

TONEAudio.

The e-journal of analog
and digital sound.

no.17

2008

The Sound of Power by Bentley and Naim



TONEAudio

PUBLISHER Jeff Dorgay

EDITOR Toni McQuilken

ART DIRECTOR Jean Dorgay

MUSIC EDITOR Ben Fong-Torres

**ASSISTANT
MUSIC EDITOR** Desi Day

**MUSIC
VISIONARIES** Terry Currier
Norwood Brown

TECHNICAL EDITOR Dan Babineau

**SENIOR
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR** Marc Phillips

STYLE EDITOR Scott Tetzlaff

**CONTRIBUTING
WRITERS** Tom Caselli
Kurt Doslu
Anne Farnsworth
Kimberlye Gold
Joe Golfen
Ken Kessler
Christina Kratzman
Jerold O'Brien
Todd Sageser
Richard Simmons
Randy Wells

UBER CARTOONISTS Liza Donnelly
Michael Maslin

ADVERTISING Jeff Dorgay

SERVER SUPREMO Nate Silva



tonepublications.com

Editor Questions and
Comments:

tonepub@yahoo.com
800.432.4569

© 2008 TONE MAGAZINE, LLC
All rights reserved.

TONE **A2** NO.17 2008

 **VERITY AUDIO**

www.verityaudio.com



80



22

CONTENTS

features

- 10 **Old School: The Krell PAM-5**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 13 **Budget Gear: A Current Classic
The Rotel RX 1052**
By Jeff Dorgay
- 18 **The Vinyl Anachronist:
Marc Explores Eric Whitacre's
Advent 300**
- 22 **Jerry Horton Of Papa Roach
Talks About His Passion for HiFi
and Working With the B&W Society
of Sound** *By Jeff Dorgay*
- 31 **Jenni Potts: The Struggles
And Hope That Influence Her
Music** *By Marc Phillips*
- 80 **A Chat with Country's Bright
New Star Tristan Prettyman**
By Kimberlye Gold
- 85 **The Collector: Tom Casseli Covers
Fantasy's Reissues of Mingus, Miles,
King Curtis and Eric Dolphy**
7. NEW CONTRIBUTORS
8. PUBLISHER'S LETTER
9. TONE TOON
By Liza Donnelly



60
(on the cover)

CONTENTS

tone style

60 The Bentley Continental
Featuring Naim Hi-fi – Luxury at Its Finest *By Jeff Dorgay*

67 Lyra's Olympos Cartridge
Unobtanium!
By Jeff Dorgay

71 The Leica M8
Analog Sensibilities With Digital Convenience *By Ken Kessler*

76 The Twang Bar King
Pick Up A Clean T and Show Your Support *By Jeff Dorgay*

77 David Lynch Signature Cup
Coffees with Intense Aromas And A Mission *By Jean Dorgay*

78 Pulse Speaker Stands
A Whitworth Design *By Jeff Dorgay*

79 Kingston Technology
32 GB of Picture Taking Heaven
By Jeff Dorgay



71

music

26. Audiophile Recordings:

Remasters Of Chuck Berry, The Byrds, ZZ Top, Kansas and the Dead Can Dance Collection *By Jeff Dorgay*

34. Current Releases:

Fresh Releases in the Pop/Rock World
By Marc Phillips and Jeff Dorgay

42. LIVE MUSIC: Ringo Starr and His All Starr Band, The Strange Noise Tour, Peter Frampton and Boz Scaggs

Grace the Stages of the Northwest
By Jeff Dorgay

51. Club Mix: Scott Tetzlaff Explores Some of His Favorite Female Artists**56. New Jazz Releases From Eastwind**
By Anne Farnsworth



CONTENTS

reviews

- 88. Manley's Massive Passive EQ**
Equally Effective for Work and Play
By Todd Sageser
- 96. The Lehmann Black Cube SE Phono Preamplifier**
First Among Equals *By Marc Phillips*
- 100. Mystère ia21 Integrated Amplifier**
By Marc Phillips
- 106. Stirling LS3/5a V2 Speaker**
The Little Legend Revisited
By Randy Wells
- 113. The Channel Islands VDA•2 DAC** *By Jeff Dorgay*
- 119. Composite Products CF-2080**
Keep the Vibration at Bay
By Jeff Dorgay
- 121. The Nagra VPS Phono Stage**
A Perfect Balance *By Jeff Dorgay*
- 129. The Audio Research PH7**
A New Reference *By Jeff Dorgay*
- 135. HEADPHONE PLANET:**
TTVJ Millett 307A and Lehmann's Black Cube Linear Amplifier
By Marc Phillips
- 143. SLUMMIN'** Audio on the Cheap!
- 145. Manufacturers Index**



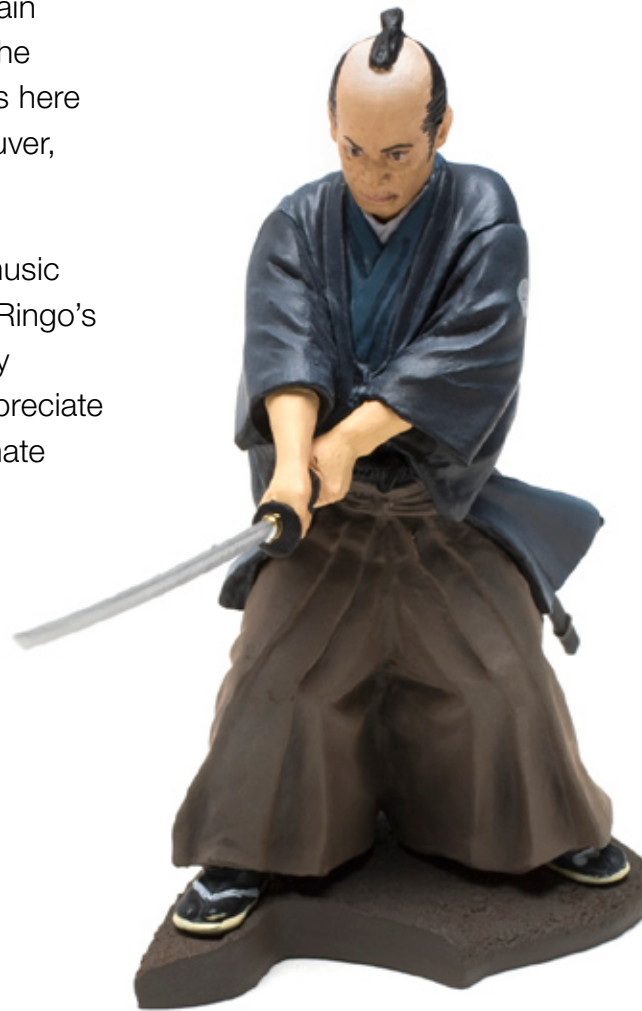
CONTRIBUTORS

new in tone this issue

MICHAEL J. KIFOIL

Michael Kilfoil was one of the main people responsible for making the VSAC audio show a big success here in TONE's home town of Vancouver, Washington this summer.

A life long audio hobbyist and music lover, he took the time to cover Ringo's All Star Band when they recently performed here. We always appreciate someone who is just as passionate about the music as the gear!



Akira Kurosawa Samurai

KAIYODO FIGURES
www.kaiyodo.co.jp/

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

Don't panic, we aren't turning into Car and Driver. However, we are making a subtle change in format. We're becoming a car magazine! Just kidding.

You will notice a new section in TONE, between the music and gear sections that has more to do with style and related lifestyle products. There, I said it; the dreaded L-word. I seem to recall back in the 90's when Stereophile started running ads for BMW in their hallowed pages, they got crucified by their readership. Personally, I thought it was brilliant and was sad to see the BMW ads go away.

As some of you might have noticed, the hifi industry is in need of a transfusion these days. The problem is, many of you in the audience who spend a lot of time arguing about power cords, etc., don't *buy* anything. Not that I don't enjoy a good argument about who has the best Power Ranger, but most people glaze over at that kind of blather. A good friend of mine in the industry put it best, "people don't have time for another hobby".

This doesn't mean the end of hifi as we know it by a long shot. What it does mean is that we need to get more people into this world of ours if we want the hifi industry to survive. I think there are a lot of people out there that would like to enjoy music more, but cringe at the idea that they might have to become nerdtrons to do it. They need our help.

So, we aren't abandoning our prior commitment to investigating great audio gear throughout the range, we're cordially inviting some more people with like interests to the party. Our reader surveys indicate that TONE readers enjoy cars, motorcycles, bicycles, watches, golf and photography. I hate golf, so you won't see any golf related articles here, but as for the other things, we're going to tickle your curiosity with a few things in those areas as we go forward. A little variety is good for you.

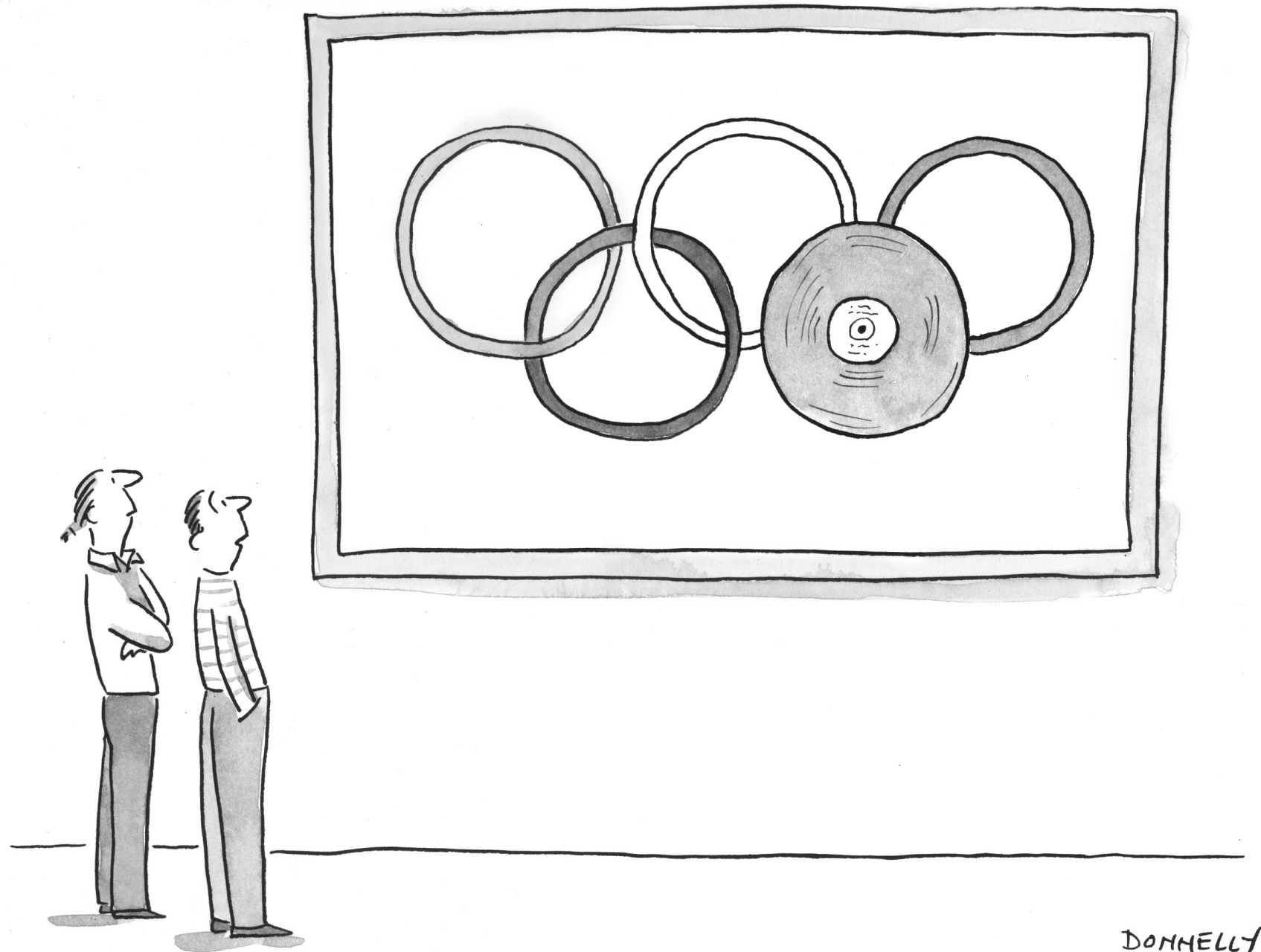
The new TONE Style section starts on page 88 with an article on the new Bentley Continental, equipped with the Naim hifi system. I must say after spending three days with this car, I am ruined for life. The driving experience was wonderful, the sound system superb and my hosts from Bentley and Naim couldn't have been more helpful and courteous.

Ken Kessler has a great article on digital, but this time it's about pixels instead of sound bits. He shares his experience with the Leica M8 and having used this one myself, it's quite the camera. Art Director and coffee enthusiast Jean Dorgay joins the mix with commentary on David Lynch's new coffee and I rounded up a few other things that might make your life a bit more fun in between arguments about cables and such.

In three years, we've pulled a lot of people into the world of hifi that started out reading TONE for the music. This makes me very happy, because that was my evil plan all along. Get em hooked on music and sooner or later they will need something better to play it back on.

I hope you enjoy our new section as much as the rest of the issue.





"I didn't know hi-fi was a sport!"

The Krell PAM-5

By Jeff Dorgay

OLD SCHOOL:



I must be honest with you, this is the only component I have ever purchased sight unseen at full retail price. That's right.

Spin the clock back to 1986, when I was still living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and making regular pilgrimages to Quintessence Audio in Naperville, Illinois to audition hifi gear. My buddy Frank at Quintessence called me when the newer, more "affordable" Krell preamp came in, telling me to **"buy one now, before there's a waiting list."**

cut from whole cloth?



Alexandria is framed by the spoils of the solid four-inch sheet of X material from which the side "wing" of the speaker was cut.

In the fifteenth century, English tailors would advertise clothes as being "cut from whole cloth," that is, from the fresh bolt of broad or "whole" cloth as it came from the loom. It was a claim of quality and authenticity.

How the expression—particularly in the United States—acquired the exact opposite meaning (of something specious and false) remains a curiosity to lexicographers, but some suggest it was the result of deceptive advertising. Tailors, looking for greater profits, would claim their suits were made from whole cloth when, in fact, they were cleverly (or not so cleverly) pieced together from scraps.

In the market, value is a function of perception—at least until it becomes apparent to enough people that your claims are "cut from whole cloth."

Wilson Audio loudspeakers have consistently been *sui generis*. Market research is anathema at Wilson. We, instead, endeavor to create our own market. We believe the value of our products is readily perceived in the listening. That alone justifies the costly materials and processes that go into their manufacture. Wilson's proprietary X material, for example, costs 14 times as much as MDF, the material judged "adequate" by most other speaker designers.

Alexandria is the pinnacle of Dave Wilson's passion to create loudspeakers that reproduce the ineluctable beauty of live music. The value of any "flagship" loudspeaker rests not in what you name it, clever market research, where it's priced, or even in what it looks like. The proof of value lies ultimately in how it sounds.

Your nearest Wilson dealer will be glad to afford you that listening experience.

Wilson Audio • Authentic Excellence



2233 Mountain Vista Lane, Provo, UT 84606 • 801-377-2233 • wilsonaudio.com

No Self-Control

Of course I went for it, and when my PAM-5 arrived a couple of weeks later I dashed right out of work to make the three-hour drive to Naperville in the middle of the day. Something to do with food poisoning, I recall. By about 10pm, I was back home and the PAM-5 was rocking the house, driving a Threshold 4000A and a pair of Acoustat 2+2's. Good memories indeed.

My experience with Quintessence was so pleasant, that ten years later, when I called Frank to buy another Krell preamplifier, I bought a kerry blue terrier from him instead!

In June when a mint PAM-5 came up on EBay for six hundred bucks, I had to take a stroll down memory lane. Fortunately, it was mint and worked like a champ. The PAM-5 sold for about 2000 dollars back in 1986 and I was blown away by the weight and dynamics. It gave my 2+2 based system just what it needed.

Remember, this was just before the dawn of preamplifiers having remote controls, so the PAM-5 is all manual. I'm sure this has contributed in a minor way to its long-term reliability, less to break and all.

Somewhat understated and less massive than the Flagship PAM-1, (and lacking the balanced outputs of later Krell designs) the PAM-5 still had a separate, out-board power supply, which was a bit rare back in the mid 80's and seldom seen on much other than Mark Levinson components.

(continued)



The PAM-5 also featured a great moving coil cartridge phono stage that was incredibly quiet and much more dynamic than the Ortofon MC transformer I had been using with my Dynavector 23R cartridge.

Sometimes The Past Is Even Better Than You Remember

In my current semi vintage system, which consists of the Conrad Johnson MV-75 from our last issue and a pair of Sterling Broadcast LS3/5a's, I am still very impressed with the sound of the PAM-5. When Krell first hit the hifi scene, they became famous for having bigger than life dynamics, and extremely powerful and well-defined bass.

This preamplifier holds up the legacy quite well, with an extremely modern sound. Eyes closed, you would swear you are listening to a preamplifier in the 2-5000 dollar range. Not only does it possess all of the dynamics I remember, but the tonality is excellent and the upper registers are clean and tidy, not grainy or sterile.

Well Krell was a bit better known back then for the sheer slam of their amplifiers, their preamplifiers were undiscovered jewels to many.

The PAM-1 and PAM-3 were better known, but the PAM-5 was more reasonably priced and even used a special "phase correction circuit" in the CD player input.

I pulled the 20 year-old Pioneer CD player out of my garage and sure enough, this did take some of the harsh, grungy sound out of CD playback. I remember in 1986, this was a lifesaver for my NAD player. The difference between good LP playback and CD was huge, but this took some of the digital edge down in a very good way.

The Krell PAM-5 is a welcome blast from the past. It has stellar build quality and top-notch sound. You could still make one of these the cornerstone of a very good hifi system today and be quite pleased. Unfortunately, Frank is no longer with us and my kerry blue terrier is getting pretty old, but you can still contact the current owner, Mick Survance at Quintessence Audio. He's having the best year in their 32-year history, providing the great customer service I received 22 years ago. ●

www.krellonline.com

www.quintessenceaudio.com



THE ROTEL RX 1052

A Current Classic

By Jeff Dorgay

Though we spend a fair amount of time in the clouds with five thousand dollar phono cartridges and hundred thousand dollar amplifiers, people always ask me “what ever happened to the good old days when you just bought a receiver?”

See in a new way.



© Craig Tanner

Lensbaby 3G™



Lensbaby 3G—the newest member of our family—lets you lock your lens in a bent position, then fine focus. Explore the possibilities of our latest selective focus SLR lens at lensbabies.com.

bend • lock • fine focus



another simple idea from

Lensbabies™

Evidently Rotel has never forgotten those days and their RX1052 is a testament to that philosophy.

In 1977, I bought a Marantz 2275 receiver for \$499. Adjusted for inflation, that would make a receiver like that worth about \$3000 today. Granted, the Rotel lacks a little bit of the physical heft of the legendary Marantz (and that super cool blue backlit tuning dial with a pair of tuning meters), but it sounds light years better. I was able to borrow a pristine example of the Marantz to refresh my memory and the Rotel is much better, all nostalgia notwithstanding.

If you are looking for a reasonably priced well-appointed component that will let you do everything and don't want a rack full of gear, your search has ended.

A Lot Under The Hood

Today, \$899 buys you a very competent FM tuner section, a respectable MM phono preamplifier, subwoofer outputs and a great headphone amp to boot. Not to mention two sets of speaker outputs, four video pass-through outputs and tone controls. Yes, I said it, tone controls. Very useful ones I might add, just offering a bit of boost and cut at the very extremes of the frequency range. Perfect for toning down a bright CD or giving a little bit more bass oomph to your iPod. A 100-watt per channel amplifier is also lurking inside the RX1052 and it's not a cheesy chip amp either. When you pick this receiver up, you can definitely feel some heft. *(continued)*



My only real complaint about the RX1052 is that the jacks on the back panel are a bit close together to use any kind of serious audiophile cabling. But I won't call the engineers at Rotel bad Smurfs, because I'm guessing that most of the people buying one of these won't be the agonize over interconnect types.

Plug and Play

I used the Rotel with a number of speakers in the 500 – 2000 dollar range and it gave a good showing with everything I threw at it. I kept my cable choices simple, with a pair of interconnects and speaker cables from Audio Art (\$99 for the interconnects, \$109 for the speaker cables) and a \$99 Shunyata Venom power cord.

I ended up settling on installing the Rotel in my living room, where everyone in my family could interact with it. My wife could listen to NPR and my daughter could put her headphones on and tune us out whenever she wanted to, so everyone had their own favorite feature set.

Setup took about five minutes; plug it in, hook up some speakers and a CD player (in my case, the McIntosh MS300 music server) and you are ready to go. Later in the review period, I added my Audio Technica AT-120 turntable with a Shure

M97 cartridge to try the phono stage and was pleasantly surprised.

No Slouch In The Sound Department

Once the 1052 was playing for about 48 hours, it really settled in, but I was very impressed from the beginning; the sound was not harsh and overly solid state at all. If anything the 1057 was a bit warm and mellow sounding! This made a great match for a number of modest speakers that I tried it with, taming down any harshness that usually accompanies speakers in this range.

I had to go all the way to the Harbeth Compact 7's until I heard the limitations of the 1052, which was only a lack of ultimate resolution.

The Harbeth/Rotel combination was still extremely musical and friendly. With 100 watts per channel on tap, the Rotel had no problems driving even fairly inefficient speakers.

Whether I was listening to hard, driving rock music or classical, the Rotel never disappointed me. The lower registers were powerful and controlled and the highs were just a little bit polite. However, I would much rather have this presentation than an overly faux-analytical sound in a budget solid-state amplifier. *(continued)*

Whether I was listening to hard, driving rock music or classical, the Rotel never disappointed me.



I never found the Rotel fatiguing, even after long listening sessions.

The Extras Make The Difference

If the 1052 stopped here, it would be a great product, but when you add the tuner, headphone amp and phono stage, it gives you a lot of opportunity to expand your system. While I started with my Audio Technica/Shure vinyl rig, I settled on the combination of the Rega P3 and Elys 2 cartridge, which proved to be a perfect complement for this receiver.

The phono stage was very quiet, possessing as much detail as I've heard with most of the out-board phono stages in the 100-200 dollar range. I tried a few more MM cartridges from Grado and Clearaudio with good results.

Headphone listeners will be very pleased with this aspect of the 1052. I put the receiver through the paces, using everything from my Grado SR60's (upgraded with cables from ALO Audio) all the way to my Grado GS 1000's that cost more than the 1052! Again, the performance was easily equivalent to any of the 300-dollar headphone amplifiers I've heard.

The best part of having everything in one box is the money you will save on interconnects and power cords.

As Good As It Gets

After a couple of months I can still say that the Rotel is a joy to use. I can't think of anything that I've heard in years that will give you this much sound quality and this kind of versatility for under 1000 dollars. There are a few decent tubed integrated amplifiers in the 1200 dollar range, but you won't get a tuner, headphone amp and phono stage (not to mention 100 watts per channel) as part of the package.

What excites me about the Rotel is that it has the chops to be a great entry-level audiophile component that has it all; versatility, understated good looks and excellent performance in a compact package that is easy to use. *(continued)*

I can't think of anything that I've heard in years that will give you this much sound quality and this kind of versatility for under 1000 dollars.

An innovative new partnership with Peter Gabriel's Real World to bring you an exclusive new album every month. These stunning recordings are delivered in lossless quality and can be burned to CD or played on iTunes. The albums cross genres and geographies: eclectic, sometimes electric, and always excellent.

Free trial available now

www.bowers-wilkins.com/sos

B&W Music Club

Bowers & Wilkins

**Just like my old Marantz,
I can see this one getting
passed down a generation
as time goes by.**

I'm happy to award the Rotel 1052 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for this year. So the next time anyone asks me if they still make good receivers, this is the one I'm going to recommend. ●



Sound of the Wood Advent 300 Preamplifier

By Marc Phillips

For years, the Advent 300 receiver was one of my favorite recommendations for anyone wanting to build an analog based system on a tight budget. The 300 was always known for having a spectacular phono section, but also for having only 15 watts per channel. So the recommendation was always with that in mind. Until recently, you could find one in fair condition on e-Bay or Audiogon for around \$100, but due to their popularity \$200 is more like it.

Kurt Doslu talked about the Advent 300 in the Old School column of Issue 12 of TONE and while it was here, a few of the staff members had a chance to give this classic a good listen. We all had a Q-Tip Moment, as in "Should I go and clean out my ears, since I can't hear anything wrong with this." The Advent 300 sounded decidedly modern, with a relatively clear, undistorted musical presentation that may have leaned a little toward the cool side of the spectrum.





Suddenly, I remembered that Eric Whitacre, the mastermind behind Sound of the Wood, was modifying 300's into preamps for a relatively low price. I immediately wondered how much better the "new" 300 would sound in my system.

A Little Background

For those who don't know Eric, he has been modifying old AR turntables for years, picking up where George Merrill left off. (Merrill seems to have turned his attention away from AR-XAs and ES-1s for the time being, and is concentrating on his own super 'tables, which are fairly expensive.) Eric's AR creations, however, are far from modest little tweaks. A top-of-the line Sound of the Wood AR turntable, with all the bells and whistles, is a fairly serious analog rig, and very popular these days, according to Eric. Should you decide to add one of Eric's tables to your system, you better act quickly because they don't stay in stock long. The same thing is starting to happen with his modded Advent receivers. Sound of the Wood is far from a large operation, and doesn't have a lot of spare units sitting around in a vast warehouse. For the most part, Sound of the Wood is Eric Whitaker, although he does partner up with engineer David Plummer to offer the Sound of the Wood Advent 300 preamplifier.

I know what you're saying...isn't the Advent 300 a receiver? Well, it is, but Eric and David have modded the 300 into a preamplifier and phono

stage, allowing you to bypass those 15 watts per channel with something a little more substantial, if you wish. And if you are fine with that amount of power, you can simply use a pair of RCA cables as jumpers between the gold-plated power amp in/preamp out jacks on the rear panel. Eric told me he uses his personal Sound of the Wood 300 as a phono preamp only. I received Eric's personal 300, and I used it as both, and as a headphone amplifier as well.

The Sound of the Wood Advent 300 preamplifier costs \$599. You might look at that from two different directions. From one side, you might wonder if you're better off buying a stock 300 from e-Bay for that aforementioned \$200. On the other hand, what \$599 preamplifier offers the level of sophistication, performance and features? For that matter, who's offering a \$599 preamplifier at all these days? For your \$599, you're getting one of the best '70s receivers of all time, and a nice, clean one at that. And then, for the same price, David works his magic.

First, he installs Black Gate capacitors in key positions throughout the preamp and phono stage. Then he adds switchable capacitance loading for the phono stage, a hardwired tone control bypass, the aforementioned gold-plated Teflon RCA jacks, and solid core silver wiring to link the jacks to the PCBs. *(continued)*

For your \$599, you're getting one of the best '70s receivers of all time, and a nice, clean one at that. And then, for the same price, David works his magic.

Performance high, without the letdown—

"To say that I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the Naim system would be a **massive** understatement ... Very highly recommended."

Nels Ferre, *EnjoytheMusic.com*, September 2007

"...the NAC122x and NAP150x do a great job at what they were designed to do, which is to let us forget about the gear and become involved with the music."

Wayne Garcia, *The Absolute Sound*, December 2007

For a listing of Naim Audio retailers in the U.S., please visit

<http://www.naimusa.com>

or phone us at (847) 647-2293

Dealer inquiries welcome.

NaimUSA • 5657 West Howard Street • Niles, IL 60714-4011 • USA • E-mail: sales@naimusa.com



CDX2 HDCD Compact Disc Player



CD5x HDCD Compact Disc Player



CD5i Compact Disc Player



SUPERNAIT Integrated Amplifier
with built-in DAC



NAC122x Preamplifier



NAIT5i Integrated Amplifier



NAP150x Power Amplifier



FLATCAP2x Dual Power Supply



NAT05 FM Tuner



world class sound...

When the mods are complete, the entire unit is cleaned up, and brought up to spec. Finally, the stock power cord is removed and replaced with an IEC socket so you can use your own. All in all, it's a very good deal for \$599.

The Playground

I used the SOTW 300 in two different systems. First, I placed the 300 into my bedroom system, which consisted of a pair of Bottlehead Par amour 2A3 monoblocks, the Zu Druid mk. IVs, the PrimaLuna ProLogue Eight CD player and the Technics SL-1200 with an Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge. I also tested the headphone section of the 300 with both my Grado GS1000s and my ALOAudio Grado SR225 cans.

With this system, I was able to create a warm, almost nostalgic sound that squarely put me back into the '70s.

Resolution was lacking somewhat, and there wasn't a great deal of soundstage depth, but I still had a lot of fun. And for the most part, I really couldn't place these shortcomings at the feet of the 300s, since I've heard these qualities in other configurations of this system. Next stop was my reference system, which included the Michell Orbe SE/SME V/Koetsu Rosewood analog rig, the Clayton Audio Stereo 40 amplifier, the Naim CDX2 CD player and the Devore Fidelity Gibbon 9 loudspeakers.

I've inserted '70s receivers into my reference system on a number of occasions. *(continued)*

I do own a Marantz 2238B that I keep around for such evil experiments, and I took a crack at a Sansui 8080 receiver for the Old School column a while back. And while I love '70s receivers in general, I always notice the same three shortcomings. First, most of these receivers come up woefully short in the soundstage depth department. Second, that graininess in the treble region always seems to show up after extended listening sessions. And finally, that deep, deep bass always seems a little bit fuzzy and indistinct. It's there, but it might be suffering from a bit of a hangover.

While I'm not about to tell you that the Sound of the Wood 300 tamed all three of these beasts, it did give them a nice shampoo and blow-dry. I still felt some of the graininess creep in, but at a greatly reduced level. The bass was relatively tight, with only an occasional lapse in clarity. Soundstage depth may have been the only real shortcoming, even with the Devore speakers, which usually excel at this. But then I asked myself, "what other \$600 preamps offer incredible soundstage depth?" Sure, you could probably mention a few older Audio Research amps, such as an SP-6, or even a CJ PV-10A, which can be had for around \$600 on the used market. But are they really any better than the SOTW 300? I think about some of the better \$600 preamps available a few years ago, the Adcoms and the Parasounds and the Superphons. They all had issues with grain, soundstage depth and low bass performance.

A Rare Treat

So what makes the Sound of the Wood 300 special? Well, you do get a very good FM tuner thrown into the deal. And there's the flexibility factor, that you can use the 300 as either a receiver, a preamp, or a phono stage. (I used the Advent with my Technics SL1200, mated with an Ortofon 2M Blue cartridge, and really liked the smooth, surprisingly quiet sound.) Plus you get tone controls, a tape monitor loop, loudness switch, mono switch, a muting switch...all the things you had back in the '70s and now forgo in the name of audio "purism" all in a cool-looking, slightly retro package that doesn't scream "I'm a '70s receiver! Look at my big useless meters and horizontal tuning indicator!"

This is the closest thing to a perfect preamp for an audiophile who wants it all, and wants it for \$600.

In other words, this is the closest thing to a perfect preamp for an audiophile who wants it all, and wants it for \$600. The only downside is that there are probably a finite number of old Advent 300s out in the world that are ready to go under David Plummer's scalpel (or soldering iron). So if this sounds like the right solution for your system, call Eric Whitacre and reserve yours now. This is a very special Advent 300 for those in the know and that's a very special thing indeed. ●



PAPA ROACH:

Sound Thinking

By Jeff Dorgay Photos Courtesy of B&W Music Club



Many audiophiles are apprehensive about the sound quality of current recordings, especially in the world of rock music. Many of the audiophiles I've talked to from the boomer generation and beyond are firmly convinced that because of the convenience offered by the digital world, newer acts feel that sound quality can take a back seat in the production process. Even more so, when we start discussing iPods and MP3 files.

The guys in Papa Roach certainly do not subscribe to this philosophy.

As members of B&W's prestigious Society of Sound, which includes music industry giants like Peter Gabriel, Dave Stewart and James Newton Howard, they have taken an active role in shaping B&W's product mix, lending their musical sensibilities to the development process.

Their membership in the Society of Sound meant access to B&W's best speakers for their homes; the upgrade to their stereo systems has had a tremendous influence on how they listen to their own music as well as that of other artists. After spending some time with their guitarist Jerry Horton, I came away with a good feeling that with a few more guys like Papa Roach's band members in the mix, the craft of audio recording will do just fine.

An articulate and passionate musician, Horton laughed when I called Papa Roach the "thinking man's brain damage band."



Jerry Horton of Papa Roach

For the love of music from the land of great design

GamuT.

For more info check out Gamut Audio, Denmark www.gamutaudio.com

How did you get involved with B&W? Did you find them or did they find you?

I had a good relationship with their PR firm and they were talking to me about getting some B&W speakers in my house and getting involved in the Society of Sound. We had a lot in common with B&W in terms of music and the quality of sound, so it made good sense.

How long have you been a member of the Society?

A little over two years now.

Before your association with B&W, did you have an audiophile perspective?

Always. Good hi-fi gear was always important to me; I just did not always have the means to have equipment this good in my home. I started with high end car audio and made the natural progression to home theater and then high performance home audio. I guess I'm a bit obsessed. Most of my friends are too.

Are you interested in analog in your home system?

I just started to get involved with analog, and I've managed to get the rest of the guys in the band and some of the crew into it also. We even take a turntable with us on tour now and listen to records in the dressing room! Now whenever we have a day off on tour, we will usually go searching for a good record store. We managed to get some rare finds in Portland.

With this excitement for analog, can we expect to see the new Papa Roach album out on LP along with the CD?

I've been pushing for a vinyl release on all of our albums, but I wasn't able to get it done. Considering how popular vinyl is now, I think we will see some vinyl on the new record. It's really a great thing for music. An album gets people to participate more and actually sit down and listen to the record, rather than having it just on in the background.

It's definitely an experience that we hope a lot of our fans will want to participate in.

After watching the videos from The Paramour Sessions it's evident how much care went into the making of the record. The audiophiles in the crowd really appreciate that.

The new record is going to go even further with the sound quality. We wanted to take each song and figure out the character and what sound it would take. It's a more stripped down recording; we wanted it to be as clear as possible.

Does the excitement of having so many guitars and amplifiers at your disposal make the creative process easier or more difficult?

On Paramour I used quite a few different amplifiers and a stack of guitars. This time, I streamlined the process a lot. We've gone a little overboard in the past, but now we know what we want and how to get the end result. It's always a learning process.

When the tour is over, how much do you listen to music during your free time?

My two year old daughter takes up a lot of my time, but she loves rock music. Anything with a good beat will get her up dancing and singing. I was surprised that a two year old would be so intrigued with music; she definitely has her favorites already.



Recording Studio at Paramour

So you are taking advantage of that and brainwashing her early: "Miley Cyrus bad, Papa Roach good?"

(Laughs) Definitely!

Has having a great system in your home pushed you further in the recording studio now that it's so much easier to hear the end result?

It has had a huge impact. Before, we were more focused on energy and emotion. While that's still a big factor in our music, now we have made the sound quality just as important.

Keep your eyes peeled for the new Papa Roach album, *Metamorphosis*, due out sometime this fall – with, we hope, some copies on vinyl. ●

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 handy button under the album art and it will take you directly to the Acoustic Sounds website.



Dead Can Dance

The Dead Can Dance Collection

4AD Records, SACD (mastered by MoFi)

If you are a fan of Dead Can Dance but were not fortunate enough to buy these albums on vinyl the first time around, this new SACD set gets extremely close to the analog feel of the originals with improvements in dynamics and weight. With this format making a mini-comeback, this box set is a real treat to those of us still carrying the torch for SACD.

I own the DCD catalog on CD and the sound quality is fair but not outstanding, with some overall compression and a slightly harsh top end. The LP's that I've heard are very dreamy, with a silky smooth high end, but compromised in dynamic range. DCD takes advantage of so much synth bass in their sound, that it's hard to get it all in the vinyl groove.

A direct comparison to the two titles I do possess on LP, (*Dead Can Dance* and *Into the Labyrinth*) puts the SACD's ahead of the game in my book. Many of us on the staff use "Yulunga(Spirit Dance)" from *Into the Labyrinth* as a reference track and the bass lines on the LP are vibrant, but the SACD shakes the room, with the overall sound stage much wider and deeper. If you thought this was a great disc to show off your system before, the SACD takes it to another level.

If you are not a mega fan of Dead Can Dance, these eight SACD's are available separately, so you can purchase your favorites. However, the box set is the only way to get the bonus EP *Garden of the Arcane Delights*. All of the discs are packaged in the Japanese Mini-LP style, with excellent printing quality. A booklet featuring album credits and song lyrics is also enclosed with each title, but get out your reading glasses.

Limited to 1500 copies, the box set is already out of print, but it is still on the shelf at most of your favorite audiophile record outlets.

Kansas*Leftoverture*

Speakers Corner, LP

Guilty pleasure time.

Released in October of 1976, *Leftoverture* was the album that finally catapulted Kansas (then billed as a prog band) to superstardom. Typical of many bands of this era, creative disagreements started to gnaw away at the band shortly after the record that made them famous was released. Though the hit "Carry On My Wayward Son" only reached number 11 on the Billboard pop chart, the album made it to number five and stayed on the charts for 42 weeks.

The album's artwork is reprinted in amazing detail, right down to an exact copy of the original Kirshner label. The recording quality is outstanding, compared to the original, which is very compressed along with a very crunchy upper register. Kansas never sounded this good in the 70's, so if this was one of your favorites, pick up a copy of this Speakers Corner release and take a trip down memory lane.

**Dick Hyman***Thinking About Bix*

Reference Recordings, CD

Though Bix Beiderbecke had a fairly short career in the world of jazz, this tribute to his work is spectacular. If you are a lover of solo piano performances, looking for another great demo disc, the latest release from Reference Recordings will put a smile on your face. Mr. Hyman has had a very prolific career spanning the last fifty years. In case his name doesn't ring a bell, he was the composer/arranger/conductor and pianist for quite a few of Woody Allen's films.

"Prof" Keith Johnson at Skywalker Sound recorded this disc at Skywalker Sound, with the HDCD process and his usual cache of custom goodies. If you've ever waffled on the validity of the HDCD process, this one will convince you. I've yet to hear a piano recording sound this lifelike on my Naim 555.

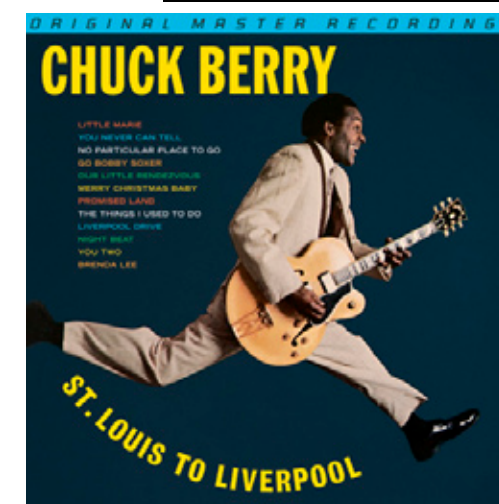
Thinking About Bix is an audiophile treat because it combines stellar sonics with a soulful performance. Put this one on your short list.



HIGH-DEFINITION MUSIC, HAND-SELECTED FOR YOUR PERSONAL TASTE.

Don't have time to browse the MusicGiants online HD music store? Introducing our exclusive Music Concierge Collections that deliver all of your favorite artists conveniently and in the highest sound quality available. Choose from a variety of collections that have been hand-selected and are delivered on a hard drive for easy plug-and-play. Visit www.MusicGiants.com for more details.

 **MUSICGIANTS**TM
High Definition Entertainment



Chuck Berry

Berry Is On Top/St. Louis To Liverpool
MoFi, 24kt CD

Though Chuck Berry is one of the architects of Rock and Roll, I never really grooved on his music because the recordings were usually pretty awful. Mastering engineer Shawn Britton at Mobile Fidelity spent almost two years, splicing together tracks from *fifteen* separate reels of analog tapes to put together the dual album CD here. "Yeah, that was a bitch!" Britton remarked on my recent visit to Mobile Fidelity, (watch for the interview in our next issue) when we discussed this project. This two-album set is full of the classics that made Berry famous and inspired numerous covers from The Beatles to REO Speedwagon.

It's to Britton's credit that he handled these songs with such good taste. He retained the raw sound, with Berry's vocals crackling on a few tracks, yet cleaned everything else up. The low noise floor and clarity that was recovered from these old master tapes makes this disc a winner. My favorite track is the instrumental "O'Rangutang". Whether you are a long time fan or new convert, I guarantee you will enjoy this slice of Rock and Roll history.



ZZ Top

Fandango!

Tres Hombres

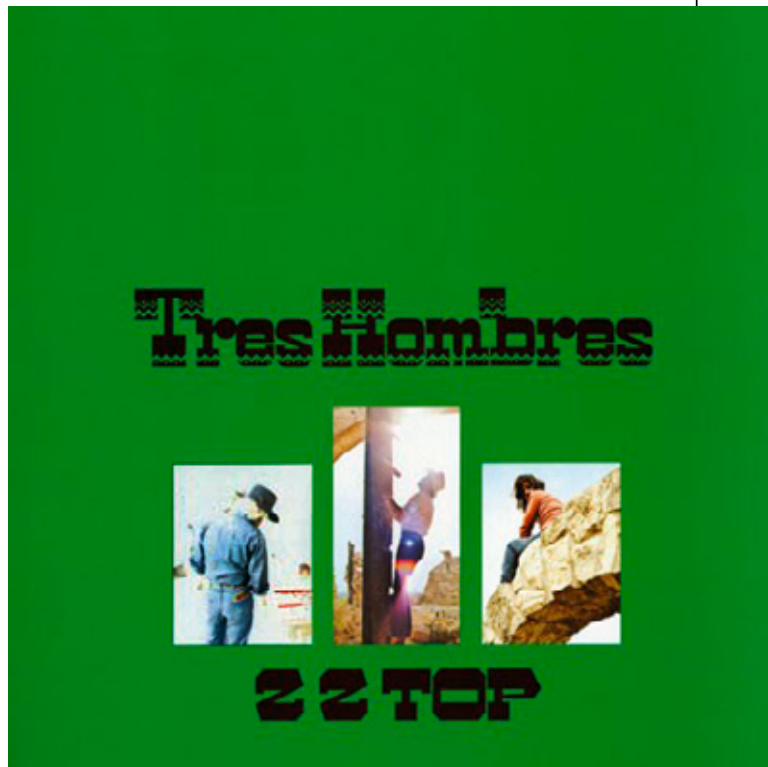
Warner Brothers, LP

As much as I would like to feign hipness and claim BB King introduced me to the blues, it was really ZZ Top. When I stumbled onto *Fandango!* and *Tres Hombres* at a good friend's house in 1975, I was hooked on their mixture of Texas blues and hard rock.

Call me a purist, but *Tres Hombres* and *Fandango!* will always be the quintessential ZZ Top albums, with their first hits "La Grange" and "Tush". If you want to hear this band at its best, these two albums are a must for your collection. The pressings are very quiet and all of the dynamic range is intact. Billy Gibbons' guitar is out front, loud and growling the way it should be and Dusty Hill's bass riffs punch you in the chest.

The live side of the remastered *Fandango!* remains compressed, but it sounds much better than on my original copy. I suspect the live recording was not produced under the best conditions and I'm sure mastering engineers Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman did everything they could to resurrect this recording. On the original, the studio side is almost as heavily compressed but with the remastered version it is able to come to life. *Tres Hombres* rocks out from start to finish and offers a huge jump in sonic quality from the one sitting on my shelf that was purchased in 1976. This has become one of my favorite audiophile records to crank up my system with.

ZZ Top is currently in the studio with Rick Rubin working on a new album to "get back to the sound of *Tres Hombres*". I'm hoping that they can recapture some of this magic because ZZ Top didn't always fly around in space shuttles.



Review the Reviews...

"... excellent compared to anything that I have encountered at any price... the beginning of a new era in audio."

Robert E. Greene - *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 183

"I haven't found a product so instantly and confidence-inspiring in years."

Ken Kessler - *Hifi News*, July 2008

"Thanks to all those inputs, the DAC1 Pre is a digital source lover's dream come true."

Jeff Dorgay - *ToneAudio Review*, 2008

Read all reviews at www.DAC1PRE.com

...Experience the Experience

Experience the DAC1 PRE with a 30 Day In Home Trial*. Order yours at: www.DAC1PRE.com



*30 Day In Home Trial available in US only. Visit website for details.

DAC1 PRE

Stereo Pre-Amplifier / DAC / Headphone Amp

www.benchmarkmedia.com 800-262-4675

Benchmark
...the measure of excellence!™



The Byrds

The Byrds Greatest Hits
Speakers Corner, LP

A greatest hits collection is usually a mixed bag from an audiophile standpoint, because it is usually just thrown together from whatever master tapes are the easiest to find. My original copy of this record is a mid run pressing from the early 70's possessing a dreadfully compressed sound that confirms my theory.

Rapidly becoming a force to be reckoned with in the world of audiophile remastering, Speakers Corner did an excellent job on this record, from the extremely quiet surfaces to the high quality of the printing on the jacket. Originally released in stereo and mono versions, this one is the stereo version. All of the classics are here from their first four albums, "Mr. Tambourine Man", "I'll Feel A Whole Lot Better", "Turn!, Turn!, Turn!" and more. While it is still a compilation, it will give you a decent overall feel for the Byrds, regardless of whether you'd just like a fresh copy for your collection or a new vinyl collector dipping their foot into the pool. ●

Jenni Potts

Is Doing Just Fine, Thank You

By Marc Phillips Photos by Jeff Dorgay

Jenni Potts is experienced beyond her 21 years. This singer-songwriter from Bellingham, Washington has just released her first full-length CD, *Take This and Go* on ClickPop Records, and it's marked by raw and emotionally harrowing songs with themes including abortion, betrayal, abandonment, and even her recent miscarriage. While this may sound relentlessly downbeat, her songs are also ethereal, and filled with energy and hope.



In person, Potts is surprisingly upbeat and sunny, a free spirit who likes to wear fairy wings on stage. I had the opportunity to speak with her by phone, and I was won over by both her intelligence and her willingness to discuss some very difficult subjects.

The mood on Take This and Go is at times downbeat and somber, reflecting someone who's been through a lot of hardship; yet your live performance reflects a great sense of humor. Was the album a result of something you had to get out of your system?

Most of the songs on the album were written in the studio during the one of the most painful times in my life. My music usually reflects my feelings, not opinions. I'm a very emotional person, and the album reflects my going through a lot of shit for a while.

I chose the title *Take This and Go* because I think it's really important to acknowledge pain, that it exists. A lot of the songs have a hint of hope, that there's a new beginning. You have to take this pain, learn something and go on and live your life. I've cut loose from the pain of that period now and my newer songs are more comforting, almost fairy-tale like. I have a childlike side and I act like a child a lot. I believe in hope and I'm determined to live again.

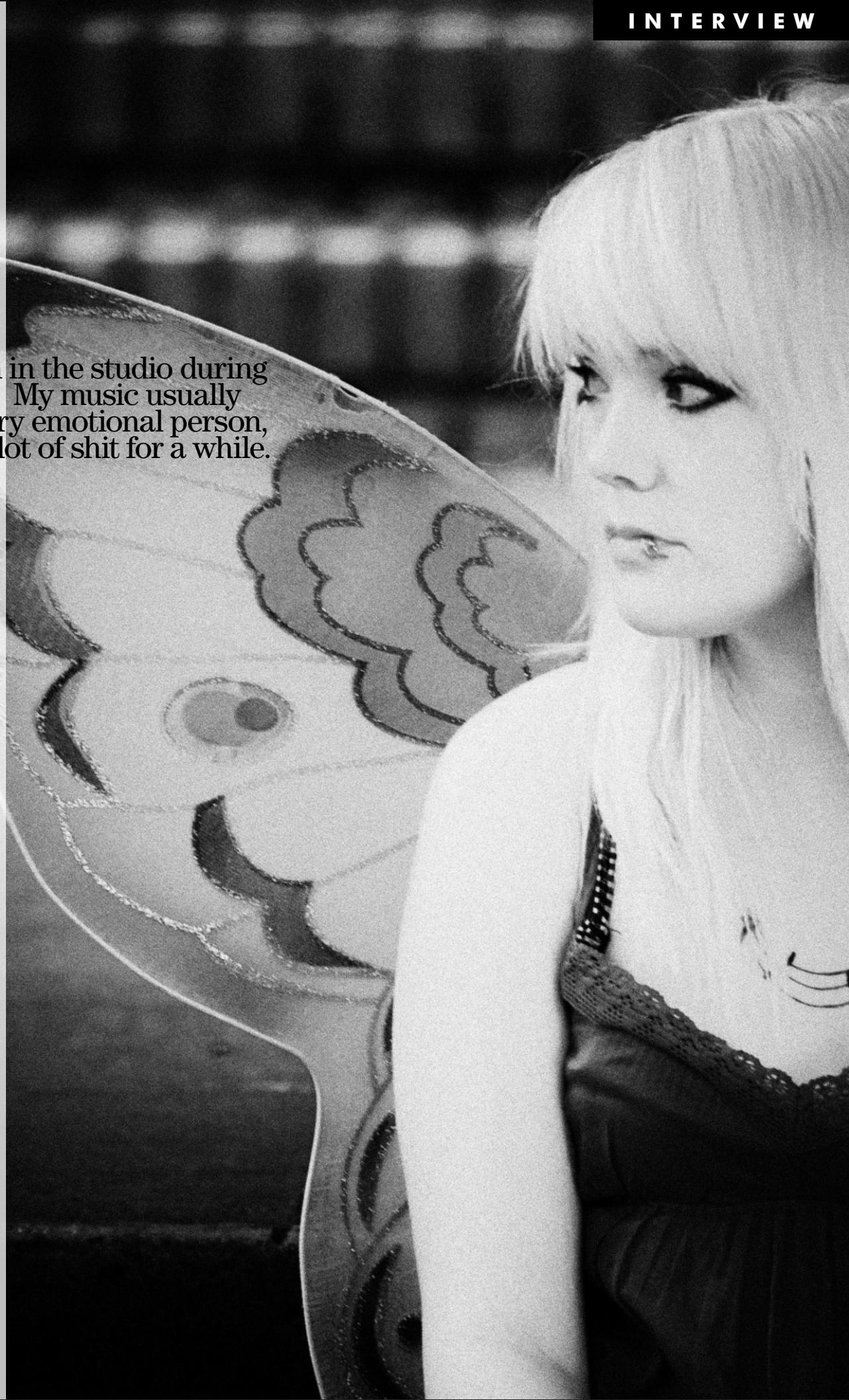
I don't think I'll ever write songs that dark or depressing again, because I hate major chords!

After listening to the album, I was worried about you. Are you sure you're OK?

[Laughs] No, I'm doing really, really well now! I believe that the lower you are, the higher you can go. Let's just say I've made some really bad decisions in the past trying to get love and affection, and that there were consequences. I need to really stay in touch with those feelings, though, because I don't think anyone should ever forget what they've experienced.

The centerpiece of your album is certainly "The Fourth," which is a direct confrontation with some of the aforementioned hardships. When you sing, "And I believe what you said when you were lying on top of me," that's such a powerful lyric...how did it feel to put that into a song? Did you know what an effect it would have on people, especially men?

Awww...that wasn't my intention! I wrote that song in my apartment when I was 19. I was living with a guy, got pregnant, miscarried and then he left. I was close to shock when I wrote that and I remember asking myself, "What's going on, how did I get here?" That guy contacted me again after hearing the song on MySpace, and it really hurt him. He said it hit him so hard he almost cried.
(continued)





I was reminded of the bitterness and anger in Alanis Morissette's "You Oughta Know," the way your belief system takes a hit for the first time.

I think when you're angry, you really detach yourself from what happened, and you become a victim. It doesn't get you anywhere.

Your album is full of dynamic shifts. Just when you're lulled into a dreamy state, you switch gears with a wall of sound. This is done to great effect in "Last Night." Is this balancing act part of what is inside of you as a performer, or can we expect a future Jenni Potts album that rocks from beginning to end?

I think in the future, I may just jump on the electronic bandwagon. I've been recording a lot of music on my computer, beats and stuff, and I've discovered that my voice is really appropriate to that kind of music.

I'd love to be in an instrumental band and just rock out, but as far as me singing that kind of music...I don't think I can. Oh, maybe I will. I don't know! There's so much I'd like to explore. But in "Last Night," it's just about me morphing into a different person, angry and self-destructive, and then going back to my normal self and dealing with the feelings.

One of the signatures of your singing voice is that rising wail, which we first hear on the second verse of "Pro LC," the first song on the album. The first time I heard it, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. What type of response do you get from audiences when you hit those notes live? How do you feel when you do it?

Well, if I'm in a bar and everyone's drunk, they're just kind of like, "YEAH!" [Laughs] When I play songs I'm usually just calm and a little sad, but every audience is different, and I feed off that. But if I'm in a "YEAH" kind of mood it makes me very happy.

When I sing like that, I'm really just making myself vulnerable by expressing some sort of desperation, and it's a little bit like making love. You're just putting yourself out there, and everyone's watching you. But every crowd I play to is really receptive to it, and I get really good feedback, so it feels great.

Finally, I need to know what "Pro LC" is about. It reads like a goth song, but the way you sing it is deceptively soothing. It seems more like a poem and less about your feelings.

That's because it doesn't have that much to do with me. It has rather disturbing lyrics, but it sounds really pretty. There are three different voices in it. The first is a doctor, the second is the voice of desire and the third is an overwhelming feeling of shock and guilt. It's a song about abortion. "Pro LC" actually stands for pro-life, or pro-choice.

I've always hated those terms because it takes a very serious thing and turns it into an "opinion." I totally understand both sides. This song goes beneath all of that. I think that when you discuss it too much, you really desensitize yourself to what it really is. I had a miscarriage, and that was really, really hard, but I've always felt this way about abortion, even when I was a little kid. I'm not trying to make a statement one way or another; it's just an opinion that's based entirely on feeling.

I don't want people to think about me when they listen to my music, even though I do talk about myself a lot. I want them to put themselves into it. ●

Current Releases

By Marc Phillips & Jeff Dorgay

Inara George with Van Dyke Parks

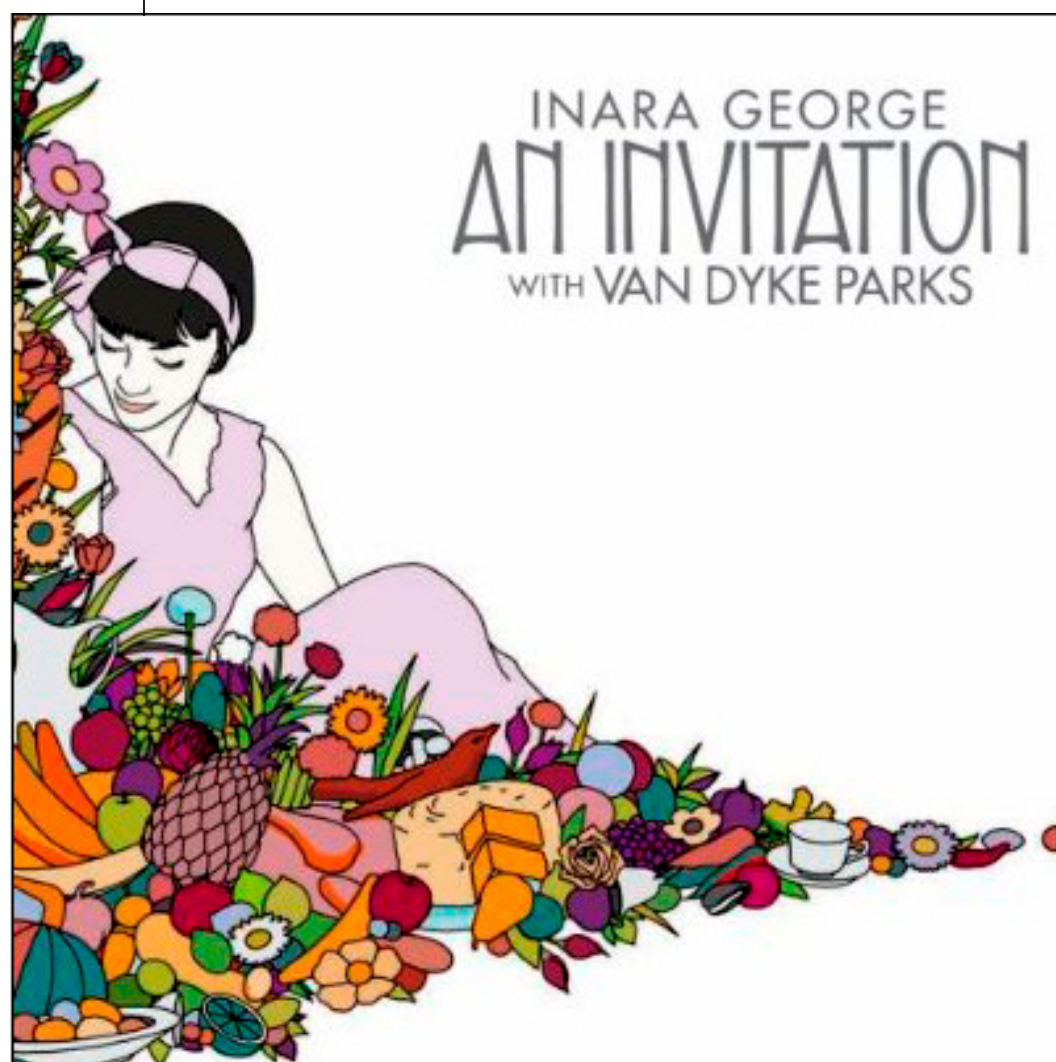
An Invitation

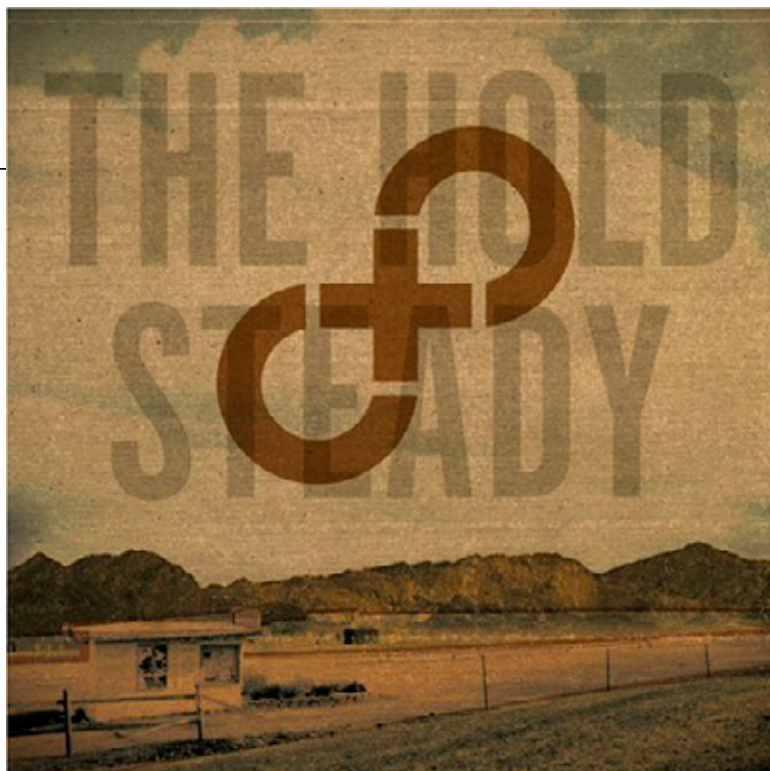
EverLoving, CD

If you loved Van Dyke Parks' light-footed and almost whimsical orchestral arrangements on Joanna Newsom's *Ys*, yet felt a little put off by the singer's propensity for sounding like Lisa Simpson, then Inara George's *An Invitation* might be more to your liking. Inara, the vocalist for The Bird and the Bee, and the daughter of Lowell George, combines a matter-of-fact delivery that may remind you of Suzanne Vega one moment, and some forgotten torch singer from the '50s the next.

Parks' work with George is similar to what he offered Newsom, with his "symphonic fantasy" remaining playful and optimistic throughout. It's the perfect counterpart to George's lyrics, which are dry and funny and more than a little sexy. On "Right as Wrong," she sings "Want to be a kite/And fly above your house/And then drop down into your room" in a way that would make any healthy heterosexual male say, "Here's the address!" On "Bomb," Parks plays a distinctly Gallic accordion that makes it seem as if George is translating Amelie Poulain's secret diary into English.

George and Parks work so well together on this album that it's surprising that this is their first collaboration. George, who is 34, is no wide-eyed newcomer to the music scene; she's worked with Merrick, Bryony Atkinson, Idlewild, Rod Jones and the aforementioned B&TB. After this, I can almost imagine Parks shopping his resume out to every wistful and ruthlessly hip female vocalist in the industry, especially since this is just as inspired as *Ys*. All *An Invitation* needs to be perfect, in fact, is some of Newsom's harp. — **Marc Phillips**





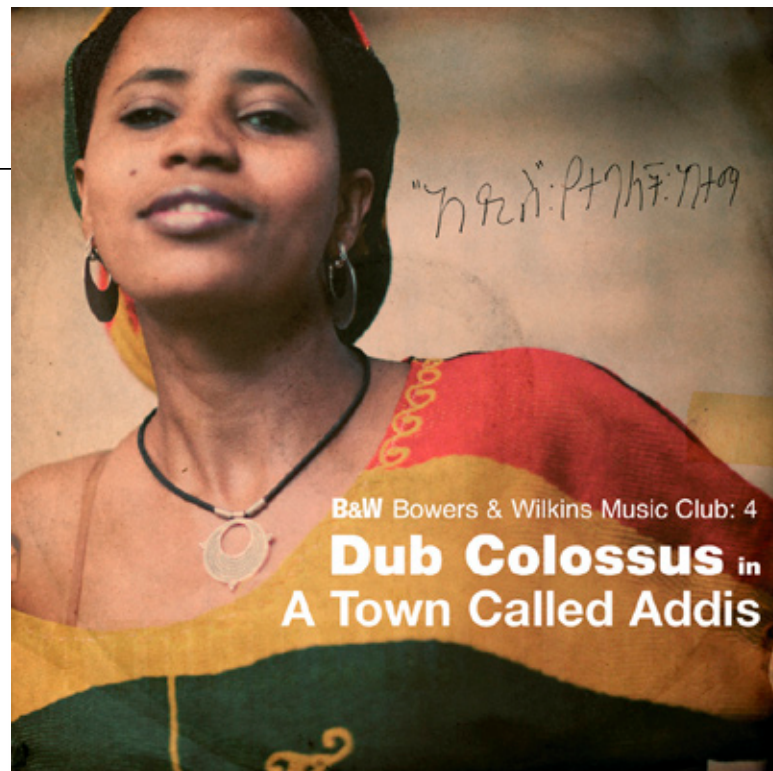
The Hold Steady

Stay Positive
Vagrant, CD

Just when you thought arena rock and indie rock were mutually exclusive musical genres, The Hold Steady comes out with this album full of Roy Bittan-esque piano riffs, GIANT drumming à la Kenny Aronoff and anthemic choruses sung by four or five angry-sounding guys. If lead vocalist Craig Finn didn't sound like a bastard child borne of Bob Mould and Paul Westerberg, *Stay Positive* would sound like the best mainstream rock album of 1986.

Finn and his cohorts are purposely trying to make the kind of music that no one is making anymore. Inspired by a group viewing of *The Last Waltz*, this Brooklyn-based band isn't just recycling the expansive sound of the bigger acts of the '70s and '80s. First, the lyrics are more sophisticated than "Baby, we were born to run," even though the familiar themes of faith and lost love are present. In "Sequestered in Memphis," the album's first single, Finn sings to a detective that, "in barlight, she looked all right/In daylight she looked desperate/That's all right, I was desperate too...I'm getting pretty sick of this interview." These passing references to crime and punishment are less about bleak futures in nowhere towns and more about escaping from checkered pasts.

While the guitar solos and pounding keyboards will certainly seem familiar to anyone over the age of 30, the band isn't above throwing listeners for a loop with something unexpected. A harpsichord, for instance, propels the melody of "One for the Cutters," the album's strongest cut, and an '80s "New Wave" synthesizer performs a similar duty on "Navy Sheets." On the country-tinged "Both Crosses," a banjo and theremin are buried deep into the mix, adding to the feeling of doom. This music, however, is less about originality and more about commitment, and ultimately about making music that somebody should still be making, but isn't. The Hold Steady are plugging that hole admirably. — **Marc Phillips**



Dub Colossus

In A Town Called Addis
B&W Music Club Download, Bonus EP/CD

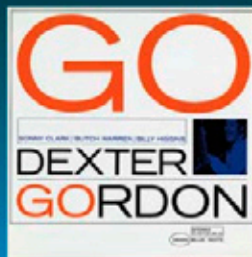
Dub Colossus is a collaboration between Count Dubula (aka Nick Page; Transglobal Underground, Temple of Sound) and a group of Ethiopian musicians who "started in a breeze block hut with a corrugated iron roof." At the beginning of 2008, these musicians were brought back to Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios in England to produce this disc, as well as a four-song EP that has two additional tracks not on the Music Club download, and two alternate mixes of songs presented here. I highly recommend both.

This record combines quite a few styles; easily transitioning from the classic Ethiopian style to reggae, dub and jazz, adding some incredibly cool beats and ambient sounds, with a quite a few interesting stops along the way. After careful listening to the huge, textural soundscapes on this recording, you might swear Brian Eno was hiding in the sound booth somewhere. Skip "Little Axe" Mc Donald (B&Ws' second Music Club release) contributes some great guitar work and adds to the diversity of the mix.

So often, music labeled as "world music" tends to fall in a pretty monotonous groove after a song or two and is easily pushed to the background. *In A Town Called Addis* is the most engaging record of this genre that I've heard; it combines extremely interesting music that appeals to the music lover side of my brain with a fantastic recording that keeps the audiophile side intrigued, too. — **Jeff Dorgay**

BLUE NOTE REISSUES

CUT AT 45 RPM • THE ULTIMATE LP REISSUE



Weezer

Weezer
DGC/Interscope, LP & CD

I'd buy this album even if I hated Weezer, because it's pressed on red vinyl and I love the fact that these guys are able to get away with a third album that is just named *Weezer*. Chicago Transit Authority, eat your heart out.

For the uninitiated, the previous self-titled Weezer albums came pressed on green and blue vinyl and were known by fans as "the green album" and "the blue album," respectively. They punctuate Weezer's discography like commas, separating the three distinct phases of their career.

The distinctive sound of layered guitars and quirky vocals may sound somewhat similar to previous Weezer albums but what really separates the red album from the blue and green is the fact that all the band members sing on this record. This gives more depth to the vocal tracks, but there is no more depth to the *songwriting*, and that's what keeps these guys so adorable. Buy the LP if you want the coolness factor of a record, but it doesn't sound much better than an iTunes download. If you don't need to be tragically hip, the CD will be just fine.

— Jeff Dorgay

Now reissuing 25 cherry-picked titles!

to be released throughout 2008

Become a Series Subscriber — call for details.

1-800-716-3553 • www.acousticsounds.com

ACOUSTIC SOUNDS INC.



TK Webb and the Visions

Ancestor

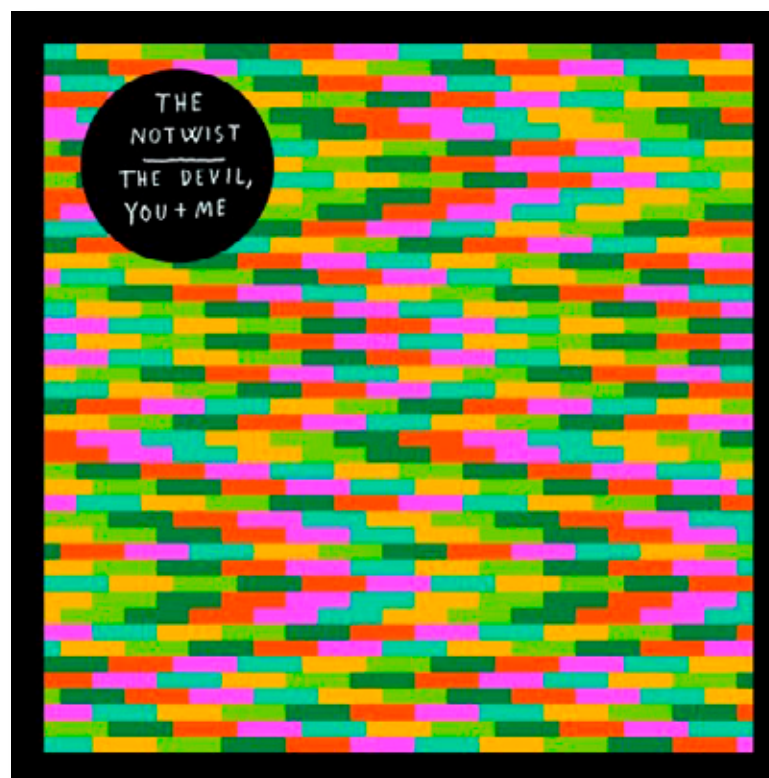
Kemado Records, CD and LP

On September 4, TK Webb and the Visions will be kicking off an 18-date tour starting in New York and ending back in the Apple on October 24. As the saying goes, “Be there or be square.” Thomas Kelly Webb, who’s originally from Kansas City, has put together an album that maintains the level of excellence from his last album, *Phantom Parade*. And that one got four stars from *Rolling Stone*.

While his MySpace page describes the band as Psychedelic/Folk, there’s precious little folk on *Ancestor*. The first two cuts have more of a Southern rock groove, feeling like an updated mix of Skynyrd and The Black Crowes. But the album takes a giant step down the psychedelic path on the third cut, “God Bless the Little Angels,” while the following track, “Closed Caption Slang,” feels like it could be an outtake from Black Sabbath’s *Paranoid*. And that still leaves seven tracks. The folkiness pops in and out on a couple of those cuts, but don’t get too comfy. The minute you think this record is going to slow down, the next track pushes the intensity right back up.

Bottom line: *Ancestor* is a killer rock record.

– Jeff Dorgay



The Notwist

The Devil, You + Me

Domino, CD

The Notwist’s last album, *Neon Golden*, was my favorite album of 2002. While I’m not necessarily a big fan of indie rock that relies on excessive sampling and sound effects to provide a false sense of complexity, I felt that this German band made compelling music by coming up with absolutely gorgeous chord progressions that instantly nestled into the nooks and crannies of my brain. The Notwist was more than a dub or electronica band—it was fragility and humanity surrounded by a cold robotic landscape.

It seems strange that it’s taken six years for the Notwist to come up with a follow-up, but *The Devil, You + Me* makes that temporal gap seem much smaller. Markus Acher’s vocals are still wan and deliberate, and his lyrics precise and slightly cryptic in a simplistic way, suggesting that English is still his second language. Lines like “Where in the world could I go but to the plane/Where in the world could I go but to the speeding train” (from “Where In This World”) won’t win any poetry competitions, but Acher’s Teutonic delivery adds another dimension, as if he was a polite yet troubled tourist finding himself lost once again in a truly strange land.

The Devil, You + Me isn’t quite as startling and unique as its predecessor, and is less satisfied with being melodic and starkly beautiful. The opening cut, “Good Lies,” is almost ordinary in its arrangement, with the band sticking to guitars, bass and drums (in many ways, it’s reminiscent of New Order’s “Love Vigilantes” in its stubborn refusal to use synthesizers in at least one song on the album, “Dammit”). But as the album progresses, those nooks and crannies get tickled once again. In fact, one way in which this album actually surpasses *Neon Golden* is with its decision not to use scratches, pops and noisy drones throughout the soundtrack. In addition, *TDY+M* resists the urge to whimper to an ambient-minded conclusion, staying strong and confident to the very end. – Marc Phillips

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

©2005 VACOM INTERNATIONAL INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



VH1 SAVE THE MUSIC FOUNDATION

HAS DONATED \$30 MILLION WORTH OF NEW MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS TO NEARLY
1,200 SCHOOLS IN 80 CITIES, BUT WE'RE NOWHERE NEAR DONE.

TO LEARN WHAT YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT THE FOUNDATION,
PLEASE VISIT US AT VH1SAVETHEMUSIC.COM.



Chairlift

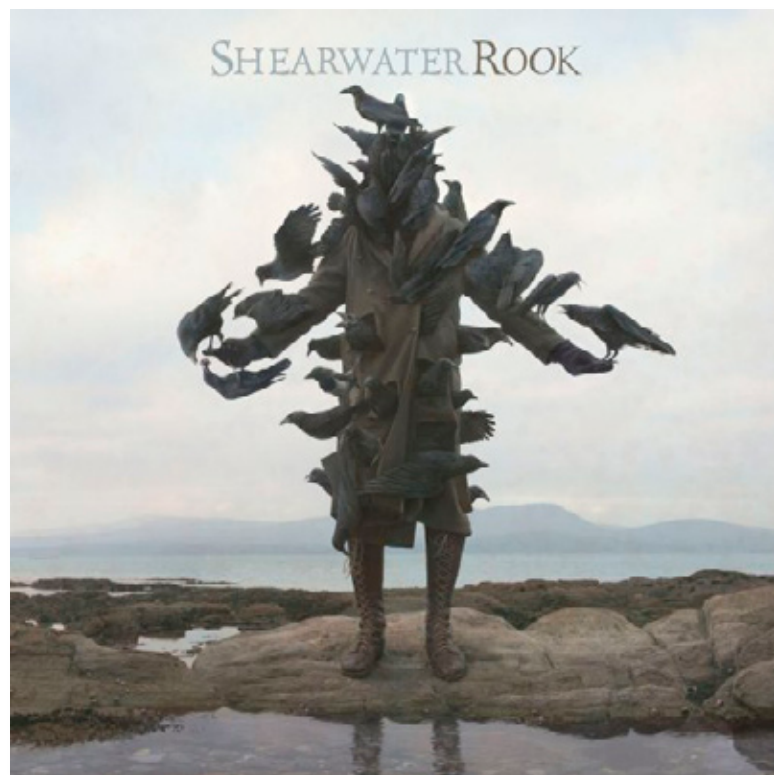
Does You Inspire You
Kanine Records, CD

The minute I heard "Earwig Town," Chairlift zoomed to the top of my personal pop chart for the year. It's easy to start grooving on the rolling melody, but then the lyrics hit you on the head: "They burrow in your left ear, lay their eggs and crawl out the right." Creepy but cool, in a *Twin Peaks* kind of way.

Defying description, lead singer Carolyn Polachek refers to the band as "25th Century Folktronica." With a huge vocabulary of sounds, from twangy country-esque guitars through some of the best synth lines I've heard since the '80s, Chairlift paints a deep soundscape that matches its quirky and clever lyrics. This is a very talented group that I hope will not stay in the shadows for very long.

Though the actual CD will not be on the shelves until mid-September, you can buy downloads from iTunes or Amazon.com, with Amazon being a better deal, offering the whole album for \$8.99. (And higher quality MP3's at 256kb/sec, with iTunes only available as 128kb/sec.)

— Jeff Dorgay



Shearwater

Rook

Matador Records, CD

Shearwater was created almost a decade ago by Okkervil River members Jonathan Meiburg and Will Sheff as an outlet for their more quiet and reflective songs. *Rook*, their fifth album, certainly leans toward the melancholy, but it's never less than completely engaging and dynamic. Aided by several multi-instrumentalists, including Meiburg's ex-wife Kim Burke, Howard Draper and Thor Harris, Shearwater is one of those bands that can introduce a glockenspiel, vibraphone or a hammer dulcimer into the mix without seeming precious or gimmicky.

Full of tiny, thrilling little flourishes, *Rook* may surprise you with its confidence, as well as Meiburg's ability to write one complex, demanding and beautiful song after another. "Rooks," for example, is as poised and accomplished as adult alternative music gets these days, with its regretful and plaintive guitar line propelling the melody with a sense of desperation and longing. "Home Life" is even more ambitious, with a full string arrangement slowly evolving into a quiet coda that will remind you of a gamelan with its deep and measured wood chimes.

Meiburg produced the album, and, from an audiophile standpoint, the sound quality is absolutely superb. The percussion on "Home Life" is unusually deep and natural and will resonate well beneath the floorboards of your listening room. Nearly every song features a wealth of instrumentation, and you will be able to hear each musician shine. While Meiburg's voice can occasionally venture into the baroque, as the music grows more haunting, he's certainly more mannered and less affected than he is when playing with Okkervil River. In a year in which we've heard strong, engaging modern folk from artists such as Bonnie "Prince" Billy, Fleet Foxes and Jakob Dylan, *Rook* stands out as one of the best recordings yet. — **Marc Phillips**

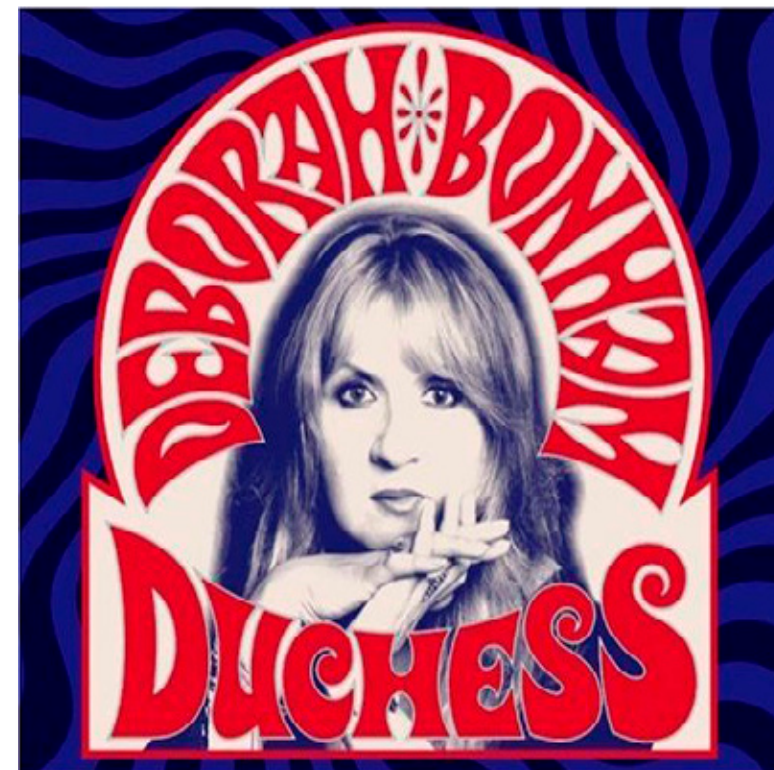
Deborah Bonham

Duchess

ATCO, CD

Deborah Bonham, who sounded like Stevie Nicks on her last album, *This Old Hyde*, has added more than a few heaping tablespoons of Janis Joplin to the mix on *Duchess*. And, where the last record was polished and relaxed, *Duchess* is full of power, grit and emotion. If you didn't hear the vocals on the first track, "Grace," you might even mistake it for a bonus track on a remastered Bad Company album. Speaking of which: On track four, "Hold On," Paul Rodgers makes a guest appearance and blends things together nicely. Also hanging out with the duchess: Robbie Blunt (Robert Plant), and Dick Parry (Pink Floyd).

Make no mistake, though; Bonham isn't riding on anyone's coattails. And speaking of riding, hang on tight: This album includes only a couple of slower tunes. Everything else is full throttle, with Bonham's powerful, bluesy voice put to propulsively good use. *Duchess* is one to crank up and enjoy. — **Jeff Dorgay**





Engedarkvartetten

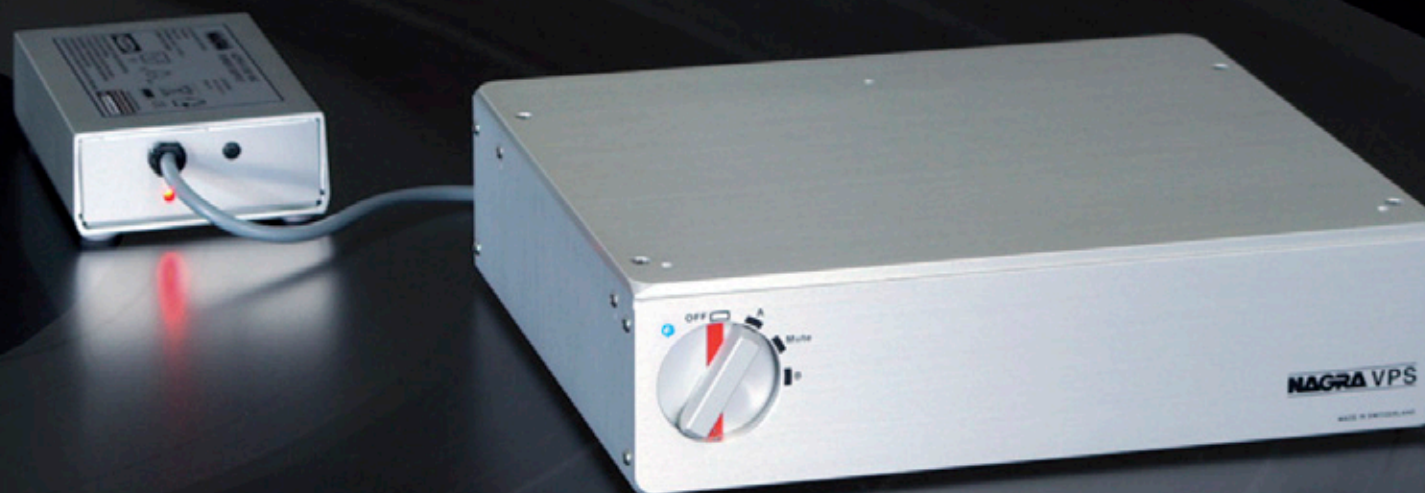
String Quartets— Haydn, Solberg, Grieg
2L, 2L-53, SACD/CD

This collection of three string quartets covers a fairly wide range of musical history, but the Norwegian Engedark quartet ably locates the harmonic bond that connects these works thematically. Starting with Haydn's String Quartet in D, op.76, no.5, violinist and leader Arvid Engedark establishes a tone that is both

minimalist and vibrant, with cellist Jan-Erik Gustafsson, violist Juliet Jopling and violinist Atle Sponberg contributing a measured warmth that is understated and precise in the quiet passages, and notably jubilant during peaks. Solberg's String Quartet in B Minor, composed in 1945, is surprisingly in accord with the Haydn piece, expressing only a minimum of dissonance that connects with some of the quiet desperation I hear in other Scandinavian composers such as Lars Erik Larsson. *(continued)*

Nagra VPS valve phono preamplifier

Discover the full potential of your LP's



- Modular, highly configurable input boards for optimal load-matching to any MC or MM cartridge
- Two selectable RIAA curves
- Selectable output level to facilitate system matching
- New, custom input transformers made by Nagra
- External power supply to ensure dead-quiet operation

NAGRA

The final piece, Grieg's String Quartet in G Minor, is played with an almost startling amount of drama and fury, providing a fitting climax to all three works.

The sound quality on this SACD/CD hybrid is nothing short of extraordinary, with a clean and quiet presentation that reminds me of some of the classic Opus 3 recordings from the '70s. The meticulous nature of this recording brings forth the natural qualities from the Engegardkvartetten, with plenty of woodiness from the bodies of the instruments mingling with the tension of the bows. Recorded at the Jar Church in Norway by Morten Lindberg and Hans Peter L'Orange, this performance also stresses the space between the musicians, with Gustaffson sounding particularly distinctive within the context of the quartet. I've been particularly fond of Scandinavian classical recordings in the past, and I look forward to future offerings from 2L.

— **Marc Phillips**



Matt Wertz

Under Summer Sun
Universal Republic CD

I dove head-first into the Nashville rock scene back in the '90s, when acts like Lambchop and Vic Chesnutt showed everyone that there was more to this city than the Grand Ol' Opry. Ten years later, the funky layer of street grime has been replaced with a modicum of spit and polish, resulting in a brighter, more optimistic musical countenance. Singer-songwriter Matt Wertz is emblematic of this new professionalism, with an earnest and almost joyful delivery that is sure to brighten your mood.

Wertz, who is originally from a small town in Missouri, has been performing for a few years now, getting his start in the Christian rock scene. Songs from his first three studio albums have graced both television shows and movies, and *Under Summer Sun*, his first release for the Universal Republic label, is mostly remixes from those first few releases, plus a handful of new songs.

While the "Christian rock" label may suggest a mainstream innocence that you may or may not find appealing, these songs seem to be both inspiring and secular. Not once did I hear "Praise the Lord," which is more than I can say for Sufjan Stevens, and I love that guy. The majority of songs here do speak of love and hope, yet in a romantic context (and NOT in the Faith + 1 mold, *South Park* fans). Wertz surrounds himself with a truly energetic band that matches his strong and clear singing style, and the recording sounds both intimate and dynamic, as if it was performed in one of those small clubs in downtown Nashville that I used to frequent back in 1998. This album makes me think of those days, and it makes me want to return as quickly as possible, if only to hunt for the next Lambchop. — **Marc Phillips**

RINGO STARR

And His All-Starr Band

July 20, 2008

Edgefield Concerts On The Lawn

Troutdale, Oregon By Michael J. Kilfoil

Ringo Starr and the tenth version of his All-Starr Band bounded onto the stage at Portland's Edgefield, wearing a wide smile and his trademark dark glasses. Starr turned 68 this year; that's startling, considering that many of us couldn't imagine reaching the age of 64 when that song on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, first suggested the idea to us back in 1967.

Any worries about the endless press of time quickly faded once the music got going. Former Beatle status aside, Ringo is an irresistible combination of charming rogue and journeyman musician. He can easily hold his own with a great band and have more fun doing it than anyone else. His shameless enthusiasm infected his bandmates as well as the sold-out crowd.

Ringo performed a satisfying selection of songs from his solo catalog, including "Act Naturally," "Photograph," "It Don't Come Easy," "Liverpool 8" (from his new album), and his stirring tribute to George Harrison, "Never Without You." Of course he found time for a few Beatles tunes, including the crowd favorite, "Yellow Submarine."

In between Ringo's sets, members of the All-Starr Band took turns playing two or three of their hits. Colin Hay from Men At Work sang "Who Can It Be Now" and "Down Under." Edgar Winter performed "Free Ride" and an explosive rendition of "Frankenstein." Billy Squier played "The Stroke" and "Lonely Is the Night." First-time All-Starr Gary Wright did "Dream Weaver" and "Love Is Alive." Hamish Stuart of Average White Band cranked up the funk with a great version of the R&B hit, "Pick Up the Pieces."

Radio-friendly hits are one thing, but where these all-stars really deliver is in their musicianship. The wide range of styles and musical genres represented here shouldn't blend together as well as they do. Undoubtedly, Ringo deserves credit for putting together this band in the first place. He also made up a third of the solid rhythm section, along with bass player Stuart and session drummer extraordinaire Gregg Bissonette. Other standouts were Winter's sparkling saxophone solos and Squier's fine lead guitar work.

After explaining that he doesn't do encores any more, Starr wrapped up the two hour-plus show with crowd-rousing versions of "With a Little Help from My Friends" and "Give Peace a Chance."



Strange Noize Tour 2008

August 5, 2008

Roseland Theater


Portland, Oregon

By Marc Phillips Photos by Jeff Dorgay

Tech N9ne, Kottonmouth Kings, Hed PE, Brother J and Prozak all hit the stage as part of Suburban Noize's second annual Strange Noize tour at the Roseland Theater in downtown Portland one evening in early August. Suburban Noize, a Burbank-based record label specializing in underground hip-hop, stages this tour to celebrate independent artists, and the common theme of the night was flipping the middle finger to the mainstream music industry by showing how indies could be successful by connecting directly with fans in a way that many mainstream labels do not.

While Portland is known more for its hippies than its rappers, the mostly-white audience did identify with the counterculture (read "weed smoking") agenda of the performers, and it was clear that the majority of the several hundred audience members were true fans of Suburban Noize and their artists. In fact, many in the crowd knew the words to most of the songs, especially those by veteran performers such as Hed PE, Kottonmouth Kings and Tech N9ne, who have all been on the scene since the mid-'90s.



A photograph of two men performing on stage. The man on the left, Brother J, is bald and wearing a black t-shirt with a graphic, a large chain, and a watch. He is holding a microphone to his mouth. The man on the right, Prozak, is wearing a black baseball cap and a black t-shirt with 'PROZAK' printed on it. He is also holding a microphone. The background is dark with some blue lighting and a sign that says 'PROZAK'.

Prozak and Brother J were first up, with impassioned, albeit conventional rap performances, winning over the audience with nothing more than wireless mics and a few thousand words. I'm familiar with Prozak, having met the Insane Clown Posse on a number of occasions (Mike Clark, aka Prozak, is ICP's producer). Brother J, the longtime front man of X Clan since the late '80s, carried himself with a calm intensity that comes from seeing hip-hop evolve over the years and still maintaining old-school values. Both of these acts were honest and simple, placing words and ideas over showmanship.

Prozak and Brother J

Hed PE

The vibe changed suddenly when **Hed PE**, a Huntington Beach-based rapcore band, played with a ferocious charisma that matched their feverish political vision (Bush, they say, is only a puppet, and the real dark forces on the planet are in the shadows that live behind your TV sets). For me, these guys were easily the highlight of the evening. Frontman Jahred Shane, his skeletal frame rendered even more ghostly through the use of whiteface, was able to shift gears on a moment's notice, switching between razor-quick rapping, primal screams and an occasionally serviceable singing voice. Backed by an actual band playing conventional instruments (bass, guitar and drums), Hed PE had an urgency and energy that reminded me of System of a Down at its most manic.



Kottonmouth Kings

The **Kottonmouth Kings** slowed the momentum somewhat with songs that were basically about two things—smoking weed, and then going out to find some more. (For these guys, “I smoke two joints before I smoke two joints, and then I smoke two more” are more than words to the Toyce’s song; they’re a personal mantra.) Okay, some of the songs were about waving your hands in the air like you just don’t care, but I’m wondering if it’s time that this whole “we don’t give a fuck” chant has played out, and it’s time for a new, clear voice of reason, a Public Enemy for the 21st century. It’s time for the smoke to clear, and for rap to be about something meaningful again. Chuck D was once quoted as saying that Public Enemy’s music was the CNN of the black community, but a bunch of white guys chanting, “Yo, where’s the weed at?” is pretty soft.





Tech N9ne, the self-proclaimed “biggest independent rapper in the whole motherfuckin’ world,” ended the night on a strong note with his amazing rapid-fire delivery and sophisticated stage act. Still, the ghost of Chuck D. emerged once more when I realized that I had no idea what he and his cohorts were rapping about. His skills as a verbalist were nothing less than astounding, and his heartfelt address to the audience at the end of the show revealed his passion. The impact tends to be distilled, however, when the only words I could make out during his “Tec-9” delivery are also “smoke” and “weed.”

Tech N9ne

Maybe I'm just getting old, since the youthful audience was nearly delirious by the end of the show. But the concept of "underground music" still means something to me, and I'm hoping the future is filled with more acts like Hed PE, and less with the professional bong suckers. Was I the only one who found it disturbing that while the Kottonmouth Kings were complimenting the crowd on the quality of Portland weed, the security forces moved through the crowd and confiscated all the contraband that was being lit up? Maybe the Kings were just running a little low on kush and needed to replenish. Then again, maybe it's time to start thinking about the future of hip-hop with a clearer head.



Frampton Shines On

PETER FRAMPTON

July 16, 2008

Esther Short Park

Vancouver, Washington

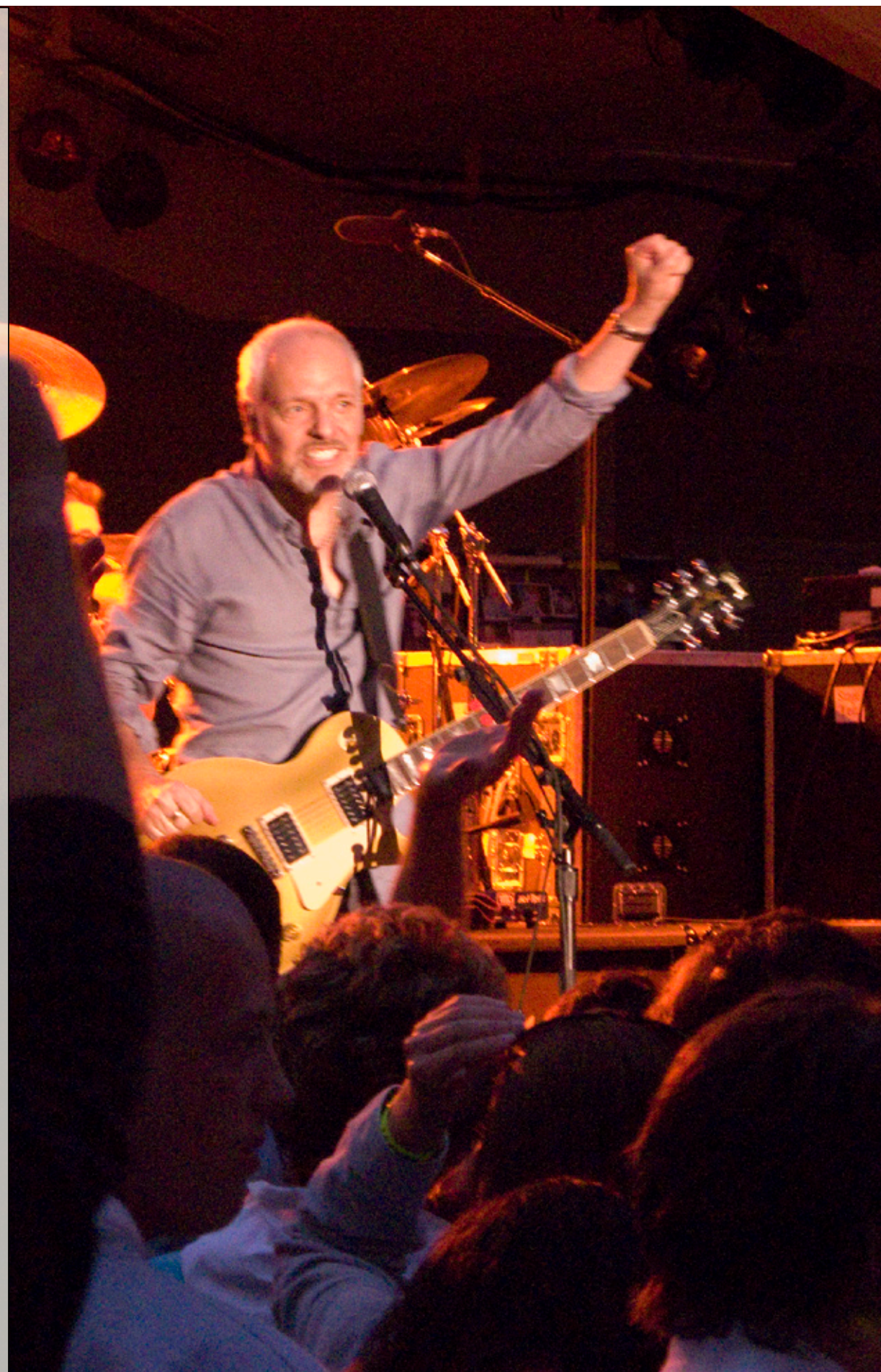
Text and photo by Jeff Dorgay

I hadn't seen Peter Frampton since the late 70's, when I photographed him on the original *Frampton Comes Alive* tour (working for Stardate Productions in Milwaukee, Wisconsin), when he was at the top of his game. When he walked out onto the Vancouver stage to a very enthusiastic audience and opened with a spirited version of "Shotgun," everyone was smiling.

After a quick run through "Signed, Sealed, Delivered," Frampton played "Lines On My Face" and I swear for the next hour it was 1976 all over again. Other than having less hair than he did back then, Frampton put on a blistering performance, never missing a note. While most of the set was made up of tunes from *Frampton Comes Alive*, he did a very cool instrumental version of "Black Hole Sun," with a few talkbox riffs thrown in for good measure, and two songs from his recent Grammy-winning instrumental album, *Fingerprints*.

Frampton's set came to an end way too soon after an hour and ten minutes, but he came back out for another instrumental, and then ripped through "While My Guitar Gently Weeps", with a level of intensity that truly did justice to the song.

But what made Peter Frampton such a cool cat was the tasteful way he went about doing his thing. No hair implants, wacky tattoos or theatrics; he let his talent do the talking.





Smooth As Silk

BOZ SCAGGS

August 17, 2008

Oregon Zoo Ampitheater

Portland, Oregon

Text and photo by Jeff Dorgay

It was a perfect evening in Portland. It was 70 degrees and slightly overcast as Boz Scaggs took the stage at 8:45 p.m. to a sold out zoo crowd of 3500 people. Though Boz is finishing an album of American Songbook standards, this tour was rumored to have more of an emphasis on his hits.

The fans were not disappointed. Opening with “Lowdown” and “Jojo”, Boz ran through the better portion of his most popular songs as well as offering up a very tasty rendition of The Crusaders’ “Street Life”, with backing vocalist Monet taking center stage on this one.

At first I thought his range had faded a bit, but the sound guys were to blame. When I was up front taking photos, he sounded great, but back in my seat he came across fairly weak; they had him buried in the mix.

Sound issues notwithstanding, Boz put on a great show and his band was fantastic. More than halfway through their tour, they showed no signs of wear and tear. The band members were all able to stretch out a bit, but no one got carried away with their solos. The few times that Boz stepped up for a short solo, he more than held his own.

Coming across as somewhat shy for someone who’s toured the world many times over, Boz Scaggs is a gracious host. You couldn’t ask for a better guy to spend an evening with.

Club Mix

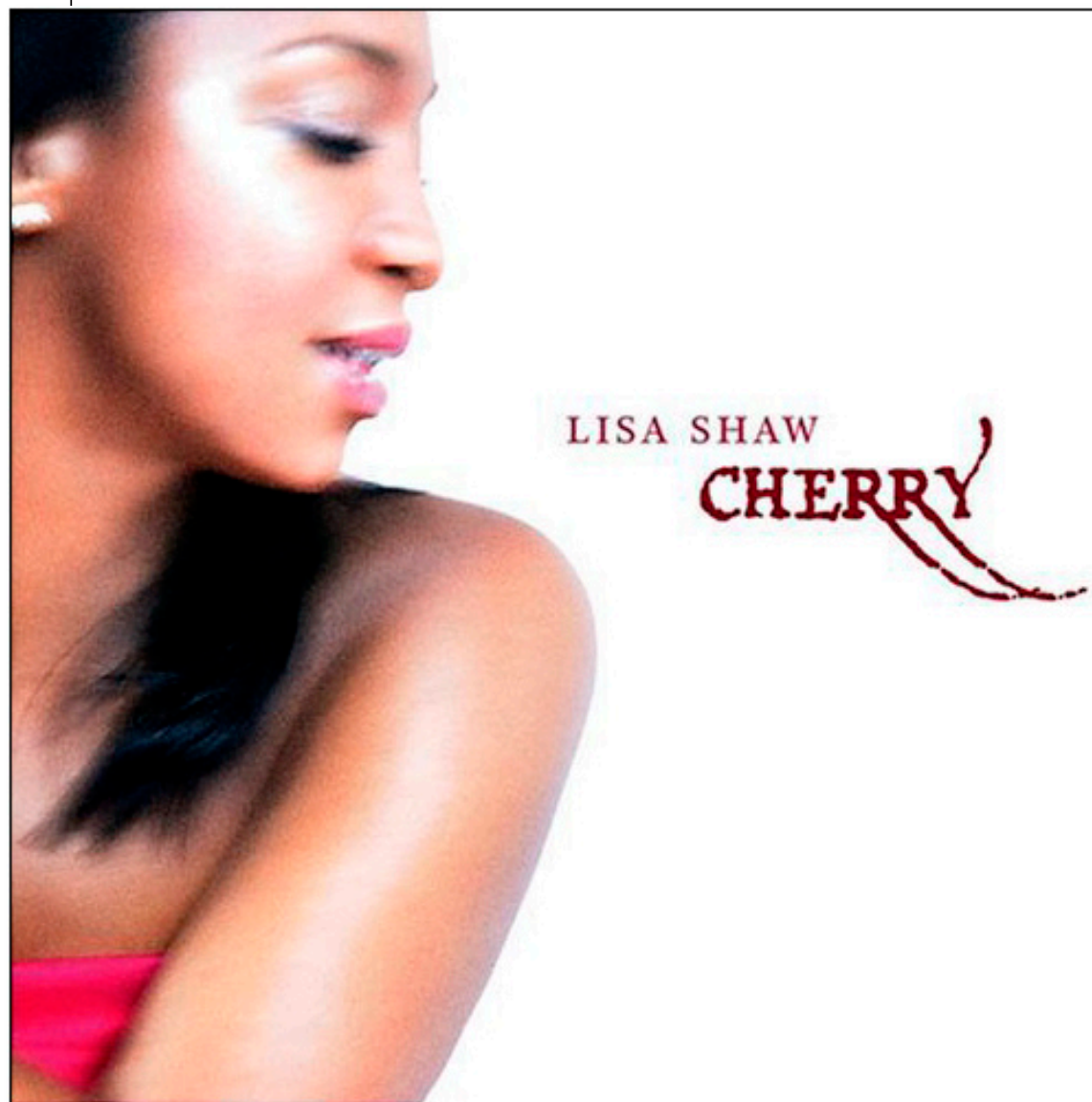
By Scott Tetzlaff

Ladies. Please.

I have been listening to a lot of female vocal tracks lately. There's something really cool about the range and clarity of a well-trained woman's voice. I'm not hating on the guys – you can do a lot with a guy's voice — poke them with a stick while singing or stretch the recording with a computer in post production to increase the range and intensity. But generally (and let me generalize wildly here) women have a much greater natural variety when it comes to vocalizations in the world of club music.

Even more so in the electronic realm; more often than not when a DJ is trying to evoke a particular emotion, more often than not they'll reach into their musical bag-of-tricks for a female voice. That's the beauty of the electronic world, with so many great performances to choose from, everything can be repurposed.

This issue I've been digging around in the crates a bit, sampling a wide range of styles – from husky voices, to lilting voices, to ladies just belting it out. Here are a few of my favorites, new and old.



Lisa Shaw

Cherry
Naked Music

There's a really good chance you've heard, and like Lisa Shaw, but just don't know it. Her vocals have appeared on many of the CD's published by the Naked Music label – including releases by Blue Six and Miguel Migs. Her "oh so smooth" R&B crooning is polished, relaxing and very distinctive. I'm sure this is what keeps her in demand on so many projects.

Her solo CD *Cherry* is an excellent showcase for her talents – with a little help from some her other Naked Music pals. Take a listen to the deep and sexy title track, the sing-song "Grown Apart", or the very smooth "Let it Ride", the disc has an Issac Hayes meets Donna Summer vibe all the way through.



Frou Frou

Details
MCA

You've probably heard Imogen Heap's breakout CD *Speak For Yourself* by now, but you may not know that before that, she was half of the duo Frou Frou. Because so many tracks from this disc have been sprinkled into various soundtracks, *Details* has touched a lot of people that love this music.

The vocal range here moves quickly from breathy and hushed to crystal clear in the low range. With the solid bass lines mixed in it's like receiving a sonic massage. This one's a winner from start to finish, but the two most recognizable cuts are "Let Go" and "Breathe In".



Helicopter Girl

Voodoo Chic
Phantom Sound and Vision

Similar to Imogen, but with a voice more on the gravelly and throaty side, is the lesser known Helicopter Girl (a.k.a. Jackie Joyce). She has a great new disc called *Metropolitan* but her sophomore effort featured here gives a much better sampling of her range.

The tracks "Angel City" and "White Revolving Circles" are backed up with some twangy guitars, having more of an Ani DiFranco feel, while a few others almost seem like they would be right at home on a straight ahead R&B disc. To wrap it up, the rest of the disc reminds me a lot of Supreme Beings of Leisure. I told you this one had a lot of range!


Goldfrapp

Utopia (genetically enhanced)
Mute Records

Alison Goldfrapp has gotten a lot of press with her latest release *Seventh Tree*, but let's dig a little deeper and go back to 2001, shall we? She's a little weird, but in a good way and if you've seen any of her videos, you know what I mean.

I couldn't help but be intrigued by a giant mutant bunny on the cover and the rest of the

disc did not disappoint me. Made up of "U.K. Girls" which is a bizarre remix of Olivia Newton John's classic disco song "Let's Get Physical" and five different remixes of the title track, along with two remixes of "Human" that just drip old school lounge cool.

But really, I was hooked at the bunny.

Squeeze the music from your CDs... right to the last note!

Thirty years of research towards the advancement of musical sound quality has enabled Rega to produce two CD players that incorporate a radical new technology. The **Apollo** and **Saturn CD players** use a proprietary system which analyses each disc and optimizes the player's setup accordingly. Rega's new technology squeezes the musical essence out of the CD just as it was interpreted and recorded, right to the last note. Take a test squeeze for yourself, contact The Sound Organisation today for a qualified Rega retailer.



Rega Apollo CD Player



Rega Saturn CD Player



THE SOUND ORGANISATION
MAKES MUSIC

Exclusive **Rega** USA Distributor
steve@soundorg.com | 972.234.0182

rega



Shirley Bassey

Get the Party Started
Decca

While on the subject, Shirley Bassey is the definition of lounge cool. Celebrating fifty years (!) of being on the music charts in the UK, this CD is totally fun. A mixture of old classics that have been updated along with some new cover tunes – it's relentlessly upbeat. Shirley's big brassy voice is definitely a classic.

"Get the Party Started" from Pink is well executed. Other favorite tracks include the jazzed up version of 'Big Spender' and the James Bond soundtrack classic 'You Only Live Twice'. This swinging collection ends with "Where is The Love" and "I Will Survive". A must have for all international men of mystery.



Miss Kittin

BatBox
Groove Attack

Iwouldn't say Miss Kittin has the most versatile voice I've ever heard, but it is certainly interesting. Her newest disc *BatBox* is an evolution from her last disc, *A Bugged Out Mix*. Slightly darker and leaning towards the gothic side, *BatBox* features deadpan vocals in an English accent that is pretty darn close to perfect in my book. Imagine Lily Allen on quaaludes and you're almost there.

One of the more interesting things about this disc, is it manages to be dark without being morose – sort of like if Hello Kitty were a vampire; a very difficult trick to pull off. Even the cover art reflects this attitude, created by the same artist that draws the 'Emily is Strange' cartoons.

I loved this one from start to finish, but if you are unaware of Miss Kittin and want a quick sample – try the first two tracks: "Kittin is High" and "BatBox" are excellent examples of quality electro. Follow that up with the flowing "Play Me a Tape". This CD is destined to be an electro classic.

Natalia Clavier

Nectar

Eighteenth Street Records

Have you ever wondered who provides the amazing backup vocals on many of the Eighteenth Street Lounge recordings? These days it's Natalia Clavier more often than not. Appearing on the Thievery Corporation and Federico Aubelle's CD's, she's got center stage on her new solo disc, *Nectar*.

Whenever I ask people to describe Natalia's voice, angelic is always the response I get. This recording is all in Spanish and is an excellent showcase for her vocal range. Dreamy is the other word that comes to mind.

Be forewarned the mix on this disc is very bass-heavy. The bassheads will rejoice but the rest of you might have to tinker a bit with the subwoofer level control to get this one to sound just right on your system. But it's worth it for that voice. My favorite tracks are "Dormida", "LaMitad" and "Simple". Let's cross our fingers and hope for a remix disc later this year.



Hooverphonic

A New Stereophonic Sound Spectacular

The President of the LSD Golf Club

Phantom Sound and Vision

I saved the most difficult one for last. Because Hooverphonic has evolved and changed vocalists over the span of their career I propose a test. A taste test if you will.

Liseje Sadonius was the vocalist on their first record, *A New Stereophonic Sound Spectacular*, only to be replaced by another amazing Belgian vocalist, Gieke Amaert, who is still currently on the roster.

Very different texturally, but still trip-hop to the core, these two discs make great bookends by which to contrast and compare this band. The first disc is more raw and experimental, branching out in quite a few different directions texturally, while their newest disc is a little more, trippy. It was too tough of a call, I bought 'em both.

This barely scratches the surface, but this collection should get you started on a new journey. If you enjoy these, a little research will reveal a lot more artists in this vein to enjoy. ●

New Jazz From Eastwind

By Anne Farnsworth

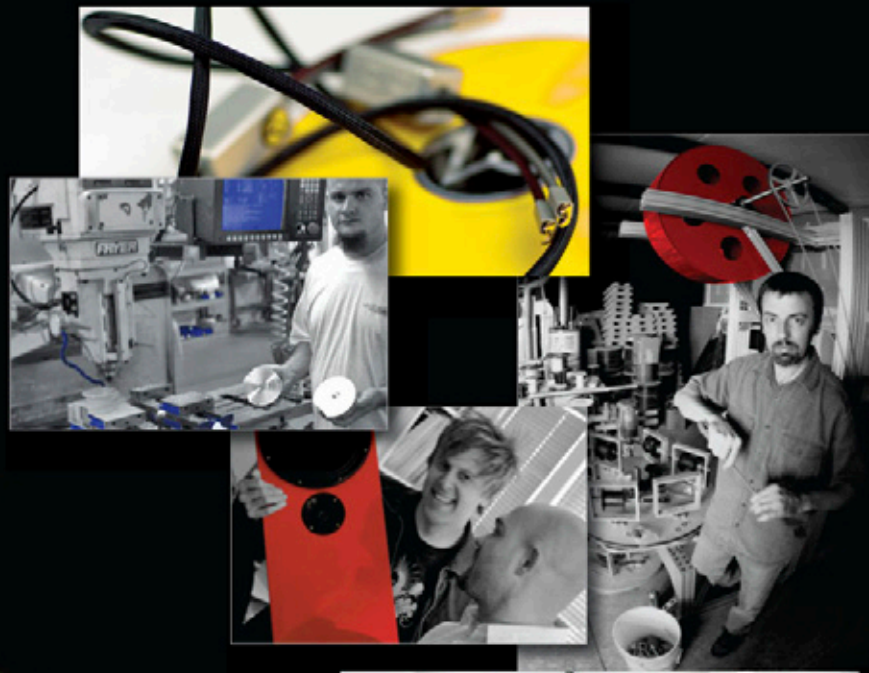
Japan has always been a welcoming host to American jazz artists, as a place to perform as well as record. Here is a sampling of a recent crop of releases distributed by East Wind Imports (www.eastwindimport.com). For now, owner Hajime Sato is only importing Japanese CD's, but with the vinyl craze showing no loss of momentum, is considering adding LP's to his store next year.



Duet – Chick & Hiromi Universal Japan

Chick Corea is a busy guy. Hot on the heels of the acclaimed reunion tour of his '70s-era supergroup, Return To Forever, comes *Duet – Chick & Hiromi* (Universal Japan), a double CD of live piano concerts recorded at the Blue Note Tokyo with the young Japanese phenom, Hiromi Uehara.

Corea's place in the pantheon was established long ago, yet he continues to experiment and grow. The multi Grammy award winner is, along with his friend and occasional collaborator Herbie Hancock, unique as a master of traditional bop-based acoustic jazz and a leading light in the fusion movement, with side trips into avant-garde atonality and the classical arena. The protean nature of his interests gives special status to a fresh take on his acoustic roots, and fans will eagerly snap up this new recording. But for those not familiar with Hiromi, the depth of her talent will amaze.



Classically trained, the Shizuoka native recorded her first album while a student at Berklee in Boston. At 29, she has released five projects as a leader. The latest, *Beyond Standard*, is post-bop experimentation that looks as far forward as it does into the past, a stunning glimpse into a remarkable musical mind. So, the grizzled American icon and the young woman from the other side of the planet are, in reality, kindred spirits.

As Corea explains in the liner notes, “...2 pianos, 2 sets ... 20 fingers, 176 keys ...and thousands of musical ideas...”

Those 20 fingers weave the music so expertly it's impossible to tell who is playing what. Among the 12 selections are several Corea compositions as well as those of Hiromi.

Given the classical background of both performers, they are no doubt well acquainted with the keyboard fantasia, the compositional form that most resembles jazz improvisation in approach and execution. Bill Evans' "Very Early" and the Beatles' "Fool On The Hill" take flight as a series of themes and variations. The duo closes the concert with a twelve-minute "Concierto De Aranjuez/Spain," a *tour de force* that caps off a recording that is one of the highlights of the year. (ed. note: pick this one up from Eastwind, as it costs \$75 on Amazon!)



Sonny Rollins in Japan

Victor Japan

Speaking of grizzled American icons, saxophone colossus *Sonny Rollins* releases *Complete Sonny Rollins In Japan* (Victor Japan), a 2-disc recording of a 1973 Tokyo concert presented for the first time in its entirety.

The show took place shortly after one of Rollins' several sabbaticals from the music industry. This time it was for an extended trip to India, where Rollins studied eastern spiritual practices. "Powai," one of the pieces in this set, is named for the ashram where he studied. Meditation and yoga are mainstream now; that wasn't the case 35 years ago. It's not just in musical matters that Rollins has always been ahead of the curve.

His most famous leave of absence is now legend; dropping out in 1959 just as his star was on the rise. The Harlem native was living on Manhattan's Lower East side and would make nightly treks to the middle of the Williamsburg Bridge to practice. Less well known is the sojourn he took in the mid '50s to break a drug habit. He moved to Chicago and worked as a laborer while weaning himself from not only drugs, but alcohol and cigarettes as well.

With nearly an hour of previously unreleased material, Rollins and his sidemen stretch out, taking their time as they re-work chestnuts like "St. Thomas," "God Bless The Child," and "Alfie," the centerpiece of his only movie soundtrack. Though the recording quality shows its age, this release would be an important addition to any Rollins fan's library.

Viva! Bossa Nova

Camerata

For those of us partial to the hazy days of summer, there is nothing like Bossa Nova to put you in a tropical mood. Languid melodies riding on the percussion's relaxed yet compelling groove create a sonic mood that undulates with the heat, salt and spray of a bleached sand beach. Tenor saxophonist Harry Allen's latest release, *Viva! Bossa Nova*, reprises a solid set of familiar Brazilian standards. Vocalist Laura Ann Boyd covers much of the same ground but adds the lilt of the original Portuguese lyrics in her *Summer Samba* (Venus).

Allen, a New York City resident, plays with an understated energy that recalls Stan Getz. In 1964, Getz brought Bossa Nova to the attention of North American listeners with *Getz A Go Go*, aided by A.C. Jobim, the genre's main composer, and its leading lady, singer Astrud Gilberto.

Jobim is generously represented on *Viva! Bossa Nova*; over half of the selections are his most famous standards. I don't care if they've been covered by every wedding band in the world or recall the soundtrack of a vintage French road film. They're great songs, and when performed by an instrumentalist who understands the restraint and sensitivity of Bossa Nova's melodic style and has the chops to improvise confidently over its harmonic chromaticism, it's a pleasure to listen to. And you don't have to explain to the bride's grandmother why you're not married/having children/living closer to your mother while enjoying the music.

Boyd attempts the same high wire act as Karrin Allyson, another American singer, did this year: singing in a foreign language whose regional accent and inflections are not easily mastered by English speakers. But the well-traveled Virginia native has studied music in Brazil and handles the challenge with an effortlessness that befits the insouciant nature of the style. Boyd's voice has a dark warmth, with solid intonation. Quatro Na Bossa, her backing quartet, supports her with a feel that is both contemporary yet authentic to the tradition. And oh, yeah, if you live in the Virginia area and are getting married, this band really is available for weddings.





"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



 **Red Wine Audio**
battery-powered purist hi-fi

www.redwineaudio.com

Spring Jazz Collection

M & I

M&I's *Spring Jazz Collection* is a compilation of piano trio recordings culled from their catalogue. If you're wondering what's happening in jazz in other parts of the world, this sampler is a great way to introduce yourself to some European musicians deserving of wider renown. Holland is well represented by pianists Mark Van Roon, Louis Van Dijk and Karel Boehlee. Italian newcomer Allesandro Gwis and Germany's Walter Lang also make appearances.

The Americans included are well known to jazz fans. Eric Reed swings on "Tea For Two," Cyrus Chestnut offers up "Stolen Moments," and the venerable George Cables shines on "Somewhere Over The Rainbow." Whatever the season, this lighthearted and jaunty collection will make you think of spring. ●



THE BENTLEY CONTINENTAL

Featuring Naim HiFi: Luxury At Its Finest

By Jeff Dorgay Photos Courtesy of Bentley Motors



Driving through the Massachusetts countryside behind the wheel of a new Bentley Continental Flying Spur Speed sedan with Sir Arnold Bax's second symphony playing, I was at complete peace with the world. My driver's seat was set for a gentle massage and it was very obvious that this car and the hifi system inside was indeed something quite special.

With no road noise in the background to intrude, the audio experience was sublime. Thanks to Naim's 15 channel, 1100 watt, 15-speaker system, I felt like I was standing on the podium, conducting the BBC orchestra.

What gives the Bentley its soul is the integration of this work of art with 600 horsepower and 553 foot pounds of torque...

And that is as it should be, however when I let off the gas pedal to coast a bit, I could still hear a bit of a rumble emanating from the dual exhausts, hinting at the 600 horsepower, twin-turbo twelve cylinder engine under the hood. The perfect balance of luxury and performance on all levels awaits those who purchase this masterpiece.

Let's Start With The Car, Shall We?

Bentley had assembled a number of journalists to Boston for the unveiling of the 2009 version of the Continental Flying Spur and Continental Flying Spur Speed sedan. The Continental Flying Spur is the entry vehicle to the Bentley range with a base price of about 190k and can go up to about 300k, depending on what you add to the option list. Should you be considering a new Bentley, the Naim system is an option that you will not want to be without. It only adds \$6900 to the sticker price and is a bargain, considering all of the technology lurking under the hood. Not to mention that you won't have to let a questionable audio installer dismantle the wood dash in your Bentley. *(continued)*



Coffin & Trout
Fine Jewellers



*Interlude - Lady's Blue Sapphire ring accented
with Diamonds, set in Platinum.*

WWW.COFFINANDTROUT.COM

IMAGINATIVE - ARTISTIC - JEWELRY

480.763.1300 800.684.8984 CHANDLER, ARIZONA

The heart of any automobile is its engine. As you can see from the cover photo, the 12 cylinder W-12 with its twin turbochargers and 600 horsepower offers up plenty of adrenaline whenever you need it. What gives the Bentley its soul however, is the integration of this 600 horsepower work of art (and 553 foot pounds of torque, available from 1800 rpm on up) into the rest of the car. The standard Flying Spur is slightly less powerful with 552 hp and 447 foot pounds of torque.

Though it has many of the options you will see on your favorite sports cars, the Speed is not a sports car. Yet its combination of luxury and Saturn V thrust can certainly fool you at times. Though this car weighs 5379 pounds, it is very agile; it does a better job at defying the laws of physics than anything else I've had the pleasure of driving.

With four different driving modes on tap in the Speed Spur, you can alter the ride balance and transmission action from luxury to performance, but I enjoyed the full sport mode the best.

David Reuter of Bentley explained, "The Sport mode shortens the shift times and holds in the gears a bit longer". When I needed to get around a very slow moving minivan in my path, putting the pedal all the way down took the car from 30mph to 75 in the blink of an eye.

Because we were in America and the police were out in full force, I was only able to sprint up to 90mph for a short while, but it was enough to peek into the character of the car. It was composed in a way like nothing else I've ever experienced. *(continued)*

Capable of 200 mph, David assured me that the car is “just as stable at 175 mph as it is at 90 and just as quiet”. While I will take his word for it, I would love to have the opportunity. Perhaps a trip to the Bentley factory is in the cards next year.

While there are 18 standard paint colors and 17 different interior combinations, you can also have the folks at Bentley personalize your car further with different seating surfaces, wood trim and various other bits. One does not customize a Bentley, you commission it.

My test vehicle came very well appointed with a number of interesting options, but the three that would be on my “must have” list would be the Carbon Ceramic brakes (\$16,500), which worked flawlessly even from cold and possessed sublime feel, whether you were gently easing to a stop or bringing the Bentley missile to an abrupt halt. Next, the heated and massaging seats. Sure everyone with a 7 series BMW or S Class Mercedes has heated seats, but the 2-position massage (also on the rear seats) control is fab.

Thirty seconds after you press play, it's obvious that there is some magic going on inside the cockpit.

Last but not least, another \$6900 treats you to the Naim audio system, and that is the second part of our story.

The System

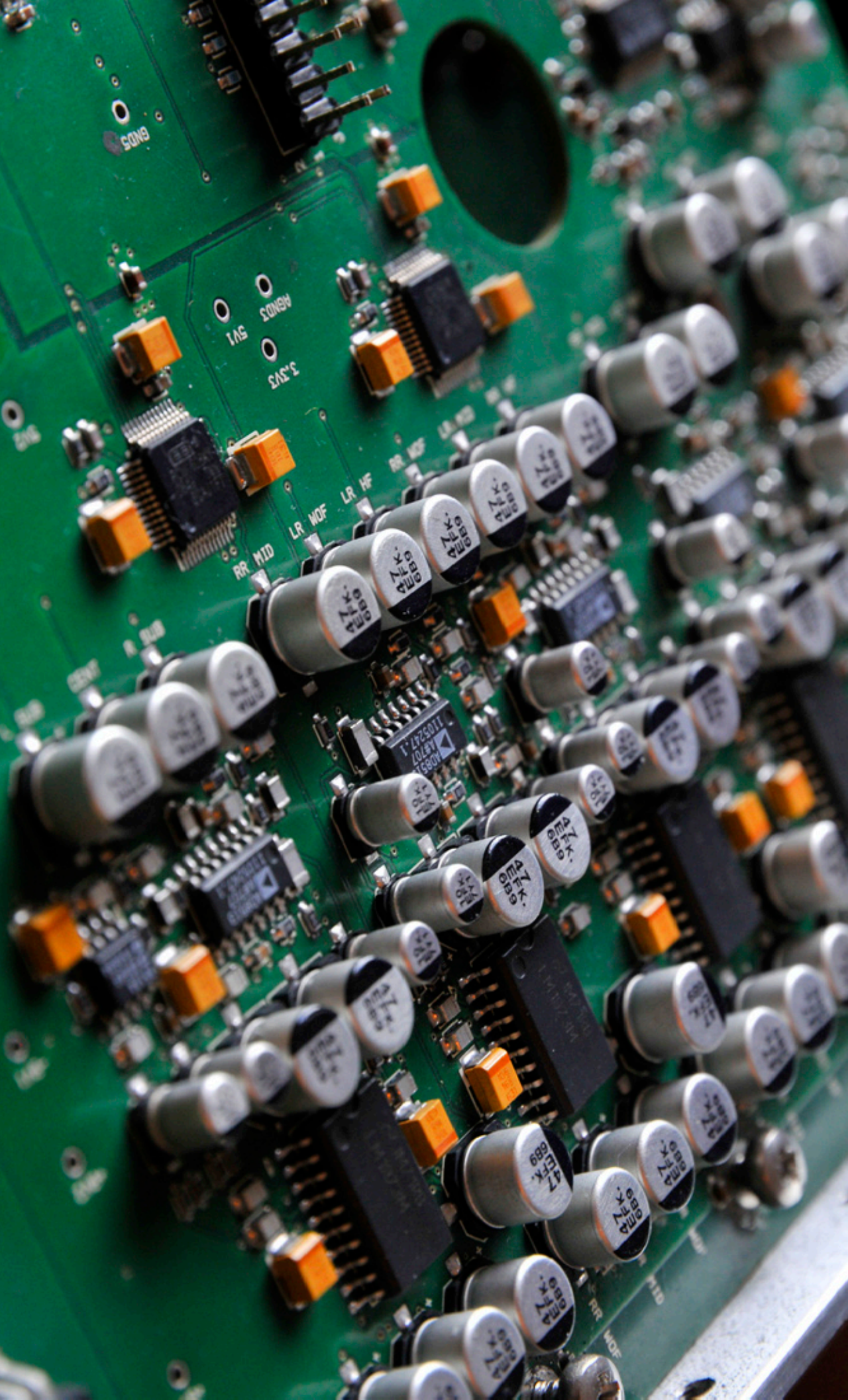
Bentley is a company that listens to their customers very carefully; they want for a sound system of higher performance was at the top of owner's wish lists. After an extensive search, they settled on Naim and after a few meetings, they realized that each company shared the others passion for engineering excellence and performance. Talking to representatives from both companies, it appears that they have a mutual appreciation for each other now that the job is finished.

Thirty seconds after you press play, it's obvious that there is some magic going on inside the cockpit.

If you open the trunk (the boot to our British readers), you see that not only has the design team done a fantastic job at hiding the subwoofers, there is an additional battery tucked inside the left rear fender with massive power cables that is strictly for the Naim system.

The core of the system is the fifteen channel, 1100-watt amplifier, incorporating proprietary Naim digital signal processing, which is slightly different for each model and is tailored to its own acoustic environment. Coupled with a custom set of drivers that would be at home in a set of Naim home speakers, this made for the foundation of an incredible in car experience. *(continued)*





But they didn't stop there. At the introduction meeting, Naim UK sales manager Doug Graham informed us that their engineers managed to cut the amount of sound coming out of the car by 30db, so that you can keep the Naim Audio experience to yourself. When

The same fellow responsible for circuit board layout in Naim's top of the line 500 series was responsible for the in car system as well.

playing the systems in the test cars rather loudly, barely a peep made it to the outside world.

Taking a peek at the amplifier that was on display revealed the marvel of miniaturization and complexity at work here; the workmanship was first rate. As it turns out, the same fellow responsible for circuit board layout in Naim's top of the line 500 series was responsible for the in car system as well, lending even more confidence to the product.

Ultimate Luxury and Ultimate Versatility

Thanks to the multi-program DSP, you have eight preset environments to choose from, all of which can be customized from the drivers seat. The DSP also provides equalization on the fly, changing eq settings for every km/hr of speed change in the car's velocity, providing over 300 unique eq settings, assuring you of a seamless audio experience. My personal favorite was the Naim "audiophile" mode, but I'm sure that if you take delivery of a Continental, you might spend a few hours in the garage experimenting. (That's where that extra battery comes in handy)

iPod users are given their due, with a 15-pin connector inside the glove box where the changer is located. With a 160gb iPod, you could spool up about 450 discs worth of music and drive from Alaska to Key West without missing a beat. One of the Bentley engineers assured me that this car can achieve just over 20mpg on a long trip, so combining that with a 23.8-gallon tank, you won't even have to stop for fuel very often!

Great In Theory and In Practice

You all know how difficult it is to achieve great sound in a car, so all of the theory can go right out the window once the play button is depressed. Fortunately, just like the rest of the car, the Naim system did not disappoint in the least. While the Naim engineers did a great job at isolating the system from the outside world, the Bentley engineers did a great job at isolating the outside world from the cockpit; even at 90 miles per hour, the car is almost living room quiet. *(continued)*

Get More Ben

TV
LAND

Like a *Rolling Stone*

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

www.tvland.com



My first test selection was the first movement of Sir Arnold Bax' second symphony. Much as I wanted to rock out, I felt the need to show a little respect.

The soundstage presented is incredibly wide, extending well beyond the windshield pillars and the tonality was excellent with classical music.

For those of you not familiar with Bax Two, this starts out a bit slow and quiet, but has some very dynamic passages, which the Naim system aced. The trunk-mounted subwoofers had more than enough weight to do this piece justice!

I happened to be paired up with Doug Graham and Chris West from Naim USA, both gentlemen had a great selection of music as well. Our next test was a few tracks from the new Fleet Foxes album and the system's ability to delineate the layered harmonies was very impressive. *(continued)*

Exquisitely engineered, self-amplified, speaker systems.

WHAT SHAPE IS YOUR MUSIC IN?

SALAGAR

SALAGAR[™]
S P E A K E R S

Drop Dead Sound.

salagar.com

TONE STYLE

We moved through a wide gamut of music, including some very heavy rock, various jazz selections to the epitome of 80's pop, Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. To wind up the first driving stint, the guys at Naim even humored me and let me play some Skynyrd!

Bottom line, no matter what type of music you enjoy, the Naim system is up to the task. It is exclusive to Bentley, so you will have to purchase one to take advantage of it.

I've spent the majority of my life as an automotive enthusiast and have had the privilege of driving quite a few fine (and rare) automobiles over the years. The Bentley Continental Flying Spur Speed is at the top of my list. ●

MANUFACTURERS

Bentley:
www.bentley.co.uk

Naim UK:
www.naim-audio.com

Naim US:
www.naimusa.com



Unobtainium!

The Lyra Olympos Cartridge

By Jeff Dorgay

It was a pretty wacky week for luxury around here. Coming off of a few days of driving the Bentley Continental Speed Spur through the Boston countryside and still drunk on that experience, I felt it was time to give the Lyra Olympos cartridge that was staring at me on my desk a listen.

Feeling much like Mr. Bond might when cracking a safe, I made sure that my tools were in order before handling this beauty. (And I made everyone leave the building, so I could have total concentration.) An hour later, the Olympos was playing music. Oh boy, was it playing music. Music like I've never heard before.



Before you rush to get your American Express Black card out, forget it. You can't have one – at least you can't just call your Lyra dealer and get one.

Your best spy skills will be necessary if you want one for your very own, because the initial run of 10 cartridges is long gone.

You will need the platinum-iron magnets and 5N iron pole pieces from the now discontinued Parnassus cartridge as a donor. From these parts and the remaining new parts, Lyra will build you an Olympos, of which only 60 total have been built. Making your creation much more rare than most Bentleys.

Setup

On the heavy side at 13.5 grams, I had to rack the counter-weight almost all the way back on the SME arm and use all of the additional weights on the Triplanar, so if you get your hands on one, be ready. Set the initial tracking force with the stylus guard on, so that your ten thousand dollar baby doesn't come crashing down when you try to adjust VTF for the first time.

The VTF range was 1.6-1.75 grams and I got the most open sound right at 1.6 grams. Loading is specified as 100 ohms to 47k, but I found 400 ohms to be the magic setting. Interestingly enough, Chris Koster at Naim (who also uses an Olympos in his system) has had the exact same results with the 400 ohm setting on the Naim Superline phono stage. *(continued)*

Vantage

POWER PURITY PERFORMANCE

For over twenty years the world's most demanding enthusiasts have flocked to MartinLogan in pursuit of the magic that only MartinLogan's electrostatic technology can provide.

Even so, our fiercest critics have argued that MartinLogan speakers were too big... Were too hard to drive... And their low-end performance didn't measure up. Not any more.

Featuring a compact cabinet, 92dB sensitivity, and explosive articulate bass, the new Vantage™ speaker system seamlessly blends a 200-watt PoweredForce™ woofer with XStat™ electrostatic technology to fully reveal the powerful emotion of sound.

For a deeper look into Vantage's advanced technologies and to locate your local authorized MartinLogan ESL Series store please visit www.martinlogan.com.



www.martinlogan.com

**The end result is so special
it almost defies definition.**

What might be mistaken as slightly lacking in punch or detail quickly falls by the wayside, once you spin a few of your favorite records. I have a few friends with Lyra Skala and Titan cartridges, but the Olympos has a completely different sound.

Though I did some of my listening on the excellent Spiral Groove SG-2 turntable with a current Triplanar arm, I did most on my Raven Two with a pair of identical SME iV.Vi tonearms so that I could accurately compare it to my reference cartridge, the Dynavector XV-1s. Initially, I used my Nagra VPL phono stage, but found that the Olympos gave up its all with a solid state phono stage. I fell in love completely with the Olympos and the Rega los phono stage; this revealed more music on many of my records than I have ever heard.

Interestingly enough, the Olympos was the yin to the Dynavector's yang. Every record I played sounded better on one cartridge or the other, with the Dynavector being slightly more dynamic and possessing a wider soundstage, but the Olympos was the champion in the depth and ultimate tonality department. On the right record, the Olympos made my speakers just melt away into the room, leaving only the music for my enjoyment.

The best way I can describe it to the photographers in the crowd is to compare the Olympos to Kodachrome 25. In the same way that legendary film allowed you to see further into the images that your camera could produce, the Olympos does the same thing. This cartridge is all about nuance. Listening to acoustic instruments, the gradation of decay just seems to blend off into infinity. *(continued)*



F80
BOOTHROYD STUART
MERIDIAN

The Meridian F80. Hi-fidelity distilled.

Developed in collaboration with Ferrari, the Meridian F80 is the world's most advanced and compact complete entertainment system. The press agrees: the F80's performance is just as astonishing as its design.

"Holy crap, that sounded good... The sound wasn't just big—it was enveloping. Immense. Intense. Immediate."
—Wes Phillips, *Stereophile*, April 2008
Stereophile Class A Recommended Component

"As a second room system, or even something to take on holiday... the F80 is a work of genius."
—What Hi-Fi? *Sound & Vision*, June 2007

"...what makes it a no-brainer is the sheer scale, drama and musical satisfaction that the Meridian can generate."
—Roy Gregory, *Hi-Fi +*, July 2007

Ferrari
OFFICIAL LICENSED PRODUCT

Meridian America Inc
8055 Troon Circle, Suite C
Austell, GA 30168-7849, USA
+1 (404) 344 7111
www.meridian-audio.com

All trademark rights reserved. Produced under licence of Ferrari SpA. FERRARI, the PRANCING HORSE device, all associated logos and distinctive designs are trademarks of Ferrari SpA.

Tonality is the other area that the Olympos excels; if you have well trained ears, this is the cartridge that really exposes the differences between different types of instruments with ease. I must say I've never experienced quite this level of tonal realism in my system.

I Want One!!

Rather than bore you with the blow by blow of all the records I played with the Olympos, suffice to say that this was truly a magical experience, but one of subtlety. I have heard my share of mega dollar components that do not deliver on their promise, but the Olympos is not one of them. If there is any way that you can become one of the fortunate people to acquire one, treasure it highly like you would any other rare and precious thing.

Though I'm ruined for life, I do thank Allen Perkins at Immedia for the privilege of this experience! ●

The Lyra Olympos

MSRP: \$9,800, \$7500 with Parnassus donor cartridge

US Distributor

Immedia

www.immediasound.com
510-559-2050

The Leica M8

Analog Sensibilities with Digital Convenience

By Ken Kessler

It was only ever going to be controversial. No way could Leica deliver a digital M-series camera without stirring up the activists than a tube amp manufacturer could bring out a solid-state amplifier without agitating its customers. Face it: Leicaphiles are just as ornery and illogical and Luddite as audiophiles. So the M8 was never going to get an easy ride.



What Leica didn't foresee (or should have foreseen) were a couple of minor glitches that escaped the factory in the early models. Not that they would go untreated. The new CEO, Steve K. Lee, told me that every one of the early M8s was entitled to the fix, and that Leica has undertaken the program at great expense, including revised firmware and an appropriate filter. Lee also makes a believer of you when he says that such a situation will never be allowed to happen again.

But such is the devotion to the brand that Leica survived the hiccup. Customers buying from early 2008 on needn't worry about the early version's troubles. The sample I tried is current production and came with the 50mm F2 lens; I also had four of my own conventional M lenses (not updated with the bar codes) to play with as well.

This is not a review per se, but the reactions of a long-time M-user (M4-P and M6) to the new camera. I was not sure how it would go, because a close and trusted friend of mine who's a Leica maven hates the mere thought of it, and he was souring my enthusiasm prior to its arrival. "Obsolete overnight" – "Unnecessary" – "Film's better" ... it was like talking to Mikey Fremer about the LP vs reality. But my friend missed the point. Leica thought of everything, with two provisos: that you accept the notion of a digital camera without autofocus, and that you are already of the mindset for using a rangefinder. *(continued)*



Leica thought of everything, with two provisos: that you accept the notion of a digital camera without autofocus, and that you are already of the mindset for using a rangefinder.

Contact us at 1-800-PORSCHE or porscheusa.com. ©2008 Porsche Cars North America, Inc. Porsche recommends seat belt usage and observance of all traffic laws at all times.



From behind the wheel, the resemblance is uncanny.

It's everything we've learned in six decades of racing transferred to the street. A lowered suspension and broader stance matched to 405 hp and 21-inch wheels. The new Cayenne GTS. For further evidence of its performance DNA, visit porscheusa.com/bloodlines. Porsche. There is no substitute.

The new Cayenne GTS



PORSCHE

In this respect, it's exactly the same approach needed when faced with a valve amp or a turntable: if you only "believe" in solid-state and CD, you will only see the lack of convenience, the size, the heat, ad nauseum. If you're into tubes and analogue, it will present no unpleasant surprises. Hence, Leica safely assumes that the M8 will appeal primarily to the converted, those who already have experience of rangefinders. The fun is handing one to a long-term SLR user to see how they readjust. And the transition will only ever yield love or hate. There's no in-between with rangefinders if you've come from the through-the-lens world of SLRs.

**My initial reaction
was exactly what Leica
wanted: it was precisely
like welcoming back
an old friend.**

Fingers fell to place, as the cliché goes. I hadn't used film in four years or more, because all of my photography bar the occasional "happy snaps" involves work-related matters: shooting hi-fi equipment at shows. And as I have to send these images via CD-R or e-mail to five or more magazines, I moved from slides to digital with a sense of relief, as much as with a sense of loss.

It should also be mentioned that my photos published in hi-fi magazines – around 300 per annum – are rarely reproduced larger than a half-page. Thus, even shots from a few years ago at a resolution of 3 megapixels are still acceptable. The M8's 10.3 megapixels? More than enough for all of my work. *(continued)*

Besides, if you really need to better what's on "analogue" film, Leica makes a special-purpose camera with 75 megapixels if you can afford it and don't need portability.

Straight out of the box, I was able to take a couple of decent, low-light shots without even opening the owner's manual. Anyone who's used a Leica from M3s onward will find only one odd sensation to accommodate: the lack of a film advance lever. Otherwise, it's pure M all the way, down to the double-image focusing. Switched on, aperture set at F2, I shot stuff in the kitchen, clutter on the table and the like, then a shot of my son standing by the kitchen sink with late afternoon light the sole illumination. I was staggered by the results, to say the least.

Sticking with the new 50mm lens – Lee assured me that it's not just the bar codes that make new lenses better suited to the M8's sensor – and a

Metz flash I use with my Digilux 2, I shot assorted pieces of hi-fi equipment. Perfect results every time, with phenomenal detail and correct color cast, something that often troubles anyone shooting metal surfaces on the fly under artificial light. I'm sure nothing aggravates the likes of Marantz or Conrad-Johnson when a published photo delivers the wrong 'vintage' of the champagne color they use for their faceplates.

There's only one real caveat: you really must shoot RAW images to exploit all that the M8 is capable of producing. With fast computers and cheap 4mB memory cards now so commonplace that RAW file sizes needn't be feared, shooting RAW+JPEG is probably the safest way to go. When you see those RAW images on screen, you will understand why 10.3 megapixels through a Leica lens ain't the same as even 12 megapixels through anything else. *(continued)*

Straight out of the box, I was able to take a couple of decent, low-light shots without even opening the owner's manual.





The MC207 features Dynamic Power Manager™, a new technology developed by McIntosh. DPM™ senses whether your speakers are 4 or 8 ohms and automatically optimizes the MC207 to deliver full power. Get all the power you've paid for with a McIntosh.

MC207 Power Amplifier

- Power a 7.1 home theater or a 5.1 home theater with 2 channels available to power a second zone
- 200 watts x 7 with either 4-ohm or 8-ohm speakers
 - Power Guard® amplifier clipping protection
 - Ultra-low distortion (less than 0.005%)
 - Silent (no fans) convection cooling
 - Balanced & unbalanced inputs

By design. There is nothing like a **McIntosh**
 www.mcintoshlabs.com
 800.538.6576

Die-hards will still disagree, but the M8 is a highly-desirable, easy-to-use masterpiece, but it is still a rangefinder in the classic M mode. Relatively compact, built to military standards, quiet, and cooler than a date with Kate Moss. All that's changed is the image storage medium. As such, it won't appeal to photographers who need long lenses or absolute speed, like sports photographers. Instead, it best suits the traditional M user, which is all that Leica could have wanted.

As the context in which this column appears is an audio site, it is worth mentioning that Leica's future is in the hands of "one of us," for the aforementioned Steven K. Lee is the same Steven K. Lee who used to distribute Nagra in the USA. And he still thinks like an audiophile. So don't worry, guys: the Leica legend is safe. Even in the digital era. ●



The Leica M8
MSRP: \$5495

MANUFACTURER

http://m.leica-camera.com/infopoint_en.html

Support the Twang Bar King

Tour T-Shirt

If you missed buying one of these in 1983, or have worn your current one out, here's your big chance to express your allegiance to one of the most interesting guitarists in history.

Screen printed on a heavy duty all cotton Hanes Beefy-T shirt, this one should last die hard fans another 25 years if washed with care. They are available in sizes s – xxl and only in white.

For 17 bucks, it's a steal.

www.adrianbelew.net



David Lynch Signature Cup Coffee

Text and Photo by Jean Dorgay

I am a coffee snob. I freely admit this to everyone and if offered a cup of something that is stale or bitter it doesn't matter how much I like the host, I'll do without. The good news is I live amongst many coffee snobs so finding the good stuff is rarely a problem. There's a wonderful drive-thru coffee hut near our office that serves freshly roasted coffee on a daily and is wildly popular. Just get in line with all the other junkies.

For an art director it doesn't get any more inspiring than the David Lynch Signature Cup coffees. It seems Mr. Lynch is a very serious coffee drinker and has used coffee as an element in several of his works, most notably, his cult TV series *Twin Peaks*. (of which I'm a huge fan) I've also been spotted enjoying the aroma of a great bag of beans like Dennis Hopper's nitrous inhaling character in *Blue Velvet*. So when these cans (not headphones) were placed on my desk I was more than a little curious and somewhat nervous. It was David Lynch coffee, after all.

**I popped the top and ground the beans.
The aroma was good. Very good.**

Once brewed I noticed the blend was dark and rich, displaying earthy characteristics and a sweet, smoky finish. Yes, I got that off the package but I don't disagree. This is definitely some of the good stuff.

When asked why he started his own coffee brand, David joked that he drinks about 20 cups a day and that he felt theaters needed to serve good coffee – amen to that. The collection includes: Organic House Roast, Organic Espresso and Organic Decaf French Roast. While decaf is never my first choice I found this one to have more richness and balance than other decafs I've auditioned in this price range.

Should you choose to indulge, rest assured that the David Lynch Signature Cup coffees are *more* than Fair Trade Certified by building direct relationships with the coffee producers, not just cooperatives. And since David is a product of the American Film Institute in the '70s, a portion of each sale goes to support the David Lynch Film Scholarship Fund at the American Film Institute Conservatory. So drink up and support the arts. Prices range from \$8.44 to \$16.27.

davidlynch.com/coffee





Whitworth Design

“PULSE” SPEAKER STANDS

By Jeff Dorgay

Somehow, we seem to have a fascination with carbon fiber around here.

Ron Whitworth is another designer that is moving over to the hifi world from open wheel racing. Having worked for Andretti Racing in the past, he has taken his extensive background in design and fabrication to create a whole line of very interesting products for your home, office and listening room.

“I’m a huge hifi enthusiast, so creating audio racks and speaker stands was a natural progression for my work”, Whitworth told me in a recent phone conversation. Impeccably finished, you can tell Ron pays close attention to detail; the carbon fiber work would look right at home on a Bentley or Ferarri and the anodizing was perfect.

The stands you see here range in price from \$799 to \$1499 a pair, depending on size, finish and whether your stands are partially carbon fiber or all aluminum. There is a wide range of color options, so these should be right at home in an environment that has a modern decor scheme.

www.whitworthdesign.com

50 Rolls Of Film To Go!

The Kingston 32GB SDHC Card

By Jeff Dorgay

Whether you are strolling down the streets of Paris or elbowing the crowd at Wally World, it's comforting to know that you have at least 50 rolls of film in your camera. The bad news is that you now have no excuse for missing the critical moment. Though I don't own the sexy M8 on page 78, it was incredibly cool to pop this card in my Canon G9 (12 megapixels) and see the picture counter read 1860 pictures in RAW capture mode! Switching to high quality JPEG mode bumped the counter up to 8100 pictures. You might not take that many pictures in your life, but now you can and that's what makes this card so awesome.

Having been firmly entrenched in the digital photography world since it's inception, I'm amazed that people on the internet are sniping that this card is, gasp, 300 dollars! It wasn't long ago that 4GB memory cards cost more than this. The last time I checked, a roll of print film still costs about four or five dollars without processing.

Digital photographers that subscribe to the "shoot everything now and sort it out in Photoshop later" method are going to be in heaven. Not to mention anyone else who has a device that utilizes an SD card. One thing to keep in mind though, if you actually do fill it up, it will take about two hours to download that much data.

How often have you heard your favorite photography enthusiast (or audiophile for that matter) say, "this is the last.....I'm ever going to buy, honest!"

The 32GB card from Kingston could be the one to deliver on that promise.

www.kingston.com/flash/sdhc.asp



“Hello, the follow-up CD to singer-songwriter and surfer gal Tristan Prettyman’s critically acclaimed debut release, *Twenty-Three*, goes down like a tall, cool glass of lemonade on a hot summer day. Recorded in a just a few weeks in London with British producers and songwriters Martin Terefe (KT Tunstall, Ron Sexsmith) and Sacha Skarbek (KT Tunstall, James Blunt), Prettyman shows a new maturity, and her smoky, velvet alto voice, backed by pedal steel guitar, Hammond organ and strings, has never sounded better.

Say ‘Hello’ to Tristan Prettyman

By Kimberlye Gold Photos by Sasha Eisenman

Actually, you CAN have it both ways.

The lucidity and harmonic "rightness" of a tube amplifier and the muscle and control of a solid-state amplifier.

Introducing the conrad-johnson ET250S enhanced triode amplifier. The sole source of voltage gain, a single-ended triode establishes the harmonic character, while a high-current, high damping factor transistor output stage produces the muscle (250 watts/ch) and control. Hear one for yourself at your nearest conrad-johnson dealer. Write or visit our web site for more information.



conrad-johnson It just sounds right.

2733 Merrilee Dr • Fairfax, VA 22031 • phone: 703-698-8581, fax: 703-560-5360 • www.conradjohnson.com

Although she's been compared to artists as diverse as Sheryl Crow, Norah Jones and Fiona Apple, Prettyman truly is in a class of her own.

The more one listens, the more Prettyman's tone and style resonates and requires getting better acquainted with this talented chanteuse. Due to her extensive touring schedule over three years promoting *Twenty-three*, Prettyman was able to record the bulk of the new album (on Virgin) live, with few overdubs, giving it an intimate, organic feel.

Prettyman recently broke off a two-year relationship with her "first true love," and the songs "Echo," "Blindfold," and "War Out of Peace" reflect the changes she has gone through. But the record is far from downbeat, with playful, sexy tunes like the title track, "You Got Me," "Handshake," and "Just a Little Bit" showing several other dimensions of this rapidly emerging artist.

The first single is "Madly", arguably the most commercial and accessible song on the record, co-written with Kevin Griffin from Better Than Ezra. She recently performed "Madly" on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and was very well received. The tone of the CD has a bluesy quality that suits Prettyman's style to the letter. The final track, "In Bloom," is haunting, with an effective use of just piano and strings that suits Prettyman's subdued yet emotional delivery. Themes of heartbreak, love and the thrill of the chase permeate this superb effort that grows on you after repeated listening. (*continued*)



Here's what our surfer gal had to say from the road:

What was growing up in San Diego like?

It was surfy and sunny.

When did you start playing live and writing songs?

I taught myself how to play guitar on and off from age 15 to 20. I was probably 20 when I started playing shows. I've been writing in my journal even when I was little kid, which progressed into songwriting fairly quickly.

What do you feel are the differences between Hello and Twenty-Three?

Twenty-Three was written from a compilation of life experiences...and *Hello* is more specific to times, places and people.

Have you grown as an artist and a woman over the last few years?

I have grown immensely, but some days I'm not sure. I still have a lot of growing up to do; I hope I never stop. People that haven't seen me for a while say I have turned into a woman. That's pretty cool. I definitely feel like I can hang at the grownup table now.

What has touring so much been like for you?

Exhausting and fun...

How were you received in Japan on your recent tour there?

The first time, the audience was very shy and reserved, but after 13 times they have really warmed up to me! It's like a second home now.

What are the pros and cons of life on the road for you?

Traveling can take a lot out of you, but there is nothing like a sold out show when the crowd is singing your songs back to you. That's the best part for me.

Who would you consider your main influences, growing up and now?

There is no one main influence. I've always looked up to my parents, though. They have been big supporters and the two people I can always go to for advice or an honest opinion.

How did you get your record deal with Virgin? Did other labels court you?

When I got with my new manager, he hooked it all up. We had some showcases in New York. I liked the vibe I got with the A&R from Virgin, so I said, "What the heck."

Many of your songs feel like a stream of consciousness. "Madly" is the most commercial, with very definite verses, chorus, bridge, etc. Did you deliberately choose that as the first single?

The label made the choice. I co-wrote that song with Kevin Griffin from Better than Ezra. It was definitely a more thought-out effort than some of the other songs I wrote, but it was never like we sat down and said, "OK, we are writing *the* hit, the single." **Kevin has a way to make songs catchy. He's good with hooks and arrangements, where as I have a lot of good ideas that I need help organizing.**

What is the next single going to be?

No idea! Maybe "Hello." I'm sure the label would like "War Out of Peace"—that's definitely pop radio. I like all the songs, though, and they are fun to play, so I'm cool with whatever they choose.

What do you feel are your main themes on this record?

It's the game of the chase. I always learn something after the songs are written.

Are all your songs autobiographical?

Pretty much. The guy I wrote "Don't Work Yourself Up" about doesn't even speak to me anymore, unfortunately. But I made sure to add happy, fun songs as well as the dark ones. Each song tells a story about something that I've gone through. *(continued)*



sooloos

Experience the world's
best music server.



How did you like recording in London?

Working with Martin and Sasha was amazing. We pretty much recorded everything together and left it all together with musicians that were all friends of theirs.

You're part of the "Barefoot Wine Beach Rescue Project," and your tour is in partnership with the Surfrider Foundation – a non-profit, grassroots environmental organization. Tell us about it.

It's pretty much the most awesome thing I have been a part of. So many people come out to help pick up trash and keep the beaches clean all over the country. Then we all celebrate and eat good food, drink good (Barefoot) wine and are merry. Over all it's just a positive event that brings the community together. It helps to keep some of our most beautiful waterways and beaches Barefoot friendly. You can read more about it at barefootwine.com/BeachRescue/home.asp

What's next?

Touring with G. Love and Special Sauce and The John Butler Trio.

Where do you see yourself heading?

I am not really sure, but my motto is: Coming, going, always learning. ●

The Collector Talks Jazz

By Tom Caselli

While I have been a rock music lover all my life, my appreciation for jazz has only come to fruition in the last ten years. Given the prices that first issue Blue Notes and Prestige titles are now commanding, I wish I had a much larger stockpile for my retirement fund instead of my now-dwindling 401k.

If you panic when you see a \$450 price tag on a mint copy of Dexter Gordon's *GO*, don't feel bad. I'm not going there, either. Fortunately, we are living in the second golden age of jazz LPs, and there always seems to be a new email announcing a pre-order for the next great reissue from the classic catalogs of Riverside, Prestige and Blue Note, the big three labels from the first golden era of jazz. Not only are these albums available again, but you have your choice of the mono, stereo, 33 and even 45 rpm versions.

Even this route can get somewhat expensive, with most titles in the \$35-50 range. If you want to build a nice collection of jazz LPs without having to take out a second mortgage, here is an alternative.

Most jazz fans and audiophiles know of Fantasy's Original Jazz Classic series, which debuted in the early '80s and were budget-priced reissues from the Fantasy group of labels. More than a decade earlier, however, at the start of the '70s – when jazz was in its darkest hour – both Fantasy and Blue Note attempted to revitalize the market with a series of two-fer reissues.

Berkeley-based Fantasy Records, flush with profits from the success of Creedence Clearwater Revival, acquired the catalogs of Prestige, Riverside and Contemporary. They quickly went about repackaging the back catalogs in a series of two-LP sets. Often dressed in generic looking pastel tone gatefold covers, they quickly filled the record bins.

Most of the liner notes were well written, but the overall package still screamed “low budget.” Thousands of each title must have been pressed, because 30 years later, they are still plentiful and inexpensive. Don't let the Spartan packaging fool you, the records inside sound great and that's what counts. Sporting the third issue Prestige lime green labels and pseudo titles like “Jazz Giant,” many feature unreleased tracks or live concerts by the top of the jazz heap.

Here are a few that I'd like to share with you this issue.



Charles Mingus

Reincarnation of a Love Bird

This is a must-have album by one of the greatest composers in all of jazz. It contains a live session recorded in Decca's Paris studio in 1970. After several years of a self imposed exile from the music scene and fighting depression, Charles Mingus was lured to Europe with financial incentives from his record company.

Originally released in the European market as two separate albums on the American label, it was given a belated U.S. release as part of Fantasy's 24000 series. Featuring long-time Mingus alumnus, tenor sax man Charles McPherson, the band opens with the title track and winds through a side-long version of “Pithecanthropus Erectus.” The sextet plays its heart out, and the sound is captured with ample depth and spaciousness that does the music justice.

Their take on Charlie Parker's “Blue Bird” is a highlight. The used copy that I picked up proved to be well-pressed and extremely quiet. This fairly unknown work is an absolute steal for Mingus fans.

Charles Mingus*The Great Mingus Concert*

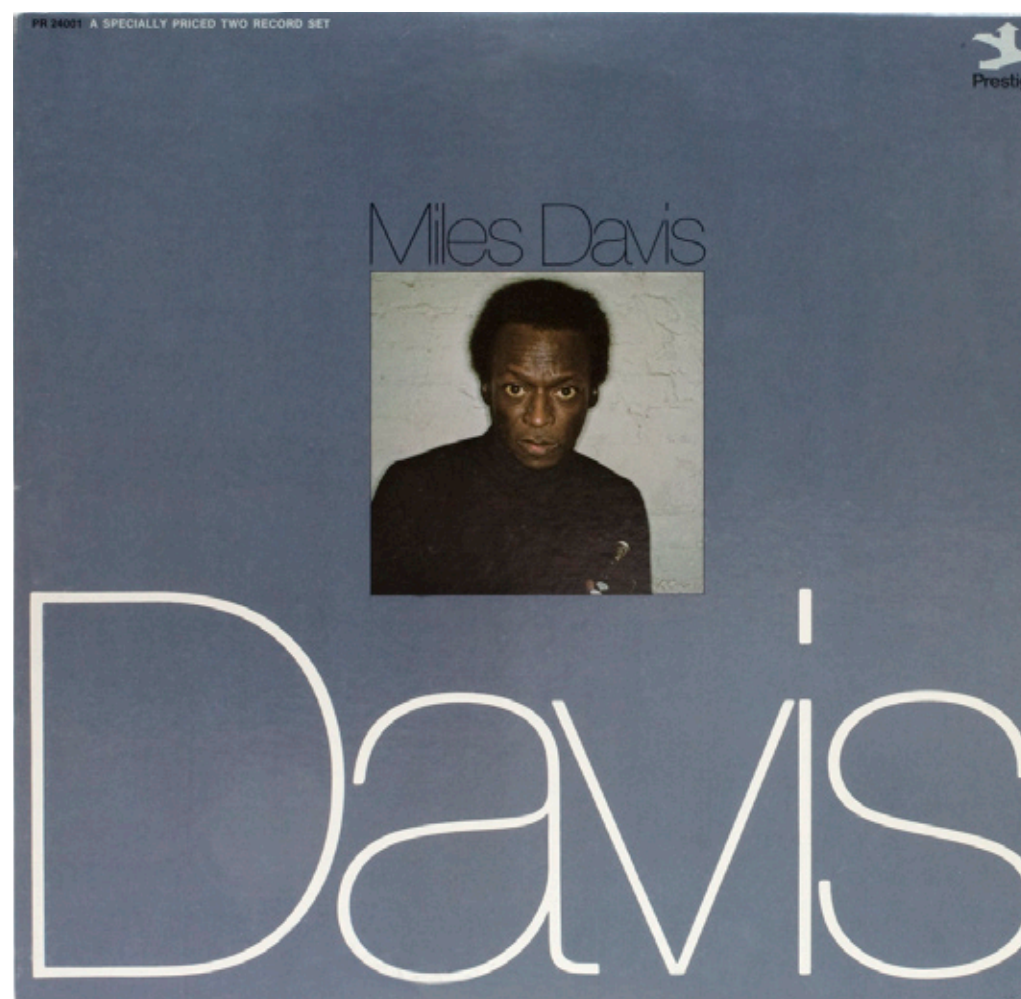
This was the first domestic release from this concert, which was originally performed in Spring of 1964. Initially released in France on the American label, this U.S. reissue is a three-record set housed in a tri-fold cover. This is the first live document of Mingus' band when Eric Dolphy was his co-conspirator. The major fault of this set is the banner proudly proclaiming "Re-processed for Stereo." I've never been able to locate an American label issue of this record, so I am not sure if there ever was an original, straight mono release. Regardless, the 12 bucks I paid for a near mint copy was a great value, since it had adequate sound quality.

The set includes many Mingus staples such as *Orange Was the Color of Her Dress* and *Then Blue Silk*. The Mingus band really stretches out on this album and all the cuts clock in between 15 and 30 minutes. Unfortunately, trumpeter Johnny Coles was ill missed this show, and Clifford Jordan was left to fill this chair alone. A 30-minute version of "Fables of Faubus," split over two sides, explores possibilities that were only hinted at on the original *Ah Um* release.

Mingus' political bent is driven home by the use of patriotic fanfares during the course of the composition.

Since this initial release, many performances by this version of the Mingus band at the peak of their powers have been recorded, but this remains my favorite.

While EMI-Capitol has a budget line of classic Blue Note titles, and the recently out of print Fantasy OJC's are still plentiful, these initial reissues from the '70s have better overall sound quality. These reissues are a great value, offering excellent sound at a modest price.

**Miles Davis***Workin' With the Miles Davis Quintet**Steamin' With the Miles Davis Quintet*

There isn't much to say about these two legendary titles that hasn't been said before, but if you don't own them, they should be at the top of the list on your next trip to the record store. By late 1955, Miles Davis had signed with Columbia and had started sessions that would eventually lead to *Round About Midnight*. Yet at the same time, he had to fulfill his commitment to Prestige. The result of the Prestige sessions was the release of these albums along with *Cookin'*, *Relaxin'* and *The New Miles Davis Quintet*.

This green label two-fer reissue was first released in the late '60s. While I don't have the original black and yellow label copies, I do have Analog Productions box set, *The Great Prestige Recordings*, which is out of print (along with most of their very expensive 45 r.p.m. sets).

The Analog Productions LPs remain my favorites, but this set captures the essence of these recordings for a fraction of the cost. Although lacking some of AP's ultimate tonality, these still have plenty of warmth in their grooves. Avoid the 12 LP mid-'80s set of these recordings if you can, because they were cut from digital masters and lack the warmth that these records possess.



King Curtis
Jazz Giant

After working at Atco in the late '50s, King Curtis released two albums on the Prestige label in 1960 and 1961.

The 1960 session features Nat Adderley, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Oliver Jackson, with Rudy Van Gelder handling the recording at his Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey studio. On that session, Curtis seems better suited to the role of sideman rather than session leader. Although Curtis opens each selection, it's when Nat Adderley solos that the track snaps into focus. With titles like "Little Brother Soul" and "In a Funky Groove," this becomes a precursor to the style that he became known for during the later part of the decade when he went on to lead Aretha Franklin's band at Atlantic. This one is not as tight as the second album, but the sound is quite good.

The second LP fares a bit better. Sam Jones' bass is more compatible with Curtis. Though it would be a few more years before funk would integrate into jazz – it doesn't fully merge until Miles Davis releases *On the Corner* – this historic meeting is a definite jumping off point.

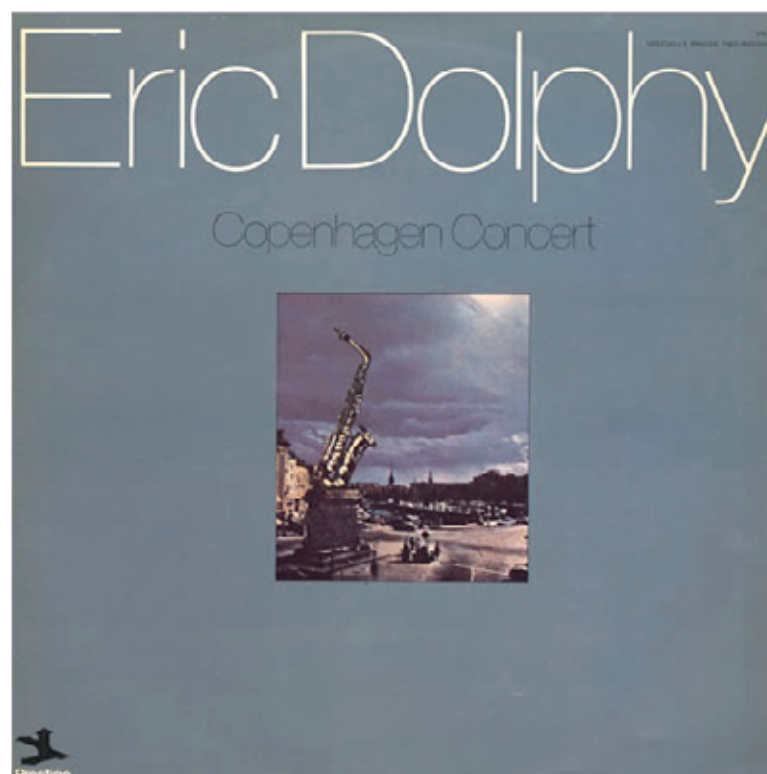
Eric Dolphy
The Copenhagen Concert

This is the first US release of recordings from Eric Dolphy's 1961 European tour. Back in the sixties and seventies, Dolphy wasn't yet on jazz's "A" team. This album, which is not as adventurous as his later work, is a bridge between his Mingus sessions and his work on *Out to Lunch*.

This concert allows Dolphy to display his playing style along with a Danish rhythm section, and the highlight of the set is his solo bass clarinet interpretation of "God Bless the Child." He deconstructs the melody, only to reassemble it as part of an abstract mosaic, all while maintaining the key elements of some ancient map.

Dolphy's use of the bass clarinet was initially limited during his tenure with Mingus, so this gave him the chance to stretch out and show his prowess. Also notable is the duet between guest bassist Chuck Israels and Dolphy's flute on "Hi-Fly." This pressing delineates each bass note superbly.

These recordings have since been reissued on Fantasy's OJC series as *Europe Volume 1 through Volume 3* and contain several performances not on the two-LP set. However, the double album offers a better overall recording with more depth. ●



A close-up photograph of the Manley Massive Passive audio interface control panel. The panel is dark grey with a fine, horizontal brushed metal texture. In the upper left, there is a black rotary switch with labels '56K - 21K', 'BOOST', 'SHELF', 'OUT', 'CUT', and 'BELL'. Below this is a large, partially visible black knob with a white scale. The brand name 'MANLEY' is engraved in large, outlined, serif capital letters across the upper middle. Below the brand name, the words 'IN' and 'POWER' are engraved. Two blue LED indicator lights are visible: one to the left of a large black knob and another to the right of a smaller black knob. The word 'GAIN' is engraved near the bottom right. At the very bottom, the words 'LOW PASS' are partially visible. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and metallic surfaces.

The Manley Massive Passive

Equally Effective For Work And Play

By Todd Sageser

As an audiophile, the hair on the back of your neck is probably standing up right now. Yes, this article centers on the dreaded “E” word. Equalizers are often considered anything but audiophile, but EveAnna Manley, well known for her company’s audiophile products is equally noteworthy in professional recording circles. The Massive Passive EQ has found a home in many of the nation’s top recording studios and is able to do all kinds of tricks and fixes, from mild to wild.

Standard Or Mastering?

The Mastering version reviewed here is a refinement to the original piece. The center frequencies of EQ have remained the same, while the amount of cut or boost has been lowered from 20 dB to 11 dB. This gives the controls a finer adjustment of those frequencies and makes this a serious contender for the audiophile who wants “the ultimate tone control” capability for his system. The control detents also allow the pro (and obsessed audiophile) to return to settings from a previous session and easily repeat past results. The original Massive Passive was created to be able to do “over the top” kind of effects in the studio, could get the uneducated audiophile in trouble because its gain capabilities might drive amplifiers and speakers to dangerous levels.

Let's start with a brief decision of the controls at your disposal. The Massive Passive is configured as two independent mono, four-band passive equalizers. Each channel has an additional high and low pass filter, followed by a tube gain/output stage. The Massive Passive is much more than just a parametric EQ because the bandwidth and cut/boost interact, as do the four individual bands of EQ. This allows the unit to stay very musical at very reasonable price of \$6000 for the mastering version and \$4800 for the regular version. Many recording engineers claim that the Massive Passive is one of the best deals in Pro Audio today.



PENAUDIO[®]

Voiced on real music.
Faithful to live music.™

CHARISMA

The Essence of Finnish Design

Simple. Elegant. Natural.

PENAUDIO USA
46 SOUTHFIELD AVENUE
THREE STAMFORD LANDING
SUITE 250
STAMFORD, CT 06902

TEL: 203-357-9922 EXT 204
FAX: 203-357-9955

additional wellbeing™



In And Out Of The Studio

To give the Massive Passive a full workout, I used it both ways. First and probably of most interest to ToneAudio readers, as a component in my stereo system and second, as a mastering equalizer, since that is the purpose for which it was originally designed.

A word about the system and connections: I don't delineate between my stereo and my recording system.

It may be a somewhat odd combination to the true audiophile, but I combine studio and audiophile components in the same room and use it for both pleasure and profit. The benefit for me is that I am intimately familiar with the sound, and that helps me get great results when creating or mastering recording projects.

I connected the Massive Passive between the main control component, a Digidesign 003 Rack, and my amplifier. The 003 serves as a digital to analog converter for my Mac Book Pro, where a combination of Protools playback and the Mac's CD and hard drive supply most of my audiophile listening material. The 003 also let me bring my phono preamp and turntable into the system. The Massive Passive has both balanced XLR connectors and 1/4 inch connectors that can be used either balanced or unbalanced. Those of you with single ended connections in your system will need custom cables or adaptors to interface with this component.

(continued)



The Massive Passive is true to its name. It is beautifully built, but it is going to commend a good chunk of rack space, as it is 5.25 inches tall, standard rack width and weighs 21 pounds. The main power switch is located top center of the front panel. Turn it on, and in about 30 seconds a relay click, and on my unbalanced setup, a faint “snap” sound from the speakers, and you’re ready to go.

Before I started my journey through the land of tone controls, I experimented with the gain settings. In unbalanced mode, the unit added gain to my system (normal when using a balanced, pro piece). The first thing I noticed in my all solid-state, and partially digital, system was a slight bit of sparkle on the very top end. Oh, those wonderful tubes!

The first thing I noticed in my all solid-state, and partially digital, system was a slight bit of sparkle on the very top end. Oh, those wonderful tubes!

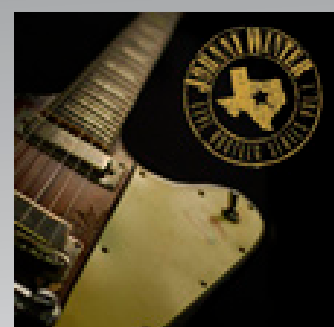
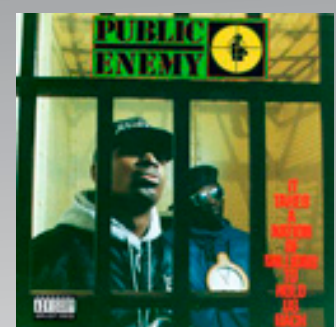
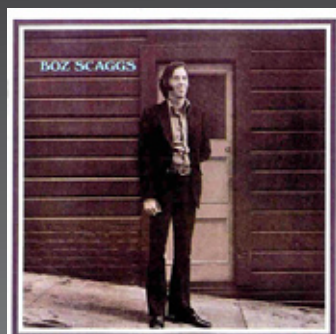
Deciphering the Massive Controls

There are four banks of switches and knobs for each channel, right and left, and a center section with power, in/out switches, gain, and low and high pass filters for each channel. These four banks are going to be where we will spend most of our time as audiophiles.

At the top are two switches. The “boost/cut” switch may be new to most users. It sets the function of the top knob. Usually, we are accustomed to the knob having both “-” and “+” settings with a center “0” detent. The switch is mounted on a translucent black panel and the “Boost” lights green, when activated. “Cut” lights red. Positive reminders of what is going on in that band. To the right is a “shelf/bell” switch. If you picture a frequency graph as a line from left to right, a bell will create a curve that looks like a bell, or inverted bell, centered around the chosen frequency, while a shelf will boost or cut all frequencies below the selected (on the bottom two bands) or above the selected (on the top two bands.) *(continued)*

SoundStageDirect

Your Online Independent Record Store



Thousands Of Titles In Stock Ready To Ship
Click On Any Of These 12 Recordings To Purchase Now
10% Discount For ToneAudio Readers, Enter Discount Code: TONE16

www.soundstagedirect.com

1-877-929-8729

International: 1-267-247-5051

The bottom knob of each bank chooses the frequency that the control affects.

The center knob on each bank chooses the width of the bell or the slope of the shelf.

I started my test with some CD material that I felt was a little tubby in the bottom end. The first CD was Sergio Mendez and Black Eyed Peas "Timeless." This CD was mixed with the hip-hop bass sound in mind, but it was just a little over the top for me. I tried a few frequencies in the lowest band and settled on 68 Hz.

Shelving wasn't quite the solution, so I tried "Bell" and found 7 clicks of cut with the bandwidth set 3 clicks from the bottom worked just right; problem solved, easily and musically.

Next I went to the other extreme, a source that lacked sparkle in the highs. This time it had to be vinyl. If you are an old guy like me, you might remember one of the first direct to disk albums from Sheffield Labs, "The Missing Link", by Lincoln Mayorga. Inside the cover, you were instructed to add 2 to 4 dB of treble. Until now, I never had a worthy equalizer to work on this masterpiece. I settled at 8K2 for the shelving frequency and a very broad, no clicks, setting on the shelf. Wow! the harpsichord shimmered and popped out of the mix, the sax was not harsh and little nuances of the xylophone and bells became audible. Even the kick of the bass drum was clearer. I would have to call the Massive Passive the "missing link"!

I had to try experimenting with mid frequencies. *(continued)*

The high mids, usually in the 3.3 K to 4.7 KHz range, can get pretty harsh on most pro equalizers. Not so on the Massive Passive. Even at higher amounts of boost, the results were very musical with a moderate bell curve.

Of course, we can't leave out those low mid frequencies. Those are the ones that can make something "thick" sounding or, if lacking, take the warmth away. I worked on a compilation CD of Duran Duran's greatest hits. Remember, great recordings don't need EQ. I liked some of those great '80s songs, but couldn't get past the anemic sound quality. Five clicks of boost at 270 Hz and the music came to life.

This can be a huge

help for a lot of music from that era.

Warning: this could get habit forming. You might find yourself as an audiophile, and mastering engineer. With the almost endless combination of adjustments available, you might spend more time tweaking, than listening. One wonderful aspect of the Massive Passive is that it is made for repeatability. Every gain and bandwidth knob has 16 detents and the frequency knobs are clearly marked with 11 frequencies. You might want to write down the settings for each piece of source material you have, so you can return to your favorite settings.

Out In The Studio

It wouldn't be fair not to use the Massive Passive for its intended purpose, so I did a couple of mastering projects with it.

Both were locally recorded and produced projects done with pro gear, but not in high

priced, acoustically perfect studios. A perfect test for this versatile device.

The first project, called "JONO", was guitar based with solo vocal tracks and a sparse mix of other instruments. Acoustic and electric guitar tracks, with a wide tonal range and many different effects, were used. As a rule, we used the Massive Passive to smooth out some bumps in the bass or low mid frequencies. This project was mixed on small studio monitors with no subwoofer. Low frequencies sometimes muddled the sound or became overwhelming on my home reference, MartinLogan Summits. Adjustments up to -7 dB at 68 Hz and 180 Hz yielded a smooth, but still powerful bass response. We also added some "zing" to the high frequencies at 8K2. This, along with the tube outputs, put the finishing touches on the 16 bit digital project.

The second project, called "The Forest", included tracks portraying different animals and situations and had one of the most diverse instrumental combinations I have ever mastered. The mix included, sax, flute, reed organ, electronic organ, synthesizer, quite a few different guitars, bass, drums, percussion, choir and solo voice.

(continued)



On this project, smaller fixes to the bass and a uniform addition of 3 dB to the highs at 12K (also called “the air band”) were the norm. Again, we noticed EQ without harshness and an overall sweetening of the sound.

I definitely need one of these for my mastering suite!

Conclusion

The Manley Massive Passive Equalizer, Mastering version, is an extraordinary device with endless uses in audiophile and professional realms. It is beautiful in construction and even more beautiful in its sound. For all its capability, it is definitely worth considering at a price of \$6,000. If you want to take the audiophile experience to the next level, this is your tool.

When Bad Things Happen To Good Records

By Jeff Dorgay

I know that most of you in the audience have labored to minimize signal paths, get mega-expensive cables and agonize over the small details to optimize your hifi system. Just the thought of putting an equalizer in your system is probably making your sphincter tighten up.

Have you ever been in a recording or mastering studio? There are miles of cables everywhere and it's usually not pretty. I'm in favor of optimizing your system as far as you can; God knows I have my share of expensive power cords, etc in mine. But what do you do when you have music that you really love and it sounds pretty flat and lifeless on your big bucks system? Do you get tired of your friends saying things like “dude, your system sounds great, but you can only play three records on it...”

If you have a large collection of incredible recordings, you don't need a Massive Passive in your hifi system. If you don't have your room properly treated, a Massive Passive will not make up for your room anomalies. However, if you are someone that has a chunk of music on CD and LP that you really love but sounds pretty flat, (or way too bright) the Massive Passive will bring an awful lot of life back to those discs.

Sure, I love to be the audiophile purist, but I'm a music lover. I'll sacrifice a bit of transparency to get the tonality back. The Massive Passive won't bring back squashed dynamics, but it will fix just about everything else once you get the hang of it, and like Todd mentioned, can give you a whole new path of obsession in the process! *(continued)*



The Connection Between Art and Science



haley

The Haley is an unsurpassed value. It is built to the same exacting standards as the "top of the line" RSA units. Designed for high-current amplifiers, front-end components, and smaller home theaters. The Haley gives you a noise-free background, huge dynamics, and protection for your audio/video investment.

- 15-amp
- 1800 watts of continuous uncompressed, uncolored power
- Three isolated RSA modified duplexes (6 outlets)
- RSA Mongoose 15-amp Power Cord optional

POWER UP

Power Line Conditioners Hand Made In California . Tel: 949.582.8072 . www.runningspringsaudio.com



running springs audio

Fortunately, my Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2 has an "external processor loop", so I was able to switch the MP into the system when I needed it and leave it out of the system when not required. A pair of XLR to RCA adaptors for the CJ and I was good to go.

Whether you have CDs with too much sizzle or older rock recordings from the 70s and 80s with problems, the Massive Passive can help. It's all subjective anyway, so you may find yourself playing Mastering God more often than you should at first, but once you get the hang of it, it's pretty cool after all.

Fortunately I don't have an addictive personality and could leave the Massive Passive out of the system on great recordings in my collection. Thanks to the control detents, I was always able to go back to where I started with a problem record and keep experimenting. But this can be a very habit forming device!

Though this is a piece of Pro gear, the sound quality is definitely audiophile quality. Yes, all of the circuitry in the MP adds a little bit of warmth overall, and those of you with a killer system will lose a bit of imaging and transparency, but I'm not talking about leaving it in your system, just use this little (well, massive) device when you need it and I guarantee you will be thrilled with the results.

I know I want one of these under the Christmas tree this year! ●

The Manley Massive Passive Equalizer

MSRP: \$6000 Mastering Version
\$4800 Regular Version

MANUFACTURER

Manley Laboratories, Inc.
13880 Magnolia Avenue
Chino, CA 91710
www.manleylabs.com

FIRST AMONG EQUALS:

The Lehmann Black Cube SE Phono Preamplifier

By Marc Phillips



After reviewing a half-dozen phono stages in the \$700 to \$1100 range, I felt I had a pretty good handle on what could be achieved at this price point. I wrote down my observations, crowned my champions and then tried to move on. But then our publisher slipped another box onto my desk at the last minute. **“I have one more. And I think you’re really going to like this one.”**

Before I could groan audibly for his benefit, I noticed the words *Lehmann Black Cube* on the outside of the carton. I started to smile. I’ve always been a big fan of the original Black Cube, and felt that it was a benchmark in affordable phono preamplifiers. While the general consensus around the analog water cooler was that the Black Cube had developed serious competition over the years, my memories of it remained fond. I looked forward to rediscovering the virtues of this classic.

That's when I noticed the words *SE* and *PWX power supply* on the box. This was not the Black Cube I'd known and admired, but a newer version with a hefty new power supply. I was indeed intrigued, and immediately took the SE home and plugged it into my reference system, eager to hear Lehmann's take on "new and improved."

New And Improved For 2008

The Lehmann Black Cube SE is basically the standard Black Cube with the upgraded *PWX* power supply. (The standard Black Cube underwent a series of modifications in 2006...more on that a little later.) The *PWX* features a 30W toroidal transformer, and has a grounded isolation coil between the primary and secondary coils as well. Lehmann states that the addition of the *PWX* results in better bass performance and more openness in the midrange.

Setting gain and impedance is extremely easy on the Lehmann, since it's all done via dip switches on the bottom of the unit. If you desire a wider range of custom settings, you can remove the case with the supplied Allen wrench and add jumpers accordingly. If your cartridge works well with 100, 1000 or 47K ohm settings, you can put that Allen wrench back in the box. I found that my unit has already been set to the proper gain (66 dB) and impedance (100 ohms) for my Koetsu, so I didn't have to change a thing.

Sets The Tone

Once the Black Cube SE was broken in, I knew I was in trouble. Like I said, I thought I knew what type of performance could be had at this price point. The SE changed everything. I knew that the SE was special when it performed one feat that is usually reserved for exotic phono stages... it sounded relaxed. *(continued)*





I've had this conversation with a number of audiophiles over the years, that novices in this hobby often expect state-of-the-art gear to sound bigger, better and more "in your face" than the affordable stuff. In reality, the good stuff seems to expand indefinitely away from the listener, and everything seems more laid-back and subtle. The SE managed to project that feeling of unlimited expansion, where every piece of musical information was presented in a distinct and logical context.

On my DCC pressing of Nat King Cole's *Love is the Thing*, for example, Cole's huge voice can completely overwhelm the string orchestra behind him, making it sound tiny in comparison. This is especially apparent on the opening tune, "When I Fall in Love." With the SE in place, there was more of a trade off between singer and strings, and each entity was allowed to exist in its own place, on equal footing.

The Lehmann could also rock the house when required. Recently acquiring a copy of Thomas Dolby's relative rare pressing of *Dolby's Cube*, I put the Lehmann Cube to the test. While the music was admittedly corny in that '80s-synth sort of way, the dynamics were impressive. My neighbors even popped over to see if I was having a party, and to find out why they weren't invited.

Ultimately, I could find so little wrong with the Black Cube SE that I determined I could live with it on an extended basis. Sure, it missed a little of the light and magic supplied by very expensive phono preamps, but those qualities are so intangible that it's hard to sit down with a clipboard

and say, "Well, the Lehmann was a touch reticent in the upper-low mids and the deep upper-bass." Top to bottom, the SE sounded smooth, seamless and right.

Not One, But Two Versions

I was lucky enough to compare the Black Cube SE to the original Black Cube, which Lehmann still offers for \$699. This is a slightly different animal than the Black Cube that was introduced in 1995. The input stages have been changed, chokes have been added to the power supply lines, and more flexibility is offered in terms of loading and gain. The main unit appears to be identical to the SE. The only difference is the power supply, which is much smaller than the PWX.

Compared to the SE, the Black Cube exhibits a slightly smaller soundstage, and it can't quite resolve the same amount of detail as its big brother. The overall presentation seemed a bit more forward and shallow. The Black Cube sounded glossier and less organic. Still, I felt that this unit offered a very pleasing sound for the price. Chances are I wouldn't have even noticed these shortcomings if I hadn't had the SE sitting right next to it, ready to strut its stuff on a moment's notice.

So the Black Cube is an excellent value and still very competitive among today's crop of \$500 to \$700 phono stages. But the SE is absolutely off the charts. It seems silly not to spend the extra \$350 for the PWX power supply and to call it a day.

The SE is absolutely off the charts. It seems silly not to spend the extra \$350 for the PWX power supply and to call it a day.

Second Opinion

By Jeff Dorgay

I've been fortunate enough to spend a lot of time in the semi stratosphere of analog for the last couple of years, but I'm still very intrigued by the gear a couple of clicks above entry level; let's say the Journeyman audio-ophile range. Perhaps you've become caught up in this vinyl renaissance that we've been enjoying for a while now with a budget table, cartridge and arm and you would like to step up a couple of notches, but aren't ready for the 3-10 thousand dollar phono stage.

Quite a few very capable phono stages have come through the door in the 600-1000 dollar range over the last six months, and I've had a blast listening to them all. However, I think this one is a definite cut above the others I've had the privilege of listening to.

The biggest question I'm always asked both in person and on internet forums is "What makes box A *better* than box B? Isn't it all subjective?" Yes and no, but I'm always listening to whether component A can reveal more music than component B, in terms of detail, tonality and dynamics. This is a test the Black Cube SE passes with flying colors. I enjoyed all of the others and they definitely had their strengths and weaknesses, but the Black Cube SE was a cut above the rest in terms of how much music it could reveal.

I agree with Marc after putting the Cube SE through its paces with a number of different phono cartridges and turntables from the SL1200 all the way up to the Continuum. The Cube SE gives you a good helping of what the expensive phono stages offer at a bargain price. No, it's not a giant killer, but it is a very well thought out product that puts the emphasis on sound, rather than a fancy box.



At this price point, every 25 bucks that can be diverted from casework to parts count is huge and this approach really helps the Cube SE deliver the goods while keeping the price reasonable.

While this phono preamp is limited by how much resolution it can deliver in an ultimate sense, it is at the top of its class at this price level. Mids are very open and natural, with the lower register being extremely solid, powerful and well defined. Where it falls down a bit is in the upper registers, things get a little grainy and congested; but that's what makes you step up to a 3-5000 dollar phono pre-amp!

What impressed me the most about the Cube SE was its overall balance. The other preamps in this price range all seemed to excel in one area, where the Cube SE did everything equally well in all areas and that's a winner for me. ●

The Lehman Black Cube

MSRP: \$1050, SE version \$699 standard version

DISTRIBUTOR Immedia Sound

www.immediasound.com

510-559-2050


PERIPHERALS

Turntables: Technics SL1200, SOTA Sapphire w/RB1000 arm, Michell Orb w/SME V Raven TWO w/SME iV.Vi

Cartridges: Ortofon Blue, Koetsu Rosewood Signature, Zu Denon 103, Clearaudio Maestro Wood Dynavector 17D3

For the complete list of Marc Phillips' reference components, click here. ●

For the complete list of Jeff Dorgay's reference components, click here. ●



Mystère ia21 Integrated Amplifier

By Marc Phillips

It still surprises me when I encounter people who don't know that Acura is merely the luxury marque of Honda, or that Lexus is Toyota's premium division or that Infinitis are nothing more than gussied-up Nissans. In most cases this is by design, however, with the marketing executives at each division aiming for an identity separate from the more common automotive brethren.

By the same token I've been surprised to hear audiophiles declare that Mystère, a new brand of push-pull pentode tube amplifiers, is nothing more than an upscale product line from PrimaLuna, as if they'd uncovered some vast conspiracy. (*Upscale* is the operative word here, with Mystère being marketed and distributed by Kevin Deal of Upscale Audio.) First of all, there's no shame in being related to the fine line of affordable, high-performance, high-value tubed products from Durob Audio in the Netherlands, just as there is no shame in being a cousin to a Honda, Toyota or Nissan. If the pedigree is strong to start with, there's nowhere to go but up.



So let's get it over with—if you want to be an audio cynic, you can say that the Mystère integrated amplifiers are just another step above PrimaLuna's entry-level ProLogue and the intermediate DiaLogue product lines. There...feel better? However, while the Mystère ia11 and ia21 integrat-eds do roughly approximate the same layout and dimensions as the PrimaLunas, you'd be ignoring the extraordinary fit-and-finish, build quality and, of course, the sound.

I've Got The Big One

We received both the ia11 and ia21 integrated amplifiers for review, which we ended up referring to as “the little one” and the “big one.” The ia21 is step over the ia11 in a few key areas, such as power output (50wpc vs. 40), and the ia21's ability to optimize the amplifier for KT88s and EL34 output tubes through Durob's proprietary Adaptive AutoBias board, which constantly monitors and

adjusts the bias of each power tube. By pushing a rocker switch on the side of the ia21 and swapping out the tubes, you can choose between two fairly different sonic presentations in just a few minutes.

Just like the PrimaLuna amps, you can use any one of the compatible tubes (EL34, 6L6, 6550 or KT88) and do not require matching in either amplifier, thanks to their AutoBias system. The ia21 takes this a step further by allowing you to slightly fine tune the auto bias for the EL34 or 6550/KT88 tubes to take advantage of the higher power dissipation in those tubes. When I talked to Kevin Deal, he told me “You can still take advantage of the different tubes in both amplifiers due to the AutoBias, but by being able to further optimize the AutoBias for the two tube types in the ia21, we were able to get a bit more power in the larger version”. *(continued)*

By pushing a rocker switch on the side of the ia21 and swapping out the tubes, you can choose between two fairly different sonic presentations in just a few minutes.



In addition to these useful features, the ia21 also uses larger power transformers than its little brother. Both models, however, feature a high-quality 24-step volume knob and soft-start circuitry that preserves the life of the tubes over the long haul. Overall, the ia21 is a substantial beast, weighing in at approximately 60 pounds. With its beautiful piano-black gloss finish and its extraordinary build quality, the ia21 accomplishes quite a bit at its relatively low price of \$3000.

Serve Me Up A Set Of EL-34s Please

I started listening to the ia21 with the KT88s installed. After letting everything break in for a few weeks, I felt that the ia21 retained many of the same qualities as the PrimaLuna amps I've heard, such

as the ProLogue One and DiaLogue One, with just a touch more refinement. In other words, the ia21 with the KT88s offered a warm, immediate and slightly forward presentation that made an excellent first impression. My only reservations concerned a lack of real power and authority in deep bass performance, and a slight loss in detail in the treble. I also noted a little bit of shallowness in overall soundstage depth as well. But none of these minor flaws were deal-breakers, and after two or three weeks, I felt that the Mystère ia21 was a solid performer and a good deal.

When I swapped out the KT88s for the EL34s, however, my opinion of the ia21 changed radically. The soundstage expanded in every direction, creating a

sonic presentation that was more suited to my personal preferences. The immediacy in the midrange, for instance, reminded me of my days as an SET enthusiast, especially in the way that solo voices would just hang eerily in the air between speakers. With the KT88s in place, the voices sounded similar, yet crowded into a smaller space.

The EL34s allowed those voices to roam around freely, almost leisurely.

These sonic qualities suited more intimate types of music, such as Jakob Dylan's solo CD, *Seeing Things*. The ia21 really underlined Rick Rubin's participation in this recording, maintaining the same spare and haunted sensibilities that characterized his work with Johnny Cash.

(continued)

When I swapped out the KT88s for the EL34s...the soundstage expanded in every direction.

DH LABS

SILVER SONIC



D.H. Labs, Inc.
 9638 NW 153rd Terrace
 Alachua, FL 32615
 (386) 418-0560 FAX (386) 462-3162

www.SilverSonic.com

In the opening cut, "Evil Is Alive and Well," Dylan's voice was so well-rounded and present that I felt like I could get up from the couch and walk around him a few times as he sat there. I had the same impression listening to Bonnie "Prince" Billy's latest recording, *Lie Down in the Light*, feeling as if I could tell Will Oldham was in much better spirits since 2006's melancholy *The Letting Go*.

Through the immediacy of the presentation, I could hear his mood change from one recording to the next as if a headache had slowly subsided.

In the following weeks, I switched back and forth between the EL34s and the KT88s several times. I know the latter tube has its fans, and many listeners may appreciate its more authoritative and forward sound. The delicacy of the ia21 with the EL34s, however, was too compelling to ignore. For me, the choice is obvious.

Let's Not Forget the Little One

I did have a chance to listen to the ia21's little brother, the ia11, after I sent the ia21 home. For me, the smaller Mystère shared the same overall character with the ia21 with the KT88s in place. The lack of truly deep bass was perhaps a bit more noticeable, as was the relatively shallow soundstage. But seeing how the ia11 is \$1000 cheaper, these shortcomings are more than reasonable, although my first instinct was to wonder how an EL34 option would transform this amplifier.

Both amps share the same gorgeous glossy finish. The "little one," at 45 pounds, is still a substantial machine. The only problem I had with either amplifier from an aesthetic standpoint was their ability to attract dust. *(continued)*

I do live on the edge of a forest, and it's the time of year when you can see a lot of things floating around in the air. But owning either *Mystère* is tantamount to owning a black car – if you want them to look nice, you need to dust them off every couple of days. Or at least you do in my neck of the woods, pardon the pun.

It Takes a Village to Build an Amplifier

The only remaining consideration on whether or not to buy the ia21 depends upon your opinion on Chinese-built electronics. Indeed, while both *Mystère* and *PrimaLuna* are designed in The Netherlands by Durob Audio, the amps are manufactured in China. Both the folks at Durob Audio and Kevin Deal have taken great pains to ensure that all *Mystère* amps are submitted to the highest quality control and manufacturing oversight. In fact, if you are familiar with *PrimaLuna* amplifiers, you'll know that the reliability on these units are among the absolute highest in the audio industry. Kevin Deal has reported a defect rate of one-half of one percent on *PrimaLuna* gear, the best he's experienced in 33 years of business. He has the same high level of confidence in the new *Mystère* gear as well.

Everything about the *Mystère* integrated amplifiers has been designed around convenience, reliability and ease of use. It's clear that both Upscale Audio and Durob Audio have targeted those audiophiles who want to take the tube amplifier plunge but are worried about tube replacement costs and the potential danger of tube failures, especially around kids and pets. The beautifully-finished tube cage will keep everything out of harm's reach. With the Adaptive AutoBias circuit in place, you won't have to worry about setting the bias on each individual output tube. You'll also get thousands of hours of music before you have to replace those tubes. Finally, if you've ever dealt with Kevin before, you'll know he has enough EL34s and KT88s in stock to get you through the next several decades of listening sessions.

In my opinion, however, bug Kevin for as many EL34s as possible. With these in place, the "big one" becomes a true giant in the world of integrated amplifiers.

Second Opinion By Jeff Dorgay

As a testament to *PrimaLuna*'s build quality, I still have my original ProLogue 1 that I reviewed for *The Absolute Sound* almost five years ago and it has performed without a hitch. Finally about ready for a retube, it has performed flawlessly in my system and that of a couple of friends that I have let borrow it. (only to become hooked on the tube thing, I might add)

I had the option to try both of the *Mystère* amplifiers (review on the ia11 soon) with an extremely wide range of speakers and I suspect Marc's lack of bass was due to an incompatibility with his Gibbon 9's. I had fantastic luck with the Harbeth Compact 7's and the Stirling Broadcast LS3/5a's. Heck, they even did an admirable job powering my MartinLogan Summits which are notorious for giving tube amplifiers a hard time.

I do agree with Marc however, on the EL34 vs. KT 88 thing. It's up to you in the end, but I really found the seductive nature of the EL34's hard to beat. A good compromise if you go with the KT88's to take a bit of the edge off that presentation is to swap out some NOS 6SN7's for the stock ones. This will bring you about half way between the two sounds. Similar to my experience with other *PrimaLuna* amplifiers, a great variation on the theme that works well with the *Mystère* amps is the 6L6GT. If you want that vintage McIntosh sound, there is a little less power on tap, but definitely a more syrupy, woody sound.

A quick peek under the chassis reveals point to point wiring, very good parts and a fanatic attention to detail.

I borrowed my old JBL-L166's back from staff writer Jerold O'Brien and had a blast listening to 70's rock. I'm sure an old pair of Advents or even some Altec 19's might be very cool if you are in this kind of a mood. Just plug in a set of 6L6's and get in the time machine! The best part of the journey is that you don't need a 40 year old amp with questionable capacitors to get it! A quick peek under the chassis reveals point to point wiring, very good parts and a fanatic attention to detail. They never looked this good in the old days! When you are done, drop your tubes of choice and return to the present day. How much fun is that?

Extended listening with the Harbeths was a major treat. I was very excited about how musical this amplifier sounded, yet possessing more resolution than the ProLogue series does. I think for a lot of people, the *Mystère* ia21 could become the central hub of a very high quality music system on a reasonable budget. ●



"Clearly one of the top
phono preamplifiers..."

Helmut Rohrwild
HiFi & Records

"Spot-on tonality..."

Jeff Dorgay
TONEAudio

audio | revelation
MUSICAL TRUTH)))

bringing music to life



Featuring our recent
shootout winner,
The Vacuum State
JLTi Phono Stage

Analog Specialists

25+ Years of Experience
40+ Leading Edge Brands

760.944.0444

www.audiorevelation.com

The Mystere ia21

MSRP: \$2999

MANUFACTURER


Mystère USA


www.mystere-usa.com

PERIPHERALS

Source Components: Naim
CD5i, Classe CDP 102, Prima
Luna ProLogue 8, Meridian 808

Speakers: DeVore Gibbon 9,
Harbeth Compact 7ES-3,
MartinLogan Summit, Paradigm
S1 Signature, Sterling LS3/5a

For the complete list of Marc
Phillips' reference components,
click here. 

For the complete list of Jeff
Dorgay's reference components,
click here. 

Stirling LS3/5a V2 Speaker

The Little Legend Revisited

By Randy Wells

“These are great speakers!”

I watched as I typed the words I’d heard so many times before. Could I remain objective in assessing an icon repeatedly heralded as the small speaker with the big sound?

I knew it would be tough to be unbiased - I’ve been an original LS3/5a owner for thirty years and I don’t buy gear that often; I’m not a hifi equipment collector or an LS3/5a cultist either. The original Rogers I bought in 1978 are the only LS3/5a speakers I have ever owned (one of the first speakers I ever owned actually) and the only component from that era that I haven’t sold or traded in by now.

kind of fell into them actually, and they saw me through until a pair of ProAc floor standing speakers resigned the LS3/5as to my bedroom system. From there the Rogers moved into a modest living room system when I bought a pair of Maggie 3.6Rs. Even when relegated to a bookshelf position in this moderately large room, visitors would often remark on how big they sounded for their size.

This was one of the main reasons I kept them, or maybe it was their portability and relative ease to fit into any space. Don't forget their magical midrange! Either way – those original Rogers LS3/5a's have turned out to be one of the best investments in hi-fi I've ever made.

A Spot of History

For those unfamiliar with LS3/5a history, this is it in a nutshell: In the early '70s, the BBC was in need of a small monitor speaker for use in their outdoor broadcast vans. So they had their design team develop a compact two-way sealed box speaker for that environment. The result was the original 15-ohm BBC LS3/5a. It was somewhat limited in dynamics and frequency range, but had a neutral tonality and worked well in a near field listening position at moderate volumes – perfectly suited for a small control room. Later, the BBC licensed the LS3/5a design to several commercial speaker companies for serial production.

Aside from Rogers, these manufacturers eventually included Chartwell, Audiomaster, Spondor, Harbeth, RAM, Goodmans, and KEF. The design was revised in 1988 when the woofer surround and crossover were altered - to bring production response closer to target and to make the impedance a less demanding 11-ohms. In 1990, the BBC approved a biwiring option. Production of the original LS3/5a finally ceased in the late 90's when KEF no longer felt it was financially worthwhile to remanufacture the 3/4" dome T27 tweeter and 4" B110 midrange/woofer.

Today's LS3/5a

In 2005, Stirling Broadcast had obtained a license from the BBC to commission the remanufacture of new T27 and B110 drive units from KEF, and reintroduced the LS3/5a to the market with high quality crossovers. After encountering some uncertainties with the continued supply of the KEF drivers, Stirling introduced an updated version of their LS3/5a, now known as the V2, which uses specially prepared SEAS and ScanSpeak drive units and Stirling SuperSpec V2 crossovers that reportedly accurately mimic the response characteristics of the original versions. Like their predecessors, the diminutive Stirling speakers stand a foot tall and are surrounded by a beautiful hardwood veneer and cost \$1795 per pair.

Standard finishes are Cherry, Walnut, or Ash. At a slightly higher total price of \$1,995 per pair, Maple Burl, Ebony, or Rosewood finished Stirling V2s are available. The grilles are made from the same Tygan material as the originals, and two pairs of gold plated binding posts are fitted to the rear panel of each speaker to allow for biwiring.

(continued)





A supplied pin that passes through both posts allows for a single wire option, which is what I used for my review. I received two perfectly finished Ebony pairs of Stirling V2 LS3/5a speakers, which our Editor had played for a couple of weeks. One pair was a standard V2 version with built in crossovers, and the other pair came without internal crossovers, only to be used with the supplied special external crossovers (and said so in a large warning label on the speaker back). More on these later...

Listening Rooms Large and Small

The majority of my listening was done near field with the LS3/5a speakers on 26 inch tall stands in my main listening room, which is 16.5 feet wide and 26 feet long. Since this space is larger than many would recommend for LS3/5as, I also placed them in a smaller 10 by 14 foot room for comparison. The Sterling LS3/5a speakers worked surprisingly well in the large listening room with my reference system. No, they did not completely envelop the larger space with sound, but when I hooked them up to my 300W triode tube power amps they sounded simply magnificent. *(continued)*

When you want to hear the truth...



echo
audio

Fine Home Audio
Bought - Sold

425 SW 10th Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97205

888.248.echo
503.223.2292

echohifi.com
echoaudio@hotmail.com

m-f 11-6
sat 12-5

Careful positioning of these speakers wound up paying huge dividends in both tonality and soundstage depth. I ended up toeing them in just slightly and placing them about 4 feet from the back wall, 5.5 feet apart, and 6 feet from my listening chair. Overall balance and ability to fill the room improved when I moved the speakers into the 10 by 14 foot space; however it did not preclude my moving them back to the larger room when I had a chance. When used in the smaller room, with a 50 watt per channel Creek solid-state integrated amplifier (which, like Naim, is the type of British gear often used with LS3/5as), their character was retained, but some of the resolution was diminished, so associated gear is as important as the room size to get the best out of this revealing speaker.

Most people notice the mid-range first when they initially hear a pair of LS3/5a speakers. Open, rich, tactile and warm, it is this life-like midrange that is one of the speaker's two great strengths. The other is its impressive soundstaging. The ability to disappear is not unusual in a speaker this small, but what is extraordinary is the solid imaging within a deep soundstage that these mini-monitors can produce. For their size, they are simply amazing in their ability to reproduce a palpable stereo image with proper tonality in a near field environment (no wonder the BBC used them as mini-monitors).

Like the originals, the Stirlings exhibit a treble that is open and well extended, with excellent transparency and resolution that is only lacking when compared to the best panel designs. Attack and decay are well rendered, though not as completely as speakers costing (and weighing) much more. The upper midrange is portrayed effortlessly with just a hint of nasality. The lower midrange is neutral, harmonically rich and complex. Bass is taut, punchy, uncolored and falls off sharply below about 40 Hz. The illusion of strong bass reproduction is excellent however – not boomy or one-note - thanks to a 2 dB bump in the mid-bass region provided by the crossover equalization. *(continued)*

**For their size, they
are simply amazing...**



Great Sound.Great Price.



Onix from AV 123

Onix Electronics offers a full line of amplifiers and

CD players for 2-channel enthusiasts.

All of our gear is designed and manufactured by us

to bring you equipment that looks and sounds like

higher priced gear! The experts agree.

*"Even dyed-in-the-wool 'philes
should put this rig on the menu..."*

Srajan Ebaen
6moons.com

"The result, great sound!"

Jeff Dorgay
ToneAudio

Purchase from us directly at

www.av123.com

877-543-7500

Even LS3/5a cultists will concede this speaker is not perfect, if they are completely honest with themselves. However, you may decide like many do - that this speaker's minor deficiencies are easily overlooked when the realistic projected presence of the LS3/5a is considered.

It is important to note that all LS3/5a speakers are somewhat insensitive at 83 dB and will require at least 50 watts per channel (more is better) to approach the dynamics they are capable of. Also, these mini-monitors will only play to sub-rock concert levels, since we are really talking about shoebox sized speakers here. Since the LS3/5a is so revealing, it can sound thin and congested if played at high volume with low quality amps, pre-amps or CD players. However, given high quality components and enough juice, these speakers will play very loud and demonstrate perfect manners, with all the musicality you could hope for from a speaker this small.

A Few Comparisons

I pulled out disc after disc - both shiny and black - as I spent my time enjoying, or shall I say rediscovering, these enthralling speakers. Jazz records like Analogue Productions' 45-RPM LP of Bill Evans Trio's *Waltz For Debby* were rendered with intimacy and believability. All the nuances, including those tinkling glasses and Scott LaFaro's subtle bass plucks, appeared before me. The same held true for such Classical violin works as *Heifetz Concertos: Sibelius/Prokofiev/Glazunov* on Living Stereo SACD, where the monitors simply got out of the way and let the music speak to me directly. *(continued)*



That “magic” midrange is still there, with all the warmth and resonance it’s famous for. Colored? Just a bit. Musical? You bet! Compelling? Absolutely.

When I played “Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes” from Paul Simon’s *Graceland* CD, each layer of the introductory vocals was portrayed distinctly, and bass was rendered dynamically with accurate timbres. The same thing happened when I played Neil Young’s *Harvest* from a West German CD. Each successive album convinced me these speakers were even better than I had remembered them to be. And when I cued up an original UK pressing of *Led Zep-pelin IV* on my P9, I found myself getting out of my chair and playing air guitar. Great dynamics, ringing chords, and realistic drums, cymbals and vocals all heightened my listening pleasure immeasurably. What more could anyone want? Well, these tiny speakers also work really well with a high quality subwoofer, like my Revel B-15, which extends the bass and fleshes out the bottom octave, so you can rock on even harder.

My job as reviewer was not quite done. I still needed to listen to the Stirling pair with the Cicable external crossovers. I also needed to compare the standard Stirling set to my original LS3/5as. After deciphering how to wire up the supplied crossovers, I discovered that everything I loved about the standard Stirlings improved when used with the Xtracable/Cicable V2 premium crossovers – smoother vocals, more coherent imaging, and cleaner

dynamics. The difference was undoubtedly significant, but the decision is up to you as to whether the external crossovers are something you need, since this essentially doubles the total cost of the speakers.

The Absolute Tests

OK, now on to the cultist test - the Rogers I own are early models that have never been serviced or restored – walnut finish, 15-ohm impedance and single-wire design. Funny thing is – I haven’t hooked them up to my main system for years. Probably because the binding posts had worn out and I had never gotten around to replacing them. When I eventually inserted them into my reference system, it was like time had peeled layers from my life. All that presence and foot-tapping rhythm had me grinning broadly. Yet, as good as the Rogers were, the Stirlings played a bit louder with a fuller and more extended bass. Harmonically, top to bottom, the Stirlings were also more coherent than the originals. On the other hand, the slightly heavier Rogers reproduced vocals more seductively and conveyed more “air”, detail, and microdynamics. Maybe the newer speaker just needed a few years of break-in to perfectly match the originals – I don’t know. But the difference between them is not enough to worry about. The main thing

is that their sonic signature is the same. That “magic” midrange is still there, with all the warmth and resonance it’s famous for. Colored? Just a bit. Musical? You bet! Compelling? Absolutely.

Don’t be fooled – this mini-monitor will never be confused with a mega-bucks six-foot tall panel speaker or a floor standing full range dynamic transducer. It’s not an old-style, overly rich, romantic box speaker that lulls you into dullsville either. Nor is it one of those modern pinpoint accuracy knock-offs that has you running for every tweak you own just to tame its top end. This speaker is well balanced, and just like the Leica M rangefinder camera, it’s a classic that has continued in production for all these years because they got it right the first time.

Yes, these are great speakers, and having rediscovered their wonderful qualities, I’m still a bit star-struck. So, I’ll simply leave you with the most objective conclusion that I can: If you have a small listening room (and even if you don’t), the Stirling V2 LS3/5a speakers partnered with some stands and great gear will allow for a thoroughly beguiling listening experience. With their impeccable fit and finish, 5-year warranty and classic sonic signature, these little legends with the big sound continue to be one of the best bargains in hi-fi. *(continued)*

NEW PRODUCT

SKY SERIES

signal cables

Sky Series Signal Cables: An Evolution in Signal Cable Science!

A PATENTED BREAKTHROUGH IN SIGNAL GEOMETRY!

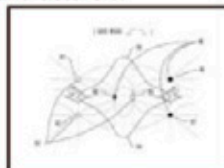
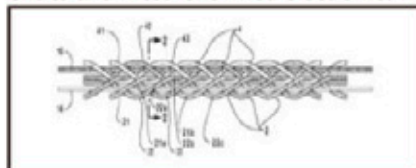
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating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

Shunyata Research's patented *Helix Geometry* solves the cable reactance problem. Wide conductor spacing and 90-degree crossing angles, minimize capacitance. Counter-rotating helices that are longitudinally offset create disparate EFF (electromagnetic flux fields) that minimize inductive reactance! Only the *Helix Geometry* achieves both low capacitive reactance AND low inductive reactance.

By virtually eliminating the self-induced distortion inherent in all other cable designs, *Shunyata Research's* hand-braided *Helix Geometry Cables* have brought about universally documented endorsements from the world's foremost recording engineers, studios and sound professionals, as well as the industry's toughest critics and most renowned electronics manufacturers.



A DEFINABLE ADVANCE IN CONDUCTOR SCIENCE

After 3 years of development and testing, *Shunyata Research* introduces *Cohergenic Conductors*. *Cohergenic Conductors* are the result of a process that creates a permanent inter-molecular alignment of the copper molecules within a conductor. During the extrusion process or the casting process of copper wire, the wire is in a molten to semi-molten state. In this state, the molecules are free to move in relation to one another. As the copper cools and hardens the molecules are locked into place in a relatively random orientation.

The *Cohergenic Process* creates an electrical alignment of the molecules through the use of a *Shunyata Research* designed electromagnet. The electromagnet's powerful electromagnetic field induces an electrical current within the conductor while the conductor cools, locking the molecules into electrical alignment — PERMANENTLY.

UNIQUE ALPHA CRYOGENIC PROCESS

All connectors are treated with *Shunyata Research's* exclusive performance enhancing *Alpha Cryogenic Process*. This treatment uses a modified atmospheric condition during the cryogenic treatment process that improves upon the effects of conventional nitrogen based cryo treatments.

PATENTED SCIENCE — A REVELATION IN PERFORMANCE

The *Sky Series's* advances in *Helix Geometry*, proprietary *Cohergenic Conductors* and the exclusive *Alpha Cryogenic Process* deliver performance in recording and entertainment systems that simply must be experienced to be appreciated.

Contact *Shunyata Research* or your nearest authorized *Shunyata Research* dealer for a complete system demonstration!

www.shunyata.com
MADE IN USA — POULSBORO, WA



If you would like to read a brief interview with Derek Hughes, the man responsible for helping to bring the Stirling LS3/5a to life, click here to go to our website. Thanks to Clark Williams at Acoustic Sounds for making this possible. ●

MSRP: \$1795 in standard finishes,
\$1995 in upgraded finishes

MANUFACTURER

Stirling Broadcast
Bridgefoot Lodge, Lydford
on Fosse
Somerset, UK

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier: Vacuum Tube Logic
TL-5.5 line stage

Power Amplifiers: Vacuum Tube
Logic Signature Triode MB-250
monoblocks, Creek 4140 integrated

Other Speakers: Rogers LS3/5a,
Revel Performa B-15 subwoofer,
Magnepan MG 3.6

Analog Source: Rega P9 with
RB1000 arm and Koetsu Rose-
wood cartridge, Cary PH302 phono
stage

Digital Source: Linn Unidisk 1.1

Interconnects: Harmonic Technol-
ogy Magic Link One and Pro-Silway
Mk III, Grover SC

Speaker Cables: Transparent Au-
dio Musicwave Ultra MM

Power Cords: Running Springs
Audio Mongoose, Black Sand
Chromium, Violet and Reference

Power Conditioners: Running
Springs Haley and Duke

Vibration Control: Fim roller-
blocks, Mapleshade platforms and
Isoblocks, DIY air suspension, Tar-
get wall stands

DAC Mini

The Channel Islands VDA•2

By Jeff Dorgay



With so many people using computers as a source component these days and the Wadia 170i iPod dock coming on strong, outboard DAC's are making a big comeback. Some of the recent models from PS Audio, Bryston, Wadia and Benchmark offer major flexibility in terms of inputs with everything from USB to glass optical inputs so that you can make your DAC a digital hub. Much like the way phono preamplifiers have progressed in complexity, this is already starting to happen with DAC's; some offer huge feature sets and numerous inputs, while the Channel Islands VDA•2 DAC you see here is tiny with just two inputs.

Only \$599, the VDA•2 looks like a small outboard power supply, or you can order the VAC•1 High Current Power Supply for an additional \$179, which is the same size. Together the two don't take up half the space on your equipment rack that a standard sized component would.

Don't let the small size fool you, only 4½" wide, 2½" tall and 4" deep, weighing less than a pound (per box), this has to be the highest amount of digital performance per ounce available today! I started the review with the standard wall wart power supply to get used to the VDA•2, switching to the outboard supply once I was very familiar with its character.

There is a switch on the front panel to choose between the two inputs and another switch to change phase between 0 and 180 degrees. Heck, my Naim 555 doesn't have that! The VDA•2 stays on all the time and the blue LED lights up to let you know that the digital signal input you have selected has been locked onto, it is not a power on indicator. *(continued)*

Don't let the small size fool you, only 4½" wide, 2½" tall and 4" deep, weighing less than a pound (per box), this has to be the highest amount of digital performance per ounce available today!



m y s t è r e

It's Here

[From the same people that bring you PrimaLuna]
 — and why it has Adaptive AutoBias™

For more information, please contact
 Upscale Audio at 909/931-9686
 or visit us at www.mystere-usa.com
 A limited number of dealer positions are open



the i011 \$1999
 40 watts per channel

the i021 \$2999
 50 watts per channel



Stepped attenuator
 volume control.

Exotic, expensive and unheard of
 in this price category.

Setup

I used the VDA•2 in all three of my systems with excellent results and I put this little powerhouse up against some of the best digital the world has to offer: The Wadia 581i SE, the Meridian 808 and of course, my Naim 555 as well as some very good players in the 2-3000 dollar range to be fair. I also happened to have a DAC1 Pre from Benchmark and the new Digital Link III from PS Audio, so a lot of cable swapping was done over the last few months!

The VDA•2 was a breeze to set up and for the majority of my listening, I used my iPod Classic (with a mixture of uncompressed and Apple Lossless files), the Sooloos Music Server and my Mac Mini running Windows Vista to take advantage of some Super HD files from MusicGiants, as the VDA•2 will lock on sampling rates up to 192 khz through the coaxial input and 96khz via the Toslink input.

A standard issue Monster Cable optical cable went from my Mac Mini for input two and a 1.5 meter length of Audience AU24 digital cable was used for input one from the Sooloos music server. The stock power cord was used for all listening.

Surprise, Make Mine Digital!

Regular readers of this magazine know that I am not very big on the "giant killer" philosophy in regards to high-end audio. For the most part, I believe you get what you pay for and as you go up the price scale (with reputable companies that build products in substantial quantities) you usually get more performance. *(continued)*

m y s t è r e

Granted, some products tend to be more biased in terms of strict performance, while others tip the scale on features and functionality.

I must say that in terms of sheer audio performance, the VDA•2 offers up some of the most musically revealing and tonally pleasing sound from a digital source I've heard at anywhere near this price. There are a few in the 1000-2500 dollar range that have more inputs, fancier case work, etc., etc., which may be more appealing to you, but if you can get by with one RCA input and one Toslink input, this is the one to buy. I defy you to find significantly better at 2-3 times the price. With the additional power supply, you are going to have to spend upward of 3-4000 dollars to get a significant jump in sound quality.

Putting the first 100 hours on the VDA•2, I placed it in my main reference system and used an 80 gig iPod Classic with a combination of Apple Lossless and uncompressed music files. Pleasant out of the box, after a few days of play, everyone here was incredibly impressed at how musical this combination sounded. Switching back and forth between a couple of different budget turntable combinations that were comparably priced, everyone picked the sound of the iPod/VDA•2 when they did not know what source was playing!

Big Sound, Small Box

Channel Islands owner/designer Dusty Vawter said once when we were talking about the circuit design of the VDA•2 "Sometimes, it's not what you put in, but what you take out that's important. We made the circuit on this as absolutely simple as we could while still maintaining performance." With only one transistor per channel in the output stage, I don't know how it could get much simpler. But it works very well.

As always, the proof is in the listening. I started with a lot of classic rock and was surprised going through my favorite warhorses (Steely Dan, Pink Floyd, Dire Straits, and so forth) how open and dynamic the VDA•2 was. When listening to the opening riffs of the title track on Robin Trower's *Bridge of Sighs* (MoFi 24kt gold disc) I noticed the airiness and the phase shifts applied as the sound bounced back and forth between the speakers the way it does on my better players. Getting back to the 21st Century, Papa Roach's *The Paramour Sessions* is filled with a lot of layered guitars and thunderous bass lines. Again, this little DAC delivered the goods in a very impressive manner. *(continued)*



"Sometimes, it's not what you put in, but what you take out that's important. We made the circuit on this as absolutely simple as we could while still maintaining performance."



If you have a better system, the power supply is a must. This upgrade took the VDA•2 to another level of transparency and dynamics.

The real test that inexpensive digital usually fails though, is acoustic music. Dark Side of the Moon might sound great on your budget player, but the minute you listen to a violin or a piano, it all goes south in a hurry. Not this time, changing the mood to some Joe Sample that I digitized from *The Three* with the Lyra Olympos on my Raven Two turntable (using an SME iV.Vi tonearm) sounded surprisingly analog, with the decay and tonality of Samples' piano well intact. Acoustic instruments had an excellent sense of tonal correctness, which is extremely difficult to nail at this price point.

We all Need Power and Balance

If you just use the VDA•2 with the wall wart, it's still a killer DAC. For many people with more budget-oriented systems, it will probably be all you ever need. I always appreciate a product with an upgrade path, especially when it is this reasonably priced. For another \$179, you can purchase the VAC•1 power supply and if you have a preamplifier with true balanced inputs, grab the VRX•1 balanced cable assembly. The VRX•1 connects both phases of the single ended output to an XLR connector for a true balanced output. Mating the CI DAC with the new BAT VK-32SE preamplifier that is fully balanced, I did observe a slightly lower noise floor with a touch more slam when playing very dynamic music with the balanced cables.

If you have a better system, the power supply is a must. This upgrade took the VDA•2 to another level of transparency and dynamics. Listening to "Screaming Like a Baby" on Bowie's *Scary Monsters* CD revealed more texture and layers of overdubs than I was used to hearing on any of the recent crop of \$3000 CD players we've had in for review. Taking the power supply out flattened the front to back imaging in a pretty substantial manner, but returning it to the system made me realize I couldn't live without it.

Giant Killer or Not?

As I said at the beginning of the review, if you only need one or two digital inputs and are on a tight budget, this is your ticket to digital paradise. Correction, your ticket to *musical* paradise. No, I'm not selling my Naim any time soon, but this does such a great job on the musical fundamentals, it doesn't send you running out of the room screaming when you play a digital source. (continued)

DeVORE FIDELITY

HAND-BUILT BY HUMANS IN NEW YORK CITY



The Nines

www.devorefidelity.com

A lot of uneducated ears were floored that I was listening to an iPod or laptop through an \$850 DAC. And the snooty audiophile types were pretty impressed too!

I love analog when it's done right, but I feel it rarely is for the price of the VDA•2/VAC•1 combination. It just doesn't get any better than this; These two Channel Islands boxes are very reasonably priced, you can set it up in about 45 seconds and it sounds great. Praise the analog gods that this box wasn't available for \$775 twenty years ago. It would have been the death of analog! If this pair isn't deserving of our Exceptional Value Award, nothing is. ●

MANUFACTURER

Channel Islands Audio
567 W. Channel Islands Blvd.
PMB #300
Port Hueneme, CA 93041
(805) 984-8282
www.ciaudio.com


MSRP

The Channel Islands
VDA•2 DAC \$599

VAC•1 External AC
Power Supply \$179

Peripherals

Digital Sources: Apple iMac,
Apple iPod Classic w/Wadia
170 iTransport, Classe
CDP-102

The rest of Jeff Dorgay's
system can be viewed here: 



Keep the Vibration at Bay

The Composite Products CF-2080 Reference

By Jeff Dorgay

Unless you have your turntable on a very stable platform, chances are you've had some issues with isolation; whether it in the form of rumble when you turn the volume control up, or a tonearm that bounces across the record if you don't tiptoe around the room. Either way, vibration robs your analog setup of its full potential.

Suspended tables can minimize this to a degree, but one of the best solutions for a spongy floor is a wall mounted turntable shelf. With a very thick concrete slab in my listening room, I haven't investigated the wall shelf option. After a discussion with Composite Products founder, Gus Malek-Madani, I was very intrigued with the way he was combining carbon fiber with acrylic, to make a shelf that attenuates vibration and has some style to boot.

In the end, the proof is in the listening. I tried the rack in two different environments; first in the studio to see if I could get any further improvement and second in my living room, which has a hardwood subfloor and is noticeably jumpy. The CF 2080 Reference will hold 125 pounds when anchored to your wall properly. (NOTE: The brackets *must* be fastened to the studs in your wall) If you are proficient with a drill and level, you should be spinning records in 20-30 minutes. Thanks to its 20 x 24 inch size, it should work with most turntables. The shelf sits on top of the brackets, isolated from them by a set of solid carbon fiber feet sandwiched between elastomer bushings.

A Rega P9 and an Oracle Delphi V were used with identical Dynavector 17D3 cartridges so that both camps (suspended and non-suspended) would be represented in three different environments. First, the table was tried on an old school metal target stand with spikes and its standard MDF shelf. Next, was my reference Finite Elemente Pagode Signature rack and last, the table was moved to the CF-2080.

The difference the platform made was readily apparent.

To make it easy, I settled in on Dire Straits *On Every Street* because I've heard it a zillion times. Listening to the guitar intro on "You And Your Friend" made it easy to key in on the airiness of the recording and evaluate the differences between platforms.



On the concrete studio floor, there was a substantial reduction in background noise when going from the Target rack to the Finite or CF-2080 with the Rega.

There was definitely a lot more air around the guitar and the attack had much better focus.

The difference between the Finite and the CF-2080 was negligible on the concrete floor however, indicating that they are both designed very well. The change between the Target stand and the two more sophisticated shelves was much less in this environment with the Oracle, thanks to its suspended design.

It was a different story in my living room and the CF-2080 really shined on the springy floor. All of the turntable bounce from the P9 on the Target rack was gone and it allowed a much higher volume level to be experienced as well. Again, the Oracle did better on all platforms, but still performed the best by a considerable margin on the CF-2080.

A listening room with a subfloor is just not the optimum setup for high quality analog sound! With so many expensive cables and tweaks on the market today, it's tough to decide where to spend your hard earned money. If you are having issues with getting the most out of your turntable, or just would like some really cool looking carbon fiber shelves to put your components on, give Gus a call. This one works. ●

www.composite.com

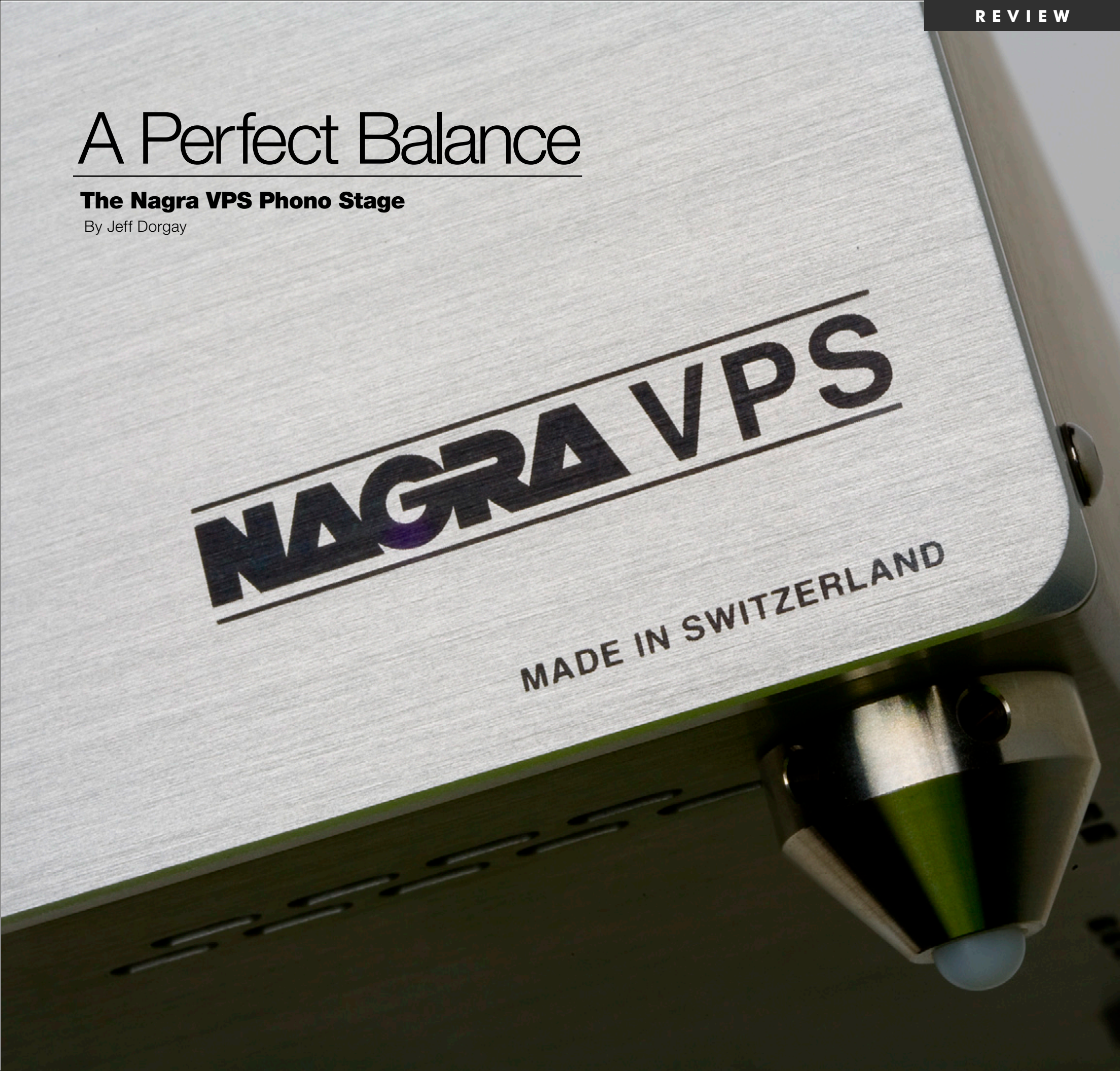
A Perfect Balance

The Nagra VPS Phono Stage

By Jeff Dorgay

NAGRA VPS

MADE IN SWITZERLAND



With vinyl enjoying such popularity over the last few years, it seems like there are more phono preamplifiers on the market than ever before. While you might be overloaded with choices at the entry level, finding one at the top of the heap is still a fairly narrow path. Even as you approach the pinnacle, you still must choose wisely and as always, define just what you are looking for, keeping system synergy at the forefront.

One of the biggest questions you will have to answer is tubes or solid state? I too have agonized over this, listening to a number of preamplifiers from both sides of the fence and am back on the tube side, with the Nagra VPS for a number of good reasons. The main one is the ultimate tonality that this preamp possesses. I must take a second to admit my reviewer bias here; the phono stage that has consistently revealed the most music to me, with all other conditions secondary has been the Aesthetix IO. It is an amazing phono stage, but has way too many tubes for me to use on a 12 hour a day basis.

The goal has always been to get as much of that sound as I could, without the inconvenience of tubes. A few truly great solid state phono preamplifiers have passed through my system, (and my ASR Basis has been replaced with the excellent Rega Ios) but I still found myself wanting for that last drop of analog richness that seems to be easier to capture with at least a few tubes in the circuit. *(continued)*



What does *ne plus ultra* mean?

ne plus ultra \nay-plus-UL-truh; noun:

1. The highest point, as of excellence or achievement; the acme; the pinnacle; the ultimate.
2. The most profound degree of a quality or condition.

As more and more audio retailers around the country embrace convenience, control, and gadgetry over audio and video performance, they effectively abandon the music and film lovers who desire a real experience from their systems at home.

At *ne plus ultra*, our passion is designing and installing systems that provide a compelling, engaging, and realistic experience of music and film in our clients' own homes. We invite you to our showrooms located in a Victorian mansion in downtown Austin, Texas. We have created an ideal environment in which you can relax and revel in just how amazing and exciting truly realistic music reproduction can be.

audio physic

Ayre Acoustics

Balanced Audio Technology

Cardas Audio

conrad-johnson design

dCS

EAR / Yoshino

Faroudja

finite elemente

Grand Prix Audio

Halcro

Helius

Hovland

Lyra

Meridian

Nagra

Rives Audio

Shunyata Research

T + A

Transparent Audio

Wilson Audio

Wilson-Benesch

A Nagra Through and Through

For those of you not familiar with the sound (or lack of it) of Nagra gear, I would describe it as some of the most neutral equipment I've heard. The PSA power amplifier tends to lean slightly towards the analytical side of solid state/neutral, while the PL-L linestage we reviewed recently has just the slightest bit of "tubeyness" that gives it a tonal richness that you wouldn't mistake for solid state, yet is not overly romantic or colored. Interestingly, it is a perfect match for the PSA and PMA amplifiers.

From the minute the VPS was powered up, it was obvious that it had an extremely similar tonal character to that of the PL-L.

Which leads me to my current nominee for membership in the highest strata of phono stages – the Nagra VPS.

The VPS comes in a small enclosure similar to the PL-L linestage (and identical in footprint), without the big meter on the front. It merely has a standard Nagra rotary switch with three positions; A, B and mute. Yes, the VPS has two inputs folks, and that's what catapulted it straight to the top of my list. I have too many turntables to live with a single input phono preamplifier.

You can purchase the base VPS configuration for \$5995 with one MC input. An additional MC card is \$1495, while a MM card is only \$395. My test unit came with MC and MM cards installed, which proved to be a perfect combination for my reference Raven Two table. When not testing cartridges, I use an SME iV.Vi arm with a Dynavector XV-1s and an SME 309 with the Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood, my current favorite MM cartridge. (*continued*)



ne plus ultra

music and cinema systems ~ *without peer*

402 West 7th Street, Austin, Texas 78701

vox 512.241.0000 / fax 512.236.1764

www.neplusultrainc.com

by appointment only

Our Reference Listening Studio Three at *ne plus ultra* features the Wilson Audio Alexandria X-2 Loudspeaker.



Extreme Versatility

The VPS is easy to integrate into your system. The rear panel has a pair of RCA inputs and one pair of RCA outputs, along with a grounding post. There is also a pair of XLR's, but this is not a fully balanced device. An umbilical cord goes from the VPS to the same ACPS II power supply that powers the Nagra PL-L linestage or their CDP CD player.

Each of the inputs on the VPS can be configured for MM or MC cartridges, utilizing different cards to achieve the proper amount of gain. The VPS can actually be a hybrid phono stage, with a solid state gain stage that you can switch in or out on the back panel. If you have a linestage with a lot of gain and you want a completely tube phono preamplifier, you can just listen to the tubes. The tube section offers 34 dB of gain alone and a maximum output of about 0.3V. My CJ Act 2/Series 2 has 21.5db of gain, so it was easy to get enough drive with the VPS with the tube stage alone.

The MC board uses a pair of very high quality transformers provide 11 dB of gain to bump the gain of the VPS to 45 dB with tube outputs and 60 dB using tube and solid-state buffer. Using MC cartridges from .23mv output up to .7mv, I was never lacking for enough gain to drive the ACT 2. Cartridge loading is adjusted by setting different jumpers on the MC card. There is another set of jumpers that come from the factory to accommodate the standard RIAA phono EQ curve. Should you so

desire, you can also set your VPS to the 1976 IEC curve, which rolls off slightly below 50hz. Most of you with high performance turntables will not need this, but chalk it up to Swiss attention to detail that they include it. Even if you never need or use this feature, it's nice to know they are there. Another part of the Nagra experience that I enjoy.

(continued)





With analog, I'll always forgo a little bit of convenience for performance when forced to make a choice.

Those who like to change cartridge loading often, will probably grump a bit at having to take the cover off the VPS and use the supplied pliers to set the tiny jumpers that are similar to those on a hard drive. Fortunately, my three reference MC cartridges all work well at 100 ohms, so I was able to set the VPS and forget about it. I must admit the remote controlled loading of the ARC PH7 is pretty enticing, but for me, the two inputs far outweigh the remote. With analog, I'll always forgo a little bit of convenience for performance when forced to make a choice.

As I mentioned earlier, the VPS is a perfect match for an all Nagra system, but it integrated into six other system combinations (tube and solid state, balanced and unbalanced), so I do not predict any synergy issues. I also begrudgingly let a couple of other staff members try the VPS, but only for a very short time!

Transistors: In or Out?

While the Nagra engineers have done an exceptional job to make the transition from all tube to hybrid phono stage undetectable, there is still a slight difference between the two, which I actually enjoyed. Leaving the solid stage gain stage out of the circuit provided slightly more warmth, which worked incredibly well with the MoFi 3.5C cartridge, the Lyra Argo i and the Sumiko Blackbird.

Switching the transistors in offered up a touch more slam and punch in the lower register, which suited the Dynavector XV-1s, Lyra Olympos and Grado Statement cartridges. In either setting, the VPS was extremely quiet and I'm sure the attention to circuit layout and only two tubes inside the box helped tremendously.

For those of you in the audience that love to roll tubes, I say don't bother. Not that you will listen to me, but I tried a few different NOS tubes in both positions and I honestly didn't find anything I liked better than the hand picked EH tubes that the VPS came supplied with from the factory. The mega-buck NOS Telefunken's were warmer, but at the expense of resolution, so that wasn't my cup of tea. A few other choices yielded the same results, I always gained a bit in one area at the expense of something elsewhere, so I'll be keeping my VPS stock. Another benefit to this approach is that the stock tubes cost peanuts to replace and should be good for 5-10 thousand hours. This will also save you the quest for another magical set of NOS tubes in a few years.

An Upgrade That You Do Want to Invest In

The one upgrade that is worthwhile is the Nagra VFS (vibration free support) platform that is built to go underneath the VPS (or any Nagra preamp or CD player). *(continued)*

series 7

781 CD Player 781i CD Player



It's about time!

Countless hours of attentive listening, a passion to sonically recreate the original performance, a love for music and engineering of minute details, have resulted in the Wadia 781 – a Compact Disc/SACD Player for our most passionate clients. Blending musical sensibility with proven Wadia technology has achieved a design that delivers unprecedented musical power.

An evolution, the 781 and 781i (with digital inputs and outputs), features advancements refining both power supply and output topologies. Combined with innovations to core Wadia technologies such as DigiMaster™, ClockLink™ and SwiftCurrent™ the 781 creates a listening experience that will suspend space and time.

Considering what some of those Telefunken's sell for these days, think of this \$1495 platform (and included spike kit that is available separately for \$349) as the cost of about four unobtainium 12AX7's that you never have to replace.

Though I am usually biased against mega expensive cables and vibration tuning devices, the VFS made a substantial upgrade in all dimensions.

Even coming from Nagra, I was skeptical, but that melted away after about 30 seconds. The already taut and tuneful bass got tighter, dynamics improved and the sound stage got wider, as if I had moved my speakers about another foot or two apart.

Again, I would like to stress that the difference between having the solid state gain stage in the circuit modest, but those of you with canine hearing will probably prefer one or the other, depending on the presentation of the rest of your system.

The Proof is in the Listening

As I hinted at the beginning of this review, the VPS offers up a very tonally engaging presentation without being overly lush or exaggerated. The VPS should serve you very well no matter what kind of music you enjoy. There is enough tonality and dynamic range to satisfy any music lover.

You will notice instantly how quiet the VPS is on the MM or MC inputs, when used in tube or hybrid mode. I can't think of another tube phono stage that I have had the opportunity to audition in the last few years that was this quiet. Put any of your favorite audiophile recordings on your turntable and you will be rewarded with an expanse of quiet from which the music rises up.

(continued)

D I G I T A L I N T U I T I O N

www.wadia.com

Wadia



The VPS allowed me to hear a lot further into some average pressings that I've heard hundreds of times over the years and some new favorites that are only so-so.

Many high performance components excel in one area or another, while falling flat in others, but we accept them for their brilliance. What makes the VPS so special is that it excels in low level detail retrieval, tonal accuracy and transparency. The good news is that there's no bad news; there is plenty of weight in the presentation and the three dimensional picture that the VPS presents is big, yet realistic. I've heard a couple of preamps from the top of the heap that have a huge sound, but in a way that instruments no longer sound natural, lacking the proper spatial cues. The Nagra does not make this mistake.

What I've always found to be the case with the most musical components that I've had the pleasure to audition is that they sound engaging, no matter what you are playing. I've heard many a disillusioned audiophile that's just spent a large sum of money on a system only to exclaim "it only sounds great on a handful of audiophile pressings".

This is why I think the VPS is so good. I could give you a list of stellar pressings that sounded great, but those records have sounded quite good on almost anything I've played them. If you want to

hear the essence of violin, the new Classic Records release of Sibelius' Concerto in D minor, Op. 47 for Violin and Orchestra is a quick test of tonality and dynamics that will put the pretenders in the dirt. You can't fake that kind of realism, and any good violin recording is a great tonality torture test for any system, that the VPS easily passed.

The VPS allowed me to hear a lot further into some average pressings that I've heard hundreds of times over the years and some new favorites that are only so-so. This is the true beauty of this preamp for the hard-core listener, because I'm betting that many of you don't have all stellar pressings in your collection.

Works Well with MM and MC

I had the opportunity to try about eight different cartridges with the VPS and nothing posed any problem, but I particularly enjoyed the flexibility of two inputs, one MM and one MC. When I'm not sitting squarely in the sweet spot, or auditioning records that I just picked up at a used record store, I really like to give them a spin on the Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood first, to make sure the record cleaner hasn't missed anything. Again, for those less than perfect 70's rock recordings and some of today's music that has been produced in more of a low budget situation, the combination of the Clear cartridge and the VPS proved to be a fantastic combination, offering a ton of musicality and a little bit of extra warmth that helps IDA just as much as it does Bruce Springsteen.

However when switching to input B and the Dynavector XV-1s, the presentation was some of the best analog I've had the pleasure to listen to. If you have the opportunity to use the VPS with a world-class analog front end, rest assured it is up to the task. I managed to still have a little bit of time left on the clock with the Continuum Criterion here, my reference Raven Two and the new SG-2 from Spiral Groove had just arrived, so it was a couple weeks of turntable nirvana! The VPS had more than enough detail and extension that I could clearly distinguish the character of each of these great tables.

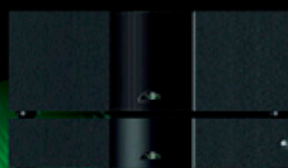
The only thing I really did not test the VPS with was a fairly high output MM cartridge. The Virtuoso Wood only has an output of 2.7mv and all of my MC cartridges fell in between the .23 - .6 mv range, so nothing in my arsenal pushed this preamp anywhere near distortion or compression. *(continued)*

500 SERIES

Serious sound from serious retailers...



CD555 - CD Player



NAP500 - Power Amplifier



NAC552 - Preamplifier

...experience the
500 series for yourself

THE RETAILERS

PACIFIC NORTHWEST
Hawthorne Stereo
206-522-9609

CALIFORNIA
Audio Vision
San Francisco
415-614-1118
Gene Rubin Audio
805-658-8311
Music by Design
415-847-8939

ROCKY MOUNTAINS
Audio Alternative
970-221-1496

MIDWEST
ProMusica
773-883-9500

FLORIDA
Wellington Audio
561-798-1059

MIDDLE ATLANTIC
Boulevard Audio
703-329-6343
Serious Hi-Fi
919-870-5522

NORTHEAST
Accent on Music
914-242-0747
Ears Nova
212-288-2855
Fidelis AV
603-437-4769
Fidelis Boston
617-851-9417
Innovative Audio
212-634-4444



world class sound...

www.naimusa.com/500

In The End, An Extremely Musical Device

The key to the VPS is nuance balanced with power. It reveals all of the subtle details that will make your record collection come alive, yet is not the least bit fussy. If you don't have two turntables, when you buy this one, I guarantee that you will have a second one before long.

This one is on my short list for the worlds best phono stages. Yes, there are a couple out there that offer more ultimate performance, bit in terms of sound, flexibility and value I can't think of anything I'd rather have sitting on my equipment rack. And if you can swing it, buy the VFS while you are at it! ●

The Nagra VPS Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$5995-7490,
depending on configuration

MANUFACTURER

Nagra USA

357 Riverside Drive
Suite 230C
Franklin, TN 37064
615-726-5191
www.nagraaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Turntables: Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm, Oracle Delphi V w/ SME 309 arm, SOTA Nova w/ RB1000 arm, TK Acoustic Raven Two w/SME iV.Vi arm and SME 309 arm, Spiral Groove SG-2 table w/TriPlanar arm

Cartridges: Lyra Olympos, Lyra Skala, Lyra Argo-i, MoFi 3.5C, Dynavector XV-1s, Dynavector 17D3, Clearaudio Maestro Wood, Grado Statement

The rest of Jeff Dorgay's system can be seen here.





A New Reference

The Audio Research PH7

By Jeff Dorgay



The Audio Research Reference series components have always received a tremendous amount of respect from music lovers and the press worldwide. However, when the latest version of Ref gear arrived, there was no phono stage to accompany it in the lineup. The original Reference Phono was almost the size of a power amplifier and was all tubes, with eleven 6922's in the signal path and one more in the power supply along with a 5AR4 tube rectifier and a 6550 used as a voltage regulator. Using a shielded step-up transformer for high gain cartridges, loading on the lower gain inputs was definitely old-school; set from the factory at 47k, ARC sent you a resistor kit and some solder to customize it yourself! \$6000 when new (the REF Phono was produced from 2000 until 2005 and sold for almost \$7000 at the end of the product run), clean used examples still command about \$4000, which attests to the integrity of the brand.


While there isn't a REF Phono version 2, Audio Research offers a stellar phono stage at the top of their range with the PH7. Listed as a "hybrid" preamplifier, taking a peek inside reveals three 6H30 tubes in the power supply and four 6922's in the gain stage. There are also a few pairs of JFET transistors lurking on that circuit board as well.

Dave Gordon at Audio Research told me that the design of the PH7 was built as a no-holds barred version of their successful PH5. "There were things that the PH5 did sonically that the REF didn't, but the PH5 was built to a price point. With the PH7 we beefed up everything in the circuit and the power supply. In fact the PH7 has three times the power supply of the PH5." Comparing the PH7 to the REF he said that some loyal owners still prefer the slightly weightier mid-bass presentation of the REF, but the PH7 "is more accurate and has more speed". Not to mention bandwidth; the PH7 is only .7db down at 400khz!

"With the PH7 we beefed up everything in the circuit and the power supply. In fact the PH7 has three times the power supply of the PH5."

Some people will grump about the 6922 tube, but ARC has used this tube successfully for so many years, there are no issues in the PH7. While tube purists might be appalled to see a few transistors in the circuit, it offers a nice balance of both worlds. Weighing in at 15 pounds, the PH7 is about 11 pounds lighter than the REF, but is also quite a bit more stylish.

The hybrid phono stage concept seems to be gaining popularity. The Nagra VPS reviewed in this issue is also a hybrid design, but uses the solid state stage for the output, where the PH7 uses it for the input stage, eliminating the need for input step up transformers. *(continued)*



One of the most obvious benefits is that it keeps the tube compliment down, yet still provides enough “analog tube magic” for the true vinyl lover.

So, if you are holding your breath waiting for the next REF series phono preamp, I suggest heading down to your ARC dealer to take a PH7 home. Dave had the final say, “I suppose we could take this one step further, but we were so happy with the PH7 that a REF version would have to be in the five figure range and it would have to offer a substantial increase in performance from the PH7.

That Big Green Display, and Why You Need That Remote

The minute you turn on the PH7, you will notice the big, green display that lights up to tell you the status of the preamplifier and the input loading that you have selected. There are four buttons; power, load, mute and a mono switch. Very nice.

Unlike the REF's high and low gain inputs, the PH7 has one input and it has a fixed gain of 57.5 db. Input loading can be set at 100, 200, 500, 1000 and 47k ohms. While a few phono preamplifiers that I have used offer infinite adjustability, most of the moving coil cartridges I've reviewed in the last few years all seemed to work just fine at 100, 500 or 1000 ohms anyway.

What I really enjoyed about the PH7, other than it's glorious sound was the ability to adjust loading from my listening chair. I hate digging inside a preamp to adjust gain and loading.

(continued)

cardas.com

Part of it is sheer laziness, but the persnickety audiophile in me does not enjoy taking the cover off of anything more often than I have to. I'm fussy; I like to see those screw heads staying pristine as long as possible. I hate to admit it, but I found using the remote as a tone control on occasion was incredibly handy, bouncing back and forth between adjacent settings did help add or subtract the slightest bit of sparkle to certain recordings.

My test set of cartridges range in output from .23mv to .6mv (MC) along with a Grado Statement Moving Iron cartridge that has a .7mv output, yet needs to be loaded at 47k and a Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood (MM) with a 2.8mv output, so I was able to try the PH7 under a wide range of conditions. Even the Grado Master with a 5.0mv output did not overdrive this preamp, so you can rest assured that it should work fine with all but perhaps the lowest output MC cartridges.

I hate to admit it, but I found using the remote as a tone control on occasion was incredibly handy.

I would like to add that though I found the PH7 a good companion for all of the cartridges I tried it with, the three that really offered a particularly high degree of synergy were the Lyra Olympos (The Skala and Argo i weren't too shabby either), the Dynavec-tor XV-1s and the Grado Statement. I've used the Statement with about 20 different phono preamps over the last year and I must say that it's never sounded better than with the PH7.

That remote has a couple more useful features. For those of you that like to listen to music in complete darkness, you can adjust the display brightness in ten steps, from darkness to very bright.

There is also a button that lets you keep tabs on how many hours are on your tubes.

I did all of my listening with the stock Sovtek tubes supplied by ARC. The older I get, the lazier I get and the tube rolling thing just doesn't captivate me like it used to, especially when something sounds this good out of the box. I'm sure those of you in the audience who have a large cache of 6922's and their derivatives can swap tubes to your hearts content and perhaps get a few more molecules of music, but if I bought a PH7, I'd just make it a point to swap the four 6922's with a stock set every 5-6000 hours whether I needed to or not and enjoy the music!

Power and Finesse

Not having a REF phono stage for side-by-side comparison, I can't truly say that the PH7 is "faster" than the older model, but that was what caught my attention immediately. This one definitely lives up to the ARC slogan of "high definition", yet the presentation is not overly etched or harsh.

That hour meter really came in handy. At exactly 100 hours I vowed to start listening to the PH7 seriously and that's when the FedEx man rang the doorbell with my new copy of ZZ Top's *Fandango*. Remember, no Patricia Barber here, I put side two on and cranked up "Blue Jean Blues". The gritty guitar intro on this song is very fat, yet still has a lot of air. I happened to be using the Grado Statement at the time and this presentation was just the epitome of analog; big, airy and organic.

Moving along to some female vocals, I did spend some time with the Olympos on the Raven Two and the current Madeline Peyroux LP from MoFi, *Half The Perfect World*. This was very dreamy, as was every other well-recorded female vocal record that was auditioned. The PH7 always presented the music with just the right amount of size and dynamics, maintaining the important spatial cues. Some gear wows you with an overblown sense of space, and while this might be very impressive at first (especially with popular music), the more time you spend listening to acoustic music things aren't right. This was never the case with the PH7.

My main system is not lacking at all for weight and dynamics, so I never found myself wishing the PH7 had more. *(continued)*



Sonics by Joachim Gerhard

Finite Elemente

Spiral Groove by Allen Perkins

Lyra Connoisseur

Lyra



IMMEDIA

Sound Refinement

www.immediasound.com 510.559.2050

However, my second system is a little lean and analytical in comparison and that's where I could see someone perhaps preferring that "slightly weightier midbass presentation" that Dave Gordon was talking about if you had a cartridge that was already a touch on the dry side (like the MoFi 3.5C or perhaps a Clearaudio MC). But this one is so neutral; I think it will be an excellent match with any system, regardless of overall tonal balance.

That Speed Thing Again

Not only did the PH7 do an excellent job with tonal shadings and character, the way it handled attack and decay without overhang is what makes this a world-class phono stage. This is really another one of my favorite tests for any piece of gear. Whether you listen to music with a lot of percussion, (Mickey Hart's *Planet Drum* comes to mind here) or Jaco Pastorius plucking an electric bass, if you have speed without control, listener fatigue sets in quickly. The PH7 did very well with every kind of complex music I could throw at it.

I was very impressed with the way that the PH7 handled the attack of a piano while maintaining the natural air and decay this instrument possesses.

Though I have no musical talent to speak of, plunking around on our Steinway gives me a great reference of attack and decay in a reasonable space. Five minutes with your favorite solo piano record and you can tell that the PH7 captures the tonal nuances that start to trick your mind into thinking you are listening to real music instead of recorded music. *(continued)*



As Good As It Gets Within Reason

Sure, there are a couple of five figure phono stages out there that offer a larger window into the musical world, but who's buying them? For the rest of us that want top-notch analog sound, yet must exhibit a little financial restraint, the PH7 does everything you could ask, provided you only have one turntable. No matter what kind of music you enjoy, the PH7 will make the most of your record collection.

It offers phenomenal sound in an extremely user-friendly package along with legendary Audio Research build quality. While it goes without saying that it will be the perfect match to an all ARC system, it proved to be compatible with a wide range of phono cartridges and linestages, so it should work very well in your system, too. ●

The Audio Research
PH7 phono preamplifier
MSRP: \$5995

MANUFACTURER

Audio Research
3900 Annapolis Lane North
Plymouth, Minnesota 55447
763-577-9700
www.audioresearch.com

PERIPHERALS

Turntables Rega P9 w/
RB1000 arm, Oracle Delphi
V w/SME 309 arm, SOTA
Nova w/RB1000 arm, TW Acoustic
Raven Two w/SME iV.Vi arm and
SME 309 arm, Spiral Groove SG-2
table w/TriPlanar arm

Cartridges Lyra Olympos, Lyra
Skala, Lyra Argo-i, MoFi 3.5C,
Dynavector XV-1s, Dynavector
17D3, Clearaudio Maestro Wood,
Grado Statement

The rest of Jeff Dorgay's system
can be seen here. ●



Headphone enthusiasts are a serious bunch. When it comes to amplifiers, these guys couldn't care less about thick faceplates, piano black lacquer finishes and company logos that are backlit by LEDs. The ones I've met want one thing, and one thing only—sound quality.

TTVJ Millett 307A Headphone Amplifier

By Marc Phillips

The TTVJ Millett 307A headphone amplifier was designed with this kind of headphone enthusiast in mind. With its plastic knobs, chunky wooden sidepieces and power toggle switch, the 307A looks more like an early '70s era tube amp, and a kit version at that. Even the simple black transformers obscure the 307A power tubes when you view this amplifier from the front. Almost nothing about this amp suggests the words "aesthetically," "pleasing" or even "WAF." I can imagine your average status-conscious audiophile taking the 307A out of its box, and sighing in disappointment as he lays his eyes upon this machine for the first time.

That, of course, would be the epitome of a book judged by its cover. Todd the Vinyl Junkie has partnered with designer Pete Millett to produce a headphone amp that aims to do one thing—provide the best sound quality possible. The 307A is nothing less than a hefty, substantial single-ended triode amplifier designed exclusively for use with headphones. It uses a 7N7 in the input stage, a 5V4GB as a rectifier and 307As for the output tubes.

The 307s are directly-heated pentodes (used in triode mode here) that are closely related to the 300B. While relatively rare, Todd and Pete chose the 307As because they simply felt this tube provided the best overall sound.

Todd assured me that this is a fairly long life tube and they are using it well below its design maximum, which should add further to their life. They also have quite a big back stock of the tubes, should you be worried and for the truly paranoid, 307's are only selling for about 25 bucks each out on the web.

The 307A is nothing less than a hefty, substantial single-ended triode amplifier designed exclusively for use with headphones.

Phone Flexibility

With the 307A headphone amp, you also get extraordinary flexibility. Not only will this amp drive just about any pair of cans ever built, thanks to its transformer-coupled output, but you can also choose from regular and balanced inputs and outputs as well. You can choose from two impedance settings as well, or even use a special high-sensitivity setting for IEM (in-ear monitors). *(continued)*





I used my reference Grado GS1000s and AKG 701s, both modified with Stefan Audio Arts Equinox cabling, with the 307A. I listened exclusively to CDs and DVD-As with the Classe CDP-102 digital player as a source component.

After looking at the 307A and noting the rather daunting price tag, I said to myself, "This better sound amazing." Thank God it did. I started with my latest musical obsession, Fleet Foxes' debut CD, and for the first time I didn't have to play with the volume knob to adjust for the wide dynamic swings in this recording. With many amplifiers, the peaks and crescendos in these gentle and emotional songs can prompt a sudden lurch for the remote control. These dynamic contrasts were presented in a large, natural and flowing space and created excitement, not annoyance.

The TTVJ/Millett allowed me to hear deep, deep, deep into a recording as well. For instance, Talking Heads' *Fear of Music* is one of my top ten favorite albums of all time, and I think I may have listened to it all the way through more than any

other recording in my entire life. But in "I Zim-bra," there it was...a new synthesizer line running between each verse, something I'd never heard before. For a minute, I thought I was listening to an alternate mix. With the 307A/Grado combination, I was vaguely aware that I was using some of the most detailed and revealing tools ever to listen to recordings. The fact that this was combined with a warmth that only single-ended amplification (and the wooden-bodied Grados) could provide put me into headphone heaven.

As I mentioned before, you probably won't want to gather your audiophile friends over to show off the 307A. Knowing how these people are, I guarantee that at least one of them will say, "You paid \$6000...for *this*?" Save your sanity and keep this one a secret to yourself. Wait until your buddies leave, pull out the 307A, and prepare to have one illuminating listening session after another. (*continued*)

After looking at the 307A and noting the rather daunting price tag, I said to myself, "This better sound amazing." Thank God it did.

The Balanced Option

By Jeff Dorgay

Shortly after Marc finished his report on the Millett amp, we received a pair of balanced Sennheiser 650's from Todd. "You have to hear them in full balanced mode, it takes the sound to another level!" Balanced headphones are definitely the rage these days, and if you take the time and expense to have your cans rewired it does make a pretty striking difference in terms of sound quality.

Every time I've heard a pair of balanced phones compared to the same model unbalanced, they always appear to do quite a bit better with low level detail, a lower noise floor and slightly better separation. Just like when you can run a phono cartridge balanced, I might add.

To give the Millett amp even more leeway, I used my Meridian 808 as a source component in place of the Classe and was treated to another level of musicality. Rest assured this amp can keep up with the best source components you have.

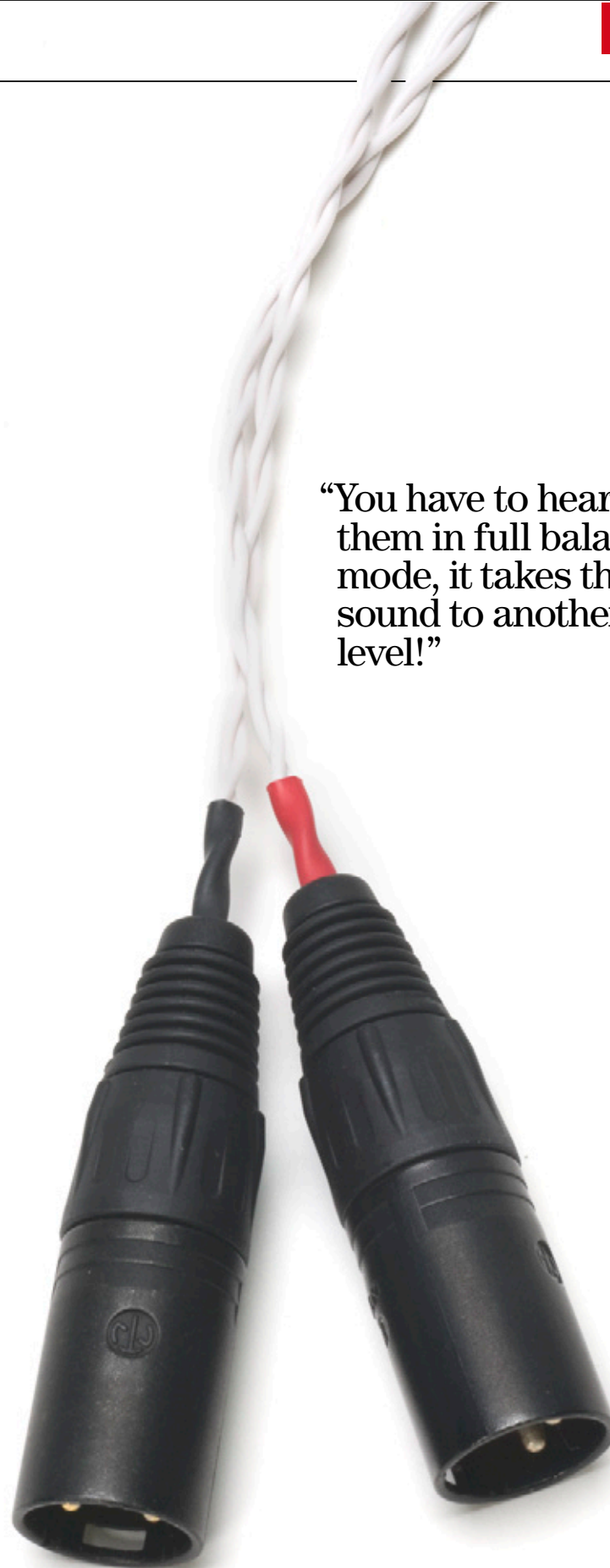
Because the Millett amp has so much resolution and depth, the difference between balanced and unbalanced took an even bigger jump than what I've heard with other headphone amplifiers. I must admit that while I am not a hardcore headphone junkie, this is the most lifelike headphone presentation I've ever heard. Until now, I was a big fan of the Woo Audio 300B headphone amplifier. If you are looking for the pinnacle of headphone sound, write Todd a big check. You will not be disappointed. ●

The TTVJ Millett 307A Headphone Amp
MSRP: \$5995

MANUFACTURER

Todd The Vinyl Junkie
866-444-3910
www.ttvj.com

"You have to hear them in full balanced mode, it takes the sound to another level!"





Lehmann Audio

Black Cube Linear Headphone Amplifier

By Marc Phillips

After spending some time in the headphone stratosphere with the 307A, it was time to come back to Earth with a slightly more modest product. Still, the Black Cube Linear is \$1149, which places it among the more expensive headphone amplifiers available. I've been quite enamored with Lehmann Audio lately, however—in my recent survey of \$1000 phono preamps, I loved the Black Cube SE so much that I bought it. If the Linear was anything like the SE, I knew it would provide extraordinary value.



The Black Cube Linear is a full-featured headphone amplifier that uses a zero global feedback Class A output stage. It also has selectable gain and two RCA jacks. Best of all, the Linear can be used as an active preamplifier in your system—as long as you use only one source at a time. This feature alone makes the price tag even more attractive! If you're not the aforementioned headphone purist, you can take comfort in the fact that the Linear is slim, well-built and yes, *aesthetically pleasing*. It looked right at home next to my Black Cube SE, even though it's not black. (Though my test sample was silver, it is also available in a black case)

First of all, the Linear does take a while to break in. Over the first few weeks, it definitely sounded harsh and overwhelming during crescendos (yes, it failed the Fleet Foxes test). I also noticed an emphasis on sibilance. But after about 100 hours, the Lehmann softened up and expanded. The lower frequencies were particularly impressive, sounding warm and natural and fully extended. On the Foxes' "White Winter Hymnal," I was taken with the way the Linear really fleshed out the big bass drum, and how I could hear the skin bend with each thwack of the drumstick.

Plenty Of Finesse

The Linear performed well with delicate yet complex fare, which separates the merely good from great in the world of headphone listening. It's easy enough to hear oodles of detail with a good pair of 'phones, but it's quite another thing to lay out the soundstage in a truly natural way that doesn't make everything sound all cooped up in your head or stacked up on top of each other. With Inola George's *An Invitation*, I was able to discern all of the tiny flourishes within Van Dyke Park's orchestral arrangement, and feel the individual musician behind each note. On Jenni Potts' *Take This and Go*, I was able to pay more attention to this singer-songwriter's splendid guitar work, which can be overwhelmed by that huge, soaring voice. Now that I've seen Jenni play live, I can appreciate her technique, and the Lehmann preserved her skills admirably.

I still noticed a trace of that sibilance, even after a few weeks. By switching from the Grados to the AKGs, I was able to eliminate almost all of that, but at the cost of deep bass and that last bit of energy and excitement. In other words, the Lehmann might work better with a warmer headphone, something that isn't the last word in detail. (*continued*)

I N T R O D U C I N G

The DiaLogue Series from **PrimaLuna®**

From the makers of the hugely-popular, critically-acclaimed ProLogue Series comes this dazzling new offering . . .

DiaLogue One and Two

How did we improve on excellence? DiaLogue integrated amps satisfy the audiophile's most stringent demands with increased bandwidth and headroom originating from some of the best power and output transformers in the industry.

What's more, they assimilate into home theater systems so easily anyone can do it. With the simple push of a button on the exquisite, full function remote, you can engage DiaLogue's home theater pass-thru circuitry as well as switch operation from the warmth of triode to the snap of ultralinear.

PrimaLuna Has Once Again Raised the Bar

Brilliantly conceived. Impeccably engineered. Bundled into a stunning, high-gloss chassis with PrimaLuna's standard-setting build quality and unparalleled reliability.

\$2199 and \$2499

For more information on all PrimaLuna Products, please visit primaluna-usa.com or upscaleaudio.com

Our PrimaLuna Partner Stores: Audio Concepts – Dallas, TX • Audio Excellence – Ontario, Canada • Audio Systems Inc. – Austin, TX
Audio Nexus – Summit, NJ • Primus Audio – Kansas City, MO

UPSCALE
AUDIO
HIGHEST FIDELITY • MUSIC SYSTEMS

www.upscaleaudio.com

2504 Spring Terrace • Upland, CA 91784
[909] 931-9686 FAX: [909] 985-6968

I've always thought that the GS1000s are a warm-sounding pair of cans, but they also present a monstrous amount of detail so the overall effect with the Lehmann could be overwhelming at times. I'm thinking that one of the lesser Grados, such as SR225s or SR325s, might be a perfect combination as well.

That said, I'm very impressed with the Black Cube Linear. Perhaps it was a little unfair to listen to it so shortly after benchmark performance of the 307A, which is more than five times the price. But since I'm not one of those hardcore headphone enthusiasts who wouldn't think twice about throwing down \$6K on an amp, I think the Lehmann gives me all of the performance I could possibly want.

The fact that I own two very extraordinary pairs of headphones really became obvious during my time with both of these amplifiers.

That's what a great amplifier should do...make everything else look good, too.

The Cornerstone of a Great Small System

By Jeff Dorgay

If space is at a premium and your input requirements are minimal (i.e. you only have one source component) I highly recommend the BC Linear as your preamplifier. I paired it up with a few of my favorite modestly priced amplifiers, new and vintage and the Linear fared quite well.
(continued)

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**

The obvious first choice was the Black Cube phono as part of an all-analog system and then with the Naim CD5i as an all-digital system, along with the Harbeth Compact 7's.

If you are pinched for space, yet still want high performance, this is the way to go.

The BC linear is worth your consideration, even if you just need a compact linestage, easily besting other things I've seen in this price range. Mated with my Croft Polestar hybrid power amplifier, the whole system only took up one shelf on my rack!

While this is the headphone section of the magazine, I do want to stress how well the BC linear did perform as a preamplifier, and what I enjoyed most was it's dynamic capability. It had a very big sound and surprised everyone that auditioned it. Listening to some of my favorite boomer rock CD's, the soundstage was very open along with excellent bass control. The opening bass riffs of "Morph the Cat" were tight, as was "Breath" on *Dark Side of the Moon*. Moving to the Radiohead catalog, spinning "High and Dry" on *The Bends*, it was very easy to pick the synthesizer riffs that are layered way behind the guitars through the choruses.

However, getting back to headphone performance, Marc's speculation on the Grado SR225's was spot on. My pair of 225's with the ALO Audio mods proved to be my favorite combination with the Linear BC. Remember, more than one input and you're out of luck. But if you live a minimalist lifestyle, put this one at the top of your list as a preamp and consider the headphone amp a bonus! ●

The Lehman Black Cube Linear
MSRP: \$995

DISTRIBUTOR
Immedia Sound
www.immediasound.com
510-559-2050



Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

This issue we have a couple of great finds. There is always a soft spot in my heart for colored vinyl and you know you have really taken the audio collector thing too far when you start buying extra units on Ebay so that you have spare parts for the vintage gear you already own, but don't have time to listen to. Guilty on both counts!



Kiss, *Alive* in mini-LP format from Tokyo

Ebay — \$30

This needs no explanation.

Steely Dan, *Aja* On Gold Vinyl

Courtesy of our collector, Tom Caselli

I'm a sucker for LP's on gold vinyl for a couple of reasons; they look really cool and they make great props for photographing turntables. A colored disc really sets off a turntable better than a black disc to me. Who cares how they sound. Thanks, Tom!

PS Audio Digital Link

Ebay — \$58

This is the Granddaddy of all DAC's, from PS Audio. Back in 1990 when they arrived on the scene, I paid a thousand dollars for one of these and I still have it. When a quick call to PS Audio revealed they no longer stock parts for this little bit of audio history, buying a second one made all the sense in the world. It still sounds great! Watch for more from PS Audio very soon. ●



Simplify your system... and get more from your music!



AURUM ACOUSTICS
aurumacoustics.com :: Tel: 709 834 8244
 MADE IN CANADA

"...a complete success..."
 — Audio Ideas Guide, 2007
 "...dangerously seductive..."
 — magazine-audio, 2007
 "...among the very standalone CD players and preamps..."
 — SoundStage!, 2006
 "... without question the best CD playback I've heard."
 — Ultra Audio, 2005



Stereo Times Most Wanted Components, 2007 :: SoundStage! Reviewers' Choice Award, 2006
 SoundStage! Edge of the Art Award, 2006 :: Ultra Audio Select Component Award, 2005

Because Less is More! ONE COMPONENT — ONE REMOTE — MINIMAL CABLE REQUIREMENTS MORE TECHNOLOGY — SUPERIOR SOUND

The pinnacle of the "less is more" concept is the **Integris CDP**. As an integrated CD player and preamp you'll hear digital at its absolute finest — the is your one-piece solution for performance, convenience and simplicity. You will also appreciate your other sources with excellent fidelity, extensive flexibility, a great feature set and reference caliber engineering, as every preamp should offer (but few do).
 state-of-the art DSP-enhanced CD playback with premium top-loading transport :: multiple PCM digital inputs supported
 neutral transparent linestage preamp with 5 inputs :: high performance MC/MM phono stage — new option!
 dedicated headphone amplifier circuit — new option!

Where to find what you have seen in **TONE**Audio.

Acoustic Sounds: www.acousticsounds.com
 Audience: www.audience-av.com
 Aurum Acoustics: www.aurumacoustics.com
 AV123: www.av123.com
 B&W Music Club: www.bowersandwilkins.com
 Benchmark: www.benchmarkmedia.com
 Cardas Audio: www.cardas.com
 Coffin and Trout: www.coffinandtrout.com
 Conrad Johnson: www.conradjohnson.com
 DH labs: www.silversonic.com
 DeVore Fidelity: www.devorefidelity.com
 Essential Sound Products: www.essentialsound.com
 Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com
 GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com
 Immedia Sound: www.immediasound.com
 Lensbabies: www.lensbabies.com
 Martin-Logan: www.martinlogan.com
 McIntosh: www.mcintoshlabs.com
 Meridian: www.meridian-audio.com
 MusicGiants: www.musicgiants.com
 Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com
 Naim: www.naimusa.com
 NePlusUltra: www.neplusultrainc.com
 Nik Software: www.niksoftware.com
 Penaudio: www.penaudio.fi

Porsche: www.porsche.com
 Red Wine Audio: www.redwineaudio.com
 Rega: www.soundorg.com
 Running Springs Audio: www.runningspringsaudio.com
 Salagar Speakers: www.salagar.com
 Save the Music: www.vh1.com
 Shunyata: www.shunyata.com
 Sooloos: www.sooloos.com
 SoundstageDirect: www.soundstagedirect.com
 Todd The Vinyl Junkie: www.ttvj.com
 Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com
 Verity Audio: www.verityaudio.com
 Wadia: www.wadia.com
 Wilson Audio: www.wilsonaudio.com
 Zu Audio: www.zuaudio.com