

TONEAudio.

The e-journal of analog
and digital sound.

no.15

2008

MILLION DOLLAR IPOD SOUND!

A FULL REPORT ON
THE **WADIA 170**

MAKANA

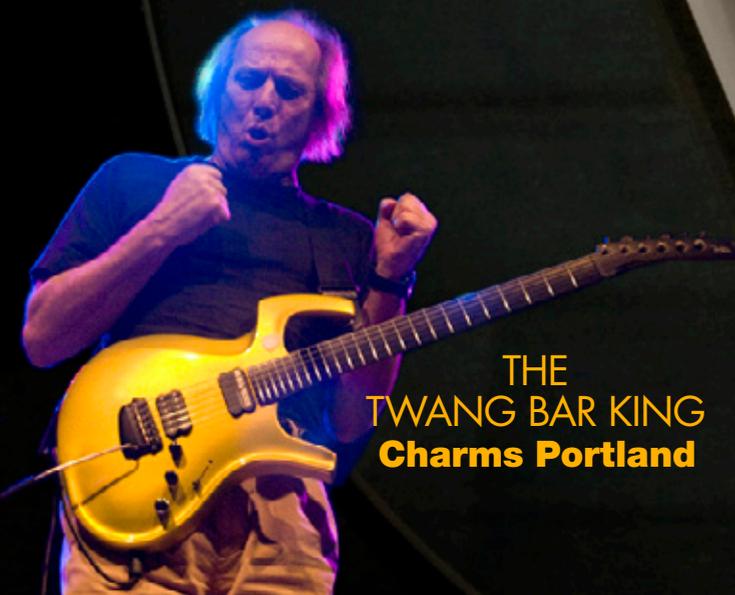
THE EMERGING VOICE
OF SLACK ROCK

DYNAUDIO'S CONTOUR S1.4 SPEAKERS

NEWS FROM
MONTREAL

BUDGET BOOM From MartinLogan

**ENTRY LEVEL
CONTINUUM TABLE**
WE TEST THE CRITERION



THE
TWANG BAR KING
Charms Portland



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(on the cover)



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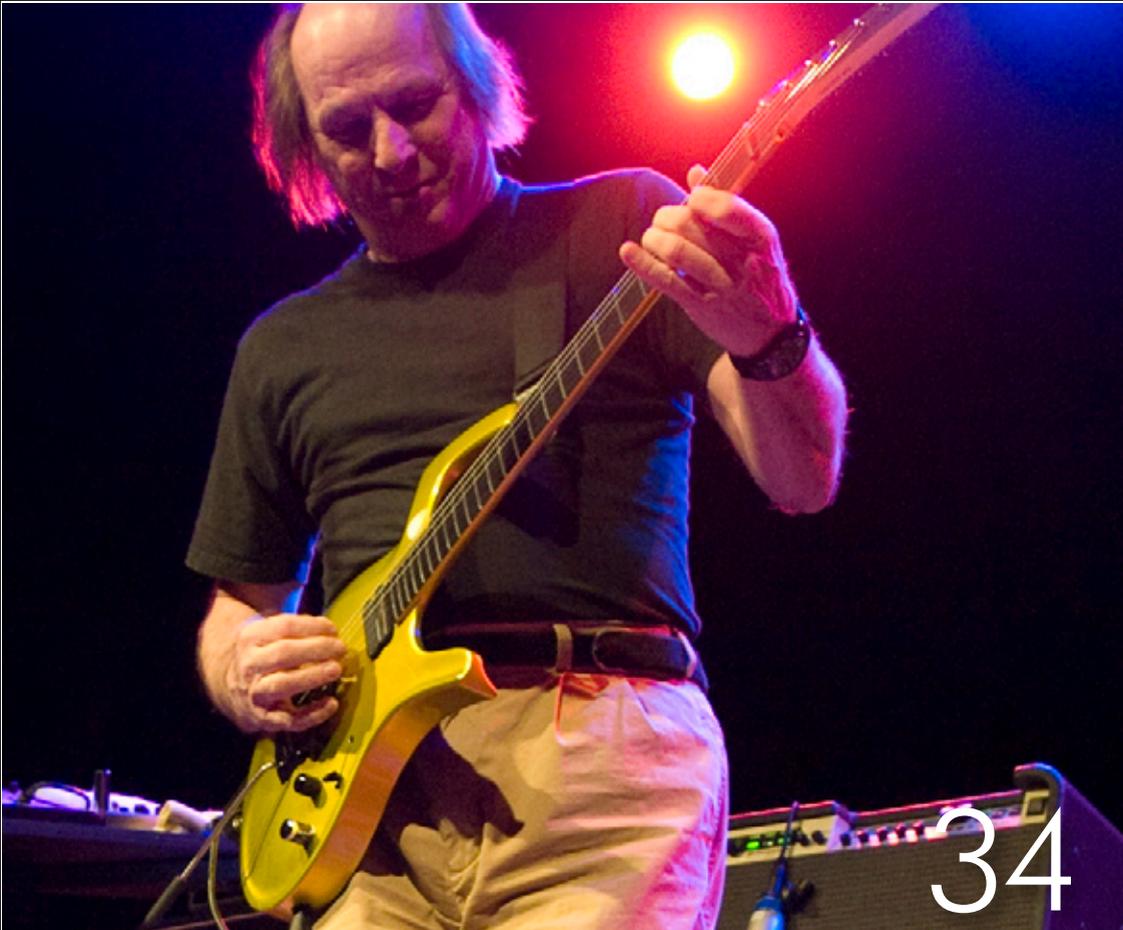
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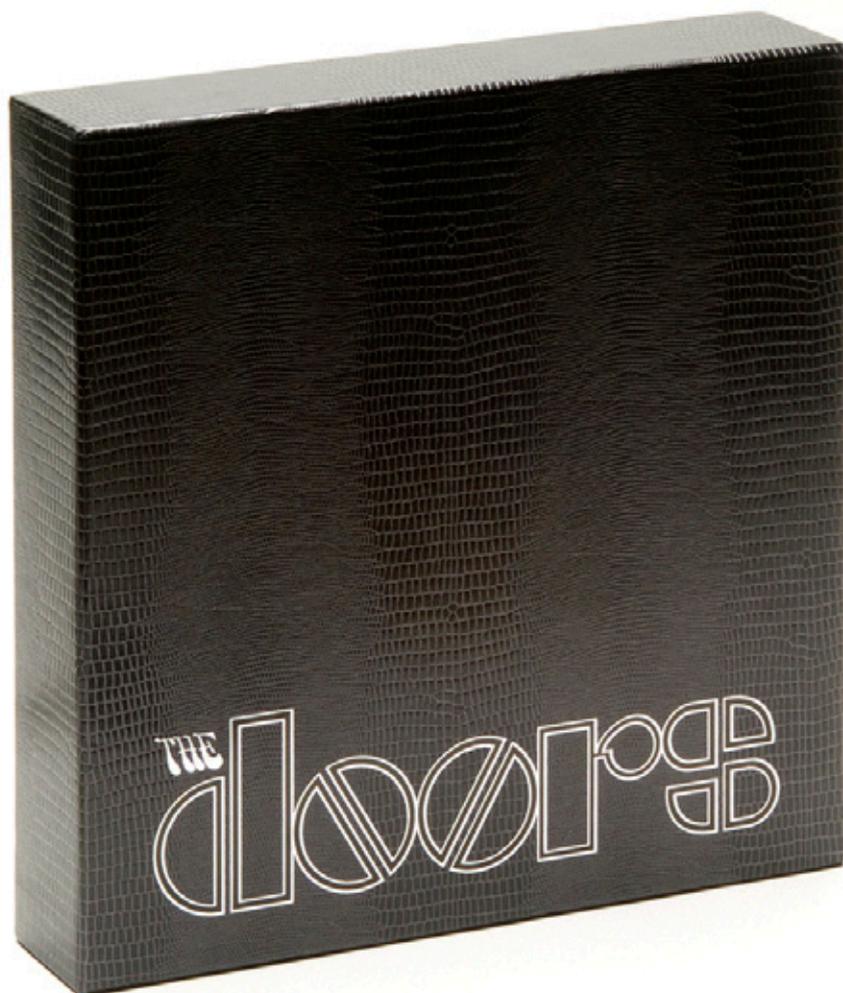
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new in tone this issue



Li'l Beethoven & Li'l Mozart
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SANDY GREENE

Hailing from the City of Brotherly Love, Sandy's first enlightening high-end audio experience came in the late '80s listening to music with Robert Becker, one of SOTA Turntables' founders. In the early 90s Sandy was a member of an indie-rock band on the Bar/None label. He fondly remembers his time in the recording studio and especially at the Masterdisk mastering suite in NYC.

Today Sandy manages web design for one of the world's largest financial institutions and has been reviewing audio equipment for a couple of web 'zines. He is now extremely happy to make his favorite audio magazine, TONEAudio, his new home.

Balancing his time between coaching his son's baseball and soccer teams, the aforementioned full time job and his writing duties, he always manages to catch a cool indie-rock show at least once a month. We look forward to Sandy's contributions on the music side as much as the gear side.

KEITH GUISINGER

The newest addition at TONE and Echo Audio, Keith brings an encyclopedic knowledge of vintage gear to the table and starts his first column for TONE with the Old School feature on table radios.

A recently retired sales guy from the software industry, we're very excited to have another person around that shares our love for vintage hifi.

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Curious why we have the \$379 Wadia 170 iDock on our cover instead of the \$56,000 Continuum turntable? Because that little dock will bring a lot more people into the world of hifi than a \$56,000 turntable ever will. That is what we need more of, my friends. Just like our kids will eventually be changing our diapers when we get old, they are going to need to keep the flame of hifi alive and we are going to have to meet them on their turf if we expect them to get interested.

Don't get me wrong, I love vinyl and I love listening to records. I own thousands of them and continue to buy them every chance I get. Not to mention the four turntables, three phono preamps and ten phono cartridges sitting around here (that I OWN, I'm not even talking about review gear). So please don't think I'm abandoning you analog lovers in the crowd.

But let's get serious. Most 17 year olds that don't have audiophiles for moms or dads don't even know what an LP is anymore. Wanting proof, we sent our roving reporters to their respective college campuses to ask around. Not much interest in LP's. And though we are going through an analog renaissance right now with amazing vinyl being repressed and a lot of pretty good new vinyl to boot, it's going to pass eventually. (Hopefully not for a while yet, because I need to buy a lot more records)

So who's buying all of these expensive turntables and \$50 records? People like my buddy Keith who earns a decent living. After a brief stint with a Rega P3 and a modest phono preamp, he became so enamored with analog that he instantly bought a BAT VK-10SE to go with the rest of his BAT system, a VPI HRX and a big pile of records. He loves it, but 17 year olds can't spend that kind of dough on analog. As long as we have guys like Keith in our midst, vinyl will have an audience and that's cool.

Being ever the amateur Psychologist, I'm always studying the human condition and I like to use my friends as test subjects. For a couple of weeks, I moved my Sooloos music server out of the living room and put my Rega P3 turntable on top of the rack. After a couple of days of squealing from my daughter, she begrudgingly started using the CD player, but had no interest in the vinyl. When her friends came over and music was playing, no one went "what's that, tell me more?" Actually, they made a lot of snide comments, but I digress.

When the P3 was replaced with the Wadia 170, something very different happened. Everyone wanted to plug their iPod in and hear the difference a good system made. Not only my daughter and her friends raised their eyebrows, but my other friends that are anti-audiophiles as well. "You mean my iPod can sound this good?" Mmm-hmm. Pretty exciting that all that great sound is locked up in that little box!

That's when the dialog of uncompressed/lossless vs. MP3 started. "How come my iPod doesn't sound as good as yours?" "That's all I have to do?" You get the picture. So, I didn't convert anyone to vinyl that month, but I got a lot of people to stop buying music at the iTunes store and start ripping their CD's in lossless format. And that's where the doors of perception to better quality sound open.

I'm sure a few of them might become full blown audiophiles and maybe even stumble into the world of analog someday. But in the end, if I've helped a few people enjoy music more, it's a good day. Besides, they will still need amps, speakers and cables! And as always, we'll do our best to help you wade through all of it.





"I'm sorry, but we just can't consider 20 thousand dollar speaker cables a miscellaneous expense!"

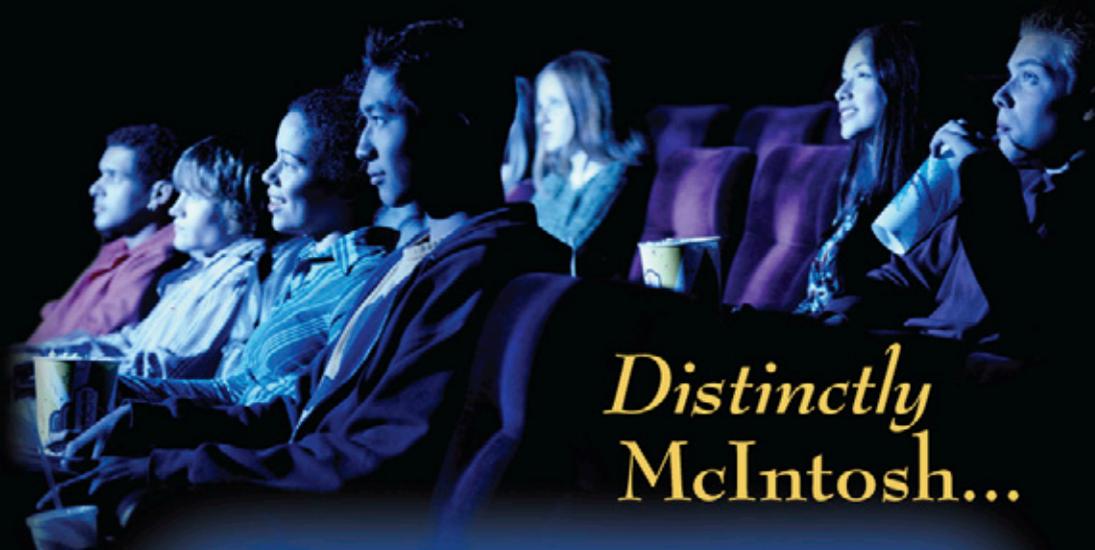
Table Radios From the Vault

By Keith Guisinger

Picture this scenario: Dwight Eisenhower has just finished his second term and John F. Kennedy is elected president of the United States. The cold war is at it's height and the Chevy Impala rules the road. Cassius Clay wins the gold medal in boxing at the summer Olympics and Elvis has just gotten out of the army. The year, of course, was 1960.

OLD SCHOOL:





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Into this cultural backdrop comes the introduction of the KLH Model 8 table radio; a true high fidelity, high selectivity, vacuum tube FM table radio. Its inventor was the late Henry Kloss (pronounced with a long "o", as in "close call") whose fame was such that his mere initial was instantly recognizable to a generation of music lovers as the "K" in KLH. Kloss had recently left AR, Acoustic Research, where he and his partner (also his former physics teacher), Edgar Villchur, had developed the first acoustic suspension speakers.

During this time in America, radio was truly in a state of flux – no longer the centerpiece of family entertainment due in large part to the recent introduction of television. Radios were changing with the times too; they became smaller and added FM reception which was technically superior to AM reception. The KLH Model 8 was, gasp, FM only! *(continued)*



It cost \$159 in 1960 and it was not stereo. As crazy as that may have sounded at the time, the Model 8 was an over the top success, enjoying a four-year production run. It sold over 12 thousand units and spawned a bevy of imitators.

Kloss had the foresight to include a “multiplex” input jack on the back of the model 8 into which an adaptor for stereo could be inserted. He later developed the KLH Model 13 “transistorized adaptor” to decode FM stereo multiplex when the standard became available in 1962.

The model 8 table radio is very “old school” in the best sense of the term. It features a point-to-point, hand wired, 7 tube chassis. The cabinet was made of solid walnut and the two acoustic suspension (from AR, of course) speakers were acoustically matched to their enclosure for maximum linear bass response and also electrically matched to the twin 6BM8 push-pull output stage for maximum power efficiency. These two factors contributed greatly to its wonderful sound.

This tube was also a space saver, being a dual section tube. The Model 8 used one triode section as the input, with the other half utilized for the output, eliminating another pair of tube sockets and their associated chassis space.

A few years later, Kloss left KLH after the “L” (Malcolm Low) and the “H” (Anton Hoffman, son of the famous pianist Jozef Hoffman) parted ways. He went on to form another famous audio company, Advent, in 1967 and create yet another audio classic, the Advent model 400 FM table radio in 1974.

Can a transistorized unit be “old school”? You bet! This baby was a flawless performer with great sound and many 400’s are still in constant use today. Or is that a Tivoli? Hmmm.

Like the KLH, the Advent 400 still has a big following, with collectors everywhere. Also making use of a big tuning dial, the 400 offers both bass and treble controls. Firing up the two examples we had here, revealed great sound with the tubed model being a bit warmer. Both sounded much more musical than my modern Music Hall table radio, so Mr. Kloss was a true visionary!

The KLH model 8 and the Advent 400 were in a class of their own. They’re not tuners because they have an amplifier. And they’re not receivers because they have their own speaker. Each filled a need for a compact, high quality system.

(continued)



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Fast forward to 2000 when Henry Kloss' ex-partner in Cambridge Soundworks, Tom Devesto, called him up and requested that he come out of retirement to design the new Tivoli Model 1 table radio. This wonderful table radio has become the industry's little darling and is immediately recognizable as a Kloss design.

Sadly, Henry Kloss passed away in 2002 at the age of 72. Henry Kloss summed it up best: referring to criticism for the unheard of price in 1960 of \$159 for his KLH model 8, he stated, **"It's a lot of money for a radio, but it's a lot of radio for the money."** I think history agrees with him.

Keep in mind, these are vintage pieces, so if you are intrigued with getting your hands on one, a clean Advent 400 will run around \$200-250, while a mint KLH 8 can bring almost \$400 on the used market. If you want a little piece of hifi nostalgia, they are definitely worth checking out. ●



Making Music Fun Again!

THE ZU DL-103 PHONO CARTRIDGE

By Jeff Dorgay



I've always said that the extremes are where the innovation is in high-end audio. Exotic solutions to engineering problems can be exploited when money is no object, which can lead to some pretty cool things, but the same can be said at the other end of the spectrum. When you are on a tight budget, every dime is critical, because you just can't resort to all those unobtainium parts and processes, so you have to get creative. Sometimes a bit more creative.

BUDGET GEAR:

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Which puts me in my present situation. The last six months, I've been in analog heaven, with cool stuff from all over the price spectrum to evaluate, not least the entry level (\$56 grand?) Continuum table and a four-foot high pile of phono preamps from \$600 all the way up to about \$10k. **However, the Zu DL-103 really caught my eye for a number of reasons: It's hard to get a decent cartridge, MC or MM for \$400.** You can send me all the emails you want about how great your Shure M97 is, but I've been listening to that cartridge in my budget system for a while now and it's pretty boring. I've tried the other obvious choices from Audio Technica and even Dynavector (who I have a major fondness for) but they've all left me pretty cold.

Reason number two is that Art Dudley over at *Stereophile* is a pretty cool cat, who possesses an uncanny ability to pick winners from off the beaten path, especially when it comes to affordable gear. Much as I'd like to say this one was my idea, when I saw his review in the December issue of *Stereophile*, I decided to take a bit more time to investigate this beauty even further.

What really makes the Zu version of this classic cartridge is their taking it out of it's stock (read: loose) plastic housing and puts it in a super cool aluminum body. It now becomes a nude design that could easily fool friends that don't know about this cartridge that you paid two grand for it, based on looks alone. The impedance is a relatively high 40 ohms and the output is a relatively low .3mv, so you will need a decent step up device. *(continued)*

Avoiding the Golden Ear Syndrome

No, I didn't bother mounting the Zu cartridge up to the Continuum's coolio carbon fiber arm, or for that matter my SME i.Vi. That would be silly. Most of the people thinking about this cartridge are further down the food chain. This baby is going to end up on a lot of Rega P3's, Scouts and dare I say it, the Technics SL-1200. So that's where I spent my time.

Unfortunately, we reviewers often get accused of being elitist jerks that only get off on hearing six figure systems, so to shut everyone up, I spent some time putting together a kick ass budget system to listen to on my desktop. It started out *really* budget with a Harmon Kardon 330C receiver, but that was a bit TOO budget. Space was at a premium and I wanted something that could fit on my desktop. My used pair of ProAc Tablettes were mated to a Croft Polestar 1 power amplifier with 25 watts per channel and it's mate, the battery powered Precession 1 preamplifier. The new MartinLogan Grotto subwoofer brings up the bottom and makes for a nearfield system that is very musical and quite dynamic as well.

Much as I love my Rega tables, I was on a mission. Intrigued as I was with the Audio Technica PL120 D I reviewed a few issues ago, this was the table of choice. They can be found new for 200 bucks, offer interchangeable headshells and have adjustable VTA! In this instance the matching phono preamplifier was the new Dynavector P-75 mkII, which you can pick up for \$750.

Together the P75 mkII and the Zu DL-103 make the best combination for analog bliss I've ever heard at this price point; period, end of story.

(continued)

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My PL-120D required the counter-weight to go all the way to the back of the tonearm stud to level out and my P3 needed a heavier than stock counter-weight. Speaking of weight, this cartridge has a tracking force range of 2.2 to 2.8 grams, which is getting a little bit hefty, but I'm one of those follow the directions kind of guys, so I went along with it. I went up and down the range, but found bliss smack dab in the middle of the range at 2.5g and nailed the anti-skate the first time as well at about 2.3g on the PL-120D's scale. The P-75 mkII came set at 100 ohms, which also turned out to be the optimum point after a little bit of experimentation.

Move Over MacGuyver

Keeping in with the budget tradition, I kept all of my cool analog tools from Acoustic Sounds in the toolbox. (at least to start) I wanted to see what kind of sound I could get with a Geo Disc, a business card, a Sharpie and a little luck.

If you've been on the fence about analog and perhaps a little nervous if you could jump into this world and get some decent results, yet all this talk about tracking force, VTA and the like has you bugging out, it's ok. If you only have access to the tools I just mentioned, you will be able to get very good sound out of the DL-103. Heck, I was even in the ballpark with the little plastic alignment tool that came with the AT table! In case you are wondering what the business card and Sharpie were for, use them to check VTA. Mark the level of the front end of the turntable, and then move to the back of the arm to get those levels even. If you are really finicky, you can fine tune by ear.

You can Believe the Hype

After I double-checked VTA and made sure the table was level, I was ready to roll. The Zu Website says that their version of the DL-103 has "real tone, with bottom to top sexy, wet analog realism."
(continued)

They say a whole bunch of other things, but hey, it's their baby, you can't blame them for being proud. As much as this kind of hoo hah always makes me nervous, I have to agree with them, this is a music lovers' cartridge indeed. Believe it or not, this combination sidetracked me from the Continuum more than once. No, I'm not going to tell you that my PL120D with this cartridge and phono preamp was "knocking on the door" of the seventy thousand dollar analog front end in the other room, but it was musical and enjoyable. Most of all, it was so much fun to listen to, I didn't really think about it and that my friends is what great analog does when you get it right. That's a lot more than I can say for a number of table/arm/cartridges I've heard that cost five times as much as my PL120D with the Zu.

No matter what kind of music you enjoy, I think you will have a blast with this cartridge. I spent a lot of time listening to my favorite 70's and 80's rock records and was very pleased with the results. This cartridge has a lot of punch and great separation. Tonally, it's a touch on the warm side, but let's face it, that's what most of these records need to sound their best anyway. In addition to the punch, the DL-103 had plenty of airiness to the presentation, making for a very big sound. Buying this cartridge will probably force you to upgrade the digital half of your system, because no one will mistake this for digital! You don't get this kind of musicality from digital until you spend a lot more.

Should you be a twenty something that could care less about my boomer taste in

music, you will have a smile on your face too. That new Radiohead album sounds like dog crap, but the Zu cartridge gave it that smidge of body that made this record quite enjoyable after all. Same with the recent LP's from Death Cab For Cutie and The Shins; just because new music is getting pressed on vinyl, that doesn't mean it all sounds awesome.

Bass is powerful and tight, with the highs having a touch of creaminess, perhaps even rounded off just a bit, but transient attack is very good. **Pinch yourself and remember, this isn't a thousand dollar cartridge you are listening to and it all makes sense.** Even surface noise is at a bare minimum with this cartridge, much like some of the Koetsus I've heard.

In the end, records played on the Zu DL-103 are very musical without being syrupy. The balance of detail and musicality is perfect. Remember, ten years ago, four hundred bucks was a fair amount of money for a cartridge!

One of the Best Buys, Ever

I'm more than happy to award the folks at Zu one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2008 with their DL-103. Honestly, this could be one of the best values in high-end audio. Whether you are new to the analog world, or stepping up from a lower priced cartridge, the Zu DL-103 should be able to keep you very happy for a long time! If you are looking for a cartridge around a thousand dollars and have a decent step-up device, consider the DL-103 and spend the other six hundred at your local record store. ●



COMPACT AUDIOPHILE SOUND

The Wadia 170 iTransport

By Jeff Dorgay

We've been waiting for the iPod to sound great for a long time now and finally the promise has been fulfilled. It's no surprise that this advance would have come from a pioneer in the digital world like Wadia, who has a number of "firsts" on their resume.



For \$379, you can now have an iPod (at least a current generation iPod) that sounds as good as some of the worlds greatest CD players, provided you have a DAC to match. I know it sounds a bit wacky, but because you are finally getting a direct digital stream from your iPod and you do not have to compromise it's functionality in any way when you want to just use it like and iPod.

In the past there have been a few ambitious modders out there (isn't this hobby great?) that have managed to wring more performance out of this little player, but they have always come at the expense of iPod functionality. What's the point of having one of these little jewels if you can't take it with you, plug it in the car, etc.? The folks at MSB made a very impressive splash with their iLink but it's going to set you back \$2500, won't work as a stand alone iPod and guess what happens if someone drops that expensive iPod? To me the iPod is a budget player.

The brilliance to the Wadia solution is that it doesn't require *any* mods to your iPod.

By having access to some proprietary Apple code and writing some software of their own, Wadia is now able to get the digital bitstream before it goes to the internal DAC.

And It Was Good

I've been watching this product unfold for the last year now with major anxiety. John Schaffer, the CEO of Wadia called me right after CES and asked me what I thought a dock that would offer a digital output for the iPod should cost. My response was "Keep it under a thousand bucks and I think they will sell like crazy!" Mr. Schaffer said "How about under four hundred?" Give me six of them...

When I heard the final prototypes right before CES and again at the show, I was very excited because the sound quality was fantastic. If you visited their room at CES, they were playing the dock through one of the digital inputs on their 781i CD/SACD players with Halcro amplification and a pair of speakers from Verity Audio. If they didn't point out the fact that you were listening to an iPod, you might not have known it. Even playing some 320 kb/sec MP3's from my iPhone was pretty impressive, though a bit less resolving. *(continued)*

What's In The Box

For \$379, you get the 170i, a larger than wall wart power supply, a decent RCA digital cable, a remote control and a set of plastic docking adaptors to make the 170i snuggle up to your particular iPod when you plug it in.

The case is silver powder coated aluminum, with a little Wadia logo on the front that looks like a big Wadia product that was put in a shrink machine, so it looks and sounds first class.

The back panel features an RCA SPDIF output for your DAC of choice, a pair of standard RCA jacks so you can use it as a traditional iPod dock if you don't have a DAC yet and a set of component RGB RCA jacks to plug the 170i into your TV of choice to play movies from your iPod. Right now, this is the only way to get component video from an iPod.

Pretty sweet, but my suggestion to Wadia would be to enable the video outputs so that you can see what's on the screen of your iPod when you are playing music. That's my only complaint with the 170i. Ok, I'd like an upgraded version with the cool glass fiber outputs to jack it into my Wadia 521 DAC for even better sound, but hey for a first effort, this is out of the ballpark great.

Great Sound and Convenience Rule the Day

It's as easy as pie to use, just plug your iPod in and go. Again, I must remind you that while the 170i works with all versions of iPod Nano, the current iPod Classic (80 and 160GB), the 5th generation iPod Video models and all three of the iPod touch series, it does not officially support the iPhone, giving you a message that says "this device is not an iPod accessory". Just ignore it and rock out, I had no problem using my iPhone with it.

Our technical editor likes to say, "anything that spins is the enemy of sound quality". Rumble, jitter, all those things that degrade our music lurk inside turntable motors as well as hard drive motors. Bouncing back and forth between my new 160GB iPod Classic and iPod Touch, when using the Wadia 521 as a DAC, I did notice a bit less grain in the overall presentation with the iPod Touch. It's too early to tell, but I suspect playing back from solid-state memory offers up a bit cleaner digital sound. *(continued)*





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Fear not, you don't need a seven thousand dollar DAC to get great sound from the 170i, but if you do have a DAC on this level or a premium CD player like the Wadia 581i se/781i series, or perhaps a Meridian 808i, you will get playback that is pounding on the front door of the best in the digital world. The iPod still doesn't have the jitter specs or isolation from vibrations that a world-class transport does, but the results are pretty breathtaking.

As great as this is, the real surprise was when I mated the 170i and my iPod with some budget DAC's from Channel Islands (\$599), PS Audio (\$999) and Benchmark (\$1529). Wow! This was some great playback indeed and was easily on par with any of the players I've heard from the majors in the \$2500 - \$4000 category. And I've heard quite a few of them lately... The bass is well defined, the soundstage is huge and the high end is very well behaved. If you have ripped your CD's to iTunes in Apple Lossless or uncompressed you will be amazed.

Everything you require from good digital is there, even with a budget DAC; plenty of bloom, definition and dynamics from that little iPod! It's amazing.

I spent a lot of time comparing these combinations to my Meridian 808 and Naim CD555. *(continued)*



Nope, it's still not going to knock either of those off their pedestal, but I dare you to find more natural sounding digital for twice the price of the 170i, the iPod of your choice and the budget DAC of your choice.

Again, moving up to a cost no object DAC raises the bar considerably, so if you already have one of these in your system, you now have the world's least expensive music server that you can put in your pocket.

Now Everyone Can Have Great Digital Playback

What makes this product so insanely great is that it is way more than just a way to integrate your iPod into a high end audio system with true audiophile sound, (though that alone is a masterpiece of engineering) it's a bridge between us, our kids and their music.

I don't know about you, but I have a very well mannered kid and I still cringe every time she gets within about two feet of my turntable, any of my good records or my rare CD's. Actually I feel that way towards just about everyone. Not really an environment conducive to sharing music, huh. The Sooloos is really cool, but everyone messes their pants the minute I lay the five-figure pricetag on them.

The 170i is a different game altogether. When people hear this level of sound quality coming out of an iPod, they are really enthused.

Even my audiophile buddies snarled, "So what does that little Wadia box cost?" Revealing the approachable pricetag has put a smile on everyone's face so far. Everyone lights up when they plug their iPod into my main system and can hear how much more music they could be enjoying. This is the way to bridge the gap, people.

As I said in my Publisher's Letter on page eight, I firmly believe that this kind of device will help get a lot more kids into the world of audio because it's approachable and affordable. Even with my adult friends, it's a great way to share music. I love it when someone comes over with their iPod full of music I don't have and can share.

So whether you are an entry-level audiophile that wants to build your system around a 170i or would just like a way to integrate the iPod into your main system, you can't go wrong. My guess is a lot of you (especially the headphone lovers in the crowd) have been ripping your music to Apple Lossless or uncompressed files anyway, so you will really have a blast with the 170i.

This is one of the most fun audio devices I've ever had the pleasure to use. I signed up to buy six of them! ●

Current Releases

By Marc Phillips & Jeff Dorgay

Elvis Costello and the Impostors

Momofuku

Lost Highway Records, LP now, CD to follow

Throughout his career, Elvis Costello has been a very adventuresome musician. While many of us will always remember him for his string of new wave hits in the late 70's and early 80's, he never really left the building.

Costello has recorded classical operettas, performed avant garde jazz with the Brodsky Quartet and teamed up with Burt Bacharach, but he always seems to find time to get back together with his band (currently the Impostors) to make a straightforward EC album, and this is one of his finest.

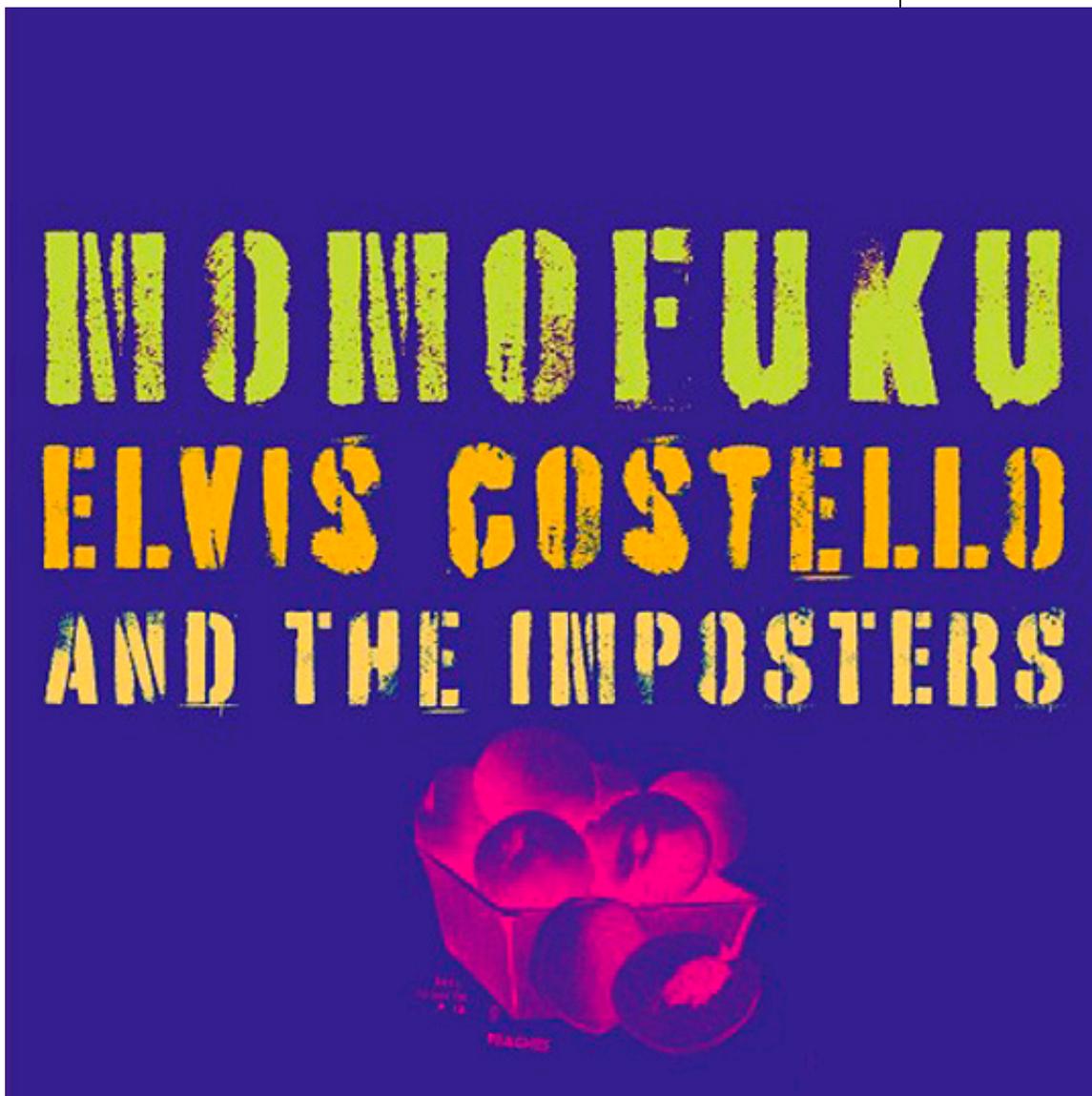
If some of Costello's past excursions were a little too far out there for you, he's brought all of his pop sensibilities back to this record, along with some great playing (and some killer organ tracks) by the Impostors.

Named after Momofuku Ando, the man who invented the cup noodle, Costello claims that "all they had to do was add water to make this record."

Already in Los Angeles working with Jenny Lewis on her new record, the vibe felt right for Costello to get the rest of Impostors together and go for it.

Analog lovers rejoice. This one was recorded to analog tape and pressed to four sides of vinyl "for clarity." There's even a track titled "Wow and Flutter." It's no surprise, but it's still great to see that Elvis Costello hasn't lost any of his sense of humor.

Buy HD Download





Vampire Weekend

Vampire Weekend

XI Recordings, CD and LP

The older you get, the more things from your youth come back in style. It happens with shoes and music with an almost equal frequency, and *Vampire Weekend* is a perfect example. Not quite emo, these guys combine a big dose of reggae, with some pop hooks and riffs from the early XTC songbook, and sprinkle in some yummy organ bits to make a great upbeat party or road trip CD. Most of the songs are about relationships, but a couple deal with of all things, punctuation. I fell off my chair when I heard lead singer Ezra Koenig sing “Who gives a fuck about an Oxford comma?”

This topic comes up again towards the end of the disc with “I Stand Corrected.” This is clever pop music at its best. I just wish the recording was better; you might as well download this one on iTunes. But back it up somewhere, because *Vampire Weekend* is a keeper. – JD

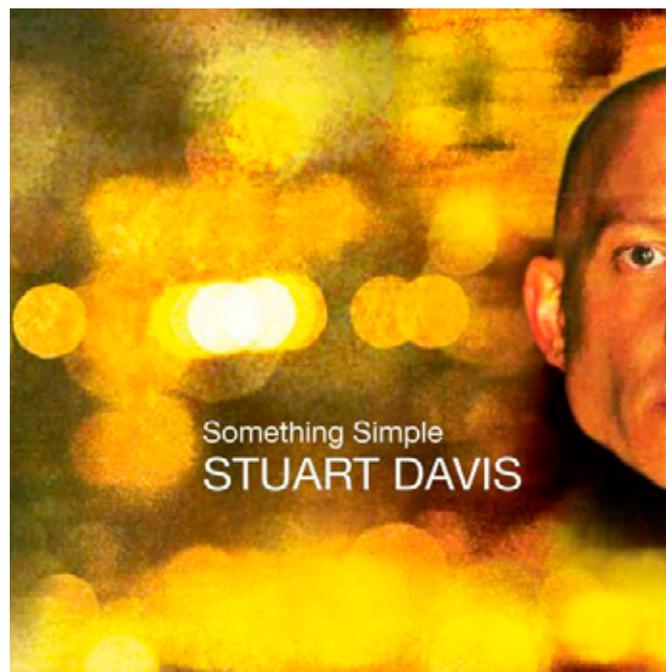
Stuart Davis

Something Simple

Majeski Media, CD

Singer-songwriter Stuart Davis’ 15th album covers much of the same philosophical ground as his last two albums, 2003’s *Bell* and 2006’s *?What*, with a slightly more accessible sound. The album’s opener, “Already Free,” is featured in the film *Drillbit Taylor*, and is already getting some radio exposure. Too bad that the mass media couldn’t have discovered this artist at least a decade ago. If you’ve been lucky enough to see Stuart perform live, your first response might well have been, “Why isn’t this guy fucking famous?”

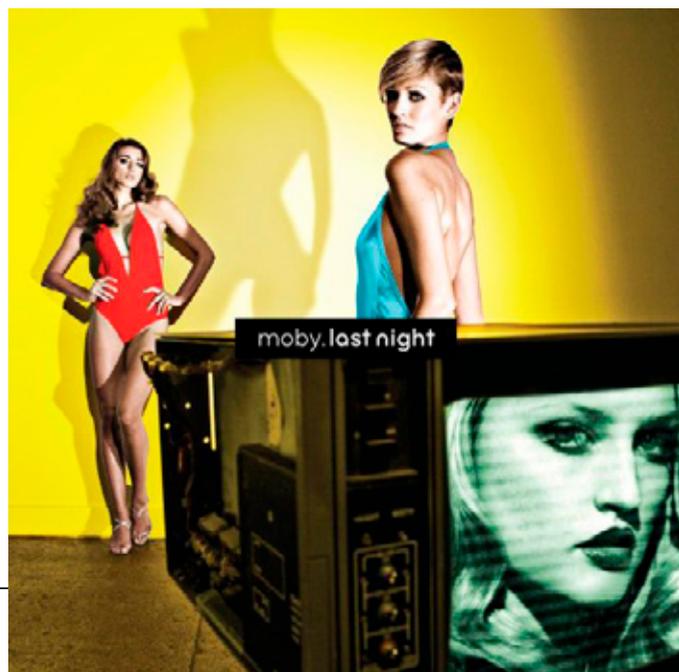
For those in the know, Stuart Davis is one of the most intelligent and spiritual man in the independent music scene. His lyrics are literate and clever and touch on such subjects as Buddhism, Integral Theory, Parker Posey, wild deviant sex with groupies and a general distaste for organized religion. In “Sugar Bullets, for instance, he claims “All I ever wanted was Jesus Christ without the Christians.”



(He also wants “peace and love without the pot smoke” as well.) His clear, confident singing voice is unusually expressive and digs deep into your brain. He’s also one of the warmest and funniest men in the music business, offering group hugs to his entire audience after his live shows. His impromptu banter between songs is the stuff of legends, and is documented thoroughly in his DVDs, *Stuart Davis: Between the Music Vol.1 &2*. Davis is a true storyteller in the best musical tradition.

Once he gets past the feel-good pop sound of “Already Free,” Davis shifts into familiar territory, namely sex, God and rock ‘n’ roll (which, incidentally, is the title of his upcoming book). He may be contemplating the Universe, but he’s doing so with wide-eyed wonder – and a devilish grin. The album’s remaining cuts are consistently excellent, but the first among equals would have to be “Twisted Mystery,” which is simultaneously melodic and adult. That means that Davis knows how to write a great song for people, as opposed to demographics.

I’ll be writing a feature about him in the next issue. Until then, you should get ahead of the curve and buy *Something Simple* before Stuart Davis is totally fucking famous. – MP



Moby

Last Night

Mute, CD and LP

In a recent interview on *Jonesy's Jukebox* live from the South By Southwest music convention, Moby said that his new album cover is a tribute to “all those cool Roxy Music album covers from the ‘70s and has somewhat of a Helmut Newton feel to it.”

This alone made me run right out the door and buy it, because those are some of my favorite album covers ever. The cover is definitely cool and worth the price of the disc alone, but the music is great, too. Further along in the *Jonesy* interview, Moby said that he’s just been hanging out around his NYC apartment and staying out in clubs way too late. “This record is a reflection of that lifestyle.”

From that first note of Cher-like disco vocals, it’s pretty apparent that perhaps Moby has been disco-ing out a bit too much, and I wouldn’t let anyone else but Moby get away with this. But it’s cool, mixing ethereal Giorgio Moroder grooves with piano parts that had me watching for Grace Jones to come around the corner at any minute. The recording is big and lush, in an 80’s excess kind of way.

Dim the lights, blaze a spotlight on your favorite disco ball (if you don’t have one, you can get one at Radio Shack) and bust the cap on the Moet. – JD

Snoop Dogg

Ego Trippin

Geffen, CD

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If you thought Snoop got soft spending time on his reality show, you better back off, fool; *Ego Trippin* is his best yet. And when it comes to sound quality, no one produces a better sounding hip-hop disc than Snoop Dogg. This disc sounds as good as any audiophile pressing I’ve ever heard, with a soundstage that extends all the way across the room and bass that will shake your fillings loose. I wish the last three U2 records sounded half this good. The cover photo of Snoop in front of an old school Datsun 510 was a nice touch too.



There is plenty of the standard Snoop fare, talking about keys and g’s, as well as plenty of rapping about boning. Amazon lists all but two of the tracks as explicit so don’t play this one when your church group is over, but with Snoop it’s all in the name of a good time.

What makes *Ego Trippin* so much fun is how much Snoop has grown on this disc, breaking out a lot more stylistically than on past discs. “Sexual Eruption” and “Waste of Time” have major R&B grooves, with some great backing vocals, and “Cool” definitely has some old school Prince riffs floating around.

The best part of this disc is track 16, “My Medicine.” It’s a country tune that Snoop dedicates to “My main man Johnny Cash, a real American gangster.” After hearing this, I’m convinced that there is nothing Snoop can’t do. – JD

**R.E.M.***Accelerate*

Warner Brothers CD and LP

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Since drummer Bill Berry left R.E.M. in 1997, the band has struggled to find its musical footing. The first post-Berry album, 1998's *Up*, certainly seemed as if the lack of a steady drummer forced REM to reinvent itself, providing some moments of inspiration. However, when R.E.M. released its last album, the somnambulant *Around the Sun*, in 2004, many critics and fans dismissed the once-great band as finally done.

R.E.M.'s unexpected new album, *Accelerate*, is a direct assault on the nay-sayers. This is easily the most raucous (or rock-us) album since *Monster*, and maybe the best overall since *Automatic for the People*. Every song is ripe with the same energy and inventiveness that put REM on the map 25 years ago, and it's clear that the band wants to reclaim its fans with this sense of renewal. In 2008, REM seems to be the lone alternative rock act that has something to prove, and that's what makes this album so exciting.

While songs like "Man-Sized Wreath" recall the band in their songwriting heyday (think "World Leader Pretend" off of *Green*), I'm actually more impressed with the grim drive and momentum of the title track and the gentle and folksy "Until the Day is Done." Both of these songs remind me explicitly of *Fables of the Reconstruction*, which is by far my favorite REM album. The catchy "Supernatural Superserious" is also emerging as a genuine radio hit as well. It's time to extend a hearty welcome to the boys from Athens, Georgia. They've been missed. – MP

**Makana***Different Game*

Makana Music, CD

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In creating a new musical genre, "slack rock," Hawaiian slack key guitarist and singer/songwriter Makana has done more than simply combine traditional elements of his guitar training (under slack key mentor Sonny Chillingworth) with more modern alternative rock themes. This young slack key master borrows from blues, country and bluegrass as well, creating a sound that will remind you of the folk-rock movement of the '70s. Fortunately, this is mated to a distinctive and highly intricate guitar technique that is quite original.

Different Game, Makana's new album, emerged out of the spontaneity and energy of his live shows, leading to a new direction in his music. The result is alternative music that sidesteps gloom and worry, and is infused with optimism, innocence and sheer beauty. Even in songs such as "Mars Declares," which focuses on the effect of the Iraq war on families in Hawaii, the album has a light, ethereal quality that springs out of a hope for a better world.

While the more jaded alternative music fans among us may construe this as naïve, that's missing the point. Slack key guitar has always been about spiritual focus and balance. If you want to strap on a sandwich board and lament the state of the world, then skip *Different Game*. If you really need a break from the sturm und drang of the modern alternative scene, and are starving for an uplifting experience while awaiting the next Sufjan Stevens album, this is it. – MP



The Black Crowes
Warrant
 Silver Arrow, CD and LP

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I'm definitely buying another copy of this on LP, but fear not, audio fussies, the CD sounds quite good, too. There's just something about those fat, beefy guitars that always sound even better when played back in the analog domain.

This is rock with a blues/country twist. It's good to see the Black Crowes back after seven years. Much like the Rolling Stones, these guys haven't lost any of their luster. If you pushed the random play button on your CD player and started with track five, "Wee Who See The Deep," you'd

almost swear that it was a Stones tune. The opening track, "Daughters of the Revolution," is a straightforward rock tune that makes you smile in the way you do when bumping into a good friend that you haven't seen in a long time. It's as if you were just hanging out yesterday.

The more you listen, the more you realize that the Black Crowes have a signature sound that at once sounds a bit like five of your other favorite bands stylistically, but after careful listening not at all. This record doesn't have a single clunker on it, and the musicianship is first rate. Combine this with an awesome recording that has plenty of space between the notes, and Black Crowes have got a winner. – JD

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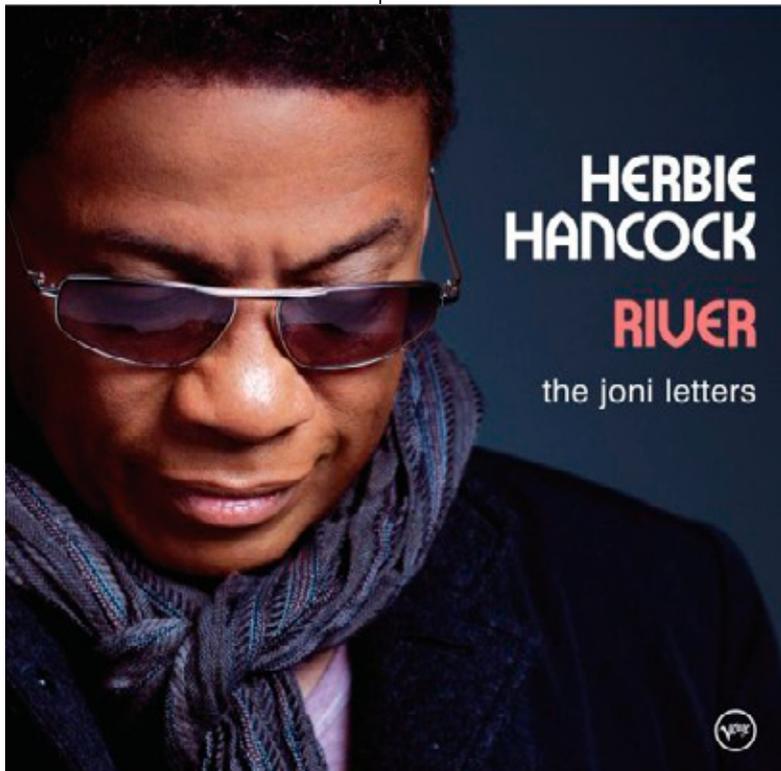


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Herbie Hancock

River, The Joni Letters
Verve, CD

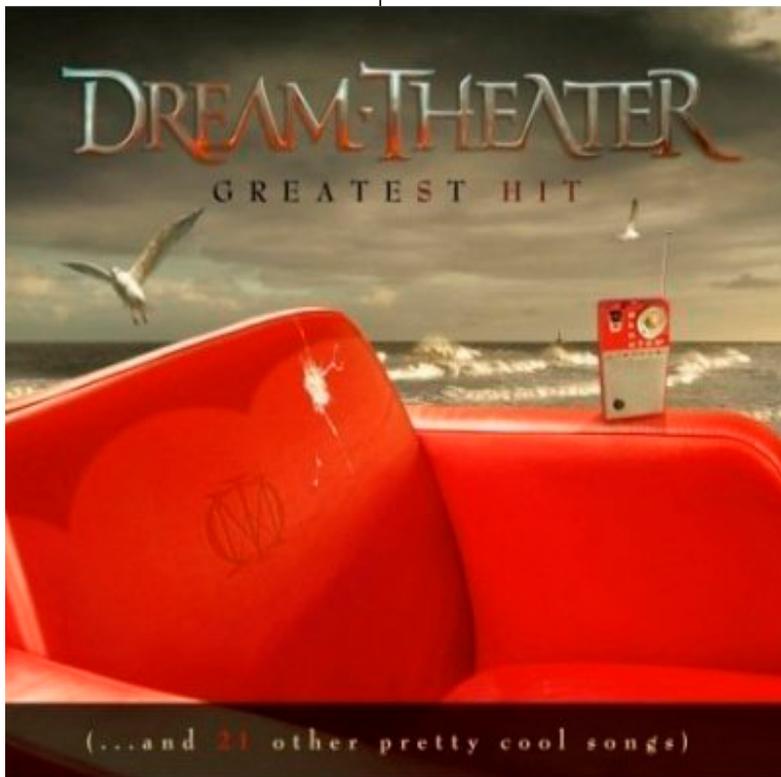
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This record is the opposite of a Reeses peanut butter cup. You know how the ad says that “It’s two great tastes that taste great together”? *The Joni Letters* is the opposite: it’s two great tastes that shouldn’t be in the same wrapper.

Nothing pains me more than dissing Herbie Hancock or Joni Mitchell. They are two of my favorite artists, but these songs are so special, I just can’t listen to Norah Jones singing a Joni Mitchell song. Whoever had the idea to let Leonard Cohen perform a spoken word version of “The Jungle Line” should be shot. Even getting William Shatner would have been a better choice. Tina Turner singing Joni isn’t much better.

If this had been just an instrumental version of Joni songs with Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Dave Holland, this would have been brilliant. These guys all turn in stellar performances and the recording is very nice. The one cut that Joni performs here only underscores how pale the others are in comparison.

While I’m sure this disc will be well received at Starbucks, if you love Joni Mitchell as much as I do, steer way clear of this one, even though it won the top Grammy this year. I think the fact that a quick peek on Amazon.com revealed over 100 of these for sale used at under five bucks a pop vindicates me. – JD



Dream Theater

Greatest Hit (and 21 Other Cool Songs...)
Rhino, 2 CD set

I have to appreciate the sense of humor that these guys have with the title of this new DT release. Even more so than Metallica, here is a heavy rock/prog band that has gone all the way on its own terms without major airplay or MTV. Their current Progressive Nation tour is sold out almost everywhere they are playing, proving that this genre of music has a loyal audience.

However, if you are a major DT fan, this set is probably not for you. It’s a compilation of previous works, and some of your favorite tunes have ended up shortened a bit or remixed – quite possibly not to your liking. The first CD starts with their one hit, “Pull Me Under,” and includes an alternate take of “Through Her Eyes” that is a bit slower than the original track. Because their albums are usually conceptual in nature and really require experiencing from beginning to end, this format only gives you a peek into what this band is really all about.

The good news is that this record is extremely well recorded, so if you have been curious about DT, or want to turn one of your friends on to the band, this is the perfect place to start. Perhaps they should have called it *Intro to Dream Theater 101?* – JD ●

Five From Polyvinyl

By Marc Phillips



Thumbs up to the folks at Polyvinyl Records, an Illinois-based label that features alternative acts Of Montreal and Architecture in Helsinki on *vinyl*. These are high-quality pressings, of the 180 gram variety. They are all available on CD too, but if you are a vinyl fan rejoice, these records are very reasonably priced: Most of their titles are in the \$12 - \$14 range.

Of Montreal

Hissing Fauna, Are You the Destroyer?

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Although I found Of Montreal's earlier albums to be so precious as to be annoying, *Hissing Fauna* possesses a gravity and maturity that had me reevaluating my opinion. Front man Kevin Barnes explores suicide, depression and guilt, expressing such sentiments as "Everything is in the trash/and it's my fault." While it may not seem particularly novel to mate these themes in the framework of the break-up of a romantic relationship, what makes this two-LP set so memorable is that it's presented in such a sunny package.

Barnes, who hails from Athens, Georgia and not Montreal, describes *Hissing Fauna* as a concept album, in which he transforms into another persona (Georgie Fruit) midway through the album, specifically during the 11-minute opus "The Past is a Grotesque Animal." In reality, Barnes was struggling with a mood disorder and starting to take anti-depressants while writing, performing and recording *Hissing Fauna*, and the LP documents his successful journey to the other side, with a new sense of balance.

This may be the reason why Of Montreal's eighth album is by far its best. Moments of whimsy still permeate Barnes' music, but the added layers of sadness finally flesh out the delivery and make this one of the best indie rock albums of the year.

Ida*Lovers Prayers*[Buy HD Download](#)

Ida has been around since 1992, and *Lovers Prayers* is its 12th album. I mention this because it's frustrating to see so many fascinating bands fly under the radar these days. As I've told many friends lately, "Your favorite album of all time is still out there somewhere, and you'll never have the time to get around to listening to it." While this gentle, folk-tinged LP isn't quite that album, it eased me into one of those warm, comforting trances that I haven't experienced in years. I'm now compelled to purchase Ida's other eleven releases.

Recorded at The Barn, Levon Helm's recording studio in Woodstock, in upstate New York, this two-LP set certainly feels as if could have been performed well into the wee hours at the Midnight Ramble, one of Helm's legendary jam sessions. (Levon himself plays drums on "First Light.") The heart of this band is the husband-and-wife team of Daniel Littleton and Elizabeth Mitchell, who create sweet and hypnotic harmonies, transcending any folk or Americana label you might throw at them.

Dreamy and spare, the music in *Lovers Prayers* is more rooted in traditional Americana than freak-folk acts such as Charalambides (also fronted by a married couple). Songwriting is placed at a premium, as opposed to slow expositions and layers, creating a sense of focus that few bands in this genre display. Along with the Of Montreal album, this is one of the most involving recordings I've heard this year. I'm awarding extra credit points for the labels on this pair of LP's because they look like they have been taken from an ancient 78 rpm lacquer – very cool.

**Headlights***Some Racing, Some Stopping*[Buy HD Download](#)

Just when I thought it couldn't get any better, I threw on the third LP from Headlights, an indie band from the same Illinois city as Polyvinyl (Champaign). Clocking in at just a little over 33 minutes, *Some Racing* made a *big* impression on me with its distinctive "lost pop classics" sound. It seems like a disservice to call their brand of music light and catchy, because these songs poke their fingers into the sad parts of one's brain, the places where deep, distracted sighs are born. In a perfect world, these 10 songs would provide the soundtrack to my better moods.

Singer Erin Fein does manage to sound like The Cardigans' Nina Persson, especially on quieter songs such as the title track, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. The point of a band like Headlights is not to blaze new territory, but, rather, to pick through the remains of the modern rock scene and salvage the best pieces. I was reminded of what a famous film director once said: "I'm not trying to show my audience something new...I'm trying to show them something inside of themselves that they haven't seen in a while."

So it is with Headlights, providing a timeless sound that could feel at home in any rock era. While my only real criticism would be that this album isn't long enough, its brevity does remind me of the days when records had 15-minute sides, songs stayed under three minutes and we played these damn things over and over again. Of the five LPs here, this is the one I *have* to have.



the first place. Songs like “Dead Right” channel “Summertime Blues” without the blues, and I could even decipher a nod or two to Cobain & Co. in “You Could Write a Book.”

By the time summer rolls around, you may be hearing more about SSLYBY, since their first single, “I Think I Wanna Die,” is starting to get airplay. If *Pershing* is any indication (and there is a ton of buzz about this album on the Internet), the indie scene is about to be repainted, with plenty of pastels replacing all those shades of gray that seem to be peeling around the edges.

Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin

Pershing

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Okay, I'll admit it. At first I thought this band's name was Pershing, and that the album was called “Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin.” But it's the other way around, with this unwieldy name chosen to make a couple of dedicated female fans laugh during rehearsals. Formed by Will Knauer and Philip Dickey, a couple of guys who originally played in bands that sounded like Nirvana, SSLYBY has evolved somewhat, indulging in more tight, catchy pop that is distinguished by the smooth, breathy harmonies of Dickey and bass player John Robert Cardwell.

Known for its lo-fi debut, 2006's *Broom*, SSLYBY has achieved a more polished sound here, with the bright melodies blending with sunny vocals that seem to indicate that indie rock's infatuation with shoegazing is coming to an end. As with the *Headlights* LP, this isn't music to change the world, but music to redefine what was so likable about the alternative scene in



Architecture in Helsinki

Places Like This

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If you like music on the quirky or downright goofy side, then *Architecture in Helsinki* might just be your cup of boba tea. *(continued)*

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Rick Gardner, *Positive Feedback*, Vol. 8 #3

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Greg Petan, *Ultimate Audio*, Recommended Components

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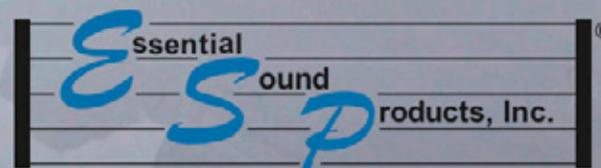
Myles Astor, *The Inner Ear*, Vol. 17, # 4 / 2007

“The phase correct ESP’s allow for a fluidity of movement, a continuity of change, if you will, that no longer wakes the mind from its trance of enjoyment.”

Michael Gindi, *Fi*, Volume 1, Issue 3

“Its sound, if “its sound” does exist, has the character of flowing water: clarity with no dominating flavor...”

Marc Mickelson, *SoundStage!*, May, 2007



A/C POWER CORDS & ACCESSORIES

One listen, and nothing else will do.

This collection of Australian multi-instrumentalists uses tubas, glockenspiels, recorders, clarinets and trombones to augment a traditional rock trio through a variety of musical genres. After the first few songs on *Places Like This*, it becomes clear that anything goes with these guys, channeling samba (“Like It or Not”), funky Moog-inspired disco (“Debbie”), and straight-ahead ‘80s synth-rock grooves (“Same Old Innocence”).

Audiophiles take note: *Places* is the one from this group that’s decidedly lo-fi, much in the same vein as a decade ago when bands like Olivia Tremor Control and Apples in Stereo ruled the indie rock scene. While this type of music can certainly dissipate into maddening indulgence (i.e. The Beta Band), AIH keeps the song structure tight, as if it’s okay to dance with a lampshade on your head as long as you’re aware that you have to get up and go to work in the morning.

As you dig deeper into this album, however, that spirit of foolishness grows stronger.

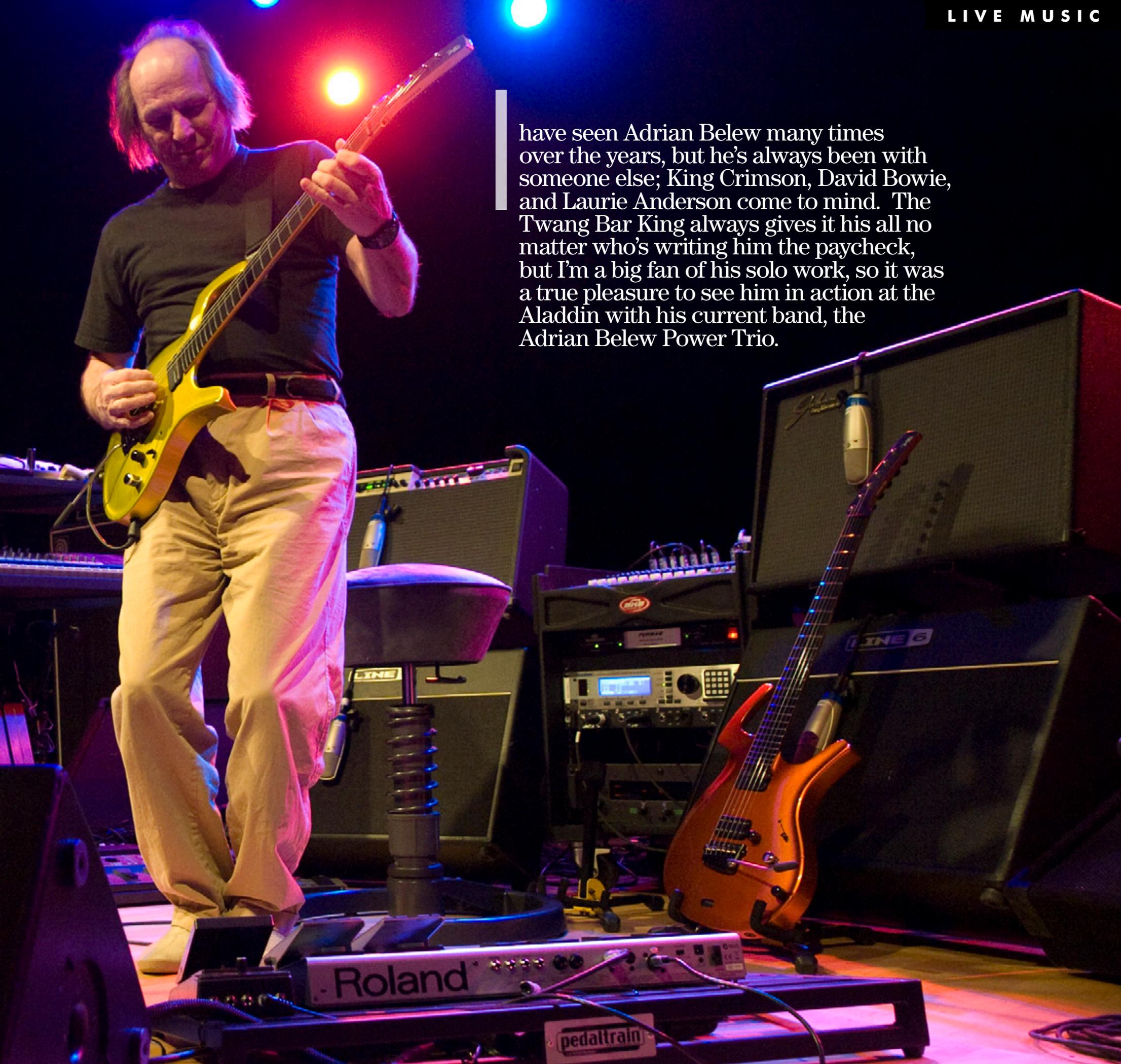
This is the perfect music for the conga line at the local insane asylum, or for making a memorable exit after you’ve finally quit your excruciatingly boring job. Not every band has the guts to sing “Give it to me, baby” these days, much less repeatedly through an entire song. Architecture in Helsinki is more than up to the challenge – as long as you supply the lampshade. ●

Adrian Belew

The Aladdin Theater

Portland, Oregon
February 20, 2008

Text and Photos by Jeff Dorgay

A photograph of Adrian Belew performing live on stage. He is wearing a black t-shirt and light-colored trousers, playing a bright yellow electric guitar. The stage is lit with blue and red lights. In the foreground, there is a Roland pedalboard with a pedaltrain logo. To the right, a Line 6 amplifier stack is visible, along with a red electric guitar leaning against it. A keyboard and other stage equipment are also present in the background.

have seen Adrian Belew many times over the years, but he's always been with someone else; King Crimson, David Bowie, and Laurie Anderson come to mind. The Twang Bar King always gives it his all no matter who's writing him the paycheck, but I'm a big fan of his solo work, so it was a true pleasure to see him in action at the Aladdin with his current band, the Adrian Belew Power Trio.



Any thoughts that Belew is carrying the kids on his coattails disappear ten seconds into the show. These are two gifted musicians.

If Belew has fallen off your radar, I suggest catching the current ensemble if they are coming to your town. You can check his website (www.adrianbelew.net) for details, and if you can't make it, pick up the CD called *Side Four Live*. This will give you a good idea of what you missed.

The current trio consists of Belew on guitar, with 20-year-old Eric Slick on drums and his 22-year-old sister Julie Slick on bass. Adrian discovered these two virtuosos two years earlier at Paul Green's School of Rock and took them on tour with him immediately. Any thoughts that Belew is carrying the kids on his coattails disappear ten seconds into the show. These are two gifted musicians.

This evening's set followed pretty closely to the *Side Four Live* disc and was only their second performance on the tour. On stage, they said they had little time to rehearse. I would never have guessed. When they blasted into "Dinosaur" and "Ampersand" at full throttle, it felt like they had been playing together all their lives. During "Three of a Perfect Pair" and "Thela Hun Ginjeet," if you closed your eyes, you might have thought Bill Bruford was sitting at the drum kit. The kid may even be a little better.

The best part of this show was the fun Adrian was having with the band and the audience. They played for almost two hours and then came back out for two encores, including an amazing arrangement of "Big Electric Cat."

I used to think Rush was the most powerful trio of all time, but the Adrian Belew Power Trio rocked harder than I've ever seen three people play in my life. Don't miss them.



While some of my friends were sitting around various family dinner tables bored out of their gourds on Easter Sunday, I was waiting for k.d. lang to take the stage here in Portland. I'm betting I had a better time than my friends.

A barefoot Lang came out at nine o'clock sharp and the crowd went so crazy, it felt like the Beatles on Ed Sullivan. Her long time touring drummer Danny Frankel was the only band member who was not new. She smiled and asked the predominately female audience

"I bet you are wondering what I'm doing surrounded by a bunch of attractive young men here?"

This was as close to a perfect concert performance as I think I will ever have the pleasure of seeing. Lang played a wide variety of tunes from different albums, opening with "Upstream" from her new album *Watershed*. Most of the evenings performance included the tunes from this album, but she threw in phenomenal takes of "Helpless," "Wash Me Clean," and "Constant Craving" (again, major hysterical screaming). She did a brief bit on the banjo, telling us that she's started playing it because it makes her a chick magnet.

Her band was fantastic, her voice was spot on all evening and she displayed her great sense of humor. The house sound was the best I've ever heard at the Aladdin, the volume level was just right so that you could hear all of the nuances of the band and her lovely voice without leaving with your ears buzzing.

When we filed out to go home, she had a "special surprise" for us at the door, which consisted of an Easter egg filled with chocolate candy and a k.d. lang guitar pick. It was as if she were compensating us for having to stand out in the rain until the doors opened. I'd do it again in a heartbeat.



The Aladdin Theater

Portland, Oregon
March 30, 2008

By Jeff Dorgay

The Crystal Ballroom

Portland, Oregon
April 10, 2008

By Marc Phillips
Photos by Jeff Dorgay



It hardly seems sufficient to say that X's 1981 album *Under the Big Black Sun* changed my life, or at least my musical tastes. (The album I'd purchased just prior to it was Black Sabbath's abysmal, Ozzy-less *Heaven and Hell*.) But I did drop a psychology course just to see the band perform free at my college. How dare that professor schedule a mid-term at the same time!

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Music of the TV Generation
by **Ben Fong-Torres**
(former senior editor at Rolling Stone)

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It's been 25 years since I've seen X perform live. It was almost by accident that I discovered that they were in Portland, playing at the Crystal Ballroom on April 10 and celebrating their 31st anniversary as a band. I'd largely ignored the band's output during the Tony Gilkyson days, when they sounded more like a mainstream hard rock act than one of the most influential of all LA punk bands. So I double-checked, and original guitarist Billy Zoom was back in the line-up (as he has been since 1998). Next to Exene Cervenka and John Doe's unique harmonies, Billy's guitar work is the biggest reason I've treasured this band. His synergy with drummer DJ Bonebrake (whose real name is actually D.J. Bonebrake) is a study in pure momentum.

I know it's a cliché to say a band sounds "just as good as it used to" during a reunion tour, but X played as if they were still in their prime, as if 25 years hadn't passed at all. **Sure, Exene's crazy goth chick vibe has turned into a scary cat lady vibe, especially with her frumpy dress, charcoal-gray cardigan and bright red lipstick (a comment made out of sheer affection for the woman, whom I place among the greats like Patti Smith and Mo Tucker).** But these guys are well into their 50s—Billy just turned 60, in fact—and they had every bit of energy, drive and musicianship as they did in the early '80s. I was so overwhelmed and transfixed, in fact, that I was sucked into the mosh pit a couple of times.

(continued)

Wisely, the band respected the presence of Zoom by sticking to material from the first four albums. (The lone example, "See How We Are," was performed acoustically as a duet with Exene and John during the second encore.) **Starting with a solid, driving version of "The Once Over Twice,"** the mood was consistently high for nearly two hours, until the band ended with "The World's a Mess It's in My Kiss," and the proclamation from John that if they played any more, they'd "start fucking up." One of the defining moments of the performance was when John beckoned the audience to vote before launching into "The New World." The lines "It was better before/Before we voted for what's-his-name," written during the Reagan era, still have meaning in 2008.

If you've ever been an X fan, you owe it to yourself to see them during this tour. This was the antidote for every tired, burnt-out reunion tour you've ever attended. ●





It Still Sucks!

By Marc Phillips

How many stereo components have you owned for 25 years? I know, there are some of you out there that may have held onto a Fisher 500 receiver or Dynaco 70 or a Thorens TD-160 for a few decades, and you still let it go a few rounds with the rest of your hi-fi maybe once or twice a year. But I'm talking about a stereo component that you use, day in and day out, for 25 years.

It's rare when I hold onto a hi-fi component for more than a decade. I had a matching SAE power

amp and preamp that lasted throughout the '80s. Ditto for my AR ES-1 turntable. I was truly surprised when my Naim CD3 celebrated its aluminum anniversary, especially since none of my other CD players made it longer than 2 or 3 years. But there is a piece of gear that I've owned and loved since I was in college, since Reagan was President, since Bjorn Borg was still a professional tennis player.

My Nitty Gritty 2.0 record cleaning machine.

Okay, maybe a record-cleaning machine isn't a true piece of hi-fi gear (although it certainly sounds the same as the day I bought it). But for the last 25 years, my Nitty Gritty has provided almost flawless service, cleaning tens of thousands of LPs in the process.

I say almost flawless, since I did have to take it in once in 1994. The plastic record turner came apart into two pieces, and the pad underneath the LP, known as the platter, started to separate. A quick trip down to Nitty Gritty head-

It turned out that I was one of Nitty Gritty's earliest customers, and mine was among the first few hundred made.

quarters (back then it was in Chatsworth, California, not far from where I lived) brought it up to spec. The president of Nitty Gritty, Gayle Van Syckle, even invited me into her office, where we chatted about record collecting and hi-fi gear. It turned out that I was one of Nitty Gritty's earliest customers, and mine was among the first few hundred made.

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Less than 30 minutes later, my machine was brought into Gayle's office looking like the day I bought it. The technicians had replaced the broken pieces and had given it a thorough cleaning, charging me just \$10 for the service. That day, I told myself that Nitty Gritty had a customer for life.

Old Nitty Grittys Never Die...

After 25 years, I've finally retired my 2.0. I've been talking about getting a new record-cleaning machine for years. I briefly considered Loricraft and Clearaudio and even borrowed a VPI 16.5 for a week. During this time I even came close to pulling the trigger on a Keith Monks machine but in the end (drumroll...) I remained loyal to Nitty Gritty, not forgetting that day back in 1994, purchasing a new Nitty Gritty 1.5.

At first it sounds like I might've stepped down a notch from the 2.0, but the 1.5 is the more advanced machine. The 2.0 is the oak-clad version of the entry level Nitty Gritty model, the 1.0, and both are completely manual machines. The 1.5 is the plain black version of the 2.5, and both are semi-automatic models (which means that these machines spin the records while you clean them). *(continued)*



I really like the oak on my 2.0, but the 1.5 looks like it's still wrapped in wood, albeit the kind that's painted black (that famous "black ash" veneer you see on some speakers), but it's still vinyl.

The oak-clad 2.5 is \$60 more, and I think that real wood has more to do with WAF, and less to do with cleaning results so I spent that \$60 on records instead.

At first glance, the 1.5 looks very much like my trusty old 2.0. The size of the two machines are almost exactly the same: the record turner, vacuum slot, brush and fluid holders and on/off switch are all where they were on the last Nitty Gritty I had for so many years. The first thing you notice, however, is the little rubber wheel in the center of the machine, adjacent to the vacuum slot. I didn't need the owner's manual to tell me that was the capstan that turned the record, but it did explain the capstan's operation, so I suggest taking a peek at the manual even if you are an experienced user.

Read the Whole Thing

New to this machine is the way the edge of the LP surface needs to be tucked under that little rubber wheel, not on top of it, as it may seem. That instruction manual also describes how you can move the capstan up and down as well as on an angle to facilitate LP placement.

(continued)



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I read on further to the end of the manual and came away admitting two things, that I now was a 21st Century Man that reads instructions before breaking things and the new Nitty Gritty is an ergonomic masterpiece that is much more advanced than my 2.0 was.

A Clean Sweep

Other nifty features on the 1.5 include a slide-out tray that captures all of the dirt from the vacuum slot. In the 2.0, the tray was inside the machine and not user-accessible. After just a few LPs, I noticed a significant bit of dust in the tray. I could only imagine what lurked inside my 2.0 after 25 years of cleaning. Another useful feature is height adjustment on the capstan to provide better cleaning for exceptionally thick records, such as 200g pressings. Two small plastic pins next to the vacuum slot hide two tiny screws that move the capstan up and down a couple of millimeters. Finally, the 1.5 comes with an acrylic dust cover, which is the greatest idea since fork-split English muffins. My 2.0 was a dust magnet, and I was constantly wiping it down, saying to myself incredulously, "You're going to clean records on this filthy beast?"

One feature that I'm not quite sold on is the additional position on the on/off rocker switch. This third choice spins the record without engaging the vacuum. I know this is so you can apply the liquid to the first side of the record without having to manually turn the LP. But I'm a scrubber, and I feel that in order to truly clean a record, you just can't sit there holding the brush, allowing the capstan to do the work. With the 1.5, I still scrub the record surface with my Disc Doctor brushes on both sides before engaging the capstan for the vacuuming.

There's one last thing I'd like to mention, and that's noise. A few months ago, I was off on another one of my crusades concerning the noise level of most record cleaning machines and how it affected your hearing, especially if you like to play your records immediately after cleaning as I do. For a while, I was really pushing quieter machines such as the Loricraft for this reason. So why the change of heart? Are the new Nitty Gritty machines quieter?

Well, the answer is no. The vacuum on the 1.5 sounds identical to the one on the 2.0. But that's where the capstan comes in handy. As the vacuum is roaring and sucking away the grime, I can wander off and do something else for a minute or two. My ears don't have to be 18 inches from that vacuum motor any longer while I turn the record by hand. It's not a perfect scenario, but slightly easier on my ears.

Change is Good

After a month or two with the 1.5, I'm hooked. I like the added conveniences and think they're worth it. I'm even wondering about the 1.5Fi and 2.5Fi machines, which add automatic fluid application to the list of features, or even the Mini-Pro 1 and 2, which cleans both sides of the LP at the same time.



The 1.5 comes with an acrylic dust cover, which is the greatest idea since fork-split English muffins.

In fact, I'm more in love with Nitty Gritty as a company than ever before, and for one very good reason. In 1983, my 2.0 cost \$365. In 2008, it costs \$425. (You can forgo the oak and still get the 1.0 for \$365.) In 25 years, the price of this magnificent, dependable and effective product has only gone up about 16%. Very impressive indeed.

What will become of my trusty 2.0 that still works just dandy?

I'm going to take it out to a farm where it can run around with other record cleaning machines. It'll be just fine. I might even drive out and visit it once in a while. ●

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The Doors Box Set

7 LP's Rhino

Raise your lighters Doors fans, it's finally here! After almost a year wait, the much anticipated Doors box set that consists of the full Doors catalog and an additional mono version of the first self titled release is out of the pressing plant on its way to the public.

If you have had yours on backorder for some time now, chances are you've had it spinning on your turntable by now and you know that it's good. No, it's magnificent.

The trio of Bruce Botnick, Jac Holtzman and Bernie Grundman spent a ton of time getting this set just right. They commandeered some of the original equipment used on the original records to go along with their up-graded suite of tools to produce a masterpiece. Not a full analog transfer, they recorded the original Doors tapes to 192khz/24 bit working masters to clean up what was lurking on the tapes, which Botnick describes as "almost unplayable to excellent."

The remaining information was cleaned up with a Pro Tools HD suite, and after hearing these records, I promise to never bitch about Pro Tools again. In the hand of skillful operators, the results truly are magic.

I know our resident collector, Tom Caselli thinks these are some of the best records he's ever heard and he's got every Doors pressing that matters. I agree with him wholeheartedly; I'd even go as far as saying that these are the best rock records I've ever heard. If you love the Doors and can still find a copy of this box set, buy it, no matter what you have to pay. Watch for Tom's in-depth analysis next issue.

The rest of you engineer dudes better step up your game, the old guys still have the touch.

Audiophile Recordings

By Jeff Dorgay

Presented By Acoustic Sounds

If you would like to purchase any of the recordings featured in this section, just click on the artwork and it will take you directly to the Acoustic Sounds website.



Santana

Caravanserai

Speakers Corner Records, LP

Santana's fourth album, *Caravanserai* has much more of a free-form, world music feel to it, than his prior three, with only a couple of vocal tracks. Like the first three albums, this too went platinum and until his recent duet albums of the past few years, was also his fourth best selling album.

Mention this record to all but the most hard-core fan and you will probably get a blank stare. To make matters worse, this was probably the most poorly recorded Santana album, but thanks to the folks at Speakers Corner, it's been restored to its full glory. It's still just a touch compressed, but all of the early 70's Columbia Records harshness is gone, you can enjoy this record without getting a headache, and there are quite a few layers of great instrumental work no longer buried in the mix.

Betty Davis

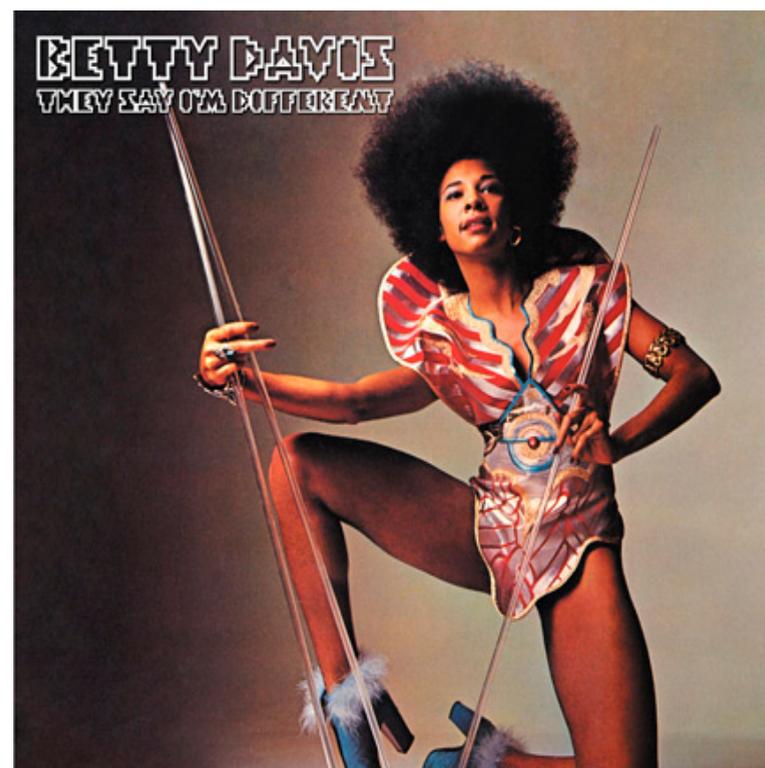
They Say I'm Different

Light in the Attic Records, LP

Light in the Attic Records is a relatively new label in Seattle that is producing some incredibly cool music. When I saw Betty Davis on LP at my local record store, I had to have it, and the minute I dropped it on my turntable, I was very impressed. The last Betty Davis CD I got had some great music, but sounded pretty crunchy and compressed. It was the same old story: great music, so-so sound. But this LP is awesome, with a big, fat, funky, warm analog sound.

If you aren't familiar with Betty Davis, she's an amazing blend of funk, R&B and just plain nasty. Mix up Janis Joplin, Tina Turner, Parliament and the Ohio Players in one powerful woman's body and you are only part way there. A quick peek at the liner notes reveals some of funk's greatest players assembled to back up Davis' powerful voice.

While Light in the Attic Records claims to be just releasing good music and not worrying about the sound, they've done a great job with both here. If you love Betty, click the record cover and buy this now. There's even a bonus 45 in the package.



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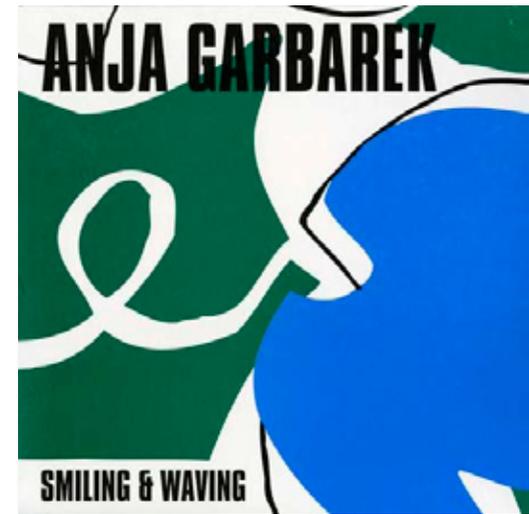
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Anja Garbarek

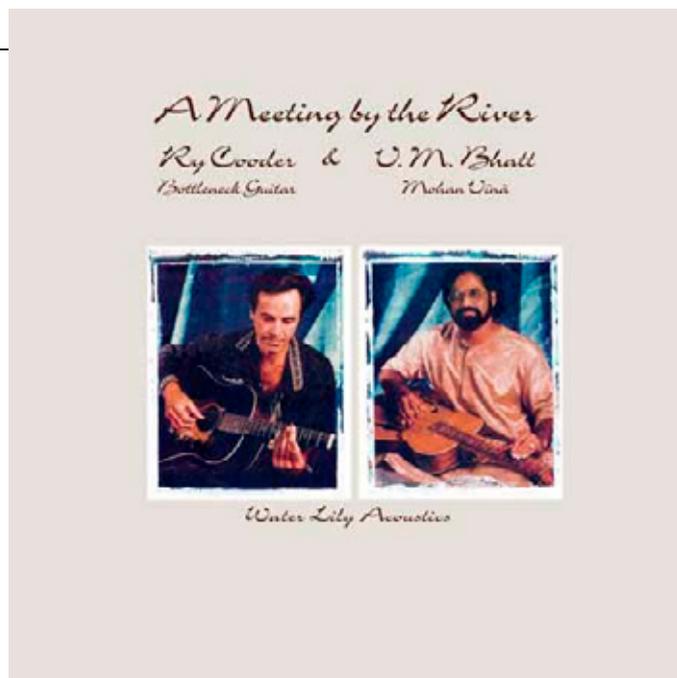
Smiling and Waving

Tonefloat/EMI Records, LP with bonus 7" record

I've always been a fan of jazz saxophonist Jan Garbarek, so I had to give his daughter's record a try. Garbarek says that "she likes to do things differently," and I noticed that the minute I pulled the LP out of the wrapper. It was white.

While Garbarek has been compared to Bjork, she reminds me more of Julee Cruise, but only vaguely. This woman doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard, and that's a very good thing. The recording is very spacious, ethereal and moody, with Anna's voice just appearing up out of the middle of your room. The drumming is very sparse in this record (her last record did not have any drums) but very dynamic, and the bass drum really pounds through. On a super system, this record is almost creepy in a David Lynch kind of way, but not harsh and gritty like Tom Waits.

Smiling and Waving is the most interesting record I've heard in a long time, and it is a sonic masterpiece.



Ry Cooder and V.M. Bhatt

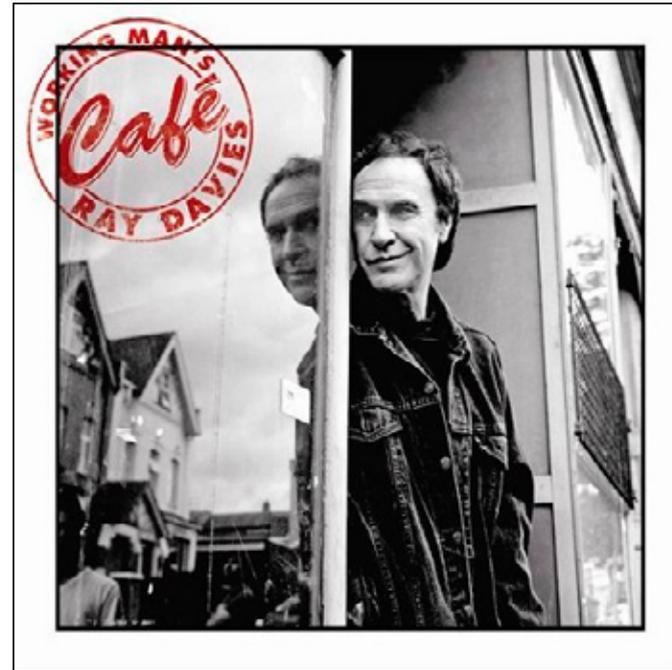
A Meeting by the River

Analogue Productions Records, LP and SACD

Although this disc won the Grammy for “Best World Music Album” back in 1993, it was only available on CD. Chad Kassem has taken care of that. He enlisted master engineer Kevin Grey to put these tracks onto a pair of 45 rpm discs and they are spectacular.

This record is a must-have for fans of Ry Cooder’s explorations into global sounds (*Mambo Sinuendo*, *Buena Vista Social Club*, and *Talking Timbuktu*). The playing is out of this world, and, on these cuts, it has less of a world music feel, and is almost bluesy at times.

With the original sessions captured at 15 i.p.s. on all custom deParavinci gear, this is the ultimate stereo test record. The sound is as real, open and airy as it gets; not one more molecule of tone could possibly be put onto these black discs! However, the 45 thing is a love and hate affair: it sounds yummy, but you have to get up every nine or ten minutes to flip the record. I’ll be curious to see just how much of this magic will translate to the new SACD versions that should be out soon. If you are feeling really wacky with your Master Card, Acoustic Sounds still has a few test pressings left at \$100 each.



Ray Davies

Working Man's Café

New West Records, LP

With a lot of Kinks fans on the TONEAudio staff, this one has been in rotation in CD form since the last issue, but we were all intrigued with the vinyl release. Ray Davies is in top storytelling form on *Working Man's Café*, weaving tales about Vietnam vets, peace, drugs and various other codependent topics. All with some Nashville twang mixed in, which is just a bit strange, but it’s a fun record.

For those of you who care, the packaging and printing is very well done. However, the New West designers took the 2point type from the CD package and left the lyrics in tiny print, so even on this big album cover, you still can’t read them.

This one is a double record 33 rpm set, so you are still getting up to change the record pretty often, but the sonics are worth it. The CD was a little flat, but the LP is great, with much less compression and a much wider soundstage. Side four of the album is labeled “bonus tracks,” but there aren’t any more tracks here than on the CD.

If you enjoyed Ray Davies when he did the “Storytellers” show on VH-1, but would have liked it to be just a little less unplugged, I think you will really dig this. It strikes a great balance of having a live feel, and sounding polished, without being too Nashville. Make sense?



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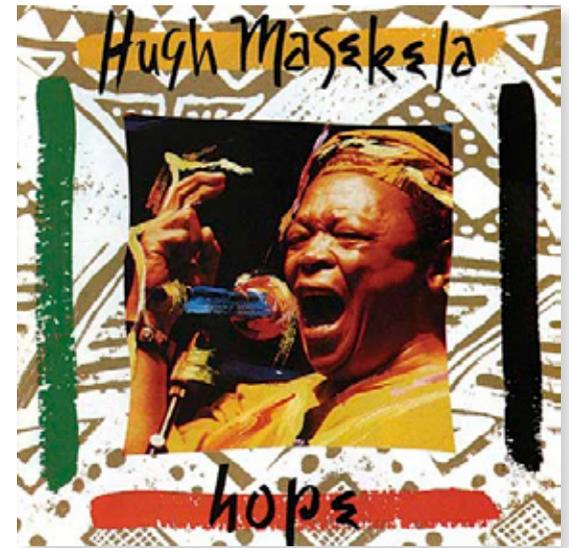


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Hugh Masekela

Hope

Analogue Productions,
2 LP set and SACD

Here's another masterpiece from Chad Kassem and Kevin Grey. Where the Ry Cooder records (see review of Cooder, above) are realistic in an organic and ethereal way, *Hope* is big and dynamic. Thanks to dead quiet surfaces, you would swear that you are listening to a master tape in your living room

It was in 1994 that Masekela assembled a seven-piece band to record this retrospective of his work. They perform a very tasty re-do of "Grazing in the Grass," and the rest of the tunes are equally good. I'd probably buy the SACD copy too, to minimize wear and tear on the LP; there isn't one clunker on this two-disc set! Along with the Cooder CD, this one is great for showing off what your stereo system can do.

A Testament To Great Sound

By Dan Babineau



*The Complete, Complete Ravel:
The Orchestral Works of Maurice Ravel*

Andre Cluytens
The Paris Conservatoire
Rene Duclois Choir

EMI/Testament, 4 LP set

I've said it before and I'll say it again: there's something very correct about a French conductor conducting French music. This concept is very apparent with the likes of Martinon, Monteux and Ansermet. It can't be denied that Pierre Boulez absolutely delivers the goods every time he picks up his baton to conduct Ravel or Debussy. And Andre Cluytens reinforces my theory probably better than anyone in his readings of these amazing orchestral works.

Possessing gorgeous tonality, solid tempos and super raw dynamics, these performances clearly illustrate the genius of Ravel. But Cluytens could not make all of this magic happen without the musical conviction and mastery of the Paris Conservatoire. (Let's not forget the Duclois Choir – brilliant on *Daphnis ET Chloe*.)

My hat goes off to the recording team for these showstoppers. I can hear every instrument in the orchestra on every LP in the set. The people at Testament made things even more accessible, as the records themselves are dead quiet and full of energy. Better than a desert island classic, these performances are so spot on that you'll find it difficult to *not* play the entire 4 LP set in one sitting. These recordings are extremely addicting simply because they are so precise, so beautiful, so Ravel.



ELGAR: Cello Concerto & Sea Pictures

**Jacqueline Du Pré, Janet Baker, Sir John Barbirolli
& The London Symphony Orchestra**

EMI/Testament LP

Sir Edward Elgar wrote an astonishingly large amount of music in his 77 years. He was the original English Romantic, exemplifying all things English with enigma, pomp and many circumstances. Elgar put England back on the classical map forever, finally erasing the curse that corrupted many English symphonic composers before him.

One common quality of Elgar's many compositions is his treatment of the amplitude of the orchestra, the difference between pianissimo and multforte. This distinct variance in amplitude is very apparent in his drop-dead gorgeous "Cello Concerto in E minor." The piece starts out at medium volume, sinks down to nothing but a lone cello and then suddenly roars up clear past multfortissimo. This change in volume is pure Elgar, bringing chills down your spine with sheer elegance contrasted by controlled fortitude.

I adore this performance, but I had difficulty finding a reasonably quiet copy. As with some of my other favorites, I played the grooves off of the original copy, exacerbating the noise issue. Fear not, this new pressing is knocking on the door of the original sonically, and is much quieter.



DVORAK: SYMPHONY NO. 7 in D minor

**Carlo Maria Giulini
London Philharmonic Orchestra**

EMI/Testament LP

In his 7th symphony Dvorak exposes all of his creative powers to create a true Czech masterpiece. All of the elements that make Dvorak's music so undeniably unique and fresh appear in the 7th with Czech folk themes as the centerpiece of the work.

The orchestration is rich with complex counter-melody, and the four distinct movements of the work suddenly come together in one grand finale. The third movement – Scherzo -- is a masterpiece in its own right, and no one can deny Dvorak's gift for creating the ultimate musical atmosphere in slow movements like the 2nd movement of this symphony. I hear Beethoven, Brahms and Schubert's influences in this work. Musical tension coupled with serene, dignified calm all wrapped around a central theme as natural as a rainstorm.

Giulini and the London Philharmonic give us one of the finest recorded performances of the Dvorak No.7 to date. The power and conviction of this work comes through loud and clear. Now add one of the best recording teams to ever flip on a microphone (Bishop & Parker), and you get this amazing record. My original LP on EMI had always been a bit noisy, again due to higher than normal use, but like the other two examples here, the new version is just as enjoyable. I must investigate the rest of the Testament catalog and I encourage you to do so as well. ●

Smart for Two

**The less you spend
on gas, the more
you can spend
on records!** By Jeff Dorgay



In case you haven't been paying attention, most of us on the TONE staff are pretty big motorheads. Two wheels or four, if it goes forward and has a throttle, we're intrigued. I've been following the Smart car, built by Mercedes Benz in Europe since its inception almost ten years ago with great excitement because I've always loved miniature cars.

There have been rumors of the Smart making it to the US, but until gas hit its current levels, it wasn't taken very seriously. A couple of years ago, my favorite British car magazine, CAR, brought a Smart for Two coupe over here and drove it from New York to Los Angeles to see the reaction of the US population.

Last year, I got a false alarm when the ZAP company started importing grey market Smart for Twos from Canada. One of our local car dealers had one on the showroom, but the flame of enthusiasm was quickly extinguished when I saw the 28 thousand dollar price tag on the windshield. It's cute, but not 28 thousand dollars cute. And back then when gas was only about \$1.89 a gallon, I figured I could burn up a lot of gas in my 20 m.p.g. BMW before I made up the difference.



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With four dollar a gallon gas on the horizon, a 40 m.p.g. vehicle is getting more interesting every day! The good news is that the Smart for Two is now available through 70 dealerships (or Smart Auto Centers, as they like to call them), so it's a legitimate purchase that you can buy at retail price. (Between \$11,000 US and about \$17,000 depending on model and how it is equipped) Kudos to the Smart dealers I've talked to that AREN'T putting a dealer mark up on the car.

Small Outside, Big Inside

Looking at the Smart for Two from the outside, it looks like a big roller skate with some bodywork stretched over the top. It's only about 8 inches longer than a Hummer H2 is wide if that gives you a feel for just how small it is.

Inside, it's a different story. Remember this car is designed by Mercedes, so it definitely has a nice feel and does not scream "cheap car" when you get in.

The example I took for a drive had the optional (\$850) heated leather seats, which were very supportive. There is plenty of legroom and a ton of headroom in the car, with a tiny luggage compartment behind the two seats that has enough room for about four bags of groceries, or a couple cases of wine. (Or records!) *(continued)*

But Can it do 70mph Comfortably?

No problem. Under the rear hatch there is a three-cylinder Mitsubishi-sourced 1.0 liter engine that produces about 70hp. This is mated to a 5 speed manual transmission that uses a paddle shifter arrangement, just like a BMW M3 or Ferrari 430. Those of you with the total need for speed will have to wait for the Brabus edition of the Smart, that will feature a set of 17" wheels, bigger brakes and a 100hp turbocharged version of this engine. While you might laugh at 100hp, with only 1800 pounds to carry around, every couple of horsepower makes a difference.

Just like the M3, used in automatic mode, the Smart is a little notchy getting up to speed, but if you take full advantage of the pedals it's definitely more enjoyable.

Zooming along illegally on US 26 at 75mph, I felt quite comfortable as my friendly Smart salesman, Mossimo, discussed what color we should order our next Ducati in.

What else would you discuss with an Italian guy named Mossimo?

And Now for the Bad News

The waiting list for a Smart car in the Pacific Northwest is 12-18 months, so if this looks the least bit intriguing, get down to your dealer and get on the waiting list, pronto. It only takes \$99 to reserve a spot and they have an "orphan list" for people who bail on the car when it comes in, meaning you might be able to get one in four to six months if you aren't picky about color.

If you are picky about the color, you can change it. The spongy plastic body panels, much like the ones on a new Corvette or Saturn can be changed in 90 minutes. Want to change your car from red to black? Easy. You can also custom paint a set to your liking if you are really creative. I'm thinking that metallic lime green on a new Kawasaki sportbike would be just the thing.

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STONES SCORSESE SHINE A LIGHT

LIVE AND LOUD IN **IMAX** AND IN THEATRES APRIL 4
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Shine A Light

By Marc Phillips

While it may not seem like the best idea to plaster the faces of a group of 60-ish rock stars across an enormous IMAX screen, director Martin Scorsese certainly had the right idea when it came to a more close-up and intimate view of the Rolling Stones at the Beacon Theater in 2006. *Shine a Light*, the new concert film which documents the two performances, does more than prove that the Stones are still vital to rock and roll nearly half of a century into their amazing careers.

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Nels Ferre, *EnjoytheMusic.com*, September 2007

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Wayne Garcia, *The Absolute Sound*, December 2007



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By placing the cameras primarily on stage and in the first couple of rows, Scorsese offers a different perspective of the Stones' performance. While many concert films strive to recreate the audience's experience, *Shine a Light* puts the viewer squarely in the middle of the action, on stage, almost from the perspective of an unseen member of the band (Bill Wyman, perhaps?). By wandering between Mick, Keith, Ronnie and Charlie, we see the subtle grins, winks and the genuine affection these musicians share during the show.

What's downright astonishing about *Shine a Light* is the sheer energy and exuberance these legendary men still possess.

All four are surprisingly fit (only Keith exhibits a slight paunch), adding to the illusion that the heads of these geezers have been grafted onto pre-*Some Girls* bodies through some CGI hocus pocus. It's only when Christina Aguilera comes on stage to perform a duet with Mick on "Live With Me" that we feel that dirty-old-man aura emerge, especially when it's obvious that Jagger is quite taken with her performance. (By the way, Aguilera's performance is so gutsy, you'll wonder why she doesn't chuck her Top 40 career and start singing exclusively in the Melissa Etheridge-Joan Osborne mold.)

The film also features guest appearances from Jack White, who sings with Jagger on "Loving Cup," and Buddy Guy, who can stare down a man with the best of them on Muddy Waters' "Champagne and Reefer." *(continued)*

Richards even takes over on lead vocals for a couple of songs—"You Got the Silver" and "Connection" – and seems to have taken some voice lessons since the days of "Before They Make Me Run." His voice is growing richer and deeper with age, suggesting that it might be time for another solo album.

Footage from the '60s and '70s is interspersed with the songs, illuminating the fact that these young men would find it utterly incredible to find themselves performing well into the next century. At one point, a very young Mick explains that the band is set for at least another year or two.

The obligatory clip in which Jagger once said he'd rather be dead than perform these songs at age 40 has been replaced with a more optimistic comment that he could see himself singing at 60.

And while the odds are against the Rolling Stones performing a decade from now (Mick and Keith are 64, Charlie's 66 and Ronnie is the babe of the group at 60), *Shine a Light* suggests that holding our collective breath may not be such a bad idea.

STONES SCORSESE SHINE A LIGHT

LIVE AND LOUD IN IMAX AND IN THEATRES APRIL 4
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Download the Album in HD By Jeff Dorgay

Buy HD Download

I loved seeing the Rolling Stones on IMAX and got to get way up close and personal with the band for only \$18 bucks in a way that people who paid \$300 a pop to see them live will not—until they go to see the movie. This is the way to see a concert in the 21st century. I think that Scorsese should be given an art grant to just film all the relevant bands so we can watch them in the comfort of the IMAX theater.

While I'm not ready to give up thumbing through the record store just yet, I'm getting close. Music Giants has the whole Stones catalog available as HD downloads that you can purchase directly from your web browser. *Shine a Light* is available for \$30.58 in the deluxe version – a two disc set – or the regular version for \$15.29. (www.musicgiants.com)

If you enjoyed the movie, this is the easiest way to buy the soundtrack. MusicGiants has a blistering server, allowing me to download the double disc set in about five minutes. If you are not familiar with MusicGiants, they are the Web's premier high resolution music download service. Unlike the iTunes premium service, which offers 256kb/sec MP3 files, these are full resolution Windows Media files that play back at approximately 1500kb/sec, just like a CD. Some of the Rolling Stones catalog is even available in SUPER HD 2.0 versions, equivalent to SACD quality.

The movie mix was fantastic, and this is a copy of what you heard at the show. If your system is up to it, you will have the same audio experience we did at IMAX. A must-have for any Stones fan. ●

Club Mix

By Scott Tetzlaff

Celebrating Ubiquity

Back in the early 90's two DJ's fell in love, got married and took a long honeymoon in San Francisco. While there, they fell in love a second time – with the S.F. music scene. They ended up staying.

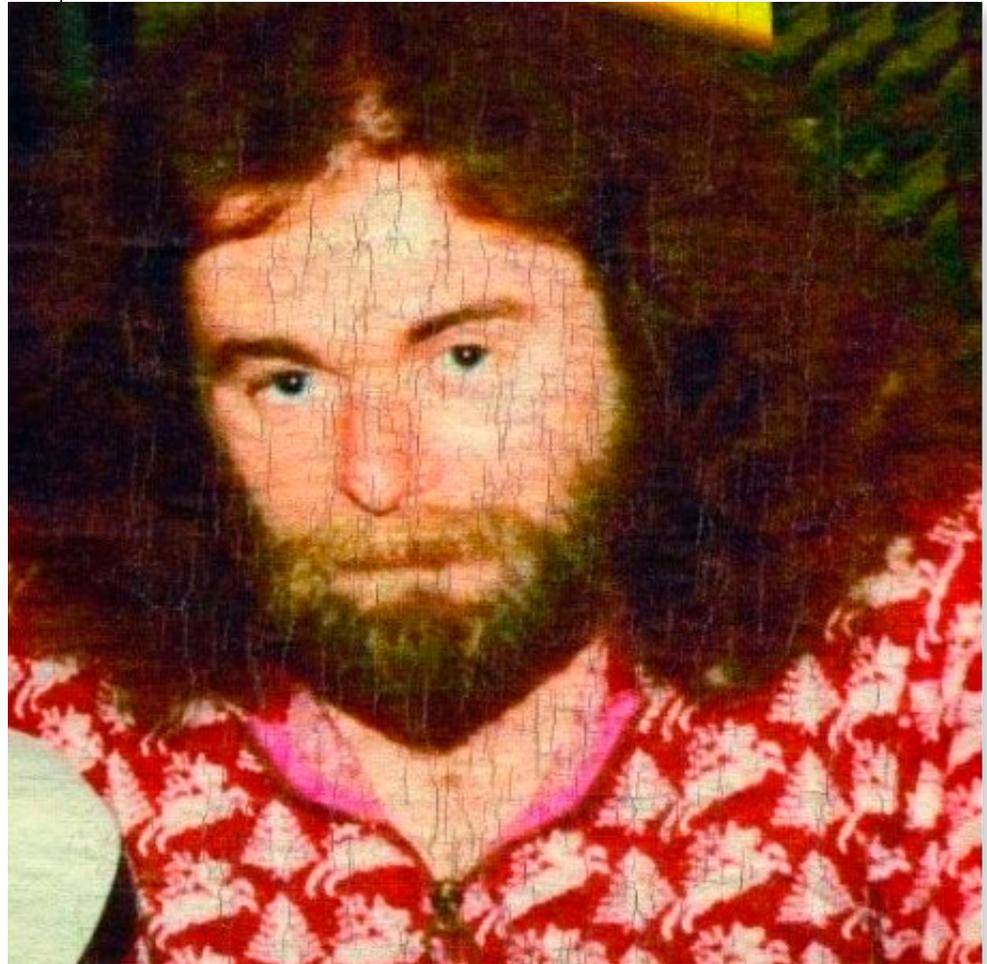
The couple, Jody and Michael McFadin, soon opened a record shop on Haight Street called Groove Merchant Records. It flourished and became a favorite source for soul, jazz and elusive beats. They also stocked a wide variety of cool music paraphernalia.

Jody and Michael wanted to follow their dream and make records, so they started their first label, Luv n' Haight, with \$1,000 and the best of intentions. They later transformed this label into Ubiquity Records. Their mission: to make obscure music ubiquitous, of course! The label is divided into three categories. Luv n' Haight is still there, with re-issues of rare groove material. Cubop produces Latin-based jazz. Ubiquity is for new music, ranging from hip-hop to cutting edge club music.

Just like those Altoid mints, they're small but mighty.

I honestly can't remember the last time I listened to a disc from this label that I didn't like. Maybe with a tighter crew it's easier to put out a quality record.

Here are some of the offerings from Ubiquity. True to their DJ roots, most of their catalog is available on CD and vinyl. It's a little tough to choose, but here's a sampling of some San Francisco treats:



Clutchy Hopkins

Walking Backwards and The Life of Clutchy Hopkins

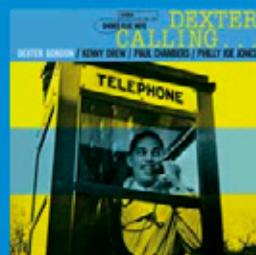
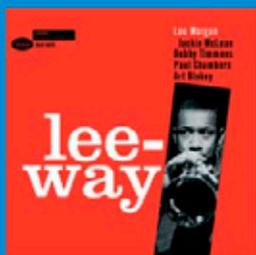
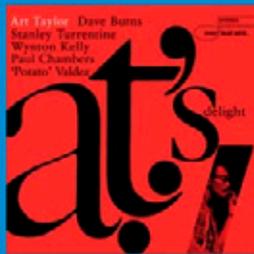
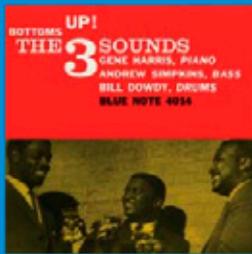
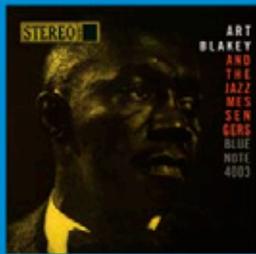
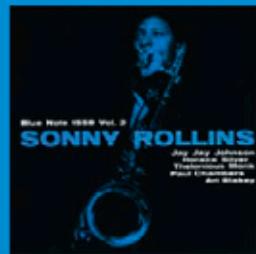
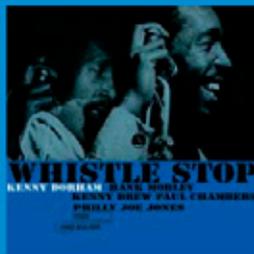
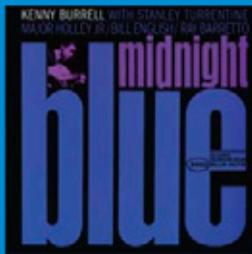
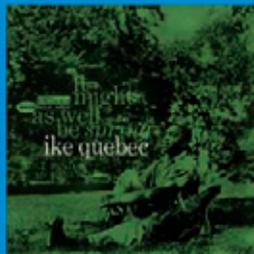
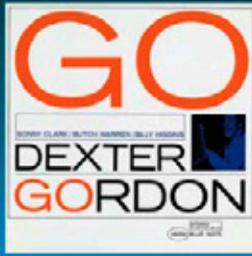
These two discs are so different; if you didn't know any better you would swear that they are from different artists. *Walking Backwards* has a small jazz bar combo sound with an electronica tinge. Jazzy with a bit of electric piano and percussion layered on top of some salsa-like beats.

The Life of Clutchy Hopkins is an earlier work from mid-2006, but it could have been released anywhere from the mid 80's to yesterday. Much more ethereal, all of the titles are only called out by their play time, which adds to the weirdness. Think of this one as a mix of part blaxploitation lounge music (with some very heavy Fender Rhodes riffs) with a bit of Brian Eno thrown in for good measure.

It's fun to see how much this mystery man has changed his style in such a short time.

BLUE NOTE REISSUES

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Spanky Wilson and the Quantic Soul Orchestra

I'm Thankful

Spanky Wilson has been making great jazz and R&B records since the late 60's. Back her up with the Quantic Soul Orchestra and you have a funk masterpiece. If you've been following my column, you know that the QSO also records on the Ubiquity label and I reviewed their album *An Announcement to Answer* back in issue 12. Putting these two together was sheer genius.

All of the arrangements on *I'm Thankful* are very tasty indeed, with some great horn arrangements throughout. This record just overflows with righteous R&B riffs, and Wilson easily goes from purring like the Catwoman (the Eartha Kitt version) to belting it out like Aretha Franklin.

I can't pick out a favorite track, but I have adopted "Don't Joke With A Hungry Man" as my personal theme song.

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Viva Cubop 2

The Viva Cubop series is the Latin jazz part of the Ubiquity equation, and their second disc is completely out of control. It's *all* about percussion here, and if this one doesn't have you mamboing around the house, something is very wrong with you.

Tasty cuts include "La La La" by Jack Costanzo, "Mi Tumbao" by Grupo X, and the classic "Rimsky" by Arturo Sandoval. If you find yourself wanting more of the artists on this disc, you may also want to purchase *Viva Cubop 3*, but it is not as intense as this disc. Keep this one on your iPod for whenever your energy level needs a jump start.



Orgone

The Killion Floor

I was smitten with this CD on the first listen. It falls right into one of my favorite musical categories: adventure music. This disc conjures images of guys with major sideburns chasing each other around in souped up cars. Heavy duty soul, funk and R&B riffs are all here. I had to use that special tool to extract the CD from the player, this one stayed in my car so long!

It's all good, but my favorite tracks were the *Kill Bill*-esque "Sophisticated Honky," the fast paced "A Wot," and the Caribbean flavored "Funky Nassau."

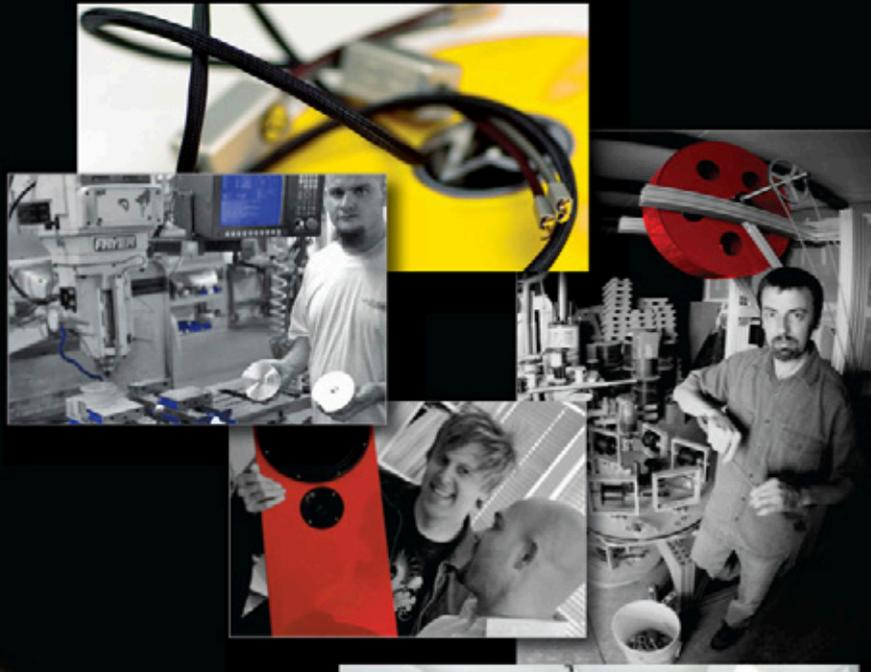


TM Juke

Forward

It's jazz. It's hip-hop. It's jazz with a hip-hop twist, and there's some electronica thrown in, too. I give up trying to categorize it; it's just really good. This is the first US release by TM Juke (aka Al Cowan) with a little help from some of his friends. TMJ is fond of working with vocalists and there's a great selection on this disc: Kinny, Naim, Elmore Judd, and Alice Russell, to name a few.

This disc is a creeper; it grows on you the more you listen to it. Favorite songs have to be "Skin," with lilting vocals from Naim, and "Pencils for Dolphins" –but I'm not sure which I like better, the song or the title.



**Freddie Cruger aka
Red Astaire**
Soul Search

If you are a big fan of Greyboy (also a Ubiquity artist) and you've worn out the grooves on his records, give Freddie a listen. Freddie's real name is Fredrik Lager – and he is a Nordic DJ. His old school mash-up style incorporates pretty much anything you can think of, but when it comes out of the blender, it has that old b-boy sound.

All the tracks on this disk are great, but my favorites are the ones featuring Desmond Foster. Keep a sharp ear for the reggae beats thrown into the mix, too. This one's got a bit of everything. It just takes a quick listen to the first track, "Over the Ocean" – and you'll be hooked.

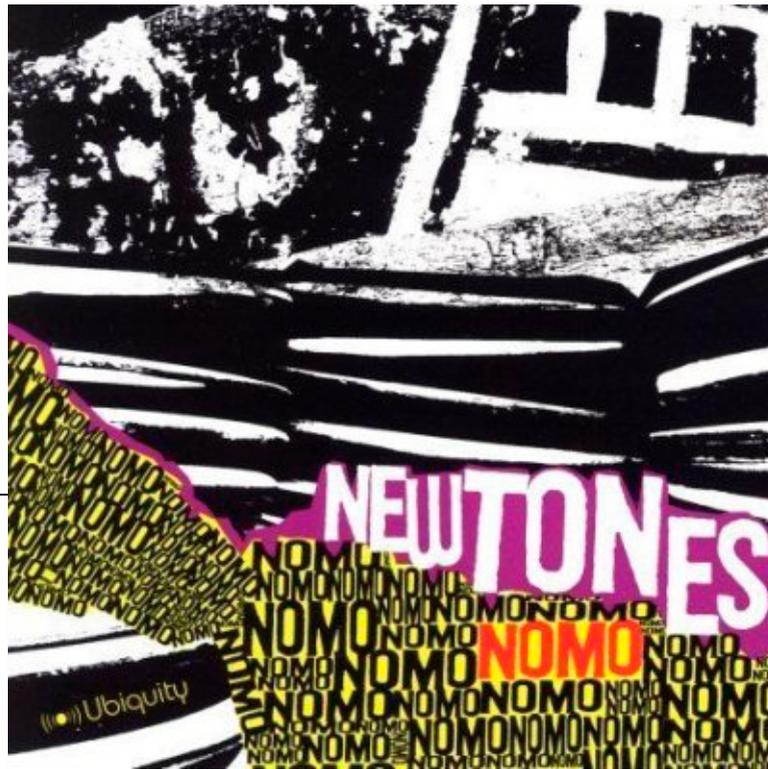


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Ohmega Watts
Watts Happening

Looking for some real hip-hop with refreshingly intelligent lyrics, clear of most obscenities, yet authentic and down to earth? This is a hip-hop CD you can play for people who don't particularly care for the genre. Thanks to a wide range of influences, from sample oriented tracks to bossa nova beats, there's something for everyone here. I definitely heard some early L.L. Cool J influence as well as some George Clinton beats in the background. It's very cool that you can have the disc to suit a lyrical or non-lyrical mood; the bonus CD is all instrumental. My favorite tracks on this collection are buried deep: "Work for Wealth," "The Platypus Strut," and "Freak Out."



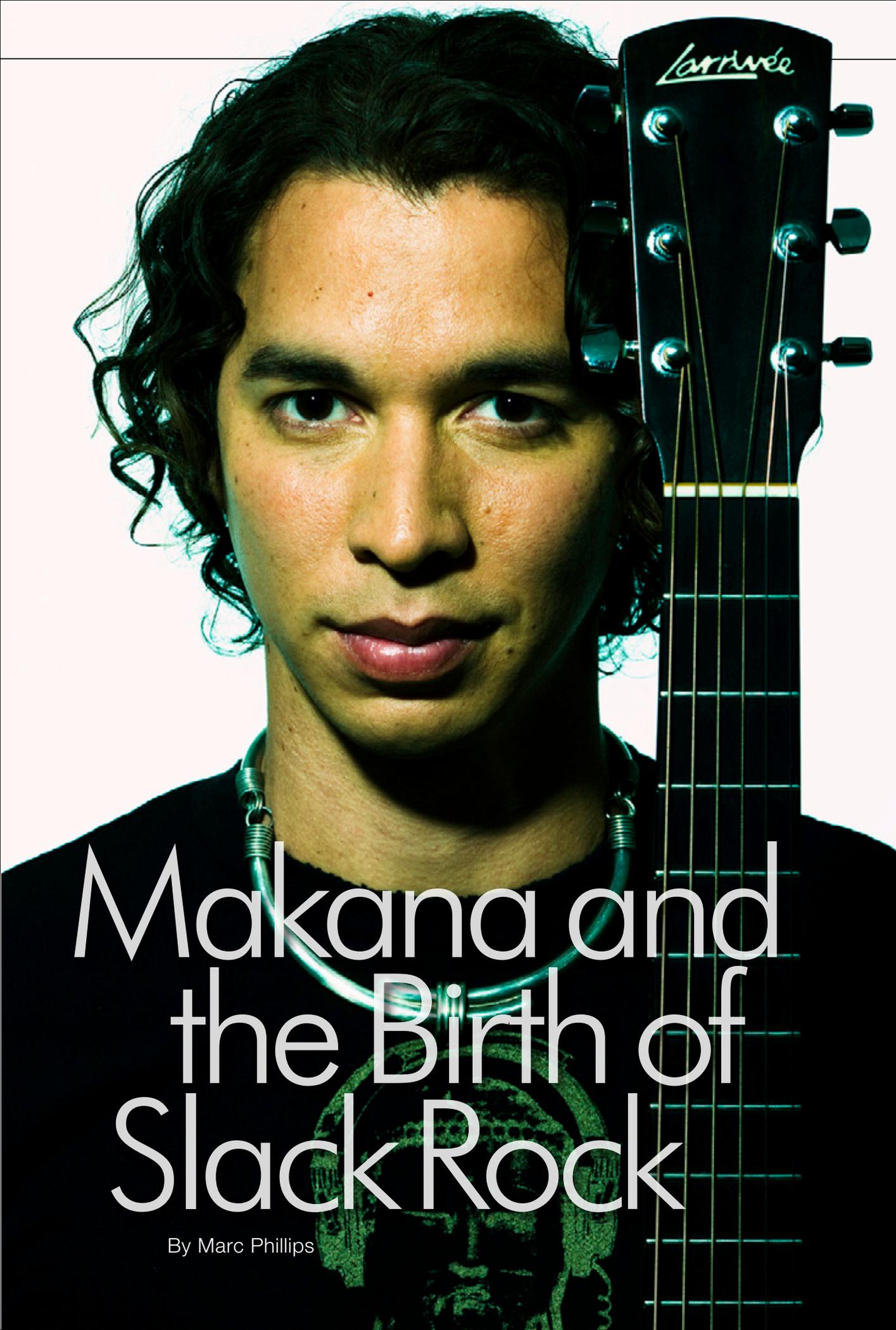
Nomo
New Tones

This one is full of big giant jazz, the kind that makes you sit upright in your chair and take notice. *New Tones* is full of funky, Afrobeat music that uses a ton of brass, with some pretty interesting synthesizer licks mixed in. This is not music to listen to passively; it's slightly abrasive and gets your blood flowing in a good way.

Start out with the opening tracks "Nu Tones" and "One to One." This is get up and go party music at its finest.

I could go on forever; we haven't even scratched the surface of the Ubiquity catalog. The compilation CD's are really cool, and there are at least another 50 artists in their roster that I promise we will get to eventually, so stay tuned. Want more? I suggest spending a little quality time at their Web site: www.ubiquityrecords.com.

You can get a good feel for the album art and get some great sound samples too. They also have some great gear that includes t-shirts, slip pads, and carrying bags for your vinyl. There's also info on upcoming release info and live appearance schedules. ●



Makana and the Birth of Slack Rock

By Marc Phillips

Mention the slack key guitar to most mainland music fans, and you'll get a blank stare. Unique and vital, slack key is a complex yet ethereal alternative to the stereotypical, traditional Hawaiian sound, of steel guitars, ukuleles and hula dancers.

Slack key got its start in the 19th century when *paniolos* (Hawaiian for Spaniards) left a few guitars for the Islanders and left them to figure out the tunings for themselves. It became extremely popular during the Hawaiian Cultural Renaissance of the 1970's and has continued to gain strength in the islands.

Slack key guitarists Gabby Pahinui, Sonny Chillingworth, Keola Beamer and others exposed the world to the evolutionary guitar sound that resulted from these special tunings. Many of these tunings were kept a secret and were quietly passed by family members from generation to generation.

Just as those artists created a new direction for Hawaiian music almost 40 years ago, a younger but equally well-known Hawaiian slack key guitarist is about to shake things up again. Makana, whose name means a *gift given freely* in Hawaiian, is ready to introduce slack rock to the world in his upcoming album, *Different Game*. A student of slack key legend Sonny Chillingworth since he was a boy, Makana combines elements from rock, country, bluegrass and the blues, and mates them with dizzying and frenzied slack key virtuosity. Should you be looking for a new guitar hero, you'll be in heaven.

If you've never heard of this young man, who is still in his twenties, you probably will soon. Building on his loyal and enthusiastic audience in Hawaii, he's been enjoying increased exposure around the world by opening for Sting, Santana, Elvis Costello and Jason Mraz. You can sample some of Makana's music at his Web site, **Makanamusic.com**.

Makana spoke to me by phone from his home in Oahu.

Does the title *Different Game* refer to your music taking on a new direction?

The title has nothing to do with the style of music being different than my past records. It solely relates to the philosophical material of the record. *Different Game* is a proposal for humanity to consider, that instead of competing with each other for resources we should have more of a sense of community.

What compelled you to depart from traditional slack key music?

I'm an artist that doesn't feel beholden to a single style, I don't think that way. It would be like telling me I could only use 20 words for the rest of my life, I would cut my tongue out! As a lyricist, composer and a poet I work with the mode of music that happens to work best at delivering my message. For example, this record was written primarily in English with more philosophical material that suits its style. With music being so much of a business, I feel it's somewhat of a lost art.

I break the rules a lot. It's not good for marketing purposes, but I have to be true to the music coming through me. Even though this new record seems non-traditional, it's still based on about 50 slack key tunings and a lot of traditional techniques. It all still applies in what I call "slack rock", but I wouldn't be able to play that music if I didn't have the traditional slack key training; it's the foundation for all of my music.

What kind of feedback are you getting from the more traditional slack key artists? Are you getting any resistance because of the new album, or does everyone appreciate your innovations?

Actually, I have a huge amount of support from the masters, the old-timers, the *kupuna* (the elders.) They are my heroes, and they really support what I do. There are no rules to the art and we all have our passions, they respect that.

Each of us have our passions, and there's no rules to art, so they respect that. My intention is to expand the audience, and I have multiple ways of doing that. One of the ways is to insert the art form into different genres of music so that people who might not have a relation to Hawaiian music will discover slack key through other kinds of music. Slack key guitar has been referred to as a dying art form for almost 50

years. First we need players, and then we need an audience, and if I continue to play traditional slack key for audiences, then that dwindles.

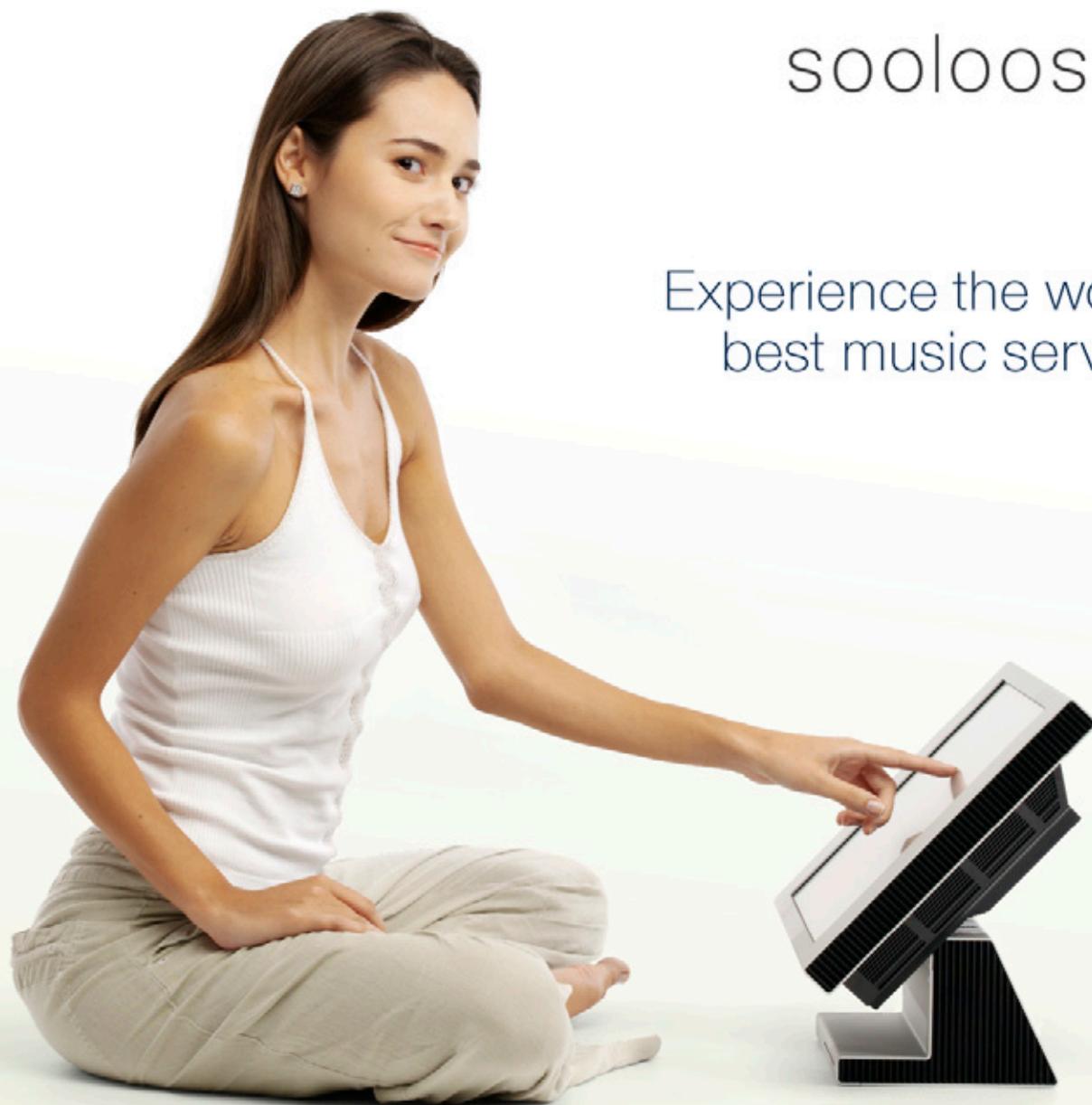
Tradition is an interesting word, and it has a living meaning, and it changes. Tradition is something that you're creating in real time, and it's not a relic of the past. I think as soon as an art form becomes a relic, and perpetuated in its past form, it's already dead. The stuff that we call traditional now was highly modern in its time. If this was 1969 or 1970, you might be having this talk with Gabby Pahinui or my teacher Sonny Chillingworth or Peter Moon and others. What they were doing in that time was considered radical, and you could have asked them the very same question. And that's what is so interesting about tradition, that it mixes what has happened in the past with what is happening today. In that sense, I've been doing traditional music, it just isn't known as traditional music, and it will take decades to become that.

(continued)



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I want this to be a living art form in this generation, and for everyone to participate in it and add to, like a community art piece. Everyone is going to add something to it. Of course we need to maintain the roots of it, but we also need to add to it, or else it's just a relic.

What changes are you seeing in the audience's response to slack rock? Are you attracting a different crowd? Are you getting an entirely different response?

People have come to expect me to do something radical on stage, and they don't know what to expect. Because I've worked so hard to break down their expectations for many years, they're very open to it. They come to see me as an artist and not to hear a particular song. They're really the ultimate audience to have, because you can be inspired and do what inspires you in real time, rather than having to repeat what you did in the past because someone fell in love with a particular thing that you did. There are songs that people request, but I really have an accommodating audience, and it's a blessing.

One of the most amazing things about slack key guitarists is their relationships with their guitars, which are often one-of-a-kind. Do you have a relationship like that with your guitar?

I had a guitar that was very very special to me, and it was stolen. It was given to me by Sonny Chillingworth when I was 13. It was a gift from him and my parents. I named that guitar "Morning Star." That was with me until 2005, so I had it for almost 15 years. When that was taken, it kind of broke my heart. That was like my best friend in the world. *(continued)*



And then I decided to let it go. In fact, if you look in the liner notes of *Different Game*, you'll see that I thanked the thieves who stole my guitar. And I thanked them because I realized that everything is a gift, everything is Makana, a kind of music that is given freely. You can't have that name and not live that philosophy. So I accepted the gift, and I realized that the energy that the music comes from, well, it comes from my hands and what's inside of me. That freed me from being dependent on an instrument. It was really powerful for me.

So as soon as I let go, a friend called me up and said "Hey, there's a guitar just like yours on eBay." The auction was ending in like 3 hours, and it was in Massachusetts, and I bought it without having heard it or played it. It was like same year, same make and same model, but in mint condition, and it had the same smell and everything. Now I call that guitar "Evening Star."

It's funny because if you see pictures on album covers with the old guitar, and it had a hole in it, kind of like Willie Nelson's. Now I have this new guitar, Evening Star, and within a year and a half it got all beat up and looked like the old one. People had thought that I'd gotten my old guitar back. So the moral of the story is letting go brings you exactly what you need.

In the song "Mars Declares," you talk about war, and the effect that it has on families. Traditional Hawaiian music rarely deals with issues like this, which of course is one of the reasons why your music is so innovative and different. I think most mainlanders assume that Iraq is far from the minds of Hawaiians since the attitudes there are more relaxed and laid-back. What are you seeing in Hawaii in regards to this?

I would never speak for Hawaii. I will say that there are many, many people here who have gone to fight in the Middle East, both Iraq and Afghanistan. An elementary school friend was killed in Afghanistan, one of my friends. So they're being affected just like everyone else. Just because we're way out here...we're a lot more military than a lot of places, like here on Oahu...

Where you have Pearl Harbor...

There's a lot of military here and on Kauai. I started the song in 2003, but I put it aside for this album, in early 2006. In the song I had envisioned a boy who comes home from school, and his father's leaving for war. He's doing it because he thinks it's the right thing to do, because he's protecting his family and Hawaii. *(continued)*

As the story goes on, he winds up killing a young boy who reminds him of his own son and realizes that he has become the very thing he was trying to fight against, and he kind of finds home there in a strange way. The night I finished composing that song, I found a blog online by one of the soldiers with that exact story in it. It really gave me chills. So I connected with the writer, who had witnessed a very similar scenario, and I sent him a copy of the song. It was a good connection.

The new album has elements of country, bluegrass and Americana. Who are some of the artists in those genres that intrigue you? What other types of music are you listening to?

My influences are really broad. I listen to everything. It's easier to say what kind of music I don't listen to. I don't listen to music by people who are just trying to make money. I think a lot of what's popular today is commercial-oriented, and it's really a tragedy. But that's the way it is, and people buy it because they have a shallow sense of self. What we're dedicated to at Makana Music is to bring people face to face with the reality of being empowered, and how music can support that. And taking responsibility for your life instead of finding a song that validates you and makes you a loser, and a song that cries out with sorrow. We have music that empowers them. I think that people are ready for that.

As far as what I listen to specifically, well, I have friends who are composers, and I listen to a lot of music that no one's ever heard...their music. This record I'm working on now is inspired by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole. I performed a number of shows with him before he passed away, back when I was a kid, and I was influenced by how he was a voice for the Hawaiian people. And now I'm writing music about Hawaii. I think that most music today doesn't have any validity on our lives. It's more of a distraction. I think that music is such an integral part of human life. Like Nietzsche said, there is no life without music. We need music to speak to what is happening in our lives. Artists need to do that, and when they do, we're going to see revolution in society.

You're now the standard-bearer of slack rock. Are you seeing other artists who want to follow you and spread the word?



Not at this point. In fact, even what I'm doing with slack key guitar is radically different than anyone else. There really is a deficit of players. There are some amazing players. I'm fearless in pioneering new things, and I'm not beholden to any structure. When people see that, there will be more. Slack rock is still a developing concept, and it's really a higher energized form of slack key. It's technically complex, but it's incorporating a lot of different elements. My friend has a funny name for it. He calls it trans-mod slack key...*transform* meaning it's incorporating these different styles, and *modern* because it hasn't been done before. We're creating it, so we're naming things, and it's happening at the shows... And I just want to pump up the energy. ●

Four from Asthmatic Kitty

By Marc Phillips

You may know that Asthmatic Kitty is the record label of Sufjan Stevens. Here are a couple more fun facts: Sufjan holds the title of Minister of Aesthetics for the company, which is located in Lander, Wyoming. (As the saying goes, Lander isn't in the middle of nowhere, but you can see it from there.) While his spirit of discovery and innocence seems to permeate Asthmatic Kitty's vision, credit needs to be given to other vital artists on the label, such as The Curtains, Liz Janes, My Brightest Diamond, Rafter, Shapes and Sizes, Chris Schlarb, Bunky, Cryptacize, Half-handed Cloud and Castanets.

Asthmatic Kitty, which is named after a company mascot whose health improved after the move to Lander, is also dedicated to vinyl. The latest project for the label, *Unusual Animals*, mates 7-inch singles (remember them?) from the various bands with the artwork of Jared Chapman, for a mere \$6 each. You can buy these, along with all of the artist's CDs, DVDs, T-shirts and hoodies, directly from the label's web site at www.asthmatickitty.com. All of the music reviewed here was on CD, but we look forward to sampling some of their vinyl in the future.



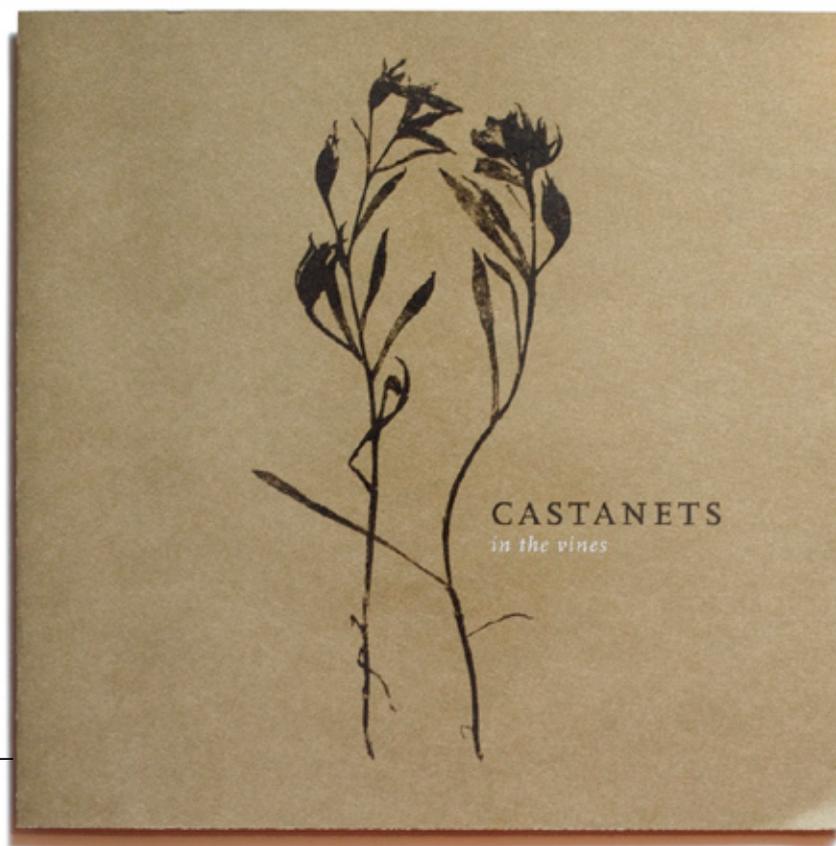
Cryptacize

Dig That Treasure

As gently suggested by Nedelle Torrisi and Chris Cohen, Cryptacize's lead vocalists, their sweet and winsome singing styles may be the result of co-habiting in a small apartment across from a C&H sugar processing plant in Crockett, California. Joined by percussionist Michael Carreira, the couple creates a nursery rhyme lyrical aesthetic mated to jagged guitars, sweeping autoharp chords and the occasionally well-played violin (via Torrisi). On their debut album, *Dig That Treasure*, the trio uses a spare and whimsical musical palette that might be considered a tad amateurish if Torrisi's singing voice wasn't so pretty and pure.

Torrisi has released a few CDs over the years (on her own and with Kill Rock Stars), and her experience shows. While she never totally upstages her bandmates (Cohen's voice may remind you of Ben Folds), she is the center of attention. Her singing on such gems as "Heaven is Human" and "Say You Will" almost seems plucked from a '50s Broadway musical, and if it wasn't grounded by the angular and minimalist instrumentation, she'd probably float away.

In fact, the juxtaposition of these two sensibilities is what gives *Dig That Treasure* its edge, and prevents it from being too light or saccharine. Cryptacize isn't making pretty background music or catchy sing-alongs (even on songs like, well, "Cosmic Sing-a-long"). This is challenging music, and you'll need to dip your toes into Lake Avant Garde before you see beneath the child-like surface and innocent ripples. Eventually you'll feel the elemental sense of wonder behind the group, however, and possibly fall under its spell as I did.



Castanets

In the Vines

To appreciate the strengths of *In the Vines*, you'll have to pass a test. The album's opening song, "Rain Will Come," starts off promisingly, with frontman Raymond Raposa's distant, sinister and nasal voice suggesting Tom Waits before his first few cartons of cigarettes. About a third of the way in, however, the noise and drone kicks in, and you'll be torn between hitting the NEXT button on your CD remote and just yanking the disc out completely. I recommend the former option, since the remainder of *Vines* is dusty, ghostly and disconcerting, the kind of music that might be played in the wrong cantina in the wrong border town in the middle of the wrong desert. In essence, Raposa's driving out the meek and unadventurous, and rewarding the brave, and the lost souls who have nowhere else to go,

As Asthmatic Kitty's Web site notes, Raymond Raposa is Castanets, and has been the only constant in the band's history. On *Vines*, he uses both a 7-piece backing band, called the Vineland House Band, and a ten-voice choir, known as the Climbing Choir (which counts Sufjan Stevens as a member). This is surprising, since the whole album is imbued with such a stark quality, and full of empty spaces, that it's difficult to imagine all those lonely souls swaying along in the studio

with Raposa. It's easier to think of *In the Vines* as a solitary work by a solitary man, composed and recorded in the back room of a club after a particularly slow and discouraging night.

What's even more surprising is that Raposa isn't the proverbial desert rat or contemporary cowboy, and is actually a former surfer from San Diego who now resides in the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn. The album was actually inspired by Raposa's feelings of loss and depression after being mugged in front of his home (both his iPod and his rent money were stolen, making him feel even more disconnected with his life). Now, the album makes more sense, with both the distant country laments and the jarring bouts of electronic noise coming into distinct, unified focus. *In the Vines* reveals more about the inner workings of a single mind than any recording I've heard in quite a while. With the right perspective, it's a haunting treasure.



Chris Schlarb

Twilight & Ghost Stories

Within a minute or so into listening to Chris Schlarb's *Twilight & Ghost Stories*, I knew I'd stumbled onto something completely new. *(continued)*

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MUSIC

Schlarb, a former insurance adjuster who found himself “aimless and unemployed” after a difficult divorce, set up a few microphones one day and recorded 40 minutes of rain and street noise outside his almost empty apartment in Long Beach, California, envisioning an ambient soundscape with no set structure. He then recruited 50 musicians to submit tracks of equally unstructured music, and started arranging the project into an almost random order, with serendipity, a pair of Akai digital mixers and his MacBook. After nearly five years, he completed *Twilight & Ghost Stories*.

The result is dreamy, organic and downright peripheral. Schlarb has created tracks that always seem to connect with the edges of your brain, rather than the center, although some of the music snaps into focus when the musicians are left alone to develop themes (yes, that’s Sufjan Stevens again, opening the album with piano). Once or twice, an actual jam breaks out, with rare and conscious musical interactions that may resemble the feeling you get when you wake up from a pleasant dream. The only constant is that rain, ever falling, and the sounds of cars driving by.

How you listen to *Twilight*, however, will depend on your musical sensibilities. This is not music you can listen to while you drive to work (most of the detail and nuance will be lost). Nor will this music make sense in the context of a boomer rock marathon. *Twilight* is a treat for those adventurous days when you’re trying to redefine your boundaries or break out of routines. It’s also for those days when you just feel like connecting with someone who might be feeling as lonely as you do.



Rafter

Sex, Death, Cassette

Of the four artists mentioned here, Rafter Roberts may be the most conventional and rooted in contemporary alternative music. That's a relative term, of course, because this redhead from Sebastopol, California, is still bursting with nervous energy, quirkiness and the willingness to experiment endlessly. But I do think he stands the greatest chance of actually getting airplay, especially with such catchy songs as "Love Time Now Please," which I think I actually have heard on a station here in Portland. Come to think of it, I've never even heard Sufjan on the radio, so this might be a bigger deal than it sounds.

Rafter is also known for being a talented guy behind the mixing board, and he's recorded and mastered albums from Castanets, the Fiery Furnaces, Black Heart Procession and the ubiquitous Mr. Stevens. As a result, *Sex* is a bit more polished and lot less stark than the other three CDs mentioned here. It's also less beholden to a specific musical style. Rafter's restless energy is evident in every song here, and you can feel his dedication to making each one stand on its own. He sings in the same whispery tones as Stevens and is committed to making complex music with a wide variety of instrumentation, but he's a bit more psychedelic, and less earnest and wide-eyed. He's also more bound to the mixing board, and less concerned with the give and take of live performance.

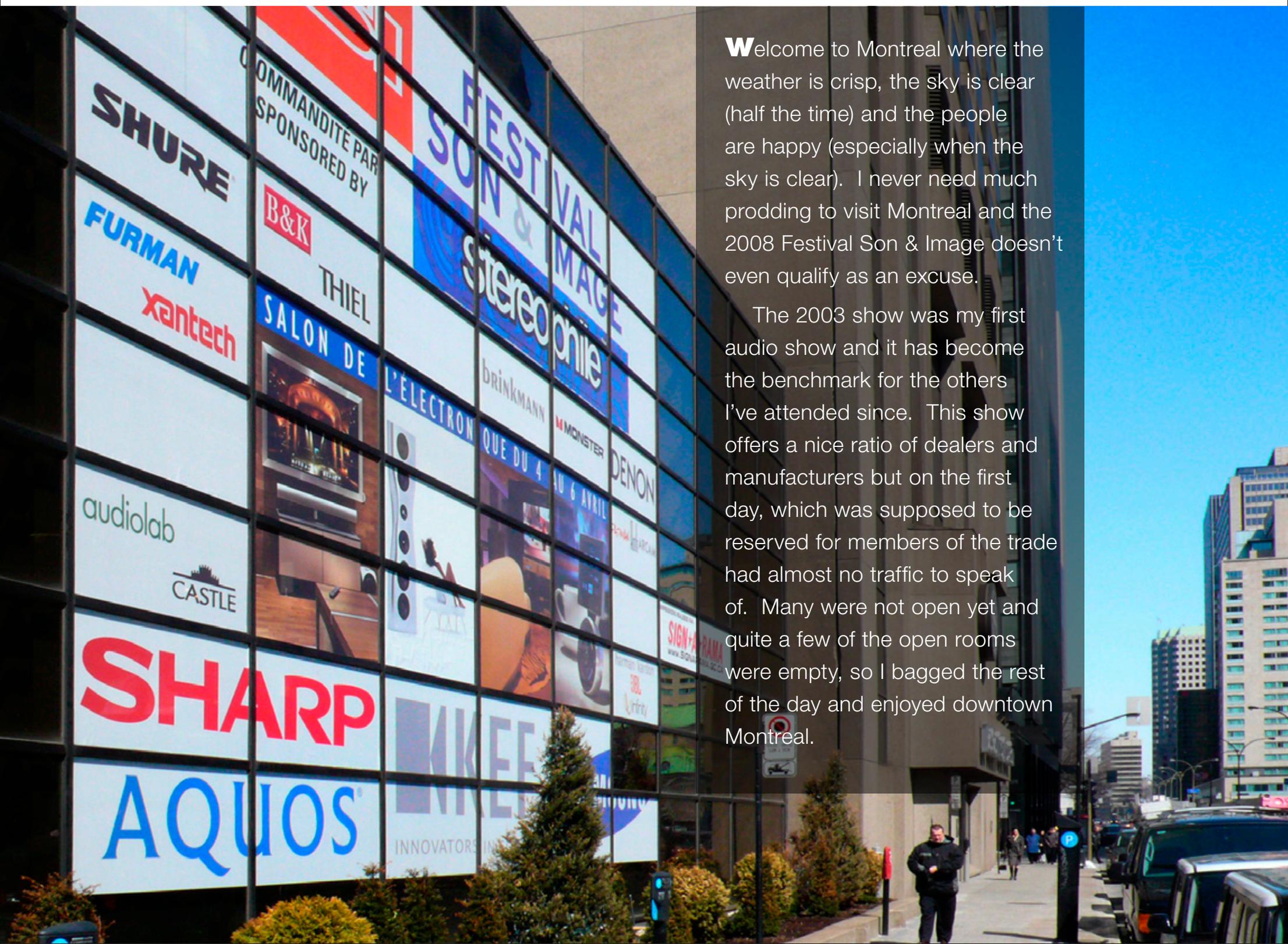
At the same time, this album exudes fun and discovery in a manner that is antidote to the urban violence and lost love examined in the other albums. I imagine a line like "I'm going to break my bones on you," from "How To and Why," would have an entirely different meaning to Raymond Raposa. To Rafter, it's simply a silly thing to say, something to elicit a giggle or two, something to get your mind off your failing marriage or losing the rent check to a gang of masked thugs—or whatever may be ailing you. ●

2008 FS&I

By Sandy Greene

Welcome to Montreal where the weather is crisp, the sky is clear (half the time) and the people are happy (especially when the sky is clear). I never need much prodding to visit Montreal and the 2008 Festival Son & Image doesn't even qualify as an excuse.

The 2003 show was my first audio show and it has become the benchmark for the others I've attended since. This show offers a nice ratio of dealers and manufacturers but on the first day, which was supposed to be reserved for members of the trade had almost no traffic to speak of. Many were not open yet and quite a few of the open rooms were empty, so I bagged the rest of the day and enjoyed downtown Montreal.





A great day to sample the local cuisine, I indulged in the two local delicacies that any tourist to Montreal must enjoy, meat and poutine (fries with gravy and cheese curd).

It turned out to be a good thing, because the weather was crisp and sunny on trade day, but the next day it snowed heavily! A great day to sample the local cuisine, I indulged in the two local delicacies that any tourist to Montreal must enjoy, meat and poutine (fries with gravy and cheese curd). Enjoy I did at Reubens, a famous local eating establishment.

The next morning was much better as the crowds filed in. All of the rooms were now up and operational. Thanks to Friday being a weekday, the crowds were small and easy to deal with creating the excellent Montreal-hip vibe that this show is famous for. Most of the larger manufacturers and dealers were in the large conference rooms on the lower floors, with the smaller dealers, distributors and manufacturers were in rooms on the upper floors.



Advertisements for the FSI show, featuring the KEF Muon speaker, were all over billboards throughout the city.

I started my Friday with a very British demo of these seven feet tall 300lb solid aluminum beauties. The presenter's accent almost justified the lofty price (\$140k) and limited production (100 units) of this very impressive speaker. However, the music choice (a drum track and a Jean Michel Jarre track) did not really give me the full idea of the full capabilities of these speakers in the 15-minute velvet rope demo. Our publisher will be making a trip to San Francisco to spend some time with them next month, so expect a full report soon.

The smaller rooms offered a bit more of a laid back experience and this was where I was able to mingle with the crowd a bit more. The social aspect of the FS&I is what makes this show my personal favorite. Though the show got progressively more crowded, the visitors were very enthusiastic and had a very European feel with the multi-lingual environment. I had a great time bringing a few of my local friends to the show and meeting some new folks in the hifi business. As always, it's a pleasure keeping in touch with the people I have been talking to on the phone all year.

One of the most pleasant experiences I had was on the 12th floor in the Coup de Foudre room, consisting of a Leben integrated amplifier, Clearaudio turntable and a pair of ProAc Response D's. They were playing a fantastic album titled *Sonny & Brownie* that was extremely musical.

(continued)



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Everyone I saw walking out of the room had a big smile on their face and it even impressed John Atkinson of Stereophile, who declared it one of his favorite rooms at the show. So you see, we audiophiles do agree on what constitutes good sound from time to time!

In the Red Wine Audio/Omega Loudspeaker room, Vinnie Rossi and Louis Chochos were mixing formats to everyone's enjoyment. Vinnie introduced his new battery powered Isabella preamp with built in DAC, using his Mac laptop, a BlueNote CD player and a Scheu turntable.

When they played a cut from the Robert Plant/Allison Krause disc on LP and then the digital file, the crowd's response was about 50/50. I felt the vinyl was a bit more musical, but one gentleman commented that he liked the CD best because it sounded more familiar.

The bottom line here, like the rest of the show was the variety available in music and components, with an easygoing attitude from the crowd to match.

Interestingly enough I did not see much of a trend in one direction or the other, it was a pretty even split between music servers, CD players and turntables, which seemed to suit the audience just fine.

That's the beauty of the FS&I show; there were as many different flavors of audio reproduction as there were fans to enjoy them. I highly suggest putting this one on your calendar for next year. ●



Classical Music A to Z

By Dan Babineau

Saint-Saens, Schumann & Schubert:

Light, Middle and Heavyweight

One of the joys of being involved in the high-end audio industry is the cornucopia of terms that audiophiles use to describe their musical experience. Bass suck, ultimate resolution, inner detail, spatiality, openness, utter transparency, chocolately mid-range, wine-soaked soundstage, airiness and of course *weight!* While it is necessary to try and explain what we hear in music to others, the nomenclature does amaze me at times. However there is one description that really does apply to all types of music: weight!

Whether I am listening to live or recorded music, I first decide if the music draws me in and involves me emotionally. Next I follow the sequence of compositional events and attempt to uncover the *musical weight* of the work. When discussing classical music, musical weight can simply be described as the combination of events that come together to form a cohesive whole. When these musical events do come together, as they say at conrad-johnson, "It just sounds right". To a large extent, this process is subliminal, but if you are somewhat conscious of what goes on in a classical composition you'll get that much closer to musical nirvana. And being conscious of the weight of a composition is one of the best places to start to really enjoy and understand music as a whole!

Though there will always be some crossover, I feel that most music can be categorized as light, middle or heavy weight. The synthesis of musical elements in a work determines its weight class. The three composers in this issue's column are perfect examples of each.

Being conscious of the weight of a composition is one of the best places to start to really enjoy and understand music as a whole!



Charles Camille Saint-Saens (1835-1921)

With the exception of his grand 3rd Symphony, Saint-Saens is an example of the quintessential lightweight in the realm of classical composition. He composed a huge catalog of music in his long life but, a great deal of these compositions couldn't withstand the test of time. It's the weight thing again, as many of his works were written for a time in history that begged for delicate elegance and simple grace. From its inception, the light, airy nature of his music seems to blow right through you. There aren't any strong musical themes here. Nor are there major contrasts in tempo and dynamics. Saint-Saens' music is instead light and fun but rarely sticks to your ribs. It's as if he wants us to dance on air without a serious thought to be found. His music clearly depicts 19th century France in all its fanciful glory!

Saint-Saens is on my Classical A to Z shortlist because of his genius in the world of romantic composition, even though I consider him light in the weight category. You might think of his work as sappy and full of melodrama, perhaps even "classical elevator music", but I always felt he was a master of his genre. He is a big part of a musical era that will never be duplicated.

"Introduction and Rondo for Violin" and "Havannaise" beautifully illustrates Saint-Saens' innate ability to tame the wind and present us with light, danceable masterpieces. His operas and piano concertos continue in this delicate direction. The program music found in "Dance Macabre" and "Carnival of the Animals" exemplifies the way Saint-Saens uses music to create his soft watercolor-like compositions.

In his third symphony, Saint-Saens steps out of his lightweight musical mold and creates an entirely new weight classification. The 3rd or "Organ Symphony" is a musical hybrid, a combination of all musical weights from light to ultra heavy. Yes we have all of the delicacies and air of his other compositions but as the two movements start to unfold Saint-Saens delivers a musical wallop equal to Beethoven or Schubert. Saint-Saens was a master organist so it's not hard to understand his reasoning for including it in this monumental work. But he also included two grand pianos and a full orchestra loaded with percussion. There's enough weight in this piece to knock down the concert hall. A true musical masterpiece!



Many of his works were written for a time in history that begged for delicate elegance and simple grace.

audience



"The Adept Response made a phenomenal difference in my system. Fundamentally, it improved the clarity of recordings by eliminating a previously undetected lack of definition, without introducing any brightness or most importantly any coloration. That is worth repeating. I did not hear any coloration from the Adept Response or any obscuring of the rhythm of the music. The Adept Response just made every recording I listened to more natural and in turn more musically engaging." **The Absolute Sound - Max Shepherd - June '06**

DAN'S PICKS:

RCA Living Stereo catalog #61387
Symphony #3 – Munch and the Boston Symphony Orchestra

Atna Classics catalog #2331
Symphony #3 – Seguin and the Grand Montreal Metropolitan Orchestra

EMI Classics catalog #82233
Danse Macabre, Carnival, Samson & Dalila, Opus 47 – Fremaux and the City of Birmingham Symphony & the Paris Opera Orchestra (great collection of Saint-Saens works)

Philips Duo catalog #442608
The Best of Saint-Saens – (2 disc set featuring some of the best recorded performances) Previn, Haitink, Ceccato, Jarvi, De Waart, Remoortel and a variety of amazing orchestras!

Decca catalog #46008
Violin Concertos 1 & 3, Intro & Rhondo capriccioso & Havanaise – Dutoit & the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (Also available on LP, catalog #CS 7073)

LP PICKS:

Klavier catalog #KS 527
Carnival of the Animals – Fremaux & the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

RCA Victor catalog #LSC2341
Symphony #3 – Munch & the Boston Symphony Orchestra

Decca catalog #SPA 175
Danse Macabre, Opus 40 – Gibson & the New Symphony of London



Robert Schumann (1810-1856)



The words that always comes to mind when I think of Schumann is dreamy-tension.

A clear-cut middleweight and another cornerstone of the Romantic Movement, Schumann's biography reads like a bad soap opera filled with bizarre events and melodrama. Born into a fairly well-to-do family, Schumann had the luxury of being able to study literature and music. Early in his life, he became a critic of both.

Schumann started out his adult life as a concert pianist, but due to an accident that badly damaged one of his fingers, he could no longer play at the virtuoso level. He then turned to composing, leaving us with some of the most beautiful music of the romantic period. Emotional, intense and dramatic, Schumann was the perfect romantic composer. He was highly influenced by the writings of Schiller, Goethe and Byron and numerous others. This is where his concept of program music evolved, as he used his music to illustrate the melodrama and raw emotions contained in his readings.

Smitten by the affections of Clara Wierk, (one of his piano teacher's daughters) he spent a great deal of his life trying to marry her. Beyond a hopeless romantic, he even tried to commit suicide when his intentions were repeatedly denied. And finally, after a long and painful courtship, he was granted permission to marry Clara. Their relationship lasted through Schumann's lifetime but not without serious conflict and drama. Robert had many psychological problems that came out in his music but also made for a rather rocky marriage. No one really knows the source of his maladies but the obvious tension generated in his music points to a troubled existence to say the least. Clara was the one bright spot in his ultimate turmoil and her exquisite performances of Schumann's many piano works delighted audiences throughout the world!

The words that always comes to mind when I think of Schumann is *dreamy-tension*. His music starts out strong, drifts off into the abyss and then regains energy to form a cloud of emotional energy. Schumann was greatly influenced by Schubert, Mendelssohn and Mozart. These composers gave Schumann the catalyst to launch his tension-ridden compositions.

"Kreisleriana" and "Fantasia" are filled with delightfully dreamy musical passages that seem to elevate us up into clouds that are sometimes stormy! Schumann's music is like a drug that takes us out of our existence and transports us to stange, exotic land. Like Saint-Saens, his music is light and flowery, but that last burst of power that Schumann asserts creates a musical tension that grabs at your soul. Definitely more of a middleweight than a lightweight.

He composed four symphonies, an opera, a great deal of piano music, wonderful art songs (or lieder) and a variety of chamber music. His first symphony, the "Spring" and third, the "Rhenish" are always popular in the concert hall.

(continued)



"Red Wine Audio's Signature 30.2 is one of my three favorite amps regardless of class or output devices... it sonically goes well beyond its own first incarnation to have turned into a bona fide ultrafi amp that'll upset equilibrium in the upper ranks of overpriced eye candy for those who pay attention and evaluate with their ears."

Srajan Ebaen, 6moons.com



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Robert Schumann has generally been given the credit for discovering and nurturing Johannes Brahms. Brahms in turn, became close with Clara and even aided her after Schumann's early death.

Schumann was an integral part of the development of classical music, combining technical astuteness with his mastery of imagery setting the stage for the future of both romantic and 20th century music. Schumann's innate ability to create musical tension is what puts him clearly in the middleweight category and on the classical arena forever!

DAN'S PICKS:

Sony Classics catalog #62349
The Four Symphonies
– Szell & the Cleveland Orchestra

Decca catalog #466383
Concerto for Piano in A Minor
– Lupu, Previn & the London Symphony Orchestra

Decca catalog #440496
Kreisleriana, Kinderszenen & Humoreque – Rado Lupu
(Wonderful piano music)

Decca catalog #470915
Works for Solo Piano
– Vladimir Ashkenazy

DG catalog #440496
Symphony #3, Genoveva & Overture etc., Opus 81
– Thielemann & the Philharmonia Orchestra

Brilliant Classics catalog #92148
Secular Choral Works – Werner Pfaff & the Studio Vocal Karlsruhe
(gorgeous vocal works including composition by Clara Schumann).

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Often swept under the rug when discussing the true greats of classical music, no one but Mozart has made as much of an impact on the classical genre than Schubert. His music was a unique blend; a hybrid of the strong principles of the classical era overlapped by the emotional drama of the romantic era. From his early chamber music to his last symphony, Schubert made a mark in the development of classical music that stands well into the 21st Century!

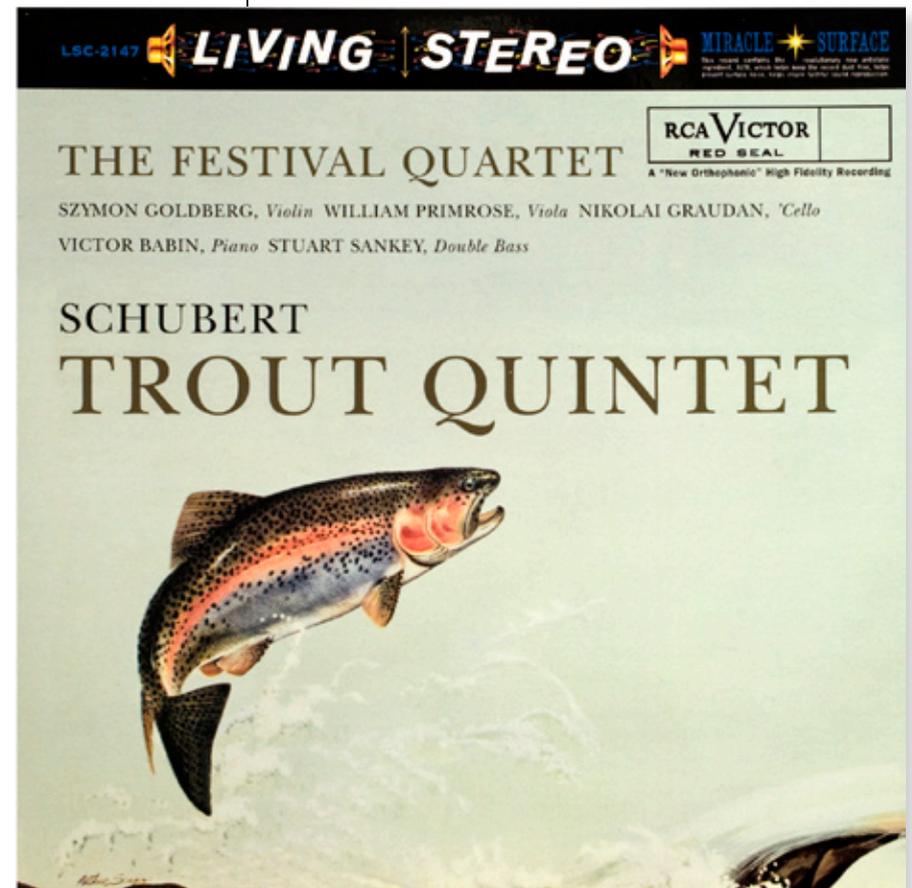
Having lived a bohemian life with little formal music education, the majority of his musical innovation came from within. He single-handedly revolutionized the art song in his song cycles or *lieder*. His many string quartets and complex arrangements like his "Octet in F" clearly show a genius at work. His symphonies are all true masterpieces in their own right, each with their own unique musical themes. No one really knows why he never finished his 8th symphony. It is widely known that Schubert was greatly influenced by his surroundings and maybe in the case of the 8th the muse escaped him due to extraneous circumstances. But the 8th did break future ground for a symphony in two movements as we've come to accept the ending of the 2nd as the finale.

The raw power and emotion of Schubert's symphonies was far ahead of its time. They are a culmination of a refined style, controlled romanticism and ultimate precision. It's as if we took the melodies of Mozart, the unending power of Beethoven and blended in a little Liszt, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms. I always hear Schubert in Brahms' music; it's the undeniable power and grace that truly overwhelms us.

The serenity and hope that expounds from "Ave Maria" has never been equaled and Schubert's sacred works are some of the most treasured of all choral composition. Many think of J.S. Bach, but I prefer Schubert's ease and simplicity every time! The melodies of his secular songs always stick in my brain like divine little jewels, full of life and ready to go.

His chamber music is also exemplary; I suggest his *lieder*, "The Trout" or "Winterreise" if you are having a difficult day, this is musical poetry of the highest degree. Schubert has been given credit for developing the art song or *lieder* and many of his innovations for this medium are still in place today.

Schubert changed classical form to meet his high expectations. What seems rather easy to the ear becomes very complicated to play; performing Schubert can be equal parts dream and chore! Multiple key changes coupled with strange shifts in rhythm, always keep you wide-awake and intent on following every note. *(continued)*



Schubert has been given credit for developing the art song or *lieder* and many of his innovations for this medium are still in place today.



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There are always timing issues while playing Schubert's music, as he extends a passage far out into the stratosphere only to finish with a grand finale!

This is why I give Schubert the title of heavyweight, in his short thirty one years he brought together two distinctly different eras of music the classical and the romantic to forge his own path. ●

DAN'S PICKS:

EMI Classics catalog #66999
Symphonies 3, 5,&6 – Beecham and the Royal Philharmonic

DG catalog #449745
Symphonies 3 & 8 (Unfinished) – Kleiber and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Decca catalog #460311
Symphony #9 – Solti & the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Philips catalog #000667202
The Trout Quintet – Brendel, Demark & the Cleveland Quartet

Philips catalog #420870
Lieder (including Ava Maria) – Elly Ameling & Dalton Balwin

Hyperion catalog #33037
Complete Songs – Pyatt, Johnson, Schade, Ainsley & A.R. Johnson

LP PICKS:

London catalog #CS 6051
Octet, Opus #166 – The Vienna Quartet (One of the finest classical recordings ever made)!

RCA catalog #LSC-2147
Piano Quartet in A (The Trout) – Festival Quartet

London catalog #CS6061
Symphony #9 (The Great) – Krips, & the LSO

Enjoying The
Continuum
Criterion With a Little
Help From My Friends

By Jeff Dorgay



Honestly, who cares how the new “entry level” table from Continuum sounds? I can’t afford one and you probably can’t either. So if you are one of our readers spinning your vinyl on a more reasonably priced setup, and you think I’m a complete idiot for even entertaining something like this, skip ahead a few pages to the next article.

If you are in the next, albeit smaller group of audiophiles who has a stellar turntable in the 15-30 thousand dollar range that lies awake at night wondering if you should cash in some of your retirement money for this table, read on. But first roll over and give whomever you sleep with a hug. Go back to sleep with a smile on your face, because life is good.

Should you happen to be in that part of our readership that actually can afford this table, I’m talking specifically to you. No disrespect to our other readers, but it’s not worth the agony if you don’t have the scratch. It’s the same reason that when I got a chance to drive a Ferrari F50 a few years ago, I just threw the keys back. I didn’t want to have the experience knowing I could never afford one and I didn’t want to get a stone chip on the nose either! Fortunately, once the Criterion was set up, I didn’t have much to do but spin records, so it was a ton of fun.



In case you aren't familiar with Continuum Audio Labs, they set the turntable world on its ear a couple of years ago when their flagship table, the Caliburn, hit the market. With the dedicated Cobra arm, it was priced at a cool 100 thousand bucks. (The price has since risen to \$125,000) Vinyl maven/madman Michael Fremer purchased one of the first few units and has since made it his reference.

The next step for Continuum was to see how much of the Caliburn's performance could be recreated at a more "affordable" price point.

The following year, the Criterion was born. For a package price of \$55,595 you can have a Criterion with the new Copperhead tonearm of your very own. Should you want to fit your own arm, the Criterion can be yours for \$49,995.

A Fusion of Art and Engineering

Inside a crate that weighs almost 400 pounds, you get the turntable components, a control box and a vacuum pump/power supply. If you are hesitant to entertain a vacuum pump in your hifi system because of past experiences, I assure you the Continuum unit is perfectly silent. The power supply weighs more than some recent power amplifiers I've reviewed, and regenerates three phase power for the motor on the Criterion with a DSP controller that offers smoother power delivery than the single phase motors in most other turntables.

The speed controller offers 33, 45 and 78 rpm speeds, though I'm not sure you would want to play those old 78's on this table with your favorite cartridge. Those of you considering a second arm board, however, might really enjoy this option.

(continued)

The Criterion uses the latest computer modeling software and exotic materials to achieve its design goals. The base is made of magnesium and has a very intriguing warm glow to it that aluminum does not. Don't touch it with your bare hands, as this finish starts accumulating schmutz immediately. When you become a proud Continuum owner, I would highly suggest some kind of all enclosing dust cover when not in use and a stack of cotton gloves. Otherwise this baby will start looking like a used DeLorean sooner rather than later.

The base weighs about 100 pounds and the platter about another 70. If your current rack will not comfortably hold about 175 pounds, add a substantial rack to the list of goodies you need to integrate the Criterion into your system. Thanks to Allen Perkins at Immedia Sound, we were able to borrow a larger version of the Finite Elemente Pagode racks

On top of the Criterion is a solid plate of carbon fiber, with a cut out for the platter and the Copperhead tonearm, again a true work of art.

that we use here in the TONE studio to accommodate the Criterion for the review period.

On top of the Criterion is a solid plate of carbon fiber, with a cut out for the platter and the Copperhead tonearm, again a true work of art. Underneath that cutout is an armboard that is completely suspended by Kevlar cables on one side and magnets on the other side, counteracting the force. The motor also sits on the shelf alone, so the platter is truly decoupled from the table and arm, which is crafted from a composite that is unique to Continuum.

Setup and Adjustment

I must commend Continuum for putting together an excellent manual. As they are now getting dealer support, your dealer should be able to set it up for you in a couple of hours. I had the pleasure of having factory tech Rich O'Neill fly out to set our test table up. Using a combination of Wally Tools and Acoustic Sounds' new test record with a multimeter, it was a snap to optimize the table.

Anyone who's spent a bit of time around turntables could probably set this one up pretty quickly if they followed the instructions carefully. Once we had VTA, VTF, azimuth and tracking force dialed in, it was ready to start spinning records! By the time I returned from dropping Mr. O'Neill at the airport, staff writer Randy Wells had the VTA fine-tuned to perfection and we were ready to do some serious listening. *(continued)*





Another bit of thanks here to Mike Pranka from Dynavector USA is in order. I've been using their excellent XV-1S cartridge for a few months now and Mike was kind enough to send us his personal XV-1S for a few weeks so that we could really compare the Criterion directly to a number of other table and arm combinations. With everything else the same, it made it a lot easier to get a quick read on what effect the Criterion really had in my system.

Which brings us to the first caveat with this table, or any other table at the far end of analog performance – careful attention to setup and optimization of parameters. With a device capable of such high resolution, setup is much more critical than it is listening to a lesser table. If you don't have the setup nailed, the magic is gone. I noticed this when switching from the XV-1S that Mr. O'Neill had set up, to my other reference, the MoFi 3.5C. Loosely set up, the sound of this great cartridge was somewhat underwhelming.

It took about an hour to get the cartridge set up properly and then another hour of fine-tuning VTA, VTF and anti-skate in very small increments to bring the excitement back.

After a bit more seat time with the Copperhead arm, it took a bit less time switching to the Shelter 9000, another one of my favorites. Again a bit of fine-tuning

was necessary to ensure great performance. All three cartridges worked extremely well with the Criterion and I felt that I was getting everything these cartridges were capable of delivering. But keep in mind, if you lack the finesse or patience to set whatever cartridge you choose correctly, the magic is gone. If you can't do it yourself, make sure you can afford to pay someone who can.

The same is true for your associated components. I really felt that my reference phono preamp, the ASR Basis Exclusive was not up to the task of fully letting everything the Criterion was capable of delivering through, and again a fair amount of the magic was gone. Fortunately, we have been working on a number of new analog reviews and we just happened to have the new phono preamplifiers from Nagra and Conrad-Johnson to compare.

Both the new Nagra VPS (\$7000) and the CJ TEA-1 (\$10K) had the necessary weight, airiness and detail to provide the rest of the experience. When I went back to my ASR, the magic was gone and the playback wasn't any more engaging (and sometimes less) than my reference Naim CD555. Unless you have one of the world's top phono stages, add one more thing to your shopping list so that you can hear all that the Criterion is capable of.

(continued)

Unless you have one of the world's top phono stages, add one more thing to your shopping list so that you can hear all that the Criterion is capable of.



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Should you purchase the Continuum, here's a quick setup tip. From the beginning the table was plagued with a bit of extreme low frequency rumble that we all found pretty puzzling. Upon suggestion from Mr. O'Neill, we moved the vacuum pump to an adjacent rack and it was completely eliminated!

Continuum tip number two: Beware the tonearm cable! Coming out of the back of the Copperhead tonearm, you will notice a hole with a very fine braided wire that goes up and around a curved wire stand. Fortunately, I did not have any RF problems with this setup, but I am concerned that people in very dense urban areas may not be so lucky.

Either way, don't let anyone near the Copperhead because the slightest tug to this flailing cable will end your vinyl bliss.

I would guess that a tonearm rewire is pretty costly and time consuming. I find this part of the Criterion's design unacceptable for the real world. After reading their engineering notes, I understand the concept of sonic purity they were going for, and it does work, but one wrong move and this thing is toast. So let's get back to listening to records, shall we?

Hard Core Listening

Even at first listen, we knew we were on to something special. Because everything else in my system has been constant for a long time, it was very easy to hear the difference that a new component had on the presentation. We conked out with exhaustion at about 3a.m. with many records played. *(continued)*

Everyone went to sleep that night with big smiles on their faces, and we got right back to it the next morning. About 5p.m. the next day, Randy promised his wife he would stop listening to records and head home, so I think that's a pretty good indicator of the pull that the Criterion can exhibit in a good system.

The Criterion's ability to handle complex musical passages without clogging up was what hit me immediately. This is somewhat of a hot button for me, having been an SET guy for a while; I love detail and delicacy. Great hifi is full of tradeoffs, but often a system that can play the most minute details with finesse tend to flatten out when asked to play very dynamic music that has an equal mixture of loud and soft bits at the same time. I'm thinking Shostakovich (and Megadeth) but you probably have your own favorites.

As I have spent quite a few 8-12 hour listening sessions with the Criterion, I could go on and on about this passage on that record, etc. etc. But I won't. I'd really like to concentrate on what this table does extremely well and at that point, it's up to you to seek one out at a friend or dealer to audition yourself.

I would also like to point out something else that is critical to really enjoying the Criterion - software. Even with an amazing system and the table perfectly aligned, if you don't have awesome records, the magic is gone. My initial excitement for this table faded a bit after I went through that first batch of outstanding records. Again, Randy was a lifesaver, bringing over some amazing Beatles pressings and a bunch of first issue Pink Islands to add to my mix of audiophile delights.

What we all noticed when using great software was the Criterion's ability to produce a very big, organic sound that Randy and Marc (who joined us later) both commented on as being "more oval shaped". The lower registers had not only tremendous authority, but also a texture and resolution that I haven't heard elsewhere to this extent. (Though a well setup SME 20 or 30 is knocking on the door here...)

If I were to call out the one really defining feature of the Criterion sound, I would say it is clarity. All of the time and effort they put into the motor and motor controller really paid off. The hardest thing for analog to achieve, because of the mechanical nature of the playback chain is an elimination of wow and flutter. For me,

this is where digital really shines over analog; when you listen to a piano or a violin with a great digital recording, while it may lack a tiny bit of airiness that analog provides, there is a purity of tone that comes through.

A lack of wavering,
if you will.

(continued)

If I were to call out the one really defining feature of the Criterion sound, I would say it is clarity.



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The Criterion does a better job here than anything else I've ever heard and this my friends is what you pay the big, big money for. If you want to get taken that last notch closer to the real thing, this is what the Criterion delivers. I can see why Michael Fremer likes his Continuum table so much.

This is the first component I've reviewed that I'm honestly not worthy of.

I own about 5000 records and even though they are all in pristine shape, only about 10-15% of my collection is made up of great remasters and hot stamper (or whatever silly thing you want to call them) originals. We did a lot of comparison listening between my Rega P9 with an XV-1S and the Continuum with the same cartridge to get a feel for the difference in sound that someone with a great but more reasonably priced deck would experience. The P9 with an XV-1S is just under \$10k, so it's not a budget table by any means.

The software makes as much if not more of a difference than the cartridges and setup.

When we were playing the primo records, the Continuum was definitely way out in front, offering up more music in every way; more dynamic slam, more pace, a bigger soundstage and more lifelike tonality.

But when we went back to average pressings, the gap was not enough that I would spring for the Continuum, even if I had a spare 56 large in my pocket. I'd be perfectly happy putting a world-class cartridge on my P9 and calling it a day.

(continued)

If Everything Lines Up, You will be in Heaven

Surprisingly enough, there is a pretty fair amount of competition for your dollar in the 30-60 thousand dollar range, so I would shop wisely. If you want something that will set you apart from all your buddies that have SME 30s, then by all means take the plunge.

Even though I own a six-figure reference system, it's still very hard to judge whether a table like the Criterion is "worth it." I feel that you are paying somewhat of a penalty for the low numbers that this table is produced, but you pay that same penalty for the privilege of owning a Ferrari 430. Sure, a Porsche GT3 is just as fast for half the price but it isn't a Ferrari.

If you don't grasp the logic of this statement, you will never understand the Continuum.

In the end, as great as this table is, if you don't have a killer record collection and a system to match, you will just be buying audio jewelry. And that's your privilege.

For this same reason, if you live in that rarified world where this kind of purchase is no big deal, you can rest assured that the Continuum delivers the goods if you value exclusivity as much as performance. Me, I bought a TK Raven table, a new Mini Cooper S and put twenty grand in my daughter's college fund. And I'm sleeping like a baby. ●

The Continuum Criterion
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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson
ACT2/Series 2

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson
Premier 350

Speakers: MartinLogan Summits, with
Descent i subwoofer

Phono Preamplifiers: ASR Basis Exclusive,
Conrad-Johnson TEA-1, Nagra VPS, Audio
Research PH7, ModWright 9.0 SE, JLTi,
Dynavector PV-1

Cartridges: Dynavector XV-1S, Shelter
9000, MoFi 3.5C, Grado Statement

Digital Source: Naim CD555

Additional Analog Sources: Oracle Delphi
V w/SME iV.i arm, Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference,
Shunyata Orion, Audience AU24. Audioquest
Sub-3 used for Subwoofer.

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion

Power: Running Springs Audio Jaco and
Danielle power conditioners, Essential Sound
Products The Essence "Reference", RSA
Mongoose, Audience PowerChord and
Shunyata Helix Alpha power cords

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode
Signature racks, Finite Elemente Master Refer-
ence rack (on Continuum), Cerapucs, Ceraballs

Room Treatments: GIK 242 panels,
GIK TRI-Traps and Sonex Classics



Some New Goodies From Shunyata

By Jeff Dorgay

I've been using some of Shunyata's wire products in my system for a few months now and the results have been very impressive. Their Orion speaker cable has become my reference in my main system, striking that perfect balance between being highly detailed and revealing, while also being free of grain. In the last year, I haven't heard a better match between my Conrad-Johnson Premier and MartinLogan Summits. While other people go on long bike rides or choose fantasy football leagues, I'm a nerd – I listen to power cords and speaker cable. To each his own.



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I've had some other great things from Shunyata to listen to now for some time; their Anaconda AC cords and their new Dark Field Cable Elevators. Both have been a great addition to my system. We'll start with the most expensive and work our way down.

Anaconda Alpha Helix AC Cord

Shunyatas Anaconda Alpha Helix power cord has been powering my Premier 350 for quite some time as well and it has been fantastic. While I have never been one to go out on a limb for expensive cable, I have to concede that in a great system, once you have optimized setup and dealt with room anomalies to the best of your ability, addressing your cables is the final frontier.

The good news is that if you let the wire go until last, you will be pleasantly surprised how much difference good cables can make.

Otherwise, you run the risk of the benefits in resolution being lost to your room. Every time I've heard someone proclaim to me that "cables don't make a difference", I take a peek inside their listening room and see bare walls, big windows and large glass coffee tables.

If you are that person, don't spend 2000 dollars on a Shunyata power cord (or anyone else's 2000 dollar power cord). Get some help, and spend 2000 bucks on getting your room in order first. Then, go buy a 2000 dollar Shunyata power cord! Buy two and call me in the morning. (Nerd humor.) *(continued)*



When we get a new piece of gear in for review, we always listen to it for quite a while with a stock power cord to make sure it is thoroughly broken in so that we can have a baseline for the sound. Not all equipment responds equally to a good power cord. In almost 200 product reviews, I've observed the best torture test for a power cord to be a big power amplifier, because they draw so much current. But it always seems to be case by case. Some gear responds to a good power cord better than others. One thing an expensive power cord won't do is transform an average component into something completely different.

It's Magically Delicious

Keeping with my new directive of comparing hifi components to breakfast cereal instead of expensive wine, cigars or scotch, I would say the Anaconda is magically delicious. When I switched from my stock power cord to the Anaconda, the background of my system went from 90% black to 100% black. The tiny bit of AC noise that was coming through my speakers if I put my ear right up against them was now gone too.

Getting rid of noise is great, but there were nice improvements elsewhere. What I noticed the most was a lack of grain

Good power products will not affect the tonality of your system, but they will allow your components to deliver every bit of performance they are capable of.

in the high frequencies. I thought my Premier 350 had no grain until I put the Anaconda in the system and everything got clearer and more focused. Good power products will not affect the tonality of your system, but they will allow your components to deliver every bit of performance they are capable of. This is what the Anaconda brings to the table.

When I plugged the Anaconda into my Prima Luna Prologue 1 (which costs less than the Anaconda) amplifier, I did not get this kind of a change because a budget component does not have the resolution to hear the difference. But swapping the already good power cord that came with my Luxman L-590A II had the same effect as the Premier 350, it was as if there was a thin sheet of tracing paper between me and my system and it was now gone, thanks to the Anaconda.

This effect was noticeable at all volume levels, but again more noticeable when I was really cranking it up. When you are pushing a 350 watt per channel amplifier hard, every bit of grain you can eliminate is a good thing. This was where the Shunyata cords really excelled.

I also had a very solid improvement in this direction with my Meridian 808 CD player and Wadia 521 DAC. *(continued)*



There was a definite reduction in grain and haze without any loss in pace or timing. Hauling in some of my usual non-audiophile guinea pigs revealed a very noticeable difference to even untrained ears. The guinea pigs squealed in unison when I told them what the Anaconda cost, but they all described the same differences. The audiophile subjects all wanted to know where to get one!

The Winning Combination

Lets face it, if I lose five pounds I really can't ride my bike much faster but to Lance Armstrong, every pound is critical. It's the same with high performance audio. If you have a modest system, you should have your head examined for buying a 2000 dollar power cord. (The folks at Shunyata have some great entry level power cords too) But in a statement level system, careful attention to every detail in setup will offer definite rewards in the presentation.

The Shunyata Anaconda power cord is a definite step in the pursuit of sonic excellence. If you have the system with the resolution to take advantage of it, I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

They Lift and Separate

It's been established now for some time that getting your cables up from the ground offers a definite benefit and this is not limited to a state of the art system. I've always managed to wring a bit better imaging and clarity out of a system when doing this simple and for the most part inexpensive tweak.

Jonathan Scull made audiophile history when he started using Styrofoam cups to get cables up off the floor in the early 90's and many of us have tried a number of different things in the meantime. There's even a fairly expensive product out there that is nothing more than those plastic things you get at Carls Jr. while you wait for your chili burger with a notch cut in the top. Hey, they are better than nothing and they do get the cables up off the floor.

While I can't begin to analyze the science behind this, they do have a patent pending for the Dark Field Cable Elevators and they work quite well.

Shunyata has come up with a very elegant solution to this problem. Their Dark Field Cable Elevators are made up of two layers of electrically conductive foam that looks a lot like the foam that delicate electronics are packaged in to prevent static build up.

While I can't begin to analyze the science behind this, they do have a patent pending for the Dark Field Cable Elevators and they work quite well. \$129 for four or \$350 by the dozen, they are a bit more than a set of Styrofoam cups, but much more attractive and certainly no more than what the guy that's selling plastic table tents charges.

This is one of those wacky products that if you aren't familiar with it, you could be a doubting Thomas (or even a skeptical Roy). Again, I sent the box of a dozen DFCE's over to some of my friends with modest systems and I had to wrestle every one of them to get them back.

Remember, this isn't going to transform your system or fix room anomalies. But putting these in the path where your speaker cables go and elevating your power cords off the floor wherever possible will add a level of resolution that wasn't there before. They worked particularly well in my reference system, where I have a 16-foot run of interconnects between my preamp and power amp.

The Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators are one accessory that I would not be without. ●

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PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson
ACT2/series 2, Nagra PL-L, McIntosh
C2300

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson
Premier 350, Nagra PSA, McIntosh
MC275

Integrated Amplifiers: Luxman L-
590A II, SimAudio Moon I-7, McIntosh
7000

Speakers: Martin Logan Summits
w/Descent i subwoofer, Harbeth
Compact 7-3

Analog Sources: Continuum
Criterion turntable w/Copperhead
arm and Dynavector XV-1s cartridge,
TK Acoustics Raven Two w/SME 309
and i.Vi tonearms, Dynavector XV-
1s cartridge and Grado Statement
cartridge

Digital Sources: Naim CD555 w/
PS555, Nagra CDP, Meridian 808,
iPod Classic w/Wadia 521 DAC

Speaker Cable: Shunyata Orion

Interconnects: Shunyata Antares,
Cardas Golden Reference

Power Conditioning: Running
Springs Jaco, Running Springs
Danielle

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente
Pagode signature racks, Ceraballs,
CeraPucs

Room Treatment: GIK 242 panels,
GIK Corner traps, Sonex Classic

A Perfect Combination of New and Old School

THE LUXMAN L-590 A II

By Jeff Dorgay

I was a huge fan of the Luxman brand back in the 70's. They made some of the most amazing audio products that I had ever experienced and they were very *expensive*. While not quite as well known here in the states as in Europe and Asia, the Luxman brand carried a lot of cachet. Somewhere in the 80's Luxman got tangled up with Alpine (the car stereo guys) and got the short end of the stick in the US market, disappearing relatively quickly after that. But Luxman went right along building great gear in Japan for the rest of the world to enjoy.

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Last fall, I got a telephone call from Philip O'Hanlon, the new importer for Luxman a few days before the RMAF in October. He told me about all of the great products that would now be offered again here in the US, and while there are quite a few great things on the list, there was one thing that really jumped right off the page – their new 30 watt per channel integrated amplifier you see here.

Philip told me that one of his customers was over listening to this amplifier with his wife and they were very impressed with the sound. The fellow's wife said, "We can replace that big stack of gear and all of those wires with this? We'll take it!" If you happen to be an audiophile that wants a more compact system, but does not want to compromise sound quality, look no further than the Luxman L-590 AII. This one does it all.

Sit down; the cost of admission is high, but the 590 is worth every penny.

Granted, ten thousand dollars for an integrated amplifier isn't pocket change, but this beauty from Luxman has everything you will ever need – the Luxman engineers threw in the kitchen sink on this one! You will also need some muscles; the L-590 weighs in at 66 pounds.

A quick peek at the photos on the Luxman website (www.onahighernote.com) reveals the exquisite attention to detail inside the 590. From the massive power transformer to the peel coat circuit boards with gold traces, nothing has been ignored. The build and parts quality are top notch.

Semi Retro Look, But 21st Century Functionality

At first glance, you may think that you've taken a time warp back to the late 70's when you look at the Luxman. Personally, I love the way this amplifier looks. The front panel is machined from about a ½ inch (15mm) thick piece of aluminum featuring a big pair of VU meters, tastefully backlit in light yellow. You can shut them off from the front panel or the remote, but they are gorgeous, so I don't know why you would want to.

The right side features a large volume control and the left side an equally large input selector, with six line level inputs (2 balanced and four single ended RCA). There are two tape monitor inputs and a built in phono stage that can be switched via the front panel for MM or MC operation. In MM mode, it has a standard 47k input impedance with a sensitivity of 2.5mv. The MC mode has 100-ohm impedance, which I found worked quite well with a wide range of cartridges with a .3mv sensitivity. This is probably my only complaint with the 590. For \$10k, I would love to see adjustable loading, even if I had to go to the back panel to get it. *(continued)*



The big surprise comes when you press the button to the left of the input selector. It reveals a headphone jack and a range of selectors, controlling the record inputs, speaker outputs (A, B, A+B and off, for headphone listening), a mode control (stereo, L, R and Mono) and a pair of tone controls that can be switched out. There is also a switch for a subsonic filter and a loudness button. I love it! Believe it or not, that loudness button is awesome when listening to headphones at low volume; it warms the sound up quite nicely.

The back panel reveals a full compliment of inputs and outputs along with a pair of convenience AC outlets. These are only two prong AC outlets, but they worked great with my TEAC reel-to-reel deck and AT PL120D turntable. There is even an LED on back that lights up if your AC outlet is wired out of phase. Also featured is a set of pre in, main out jacks that allow you to bi amp or just use the 590 as a preamplifier.

The attention to detail on the 590 is phenomenal. All unused inputs and outputs feature little plugs with the Luxman logo on them and the AC power cord supplied by Furutech is easily equivalent to something you would pay at least a few hundred dollars in the aftermarket. Philip said, "When was the last time you saw a power cord like that included with a component?"

21st Century Sound as Well

All of this extreme coolness would be a big waste, if the Luxman did not deliver mega sound quality, which it does. As a tube lover, I've always been a big fan of Class-A solid-state amplifiers, because I always felt that they offered the best of both worlds; very musical with exquisite detail and no tube hassles.

(continued)



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Yes, the 590 gets really warm in normal operation, but no warmer than any other Class-A amplifier I've owned or used.

When you fire it up from standby mode, it does take about 45 minutes to really reach full song, just like a tube amplifier, but once you get there you will be a very happy human.

Because Philip believes in sending gear to his dealers and reviewers that has had some time on the clock, this one was love at first listen, I didn't have to wait 300 hours for it to break in.

Once my main reference system was built to my satisfaction, I started getting a bit carried away with my second system. I wanted it to be a few clicks down from my ACT2 and Premier 350 in cost, but didn't want to give up any of the resolution or tonality. Sound like anyone else you know? I was on a quest and had been trying a number of things, but I stopped dead in my tracks when the Luxman started playing.

The 590 does everything right. Even using it with the 86db Harbeth Compact 7ES-3's that we have in for review, this amplifier has plenty of power, dynamic range and control.

I've probably used the 590 with about ten different speakers while it was here and was never disappointed unless I needed to achieve concert hall volumes. At anything approaching realistic levels, this amplifier has way more oomph than it's 30 watt per channel rating might suggest. *(continued)*



Bass was well controlled and detailed, and the highs were silky smooth, yet detailed. The 590 has a very seductive quality about it, adding plenty of midrange magic to go along with the top and bottom of the range. This is truly an amplifier without sonic compromise that held it's own up against my reference CJ ACT2 and Premier 350. A few of the speakers we have had in for review lately (particularly the Harbeths and the Avalon Ascendants) even had a bit more magic with the Luxman than with my CJ gear.

If you can get past the heat penalty, there's just nothing like a great Class-A amplifier. No matter what I listened to, I was transported to another place where I could just forget about the gear and enjoy the music. Just make sure you give this one plenty of ventilation room on your rack!

This amplifier was an excellent musical companion. If you haven't spent much time with a Class-A amplifier, it's a bit surprising at first. You could almost swear you are listening to tubes, but with better bass control and more dynamics! Even after listening for a full 12-hour day, there was absolutely no listener fatigue with the 590.

As I mentioned earlier, it does take about 45 minutes to fully warm up. When you first turn it on, it still sounds very good, but slightly two-dimensional. About 30 minutes into your favorite CD, I guarantee this one will start to grab your attention and by the end of that disc, the 590 is a completely different amplifier! It just comes

alive with a three dimensional presentation and airiness that you might have thought could only be achieved with glowing bottles.

Also like your favorite valve amplifier, this one is a monster when it comes to tone. Acoustic instruments have the right amount of decay and transients are instantaneous. That's what really grabbed me about the 590 so much, it has such a wonderful balance of power, finesse and tonality that my reference system has not been getting as much play as it normally does!

No matter what kind of music you enjoy, the 590 will help you to get the most out of your collection. Voices just float in the air with this amplifier, thanks to a completely black background that always seems to be the hallmark of great solid-state gear. The soundstage is very big in all dimensions, providing a very lifelike texture to great recordings. The 590 is one of the most musical amplifiers I have ever heard.

Fantastic With Any Source

Because the 590 is capable of so much performance, I experimented with a number of digital and analog sources to see if and where the sweet spot was. Starting with the Naim CD5i and working my way up to the Meridian 808, it just got better as I improved the source, revealing more music with every upgrade. *(continued)*

The 590 comes alive with a three dimensional presentation and airiness that you might have thought could only be achieved with glowing bottles.

I did not have quite the same luck with the phono stage. While I would consider the internal phono stage quite good, (and better than I have yet to hear elsewhere in an integrated) I would put it on par with a number of outboard phono stages I've heard in the \$1500-2000 range. Still damn good for being included with the package! My Rega P9 was a great match for the Luxman, but when I jumped from a few of my mid priced cartridges up to the Dynavector XV-1S, I felt the onboard phono stage was a bit outclassed at that level.

However, if you are putting together a decent system that will accommodate LP playback, you will still have to go pretty far up the analog food chain before you outgrow the one included in the 590. I was able to achieve excellent synergy with the Dynavector 17D3, the Sumiko Blackbird and the new Denon DL-103 from Zu.

If your sources happen to use XLR plugs, you will really appreciate the 590. Both inputs have a switch so that you can adjust which pin is hot, keeping phase in check. Another small touch that everyone else seems to overlook, it certainly adds to the experience.

The headphone amplifier built into the 590 is not an afterthought, either. I used my standard reference phones (Sennheiser 650's w/Stephan AudioArt cable, AKG 701's w/ALO cable and Grado GS 1000's) and every one was a good fit. I no longer need

that expensive outboard headphone amp that I was using which again translates into a lot less system complexity. One more set of interconnects and power cord I no longer need! What really made the headphone experience sublime was the pair of tone controls lurking under the front panel.

Those of you that are not audiophile purists can use those tone controls every day with your speakers too. Depending on your record/tape/cd collections, you might actually find them very handy. As someone who has quite a few other formats at the ready, I enjoyed them a lot when listening to 78's, or even my vintage reel to reel tapes. With 10db of boost or cut available at 100 hz and 10khz, this goes a long way in taming a harsh recording, or giving an old recording a bit of a bump.

A Brilliant Performer

The Luxman L-590A II is definitely one of my favorite integrated amplifiers of all time. If it fits your room and speaker requirements, you can definitely live with this one forever and not even need to think about upgrading. Mate the 590 with a pair of great speakers and a pair of good source components and you can have a serious piece of the best sound that the high end has to offer at a very reasonable price indeed.

In the end, what really makes this such a special product is the FANTATICAL attention to detail in every aspect, from the outstanding owners manual down to the little plugs on the unused jacks. There will definitely be a huge pride of ownership with the 590.

When the day comes that I hang up the audio reviewer game, this is the one I'm going to retire with. ●



Mate the 590 with a pair of great speakers and a pair of good source components and you can have a serious piece of the best that the high end has to offer at a very reasonable price indeed.

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949-488-3004

www.onahighernote.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Sources: Oracle Delphi V turntable w/SME iV.Vi arm and MoFi 3.5C cartridge, Rega P9 turntable w/RB1000 arm and Dynavector XV-1S cartridge, Audio Technica PL120D turntable and Zu/Denon DL-103 cartridge, TEAC 4300 reel tape deck

Digital Sources: Naim CD-5i, Rega Saturn, Prima Luna PL8, Meridian 808

Speakers: Harbeth Compact 7ES-3, Avalon Ascendant, KEF 207/2, Verity Audio Rienze, MartinLogan Summit, ProAc Tablette

Speaker Cables: Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Orion

Interconnects: Shunyata Orion

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence "Reference", Audience PowerChord

Beauty & Performance

THE GEMME AUDIO TANTO

By Jeff Dorgay

While many people think of Great Britain as a speaker mecca (and rightly so) I'd also cast a strong vote for the Canadians. They are home to quite a few great speaker manufacturers as well. I have a new one to add to your list, Gemme (pronounced "GEM") Audio. Though Gemme Audio has been around for quite a few years, they have been somewhat under the radar in the US until recently, quietly picking up dealers here and abroad along the way.



Initially, they had hung their hat on a horn loaded, single driver speaker system that has received quite a bit of praise. One speaker can only move so much air and eventually you have to move on to a multi driver system to get more range and versatility. The Tanto is their first effort in this direction and it succeeds quite well.

As much as I love mini monitors or small stand mounted speakers, you still need to buy stands. Once you've figured out the best way to mass load them and integrate them into your room, you still have to deal with stands. This usually means making a few aesthetic compromises and additional expense. I'm a big fan of Sound Anchor stands, but they usually add about 500-700 dollars to the price of whatever stand-mounted speaker I might be considering.

Which makes me start to think about small floorstanders, like the Tanto.

A pair of Taintos cost \$5495, putting them somewhat above the pricing of the two other standmount speakers we reviewed this issue, but way below the floorstanding speakers we featured last issue from KEF and Avalon. The Tantos feature a 6 1/2" woofer and a .75" ring radiator tweeter with a very simple 6db/ octave crossover consisting of just one capacitor between the woofer and tweeter, rolling off at 6000hz. I found it interesting that the woofer features a wool impregnated paper cone.

This arrangement has a lot of benefits: The Tantos are very efficient, having a sensitivity of 91.5db and along with their 4-ohm impedance are extremely easy to drive. They were a great match with my Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature amplifier that is rated at 30 watts per channel. I had great luck with a few other low powered amplifiers as well, the Polestar 1 from Croft, which is a 25-watt per channel hybrid design had more than enough power to drive the Tantos too. I dragged out my old Dynaco SCA-35 that uses EL84's and makes about 15 watts on a good day and this also made for a very nice combination, though much more romantic than the modern amps.

I also tried a few bigger solid-state amplifiers as well as my trusty McIntosh MC275 (75wpc-tubes), all with great results. The bottom line is that this speaker is not at all amplifier dependant. They weren't particularly fussy about speaker cables either; I tried my favorites from Shunyata, Cardas, DH labs and ED. *(continued)*

The Tantos are very efficient, having a sensitivity of 91.5db and along with their 4-ohm impedance are extremely easy to drive.



While each maintained a bit of its own signature sound, none really threw the tonal quality one way or the other that much, which I also attribute to the simple crossover design. The rest of the system consisted of the Nagra PL-L line-stage and the Sooloos music server, running through the Wadia 521 DAC with Kool Cables Silkworm interconnects.

After playing around with some different electronics, to get a feel for compatibility issues, I went back to just listening with my living room reference gear. Thanks to their VFlex technology, the Tantos are a ported design. If you look closely at the cabinets, you can see their rounded sides that help to eliminate internal resonances. Internally, the drivers are connected with Cardas wire and come out to some very high quality binding posts.

My test pair came in a very attractive dark grey wood finish. The Tantos are 36 inches high and weigh in at 80 pounds each and pass the knuckle test with ease – the cabinets are very solid and inert!

Loads of Listening

Once the Tantos had about a weeks worth of playing time, they opened up rather nicely. While the Gemme Audio website says that these speakers will play “the lowest notes of the pipe organ with ease”, I did find them a bit lacking in the extreme lowest ranges. In my living room a test tone sweep revealed pretty strong bass down to about 40hz, with a pretty rapid fall off after that which was confirmed by quite a bit of listening. My reference system goes down to 20hz with ease and while the Gemme’s do a great job, they do not go down to 20hz with any authority. Then again, neither do any of the other speakers I’ve listened to in this price range, so it’s not a knock against the Tantos.

Thanks to the Sooloos, it’s very easy to have multiple playlists at your disposal, making it easy to get a quick read on a components character. It’s a snap to go through snippets of about 200 songs quite quickly, doing the audiophile thing. Then it’s easy to get back to the business of just listening! I always find it tough to judge a speaker by a list of ten or twenty tracks, preferring to really live with a speaker for a while before making a final evaluation. I have to thank Jean-Pierre Boudreau at Gemme for granting me the luxury of listening to the Tantos for about four months before sitting down to write this review! *(continued)*



Once the Tantos had about a weeks worth of playing time, they opened up rather nicely.

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While more than half of my listening was done in my living room system, I did move the Tantos out to my reference system for a few weeks, to see how they fared in a bigger room with a lot of power on tap. Again, I was very impressed. In the larger room (16 x 24 feet, speakers on the long wall) there was even a bit stronger bass on tap because I could get the speakers out a bit further from the walls. This also allowed for a bit wider soundstage as well, with the speakers about 8 feet from the sidewalls in this installation.

A Load of Strengths, Precious Few Weaknesses

If you don't need to have that last bit of super low bass, the Tantos should be some very good musical companions. They only come up a bit short if you need to play large-scale orchestral music or brain damage rock music at extremely loud levels. Keep in mind, these were some of the same limitations experienced with the Dynaudios and the Harbeths reviewed this issue. Two small drivers can only move so much air, folks!

Those of you wanting to crank "Iron Man" may need to find something more suitable to that purpose. Remember, you can't have it all at this price range.

However, what the Tantos do, they do very well indeed. Running the 6 1/2" driver up to 6000hz with the gentle crossover gives these speakers a high degree of coherence. Woofer/tweeter integration is as good as it gets, with a very smooth transition between the two. *(continued)*



When listening to Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* at a more reasonable level, the opening bass riffs of "Hand of Doom" had a lot of texture. The bass response that these speakers offer up is of very high quality. Whether I was listening to synth bass on a Peter Gabriel album, Stanley Clarke playing electric bass on a *Return to Forever* album (tour starting now!) or Dave Holland playing standup bass on a Miles album, I could always hear enough detail in the lower registers to have an excellent musical experience.

The overall presentation of the Tantos is very neutral and relaxing without being rolled off. I found these speakers very unfatiguing and easy to listen to for very long periods of time, in short – highly musical! I never felt like the Tantos were pushed up in my face or laid back either. They definitely get out of the way and let the music come through.

Back to the Magic Midrange

While the high end of the Tanto is very smooth and lifelike, it really was the midrange magic that kept pulling me back to the listening chair. It's like having the magic of a single driver, SET system with a little more weight on the bottom and a bit more extension on top. Acoustic images sounded correct with plenty of detail, again, without being overbearing. That is the true magic of this speaker. *(continued)*

While the high end of the Tanto is very smooth and lifelike, it really was the midrange magic that kept pulling me back to the listening chair.

This detail is also what makes the Tanto so enjoyable to listen to with great associated components; it definitely has enough to take advantage of good gear! When working on a pile of integrated amplifier reviews (a few in this issue), the Tantos made it very easy to tell the difference between the different amplifiers. These speakers definitely benefit from great source components.

In the end, some moderation is the key.

It's a lot like when you go car shopping, while it's a blast to talk about 0-60 times and other specs, thinking that you really need to go 187 mph, you spend most of your time between 20 and 90 mph. I feel the same about speakers, I'm always willing to give up a little bit of performance at the extremes to get a very musical speaker that I enjoy listening to on 95% of my music every day.

And that's what you get with the Tanto. A well made speaker that delivers the goods and looks great doing it too! We are happy enough to add a pair of Tantos to our reference fleet of speakers. ●



MANUFACTURER

Gemme Audio
450-472-5908
www.gemmeaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources: Naim CD555, Nagra CDP, Meridian 808, Sooloos Music Server with Wadia 521 DAC.

Analog Sources: Rega P9 w/ RB1000 arm and Dynavector XV-1 cartridge

Preamplifiers: Nagra PL-L, Conrad Johnson ACT2/series 2

Power Amplifiers: Conrad Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, Red Wine Audio 30.2 Signature, Croft Polestar 1, McIntosh MC275

Integrated Amplifiers: Naim SuperNait w/HiCap 2 power supply, Luxman L-590A II, McIntosh MA 7000, Sim Audio Moon I-7

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Audience AU 24, Kool Cables Silkworms

Speaker Cables: Shunyata Orion, DH Labs Q-10, Cardas Golden Reference

Power Cords: DH Labs Red Wave, Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Helix Alpha, Essential Sound Products The Essence "Reference"

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco, Shunyata Hydra V4

Changing My Perspective

THE GAMUT Si100 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

By Sandy Greene

Though I've spent quite a few years with an integrated amplifier as the anchor of my hi-fi system, separates have been my recent move. Almost double the cost of my BelCanto separates; the GamuT Si100 (\$7200) has me back at the fork in the road again.



The GamuT Di 150 has received a lot of good press and the Si100 follows in the footsteps of its big brother with fantastic sound, high build quality and Danish good looks.

Features and Build Quality

The Si100 offers six inputs, with two XLR's simply labeled Bal 1 and Bal 2. The four RCA inputs consist of three line level inputs (CD, Tuner and Tape) with a home theater bypass that allows access to the power amplifier for a surround setup. There is a set of fixed level RCA's for tape output and variable output RCA's for line level out. There is also a pair of XLR line outs, so that you can use either for a separate subwoofer.

I enjoyed the intuitive operation of the Si100; each of the six inputs has its own button on the front panel with a single, large volume control in the center of the glass plate. Each input has a peaceful, rich blue hue with two brightness levels and completely off for those who prefer to listen in the dark. The volume control spins continuously and scrolls between a numeric value of 0 and 100. It is now an active attenuator, instead of the passive device in earlier GamuT models. This directly contributes to this amplifier's low noise floor. *(continued)*



My review sample was finished in black, but is also available in silver. The Si100 has a physical heft and when you lift the cover, it's easy to see that the workmanship justifies the price-tag. Definitely a work of talented industrial design, it features large heat sinks on both sides along with the GamuT logo laser cut out of the top panel, exposing an aluminum mesh underneath for additional ventilation. I never found the amplifier to run too hot, no matter how hard I pushed it.

While the remote has a more than adequate control set, the lightweight plastic construction feels a bit like an afterthought. I would like to see a more substantial remote made out of metal at this price point.

The GamuT Si100 provides 130 Watts per channel into 8 ohms, and 200 watts into 4 ohms. The output stage features a single pair of MOSFET's with a very beefy high bandwidth, low impedance power supply.

“Matching a single pair of output devices is more work, but essential to our design”, said Lars Goller, head of design at GamuT. “With all of the signal passing through one pair of output devices, we can optimize dynamic behavior, improving clarity and transparency.”

How's it sound?

This transparency was what immediately spoke to me when listening to the Si100. The Si100 allowed me to clearly hear the sonic characteristics of each of my various sources than I have been able to in the past.

(continued)

cardas.com



The sonic differences when comparing phono stages for my next system upgrade were much more pronounced than I have heard before. I had the same luck with digital, alternating between my PowerBook/BelCanto DAC3 combination and GamuT's CD3 player. I was definitely experiencing more detail and color from my recordings, offering a more engaging link to the music. So much for thinking separates were the only way to go!

Listening to the new Editors album, *An End Has a Start*, shows the Si100's way with dynamics and control. Right from the start, this album is bombastic. The first track, "Smokers Outside the Hospital Doors", leads off with a pounding drum, lead vocal and piano and within four bars is at full blast with U2-like guitar and bass, then just as fast back to the quieter vocals, drum and piano. This was just another example of how the Si100 excelled with dynamic contrasts.

At low levels, the presentation is a bit flat and narrow, but with my speakers the Si100 really came alive at medium to moderate levels. There was plenty of weight and punch, yet the music always remained very tuneful along with very precise imaging.

My experience with Class-D amps like the Bel Canto and even Red Wine Audio, have been consistent compared to solid-state amps in that the digital amps have a fuller sound at lower volume levels but tend to compress more at higher levels. The Si100 was free of this compression, offering up a more lifelike playback, especially at higher levels.

Different Speakers and Synergy

I'll be reporting on a full GamuT system with the Si100, CD3 and Phi7 loudspeakers that will be on the "turnkey" section of the website very soon. It was no surprise that the GamuT Si100 worked incredibly well with the Phi7 loudspeakers. When switching back to my reference Audio Note An-E/Lx speakers, they sounded a bit hotter on the top end of the spectrum, which I attribute partially to the characteristic sound of the speakers. See our sidebar, where our publisher mated the Si100's with a few more pairs of speakers. As fantastic as the Si100 was in an all GamuT system, I could not get the synergy I'm used to with my Audio Note speakers.

Though I normally resist the top of the charts, Jack Johnson's new release *Sleep Through The Static* is produced so well, I had to jump in. The recording has a very rich, inviting, comfortable sound. Maybe it's due to the solar powered gear they used to record it?

Track 8, "What You Thought You Need" has a wonderful layering of acoustic guitars and vocals. With brushed drums and deep, rich bass and kick, this song sonically fills the audio spectrum. Through the Audio Note's the song lacks the grounding of the bass and kick. When the GamuT Si100 amplifies these tunes through the Phi7 speakers, the full sonic range is accurately delivered with elegance and finesse, really showing off what this system was capable of. *(continued)*

I was definitely experiencing more detail and color from my recordings, offering a more engaging link to the music.

Summing Up But Not the End

I can't get enough from this high-end integrated amp, especially through GamuT's Phi7 loudspeakers. Lars Goller summed up his email by writing, "Our goal is to create products that can reproduce music at home as if you were present at the event where it was recorded." I recently heard the pop ensemble Pink Martini performing at the Kimmel Center here in Philadelphia. Pink Martini is (on average) a twelve-piece fronted by the very talented China Forbes. Verizon Hall at the Kimmel Center is very well respected for its sonic qualities. Pink Martini sounded fantastic, full and fun live and carries that quality on record. Through the GamuT system, I definitely got a good helping of the live experience.

The Gamut Si100 integrated amplifier certainly meets Lars' goal of recreating the event as if you were there.

The Si100 has an ease delivering the texture and tone of real instruments and voices. The Si100 also has strong dynamic capabilities delivering bottom slam, punch and scale that help recreate the illusion of the live or recorded event. It's a luxury piece for sure, but in context of the entire GamuT system, the overall musical experience is worth the investment. Very impressive and enjoyable.

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Trying the Si100 With a Few More Speakers

By Jeff Dorgay

I just happened to have a few extra pairs of speakers here while photographing the Si100, so I always like to try an amplifier with as many different speakers as I can to see where the bumps in the road might be.

I concur with Sandy that this amplifier is a master of tonality and dynamics, and I would put its character as very detailed without being harsh. Yet it is right at the edge and if you have a speaker that is pretty forward, this may not be the match for you. When I tried the Si100 with the KEF 207/2s that we featured in our last issue, it was too bright. The KEF's are very detailed and a slight bit forward, so the match with the Si100 was too forward for my tastes.

Swapping out the KEF's for the Verity Rienze's that are in this issue, the new Harbeth Compact 7-3's and the Avalon Ascendant's was a fantastic match. This amplifier also did very well with my Penaudio Serenades and MartinLogan Summits, both of which are somewhat current hungry.

I really enjoyed the purity of sound that the single output devices provided. It reminded me a lot of one of my favorite amplifiers, the First Watt F3. Nelson Pass told me once "the minute you use more than one pair of output devices, the magic is gone!" Hmmmm.

Whenever I have heard all GamuT gear at a show, I've always walked out of the room impressed. The sound that GamuT had at their off site location at CES was the most realistic I've ever heard. I still daydream about having a pair of L-9's! Lars definitely builds some of the most musical gear I've heard. Highly recommended. ●

The GamuT Si100
MSRP: \$6,000

MANUFACTURER

GamuT International A/S

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DK 7400 Herning
Denmark
Phone: (+45) 70 20 22 68
Fax: (+45) 59 43 97 26
E-mail: info@gamutaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Phono Preampfier:

Gram Amp Ilse, Heed Audio Quasar

Digital Sources:

GamuT CD3 cd player
Mac PowerBook via USB to Bel
Canto Dac3

Analog Sources:

Rega P25 with Exact II cart

Interconnects:

Van Den Hul, Shunyata,
Audio Note, Straightwire

Loudspeakers:

GamuT Phi7
Audio Note An-E/Lx

Baby Boomer

The MartinLogan Grotto i

By Jeff Dorgay

One of the biggest problems using a subwoofer is seamless integration with your main speakers. Often times, you get the additional bass extension you need, but at the expense of having this other box in the corner thumping away. If you use a panel speaker or a single driver speaker, it gets even more difficult to have a seamless transition because it's tough to get the necessary speed and bass definition so that the subwoofer just disappears in the room.

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So, it made perfect sense that a great sub would come from MartinLogan, where they specialize in hybrid electrostatic speakers and have to deal with these engineering challenges every day. I use their flagship Descent i subwoofer in my main system with excellent results (review in the works). The Grotto i uses just one of the amplifier modules that the Descent i uses in a much smaller package, with a slightly different 10" subwoofer than the Descent i or Summit, taking up a footprint of only 15" wide by 13" deep by almost 19" tall. You can read all of the full specifications on the ML website here: http://www.us.martinlogan.com/specs/grotto_i.html

ML Gets It Right

Because I'm a big fan of ESL speakers and minimonitors, I've tried and abandoned quite a few subwoofers over the years for the same reason you have; the ultimate lack of bass definition and integration with the main speakers has always made me give up the weight for detail. Thankfully, I don't have to do it any more!

Using the Descent i with my Summits has been a home run out of the ballpark, making my past REL sub feel like the woofer cone was made of play-doh in comparison.

My second system is now built around a pair of ProAc Tablettes or the new Harbeth Compact 7-3's (depending on my mood), in a smaller space, so while the Descent i seemed like a bit much, the Grotto i fits perfectly. Its lower price of \$1095 makes this a very cost effective upgrade.

(continued)

DIGITAL INTUITION

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Wadia



The Grotto i easily passed the test of being able to disappear in my system to the level where I could not localize it.

Versatility Is The Key

The Grotto i is a great match for a home theater system or a hifi system, with enough bass extension and power to keep either user happy in most situations. If you really need to move a lot of air, consider two of them, or even a pair of Descent subs. (If that doesn't move enough air for you, I can't help!) It features left and right line level RCA inputs, RCA and XLR LFE inputs as well as speaker line inputs, so you should be able to use it anywhere.

Thanks to adjustable low pass settings at 30, 35, 45, 55, 65 and 80 hz, the Grotto i is very easy to fine tune and marry with your main speakers, which came in handy with some of the smaller minimonitors I used. Normally, I would never cross over a 10" woofer at 80hz, but this is where the ML speed and definition really impressed me the most, blending in with the little ProAcs and the new Stirling LS3/5a's we have in for review perfectly. It's just amazing how much fun a small pair of speakers can be with some serious bass!

In addition to the level control, there is always a variable phase control, with settings at 90, 180 and 270 degrees, also helps in fine-tuning your system. The Grotto i easily passed the test of being able to disappear in my system to the level where I could not localize it. This is incredibly tough to pull off with small minimonitors, but it was no problem here.

I also took the Grotto i over to a good friends house that has a pair of ML Vantage speakers. These feature a powered 8" woofer in each cabinet and have a claimed lower limit of 34hz. Running the Vantages full range and setting the low

pass right at 35hz in his room gave them an extra bit of weight and punch that was very enjoyable. If you are a content Vantage owner that isn't ready for a pair of Summits yet, a Grotto i or two just might be your ticket to the next upgrade.

Speed and Texture

Those two words are the key to the ML subwoofer sound. As much as I like to break out the Snoop Dogg discs and get booming, my favorite subwoofer tests really feature my favorite bass players, Stanley Clarke and Jaco Pastorius. Listening to those guys rip up the fretboard is a great subwoofer torture test. Depending on your age, you might also add some Yes to the mix or perhaps some Red Hot Chili Peppers.

If those plucky bass lines just thud along, it's game over. But speed isn't everything; to really enjoy all that new energy in the lower registers, definition is a must. This is what sets the Grotto i apart from the others I've heard. Make the switch to your favorite acoustic bass player and you are in for a treat, with more than enough detail to put a big smile on your face.

Should you be in the obsessive audiophile category and want the ultimate tweak, (and this applies to Descent owners as well) I highly suggest the Sub-3 subwoofer cables from Audioquest. These are a silver coated copper cable, using Audioquest's DBS technology that utilizes a battery-powered dielectric. Sometimes, the silver plated approach can be a bit brittle or harsh, but in a subwoofer application, it's brilliant, giving you every bit of resolution your subwoofer is capable of delivering. *(continued)*

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Right Size, Right Price

For \$1095, the MartinLogan Grotto i is the most enjoyable subwoofer I've ever heard. It's going to be taking up permanent residence in my second system from here on in. For many, this (or perhaps a pair of Grotto's) may be all the sub you will ever need. I love it! ●

**The MartinLogan Grotto i
 Subwoofer**
MSRP: \$1095

MANUFACTURER

MartinLogan
 2101 Delaware
 Lawrence, KS 66046
 785-749-0133
www.martinlogan.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source: Rega P9/
 RB1000 with Shelter 9000
 cartridge

Digital Sources: Meridian 808,
 Wadia 170 iDock with Wadia 521
 DAC

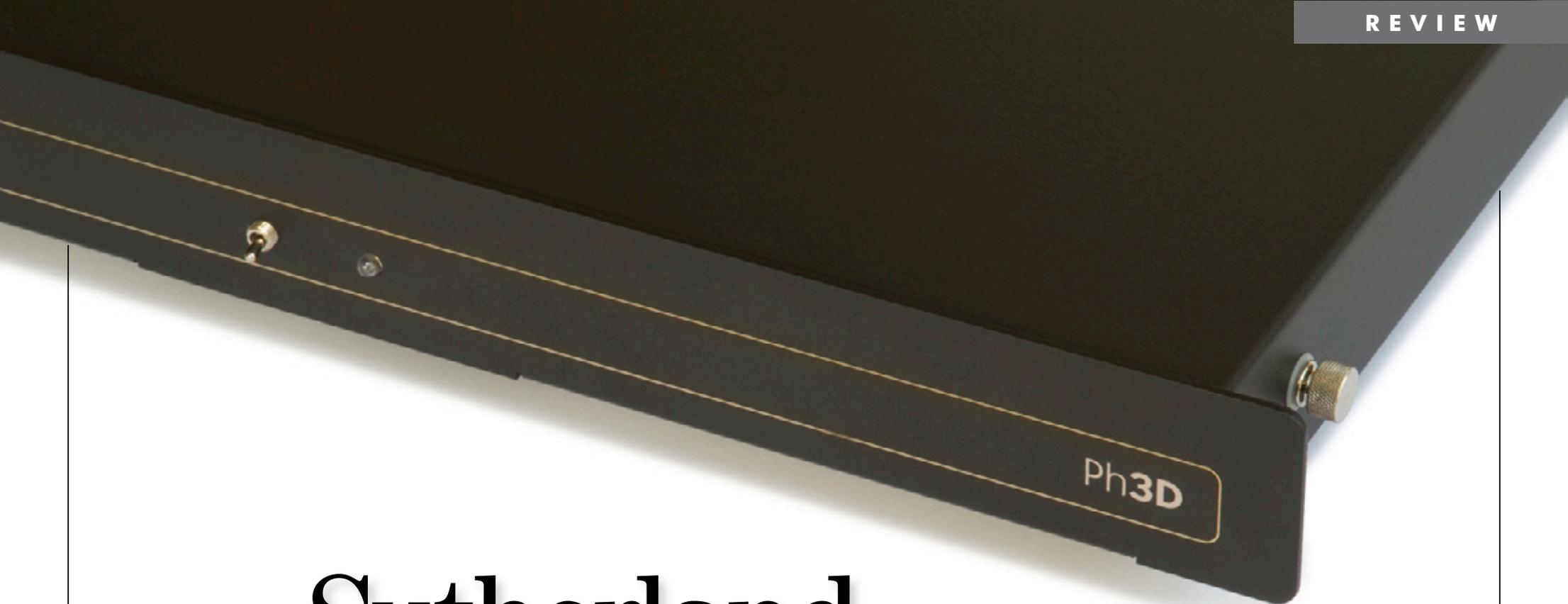
Amplification: Luxman L-590A
 II, Naim SuperNait, SimAudio
 Moon I-7

Speakers: MartinLogan Van-
 tage, ProAc Tablette, Stirling
 LS3/5a, Harbeth Compact 7-3,
 Dynaudio Contour S1.4

Interconnects: Cardas Golden
 Reference, Audioquest Sub – 3
 (subwoofer)

Speaker Cables: Cardas
 Golden Reference

Power Conditioning: Running
 Springs Haley and Running
 Springs Mongoose power cords



Sutherland Ph3D Phono Stage

By Marc Phillips

More than any other type of component, phono preamps seem to gravitate around certain price points. For \$300, you can buy a relatively basic MM phono stage that will be an appropriate match for a decent entry level 'table from Music Hall or Rega. For \$600, you can buy an even better-sounding unit that may allow you to experiment with loading options, or even let you investigate low-output MC cartridges. By the time you hit the \$1000 price point, you're dealing with units that begin to truly distinguish themselves sonically. If you're looking to upgrade to something like a Michell Gyrodec SE, VPI Scoutmaster or Rega P7, you really should be considering a phono preamp at this level at the very least.



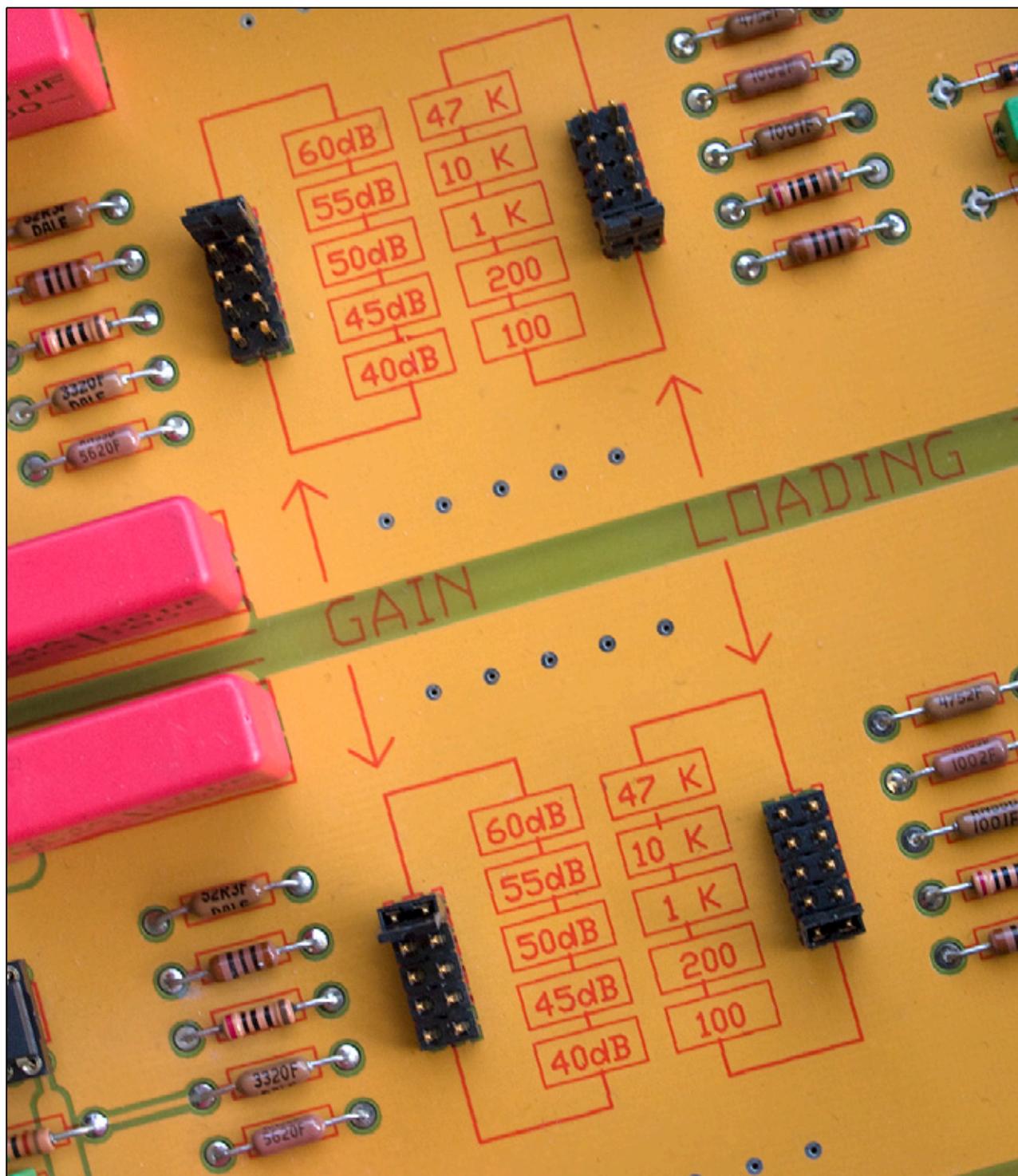
What \$1000 doesn't normally buy you, however, is battery-powered operation. When it comes to analog playback, a low noise threshold is king, and freedom from a potentially noisy wall outlet is a logical and straightforward way to get those legendary black backgrounds that the mega-buck phono stages routinely provide.

Until now!

The Sutherland Ph3D, at \$1000, is one of the more affordable battery-powered phono stages on the market. By popping open the case of the Ph3D, which accomplished easily enough via the knurled-screw knobs on the side of the chassis, you'll notice that the actual circuitry is confined to one isolated half of the chassis and is a rather simple design. Top-quality parts such as Dale/Vishay resistors and Wima polypropylene caps are used, however, so you shouldn't assume that's where corners were cut. As a matter of fact, this design is somewhat similar to the one found in the Ph3D's big brother, the \$3000 PhD. One of the compromises made to bring the Ph3D to its relatively modest price is the simple case, which is made from cold-rolled powder-coated steel.

The other half of the Ph3D is empty. Well, it's empty until you insert the 16 D batteries, which probably triple the entire weight of the unit. That's another reason why you're able to get this unit at such a great price...you're not paying for an out-board power supply chock full of big capacitors and a big power transformer. Before you start thinking about all the D batteries your boom box ate back in the '80s and wondering if the Ph3D is really that much of a bargain, you should know that the unit should run for around 1200 hours before the batteries need to be replaced. The red LED on the front panel even tells you when you're getting close. You may need to re-tip your stylus, in fact, before you have to mosey on down to the local Rite-Aid to pick up a few more packages of Duracells. *(continued)*

The Sutherland Ph3D, at \$1000, is one of the more affordable battery-powered phono stages on the market.



Overall, the Ph3D was an energetic and expansive phono stage, giving the music a great sense of momentum and size.

After the simple metal case, I can no longer tell where Ron Sutherland had to compromise. This is a very flexible phono preamp, with five settings for gain (40 to 60 dB) and five settings for input loading (100 ohms to 47K ohms). As I mentioned before, removing the case to make these adjustments is swift and easy. I set the Ph3D at 100 ohms and maximum gain to match my Koetsu Rosewood, and started spinning records.

Quiet, please!

As with most battery-powered analog devices, the first impressions are usually based on very low noise levels. Indeed, the Ph3D was exemplary in this respect. My Michell Orbe SE is a lush, velvety-sounding 'table to start with and the Koetsus are my favorite for relegating surface noise far into the background, so I'm no stranger to quiet analog playback.

With the Ph3D in the chain, this level of pure calm exceeded anything I've experienced. I'm not going to bore you with a lecture about the spaces between the notes being as important as the notes themselves, but you get the picture. The Ph3D was superbly quiet.

Overall, the Ph3D was an energetic and expansive phono stage, giving the music a great sense of momentum and size. On my 45rpm Classic Records pressing of Willie Nelson's *Stardust*, for example, the Red-Headed Stranger sounded focused and appropriately big (no herbal jokes, please), with the backing string section clearly delineated from side to side, and front to back. I've heard this recording sound a bit lethargic and syrupy on other phono stages, but I felt that the Ph3D offered an extraordinary amount of detail and life. *(continued)*



Compared to much more expensive phono stages, the Ph3D may have lacked a certain measure of heft to the presentation. The sound wasn't bass-shy by any means, but it could sound a little too delicate on certain passages compared to some more expensive tube phono stages that I had been using. When I first plugged the Ph3D into my reference system, I was listening to the very impressive LS3/5as from Stirling Broadcast. With the Sutherland in the chain, I found myself less impressed with the Stirlings' ability to sound unusually big for their size. Once I substituted a pair of Harbeth Compact 7-ES3s into the mix, most of the size and weight returned. In other words, you may want to carefully audition the Ph3D in your system if you're a fan of small mini-monitors and desire a warm, full sound.

Not The 1200!

I did have a chance to use the Ph3D with my back-up 'table, the venerable Technics SL1200, which was mated to an Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge. The Ph3D did an excellent job of reducing the inherent darkness of the 1200, making it sound much larger and open than ever before. While it may not make sense to use a \$1000 phono stage with a \$500 turntable, the Ph3D might be the perfect antidote to a compressed, hemmed-in analog source. I can think of a couple of pricey turntables that fit this description as well, but I'll keep it to myself for now.

The Sutherland Ph3D is detailed, dynamic and extraordinarily quiet. The wafer thin footprint makes it particularly flexible, so it will slip into a crowded equipment rack. Thanks to the battery power, you won't have to buy an expensive power cord to get the most it is capable of and I truly feel that this could be the future of analog playback. The Ph3D is at the top of the heap for phono stages in this price range and I give it our highest recommendation. ●

The Sutherland Ph3D
MSRP: \$1000

MANUFACTURER

Acoustic Sounds

1500 South Ninth
Salina, KS 67401
785-825-0156
www.acousticsounds.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source: J.A. Michell Orbe SE w/SME V/Koetsu Rosewood

Digital Source: Naim CDX2

Preamplifier: Nagra PL-L

Power Amplifier: McIntosh MC275, Nagra PSA, Conrad Johnson ET250

Speakers: DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Super 8s, Zu Druids

Interconnects: Audience Conductor, DH Labs ReRelation, Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cable: Zu Libtec, Wireworld Equinox III +

Power Cords: Shunyata Taipan Helix, Diamondback, Copperhead, Venom

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco

UNDERSTATED POWERHOUSE

The Dynaudio Contour S1.4 Speaker

By Jeff Dorgay

To many people not familiar with Dynaudio, you might not realize that they have been around for quite a while. Founded thirty years ago, they actually used other people's drivers and after a couple years of not being able to source exactly what they wanted, decided to raise the bar and develop their own. Today, they supply drivers to quite a few other manufacturers as an OEM as well. (They also make a pretty cool set of car audio drivers for Volvo.)

Dynaudio US has only been in the United States market for the last thirteen years, and even then it has been somewhat understated. If I would have to sum up the Contour S1.4 in one word, it would be *understated*.



When you take these little speakers out of the box, their build quality is obvious, but the minute you turn them on, you should experience a rather large “wow”.

When you take these little speakers out of the box, their build quality is obvious, but the minute you turn them on, you should experience a rather large “wow”. Once the S1.4’s have about 100 or so hours on the clock it will be even better. The first thing that really grabbed me when listening to the S1.4’s was the expansiveness of the sound. My test pair came in the piano black finish but they are also available in rosewood, maple, cherry and black ash. A pair of the S1.4’s with their optional stands will set you back \$3750. The speakers are \$3300 by themselves in the standard finishes, but the piano black lacquer you see here is an additional 20%.

A quick peek at the Dynaudio website (www.dynaudio.de or www.dynaudiousa.com) will give you some more technical background on their complete line of speakers and reveals how much engineering excellence has gone into these speakers. But then you might expect a great sounding pair of speakers from a company with this much expertise in building drivers.

Behind the grill, which is suggested to be removed while playing for the best results is a seven-inch woofer and a one-inch dome tweeter. They are crossed over at 1900hz with a 6db/octave slope. Around back is a pair of hefty WBT binding posts that should work fine with whatever your cables might be terminated with. The S1.4 measures 7.5" wide x 16" tall and 14" deep, weighing 27 pounds each.

A Very Versatile Small Speaker

More often than not, a small speaker just cannot move enough air to work well in a moderate to large sized room. The first few hundred hours of break-in and listening to the S1.4’s was in my living room that is somewhat small (11 x 17 feet) with modest Croft electronics. I used the supplied Dynaudio stands here, which are 25.6" tall with excellent results.

But the big surprise was moving them to my reference room, which is 16 x 24 feet. Even in this size room, the little Dynaudios gave a very impressive performance. The system here was made up with the Nagra PL-L pre-amplifier, alternating between the McIntosh MC275 tube power amplifier and the Nagra PSA solid state power amplifier. Thanks to a very neutral impedance characteristic, these speakers work equally well with tubes or transistors. I was really digging the little bit extra romance from the all tube combination of the McIntosh and the Nagra, but could live happily with either. The Naim CD555 was used as a source.

I would like to emphasize here how well a modestly priced, high performance speaker can work in a room that has had some attention to room treatments. While the S1.4’s were very pleasant in my living room, they really came to life in my reference room. The speakers were set up on the long wall, with the tweeters about 42 inches from said wall. *(continued)*



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They ended up six feet apart and about nine feet from my couch. With this setup, I actually preferred them on the 19 inch Sound Anchor stands that I use with my Harbeth Compact 7's, than the standard Dynaudio stands.

Your room and taste will ultimately determine stand height. The lower stands tended to reinforce bass a bit more and offer up a slightly wider presentation, while the higher stands gave a bit more image height.

Big Speaker Sound in a Small Box

Though these speakers only have a sensitivity of 86db, I was never at a loss for dynamics with the MC275, which is conservatively rated at 75 watts per channel or the Nagra PSA at 100 watts per channel. Even using the Red Wine 30.2 Signature, with 30 watts per channel, I was able to get enough sound pressure in this room.

Listening to panel speakers most of the time, I sometimes lose sight of the advantage to a cone speaker's ability to throw a big wide soundfield and make that image available to more than one person right in the center of the couch.

The S1.4 sounds very good off axis and easily provides a three to four person wide image.

Bass response was solid and defined with a generous helping of texture to boot. The S1.4 is claimed to be down 3 db at 41hz and this was easily verified with test tones. Output is very solid at 50hz and gently goes down to 40hz, with a pretty sharp cutoff from there. Forget about getting the meat from your favorite pipe organ records, but on a lot of popular music and jazz you might not even notice that last bit of low bass. *(continued)*

I felt the S1.4 was a lot like a Magnepan in that respect, the quality of bass is so satisfying, you just aren't as concerned about getting down to 20hz. Because the S1.4 went down so far comfortably, it actually mated quite seamlessly with my MartinLogan Depth i subwoofer that I use with my Summits. Should you buy a pair of these speakers and decide you need that last bit of low-end grunt, I expect you could live happily ever after combining the 1.4S with a high quality sub.

I was also very impressed with how much width and depth I was able to achieve with these speakers. The soundstage easily extended out way past the speaker boundaries, which doesn't always happen with a small speaker.

A Healthy Dose of Nuance

Resolution is what really sets the great speakers apart from the pack and the S1.4 offers up quite a bit for its price. This speaker does a fantastic job at resolving the fine details in your recordings. No matter what I was listening to, I felt I was getting a very good taste of what was going on. The highest compliment I can pay the S1.4's is that I felt they did a great job with all types of music. Because some smaller speakers have a fair amount of limitations, they can't play heavy rock music or large-scale orchestral music, but the S1.4 came through every time.

Only when you decide to really push the envelope will you notice the limitation of these speakers. They excel at reasonable to moderate levels, but lose their poise when pushed too far, with imaging collapsing and some graininess setting in. A small two way can only be asked to do so much and you can only cheat physics to a point. Keep things below house party levels and it's all good. It's also worth noting here that the S1.4's do extremely well at low levels too, which is a feat not all small speakers that can play loudly can accomplish.

I never felt that these speakers were tilted in any one particular direction. There was a great balance from top to bottom, with a very neutral sound quality overall. When not pushed beyond it's limits, I always felt like I was listening to a much more expensive speaker. Stringed instruments, pianos and drums sounded very natural, with just the right amount of attack as well as decay.

Nothing felt harsh, or forced when listening to the S1.4's and I spent quite a few extremely long listening sessions with no fatigue whatsoever. Vocals also sounded very natural and overall I'd say these speakers had about a tenth row perspective, with everything blending together nicely, but never in your face.

One of the Most Enjoyable I've Heard in this Range

It's easy to make a good speaker for \$2500, but it's really hard to make a *great* speaker at \$2500. I think Dynaudio has more than exceeded expectation at this price point with the S1.4. I haven't heard every single speaker out there for \$3-4000, but for now the Dynaudio S1.4 is at the top of my list. If you are shopping in this range, I would get down to your Dynaudio dealer and audition these. I think you will be very excited. ●

This speaker does a fantastic job at resolving the fine details in your recordings. No matter what I was listening to, I felt I was getting a very good taste of what was going on.





The Dynaudio Contour S1.4 speaker

MSRP \$3300 in standard finish

Stands \$400 additional

MANUFACTURER

Dynaudio USA

1144 Tower Lane
Bensonville, IL 60106
630-238-4200

www.dynaudiousa.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifiers: Croft Precession 1, Nagra PL-L

Power Amplifiers: McIntosh MC275, Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature, Nagra PSA

Integrated Amplifiers: Naim SuperNait, Luxman 590II- A, McIntosh 7000

Digital Sources: Sooloos Music Server, Naim CD-5i, Naim CD555, Meridian 808

Analog Source: Rega P9/RB1000 arm, Shelter 9000 cartridge, ASR Basis exclusive phono stage

Interconnects: Cardas Neutral Reference, Audience AU24

Speaker Cable: Cardas Golden Reference, Tara Labs The One

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence "Reference", Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: (living rm.) Shunyata Hydra V-Ray, (studio) Running Springs Jaco

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature Racks w/Cerapucs and Ceraballs

Room Treatment: GIK 242 panels, GIK Tri traps, Sonex Classic

Accessories: All speaker and interconnect cables elevated with Shunyata Dark Force cable elevators

The Naim SuperNait

S U P E R I N E V E R Y W A Y

By Jeff Dorgay

Naim products have very much of a family look to them and someone unfamiliar with their newest addition, the SuperNait, might confuse it for one of their preamplifiers. But there is a lot more lurking under the hood here.

The confusion ends the minute you pick the SuperNait up, this is a beefy, yet compact powerhouse. True to the Naim philosophy that the power supply is critical to the sound, the SuperNait has a huge power transformer with separate windings, regulation and capacitor banks for the preamplifier, DAC, control circuits and power amplifier sections. Chris West at Naim USA refers to it as **“The mother of all transformers!”**





When you consider that the SuperNait is based on the \$6950 NAC 282 and the \$3300 NAP 200, the fact that you get a DAC thrown in the box on top of all this makes it a pretty amazing value indeed.

The SuperNait Should be Pretty Difficult to Outgrow

If you are considering purchasing a SuperNait, think of it as the building block to a very versatile hifi system, not just an integrated amplifier. For most users the standard issue SuperNait should be more than adequate, but if you do want to continue upgrading, you can add an external power supply, or even another power amplifier and a Naim crossover should you want to run an all-Naim system with active speakers.

Along with the amplifier and power supply variations on the theme, there is also a separate set of line level outputs to use with a subwoofer and four digital inputs on the rear panel as well as a combined analog/digital input on the front panel right next to the headphone jack that works like the optical digital inputs on most Apple computers. See what I mean about this one taking a lot to outgrow?

The DAC in the Box

If you happen to be part of the computer audio generation, or have an older CD player that could use a better DAC, the SuperNait is the perfect amplifier for you because it has a 24bit/96khz upsampling DAC built right in! Even if you don't need a DAC now, chances are you will take advantage of this sooner or later. *(continued)*

Nik Software Professional Suite

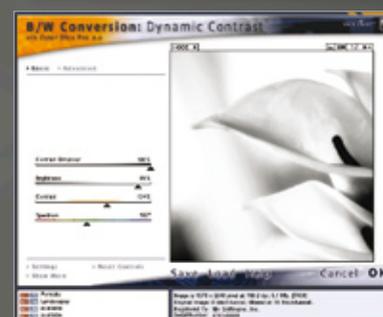
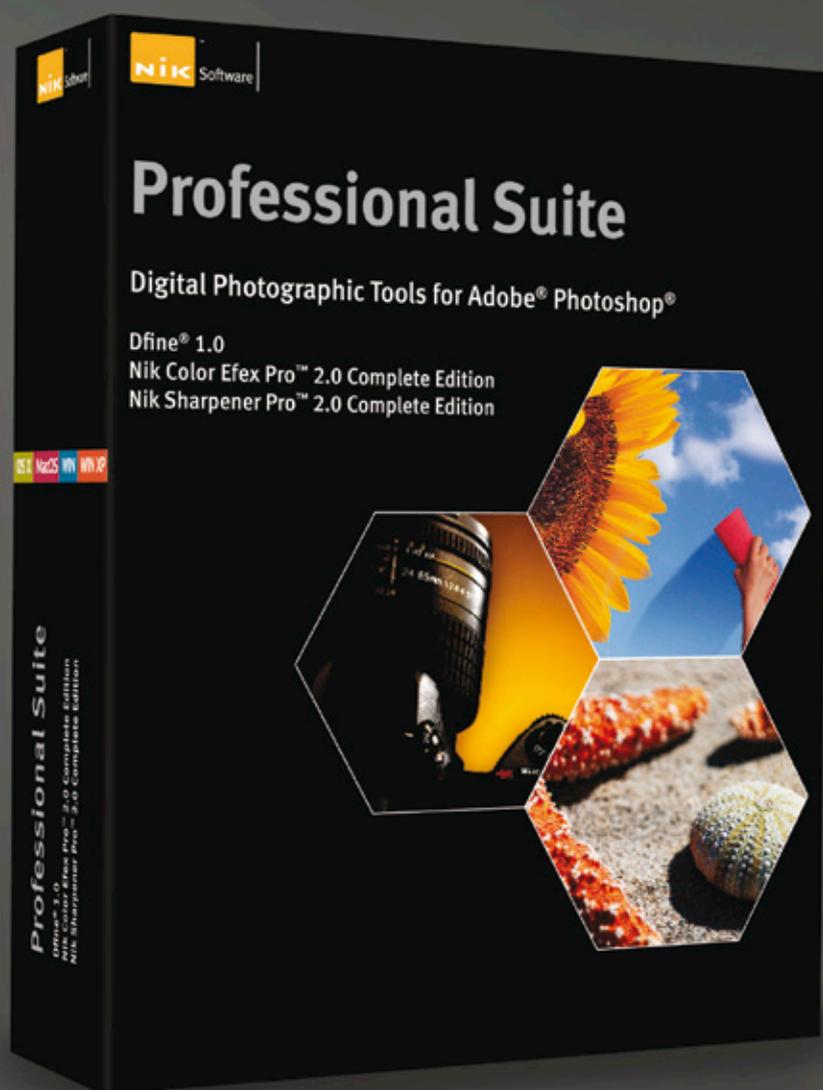
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If your house is full of iPods, music servers and networked laptops with music libraries on board, you will love the SuperNait because it has five digital inputs: two coax and two optical on the rear panel and one combined high level/optical (like the Apple computers) on the front panel next to the headphone jack.

This DAC is not an after-thought either; I was highly impressed with how neutral the presentation was. Using the SuperNait in my living room system, it had a much more musical sounding DAC that what was on board with my Sooloos or McIntosh MS300 music servers.

My favorite partner for the SuperNait was using it with the new Wadia 170 iDock, which outputs a full digital bitstream from your favorite current generation iPod.

Using an Audience AU24 digital cable along with a combination of uncompressed and Apple lossless files, the sound was definitely on par with if not a touch better than my Naim CD-5i and that is high praise indeed.

Much like the other Naim CD players I've spent time with, the presentation is open, dynamic and very musical without being rolled off. The coax inputs had the most resolution, but the optical inputs were quite good too. If you are using a Mac Mini or Apple TV as a music server, this is also a great combination with the SuperNait and I think you will be very impressed at what a nice music server this can make.

(continued)

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Small Footprint, Big Sound

In addition to the great control center versatility the SuperNait possessed, the sound was what really bowled me over. While the Naim/Harbeth combination was a match made in heaven for me, I tried it with quite a few speakers to see just how versatile it was. We've had quite a few excellent speakers here lately, so I managed to pair up the SuperNait with about a dozen different speakers from the new Stirling LS3/5A monitors, to my MartinLogan Summits. Thanks to the subwoofer output on the back, I was also able to integrate my Descent sub into this combination as well. Everything I tried proved good. I used some standard Naim speaker cable with excellent results, but also had very good luck with Cardas Golden Reference speaker cable.

If you are not familiar with Naim gear, as I mentioned earlier they tend to do a great job with the pace and timing of the music along with very accurate tonality. This is not an amplifier that embellishes at all, but it is not harsh either. For my tastes, there is a very nice balance of offering up quite a bit of musical detail, without being too forward as some solid state designs can be.

Bass is very powerful and well controlled, especially for an 80wpc amplifier. When listening to my favorite tracks

with a lot of bass from Pink Floyd, Laurie Anderson and Snoop Dog, I was happy with the SuperNait's ability to reproduce really deep bass without losing control.

The upper registers were well sorted out and did not get harsh when pushed. Again, the feeling was quite neutral; you would never mistake the SuperNait for a class-A amplifier, but you wouldn't mistake it for a Krell or Levinson amp either. Things were very free of grain and with the HighCap 2 in place, the combination was not only a bit more dynamic, but could be pushed a bit louder before clipping.

I was also very impressed with how well the SuperNait did with top-notch digital and analog sources. It was not embarrassed in the least when I put the CD555 in the system. I am looking forward to a follow up with Naim's new phono stage, as I enjoyed using the SuperNait with my Rega P9/Dynavector XV1-S combination to spin records. Should you have a music server or tape deck, there are two tape outputs to keep you happy. This is where the two rows of buttons come in, the top assign the inputs and the bottom assign the record outputs. *(continued)*

If you are not familiar with Naim gear, as I mentioned earlier they tend to do a great job with the pace and timing of the music along with very accurate tonality.

So what about that spiffy power supply?

I like the option to add the outboard power supply for a few reasons, the main one being that I love to upgrade things, so if I know it's there, I have to investigate! I used the middle model in the range of the Naim power supplies, the HICAP2. This is 2,150 dollars and will require a SNAIC4 umbilical cord that will set you back \$230. The HICAP2 comes bundled with a SNAIC5, so you only need to buy one cable.

While you might think this is an upgrade for the true hard core audiophile (or Naimophile), it depends on what your priorities for your system are. Adding another box and more complexity can be a bit defeating to the idea of keeping it all in one box philosophy. Fortunately the SuperNait can power all of the Naim phono stages up to the Superline, but the HICAP2 will also improve the sound of that, so why not?

Though you can go full blast and purchase the SUPERCAP supply that is about 6500 dollars, this would be a waste of money as, the SuperNait does not take advantage of the 14 separate supplies in the SuperCap. The HighCap2 really seems the thinking mans upgrade and does provide a noticeable enough upgrade to the SuperNait to justify it's cost.

Where I really noticed the difference was with power hungry speakers like my Penaudio Serenades or the MartinLogan Summits.

With a bit easier speaker to drive, like any of the Naim speakers, the Gemme Audio Tantos we have in for review or the Harbeth Compact 7-3's, you will probably be just fine. Either way, it's nice to know that a few years down the road, should you decide you would like to take your system to the next level, all you need to do is make this one addition.

Pretty Close to Perfection

I only have one and a half small nits to pick with the SuperNait. It does have quite a bit of gain, which manifests itself a bit differently, depending on your choice of sources. If you have peripherals that have an output in more of the 1V range, there is a normal range of volume control. With some newer sources having 2v (and some even 4V) outputs, the remote ramps up the volume rather quickly, so keep uninitiated friends away from the volume control!

Speaking of remotes, the standard issue Naim plastic remote is very functional, but just a bit lightweight. Again, I'm spoiled with the R-Com remote that came with my CD555. If you purchase a SuperNait with a HICAP2, put your friendly Naim dealer in a headlock when he takes your MasterCard and tell him to give you a great deal on an R-Com while he's taking your hard earned money. It will really round out the system nicely.

The SuperNait packs a lot of performance into a very compact package without falling victim to using class-D amplification, which I find commendable. Despite the traditional understated Naim look, this is definitely a high performance machine, with or without the additional power supply.

Thanks to such a solid upgrade path, and a plethora of inputs and outputs, the SuperNait should have quite a few birthdays in your system, should you choose to take it home. ●

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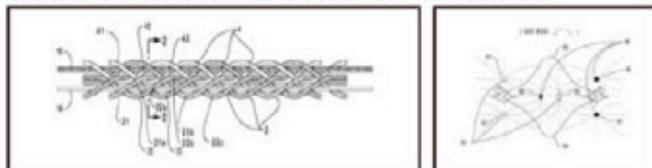
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating geometry eliminates the self-induced distortions that plague other cable designs.

All signal cables have a characteristic resistance and reactance (capacitive and inductive), which is essentially a simple type of filter. Resistance is a linear function and simply reduces signal level while reactance is much more destructive to signal integrity in that it is frequency dependent. It skews amplitude and phase as frequency increases.

Conventional cable geometries dictate that a cable must be either capacitive or inductive, if one is reduced the other increases and vice-versa. By all accounts, the ideal cable would have virtually zero resistance, zero inductance and zero capacitance — which of course is impossible to achieve, but it should be the design goal. No cable should be designed to be either capacitive or inductive.

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The Naim SuperNait
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MSRP: \$4995

HICAP2 Power supply, \$2150

R-Com remote, \$500

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Naim USA

5657 W. Howard St.

Niles, IL 60714

847-647-2293

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PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources: Naim CD5i,
Naim CD555, Wadia 170 iDock,
Apple Power Book

Analog Sources: Rega P9 w/
RB1000 and Dynavector XV-1s
cartridge, Modwright 9.0 SWP SE
phono stage

Interconnects: Naim Hi-Line,
Cardas Golden Reference

Speaker Cables: Naim NACA-5,
Cardas Golden Reference

Speakers: Martin Logan Summit
w/Descent subwoofer, Harbeth
Compact 7-3, Stirling LS3/5a,
DeVore Gibbon Super 8, Verity
Audio Rienzi, Avalon Ascendant,
Penaudio Serenade

A Stellar Combination

The Verity Audio Rienzi

By Jeff Dorgay

RIENZI

Who names this stuff anyway? Where do they get their ideas for giving inanimate objects sexy names? I'm too square, I'd probably just give them numbers and be done with it. Fortunately, the Verity Audio Rienzi's also offer sexy sound to match their name. This beautiful pair of compact floorstanding speakers competes with the best that the ten thousand dollar price point has to offer and comes out at the top of the heap.

The Rienzi is a full three-way system that weighs 78 pounds when assembled. Current retail price starts at \$8,795 in choice of satin sycamore or makore veneer. They are available in the standard Natural Sycamore finish that you see here, or a variety of custom finishes. Please check the Verity website (www.verityaudio.com) for finishes and availability.

Only 8.6" wide, 13" deep and 38" high, these speakers take up precious little floor space and look great doing it! The bass cabinet features a 7" woofer, while the monitor that sits on top has a 6.5" woofer and a ¾" soft dome tweeter.

Versatility is the Key

I've always been impressed with Verity for a couple of years now, because whenever I visit their room at a hifi show, they always have fantastic sound. I've always felt that if great sound can be achieved in the hostile environment of a show, it should be a piece of cake in my room or yours with minimal fuss.

The Rienzi's compact size really helps the setup process, because they come in two separate cabinets; one for the low bass driver and the other for the two way monitor that sits on top separated by a black platform with some vibration control devices between the surfaces. The monitor weighs 23 pounds and the bass cabinet 55 pounds, so you will probably be able to unpack them by yourself with relative ease. *(continued)*



RIENZI



Everything is tied together with a pair of high quality jumpers but there is a surprise – you can face the ported bass cabinet towards the front or the rear of your room!

Everything is tied together with a pair of high quality jumpers but there is a surprise – you can face the ported bass cabinet towards the front or the rear of your room!

This is very exciting, because it really helps the setup process in a difficult room (like my living room) giving you the option to have two slightly different sounds. If you don't have a room issue to work around, putting the woofers towards the front gives a bit smaller image, but a touch punchier bass. Moving them towards the rear offers a larger soundstage with better overall bass integration and is how I usually see them displayed.

However if you were strictly a rock and roll listener and wanted the extra punch, I would suggest investigating the front woofer placement, it might be perfect for you.

Still on the subject of setup, I would like to mention that it did not take long at all to get the Rienzi's optimally placed in my main listening room. While my speaker placement options in my living room are somewhat limited, in my main room I have a lot of leeway to move things around. Having had quite a few different speakers to audition in the last few years, most of them tend to sound best about 8-9 feet apart, 8-10 feet from my couch and about 40-48" inches from the rear wall. This puts most speakers about 6-7 feet from the side walls. I started out in the standard position and after about a half hour had the optimum position. Even out of position, the Rienzi's sounded very good, but taking some extra time to line them up with the Leica Disto 2, took them all the way to perfection. You will know when you have these speakers placed properly when the stereo image extends about 2-3 feet beyond the left and right speakers!

Great speakers you can build a system around

A question that often troubles audiophiles is whether to buy a great pair of speakers first and build a system around them, or buy the source components first and go on a quest for the perfect speakers to complement them. That's a real dilemma, but should you decide on the Rienzi, you can easily start with the speakers and work your way back.

Perusing the spec sheet, don't be alarmed at the 87db sensitivity – the Rienzi is one of the easiest pairs of speakers to drive that I've listened to in years. *(continued)*

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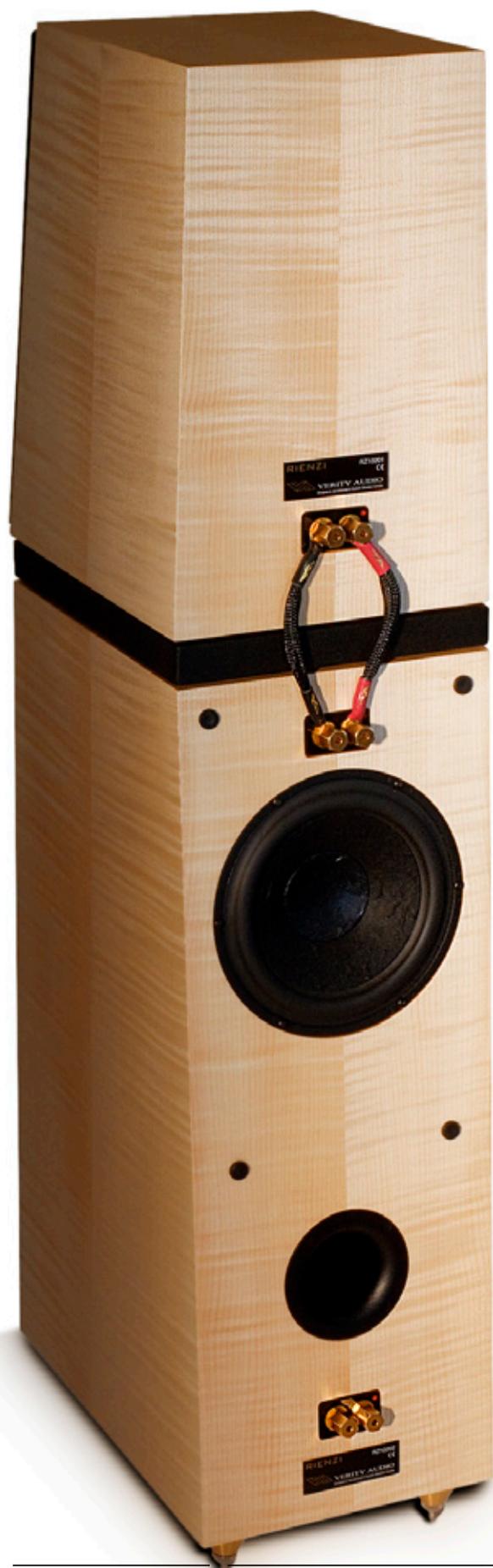
When evaluating the comparably priced offerings from KEF and Avalon last issue, those speakers definitely had their favorites in terms of care and feeding. Two of my reference speakers, the Martin Logan Summits and the Penaudio Serenades are no different; you can't just hook them up to any amplifier and go.

The Rienzi is like a chameleon; it works great with anything and blends smoothly into any system.

When evaluating a speaker, I like to try it in a few different rooms and with as many different power amplifiers as possible to find the bumps in the road. Between our reference components and the usual pool of review gear, it's always easy to try any given set of speakers with everything from a 3 watt per channel SET up to the Premier 350, with 350 watts per channel on tap.

I would suggest at least 50-80 watts per channel (more if you've got it) to power the Rienzi's in a medium sized room. At first, just to be familiar with what I've heard at shows, I used them with a full stack of Nagra gear, featuring the PL-L preamplifier, the CDP CD player and the PSA power amplifier. All but the Nagra CD player has been reviewed here and comprises a very compact, fashion forward system. If you have been to the Verity room at any of the shows in the last two years, there's a good chance you have heard this system.

Swapping the PSA out for my favorite all around tube amplifier, the McIntosh MC275 was easy. The presentation went from more neutral to a bit romantic, easily showing off the differences in amplification.
(continued)



If your taste in music centers more around boomer rock and traditional jazz, this could be a great combination, offering up that little bit of forgiveness that tubes possess. I was in heaven listening to all of my James Taylor, CSN and Neil Young albums; that extra airiness from the tube amplifier made this an extremely mellow experience!

From there, I spent some time with the ET 250 from Conrad-Johnson and my reference, the Premier 350. The more clean power I could feed the Rienzi's, the bigger and more dynamic the sound got. Playing "Skin Tight" from the *Ohio Players Jam* at disco levels was no problem; the Rienzi's had tons of bass control and power. Ok, I did play some serious music too, but going back to "Love Rollercoaster" (from the same album) was just too much fun with these speakers because it's so rare that you can listen to a speaker with such good tonal control and accuracy that will still get up and go like the Rienzi.

Trying the low power side of the equation was equally rewarding. Using the 590 II from Luxman was an excellent combination of nuance and control with only 30 watts on tap. In my somewhat small living room the combination of the Nagra PL-L with the Red Wine Audio Signature 30.2 was fantastic, with plenty of detail and bass control. You SET guys are somewhat out of luck, because an 87db speaker just isn't efficient enough to get any major output with three watts, but everything else I tried was great. The speakers let the character of whatever amplifier I was using through and worked well in all other instances.

Much Bigger Than They Appear

Thanks in part to the solid bass response, these speakers always presented a much bigger soundfield than you might expect from just looking at them, especially with the woofers turned to the backside. When I first heard them at the RMAF, they were in a room that was about 20 x 30 and I actually thought the bigger pair of Verity speakers were playing!

We all know that the ability to play loud isn't enough to keep a sophisticated audiophile happy.

These speakers also play soft with quite a bit of finesse without sacrificing resolution too, which I really enjoyed when they were in my living room.

Transient attack and control was spot on. This is what really gives the Rienzi such a universal appeal, it doesn't come off as a "rock speaker" or a "classical speaker", it just plays music with a high level of tonal accuracy. If you are someone that has a large musical palette, the Rienzi will not disappoint you, no matter where your taste might take you. The only thing missing is that last bit of bass that lurks below 35hz. When listening to the title track from Prince's *One Night Alone*, the super low synth bass riff that shakes things off the walls in my reference system was very tame here. Ninety five percent of the time you will never notice it, but if you listen to a lot of pipe organ or other music with a lot of extremely low frequency content, you may want to go up a model or two in the Verity product line.

It's the same with the rest of the scale; mids and highs were well fleshed out and did not appear to be tipped forward or backwards with tube or solid state gear. Going through the usual warhorses of Steely Dan, Dire Straits, Stevie Ray Vaughn, etc., revealed the kind of sound I tend to prefer; very musical without being soft and romantic yet possessing a high level of resolution but not harsh. This is a very hard combination to achieve, but the Rienzi does it with ease.

An Excellent Overall Balance

The keyword for the Rienzi is balance. This speaker does a lot right and precious little wrong, with its only real error is that it doesn't go down to 20hz, but nothing in this price range does with any quality anyway. It's gorgeous, easy to set up and will offer up great sound with any kind of amplification.

The Rienzi is one of those speakers that doesn't blow you out of your chair the minute you hear it, but by the same token it's one of those rare speakers that is incredibly musical that you find yourself always looking for another record to play instead of going to bed at 1 a.m. For just under ten grand it doesn't get any better than this.

Verity Rienzi – Second Opinion

By Marc Phillips

I first heard the Rienzis at the 2007 CES with a Nagra PSA amplifier in one of the smaller suites at the Mirage. While the Rienzis aren't exactly mini-monitors, these relatively compact floorstanders looked tiny in that room. To my surprise, I was absolutely floored by the rich, generous sound that these speakers produced. I was then reminded that every time I've heard Verity speakers at the various shows, I've always been completely won over.

After more than a year, I finally had the chance to audition them. The wrinkle was that I used these speakers in my currently listening room, which is relatively small (14' wide and 7.5' tall, and open on one end). One of the reasons why the Rienzis, along with most Verity Audio speakers, sound so big in big rooms is the rear-firing woofer. With most of Jeff's listening done with the woofers facing backward, my mission was to listen to the Rienzis with the woofers facing forward, which is the set-up Verity recommends for less-than-cavernous listening spaces.

I did try the Rienzis with the woofers facing the rear just to get a better sense of the design parameters. I brought the Rienzis out about 3' from the rear wall, which is pretty typical speaker placement in my room. Indeed, much of the deep bass was lost in this arrangement, and the bass that did exist sounded diffuse and muffled. It was clear at that point that my listening room just wasn't suited for this type of arrangement.

Spinning the bass enclosure around so that the woofers were facing forward was a relatively quick and simple process. The two logo placards on the front of the speaker are actually plastic inserts that hide the binding posts on one side of the enclosure. Pull out the inserts, remove the jumpers between the bass and head modules, spin the lower enclosure around, and hook everything back up. It took five minutes at the most. It's only fair to note that my listening room only has a couple of spots for speaker placement, so this may not be your experience in a smaller room.

With the woofers facing forward, the bass reappeared in a big way. At first I thought the quantity of low bass was overwhelming, and I still thought that maybe the Rienzis

were a bit too much speaker for my room. After a couple of days, however, the bass seemed to settle down and conform to the room boundaries. (Okay, maybe my ears conformed a little as well.) While I was never quite able to replicate the warm, generous and expansive sound I experienced at the Venetian, I was sure that I was hearing the tightest, most accurate bass I'd heard in my room. I'll even go on the record as saying that with the Rienzis in place, my reference system has never sounded better. I used the Conrad-Johnson ET250S, the Clayton Audio Stereo 40 and the Croft Polestar with the Rienzis, and had excellent results with each (although the sound with the 25wpc Croft may have lacked a little weight).

From top to bottom, the Rienzis offered a smooth, non-fatiguing sound that easily expanded beyond the boundaries of my listening room. By remarking on their smoothness, however, I'm not suggesting that these speakers or soft or unusually forgiving. But I can't remember one time when I felt a recording was unusually hot or harsh. The Rienzis did what most of the really good stuff does ... it allowed all the detail to come through without a trace of hardness. I highly recommend the Rienzis for small rooms as well. ●

From top to bottom, the Rienzis offered a smooth, non-fatiguing sound that easily expanded beyond the boundaries of my listening room.





The Verity Audio Rienzi

MSRP: \$8,795 in standard finish, premium and custom finishes on request.

MANUFACTURER

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Quebec, QC G2E 5L1
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www.verityaudio.com

US Agent:

Tempo Sales & Marketing
P.O.Box 541443
Waltham, MA 02454
(617) 314-9296
temposales@rcn.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources: Nagra CDP, Naim CD555, Meridian 808, Wadia 170 with 521 DAC

Analog Sources: Continuum Criterion w/ Copperhead arm and Dynavector XV-1s cartridge, TK Acoustics Raven 2 w/SME i.Vi arm and Dynavector XV-1s, Rega P9 w/RB 1000 arm and Shelter 9000 cartridge

Preamplifier: Conrad-Johnson ACT2/ Series 2, Nagra PL-L

Power Amplifiers: Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, ET 250, Nagra PSA, CLASSE CA-2100, McIntosh MC275, Red Wine Audio Signature 30.2, (integrateds) Sim Audio Moon I-7, Luxman L-590A II, Prima Luna Prologue 1

Interconnects: Cardas Golden Reference, Audience AU 24, Shunyata Antares

Speaker Cable: Cardas Golden Reference

Power Cords: Essential Sound Products The Essence "Reference", Running Springs Mongoose

Power Conditioning: Running Springs Jaco, Danielle, Haley

Vibration Control: Finite Elemente Pagode Signature, Pagode Master, Cerapucs, Ceraballs

Room Treatment: GIK 242, GIK Tri traps, Sonex Classic

The PrimaLuna ProLogue Eight CD Player

By Marc Phillips

The first time I saw a photo of PrimaLuna's Prologue Eight, it didn't occur to me that it was a CD player. On that particular visit to the TONE office, I thought "Didn't we review the ProLogue One a long time ago?" The photo shoot was in process and when I saw the CD tray pop out I was really intrigued.

True to PrimaLuna tradition, it offers a lot of features and sound quality for a pretty reasonable price. And I'm not about to complain about the Eight's resemblance to other products in the ProLogue line. When a manufacturer uses the same external case in more than one product, it usually means that they're concentrating on the innards, which is always a good thing. In the case of PrimaLuna, this has always been the rule. After four years, they still have not had a field failure of any of their products other than an occasional tube, that's reliability!

Are You Sure It's A CD Player?

With the exception of the transport drawer located in the middle of the faceplate, the PrimaLuna ProLogue does look more like an integrated tube amplifier than a CD player. While most so-called “tubed” CD players may toss a couple of tubes into the output stage, the ProLogue Eight has two 5AR4s for full tubed rectification, as well as two 12AU7s and two 12AX7s for a true dual-mono design. That’s already one more tube than my Yamamoto Sound Craft A-08S SET amplifier.

Inside the chassis, the folks at PrimaLuna snuck one more tube in, this one a military-grade mini-triode that is incorporated into the data-clocking device, replacing the usual crystal. Called the SuperTubeClock, it’s also available as an option in the brand new Ah!Tjoeb Njoe Tjoeb 4000 for an extra \$342. PrimaLuna claims that the SuperTubeClock provides gains in clarity, resolution and detail and I would have to agree.

In addition, the ProLogue Eight also boasts a Burr Brown SRC4192 24/192 upsampling circuit, Burr Brown PCM1792 DACs, polypropylene caps and custom transformers that separate the analog and digital devices. The chassis is made from heavy-gauge steel, with a hand-rubbed five-coat dark blue (almost black) automotive finish. *(continued)*



The remote control is also impressive and substantial, made from anodized brushed aluminum with shiny silver buttons. The rubber rings on the ends of the remote control, which prevent the aluminum from scratching your furniture, was a nice touch. Of course there is a tube cage to protect your kids and furry friends, but if you can, throw that back in the PrimaLuna box. You want to stare at the tubey glow, right?

And Glow They Did...

The ProLogue Eight served time in both my reference system, and my burgeoning bedroom system as well. My Naim CDX2 has been my reference player for the last two years and I was interested to see if a \$2500 CD player, albeit a very unusual one, could capture my interest. My first reaction was one of surprise, as I found the ProLogue Eight to have a very pleasing sound, large and round and not too much unlike the sound of a decent 300B amplifier, surprisingly enough. Under scrutiny (and after break-in), the Eight provided a slightly more detailed sound than that, but still gave me that warm feeling that only comes with a full complement of tubes.

I like to use the song "En Gallop" from Joanna Newsom's *The Milk-Eyed Mender* as a test track for new components. That's because there can be such a disparity between the full, lovely sound of her harp, and her childlike, sometimes screechy vocals. The ProLogue Eight was the first CD player I've heard that truly tamed the harsher borders around her voice. For the first time, I didn't jump in the least when Newsom sings "And I go! where the *Trees! Go!*, and I walk from a *Higher Education!*" I settled back and relaxed, knowing that my time with the Eight was going to be filled with serene and pleasing musical reproduction, especially when Joanna gently admonishes, "Never draw so close to the heat that you forget that you must eat."

This one swings

The Eight also did well with less bucolic fare. I had a few guests over one night, and after they got over the idea of a CD player with vacuum tubes sticking out of the top, they requested lots of Nirvana, Tool, System of a Down, and Led Zeppelin. I obliged, being the excellent host that I am. The Eight did a good job of impressing my guests with its ability to provide deep bass, a giant soundstage, and a smooth and extended top end. Most of all, the Eight was a highly detailed player, allowing my friends to hear things they've never heard before, which made them giggle uncontrollably. (All right, a little too much wine may have been consumed.) Who knows, I might have sold a few of these to my guests to take home that night if I would have had a few spares piled up in the garage! The ProLogue Eight was a hit...at least until I cleared the room by playing Scott Walker's *The Drift*.

My only real reservation about the Eight concerned its somewhat unusual dimensions and how they related to my equipment rack.

The Eight is as tall as a tube amplifier, and you made need to give it the same amount of space as you'd give a top-loading CD player, if not more. I did slide it into a space on my equipment rack for short periods of time, but since there was only about an inch of clearance at the top, I knew it would ultimately shorten tube life. For longer auditioning periods, I wound up putting the Eight on an amplifier stand, and my amplifier on the rack.

And while the ProLogue Eight did offer a large, unfettered musical landscape with plenty of detail (all without digital harshness, I might add), I did notice that the higher frequencies could sound slightly detached from the body of music, drawing just a bit closer to the listening position. This only happened during louder passages, however, and not on every recording; for the most part, the treble was extended and clean. *(continued)*

The Eight did a good job of impressing my guests with its ability to provide deep bass, a giant soundstage, and a smooth and extended top end.



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In the End a Big Success

I've been really spoiled by digital playback over the last year or so, having been exposed to some of the finest CD players in the world. I've gotten to the point where I'm not such a vinyl bigot anymore, and I'm thrilled with the sonic advances that have occurred in state-of-the-art digital playback. The good news is the level of excitement I now have for many of the players at this price point. I'm very excited by the level of performance offered by the Pro-Logue Eight.

While it may not provide that top-to-bottom seamlessness of those very expensive players, it did communicate space and dynamics with ease, which is where the modestly-priced players often falter.

Used in conjunction with one of PrimaLuna's matching ProLogue integrateds, and your favorite pair of 2000 dollar speakers, you can have a highly involving system for just a shade over six grand. And while the PrimaLuna ProLogue components are tall, they are also narrow, so they can sit side by side on a single shelf. Just plan your rack space accordingly. Throw in stellar PrimaLuna build quality and this player should be at the top of your list. I had a blast with it!



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Second Opinion

By Jeff Dorgay

I can happily say that I was one of the first people in the audio industry (at least in the US) to be exposed to PrimaLuna, back with their original ProLogue One. TONE still owns that little integrated, and it's been chugging along ever since without any problems. I have recommended PrimaLuna to quite a few of my friends over the years and they have all been very happy with their purchases. A quick peek at Audiogon rarely turns up a piece of used PrimaLuna gear and I don't think I've seen more than one or two for sale on EBay ever. That says customer satisfaction to me.

PrimaLuna has expanded their product line considerably since then and everything they've come up with has won major accolades around the world with all of the hifi magazines. But this new CD player is something really special.

I admit it; I'm a very obsessed audiophile, especially when it comes to digital playback. I could buy a nice used Porsche 911 for what I've got tied up in CD players, so I'm pretty spoiled. But back in the real world, I've been listening to a lot of great players in the 2-4000 dollar range from a number of manufacturers. Just like the best players, the ones in this price category all have a signature sound that will either be a fit for your system (and your taste) or not.

Very Comfy Indeed

The ProLogue 8 spent almost all of its time in my second system that consists of the new Luxman 590 integrated amplifier, Penaudio Serenades and my Meridian 808, along with the newest Rega P3-24 and a Shelter 7000 cartridge. So, it was definitely in some good company and during the course of the review I was able to compare it to quite a few other players at this level as well as bounce back and forth between the ProLogue 8 and a comparably priced analog setup.



**Of course being tubed,
one expects midrange magic
and this is where the PL8
really eclipses
it's competitors.**

For whatever reason, the synergy between this player and my Luxman/Penaudio system was stellar. No, it didn't have the resolution of my Meridian, but it was just so enjoyable to listen to, I had a wonderful time with this player. It is not fatiguing in the least, yet still possesses enough musical detail and air that you don't feel like the edges are being rounded off the corners of the music, as a few of the other players that are touted as "analog sounding" do.

The bass response of the PL8 is tight and tuneful. When listening to any of my favorite jazz recordings with acoustic bass, I was very impressed with the texture and detail in the lower registers. While there was enough of an airiness to keep me more than happy, this is one of the big differences you notice when switching back to a cost no object player, there is definitely more space between the notes.

Of course being tubed, one expects mid-range magic and this is where the PL8 really eclipses its competitors. This is one of the most pleasant, non-digital sounding players on the market. But again, the PL8 is not lacking in the dynamics department either. When listening to my favorite rock recordings, it had plenty of punch when it came to driving bass, drums and blazing guitar solos.

I Think You Need One

Because the PL8 is so anti digital, you can listen to this player all day and never get listener fatigue. For someone putting together a reasonably priced system in the 5-30 thousand dollar range, this may be all the player you will ever need, especially for those of you that are primarily analog listeners that are going to CD begrudgingly. This one will win you over on the virtues of the shiny discs for sure.

Even those of you with a cost no object system might consider a PL8 for the same reason you probably have more than one turntable; not all recordings are created equal. *(continued)*



I have an analog setup that is very detailed that I use for the best recordings and I have another that I use a Grado Statement (that costs as much as this player) cartridge because it adds that touch of warmth and magic to those discs that are less than flawless.

If you are like me and enjoy a lot of popular music, this player does a killer job at adding a bit of life to some of those overly compressed discs or the ones that are a touch bright. I have quite a few CD's that benefited from the PrimaLuna's presentation. This player does embellish a tiny bit, but it's all good and I'd much rather it go in this direction than too far the other way and be painstakingly analytical.

What really stood out for me with the PL8 was when I went back and forth between it and my turntable. At this price point, often analog offers up a much more musical presentation, but not so with this player. I am happy to report that even after eight hour listening sessions, I never caught myself aching for LP playback; I was perfectly content with this CD player.

It's Easy For Me to Spend Your Money

If you really want to obsess about this, put some vintage NOS tubes in your PL8 and you can have even more fun. When you call Kevin Deal to purchase one, spend a couple hundred extra bucks and get some of his coolio vintage tubes. A decent pair of 12AX7's, 12AU7's and 5AR4 rectifiers will still keep the purchase price well under three grand and give you even more tubey goodness.

I just happened to have some Mullards hanging around and they definitely made this player even more three dimensional, with an even bigger soundstage than before and a lot more depth. It's great out of the box, but a great set of tubes is the icing on the cake!

Is It The Player For You?

That's always the toughie. If you want the last molecule of detail from your CD's then this one is probably not going to be the player for you in stock format, but PrimaLuna now offers their I/V op amp upgrade. Just like rolling tubes, this offers you the ability to give your PL8 a bit more analytical character to fine tune it to your system. Now you have the option of having two players in one, so if you are a real music lover this one is a winner. Watch for our review on the update soon.

We are happy to give the PrimaLuna Prologue 8 CD player an Exceptional Value Award for 2008. The Prologue 8 really rocks! I guarantee this is one you won't get tired of. *(continued)*

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I'm really obsessed with remote controls and the PL8 has a killer remote. Most players in this category have a plastic happy meal remote. The remote that comes with the PL8 would be right at home with my ACT 2 pre-amp or a piece of BAT gear with a five figure price tag. Definitely a nice touch!

It offers great build quality with stylish yet slightly retro good looks and a musical presentation that is extremely enjoyable. Ask any PrimaLuna owner and you will get the same big smile. Kudos to Kevin Deal and PrimaLuna for helping to keep great sound fun and affordable! ●

The Prima Luna ProLogue 8
MSRP: \$2499

MANUFACTURER

Upscale Audio
 2504 Spring Terrace
 Upland, CA 91784
 909-985-6968

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source: Michelle Orb w/SME V arm and Koetsu Rosewood Cartridge

Phono Preamp: Sutherland PhD3

Preamp: Nagra PL-L

Power Amplifier: Conrad-Johnson ET 250, Nagra PSA

Speakers: DeVore Gibbon Super 8, Verity Audio Rienzi

Headphone Planet

By Marc Phillips and Jeff Dorgay



I never feel more nostalgic about my early audiophile days than when I strap on a pair of headphones and listen deep into the night. I'm reminded of the many times when teenage Marc would grab his trusty pair of Sennheiser HD-414s (the ones with the yellow earpads that were ubiquitous throughout the '70s), plug into the headphone jack of his Concept 5.5 receiver, and fall asleep listening to *Dark Side of the Moon* or *Crime of the Century*. I woke up many a morning with a severe case of Headphone Hair.

Flash forward twenty-five or thirty years, and headphone gear has grown a bit more serious. I've been listening to the very impressive Rudistor NX-02 Sistema headphone amp for the last month or two, along with some of the most highly regarded cans in the audio industry. I tossed aside the majority of audiophile-approved recordings that have plagued me throughout my adulthood, and I concentrated on recreating those magic moments from my adolescence with such titles as *DSOTM*, *Crime*, Heart's *Little Queen* and the first Cheap Trick album. There were times when I could almost hear my mom calling for dinner.



**This is one gorgeous
headphone amp, and it
comes as no surprise that it
has been designed in Italy
by Dr. Rudi Stor.**

Rudistor NX-02 Sistema – \$899

Quite simply, the NX-02 is the most solid and well-built headphone amp I've ever used, with a level of fit and finish equal to some of the most expensive amplification in high-end audio. While not at all large, the NX-02 is more substantial than you think, with a thick faceplate that happens to be finished in my favorite shade of cobalt blue (or maybe a shade lighter). You also get a large shiny volume knob, a substantial toggle switch for power and not one but two headphone jacks. This is one gorgeous headphone amp, and it comes as no surprise that it has been designed in Italy by Dr. Rudi Stor.

IF WE DON'T HOLD ONTO THEIR DREAMS,
WHO WILL?

The NX-02 is a high-current Class A design that Rudistor claims is powerful enough to drive small, efficient loudspeakers. The NX-02 uses no capacitors in the signal path, nor any global negative feedback. The output devices are Darlington Bipolar transistors, which are mated to a solid-state current regulator. The signal path is unusually short, and the innards are simple and clean. According to Rudistor, the NX-02 is designed to be fast, neutral and with distortion levels so low that they are hard to measure. The noise floor of the NX-02 is rated at -113dB. This is one quiet headphone amp.

While using a variety of headphones, I was very aware of this propensity for speed, neutrality and silence.

With an open, extended pair of cans like the Grado GS1000s, the effect was almost like standing at the edge of an abyss, waiting to be pushed in. This was an extremely dynamic combination, almost scarily so. The dynamic contrasts were so effortless and seamless, in fact, that this is one headphone system where you might want to pay extra attention to the volume control to avoid being suddenly run over by a sonic freight train. My heart skipped a beat every time the alarm clocks kicked in on "Time" from *DSOTM*, regardless of the set of headphones I used. – MP



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Stefan AudioArt Equinox GS1000

– \$209-\$509 (length dependent)

Stefan AudioArt has been supplying cable upgrades to some of the world's finest headphones for a few years now. The Equinox line is the company's state-of-the-art assault on headphone cabling. This 4-conductor cable uses pure copper wire encased in specially treated Teflon/Oxygen dielectric, and is very flexible and lightweight. The single-ended braided wiring chosen specifically for the Grado GS1000 headphones is available in a variety of lengths from 3 to 20 feet, with both full-sized and mini connectors available. Prices range from \$299 to \$509 for the wiring upgrade alone, depending upon the length and connector.

Since I already own a pair of GS1000s, this was an excellent opportunity to compare the Stefan AudioArt to the stock wiring through the two jacks on the front of the Rudistor NX-02 Sistema. Using my beloved Naim CDX2 CD player, which was connected to the NX-02 with a pair of Audience Maestro interconnects, I was able to detect a very noticeable improvement using the modded Grados. First of all, the Equinox GS1000s sounded a bit louder than the stock cans, so I played with the volume control a bit to match the levels more consistently. After a while, I realized that the Equinox GS1000s were simply more open and dynamic through the treble. I was able to hear slightly further into the recording as well, with the background voices and effects throughout *DSOTM* a tad clearer and easier to separate from the mix. A definite step up from the stock GS1000s.

I also noticed that the Equinox GS1000s were less fatiguing than the stock Grados. Combined with the Rudistor amp, the sound through the regular GS1000s returned you to that aforementioned abyss, with the ground crumbling under your feet. Cymbal crashes and loud swings in dynamics were almost stressful at times, hinting at both unlimited headroom and impending deafness.



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The Equinox reined in the excess, and allowed me to melt into the sonic landscape a little more easily (which is the point of listening to headphones in the first place).

The Stefan AudioArt GS1000s also made crunchy-sounding recordings a little less grimy, adding sparkle and clarity to some of those '70s recordings. When I was a teenager, for example, I never really complained about the recording quality on Heart's "Baracuda." It always just rocked. With the Rudistor/Grado combo, the recording sounded muddy and almost primitive, but with the Equinox cable in place, those nostalgic feelings from 1979 came back to the forefront of my consciousness.

So if you're still skeptical about the benefits of cabling in general, I suggest that you listen to the Equinox upgrade yourself.

If anything can reveal subtle improvements that come from different cables, it's a fantastic set of cans and a truly quiet and fast headphone amplifier. For me, the choice was clearly in favor of the AudioArt version of the GS1000s.

As this is a very difficult headphone to take apart and rewire, if you don't have a rocket scientist at your disposal, you can send your GS1000s back to Grado and they will install the Stefan cable for 90 bucks and keep your warranty intact. So before you tear into your favorite pair of \$1000 headphones, this is a great option. — MP



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Stefan AudioArt Equinox K701

– \$255 - \$435 (length dependent)

I can't let the boy have all the fun, can I? Having been very impressed with the AudioArt cables that are on my Sennheiser 650s, I was looking forward to comparing their upgraded K701 mods as well and just happened to have a stock pair that was broken in to compare. If you are a headphone enthusiast and a lover of these phones, you know that they take some time to break in and get rid of that initial brittleness.

The upgrade price is slightly less than the GS1000's, again dependent on connector and cable length. Go to www.stefanaudioart.com to get the full pricing structure and check out the other great headphone stuff there while you are at it. Our test phones both had six-foot cables, but if I had to do it again, I'd get 12 or 15 footers. I banished the new AA phones to the garage, hanging them up and playing KC and the Sunshine Band with the loudness button depressed on my Pioneer SX-737 for a solid week. This always snaps a pair of new phones right into shape and saves me the time of having to listen through the break-in period.

The stock 701s have a bit smaller presentation than the stock GS1000s and slightly recessed through the midrange. Most of this can be offset by the tone controls on my Luxman L 590A II amplifier, but the minute I put the AA 701's on, I could tell a veil had been lifted from the presentation of this phone. Marc commented that the AA 701s were smooth and relaxing and I concur. With the AA cable in place though, they go from being laid back to being much more neutral and organic.

While SAA does not have a factory cable upgrade similar to the Grado deal, they do have a couple of highly recommended installers, which I think is really taking customer service to a new level.

I bounce back and forth between the Sennheiser 650s, the Grado GS 1000s and now the AKG 701s. Often the type of music and recording dictates one set of phones over the other, but one thing is for certain, if you own either of these phones, I would highly suggest the Stefan AudioArt upgrades. They definitely take the experience to the next level of headphone enjoyment. - JD



Stefan AudioArt

...And Now For Something Completely Different
Sennheiser PXC 450 – \$449

I've considered bringing my reference Grado GS1000 'phones with me on plane flights, but I knew their open-air design would totally aggravate my fellow travelers. I've never quite cottoned to the idea of in-the-ear headphones (I do suffer from claustrophobia), and earbuds totally suck in every conceivable way, most noticeably in the way they fail to seat properly in my ears. So when I had a chance to try out Sennheiser's new PXC-450 noise-canceling headphones, I wondered if this was the solution to my travel dilemma.

First of all, how much noise does these headphones cancel? Well, when I slipped them on, I could immediately hear my heart beating. Loudly. I can see how a device like this could render stethoscopes obsolete one day. Secondly, the 450s were remarkably comfortable, although they did clamp onto my head a bit tightly at first. Every Sennheiser I've ever worn has fit my head just about perfectly.

Finally, while noise canceling is often criticized for sacrificing overall sound quality for the noise-reduction technology, I found that the 450s were more than satisfying to listen to. They might have lacked the warmth and openness of the other premium cans I've heard, but the sound was clear and detailed. The balance was on the thin side, and low bass was lacking, but the 450s definitely exhibited the trademark Sennheiser sound, which I've always found to my liking. Sennheiser even includes a carrying bag (the 450s fold into a surprisingly compact space) and a variety of adapters, and two AA batteries as well. While the 450s retail for nearly \$450 (around the cost of the exquisite HD-650s), I've seen them discounted to well below \$300. At that price, the PXC-450 is quite a bargain. – MP ●



Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

Staying in an analog mode, this issue we have tube related treasures and a great Japanese import.



Eico 625 Tube Tester

Audio Circle — \$70

Every self-respecting audiophile should have at least one tube tester.

If you are committed to gear that has tubes inside, it makes sense to grab one of these while they are still available. This one arrived in perfect shape and I was able to get right down to checking out some budget tubes I picked up. This one does not have enough functionality to match both sections of a 12AX7, but it will give you a bit more than just a go/no-go test.

One of these are very handy if you just need to find out in a hurry if you have a bad tube, and it's not a bad idea to run a quick check on bargain or other tubes that you have perhaps bought online before you install them in your favorite amp or preamp. Keep an eye on an upcoming article on tube testers for those of you that are a bit more obsessed with tubes!

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—Chris Martens, *The Absolute Sound*, August 2007



Here's the Magic!



Westinghouse Ready Guide Powell's Technical Books — \$10

What good is a tube tester without tube manuals? I love to collect tube manuals, so when I saw this one for ten bucks, I couldn't resist. Not a full blown tube manual per se, but a "Cliff's Notes" type of guide to some of the more popular tubes we know and love. There are some great charts inside for all of us nerdtrons that need to know the transconductance values of our favorite triodes at the flip of a page.

Sadly, the intro pages show the two giant Westinghouse factories for building these tubes that are long gone. Makes you wish for the old days sometimes.

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Kyu Sakamoto

Sukiyaki and Other Japanese Hits
Mermaid Music — \$3.99

Remember the hit “Sukiyaki”? (“Ue O Muite Aruko”) Even at deadline, I can’t resist a quick stroll through a nearby record store and I struck gold! This record was a greatest hits compilation on Capitol (T10349) and is done in mono. An obscure slummin’ find to be sure. ●

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