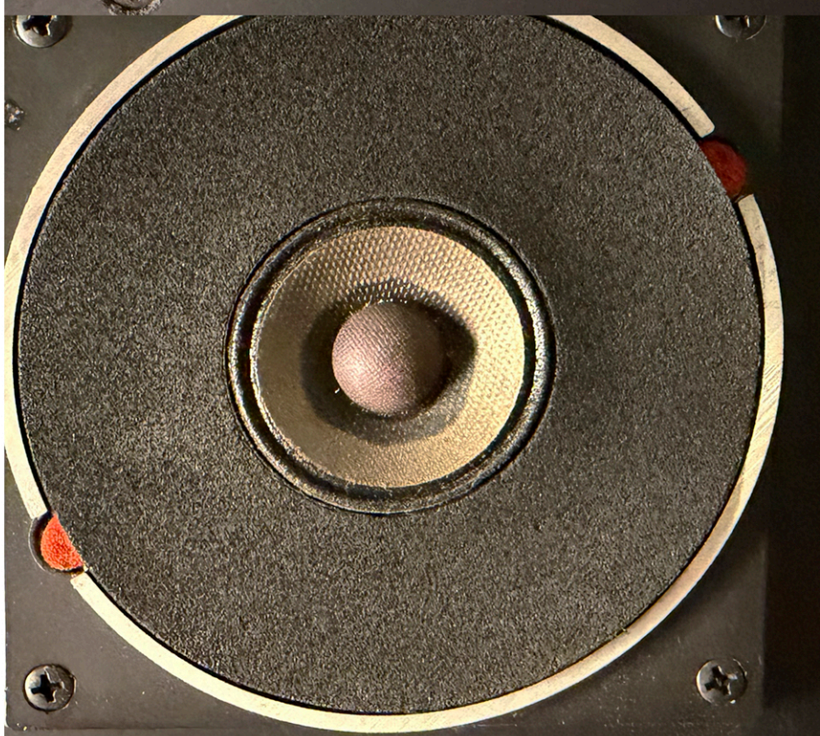
Pairing them with the new L-100 (hmmm.),20-watt-per-channel Class-A integrated from Luxman that's in for review, delivers a level of musicality well beyond what was available when these speakers were new. And worth noting, way better than the 90s Luxman in my garage system.

I'm sure the L-36 is not up to audiophile standards; but they truly are not "junk but loud." I enjoy pulling mine off the shelf a few times a year to revisit some of my favorite rock classics as they sounded in university days.

Their high level of musicality would make a great anchor for a small- to medium-sized vintage listening room. Just be careful with those tweeters.











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Sometimes, the best component is a used one.

Here's this issue's pick...

Having just received the new REF20 preamplifier from Audio Research for review, the thought occurred to go back to their SP3 tube preamplifier to see and hear what has changed and what has stayed the same in fifty plus years.

In consideration, that seemed too far to stretch, so going back to the first ARC REF preamplifier, built originally in 1995 with an MSRP of $8,495 feels right. As someone who has owned the SP-10, SP-11, and the SP-15 preamplifiers, all of which embody ARC's FET/tube hybrid design, this all tube pre is intriguing. With 8 6922s under the cover, premium new stock tubes are not out of reach, and if you want to be crazy, another thousand bucks or so will get you some mint NOS tubes.

This one was on the TMR site for $3,195, in excellent shape, albeit no remote. As one of my good friends from the UK likes to say, "You Yanks need your steps anyway," so this wasn't a deal breaker. I couldn't press the buy it now button fast enough.

Like every other component I've purchased from TMR, this one arrived in no time at all, expertly packaged, and in better physical shape than their photos even suggested. That is one of the things I like best about TMR, they always deal with gear that looks as good as it sounds.

Very robustly built, weighing in at 30 pounds, this is a substantial piece. Mine did not come with an instruction manual, but should you find yourself in the same situation with anything ARC-related, just drop by the Audio Research Database (www.arcdb.ws) and you can usually find what you are looking for, along with specs, original sales literature, and sometimes even a schematic. (yes on the REF1) Closer inspection of the schematic certainly looks like FETs in the signal path, so we'll clarify by the time a full review is done.

Sporting 8 inputs, all with balanced XLRs or RCA, a pair of fixed level tape outputs, and two sets of main outputs, this is a true full-function control center. Considering the new REF20 is almost $50k, this one is a stone-cold bargain at $3,195. How will it stack up sound-wise? You'll have to stay tuned..

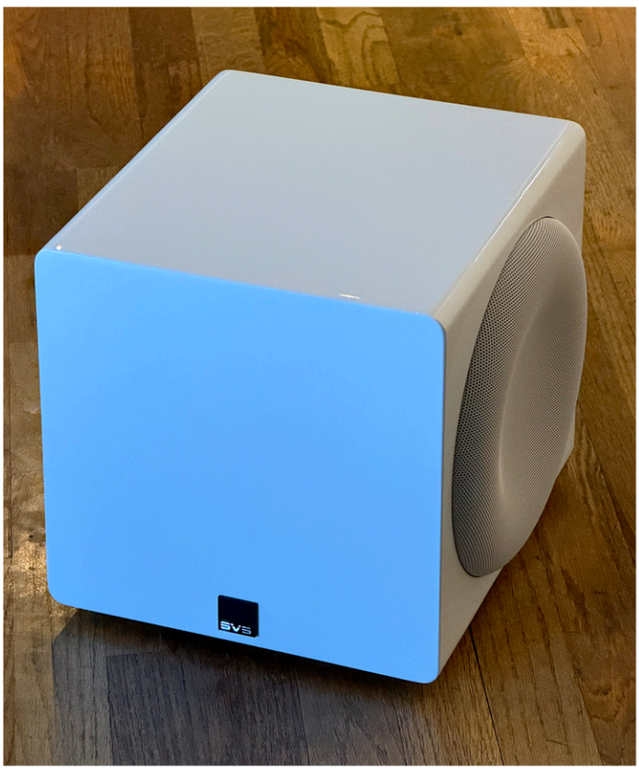
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The SVS 3000 Micro R | Evolution
Subwoofer

Bass when you don't have the space.

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svsound.com



Listening to the deep, growling bass lines in Billie Eilish's *Hit Me Hard And Soft*, you'd think there was a big subwoofer somewhere in my living room. The friends over for dinner were sniffing around, looking for what was bringing up the bottom end with my YG Cairyn monitors to no avail. When I pointed the compact SVS subwoofer out, there was a Bill and Ted "no way" moment for the music lovers on the couch. Yeah, the 3000 Micro R | Evolution is that convincing.

It's easy to get excited about the bone-crushing power of a big subwoofer, or towers of big subwoofers, especially if you are an action/adventure movie fan, or a gamer. Once you've heard a properly integrated subwoofer in your system, it's tough to live without the bass extension and added dimensionality a great sub brings to the recipe. Guilty as charged.

While I use a pair of SB-5000 R | Evolution subwoofers in the Klipshorn system, and they can achieve concert hall sound levels, not everyone has that much room. Granted, SVS makes models in between this and the Micro R, but the former model (The 3000 Micro) is a major favorite, and one that I've suggested to readers and friends over the years, because its 10-inch cube enclosure fits nearly anywhere.



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The performance is out-of-this-world good. I'll save you the trouble of skipping to the end of the review for the conclusion. I think the SVS 3000 Micro R | Evolution is the best small sub going. It's certainly the best small sub I've ever used.

Yet SVS has done the near-impossible task of making the new Micro R | Evolution even better. Comparing them side by side, the new one is quite a bit better. Best of all, the new model is only $100 more and has gained only an inch all around, because it now features a pair of opposing 9-inch drivers where the prior model had a pair of 8s.

You might not think that little bit of extra displacement would be all that much. It's like driving an earlier Porsche 911, when they went from the original 3.4 litre engine to the 3.6. A little bit more horsepower, a bit more torque. On paper it didn't seem like much, but specs don't tell the whole story, and they certainly don't here.

Exceptional as the earlier model is, the new Evolution model comes much closer to feeling like one of the big SVS models. If you have a small-to -medium-sized room, it may be all you need. However, if you can find a spot for a second one, you'll get more extension, more output, and an easier time distributing low frequencies in your room. For now, let's concentrate on a single unit.

Unbox and setup

No one does a better job at packaging, concise instructions, and a killer app than SVS. (And the best customer support going.) The box is small, and the package only weighs 22.5 pounds out of the box – less than a kettlebell. Live it up, play catch with it for a while before you set it up and get your workout for the day. But don't drop it – that finish is smoother than the one on your friend's 911. No kidding. They are available in gloss black or gloss white, but my personal favorite is the white, because it really performs a vanishing act.

The previous model, when used with the app, offers a wide range of adjustments for crossover frequencies, level, and parametric EQ. Subwoofers can be a little tough to set just right, so being able to do it from your listening position with your phone makes the job much easier. You know when it's right when you can't place the sub in the room. However, with the Micro R | Evolution, SVS has taken things much further. Now you can use their SVS AUTO EQ function, with your phone acting as a microphone, to have the internal DSP fine-tune the sub to the room automatically. Those of you with canine hearing may still prefer to do it yourself, but I came away thrilled with how well the SVS app works.





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This isn't as big of a deal when you can put that sub exactly where it needs to go to be acoustically correct in the room, and mate with the main speakers perfectly. Usually, most of us don't have that luxury, and that's where the DSP and the AUTO EQ really comes in handy. You can always test your Jedi abilities by setting it up to the best of your ability, then see how much better things sound when the app takes control. Or you can sit back, relax, push the button, and let things unfold. I chose the latter, and a couple of minutes later I had low-frequency awesomeness. Life is short. Let the app do the work. Before you've even asked DoorDash to include extra sweet and sour sauce with your order, the sub will be perfectly set up.

In my 13 x 18-foot listening room, the Micro R sits slightly off center on the 13-foot wall, and when swapping it for the previous model in my office, it's a slight corner placement (that's the only place I can put it). In the more difficult office environment, the AUTO EQ works major magic, allowing tighter, deeper bass and much better integration with the small Dynaudio monitors I'm using than by manually adjusting the older model. Guess who's going to need a second Micro R? I've already given Dr. Pam the hint. Christmas is coming, and it's my birthday. I deserve another sub. Stay tuned to our IG channel to see if she gets the hint.



The Micro R can be set up with stereo, line-level outputs from your receiver, via a single LFE if you're running more of a theater system, or wirelessly using the SVS SoundPass Wireless adapter. I highly suggest going this route; it's the best $179 you'll ever spend on your system. SVS claims it works up to 65 feet, but in my small house I have no way of verifying that. A pair of mediocre interconnects will run more than $179, and it's less clutter. Perhaps even less pushback if you share your space with someone who is cable adverse. Everyone wins.

Speaker compatibility

During the review period, I managed to try the Micro R with several different speakers, mostly smaller monitors from YG, Dynaudio, and Harbeth. Nothing presented an issue, and I achieved perfect integration. Just for fun, Taking the Micro R out to the garage system, where a pair of SVS Ultra Evolution Towers anchor the system,is a killer combination, If you have a pair of these or the Ultra Evolution Bookshelves, you might want to add this sub to your list as your next upgrade. The Micro R really rounds out the package nicely.

The fun didn't stop there. Mating the Micro R up to the small Shakuto horns now part of the reference arsenal, proves fantastic. Because of their 96dB sensitivity, the Micro R adds much-needed low bass, yet is never taxed. The speed of the 9-inch drivers is a perfect match.

Finally, putting the Micro R in a system with the Magnepan 1.7s also delivers excellent results, and not every sub out there can keep up with a pair of panels. Again, the speed of the smaller drivers seals the deal here. This was the one speaker that required manually tweaking the settings; as the app was delivering a tiny bit too much mid-bass to be a seamless fit.15 minutes of fine-tuning, problem solved. So for the Maggie owners out there with the three smallest models, this little sub will give you a completely new world. Highly recommended for this application.

More listening

I could go on and on for days, giving you this track or that track, but it's probably all music you don't know or don't like. Right?

What's important is the way the 3000 Micro R | Evolution delivers bass that is tight, tuneful, powerful, and articulate. Find your favorite tracks, whether they feature acoustic bass, electric bass, synth bass, or just cannon shots.

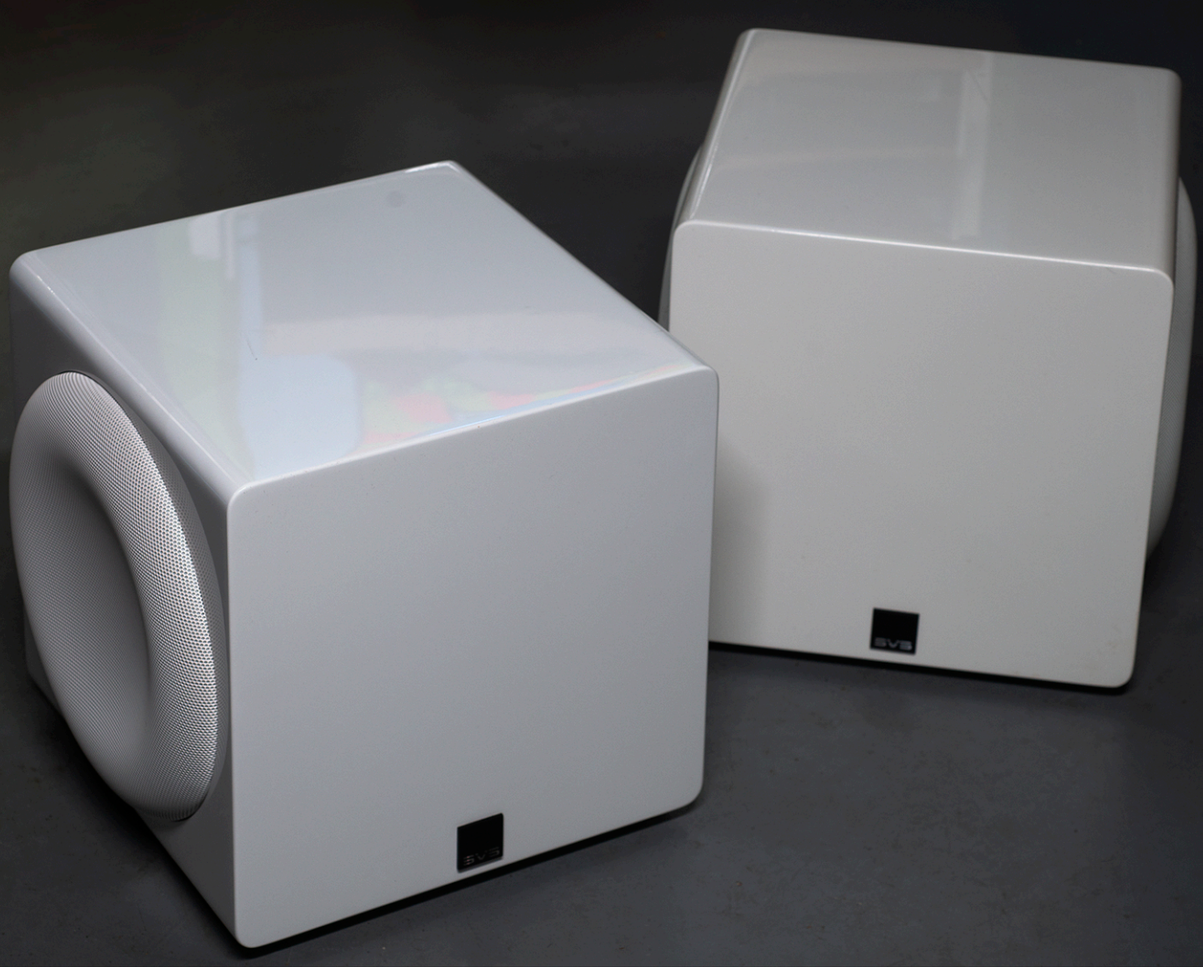
If you want to fine-tune the auto settings a bit, I suggest some male vocals. A husky voice like Johnny Cash or Tom Waits hits both the upper bass and lower midrange in a way that tests the transition between your main speakers and the sub. Again, when it's perfect, you won't be able to place your subwoofer in the room. A track I use often is Lou Reed's "Vanishing Act." Reed's solo vocal, along with piano, is excellent at achieving great subwoofer blend, and the piano is so well recorded it might even help you touch up your mains a bit.

As with the original, I am never less than amazed at what the SVS team has accomplished with this compact, powerful sub. While we don't do measurements per se, running some test tones down to 25 Hz confirms that the Micro R has solid output in the 25-30 Hz region. These new 9-inch drivers have incredible excursion. No matter how loud I was playing the main system, even with a steady diet of electronica and hip-hop, the Micro R does not bottom out. Even when playing music at party levels.

When all is said and done, the most exciting aspect of the Micro R is how tonally accurate it is. Yes, I'm getting a little audiophile-y on you here, but after a few days of listening to a diet of jazz and exploring a lot of standards that feature acoustic bass, this small sub still delivers the goods. I think even the fussiest audiophile will have a great time with this one. Thanks to the EQ, if you only listen to electronica, hip hop, and heavy rock, you can tweak the settings a bit to your taste and make this small but mighty sub feel even bigger. I won't call you a bad Smurf.

So you might be asking, "Why do I even need bigger subs?" It's all about moving air. If you have bigger speakers, a bigger room, and listen really, really loud, you'll want to move up the range. SVS can certainly help you there.

In a small- to medium-sized room, though, one or two 3000 Micro R | Evolution subs are tough to beat. At just under $1,000 each (and you get a 5% discount when you order a pair), I submit they are the best choice. I certainly love mine. Get em on your holiday gift list now, even if you must buy them yourself. Ha.



Parasound JCM 250
Monoblock Power Amplifiers

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You gotta crank it up when you have high-powered solid-state monos, so our listening starts with Soundgarden's *Larger than Love* through Chris' Focal Scala Utopia EVOs with a pair of REL Carbon Special subs. There's a big, beefy, powerful sound that begs you to keep turning it up. While for some, the absolute sound is faithfully capturing the nuance of a string quartet, for some, it's the majestic force of a band like Soundgarden hitting as hard as they can. And we both saw them back in the day.

We start with the Mola Mola Perca, the amplifier that has been Chris' reference for some time before swapping the Parasounds in. Immediately, there's a larger soundfield and broader, more focused image painted by the big Focals with the JCM250s. Chris confirms I'm hearing the same changes in his system with the Parasounds in place. Bias admitted, we have both owned our share of Parasound products and are enthusiastic about the brand. The company has always delivered high performance and reliability at a much more approachable price than a lot of other brands. For at least the last decade, while understated, Parasound's aesthetic is commensurate with its performance. Their components look great sitting on your rack.



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SOUL NOTE



With or without the RELs in the system, the Parasound monos deliver incredible sound. I'm excited by how much of the sonic signature of the big JC1+ monos that were a reference here for a few years. Slightly less warm than the Pass class-A amps, but more resolving and neutral than the big PS Audio monos, and several Simaudio Moon amps we've used and reviewed.

If you were sitting behind a screen and didn't know what amp you were listening to, I suspect you'd mistake these amplifiers for something more expensive. Considerably more.About an hour in, I knew these were going to be an Exceptional Value Award winner.

While not as massive in presentation as the flagship JC1+ monos, the JCM 250s are slimmer in footprint and in price. For many, especially depending on your room and rack size, this will probably be a good thing.

After living with the JC1+ monos for some time, I'm amazed at how much of the sheersound quality Parasound has been able to pack into these amplifiers.

Unboxing and setup

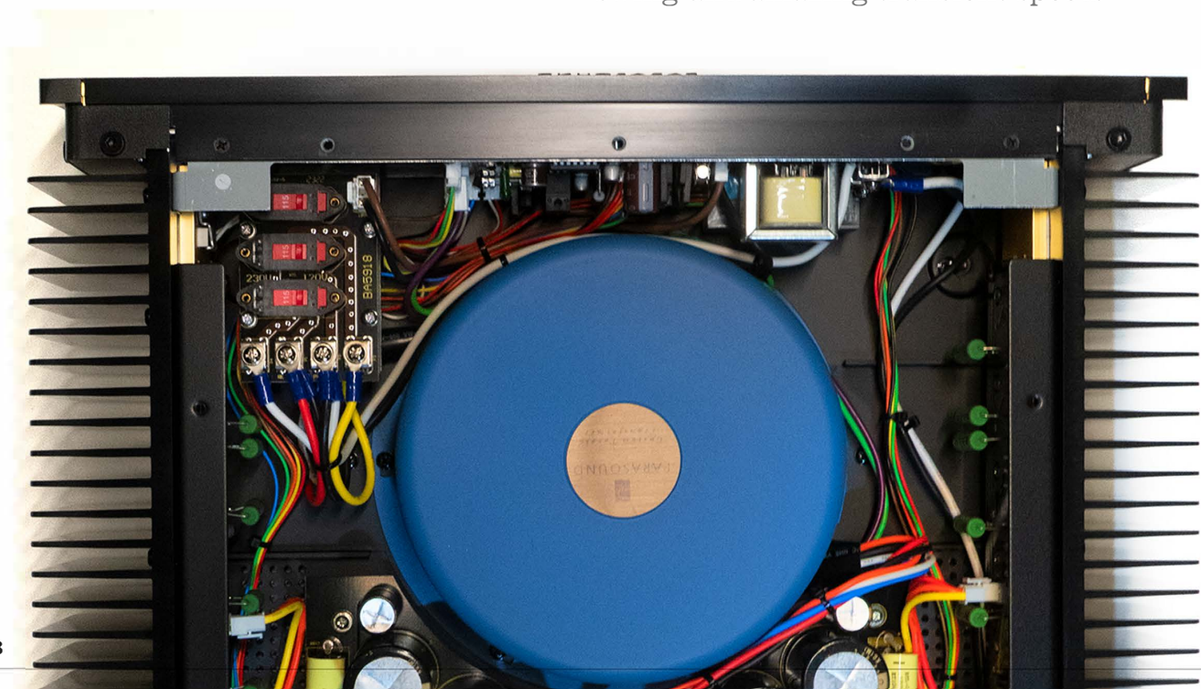
At 42 pounds each, setup should be easy with one person. The JCM250s utilize a 15-amp standard AC power socket, so should you feel the urge to upgrade the power cords, you won't need re-terminate anything.

The rear panel is straightforward, with a set of balanced XLR inputs and a pair of RCA inputs that are switch selectable. This John Curl design is not fully balanced, but does have a complimentary differential input stage. There are also switches for low or normal gain. Low gain delivers the first 4 watts in class-A mode and normal gain mode delivers the first 8 watts in Class A. Some of you with very sensitive speakers may never get out of class-A! The rear panel (23dB/29dB) switch helps to maximize the effective range of the volume control on your preamplifier.

You can click here to visit the Parasound site for all the fine details and tech bits:

https://parasound.com/products/jcm250

However, an overview of the specs reveals 16 beta-matched output bipolar output transistors, driven by JFETs in the input stage and MOSFETs in the driver stage. The input, driver, and output stages all have their own power supplies, and everything in the circuit contributes to massive dynamic swing and amazing transient speed.





In addition to the, huge power supply, the combination of careful circuit layout, matched parts, and Bybee Music Rails™ active noise filters all add up to the best of legendary designer John Curl's work on display. And these babies are quiet. When it comes to dynamics, the quieter things are, the louder your music sounds.

A panel lover's dream come true

What you really need to know is that this 250-watt-per-channel amplifier (8 ohms) nearly doubles down in power to 4, and produces 800 watts into 2 ohms. Parasound claims it can drive 1 ohm without problems. Where was this back in the day when I had Apogees? Speaking of Apogees, hooking the JCM 250s up to my Clarisys Auditorium Plus ribbons, which are much easier to drive than my Apogees were back in the 90s and it is an absolutely lovely match-up.

Ditto for the Magnepans and vintage Acoustat 2+2 ESLs. Honestly, everything we hooked them up to, and as mentioned at the beginning of this review, the JCM 250s deliver fantastic system synergy with Chris's Focals and his ARC LS-28 preamplifier.

Great with everything, actually.

Back when the JCM's were here, I made it a point to match them up with the new Emir's from ØAudio, the Jade 30s from Pylon Audio, and a pair of Piegas. With this much power on tap, the JCM 250s high damping factor, and enormous power in reserve, they deliver a dynamic presentation. There's something great about a high-powered solid-state amplifier that delivers detailed, controlled bass response.

Yet these amplifiers have a resolving, smooth, and very neutral midrange, and a mid-to-top-end transition. Over and over, the feeling is that these amplifiers sound much more expensive than their price tag suggests.

Tracking through local Portland act The Cosmic Tones Research Trio really shows this off with their light interplay of sax, piano, and violin, playing right to the strength of these amplifiers—acoustic instruments float, as they should. Bias admitted, I'm more of a fan of these amplifiers than I am of any Class – D product.



The individual chassis make for incredible channel separation and lifelike imaging in all three dimensions. As we always jokingly call dynamics the fourth dimension, they succeed brilliantly here too. The Parasound steals the show with a few drum and percussion tracks from Mickey Hart and his *At The Edge* disc. "The Eliminators" is always the go-to track with this disc, but the more densely packed, quieter tracks are equally enticing. Turning it up a notch with *Paul's Boutique* from the Beastie Boys reveals how well these monoblocks can unravel dense mixes. This is an album that you might put your audiophile thumb down at until you hear it on a great system. There is a ton of information going on here, and if your system isn't capable of this level of resolution, it feels more like a big ball of sound. The Parasounds make this the masterpiece that it is. The bass is anchored down tight, the scratches have their own defined space, and you can hear all three of the Beastie Boys distinctly. Takes you right back.

Splitting hairs

The big choice is to go for the more powerful JC5 stereo amp for $7,000 or the pair of JCM 250s for $8,500? Chris owned the JC5 stereo amplifier for some time and feels that the monos offer more refinement and a larger stereo image, where the JC5 has a bit more ultimate power. The JC5 delivers 400 watts per channel into 8 ohms and 600 x 2 into 4 ohms. It will all come down to how much power your speakers crave, how their impedance curve is, and how loud you listen on a continuous basis. Our combined experience with Parasound amplifiers says neither is a bad choice.

In the end, an award winner

We conclude the listening session at Chris' place with Primus' "My Name is Mud." Not going to hear this at Axpona, that's for sure. Those killer, rapid-fire, plucky bass riffs nail me to the couch. The sheer speed that this amplifier serves up is impressive. Should you be a bit of a bass head, you might discover a whole new aspect to some of your favorite tracks.

I'm happy to award the Parasound JCM 250 monos one of our Exceptional Value Awards.Not only do they steal the show in terms of delivering an organic, believable presentation – one that makes it easier to relax, disengage and enjoy the music, they deliver a lot of the best parts of Parasound's flagship amplifiers.

If you don't need the boundless power of their JC1+ monos or want to deal with the 100wpc of pure class-A power that the JCA100 Tribute Monoblocks provide, you'll be very comfortable with the JCM 250s. A note to the upgrade-hungry audiophiles: in the context of a $30k-$100k system, these are going to be the last thing you'll ever want to replace. For all but the fussiest six-figure system audiophiles, you can probably use these as a system anchor forever.

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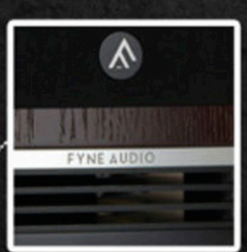
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Late Night Garage Playlist
-Jeff Dorgay

We've passed fall and are moving hard core into winter, here in the Pacific Northwest.

This is discouraging a lot of normal car duties, other than vacuuming the leaves out of everything, So garage listening is a bit more intense than normal. Gotta keep that blood flowing.

Ah, forget that, Just play a couple of your favorite Van Halen albums start to finish! But do it in a random order to mix it up. Bonus points for Japanese pressings, and hey, how about that clean garage floor!

More next issue!



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By Jeff Dorgay

Twice as good:

Checking out what's in the closet before you go.

It started with me looking for a low-powered Japanese receiver to go with my Klipshorns.

While most eBay sellers want crazy money for their treasures, and a few online sellers do too, Facebook Marketplace still seems to have a few good deals lurking about.

The woman selling what appeared to be a mint Pioneer SX-535 led to an hour-long road trip out of town, but so much more. Chris agreed to be co-pilot, and with some drive-through fast food, we were off to the middle of nowhere. Driving up into a pleasant valley, Sunday kind of neighborhood, her husband was in the garage, with the receiver playing.

Check and double-check; it was super clean. This was a steal for $300.

"Do you want to see the Sansui I've got in the closet that's even cleaner than this one?"

Secretly, I was hoping it would be a 771 to replace the one I lent to a friend years ago that decided to claim squatters' rights. This was something much more special and much rarer. A Sansui 800, from about 1968, looking like brand new: the 800 was produced from 1968 to 1971.

The 800 was rated at 22 watts per channel, featuring a great FM section along with MM phono. All the lights worked perfectly. A quick Google search reveals these are trading regularly for $600-$900. My butt puckers. "Seeing you're taking the Pioneer, I'll let you have it for another $350."

Oh yeah.

On the way home, I send a pic and a text to Kevin Deal at Upscale Audio, who I know is a major vintage collector. "Dude, where did you get *that*?" I knew I'd scored.

Connecting it to the Khorns, I'm back in high school again. And on one level, isn't that a big part of what this vintage audio journey is about – bringing back good memories?



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COVERStory

By Bob Gendron

The Box Set is Having A Moment...

A brief history and evolution of a superb collectible.

It's the ultimate accessible representation of fervent devotion to an artist or album. An anomaly whose tangibility, physicality, permanence, and comprehensiveness rebuke our increasingly ephemeral and artificial cultural landscapes.

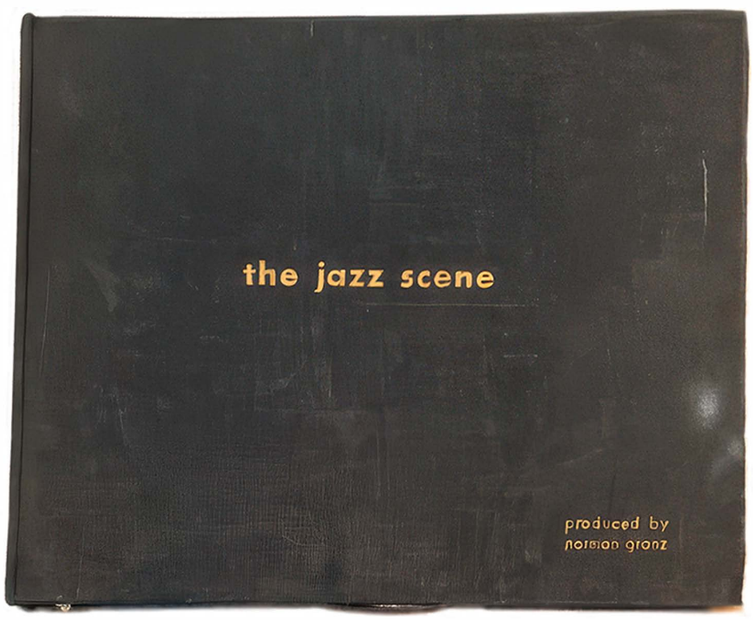
In an era in which attention spans keep growing shorter, music often gets consumed via video via palm-sized screens, and reading for pleasure amid all ages continues to decline, the box set is experiencing a golden age. Temples to music, history, and the artists, places, and personnel that help capture it, as well as the illustrators, photographers, and creatives that render striking visual treatments, the best box sets demand and reward considerable investment.



They offer prime opportunities for discovery, exploration, immersion, and connection. They double as the analog of an encyclopedic book, investigative documentary, thrilling concert, and cherished memory combined. They are lavish objects of art, imagination, and scholarship. They proclaim that music deserves an elevated perch and preservation. They function as testaments to fandom and reflections of our personalities.

More than three-quarters of a century after they first appeared as packages of multiple 78 and 45RPM recordings — in "album" bundles complete with bindings and, in certain cases, special touches such as lock-and-key access — box sets have in many instances reached levels of sophistication, exhaustiveness, indulgence, and cost that no label or fan could've imagined 20 years ago let alone amid the post-WWII era in which they greatly informed the development of the album itself.

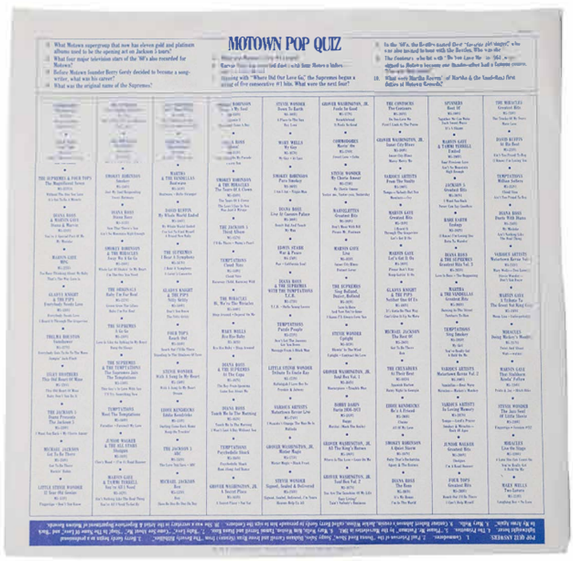
From their construction to contents, modern box sets share little in common with the titles issued before the format took on new life in the mid- and late 1980s. While select instances of spoken-word and "music appreciation" sets created for soldiers, libraries, and schools existed as early as the late 1910s, the release that veritably invented the amenities and aesthetics that became associated with box sets arrived in late 1949 with Verve Records' 6LP 78RPM collection *The Jazz Scene*.



Archivist and author Tad Hershorn described its singularity upon its entry into the Library of Congress' National Registry in 2007: "The albums prefigured deluxe box sets of today in that the packaging itself was a work of art. The records came in sleeves enclosed in a black cloth notebook with the title displayed in simple gold-leaf lettering at the center and with [Norman] Granz's name in the lower right corner." A commissioned illustration, portfolio of 32 photographs, detailed notes, and hard 5,000-limit cap — along with a staggering $25 price tag (approximately $345 today) — telescoped its extravagance, magnitude, and desirability.

In subsequent decades, Decca, RCA Victor, and other imprints released sets that encompassed opera, jazz, classical, comedy, easy listening, and spoken word. Verve Records upped the ante again in 1959 with *Ella Fitzgerald's Sings the George and Ira Gershwin Songbooks*, a 5LP + seven-inch bundle with framable lithographs and a hardcover book. Nothing of the age trumped its prestige.

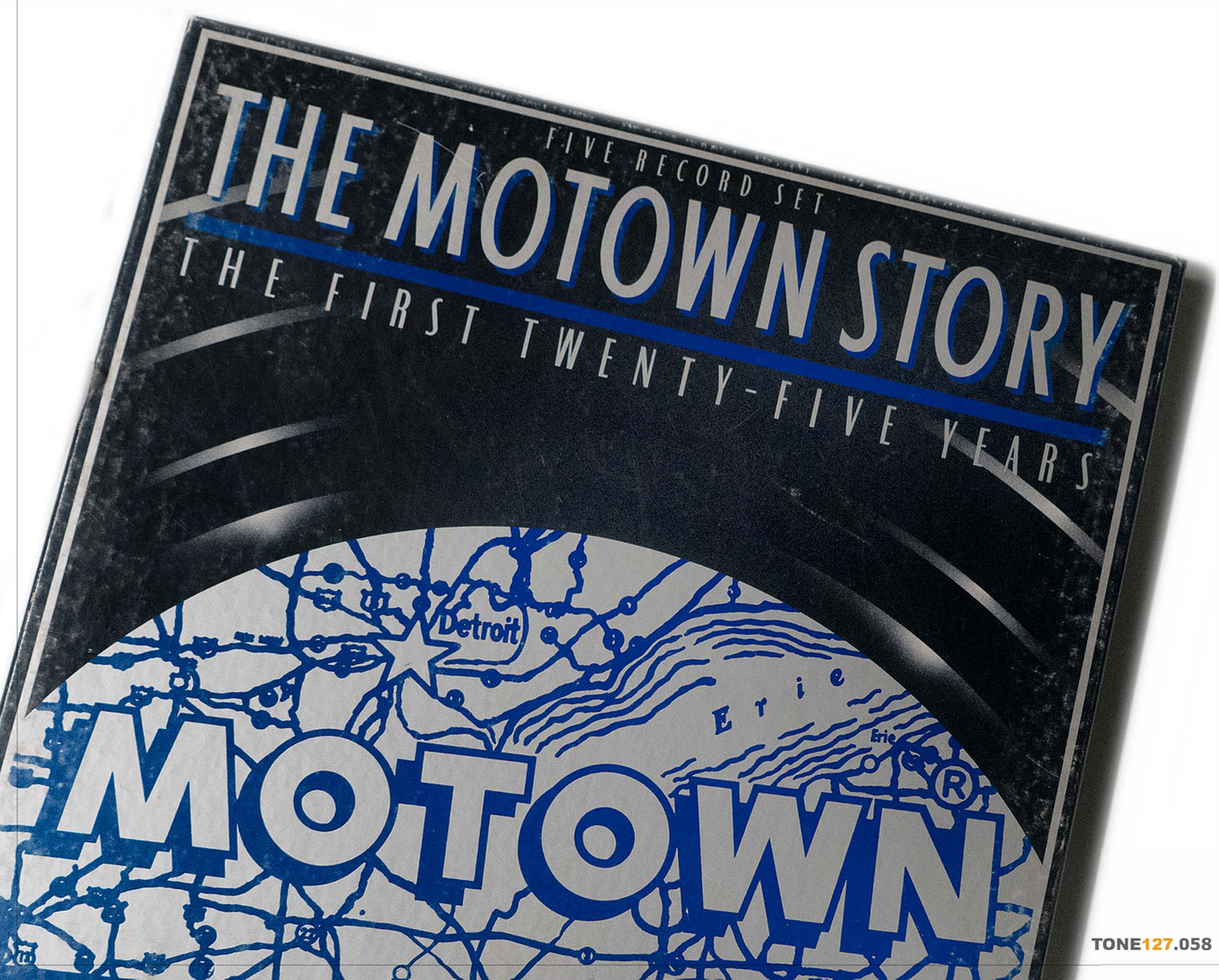
Older listeners and crate diggers might recall the multitude of collections assembled by Reader's Digest, which usually badged its no-frills sets with titles that referenced universality, popularity, and "greatest" merit. In the early 1970s, Time-Life adopted that concept with mail-order classical, jazz, and pop staples.





The1970s also witnessed a smattering of "proto" box sets that helped ideate packaging and contents that would be customary by the early 1990s. Leaning toward recent rock and pop, such titles included: The Beatles' *Let It Be* (1970), *The Motown Story: The First Decade* (1970), *The Concert for Bangladesh* (1971), *Fillmore: The Last Days* (1972), *Electric Muse: The Story of Folk into Rock* (1975), Mike Oldfield's *Boxed* (1976), Soft Machine's *Triple Echo* (1977), the Beatles' *The Beatles Collection* (1978), and Buddy Holly's *The Complete Buddy Holly* (1979).

Though not in box form, Neil Young's *Decade* bowed in 1977 as one of the firstsubstantial collections from a high-profile, major-label, active artist to feature rarities, a catalog overview, and annotated commentary. Also slightly ahead of the curve: Elvis Presley's *Elvis Aron Presley* (1980), an 8LP compendium that cracked the Top 30 and boasted an embossed slipcase and 12 x 12-inch booklet. Miles Davis' 12LP *Chronicle: The Complete Prestige Recordings* (1980) went even further with a 64-page book with observations from jazz historian Dan Morgenstern.



The early 1980s also saw various Beatles sets capitalize on the band's followers' staunch dedication. Two renowned specialty labels, Bear Family Records, which issued its first box set in 1981 but concentrated on single and double LPs or discs during most of the decade, and Mosaic Records, which launched its *Complete* series in 1983, targeted niche markets. Yet independent of the label or artist, the grand majority of box sets issued before 1980 basically repackaged existing albums or EPs — a trap into which the industry would repeatedly fall.

The box set as most music lovers presently know it didn't emerge until the middle of the Reagan Era at a time when vinyl and cassettes still dominated sales. Ironically, the mainstream embrace of the CD — in concert with the founding and efforts of major-label specialty imprints such as Legacy Recordings and Rhino Records — would push box sets from beyond the limited realm of the hard-core connoisseur and onto the radar of casual fans. Released just before the crucial holiday sales season in 1985, Bob Dylan's *Biograph* established new standards that forced the industry to take notice.

Though it contains an assortment of familiar tunes and deep cuts available elsewhere, *Biograph* made its biggest impression by way of previously unreleased material (accounting for a third of the set) and 36-page, full-size booklet with liner notes, rare photos, and more. The Top 40 success confirmed a sizable market for rarities and odds-and-ends existed, and that people would pay more than the cost of two or three typical albums for it. That wasn't news to aficionados who scoured shelves for bootlegs or consulted *Hot Wacks* volumes as reference guides. But for the likes of Sony, Warner Bros., retailers, and others, *Biograph* signaled an inflection point.

If Dylan's first archival set served as a jagged stone that punctured a hole in the floodgates, Bruce Springsteen's *Live/1975-85* trove was the hundred-year storm that ripped them from their moorings. Having obliterated the record for advance orders upon its release, the 216-minute-plus opus featured nothing but previously unheard fare and a thick booklet. Fans waited in blocks-long lines in anticipation of its midnight release on November 10, 1986. Critical acclaim further juiced sales.

Redefined as collections that didn't simply collect and replicate existing albums, or present an opera or overview of singles, but which dug into artists' vaults and surveyed their careers in thoughtful fashion, the box set had arrived. Just in time for the compact disc's ascendency.



Eric Clapton's *Crossroads* (1988), Jethro Tull's *20 Years of Jethro Tull* (1988), David Bowie's *Sound & Vision* (1989), Cecil Taylor's *In Berlin '88* (1989), the Rolling Stones' *Singles Collection: The London Years* (1989), the Allman Brothers Band's *Dreams* (1989), and *The Chess Box* (1989) series that highlights the separate output of Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and Howlin' Wolf succeeded the Springsteen package. All are well-curated, wonderfully annotated packages that solidified the approaches for the coming deluge of box sets.

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Though the dawn if the 1990s saw more worthwhile deep-dive overviews — Elton John's *To Be Continued*, Charlie Parker's *Bird: The Complete Charlie Parker on Verve*, Robert Johnson's *The Complete Recordings*, Jack Kerouac's *The Jack Kerouac Collection*, and the self-titled *The Byrds* included — the musical and literary benchmarks these and the other aforementioned titles established would soon be subject predictable downfalls: blatant greed, thoughtless design, terrible sound, total overkill. Coincidentally, the declines in quality and consistency coincided with the near-disappearance of the LP and questionable mastering.



Not that there's a dearth of incredible CD box sets. To the contrary, 100s of such collections — some which are getting pressed on vinyl for the first time — function as a bridge between box sets' initial heyday and the panoramic collections that hit shelves over roughly the past decade. The legendary band largely responsible for the spoils?

The Grateful Dead.

The San Francisco-based ensemble's role in both the presentation and mainstreaming of live archival fare, which began with its initial *One from the Vault* (1991) and first *Dick's Picks* volume (1993), is well-known. Less recognized? The group's coveted stream of deluxe, numbered box sets. As of March 2026, they total 19 releases and encompass more than 440 CDs, spanning *Fillmore West 1969: The Complete Recordings* (2005) to the colossal *Enjoying the Ride* (2025).

Each of those collectibles features unreleased music, distinct packaging, good-to-stellar sonics, period-appropriate images, and copious documentation that explains their significance. No artist has neared what the Grateful Dead has achieved in collaboration with Rhino Records. No matter. The point is that a model developed that recalibrated what a box set should offer.

Concurrent with the analog renaissance and the willingness of diehards to pay hundreds of dollars for thoughtfully devised sets, that blueprint also inspired other labels, artists, and estates to imagine what they could produce.

Regrettably, there's still an overabundance of box sets that blandly repackage non-remastered studio albums or reassemble prior releases under different names. Just as commonplace: Sets that double as dust-collecting doorstops due to their containing a massive dump of C- and D-list material that no one will want to hear more than once (if at all). Some disappoint with nothing else than scant leftovers or atrociously recorded "newly discovered" selections hyped as essential. Another chronic shortcoming: The lack of critical expertise, research, and perspective in essays that don't dare to do more than rehash basic histories or spout hyperbole. And too many sets forgo any narrative or context whatsoever; kudos to DownBeat magazine for calling out a recent Roberta Flack compendium for that omission.



Foibles aside,fans of everyone from household names to cult heroes have seldom had it better. You just need to know what to look for (and avoid). These criteria remain yardsticks for any box set worth a slot on the shelf: credible and verifiable mastering; pressing from a top-tier vinyl plant; hardbound books or robust booklets. Other attributes such as previously unheard music, rarities, or exclusives; lavish packaging; keepsakes; fold-out posters or replica programs; bonus cassettes or Blu-ray discs; insightful liner notes or essays; and strictly numbered production should also be given priority.

(For the purposes of this article, audiophile-centered sets primarily focused on providing a sonically definitive version of an album, like Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab's UltraDisc One-Step reissues — a concept/series that's been aped by at least four other imprints and whose packaging has been slavishly mimicked by half of those labels — warrant a separate conversation. Nonetheless, they, too, serve as evidence of the box set's nouvelle belle epoque.)

One of the most significant shifts with many of the finer contemporary box sets relates to the transition from celebrated anthologies that spotlight tracks across an artist's partial or entire career (i.e., Dylan's *Biograph* and Presley's *The King of Rock 'N' Roll: The Complete '50s Masters*) and toward hyper-concentrated sets that zero in on a particular album or sequence of LPs from a specific period.

The changes parallel the proliferation of vinyl and decline of the CD — the reverse of what occurred in the late 1980s when the silver-disc phenomenon expanded the visibility and saturation of box sets. Some of the early album-centric box sets include both formats. The "Collector's Edition" versions of Pearl Jam's *Ten* and *Vs./Vitalogy*, and the "Deluxe Edition" versions of the Led Zeppelin standalone album reissues, adhere to that tact.

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Box sets continue to evolve.

Though it comes at the expense of widespread adoption, the bend toward specialized focus and premium quality results in superior experiences (and, yes, steep costs). Troves from heavies like the Beatles, Rush, Kiss, Prince, Metallica, Pink Floyd, U2, Guns N' Roses, Wilco, Deep Purple, Joni Mitchell, Black Sabbath, Velvet Underground, David Bowie, Nirvana,Smashing Pumpkins, Talking Heads, Keith Richards, Genesis, Frank Zappa, Motorhead, Rolling Stones, Black Crowes, Tom Petty, Slayer, and Neil Young - plus delightful treasures from independent-leaning acts such as Drive-By Truckers, Tragically Hip, Jason Isbell, Liz Phair, Pavement, Superchunk, Dianogah, and Quicksand – hint at the possibilities to come.

Just make sure you've got room on your shelf.



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Review
By Jeff Dorgay

dCS Varèse
Digital Playback System

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What would you play first if you had the dCS Varèse plugged into your system? It had to be Chicago's "Hit by Varese," from *Chicago V*. Sorry, no flute music here. Why use a track that many audiophiles would consider off the path? The explosiveness of the horns on a cut I've been listening to for decades, honestly, tells me everything I need to know instantly. This was going to be a wild ride indeed. Four months later, the Varèse is still as exciting to listen to as it was the first 15 seconds it was on. Precious few things deliver that much excitement.

With anything. It's often easy to assimilate even quantum leaps in performance quickly making them the new normal, forgetting what came before.

Not this time.

Shiny discs remain a viable means to listen to music here; the transport option for the Varèse is a welcome addition. Of course, you could get the optional interface board (which our review sample has) and use a lower-capacity transport mechanism if you have a smaller collection, but if you've come this far, why not have everything match? I apologize, it's always easy to spend your money.

With component to achieving success with a big speaker is a big room. so many YouTubers crying foul play on a digital music player costing this much, why write a review of this product at all? Even within the TONE readership, it's a bit beyond what most would choose, though a healthy number of our audience are dCS owners, with more Vivaldis out there than you might expect.

The reasons for exploring this flagship product are primarily selfish, and here's why. Years ago, an acquaintance offered me the keys to his then-new Ferrari F50. I politely refused, telling him, "I can't ever have this, so I'd rather not know."

I've regretted saying that more days than you can imagine. As Stirling Archer would say, "Why would you not?"



.
This time I took the keys with pleasure. The next track up is "Keys to Her Ferrari" by Thomas Dolby. If you're waiting for my comments on Patricia Barber or Diana Krall, it's not gonna happen. However, if you are a female vocal or acoustic instrument lover, you'll be taken aback by the rock-solid pitch stability the Varèse offers.

After a nearly 20-year relationship with dCS, and owning the past three dCS players that have come through the door as reference components (a four-box Paganini stack, my current reference, the Vivaldi ONE/Apex, and the Lina stack), there was a bit of expectation bias with the Varèse. Not the bias you might expect. I thought it might be an exercise in self-indulgence.

With the high-end taking so much flak for being overpriced, unboxing all this stuff caused no small amount of anxiety. All the past dCS DACs reviewed, usually need at least an hour or so for the electronics to completely stabilize thermally and electrically – and the Varèse was no different. But 3 seconds into that Chicago track, this was well beyond anything I've heard from digital. The next day, after playing nonstop for 24 hours, it opened up quite a bit more. It hasn't been powered down since that day.

The better news is that, nearly four months later, my enthusiasm for the Varèse has only grown. Like the Magic Bus, I want it, I want it. $300k + on a digital music player at this point in my life doesn't make sense.

If I were in my late 40s-mid 50s and knew I still had at least 20-30 years of canine hearing left, I'd be at the bank signing papers for a HELOC right now. I'm telling you this now to frustrate those who only read the last paragraph of a review. This is my conclusion, baby.

I'm not kidding. It's that good. I couldn't have been more wrong. The level of performance and musical reality that Varèse brings is straight up from where Vivaldi lives.

As good as the Vivaldi ONE/Apex is, this is another level. It's like going from a 911S to a GT3RSR. On one hand, you jump back in your standard Carrera, thinking "this isn't so bad, it's not really 1/3 the car." But then you get back in the GT3 and listen to that engine shriek as it hits 9,000 rpm. On one hand, it might not be worth 3x, (to you) but on the other, you can't get this level of performance any other way – so at that point it's priceless. Seriously, you could spend more than this on a turntable these days.

Much like turntables and cartridges at that level, the best digital products go to a point of resolution, detail retrieval, dynamic range, and lack of sonic signature that they truly disappear from your thought process as you experience them.

That's what Varese does. Pages of flowery prose comparing this thing to the world's best everything still doesn't tell the story. Having been promised "perfect sound forever" for a very long time, this system delivers on that promise.

It's still different than vinyl

Comparing great pressings of similar albums is still somewhat of an apples-to-oranges proposition. There are times the digital platform reveals more music, and others, the nod goes to analog. My favorite comparison is that of an image shot on the world's most resolving digital camera and an equally excellent film camera. The digital camera provides an image that is crisper, with wider dynamic range, and truer color – for some pictures, this rendition suits them better, while the more compressed, embellished, saturated delivery of analog can be more intriguing. After decades of arguing about analog vs. digital, I submit it's more about perspective than sheer ability at this point.

Years ago, when I stepped up to a dCS player, I stopped saying, "It sounds good for digital." The two formats have happily co-existed in my system ever since.

In Quintessence

Originally, I was going to experience the Varese's awesomeness at Quintessence Audio in Morton Grove, Illinois – thanks to their always hospitable owner, Mick Survence. It was not to be; my mild case of dyslexia thwarted that.

On the Friday of the event, I received a phone call from David Steven, director of dCS:

"What time are you planning on being out for the event?"

"Umm, next Friday at 7pm, dude."

"It's this Friday, mate."

"Uh oh."

Fortunately, he laughed at me and said, "Well, we've all done that, haven't we?"

So, a couple of weeks later, LMC Audio in Scottsdale, Arizona,, was hosting the next Varese event, and the equally affable owner, Mike Ware, let me join the party. Steven was there to present, and we all had a good laugh at my expense. A few days earlier, he did check up on me – "got the date right this time?" Busted.

The Varese made an incredible showing paired with not one but two multi-million-dollar systems – one based on Wilson Audio and D'Agostino, the other Sonus faber and Burmester. At this level of excellence, it's tough to tell the delta without truly hearing it in the context of your reference. Suffice to say, everything digital was a letdown at the Florida HiFi Expo the following day.

Someone else's bell

As there have been a couple of in-depth, back-and-forth conversations about all the fine details of the techie side of the Varese system, I'm going to send you to Stereophile. Click Click he link here to read Jason Victor Serinus' point-by-point of the tech minutiae.

This is going to be more of an experiential review of what it's like to live with a product delivering this level of performance, what it's like, and how it's altered my thoughts on what digital can really deliver.

To say the Varese was the high point of my year last year (2025) would be the understatement of a lifetime. However, it didn't start with all six boxes because the transport hadn't yet been released. At this point, the Varese in my system was still sans transport.

The component parts

In addition to the CD/SACD disc transport, the Varese system consists of the core (the largest box) that handles housekeeping functions, streaming services, and processing required before feeding the mono DACs. (I'm guessing this means upsampling, should you choose to go this route)



The mono DACs have one set of balanced XLR outputs and one pair of RCA outputs. I've been cheating, using the balanced outputs for my main system, and running a 5m pair of interconnects to system two. Like my Vivaldi, being able to serve music up through two systems really provides more value as a review tool, to be sure.

The master clock connects via the same bus, and finally, the system controller. Both iOS and Android can be used to control the system externally with the dCS app, should you choose to use it. The master clock is an additional $39,995, as is the transport, so ideally you could get into an "entry level" Varese for about $215,000. Crazy, eh? Makes me think about going for it...

As with every other great digital setup I've used (dCS or not) that supports a master clock, the Varese takes it to another level. The effect is the same. You might think those 1's and 0's aren't all that important, but how they arrive at the DAC is. The more accurately this is handled, the cleaner, bigger, and broader the music sounds.

dCS went back to the drawing board for every aspect of the Varese. Their legendary Ring DAC, which is all software-driven, is now a dual-differential Ring DAC, massively overbuilt, with future processing headroom built in for expansion at some point. In addition to the advances in their raw DAC technology and the ACTUS bus/cables, their new Tomix technology enables those mono DACs to operate in complete synchronization.

Add all the small increases in performance, everywhere – both in the mechanical and electrical domains, and you have a digital music system that delivers a breathtaking experience.

A snap to set up

Arriving in a monstrous stack of wheeled Pelican Cases, the Varese is incredibly easy to set up and start playing music. Having cleared a shelf on my bespoke Quadraspire rack for the dual DAC modules and acquiring another for the other four components (the transport was on its way), nothing proved too heavy to lift and move by myself.



At 73 pounds, it's a touch heavier than my Vivaldi ONE/Apex, but it's not Pass monoblock heavy. The other pieces weigh about 40 pounds each. Easily a one-person job, just make sure you have the rack space. Seriously, the Varese takes about five minutes to put in the rack, and another five to connect it up.

Where the full Vivaldi four-box stack needed about a dozen separate digital cables to interconnect them, the Varese uses five if you use the transport. The four-box Vivaldi architecture required a fair amount of daisy-chaining components together and running separate clock cables back and forth. Vivaldi featured a DAC, clock, upsampler, and transport, all as separate components.

Varese uses a central core, a pair of mono DACs, a master clock, and a user interface, all separate. And of course, the transport, should you decide to take that route. I suggest you do.

The secret is their new ACTUS bus, which connects everything. In the past, with digital cables and clock cables, even with dCS' concise instructions, I'd be lying if I said I haven't set one up wrong on the first go. ACTUS eliminates all of that. With Varese, everything plugs directly into the CORE (the large box)

Varese only requires you to pay attention to one of the 8 sockets on the rear panel, the one marked "clock." As long as you get that one right, the other 4 or 5 cables can be plugged into any socket, in any order. dCS utilizes a special set of LEMO connectors for the ACUTUS cables designed specifically for dCS and the bandwidth required. You can read more about that on their website here. Everything clicks together in a positive manner, exactly like connecting a power supply to a Nagra piece – they are the same connectors functionally, though the ones custom-designed for dCS go further in terms of electrical and mechanical performance.

If you don't read the manual, a difference with this dCS is the Bluetooth antenna. Crazy as it sounds, you can stream from your phone with Spotify. Upsampling to DSD, the rubbish bit stream sounds damn good. Back when iPods took advantage of exporting the digital bitstream to USB, I used to demo 128kb/sec files from my iPod through the four-box Vivaldi, and people were shocked at the playback quality. The Varese does an equally stunning job with Bluetooth playback – though you'll probably never use it.

What you will need it for is to link to the Coolio, round, backlit remote. Oh yeah. dCS, REL, and Devialet all get my vote for the sexiest, easiest-to-use, smoothest-feeling remotes. Come on, you don't want a kids' meal remote with your $300k player, do you? Or you can download the new dCS Mosaic ACTUS app from the web.

At present, there are no third-party cables for the Varese, but dCS claims that cables will have to meet a certain quality standard to be used, should they ever arrive. That said, I did hit the folks up at Cardas for a set of six Clear Beyond XL power cords to use for the duration of the review. (ED Note: since the review wrapped, Transparent now makesACTUS cables and they will set you back about $10k each.)

With a Cardas power strip already on hand, the Varese system got its own, dedicated 20-amp circuit, to minimize noise and interaction with the rest of my system. At this point, why leave anything to chance, right?

Even with the optional Digital I/O module, setup is still incredibly easy. It features single and dual-AES inputs for another source, and a BNC clock output. Should you want to use an existing Vivaldi or Paganini transport, you can do so and keep everything in sync with the master clock.



Once connected, pressing the small buttons at the bottom of the cases start the system up. About two to three minutes later, small LEDs on the front panel turn from purple to white, and the display comes alive.

If you are using the Varese inside a Roon ecosystem, setup is immediate. Merely going to the Audio section of the settings menu will show the Varese in the "ROON Ready" column. Click "enable," and you're rocking.

A quick test

The I/O module makes it easy to hear the difference the Varese transport makes in overall system resolution. dCS has made an incredible effort to isolate the transport mechanism from the case, both mechanically and electronically – delivering a level of clarity I've never heard before.

Using transports on hand from Metronome, Advance Paris, Sony, and a vintage Proceed, quickly show off how much more fine detail resolution and image size in all three directions the Varese transport extracts from the discs. There's more to this than just 1s and 0s. Perhaps before the Varese has to go back, we can get our hands on a Paganini transport; something in the 10-20k range to see how it works. Again, those not having such a massive disc collection might welcome this as a transport option.

The art of noise cancellation

A big part of the sheer clarity the Varese provides comes down to an F1-level attention to the minutest electronic and mechanical details. As their field guy, Andrew Szelke tells me on his visit, "Every single hole in the casework is a place for RFI and noise to enter or escape."

Every aspect of Varese was examined to keep every kind of noise to the lowest possible levels. I am convinced that this level of obsession everywhere is what gives this player such a huge sonic footprint.

Even the user interface display was questioned. Instead of the TFT screens that everyone else uses, this is an insanely high-quality LCD panel. Again, lower noise was the main reason for choosing this part, albeit at a much higher cost.

The dual mono DACs are a big part of the Varese's lack of sonic signature, and dCS claims that the two individual mono chassis are matched to within 1 ppm in digital accuracy. Again, Steven goes on to tell me just how much time and work went into achieving that level of accuracy. "That's a big part of what gives the Varese its magic."

Spinning discs

I can't tell you why, but playing the disc versus merely streaming a track (hi-rez or not) always reveals more spatial information. For example, comparing the 24/192 file from Qobuz or Tidal to even the standard CD of this recording, the 16/44 disc wins hands down, and the SACD produced by Analogue Productions even more so.

With thousands of discs at my disposal, a disproportionate amount of time playing my favorite tracks on disc proves more engaging when available. If the Varese makes you new to the compact disc and SACD thing, you will probably end up searching out certain, often times more original discs rather than relatively current remasters that tend to be more compressed and brightened up. Don't overlook early Japanese CD's and early "target" CD pressings. Often, these were much closer to the master tapes than later editions.

MoFi, Acoustic Sounds, and Impex – among others are still firmly committed to producing SACDs, so even if you don't have a collection and would like to start, there are plenty of discs at your disposal.

Roon and everywhere else

Counterintuitive though it may be, listening to a fairly long playlist of music that I know sounds terrible from a production standpoint further shows off the sheer ability of the Varese. And this is another argument amongst the internet pundits – with so many bad recordings, why invest in a playback system like this? Yes, the worst recordings you love still sound worse than the best recordings in your collection.

The way the Varèse unpacks even the most two-dimensional, compressed recordings (both via disk and streaming) is more stunning than even what it does with pristine recordings.

What makes the Varèse such a wonder is how much further it takes every aspect of musical performance. Even minor details in recordings that don't matter to you, While I can't hear the difference in noise floor between the Vivaldi ONE and the Varèse, I can hear the increased dynamics everywhere. There is considerably more low-level detail and decay, with the Varèse which I never really noticed until going back and forth between the players. This results in a richer musical tone and texture throughout.



"In my long experience with high-performance digital, the Varèse presses the boundaries of component invisibility further than anything I've experienced."

That's the top compliment I can pay it. Not only is it completely devoid of any digital or electronic signature, the sound field rendered in the context of my reference system is enormous in all dimensions, almost as if I were listening to surround or Atmos, but I'm only listening to front speakers (with the six-pack of REL subs).

In addition to the gains in dynamics and the ability to create a three-dimensional space, the Varèse serves up a ton of texture and musical detail. All of the timbre-related cues that fool you into thinking you're hearing real instruments between the speakers are here in spades, too. I've heard more than my share of harsh, overly etched phono cartridges that don't sound this natural.

Tempted by the fruit of another (format)

I'm going to come right out and say it. Much as I love turntables and vinyl, I could live without analog if I had a Varèse. And I say that after decades of turntable setup, and record cleaning, I'm seriously considering selling my seven turntables, three phono preamps, and 5,000+ record collection, and calling it a day. If for no other reason, simplicity in my old age.

Considering what records cost today, many of you already have the cost of a Varèse tied up in vinyl. It's blasphemous, I know, to suggest such a radical shift in your audiophile life (and I probably won't be able to do it either), but in terms of rationalizations, getting your hands on a Varèse isn't as outright crazy as you might think.

I get it, this is a very expensive player, out of reach of most of us, myself included. However, in a never-ending collection of data points, from $100 to the $300k+ of the Varèse, this has been an exciting exercise. And it's rare that I don't buy $500-$600 worth of records every month.

Maybe I should re-think.

Totally worth it

That said, I won't minimize how great this player is, just because I can't afford one. You can't get what the Varèse does in a budget player, and should you pick one of the other top players from Esoteric, MSB, or Wadax, you're looking at spending the same amount or even more.

It's fun knowing that stuff like this exists, and people go to work every day trying to figure out how to push the envelope further, all the time. As David Steven winds up our Zoom call, he makes it very clear that Varèse took years to implement. He smiles, saying, "halfway in, after we'd spent millions of pounds on R&D and prototyping, we still weren't completely sure."

According to Steven, a lot of the final bits on Varèse were worked out, producing their newer compact DAC, the LINA. TONE staffer Chris Harr has a LINA stack, so we were able to compare there as well. "On one level, the Lina has more in common with the Varese than the Vivaldi does."

To the people in the audience who can easily afford the Varèse, or perhaps are stepping up from a Vivaldi, I think you will be surprised that dCS is able to make such a quantum leap in performance, and I'm assuming you've got the room, system, and music collection to easily hear it.

With two or three remaining free slots on the rear panel (depending on whether you get the I/O board), dCS will no doubt have more in mind for the Varèse.



That said, I won't minimize how This is a major point in favor of investing in a dCS music system. They offer a steady stream of hardware and software updates to keep your player up to date.

The only thing the Varèse doesn't do is display album art and track info when playing a music CD. It's all good when streaming. Knowing the folks at dCS, I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if this shows up sooner than later in a future firmware upgrade.

I've owned my Vivaldi ONE for almost 8 years now, and with an APEX update and the latest firmware, it's a new machine again. An important thing to consider when spending this much money. It's also worth mentioning that in over 15 years of using dCS players as my digital reference – being powered up 24/7, nothing has ever failed. For that matter, none of the people I know who own a dCS product have had issues yet.

This is the longest review I've written in nearly 25 years of writing about audio – but the dCS Varèse is the most elaborate component I've ever spent time with. I still feel, after nearly 4,000 words, I haven't told you enough. It's also the most amazing component I've ever experienced. I truly can't imagine pulling more information from those 1s and 0s.

If you're the person who skips to the end, thirty seconds of listening will tell you more than this review. You'll know the minute you press play on a well-known track. And if I were a younger man, I'd be lining up to order one myself. HELOC rates be damned.

Peripherals

Preamplifier	Pass Labs XS Pre 2
Power Amplifier	Pass Labs XS300
Speakers	Clarisys Auditorium + with six-pack of REL Carbon Special subs
Cable	Cardas Clear and Clear beyond
Racks	Quadraspire

Review

By Jeff Dorgay and Tom Caselli

Harbeth 40.5 XD2
Speakers

In a word, majestic.

$21,990/pair
harmoniadistribution.com (NA distributor)
harbeth.co.uk (factory



Somehow, the go-to record for listening to a new pair of Harbeths is always the Beatles' Abbey Road. It could be the BBC heritage, maybe it's just a great-sounding record, but there is something so lovely about listening to the Beatles on a BBC monitor that is one of life's true musical pleasures.

But this isn't just any pair of Harbeths – it's the new flagship 40.5XD2.

Harbeth designer Alan Shaw says that the new .5XD2 iteration is "much more transparent and much more vivid." I agree with this 100% having had the 40.2s as a reference for some time, and the 40.3XD in for an extended review. This speaker, like the rest of the Harbeth range, benefits from Shaw's constant revision and evolution.

Listening to Ringo's drumming, to borrow a phrase from conrad-johnson, "It just sounds right." The way the drumheads breathe out after being struck is served up as if you were in the room with that famous Ludwig kit. Powerful, with just the right amount of attack, body, and warmth. These are speakers you can sit and groove on forever. And those Rickenbackers. Woo woo. The same with Mick Fleetwood's pounding drum intro on "The Chain." The texture and body at your disposal via the 40.5XD2 make things seem that much more realistic.

180 degrees out of phase with the Mac and the Beatles, next up is Yoko Ono's "Yes I'm A Witch." Now, you may be Yoko-averse, but this track rocks. It's got a driving, deep synth bassline, screaming guitars, and massive dynamics. "I'm a witch, I'm a bitch, I don't care what you say." Power to the people, right on.

My original 40.2s wouldn't quite rock like this. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young – all day long. String quartets – awesome. However, even with a massive solid-state amplifier (I was using a CJ Premier 350 at that time), the big Harbeths couldn't go that last step. I still loved em' and I still bought em', but that ultimately led me to pass them on to a friend with a more subdued musical taste.

Love it or hate it, music has come a long way since I had the 40.2s. More techno, more electronica, and more of today's pop music is more dynamic and bass heavy. The 40.5XD2 is up to the task.

Tracking through Bad Bunny's "El CLuB" is a romp and a half. The 40.5XD2s push BBs vocals out in front where they belong, weaving the background instruments and electronic sounds in front and behind the speakers, creating a deep sonic expanse, while the bass line drives and stays locked in.

Setup

The crew at Harmonia Distribution sent a set of Trager stands that present a very minimal footprint for the Harbeths, with minimal diffraction and contact with the cabinet. These will give you the last bit of transparency the big monitors offer, but if you have kids, pets, or are the least bit clumsy, I suggest getting a pair of Sound Anchor stands. The beautifully finished thin-wall Harbeth cabinets will not take a fall to the floor without damage. You've been warned. These British beauties weigh almost 83 pounds each now.

The previous model was rated 84 dB/1 watt, and these speakers are now rated 86 dB/1 watt. Harbeths have always been easy to drive, and while this might suggest tubes, a tube amplifier wouldn't be my first choice unless I choose carefully. However, Tom has found excellent synergy with the McIntosh MC1502, which has a different sound than my Prima Luna EVO400 monos with KT150 output tubes. If going PrimaLuna, I'd suggest their equally excellent (but more extended EVO300 Hybrid amplifier. Or a pair in mono.

The 40.5XD2 claims a minimum amplifier power of 30 watts, but a "maximum programme" of 650 watts. With a pair of Pass X600.8 monoblocks on hand that happen to produce that kind of power, this was the magic combo.

Fook me, Austin Powers.

I like to Rock

Given that Deep Purple was Britain's loudest band (other than the legendary Spinal Tap), I broke out the new 10-disc remaster, re-everything version of DP's *Made In Japan*. I cranked the hell out of "Smoke on the Water," and the 19:50-minute rendition of "Highway Star." Of course, I had to play Tap's "Sex Farm," and the current version of "Stonehenge" with Sir Elton John. These speakers can play the heaviest of rock with ease.

Even at OSHA non-compliant volume levels, the 40.5XD2s show no strain, no distortion, and no loss of imaging depth. Many other speakers would have turned to goo at half this level. And I've destroyed my fair share of speakers over the years with music like this.

It's all about that new crossover and refined drivers. Thanks to Tom, we had the chance to go back and compare these to his 40.2s, and he agrees with my aural memory that the current model is a huge jump forward.

Tonal accuracy, classical and jazz

Hopping back to some more mixed material, a series of Paul Weller tracks again illustrates the versatility of these speakers. "My Ever Changing Moods" from Café Bleu and "Remember How We Started" from his self-titled solo album are brilliant. Weller's multi-layered instrumental approach, combined with his silky vocals, shows how his voice has matured over a few years, with more body. (at this point in his career)

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Where, the new model also excels over the past version (that XD thing again) is the lower noise floor that these speakers exhibit, translating into more dynamic range. One of the 40.2s biggest strengths was their ability to deliver an engaging presentation at both low and high volumes. The 40.5 has improved significantly here. The small details are more easily discernible and remain musically satisfying even at a very low overall volume level.

Love that British sense of humor, where the manual says that you can pull the grilles off with "your own strong magnet." Yep, happen to have one of those around. But be careful. Even pressure got the grilles off for the photos. However, Shaw suggests leaving the grilles on and that the speakers are voiced thusly. So back on they went for all listening.



But how do they sound compared to the older 40.3s? Read on. Fortunately, staffer Tom Caselli has the 40.3s from our last review as his reference speakers in his upstairs system, so we can do a direct comparison.

Back to the future – Tom's notes

After decades of avoiding large-box speakers because of the usual limitations in transparency, I took a blind leap and ordered the Harbeth 40.3 XD's after reading many reviews. My first impression was similar to the scene in Back to the Future when the guitar player watches Marty McFly, "Chuck, this is your cousin Marvin-Marvin. Berry, you know that new sound you've been looking for, well,listen to this-".

This was what I was searching for, a window into the recording that only a monitor can provide. Let's be honest, you can't replicate a live performance in your room.

Nor would you want to. I'm not sure about you —but most modern live experiences are visually exciting; however, the sound is anything but exemplary. Other than at Classical performances in a great hall, even in the best small clubs you're listening to music played back via commercial PA electronics. The goal should be how well your system reproduces the recording.

I say with conviction the big Harbeths put you in the control room watching through a window into the studio. Every little detail is exposed. The 40.3 XD's were almost the perfect speaker for me. Almost because, while they are a full-range speaker, the lowest frequencies needed reinforcement. Some tracks really needed a tighter, more controlled bottom end and impact to truly satisfy this heavy rock fan. And as a side note, the 40.3s are large speakers, never letting you forget they're in the room.

These issues have all been addressed in the new 40.5XD2's. That window into the recording session has been replaced with a large bay window, and the "Harbeth sound" is still here in full force. First and foremost, the lower and upper mid-bass are tightened up, even though the specifications on the sheet remain the same. No matter what the music, the new speaker goes deeper and is better defined. It's even easier to hear it when the new and old models are side by side for a direct comparison.

As a result, acoustic bass sounds much more realistic, yet the electric bass is even heavier. Play any Bill Evans album and marvel at Scott LaFaro's dexterity. Throw a Tangerine Dream album on and you'll feel the pulsating electronic low end more than before. Even with these changes, the Harbeth 40.5 XD2s remain an easy speaker to drive for everything but a flea watt tube amplifier.

For speakers the size of a dorm-room refrigerator, they now do a disappearing trick David Copperfield would be proud of. With well-recorded source material, they deliver a solid, defined soundstage. While the prior midrange was already exceptional, the 40.5 XD2s offer greater clarity, releasing the smallest of details. Tracking through a handful of Ornette Coleman albums reveals his breathing clearly; the presentation has been moved slightly forward. A good friend stopped by during my auditions to sample a bit of Blossom Dearie. If he had suddenly died at that moment, the undertaker wouldn't be able to swipe the smile off his face.



A regular go-to test album is a promo copy of America's first album, first issued without their hit "Horse with No Name". The soundstage and detail on the pressing are beyond description. Playing it back over the XD2's places each member in a defined spot across the stage – again reinforcing that impression of being in the studio control room.

These large speakers work well in my midsize room, which is 16 x 18 x 8 feet. Placing them 3 feet from the back wall, about 4 feet from the side walls, and 7 feet apart center-to-center is perfection in this room. Sitting relatively near field they remain transparent.

While they are visually identical to their predecessors (but about 15 pounds heavier), they disappear like a pair of Compact 7s.

The old Harbeths went to a friend, and the new 40.5XD2 remains as my system 2 reference. After about 150 hours of continuous listening, the speakers continued to improve, and with this new level of detail on tap, they rival the Wilsons in the big system downstairs. As a side note, while the Ton Trager Reference Stands were provided for the review, as a pet parent of two rather large dogs, I chose to keep the Skylan stands from my 40.3s for increased stability. I also use IsoAcoustics OREA pucks to decouple the speakers from the stand with excellent results.

Every one of my close audiophile buddies has come away from a listening session with the new Harbeths not only drawing the same conclusions but also being equally impressed. Who knows? I may have converted a few.

I cannot imagine any changes that could further improve the performance of this speaker.



Final thoughts – Jeff Dorgay

While Tom's room is about 15 x 19 feet, my main room is 24 x 36 feet. Where the 40.2s I had still favored a more near-field listening position, these make it easier to move the couch a few more feet back, offering a more immersive experience.

Yet at the same time, these speakers excel in keeping the musical pace. While anti-audiophile types make fun of PRAT (pace, rhythm, and timing), don't sell it short until you pay attention to it. Those BBC engineers knew what they were talking about. Shaw has taken these fundamentals and refined them to excellence here. My only question is, will he be able to take it further? These might be the pinnacle.

There are a handful of true classic speakers with such a defined sound that, if this is your jam, you won't go for anything else. I think the new 40.5XD2 is one of the true legends in speakerdom.

Sure, a pair of LS3/5a's or a pair of Quad 57s (got those, too) have an undeniable magic about them, but they can't play everything. You can play Zeppelin, you can play Pine Top Perkins, and everything in between on the big Harbeths. I truly could go on and on and on. After nearly 25 years of listening to many speakers, the 40.5XD2 still comes out as one of my all-time faves.Should you be someone with a wide range of musical tastes, spanning generations and genres, and perhaps found other speakers "great with this, but not with that," this is a pair of speakers I suspect you'll never tire of. These are speakers you can listen to till all hours of the night without wanting to stop.

Isn't that how music should be?

Before you spend $20-$70k on a pair of speakers, don't pull your wallet out until you hear the Harbeth 40.5XD2. It's a must. Job well done.

Playlist no.3

Do you listen to music when out driving? Around town, or just on a road trip?

Do you prefer music that is more relaxing, or more stimulating?

Do you like to sing along? Be honest.

Here's a handful of favorites that always end up getting a lot of play when driving more than 50 miles...



Monkees - *Last Train to Clarksville*

Kiss - *Black Diamond (From Alive!)*

Thomas Dolby - *One of our Submarines*

DEVO - *Mongoloid*

Gary Numan - *Me, I Disconnect From You*

Pretenders - *The whole first album, ha!*

Pat Metheny - Will You Go With Me?

Scorpions - *Blackout*

Pat Travers - *Boom, Boom (out go the lights)*

DEVO - *Secret Agent Man*

Kraftwerk - *Man Machine*

Focus - *Hocus Pocus*

Queen - *I'm in Love With My Car*

Review
By Jeff Dorgay

YG Acoustics
Vesper 3 Speakers

A Compact Masterpiece.

$44,900/pair
yg-acoustics.com



My time listening to the YG Acoustics Vesper 3 actually kicked off a few weeks earlier, at AudioVision SF's yearly event in San Francisco. Antonio and Randolph had these speakers singing in a fairly small room, with bottom-end grip I wouldn't have expected in this environment. Then again, I've heard YG's Carmel 3 accomplish great things at the store, too.

To put this in perspective, I have a pair of YG Summits in my living room that we listen to every day (an upgrade from the YG Cairns that were there before), and I recently reviewed the Carmel 3. I've spent a fair amount of time with the XV 3 Signature and XX 3 at Supreme Acoustic Systems in Las Vegas, and briefly with the new $1M/pair Titans at the Warsaw AV Show. So I feel familiar with the brand now.

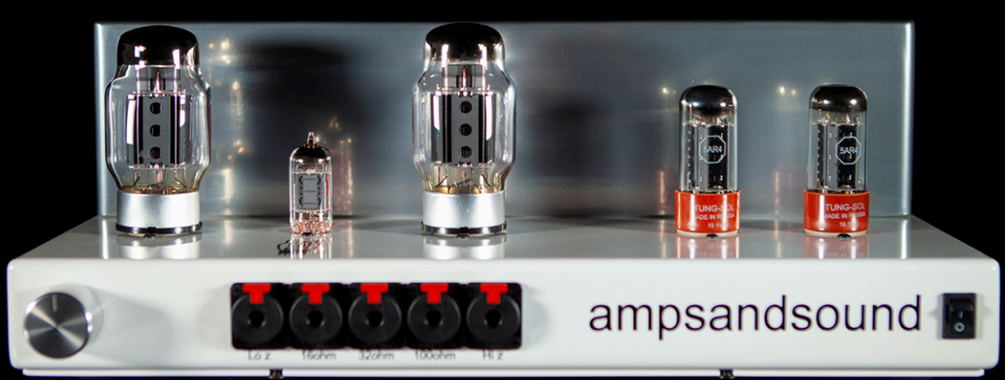
With the 2025 introduction of the Titan into YG's new Ultimate line, you might wonder how much of that experience YG delivers in a $45k pair of speakers. Quite a lot, actually. Keep in mind that to fully take advantage of a pair of speakers of Titan magnitude, you need another million bucks worth in ancilliary gear, an optimized room, optimized power, and an amazing collection of source material. Otherwise, you're just leaving resolution on the table. I'll stick my neck out and claim that what everyone heard in Warsaw was probably 30% of what those speakers can really deliver. And they had a great room.

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Another component to achieving success with a big speaker is a big room. Supreme Acoustic Systems in Las Vegas has a room that is almost 40 x 50 feet with a nearly 20-foot ceiling. That's a lot of volume to fill. That is why mini monitors, no matter how accurate, tend to leave you cold: they can't achieve the spatial and size relationships you get with a pair of big speakers in a large room. I hear that Supreme is planning to bring the Titans in for an event next year, and I'm there for it.

A bit of tech

Looking at the YG website, it might be easy to think the Vesper 3 is merely a Carmel 3 with a bigger cabinet and an extra woofer. This is not the case at all. Vesper is brand new from the ground up, but it borrows heavily from the flagship Titan in both cabinet construction and crossover design. Their Lattice tweeter is a mega feat of engineering, combining a soft dome with an aluminum airframe to back it up, machined in-house. On a recent factory tour, seeing these up close reveals an amazing amount of delicacy in the final component. YG feels a lot more like AMG/Mercedes than a speaker manufacturer.

There's so much more to talk about, but I think the true success of these speakers is the ultracoherent crossover network, which optimizes amplitude, phase, and phase slope simultaneously. This gives the Vesper 3 sound the seamlessness of a single driver, or full-range ESL, without the limitations those speakers impose. This crossover is placed in a sealed, isolated chamber, free of vibration effects. It also offers an upgrade path if you want to turn your Vespers into active speakers later.

YGs chief, Matthew Webster, elaborates further. "To give you a sense of scale: the bass crossover circuit of the Vesper alone costs twice as much as the Peaks Ascent's entire crossover network which is truly elaborate and exotic for the price. It carries everything we've learned in the Titan program. The Vesper 3 is very much a YG Reference speaker: it offers utter realism, with bass exactly as it was performed – nothing added and nothing softened."

In the end, it all works, perfectly. When you can completely forget the engineering details and fall into the music, that's success. Mission accomplished, and then some.

There's no place like home

Critical listening begins with the Vesper 3 in my 24 x 36 foot room in the middle of the 36 foot wall – so side walls are not an issue. These speakers open up and create an immersive three-dimensional sound field that is positively lovely.

The first track? The extended version of Rare Earth's "I Know I'm Losing You." This isn't an audiophile track, nor even a terribly well-recorded one, but it's full of studio effects, with some big echo. At the beginning of thetrack, there's a solid bass line, a screaming, distorted guitar, and serious cymbal action all around the lead vocal. These speakers keep all four elements locked down, in their own spaces, in a way many others can't. The stereo image presented goes way beyond the speakers and bounces around the room in a very psychedelic way.

Meticulously recorded female vocals are low-hanging fruit. It's like driving a high-performance car on fresh, smooth, level pavement. It doesn't strain the machine's performance envelope. Of course, those tracks sound brilliant on the Vesper 3. If that's most of your listening, you'll freak out at how seductive these speakers are. Every breath, every throaty exhale, comes through in a luxurious, realistic way that will keep you in the listening chair for hours.

Unbox and Setup

The Vesper 3 is by far the easiest 156-pound speaker I've had the pleasure of unboxing. Roll the road case into place, prop it up, and thanks to the Teflon case bottom, slide 'em out. Install spikes and done. It barely took 15 minutes to get both speakers in their preliminary position. It's nice to see premium manufacturers offering this level of user friendliness.

The Vespers ended up delivering their best within a couple of inches of where the Carmel 3s and the Summits work in my room.



One key to setting up every YG we've used is getting the rake angle just right after optimizing for a balance between low-end weight, mid-bass clarity, and a clean transition from mid-bass to midrange frequencies. I always lean heavily on Johnny Cash's first American recording to nail this down, but I'm sure you have a few tracks of your own. A bold, growling baritone will help you place the speakers so everything goes smoothly from the lowest bass notes to the upper midrange.

A slight bit of toe-in to taste, then work that rake angle ever so slightly for the last bit of the stereo image to lock in, and the size of the soundfield goes from big to nearly infinite. That's when you know you've got it right.

The speakers came out of the box sounding good. One other thing you need to know in case you aren't one to read the instructions: there are four hex screws in the Pelican case with the spikes. You will notice two empty holes on the rear face of the speakers and this is by design. This equalizes the air pressure in the enclosure when the shipping crates are out in a cold truck. Give your Vespers a day to reach ambient temperature before installing them.



While my review pair had some hours on them from the AVSF show, YG let me know they make sure all the caps in their crossover networks get 80+ hours of burn-in at high current and high frequencies before installing them on the boards. This will dramatically reduce burn-in time for you.

Definitely a nice touch.

Amplifier friendly

As we had a bit tighter schedule than normal to produce this review, I had to keep the amplifiers used to a shorter list than normal. The 88dB/1-watt spec is misleading only in that these speakers are incredibly easy to drive, even with a 30-watt-per-channel tube amplifier. Ultimately, the sound quality, especially the lower register will depend on your amplifier's ability to control the output and deliver the necessary current.

Listening began with a recently acquired Threshold 400A 100 WPC class-A amplifier. Good as this amplifier still is, the Vespers have enough resolution to reveal its limits compared with Nelson Pass' current flagship, the XS300 monoblocks.

The big Pass monos really grip the Vespers, and honestly make them feel about two sizes bigger than they actually are. And, they show off just how much sound they can make. Whether listening to the most intense electronica or full-scale orchestral music, these made for a fantastic system. (along with the Pass XS Pre)

Circling back to a few more things that might be more in keeping with what someone would pair the Vespers with, or perhaps start their journey, the Pathos InPol Heritage mkII integrated (80 wpc, class-a hybrid) made the most sense. With a bit of tube warmth in the front end and a class-A solid-state output stage, the Vespers rock the house.

As a compact, lower-powered option, the new conrad-johnson CAV-60 integrated delivers 60 WPC with a quartet of EL-34 tubes. This sub-10k integrated delivers a tonal richness that will appeal to a certain subset of users. If your music taste is not quite as demanding, and your room a bit on the smaller side, this could be a great alternative at all but the most punishing volume levels. Make no mistake, 60 WPC of good tube power will deliver the goods with these speakers.

Though warmer and slightly more colored than the solid-state amplifiers, the lush, three-dimensional picture this combination paints is incredibly seductive. Yep, female vocal lovers will dig this.

Finally, we've been getting great results with the recently delivered LAiV Harmony GaN Class D monoblocks. Again, the detail the Vespers serve up combines with the Class D amplifiers to create a completely different sonic picture. If you love electronica, hip hop, and heavy rock, this is a drier presentation, but very fast, dynamic, and punchy.

Much of what makes the Vesper 3 so compelling is the level of resolution it offers. In the context of a $70-100k system, it delivers fantastic sound, but if you are a music lover who wants a mega performance in a compact system, you could easily pair it with six figures' worth of electronics and be delighted.

To me, the Vesper 3 is the Porsche Cayman GTS of speakers. It delivers so much of what the crazy money Porsches do; unless you're driving on a track and have the skill to qualify on the grid at LeMans, you'll barely notice the difference. They represent one of the best values I've seen in a speaker at this price in a long time. Bravo to YG for delivering a speaker this good, that people can actually aspire to owning.

More listening

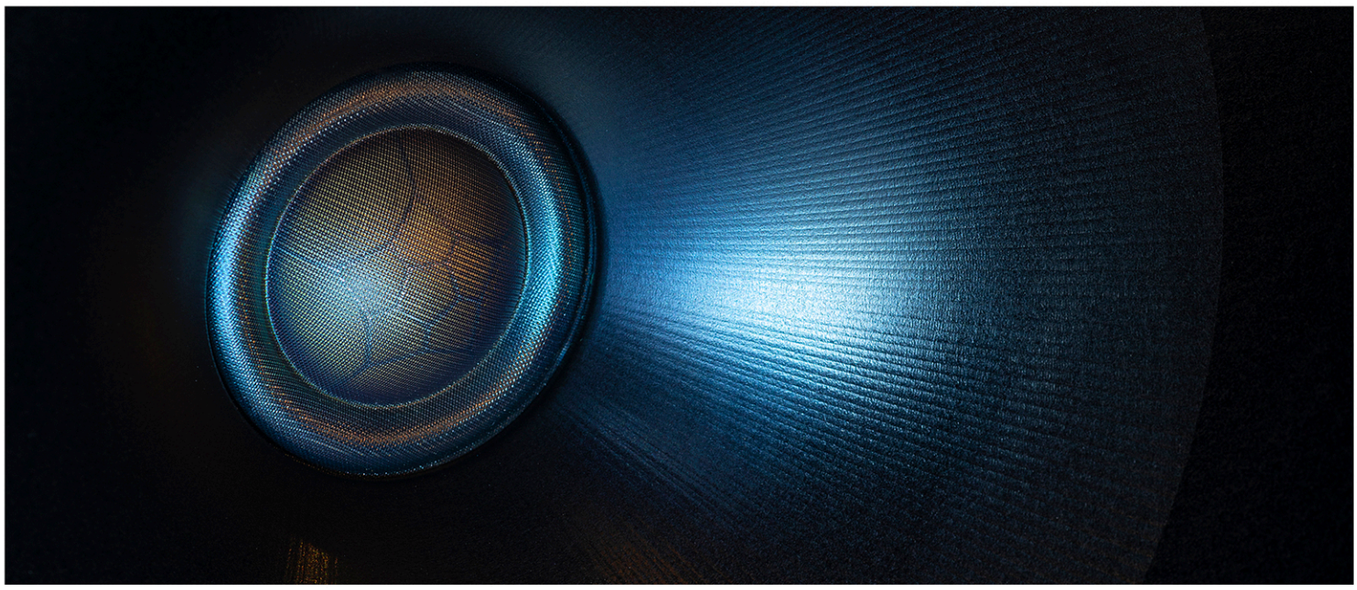
The more music that pours through the Vesper 3, the more their excellence shines through. What don't you get from the $500k and $1M YGs? A bigger presentation. The gigantic YGs, much like my reference Clarisys Auditoriums, produce such a massive soundfield that it feels like you are swimming in a pool full of music that completely envelopes you. That's what you pay the big, big money for. You can get up in the room and walk around.

The compromise made in the Vesper 3 is merely one of sheer output and sonic size. Sitting in the chair, with a relatively wide sweet spot, you might just be convinced you are listening to the big YGs from a sheerly qualitative standpoint. Especially if the program material doesn't have subterranean bass or require triple-digit SPLs. In most rooms, with good supporting components and careful attention to setup, you get a lot of the big-system experience.

Digging out an old LP copy of Tommy Bolin's *Private Eyes* again illustrates how easy it is to just stay in the chair and listen all the way through. Queuing up a few of the current tape releases from Rhino is heavenly. That resolution I keep talking about certainly plays to analog's strengths here.

Back in the 21st century, if Billie Eilish's "No Time To Die" from the Bond movie of the same title doesn't send something right up your spine after hearing it on the YGs, you're not breathing.

With this track, it comes down to handling complexity and keeping the pace. This is the result of careful attention to detail in every aspect of the Vespers, and their commitment to keeping phase shifts to a minimum in their crossovers. Remember, the same people building those million-dollar Titans are building these. Would you rather have a gallon of mediocrity or a pint of excellence? The Vesper 3 are the latter, by a long shot.



One of the most dramatic things that distinguishes the world's finest loudspeakers from the merely pretty good is the way they exhale. Leading transients are one thing, but when you hear a speaker like the Vesper 3 release the music, it's that thing. That's what makes it feel like you are actually listening to real musicians in a real space. Even if you can't play an instrument, go into Guitar Center and strum an acoustic guitar. Maybe borrow one from a friend. Really feel the instrument's decay as your fingers leave the strings. Do the same with a piano. Listen to the decay after a solitary note is played. Can your speakers do that? The magic is all in the fine details, and the Vesper 3 delivers.

I'm sure you have your favorite test tracks to explore dynamics, imaging, and tonality. They will help you determine just how good these speakers are.

Choices, choices

If you had previously auditioned YG's Carmel 3 at $30k/pair and the similarly priced Summit, but still came away thinking you were close, but not quite there yet because the Carmel 3 had the extra resolution your craved, but the Summit was a touch too warm (and you deserve to be super fussy when you're writing a $30,000 check), Vesper 3 is the bullseye. For what it's worth,I wouldn't even think about writing a check for anything Wilson makes without hearing these first.

After 2,500 plus reviews, I'm entitled to my opinion. I'll stand by that one. And I'll stand by it in front of whatever higher power you believe in.$45,000 isn't a small amount of money, but to put it in perspective, there are speaker cables that cost way more than a pair of Vesper 3s. A Golf GTi is about $45k, as is a nice new Ducati or Harley Davidson motorcycle. Like the person buying a new Ducati, you're probably trading up from something else, so it's not a ground-zero purchase.

So it may be an easier get than you think.

We are happy to be naming the YG Vesper 3 as one of our five Products of the Decade.

They are that good.

Peripherals

Preamplifier	Pass Labs XS Pre
Power Amplifier	Pass XS 300 monos
Digital Source	dCS Vivaldi ONE/Apex
Analog Source	Rega Naia turntable w/Aphelion 3 cart
Phono Pre	Pass Labs XP-17
Tape	Otari 5050
Cable	Cardas Clear – speaker, power and interconnects

Review
By Jeff Dorgay

Audio Desk Systeme Gläss
Vinyl Cleaner Premium

The BEST RCM going...

$3,599
mofidistribution.com



I still remember the first time I heard the difference a clean record makes to improve vinyl playback. My local dealer (The Audio Emporium in Milwaukee, Wisconsin) had the legendary Keith Monks cleaner and used to charge a dollar to clean your record and put it in a rice-paper sleeve. FYI: $1 in 1980 is $4 in today's funds. The Monks is still around, but is the epitome of inconvenience. The fluids, the string, and the noise. Too much mess, too much work for me. Ditto for the Loricraft.

However, the results were well worth it. Even in the context of my 1980 system, bringing those records home sparkling clean was another level of analog performance. This is why I get so angry when I read articles talking about the "vintage sound of vinyl, with the clicks and pops." You should be able to have noise-free records without issue.

The larger and more diverse your record collection gets, the more you need a great record cleaning machine. Especially if you do a lot of crate digging and used record shopping. You'd be surprised the difference in cost between really filthy records and clean ones from a used record store or meet. I have scored more than once, bringing home a pile of $5 records (or cheaper) that didn't appear to have visible scratches but cleaned up great.

You might be thinking almost $4,000 for a record-cleaning machine is crazy. If you've only got a couple hundred records, and most of them new, probably so. Like any other high-performance piece of audio gear, the more information your music system can resolve, the easier it will be to hear the difference the ADSG brings.

Defeating expectation bias

Two things were tried to investigate further just how clean the ADSG can make your records. Having just received a pair of the new MoFi remaster of Rush's *Fly By Night*, only a couple of pressing numbers apart, this is as much of an apples-to-apples comparison as can be accomplished, so it was easy to compare.

One copy was cleaned with the Hummin Guru ultrasonic, which you can get for about $500. If you aren't cleaning a lot of records, and a huge percentage of them aren't filthy with heavy fingerprints (the toughest thing to get out of your records), the HG is a good way to get used to the ritual of ultrasonic cleaning.



When you listen to both records side by side, the album cleaned with the ADSG reveals another level of clarity over the HG. Is it worth the money? If you have a system capable of resolving the difference, and you have a fairly large collection of audiophile pressings, I submit it is.

The difference in soundstage size and lower noise floor achieved – not only in overall quietness, but going from a few noisy bits to none - the ADSG delivers the sonic goods. If you want your records to play with a level of quiet associated with digital, this is the machine to own.

The sound of supremely clean records is a true luxury, and before you even think about spending four thousand bucks on something like an expensive power cord, consider a premium RCM.

While the phrase "component level upgrade" is thrown around with regularity, using the ADSG with your records will deliver this level of additional performance.

Intrigued by the results, a few more pairs of records were purchased for another comparison. A record straight out of the jacket, played on the SME 20 with an Umami Red cartridge, compared to the same record on the Technics SL-1210G with a very reasonably priced Denon DL-103r, was still noisier and cloudier in the upper frequency range. Even if you are a vinyl lover with a mid-level setup but a massive record collection, I think you will be impressed making the ADSG part of your system. You don't need a mega system to hear its effect.

If I were one of those yelly, screamy YouTubers, I might even go as far as to say this is the best upgrade you could ever make to your system. In all seriousness, though, if you've moved up from an entry-level system and are collecting new and used records regularly, the ADSG is a worthy contender for your next system upgrade.

Unbox, setup, and maintenance

The only thing you'll need that isn't included is a gallon (4.5L) of distilled water. Distilled water is essential so mineral deposits do not build up inside the machine or on the surface of your records.

Next, mix this with the enclosed bottle of cleaning solution, and you should have enough solution to clean 100-200 discs. Possibly less for incredibly dirty and fingerprinted records. Two bottles of cleaner are packaged with the machine so that you can get a good start on your collection. With the earlier version, I always made a point of cleaning brand-new records first, then moving on to the dirtiest. To be just a little extra OCD – because if you're taking your vinyl this far, you know you are - give the dirtiest records a second pass with clean fluid to be sure.

The microfiber barrels that gently scrub your records during the cleaning process are available as a set of four for $100, and need to be replaced about every 500 records. And it's important to point out that the ADSG is the only ultrasonic that combines a gentle scrub with ultrasonic cleaning. Use a shorter interval between cleaning and filters if you are working with a lot of very dirty records. A 20 ml bottle of cleaning fluid concentrate is $25. If you clean a lot of records, I'd suggest having an extra bottle or two on hand, because you never know when the urge to spend a whole weekend cleaning records might hit you!



Getting down to cleaning

Once the fluid is mixed and the reservoir is filled, the rest is easy. Gently place your record in the tank, press the start button. The record will spin around slowly (and quietly) until it is finished, then the drying cycle begins. Approximately five minutes later, you'll have a pristine piece of vinyl to slip into the protective sleeve of your choice. Easy.The compact footprint of the ADSG makes it easy to put anywhere, and its low noise won't distract youfrom listening to music in the background while you clean.

PRO TIP: If you'd like to maximize the life of the cleaning fluid and microfiber rollers in your ADSG, consider this. Before you run a heavily fingerprinted, extremely dirty record through your ADSG, set the record down on a clean microfiber towel. Take another clean microfiber towel saturated with MoFi's PLUS Enzyme cleaner, wipe both sides of the record, and let it sit for five minutes.

Wipe off as much of the enzyme cleaner as you can,then immediately place the record in the ADSG. This will extend the use of the fluid, rollers, and filter. The built-in filter only needs to be rinsed out with clean water at regular intervals. Again, for ultimate cleanliness, consider using tap water for the first round of cleaning the filters, then saturate with distilled water for a final round.
That way, you are assured of no minerals or contaminants.

ADSG suggests a full cleaning every 500 records, and the supplies to do so are about $175.



Audio Desk Systeme Glass

.

The big B word

Having owned or reviewed Nitty Gritty, VPI, Clearaudio, Loricraft, Monks, Degritter, and Kirmuss machines, I can say without reservation that the Audio Desk Systeme Glass is the best record-cleaning machine at all levels.

The company that started the ultrasonic cleaning revolution is back to retake the crown.

You get what you pay for at every level. The ADSG's sheer ability to get records cleaner than anything else, along with quiet and convenience is worth the cost. Considering that the average 1-step pressing is now $125, this is only 30 records. And they will sound the best they can.If the price doesn't quite make sense, get a couple of vinyl-loving friends to join you on one and make it a group buy. This is an analog accessory you will not regret owning, and if you put it in context with what you might pay for a premium phono cable or a cartridge upgrade, I still feel strongly that this will reveal more music from your records. And when you do get that next cartridge, you'll be even more impressed.

Those of you with older ADSG machines can trade up to the current model for $2,300 and your old version. (That's only 20 records...) Some of the earlier machines did have some issues, which Audio Desk Systeme assures us have been addressed. They now back the machine with a three-year warranty, up from the original model's one.

Charge your buddies two bucks to clean their records. Adjusted for inflation, that's a killer deal. As I've said before, I'm good at justifying things.

Furthermore, the cleaner your records are, the longer your cartridge will last, with less stylus wear from dirty grooves. One thing you'll notice immediately after playing a few clean records is how little gunk is building up on your stylus. So if you have even a moderately expensive cartridge, and you listen to vinyl a lot, the ADSG will amortize itself over the warranty period in terms of lower cartridge wear.

I'm standing by the B word on this one, and I bought the review sample. Highly recommended. No more clicks and pops, period.



Music Direct

Chicago, Illinois

musicdirect.com

I couldn't go to Chicago without stopping by to say hello at Music Direct.

Our relationship with Music Direct and Mobile Fidelity goes way back before TONE. They have always been the go-to for records and vinyl accessories. Their customer service is fantastic, so I make it a point to send my friends there as well.

And hey, is this a record collector's dream or what? This is only one of countless aisles of vinyl - MoFi and others all in perfect order waiting to head your way.



Upon arrival, the first person to greet me was none other than big cheese, Jim Davis. We got to catch up on things, and then he turned me loose back here! Trust excercise.





Audio Vision SF

San Francisco, California

audiovisionsf.com



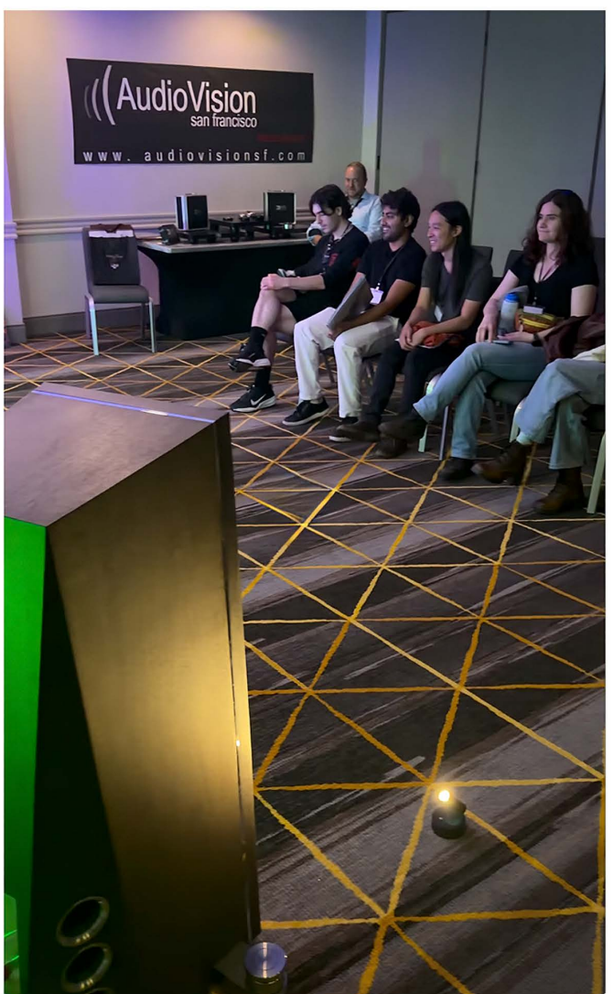
With so many big shows going on, Audio Vision San Francisco has done something really unique.

Their yearly big event takes place in their showroom, and two large rooms across the street at the Holiday Inn.

It's always just big enough that you can see everything, but small enough that it's easy to chat with the staff, and the manufacturer's that they always bring in.

This year was no different. ØAudio was there, along with Marten, Octave, Rega, YG Acoustics, Nordost and many more.

People were encouraged to bring their own music, and this played well to a much younger audience than normally attends this kind of thing.



They even let one fellow play the entire side of an album! You won't see that at any other show.

All of the rooms achieved excellent sound quality, so that visitors were not disappointed.

The folks at Nordost put on a cable demo so convincing they even converted a die-hard non-beliver (he loudly proclaimed that cables didn't matter to the audience) to a change in his beliefs.

That's what it's about.

Music, sharing, and some great listening.

Join me there next year! And there's always a ton of fun things

Warsaw AV Show

Warsaw, Poland

avshow.pl

Warsaw is about 5,600 miles from TONE's office. Even when things go right, it's about 20-ish hours on a plane to get there.

The show takes place in one large stadium and two smaller, peripheral hotels over the course of three days.

In all, perhaps about 200 rooms to see and hear. There were a group of rooms on the top floor of the stadium featuring multi-million dollar systems with the likes of dCS, YG Acoustics, and of course Wilson was there showing off their new monstrosity. When you consider that average gross monthly salary in Warsaw is about $3,000 a month, this goes beyond aspirational marketing.

The percentage of rooms with good to decent sound was high, and the show was densely packed all three days.

As this is a consumer show, there were a lot of dealers and a few distributors, but few manufacturers, outside of a number of Polish companies there with a presence.







Warsaw AV Show

Warsaw, Poland

avshow.pl

I enjoyed how much of a commitment the Polish audio community had for analog, with a lot of LPs available to buy and spin, along with the number of tape machines that were spinning too.

The hospitality from the shows presenter, Adam Mokrzycki was superb, and their brochure listing the exhibts was excellent.

There was a very strong presence from the other audio companies we all know and love, so I suspect they are doing a fair amount of business in Poland and nearby countries.

My favorite room was in the bar at the Golden Tulip hotel.Sponsored by Albedo speakers, Faber's Cables,Music Tools racks, Soulnote electronics, Benny Audio Turntables and Supreme Acoustic Systems (the US importer for thesebrands), with Mytek digital tagging along, put together a super chill listening room,for show goers to relax and unwind. They promise to be back next year with some room treatments, but did an admirable job considering what they were up against. The digital playback was so-so, but the Benny tables were excellent.

Would I go back? Considering how much time it took to get there and back, and unfortunately how many of these excellent Polish brands are not available here in the US, probably not. But for our European readers, this show is worth attending!







MoFi ELECTRONICS

SourcePoint Loudspeakers

Designed by Andrew Jones



SourcePoint 10 SourcePoint 8

Two Speakers, Countless Accolades

GOLDEN EAR the absolute sound 2023 AWARDS

"The SourcePoint 10 makes ***a major statement in the under-$10k speaker category*** *and breathes new life into the concentric loudspeaker genre. At its asking price, it represents a major bargain and* ***a mandatory audition for audiophiles and music lovers alike.****"*

- Dick Olsher, The Absolute Sound

stereophile RECOMMENDED 2023 COMPONENT

"Clean, superbly well-defined low frequencies, the natural-sounding midrange, the high sensitivity, the easy-to-drive impedance, the ability to play loudly without strain, and the affordable price, the SourcePoint 10 gets a thumbs-up from this reviewer.

- John Atkinson, Stereophile

pta

"The sound of the MoFi Sourcepoint 8 went **far beyond its "bang for the buck" descriptors** *and provided a refined and balanced sound that should appeal to the tastes of even the fussiest of audiophiles."*

- Marc Phillips, Part Time Audiophile

The Audiophiliac

"Andrew Jones has done it again!" **- Steve Guttenberg, The Audiophiliac**

Experience them in person at your local dealer or learn more online at mofielelectronics.com

While Bob Gendron was hard at work on the box set piece, I asked him for a handful of his favorite tracks of 2026.



The Tubs “Hard Life"

Angine de Poitrine “Sarniezz"

Vince Staples “Only in America"

Twisted Teens “Swamp"

Lydia Loveless “Let Me Get My Hopes Up"

Margo Price “Oval Room"

Lucinda Williams “How Much Did You Get for Your Soul"

Andrew Sa “Lavender Cowboy"

Margaret Glaspy “That Rose"

Charlotte Cornfield “Hurts Like Hell"

Phoebe Bridgers “As Above"

Jill Scott “Be Great"

Low Cut Connie “Get Down"

Ratboys “Know You Then"

Vial “Creep Smoothie"

Anthrax “It’s for the Kids"

Sunn O))) “Does Anyone Hear Like Venom?"

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In celebration of 40 years in the pursuit of high-performance in audio, conrad-johnson is pleased to present our new limited production ART150 (stereo 150 Watts/channel) and ART300 (mono 300 Watts) amplifiers, each a virtual window on the emotional experience of live music right in your home.



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INHouse
The soundtrack of the issue.

RZA is always good.

With a new Quentin Tarantino joint about to drop, it just made sense to go WAY back, and get back into this one.

And... RZA has some awesome snacks on Amazon to go with!



23 October 2012

The Man with the Iron Fists (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)

Various Artists
RZA

Play now

ALTERNATIVE RAP | LEFT-FIELD RAP | RAP | SOUNDTRACKS | STAGE & SCREEN | UNDERGROUND RAP

Offered the opportunity to direct a karate flick -- and with all the freedom, funding, and flash that an executive producer like Quentin Tarantino would allow -- Wu-Tang leader and kung-fu fanatic RZA must

Length	1hr 1min
Type	Soundtrack
Rating	★★★½☆
Format	FLAC 44.1kHz 16bit | E

TRACKS CREDITS VERSIONS

Focus Filter

The Baddest Man Alive Performed by RZA, The Black Keys	2		3:50	▶1
Black Out Performed by Ghostface Killah, Pharoahe Monch, M.O.P.	3		4:11	▶1
White Dress Performed by Ye	2		3:35	▶0
I Forgot to Be Your Lover Performed by Tre Williams, The Revelations, The Revelations			3:22	▶0
Get Your Way (Sex Is a Weapon) Performed by Talib Kweli, Idle Warship, R.E.S.			4:10	▶0
Rivers of Blood Performed by Wu-Tang Clan, Ghostface Killah, Raekwon, Kool G Rap	2		4:40	▶0
Built for This Performed by Freddie Gibbs, Method Man, Street Life			4:24	▶0
The Archer Performed by Killa Sin			2:55	▶0

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Damn Awesome Monoblocks - 2A3 parallel SET Class A Monoblock Integrated Amplifiers - 9.5 Watts/channel



Circuit Salad - 60 Watts/channel Hybrid Stereo Integrated Amplifier operating in Class A, Class A/B

Hear the Truth

Engineered with zero capacitors in the signal path. Hand-built in Oregon USA

info@whammerdyne.com

SHORTTake

By Jeff Dorgay

The Most Amazing Record Clamp, EVER...

Döhmann RC1 Mk3

$3,500
musicalsurroundings.com



If you think cables arouse the angry mob on the internet, post a pic of a $3,500 record clamp. Long-time TONE readers know that while I don't usually go for this kind of thing, I keep an open mind to examine what's out there.

Because when it comes to analog, everything matters. Setting up a turntable properly is like setting up the suspension on a high-performance car or motorcycle. When it's right, your ability to achieve greatness on the street or the track is so much higher than when it's wrong. If you watch any racing at all, or you've been out on the track yourself, you know that races are won in the corners. Anyone can go fast in a straight line.

But the more speed you can carry into a corner is just like a stylus tracing a record groove. The more you can keep that stylus centered in the groove, free from vibrations, the more music you extract from that groove. Take the emotion out of it, and the math remains.

And so it is with the Döhmann RC1 Mk3 record clamp/weight. A threaded version is available for those who need it, but we spent time with the non-threaded version.

I can only imagine how much more this clamp brings to the presentation on a zillion-dollar system with a mega turntable. However, while Chris and I both looked at this exquisitely machined piece with awe, contempt, and a hint of expectation bias, we started listening with the Technics SL-1210G and the DS Audio E003 cartridge in my Klipschorn-based system. (about $60k all in, including the clamp)

The instant the stylus hit the groove, this was major. Shockingly good, actually. Image focus sharpened up considerably, and frequency extremes at both ends of the scale were more defined, in a good way. Knowing how good Döhmann's engineering chops are, I wasn't surprised, yet I was.

SHORTTake

They talk about three separate types of resonance that the Mk3 is designed to combat: record resonance – the vibrations that are actually present in the slab of vinyl that is your record, spindle resonance, and isolation of the record from the spindle.

You can read the full explanation here at the Döhmann site:

https://dohmannaudio.com/helix-mk3-record-clamp/

A quick email to Mr. Dohmann reveals that it takes a couple of months from the first machining of raw parts to a finished batch. Again, refinement costs money.

While I never read other reviews in the middle of one of my own to avoid bias, I was curious to see what Michael Fremer wrote at the Tracking Angle, and he really did his home work on this one. Though he was using it with much higher-grade tables than my 1200, he heard the same things we did, but at a greater concentration. I have to acquiesce that this is one of the best equipment reviews I've ever read, and I tip my hat to him.

It's easy to get cranky pants about expensive components, and even more so about expensive accessories. Yet what the Döhmann RC1Mk3 brings to the presentation is substantial. If I were listening to a pair of 1200s side by side, one with the clamp, one without, and you told me the one with was $3,500 more, I'd pick that version and be totally happy.

Analog magic, if you will, is about nuance for me. If you want to listen to music, buy a $500 DAC and stream Qobuz—no shame in that.

The further you go down the analog path, or should I say, the more it pulls you in, the more you hear. That's what makes analog so special in the first place.

Removing the sonic degradations that a mechanical system brings to analog playback makes the result increasingly more realistic. This is what makes you forget about the gear and dive further into the music. On many levels, it makes the playback so much more relaxing.

In TONE's history, I have paid precious little attention to stuff like this. Most of it has been BS. That's why you've seen so few of these products reviewed in our pages.

I hope it carries some weight (pun intended) that I find the Döhmann RC1 Mk3 so incredible. Product of the Year award incredible. I don't want to be smug or dismissive about spending your money, but this is one item in your vinyl arsenal that I suggest you don't go without if you have the system and records that it makes sense. The more diverse your record collection, the more you will appreciate it, especially if you have a fairly dialed-in analog front end but want a new Scooby snack without changing your cartridge, tonearm, etc. I've certainly heard cables that cost 2-3 times what the Döhmann clamp does, offering significantly less, if any, real performance upgrade.

Again, it's like nailing the suspension setup on your sports car. On one hand, perhaps expensive, but on the other, priceless in the final result.

Allnic
H-7000 Phono Preamplifier

$19,800 ($21,300 with silver 1st stage upgrade)
kevalinaudio.com

Four inputs. How cool is that?

The more your record collection grows, the more multiple turntables, tonearms, and cartridges make sense.

That way it's possible to have your entire collection sound great.

With two MM and two MC inputs, and a gaggle of gain/loading options, this LCR phonostage can be your last purchase. The H-7000 is the ultimate in flexibility. And sonically beautiful to boot.



Staccato
BU-01 Integrated Amplifier

$15,990
staccatoaudio.com

The BU-01 was by far one of the nicest sounding amplifiers at the Warsaw hifi show. As senior editor Rob Johnson and I are both huge fans (bias admitted) of Class A solid-state amplifiers we had big smiles when company founder Jakub Honkisz told us that the BU-01 was a single ended Class-A design.

You just know when it's right.

Honkisz has agreed to let us listen to this one long term, so we will be pairing it with as many different speakers as we can while it is here. You'll be seeing a lot of this one on Instagram!



Enleum
AMP-54R Integrated Amplifier

$25,000
enleum.com/store/amp-54r/

The last Enleum amplifier we reviewed, their 23-r, was a product of the year and a refernce component here for a number of years. (Jerold O'Brien still has it, driving a pair of Quad 57s)

The new flagship 54-r, delivers more power, switchable between a high-current (50 wpc) and high-voltage (115 wpc) mode to be able to custom tailor it to whatever speakers you have on hand, or might be considering purchasing.

In addition, there is a current-mode MC stage built in, so this is truly an all-in-one piece.

We are anxiously awaiting this one...



Rega
Naia Turntable
w/Aphelion 2 MC cartridge

$18,995 w/cart, $14,995 sans cart
soundorg.com (NA Distributor)
rega.co.uk (Mfr)

Our Journey with Rega goes way back. Back to 1980. And we were at Roy Gandy's house in 2008 when he was showing off the prototype of what would be come the edition of 50 Naiad turntable.

So this one's personal. Big time. The regular production Naia is the most prescise turntable Rega can build. And while it may look like a P10 from the outside, the materials and production tolerances are far higher.

The new Aphelion2 cartridge is spectacular, and this is the easiest high end turntable to set up. Full stop.

Resulting in the best Rega table in regular production.



THE $10K TUBE PHONOSTAGE FOR 1/3 THE PRICE



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- DICK OLSHER, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND GOLDEN EAR AWARDS 2024

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Oilily
A211 Mk. II
SET integrated amplifier

$1,749
oilily-hifi.com

If you've ever been SET-curious, but want a bit more than the 8 or 9 watts per channel a 300B amplifier delivers, consider the Oilily A211 Mk. II.

Utilizing 211 tubes that are run very gently, this amplifier delivers about 12 watts per channel. That may not seem like a ton, but it's nearly 50% more power than a 300B and opens up many more speaker possibilities.

We've purchased the review sample, and are having a ton of fun with this one. With 6SN7 drivers, you can tube roll for days.





Introducing

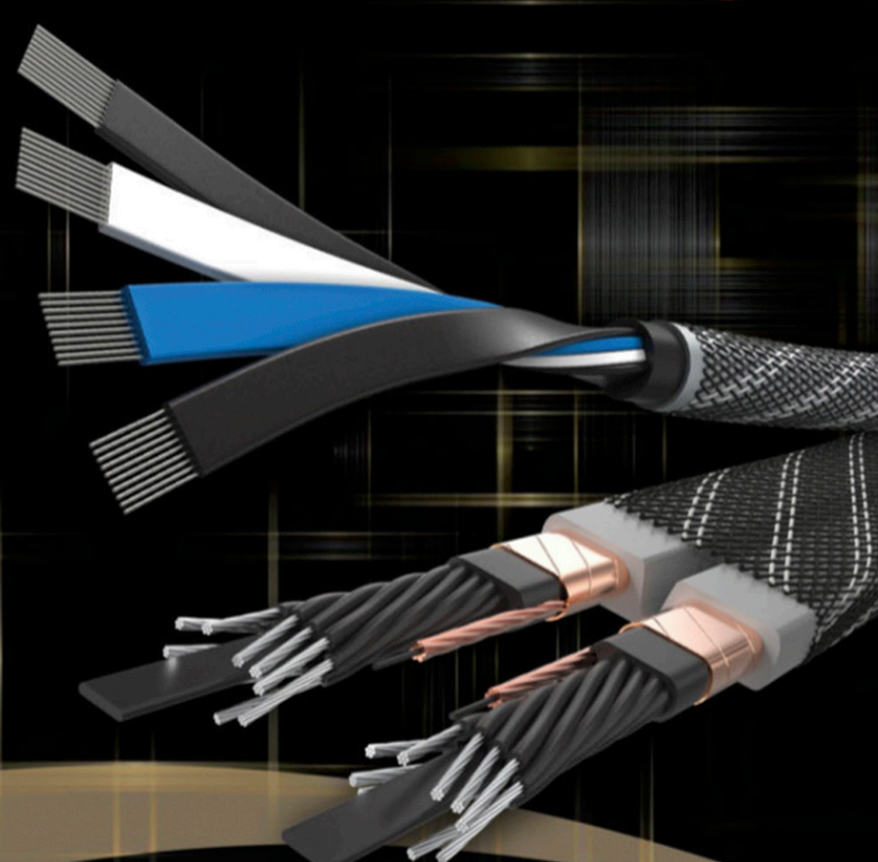
WIREWORLD®
CABLE TECHNOLOGY

SERIES 10 Xtraordinary

New Ultra-quiet **COMPOSILEX®** 5 insulation improves textural purity, enabling us to hear quieter sonic details than ever before.

New **DNA HELIX®** designs have more strand groups, which strengthens the electromagnetic field that moves the signal, providing greater resolution, image focus and dynamic contrasts.

The combination of these technical improvements provides surprising upgrades in recreating the power and delicacy of live music.



a David Salz innovation

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Other cables filter your music.
Wireworld cables let the most music through.

Technology that channels musical expression.

www.wireworldcable.com

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Engineered for Reality™

Luxman L-100 Centennial Integrated Amplifier

$11,999
luxmanamerica.com

When pressed, our publisher will tell anyone that his favorite integrated amplifier of all time, is the Luxman L590-AXII. 30wpc of pure Class-A power, a great phono section, beautiful power meters, and tone controls that work incredibly subtly.

Luxman chose to bring back a Class-A model for their 100th anniversary.

It upholds the tradition perfectly, and we can pretty much guarantee this is a review sample that won't be returned.

If this fits your design brief, there is nothing we'd suggest more highly.



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*Free turntable setup is included with the purchase of a turntable and phono cartridge.





Quad Platina
Integrated Amplifier

$5,495
mofidistribution.com

Quad has really been on a roll lately, with new dynamic speakers, a revamp of their legendary ESL's a re-do of the 33/303 series and now, the entirely new Platina.

This 200 watt per channel amplifier features a proper class AB output stage, massive power supply, and an internal DAC along with an MM/MC phono stage.

It's the perfect all in one, for the person wanting great sound in one box.

And it sounds lovely with our vintage Quad 57s too.


BREAKING NEWS
Cardas Audio
“Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing”
- Pauline T., 1868

Wattson Audio
Madison Phono Preamplifier and Power S

$5,495 and $2,750
wattson.audio/madison-phono

You might just be looking at the future of the phono stage. Wattson, a subsidiary of CH Precision, has adapted their phono technology from the larger pieces in the lineup to produce the Madison. And it's made in the same factory with the same group of people building the mega CH gear.

It can be configured as a transimpedance pre, for MC use, MM, or for an optical cartridge. But theres more...





MINE
it should be YOURS

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.



Stuff Storage

From Toyo Steel

$35
https://rarely.co/pages/toyo-t150

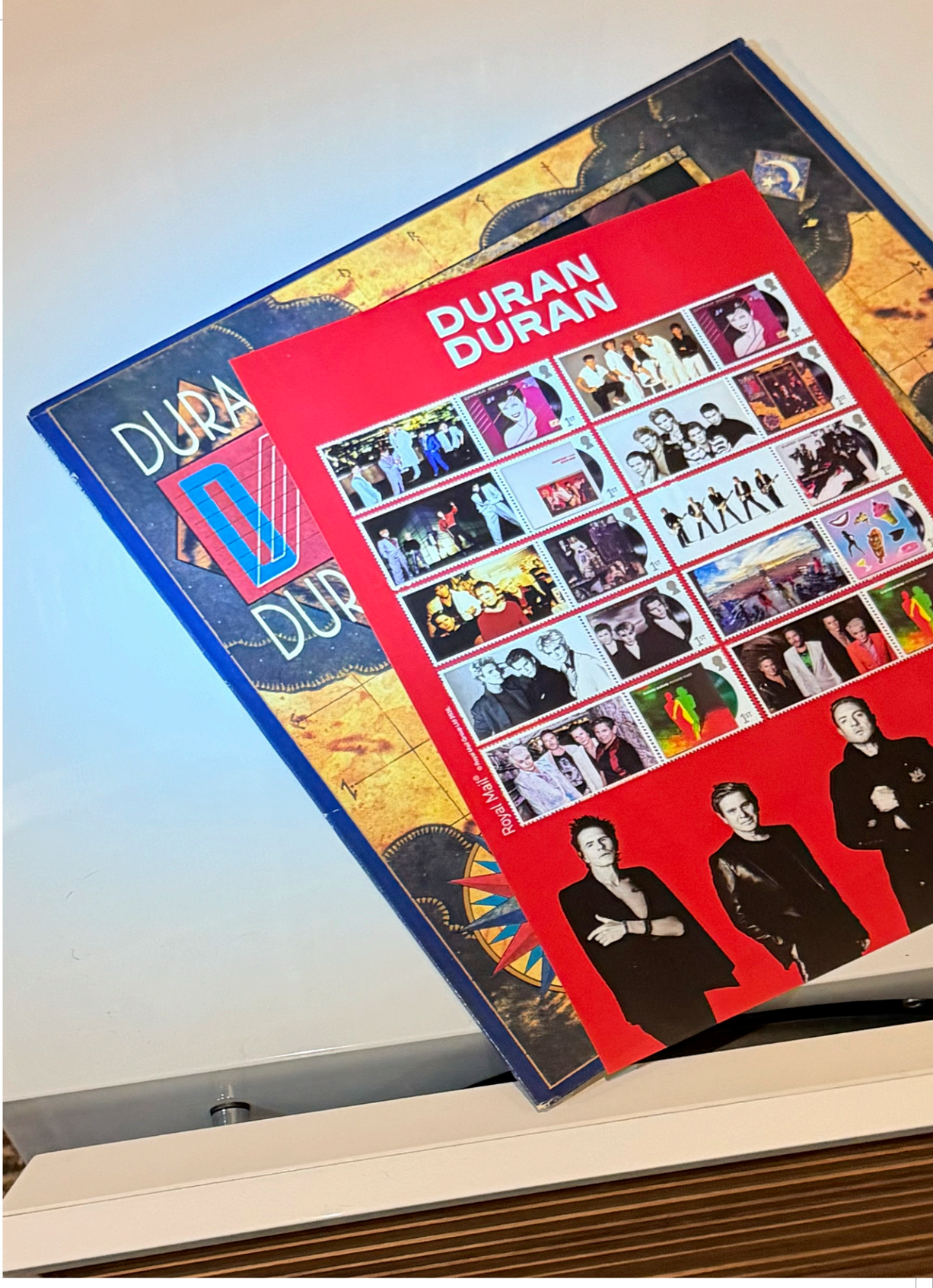
Toyo Steel's small cases are made from a single piece of steel, with no welds.

They come in a wide range of very cool colors, and the 6" x 4" size is perfect for keeping your analog tools in one place.

Built to stack, you can keep a lot of small things out of entropy's way.

Exquisitely made, highly recommended

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For the stamp collectors in the audience...

About $30 per sheet
royalmail.co.uk

When I saw the DuranDuran stamps pop up on my Instagram feed, I immediatly went to the Royal Mail website to snag a sheet.

What could be cooler than mailing a note to your favorite friend from back in the day with a Duran Duran stamp affixed?

Bring back the art of letter writing with something fab.

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Repeat Play: The WaxRax RC-2 Cart

$2,075
waxrax.com

This is the first time in the TONE's history, that we're featuring something twice.

The WaxRax RC-2 cart has been getting daily use now for ten years, and it remains the handiest vinyl accessory ever.

Whether you only have 3-400 records and want to keep it portable, or thousands of LP's and want to keep your favesclose by, there's still nothing better.

Ten years later it still looksas lovely as the day we uncrated it.

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*

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The best way to butter

Anything....

$19
thebuttercrayon.com

How can you not want this?

Whether you love corn on the cob, waffles or perhaps some crazy playtime, applying butter could never be easier with the butter crayon.

Our inner Homer Simpson says a big yes to this.



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Image courtesy of Swatch PR.

Sleek Swatches

$110-120
swatch.com

While we are watch geeks here at TONE, we really love Swatches.

The What If... collection features a 33 x 33 mm face, and these recent models are part of the What if...Jelly? collection.

With five bold, bright colors to choose from, these are made of biosourced materials.

Defintely a great bit of color to add to your day.

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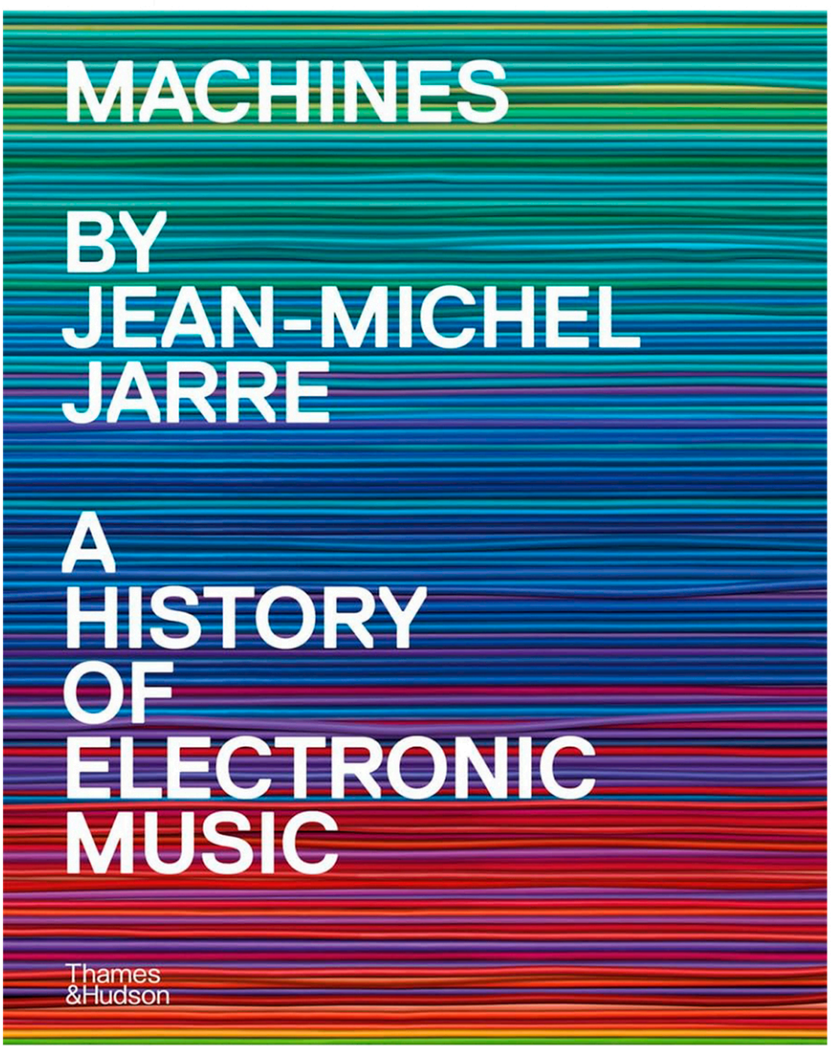
How cool is this?

$23.95
modcrafted.com

With holiday season right around the corner, fun presents, and fun wrapping materials are probably at the top of your list.

Why not wrap a few small gifts in some Depeche Mode cassette-spine wrapping paper? The perfect thing for that friend of yours that loves DM.





Or this?

$65
amazon.com

Due out on Nov. 24, just in time for Thanksgiving, this book from Electronica pioneer, Jean-Michel Jarre, gives an overview of part of his collection of various synthesizers.

Also included in his story are comments from fellow electronic music creators.

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ARIA

www.clarisysaudioglobal.com

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But you cant have it...

The Limited Edition Mazda Roadster FSW Ver.2

About $40,000 (Japan only)
mazda.com

Mazda treats the MX-5 with great respect, and has always given fans special models over the years with unique colors and trim packages.

They've outdone themselves with the FSW Ver.2, as only six will be made, and they will only be available in the home market - with the lucky owners being required to win a lottery to purchase.

The six cars are bathed in yellow by Mazda Engineering and Technology, with sticker and documentation to match.

Photos courtesy of Mazda Japan





clearaudio

THE NEW ENTRY POINT INTO HIGH END PERFORMANCE

"The Clearaudio Compass was one of the finest-sounding belt-drive turntables I've heard."

- Tom Fine, Stereophile, November 2026

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COMPASS

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WA-CHAA, Indeed

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amazon.com

What could be better than Kung Fu and spicy snacks courtesy of RZA?

If you are a fan of the genre, you know these spicy nuts are immortal.



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www.aquahifi.com
info@aquahifi.com

Playlist no.5

Club Mix has a new contributor this issue that prefers to stay in the shadows for now. Here's a 15-track list in the jazzy chillout vein for your listening pleasure.

Enjoy!



Thievery Corporation – Lebanese Blonde

Nightmares on Wax – Morse

Massive Attack – Teardrop (feat. Elizabeth Fraser)

Air – All I Need (feat. Beth Hirsch)

Portishead – Roads

DJ Shadow – Building Steam with a Grain of Salt

Zero 7 – Destiny (feat. Sia & Sophie Barker)

Tosca – Suzuki

Boozoo Bajou – Take It Slow (feat. Joe Dukie & U-Brown)

Jazzanova – Fedime's Flight

St. Germain – Rose Rouge

Peace Orchestra – Domination

Kid Loco – She's My Lover

Bonobo – Flutter

dZihan & Kamien – Strophobia

See you in 2027!



FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL AUDIO EXPO

Listening In Paradise

www.floridaaudioexpo.com

"Great vibe, nice venue and enthusiastic attendees! And hey - Florida in February isn't bad either!"
Angela Cardas Meredith, Cardas Audio

"The clientele are enthusiastic about the music. You see people of all ages... It's a lovely show!"
Kevin Hayes, VAC

"It's the perfect size show. Great mix of gear, and not too big you can't see it all in the weekend. And - Waffle House just down the street. Awesome."
Jeff Dorgay - TONEAudio Magazine

DEALERS That Mean Business.

We've had this section at the back of TONE for some time now, and actually beforewe got hit with COVID, and it was easier to just pop in your favorite hifi store for acursory visit, I was planning on a series of road trips 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, butthe best dealers have adapted and are still thriving. Innovate or perish, as the sayinggoes. Many have gone to an appointments only model, which hasn't been all that much ofa stretch, because many hifi shops had adopted this model, or at least a semi-appointment model before the current situation.

Of course, stricter anti-cootiesprotocols 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 2026 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. And despite the wacky world, I see them making a comback.

NAGRA

The New Preamp II-S

Focus.



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lmche.com
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Marietta, Georgia - The Audio Company

www.theaudioco.com
146 South Park Square NE
Marietta, Georgia 30060 770.429.0434



50 BRANDS

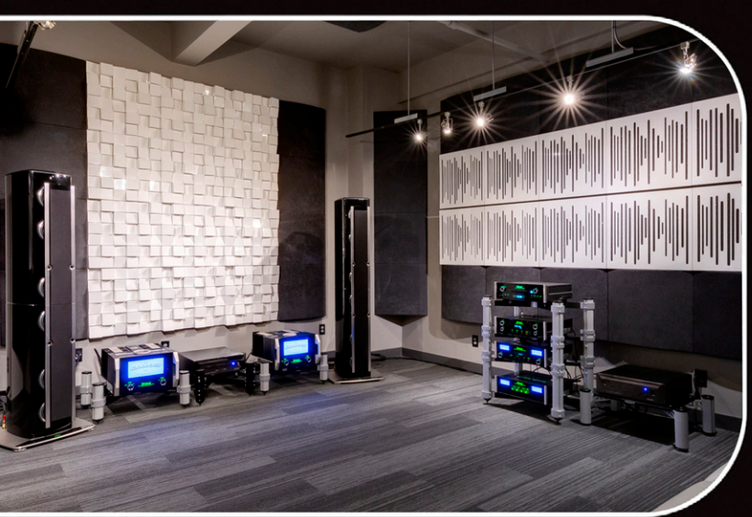
8 DEMO ROOMS

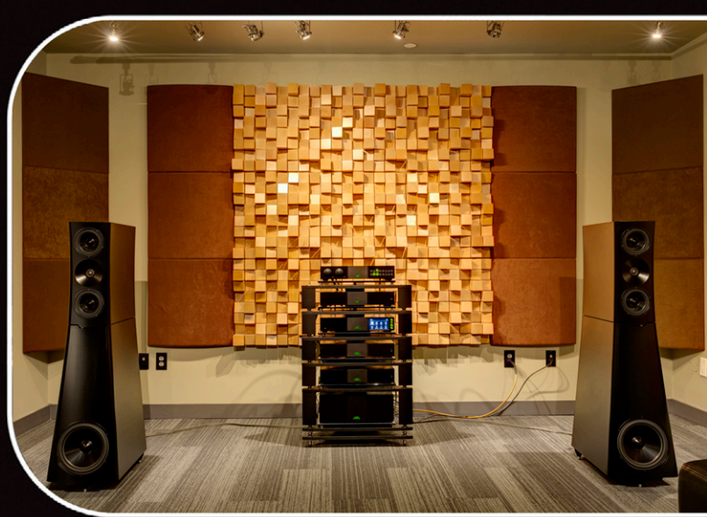
1 LOCATION

hifi centre







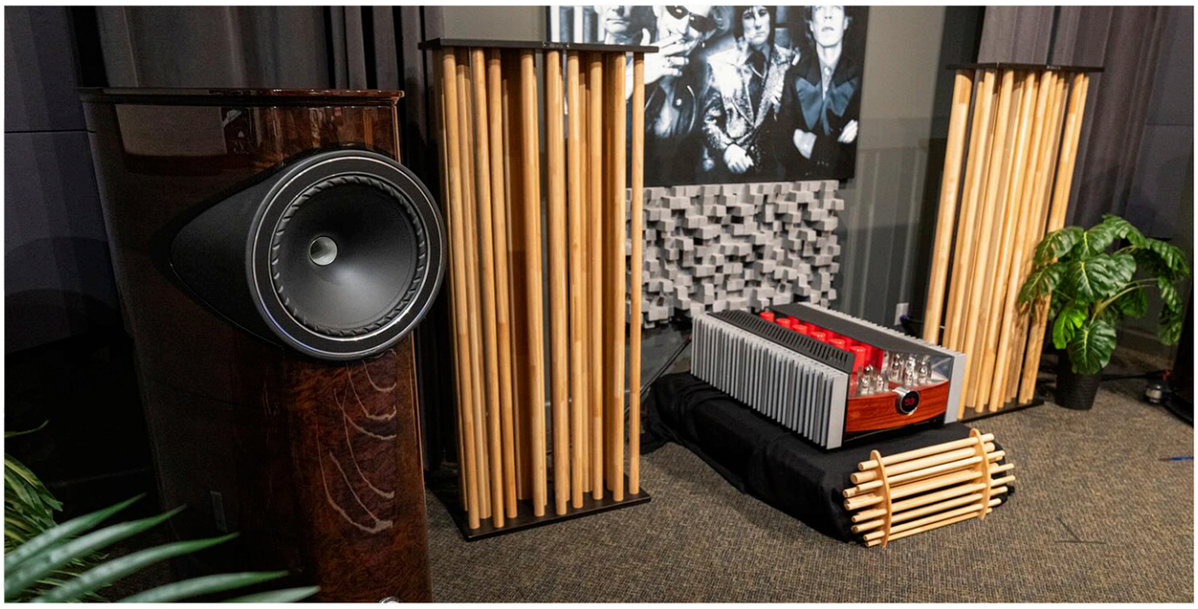


hificentre.com

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La Verne, California - Upscale Audio

upscaleaudio.com
2058 Wright Avenue
La Verne, California 91750 909.931.9686



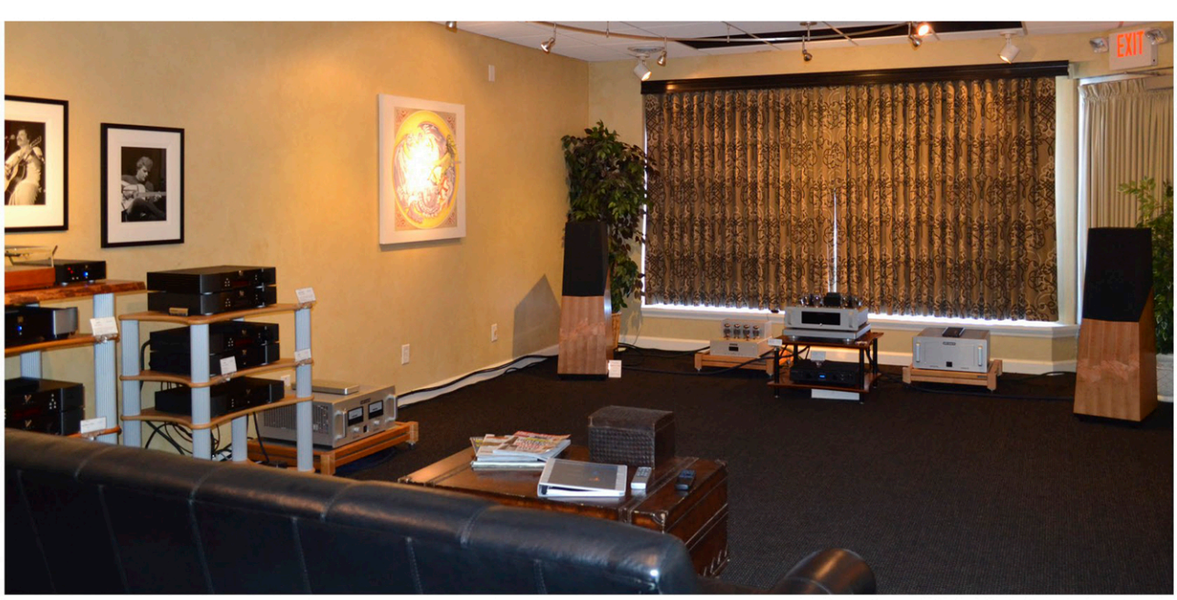
Vestal, New York - Audio Classics

audioclassics.com
3501 Vestal Road,
Vestal, New York 13850 800.321.2834



Wauwatosa, Wisconsin - Ultra Fidelis

www.ultrafidelis.com
7125 West North Avenue
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53213 414.221.0200



Sarasota, Florida - Suncoast Audio

www.suncoastaudio.com
7353 International Place, Unit 309
Sarasota, Florida 34240 941.932.0282



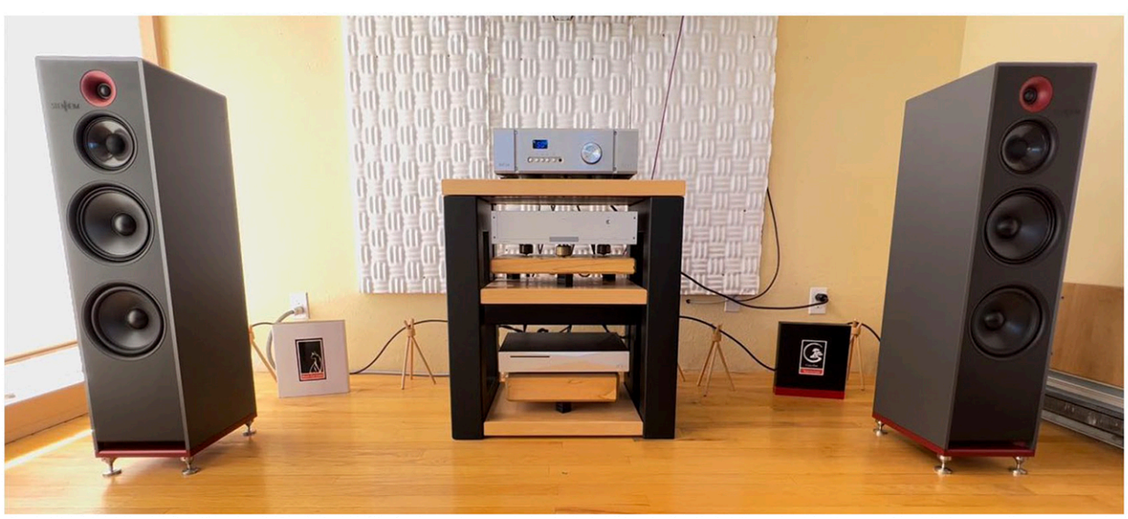
Morton Grove, Illinois - Quintessence Audio

quintessanceaudio.com
5701 W. Dempster Street
Morton Grove, Illinois 60053 847.966.4434



Santa Fe, New Mexico - Gestalt Audio

www.gestalthifi.com
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Santa Fe, NM 87508 (by appointment)



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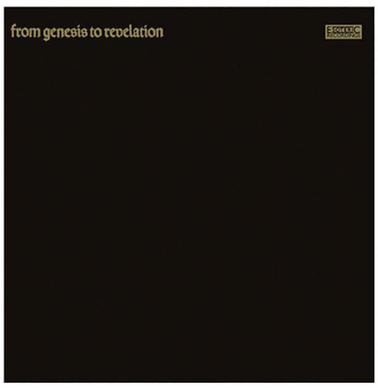
Onliners

Some of our latest trials. Thanks to your favorite streaming services, you can vet these selections, should you care to commit to physical media.

Enjoy!



The cover got me



For hard core fans only



Still on the boulevard



Always room for it



Get off my lawn



Still the cutest Beatle



Music for colonoscopies



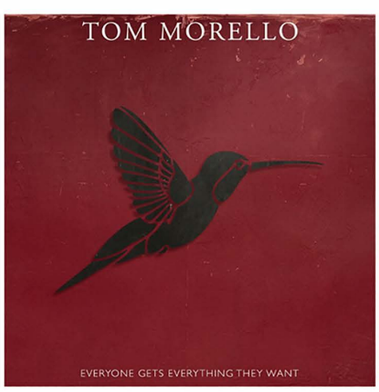
Touch my monkey



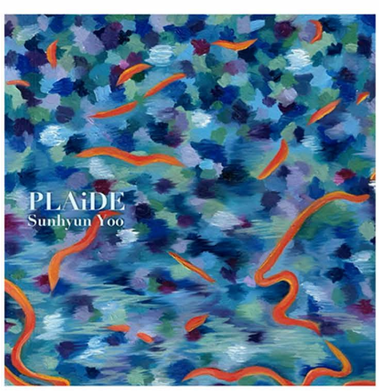
How can you resist this?



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Zappa + Audioslave = THIS



Jetsons Jazz/Prog



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The **adept**Response conditioner family, available in standard, and the *new* **T3**, and **T4**. We believe the role of the power conditioner is to improve the audio performance of your system, not just protect it.

"I'll admit that I've never been a dedicated fan of this segment. But the Audience suggests something different."
Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound,* Issue 275.

audience

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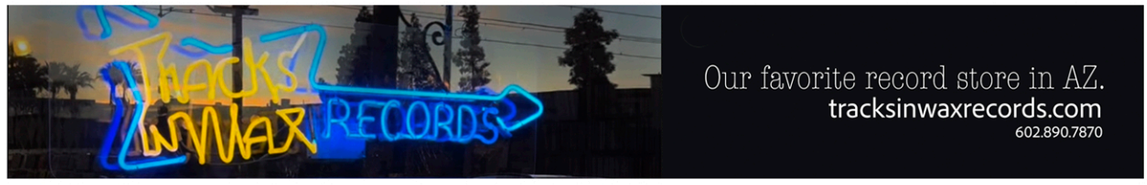
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MoFi Distribution	mofidistribution.com
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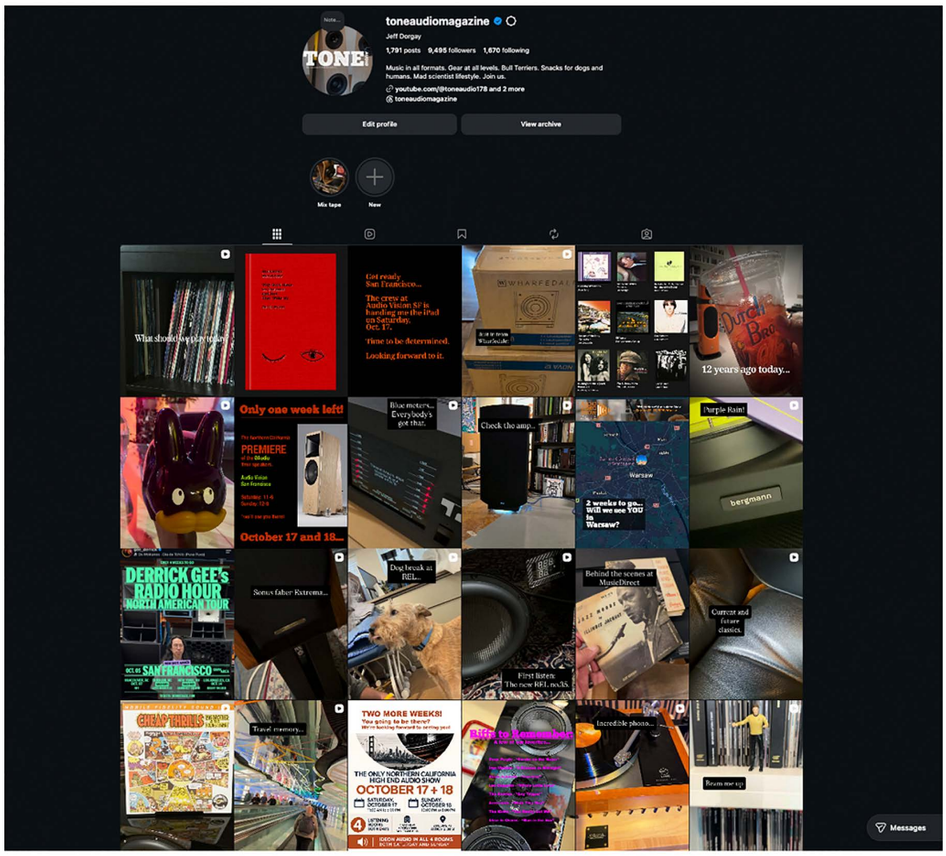
H&T HEEL & toe Magazine
Musings on the daily life of an obsessed automobile enthusiast





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I resisted the Instagram thing for so long, it's not even funny. Posted a few pics, got a few followers, and didn't think about it much after that.

Then, this spring the light bulb went off, and I can't tell you exactly why, but I decided we should be out there.

I've been on a tear since Axpona, and we've grown to almost 10,000 followers. All organic, no buying followers, and not even that many "boosts."

So, I'd like to take this time to personally thank all of you that are supporting us out here.

I'm trying to share fun pictures, 10-second clips, and as you know even a few shots of the doggos now and then. If you've read TONE at all over the last five years you know how much I truly love my two bull terriers, Ricki and Lucy. Some of you have even shared your dogs with us, and on many levels, that means more than pics of your system or record collection.

A bit of humanity is always a good thing.

And I've made it a point to try and respond to as many comments and messages as humanly possible.

Unlike so many other internet people who have abandoned contact with their public, unless being paid, I enjoy interacting with you. The comments have been good, and the vibe has been very friendly, as well as inviting.

Here's to more growth in 2027.



Still looking for that real tomato

Having just seen those loveable spuds the other day, I was motivated to pull this special edition of *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are DEVO!* and revisit the past a little more.

On a side note, we are anxiously awaiting the first to DEVO albums getting the Mobile Fidelity treatment in the near future.

Add a third dimension to your 2-D world. We must repeat.


Feel the *woof* in subwoofers
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LAST Word

our parting thought...



How did fall creep up on us so quickly?

I hope you all had a great summer, and got to spend a few hours with the screens off and the wind in your hair.

We've got a busy fall, winter, and spring in store.

As Patti Smith said: "There's always more labor to do..."

Next issue, 128:

Next issue... a little bit of this, a little bit of that.

This has been an incredibly frantic year. Back on the plane.
A LOT. We've grown Instagram like crazy, and ready to start
with YouTube. We need to go back to print too. (did I say that?)
We'll see.

Thank you all for the ongoing support.



TONE