

## MAJOR MUSIC ISSUE

WE TALK TO ROCK VETERAN  
**TODD RUNDGREN** AND RAW  
RECRUIT **CURTIS PEOPLES**

## A VISIT TO MOBILE FIDELITY SOUND LAB

35 NEW MUSIC REVIEWS

## TEN CONCERTS COVERED FROM COAST TO COAST

## TONE STYLE:

**BOWERS AND WILKINS**  
MAKE THE **JAGUAR XF** PURR

## GREAT DJ SHIRTS

GOODIES FROM **APPLE**,  
**NAGRA**, **CANON** AND  
**LOIMINCHAY**

Mega Gear from **McIntosh**,  
**Red Wine Audio**, **Furutech**  
**Whest**, **Running Springs**,  
and More

**THE PERFECT BLEND OF  
ART AND SCIENCE:**  
THE **LOIMINCHAY CHAGALL**  
SPEAKERS

# The Chuck D Interview:

**Hip Hop in the  
21st Century**



# 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** 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

Cover Photo by David S. Rubin



**tonepublications.com**

Editor Questions and  
Comments:

tonepub@yahoo.com  
800.432.4569

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20 (on the cover)



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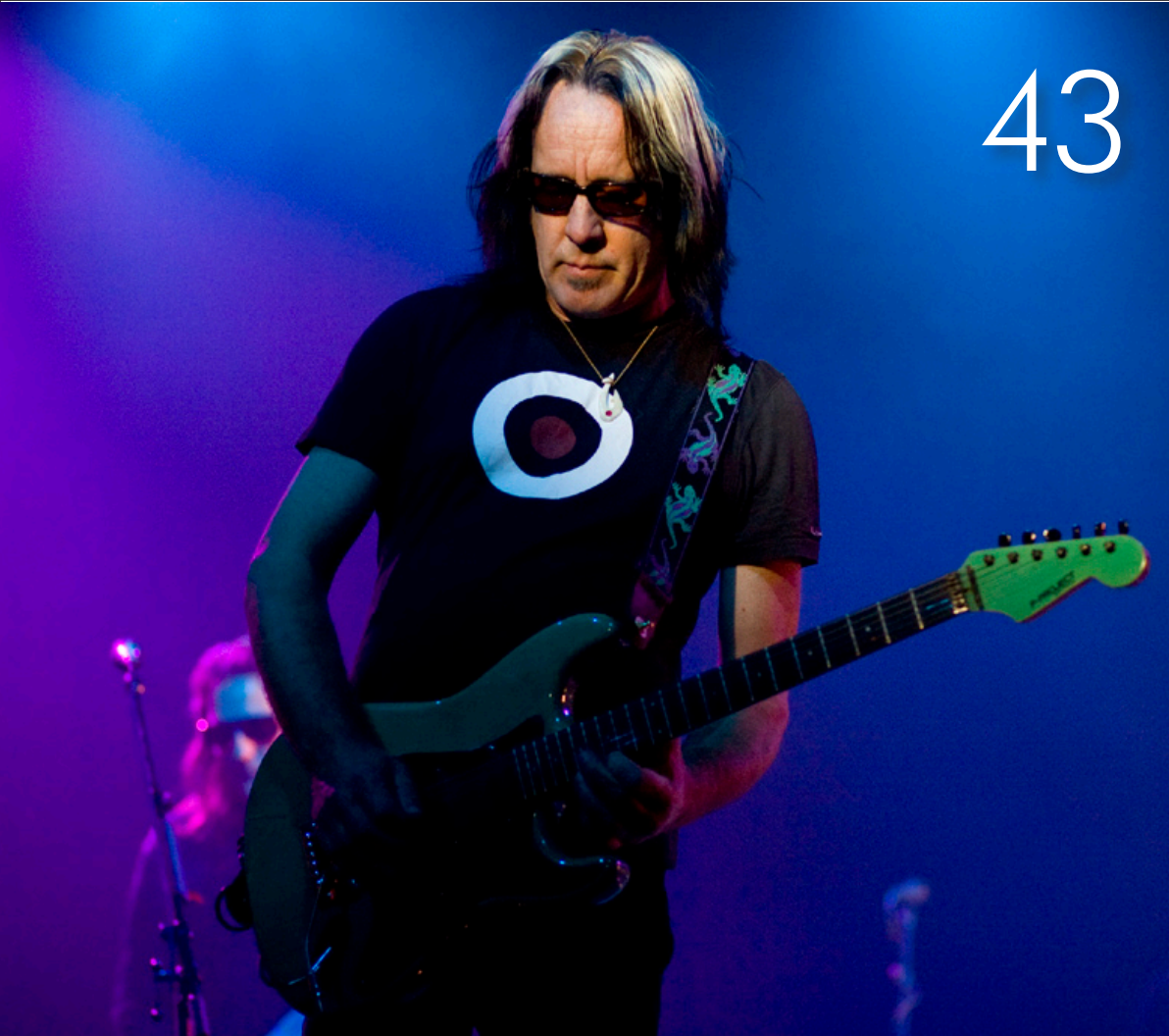


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# CONTRIBUTORS

## new in tone this issue

### RICK MOORE

Rick Moore is a former Las Vegas musician and ex-radio announcer who is seeking his fortune as a songwriter in Nashville. He writes about music and other subjects for print publications and Internet sites in Nashville and beyond. You can find Rick at:  
[www.myspace.com/rickmoorewriter](http://www.myspace.com/rickmoorewriter) or  
[www.rickmoorewriter.com](http://www.rickmoorewriter.com).

### PAUL GOLFEN

Paul Golfen is a student at Arizona State University studying photography, art and graphics, with a strong interest in world history and archaic contraptions. His photographs have appeared in several publications and web sites in Arizona, including The Arizona Republic, the state's major daily newspaper.

### BRIAN HUGHES

Brian Hughes is a freelance writer from New York City. Currently writing bio material for record labels, editing his short fiction, working on his first novel, The Boxxpress Manifesto, as well as being a regular contributor to The Boutros Boutros Follies ([www.theboutrosboutrosfollies.com](http://www.theboutrosboutrosfollies.com)) this is Hughes' first appearance in TONEAudio.

A life long audiophile and owner of two iPods that he carries at all times (one for new music; one for "classics"), Hughes' passion for music is only rivaled by his passion for the New York Yankees. 2009 will be better for them, he swears.



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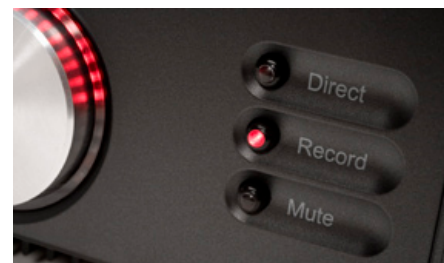
## new on the web

Look to TONEAudio's website for bonus content not in the issue. We are constantly adding new product reviews, music reviews and concert coverage, so check back often.

### GEAR

**Nagra CDP:** Nagra's flagship CD player. Big performance, tiny footprint.

**Rega Elicit:** Rega's new integrated packs 82 watts per channel and a great phono stage.



### MUSIC

New CD's from Rebecca Pidgeon, The Pretenders and more...



### CONCERTS

Additional concert photos from Lindsey Buckingham, Fleet Foxes and coverage of Boy Eats Drum Machine





# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

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## It's Birthday Time Again.

**G**reetings, readers. It's our birthday! The year flies by when you are having a great time.

As we enter our fourth year of publication, TONE has grown tremendously. Though we've stuck to our six-times-per-year publishing schedule, we've more than tripled our page count from the first issue. I know we've added more ads, but considering our competitors are 50-70 percent ads, we're keeping it less than a third with TONE, so I feel that we offer you plenty to read with every issue.

As a proud parent, I'm most excited about the steady growth in our staff over the years. We've grown from less than 10 people to about 25 regular contributors who all love music just as much as I do. And thanks to their input, we just keep adding more music. This issue has the most we've ever produced, with almost 30 album reviews, four artist interviews and 10 live show reports. Not to worry, gear lovers, we still have plenty of that as well.

Speaking of music, I have to confess that I haven't spent as much time as I usually do in front of my system while producing this issue because I've been out seeing so many shows. Since our last issue, I've seen more than 20 shows in two months. I can't tell you what a thrill it's been to see and hear so much live music. It really puts things into perspective.

While you get lucky now and then seeing a live rock show with someone like Todd Rundgren or Lindsey Buckingham, where the venue is meticulous about the live mix, it's always great to see the performers you love right up there on stage in front of your face, regardless of sound quality. The energy is what makes the evening. We sometimes spend too much time in front of a TV or computer screen, so it's always a treat to see the real thing.

As always, I'd like to thank my staff for sharing my vision and helping me put the magazine together, our advertisers for continuing to support us by helping to keep the lights on and a steady stream of excellent gear to review, and most of all, our loyal readers. Because you've passed the word on to your friends, TONE is now read in 100 countries all over the world.

As I said last year, we have even more fun stuff in store for you, so stay tuned. And go buy some tickets to see your favorite artist!





*"It's clear that while I've become digital my opponent remains analog!"*





# PS Audio's Digital Link

## The Beginning of the Digital Revolution

By Jeff Dorgay

In 1989 I purchased a Nakamichi CD player that had a digital output jack on the rear panel. I scratched my head and thought “what’s that for?” It didn’t take long. A few months later a good friend had just purchased this tiny box from PS Audio called The Digital Link, that took the digital output from your CD player and did outboard digital conversion, with an external power supply similar to a phono preamplifier. Oh yeah, that little box was a *thousand* bucks.



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# B&W Music Club

Bowers & Wilkins

If you remember what CD's sounded like back then, you would have paid a million bucks if you had it to get rid of early digititis. Man, those players sounded screechy back in the day.

Of course, I ran out and bought one right away and it still works just fine, almost thirty years later. When PS Audio's Digital Link III came in for review, it jogged my memory and I realized that it was still up on a shelf somewhere. Serial number 1351. How old is that? So old that the folks at PS Audio only have a schematic for it, but that's all they remember.

**Next step, pop the top and see what's inside.**

As you can see from the picture, this was a well thought out and nicely built piece of gear. Using a pair of what was then Burr Brown's newest 18-Bit DAC chip, the PCM 61P, the Digital Link was a real hotrod in 1990. I still remember the day I brought it home and hooked this one up. My audiophile buddies thought I had gone completely insane, thinking that CD's could actually sound good, but the Digital Link was great.

Years later I stepped up to a PS Audio UltraLink II, as my local audio dealer was abandoning their support for PS Audio for \$400. While I kept that DAC for about eight years, something told me to hang on to the original. Recently, I borrowed that old Nakamichi OMS-3 CD player from staff writer Jerold O'Brien and we were both surprised at how well these two still sounded together.

While the Digital Link is not anywhere near as resolving as today's hardware, it is still a very musical device. Back in 1990, it was a big breath of fresh air and was responsible for my CD collection growing to where it is today. ●





# The Perfect Compact:

## AV123's EL525T Towers

---

You might wonder how tower and compact can end up in the same sentence, but AV123's new 525T's only take up a six by ten-inch footprint on your floor. That's less than most speaker stands that you might put under a pair of mini speakers. Considering what I paid for my last pair of Sound Anchors stands, the \$799 (shipping included) price of the 525T's isn't much more than I paid for a pair of good stands, sans speakers.



The EL525's have a pair of 5 ¼ inch woofers and a 1-inch fabric dome tweeter with a front firing vent. The front firing vent is extremely handy when you are challenged for space and need to move your speakers a bit closer to the wall than conventional audiophile wisdom might dictate. Weighing about 40 pounds each and finished in a handsome dark cherry veneer. Though the 525T's have a somewhat low sensitivity spec, rated 87db, I found them easy to drive with any kind of amplifier.

After removing them from their foam lined and quilted packaging, you just need to install the black bases and the spikes to start listening. This leads us to my only gripe about the 525T's; I know that every dollar is critical at this price point, but the binding posts need to be upgraded on these, even if it means raising the price to \$850. I'm sure we could argue that someone buying \$800 speakers isn't going to be buying mega speaker cables, but the rest of the speaker is finished to such a high standard, this is not in keeping with the rest of the design ethos.

### Unfussy As They Come

The 525T's sound good right out of the box, and after a good weekend of rocking out they will sound even better. Thanks to that front firing port and those small woofers, these speakers have tight, punchy bass that is on par with more expensive speakers (in a bigger box) having a single 8-inch woofer.

I only used these speakers in my small living room where I have minimal speaker placement options, offering much more of a real world setup than in my studio that is fully treated acoustically. A slight corner placement worked perfectly and accentuated the bass response; fooling a lot of visitors into thinking these speakers had a hidden subwoofer somewhere else in the room.

Though I did a lot of critical listening with the Red Wine Audio Isabella Preamp/DAC and 30.2 Signature power amplifier to find the maximum capabilities of the 525T's, I also spent a lot of time with the Rotel RX-1052 receiver that featured 100 watts per channel of solid-state power. For many entry level or budget minded audiophiles, this \$900 receiver along with a decent CD player would make up a very capable system.

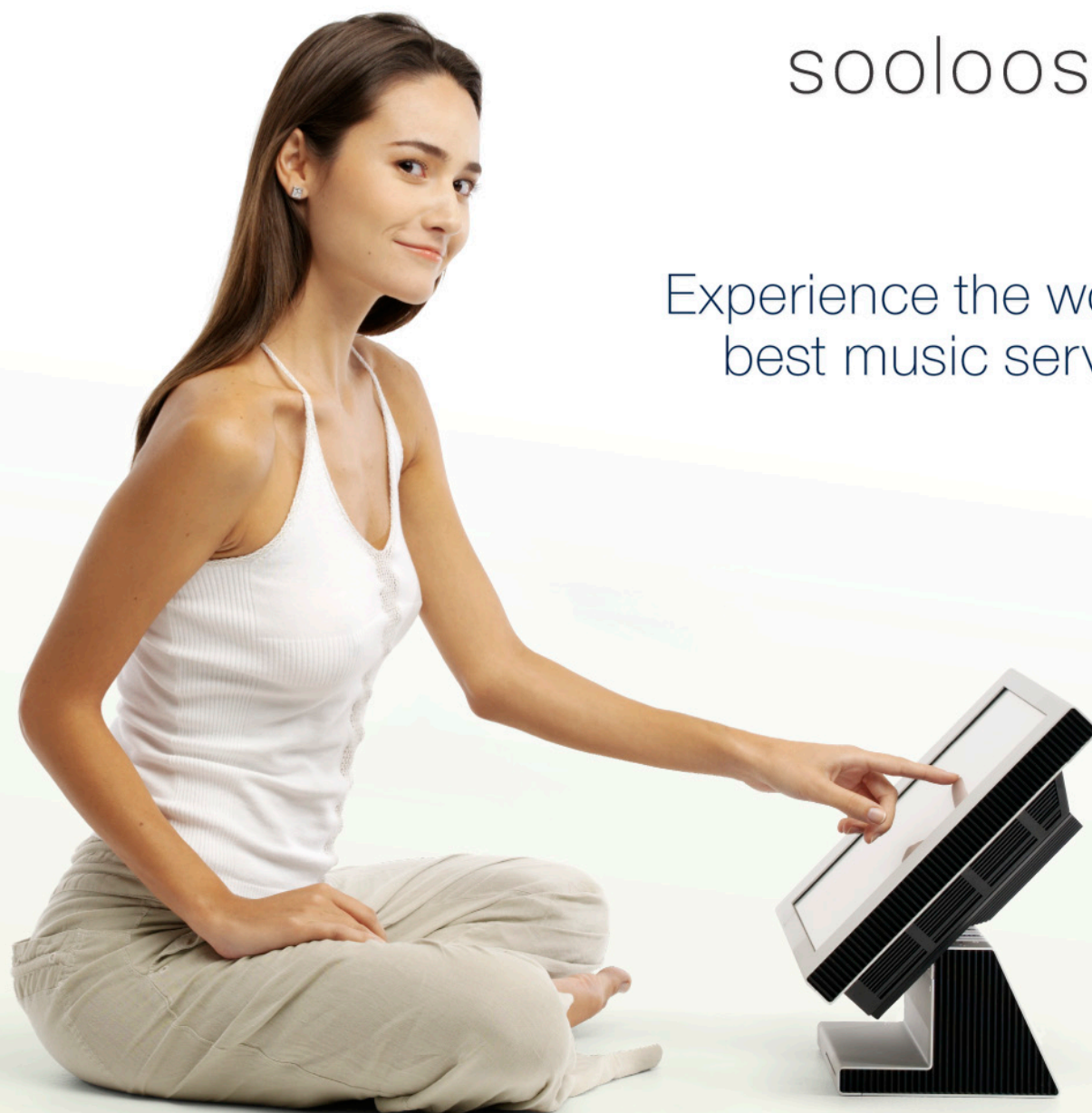
If tubes are your thing, even a fairly low powered tube amplifier will work very well with the 525T's. Using a vintage Dynaco SCA-35 with only 15 watts per channel on tap was a great match with these speakers and unless I was trying to blast Motorhead, I had more than enough juice to get the job done. *(continued)*

**Thanks to that front firing port and those small woofers, these speakers have tight, punchy bass that is on par with more expensive speakers having a single 8-inch woofer.**





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I ran the 525T's through a wide variety of music, leaving the Sooloos music server in its random-play, swim mode and they never let me down. The spec sheet on the AV123 website claims the lower range of the frequency response curve to be 48 Hz, and in the corners of the room, I was definitely getting strong enough bass to be able to enjoy Pink Floyd or LL Cool J. Super bassheads will of course need a subwoofer, but that defeats the purpose of a compact speaker.

**Most importantly, the critical midrange area is where these speakers excel.**

Spinning MoFi's latest Frank Sinatra release, *Nice and Easy*, his vocals were able to breathe in the room and not take on that nasal, cardboard-like texture that befalls so many inexpensive speakers. If you do have a bigger amplifier like the Rotel in your system, these speakers will play surprisingly loud without fatigue. Switching to my Judas Priest's greatest hits playlist, I was able to play "Breaking the Law" loud enough to annoy everyone in the house and that's success in my book.

### Think Daily Driver

The AV123 525T's are like the new Volkswagen Rabbit. Inexpensive, unobtrusive, yet possessing enough performance that you can still have a lot of fun with them in a modest system and not feel like you settled. The HiFi world needs a lot more products like this if we are going to keep a steady stream of new recruits joining our ranks. Watch for these speakers again in the Exceptional Value Awards column of our December issue. ●



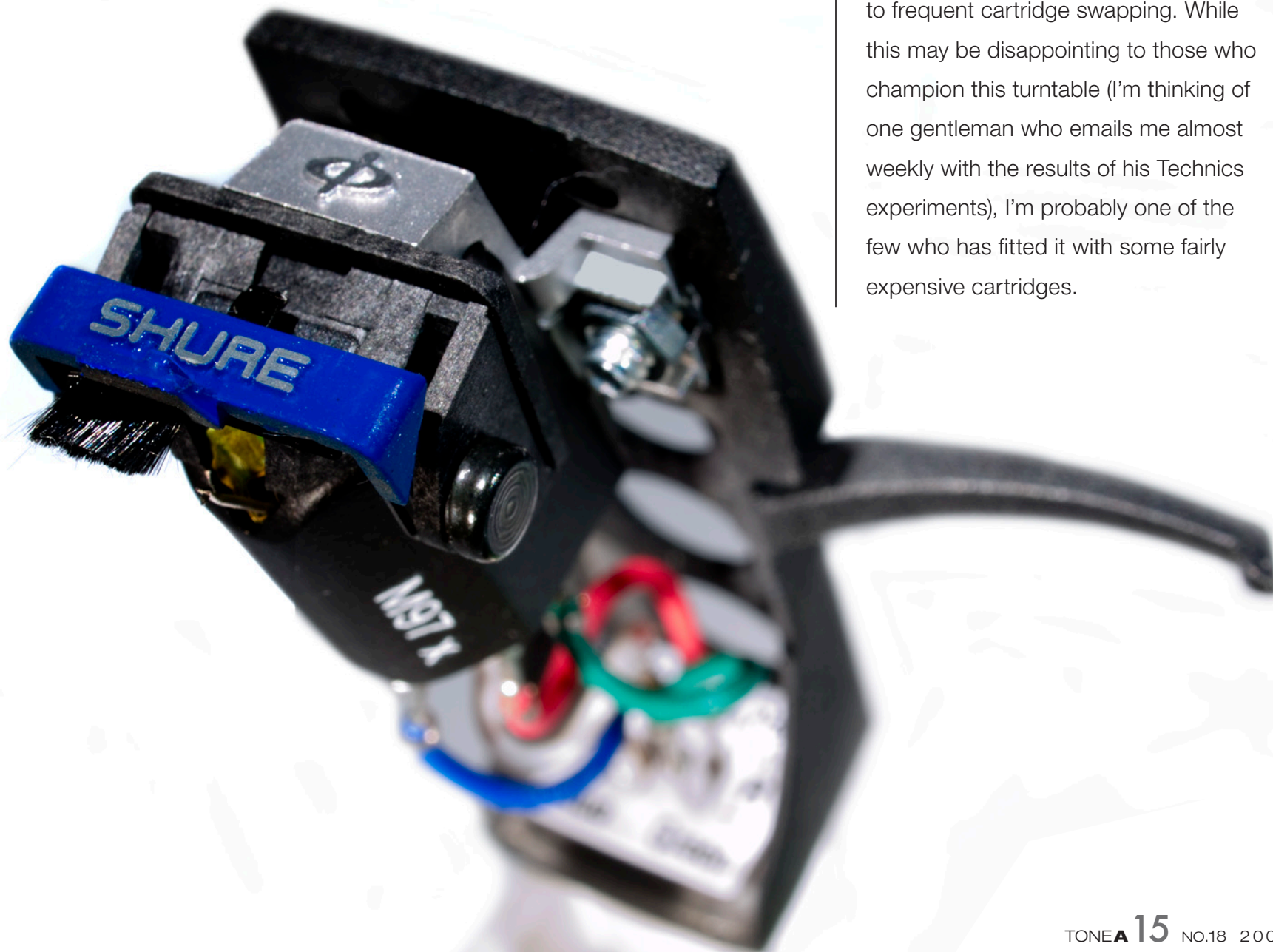
# The SL1200 Chronicles, Part 2

By Marc Phillips

“There’s nothing wrong with her  
that a hundred dollars won’t fix.”

– Tom Waits, “9th and Hennepin”

I’ve spent a year now with my Technics SL1200, and for the most part, my experiments and tweaks with this venerable machine have been limited to frequent cartridge swapping. While this may be disappointing to those who champion this turntable (I’m thinking of one gentleman who emails me almost weekly with the results of his Technics experiments), I’m probably one of the few who has fitted it with some fairly expensive cartridges.







**At the end of Phase One, I can agree that the 1200 can sound pretty good with certain cartridges.**

I plan to try the KAB modifications in the near future – the fluid damper and the Sorbothane boots are supposed to be particularly illuminating– but for now, I’m merely sticking to Phase One of the experiment, which addresses the claims that the SL1200 can truly shine with a quality cartridge. Phase Two will involve the KAB tweaks and Phase Three will investigate the theory that the weak link in the Technics chain is the tone arm, and that a replacement arm such as the Rega RB300 is the final ingredient proving once and for all that the 1200 can compete with any sub-\$1,000 analog rig.

## **Down at the Swap Meet**

At the end of Phase One, I can agree that the 1200 can sound pretty good (not great, but good), with certain cartridges. When I first bought my 1200, I used the Ortofon OM-10 that came with it. I found this combination to be dark, compressed and lifeless. I enjoyed the deep bass performance

and the imaging, but for the most part, I couldn’t wait to stick my reference J.A. Michell Orbe SE turntable and SME V tonearm back into my system. Then I mounted an Ortofon 2M Blue on the Technics and found that the sound opened up a bit, with a well-rounded presentation that was much more acceptable. The 2M was quickly pressed into service as the daily driver for my 1200, and the OM-10 was stashed in its little cardboard box and placed in the back of a drawer, where some AAA batteries and a couple of pizza menus now keep it company.

I did go a little crazy with the ‘1200 by mounting both my Koetsu Rosewood and the Benz-Micro Ref 3 cartridges. While it certainly seems insane to install two cartridges that cost four to five times as much as the entire Technics rig, I had the opportunity to give it a try, so I shrugged and put on my magnifying glasses. After all, I had listened to an SL-1210MK5SE with an Ortofon Kontrapunkt B cartridge, and it was actually a decent rig. *(continued)*



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## FEATURE

Our publisher even went as far as to mount a Dynavector XV-1s and the \$10,000 Lyra Olympos to the 1200. Why? Because we can and so you guys will shut up when we say that a megabuck cartridge won't make this table much more than it is.

I was able to mount the Koetsu and the Benz with few problems, and settled in for a long listening session. Both of these cartridges inspired the 1200 to new performance heights (the Benz may have been too analytical and detailed for my tastes, however), but I still felt deep down that I was putting lipstick on a politician. In other words, those two cartridges sounded so much better on my Orbe, and it felt just plain wrong to limit their performance in this way.

**The Zu Audio DL-103 provided a much more compelling combination.**

At \$399, the Zu seems like a more realistic match with the \$500 Technics. The only issue was the Zu's weight. At 14 grams, the Zu presented some very real setup problems, and I had to move the counterweight all the way to the back of the tone arm to achieve a balanced installation. In fact, I might have been more comfortable with another millimeter or two, but the Technics arm just couldn't acquiesce to my wishes. If you're going to try this combination, you should buy a heavier counterweight, or consider one of those adhesive discs that some SL1200 owners use to increase the mass of their tone arms.

*(continued)*



Even with a somewhat precarious installation, the Zu seemed to provide a large measure of the light and life I hear from most affordable belt-drive analog rigs. The inherent darkness of the Technics didn't completely vanish, but it was bludgeoned into semi-consciousness. The Zu made the 1200 seem more forward, more assertive and less veiled. I quickly declared the Zu the winner, and started perusing the KAB website for a set of isolation feet.

### Shure, I'll Give it a Shot!

Then I had an idea. While it's certainly satisfying to tell every 1200 owner to run out and buy a Zu DL-103 and a heavier counterweight and be done with it, I know that \$399 is still a lot of money for some people. When you start lurking around the various audio discussion forums, you don't find a lot of people slapping Koetsus and Benz-Micros on their 1200s and calling it a day. What you see is a lot of Shures and a lot of Audio-Technicas. Most of these guys are spending less than \$100 for cartridges on their 1200s, and they're still saying how utterly satisfying these rigs are. So I decided to try one last cartridge – the Shure M97xe.

The M97xe, sadly enough, is now the top of the Shure cartridge line. When I first became a serious audiophile in the '70s, Shure was one of the Kings of Cartridges (along with Stanton, AT, Pickering and Ortofon). I owned a V-15 Type III for many years, and thought it sounded great when mounted on my Dual 510. After the controversial discontinuation of the Shure V-15VmXR a few years ago, the \$99.95 M97xe now stands as the ultimate expression of the Shure cartridge philosophy. (By the way, I was able to get my M97xe online for just \$70. Woo hoo!)

I don't want to sell the M97xe short, however. For many years, this cartridge languished in the shadow of its big brother. Some Shure aficionados claimed that the 97 offered a major taste of the VxMR's performance for a fraction of the price. So when the V was discontinued, quite a few people said, "Well, at least they're still making the M97." Today, many vinyl lovers are mounting M97xes (along with Audio-Technica At-440mls) on their Technics SL1200s. I was curious about the

sound quality offered by these combos, and I wanted to see what "good enough" meant to all of these music lovers.

### My Mission Statement in a Nutshell

When I first started writing about vinyl LPs and turntables more than a decade ago, my main objective was to show audiophiles and music lovers that a decent analog set-up could provide a better sound than a comparably-priced CD player. I did clearly state that there was a minimum entry fee of \$500. Back then, that was the price of a Rega Planar 2. I didn't want people to run down to Circuit City, buy a cheap plastic \$100 direct-drive turntable, and then fire off an angry email to me when they weren't convinced to throw their CDs into the garbage can. That's one of the main reasons why I've been so down on the SL1200 all these years; I didn't think it had the right stuff to make my argument stand for the ages.

Well, with the Shure M97xe mounted on my SL1200, that perception doesn't change. I was subjected to a muddy, indistinct and non-involving presentation that wasn't satisfying at all. Before you say that I've been spoiled by my reference rig, I'll remind you that I dug the SL1200 with the Zu DL-103 and, to a lesser extent, the Ortofon 2M Blue. The Shure/Technics combination that so many vinyl lovers have lauded over the past few years would never have convinced me to stick with analog through the Vinyl Middle Ages (roughly 1989 to 1996). While the low bass performance remained impressive (a solid 1200 trait), it sounded like someone had thrown a thin blanket over my DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Nine speakers. *(continued)*

**The Shure/Technics combination that so many vinyl lovers have lauded over the past few years would never have convinced me to stick with analog through the Vinyl Middle Ages.**





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I placed my near-mint original pressing of the Casino Royale soundtrack on the platter. I then quickly took it off. That's the closest this rig will ever come to such a valuable recording. Despite the Shure's ability to track well, I had no intention on placing any vinyl of value in jeopardy. I did try a couple of dozen less-treasured recordings with the Technics/Shure combo, hoping something would sound at least acceptable. I then worried that there was something wrong with the Shure. I put the M97xe on my Orbe, and it sounded fair. I put the Ortofon back on the 1200, and again it sounded passable. I double-checked the tracking force and alignment and everything else I could think of, but it didn't get any better.

**The Technics/Shure was simply not good enough. I'd rather listen to CDs any day.**

This combo is not good enough for you, either. If I've learned anything about my time with the 1200 so far, it's that you can extract decent performance from this table. Many people have had success with tweaking the 1200, and I'm starting to believe that they may be onto something. Given \$1,000, I'd still go with a Rega P3-24 in a heartbeat. But I do think that an SL1200, a Zu Audio DL-103 and perhaps a few KAB mods could be a viable alternative for audiophiles who prize speed stability and solid imaging. But for now, don't sell your 1200 short. Brown bag it for a month and save enough money for a good cartridge.

Stay tuned for the KAB mods! ●





# From Rock to Barack

## The Chuck D Interview

By Richard Simmons

After more than 20 years of bringing on the noise, Public Enemy's front man Chuck D is still on a mission to bring his point of view to the world. He took some time out to let us know what's happening with him, his music, and why he considers PE to be the Rolling Stones of the rap game.



*It's rare for any group, in any genre to last for 20 years. Congratulations. And happy birthday. What has kept you going for so long?*

Thanks. I think the key to PE's longevity is being well traveled. Whenever the United States didn't really feel us, we were planting seeds around the world, to make ourselves well known in many places so we could pick fruit later. We knew we could always come back here at the end of the day. We tried to get that across to a lot of other cats that rap, too.

*Even so, how do you keep the passion?*

You have to be open and aware to study other genres, you have to be a fan of music. When you're a fan of music and able to see the timeline of other genres, it's easier to come up with a timeline for yourself. When I say Public Enemy is the Rolling Stones of rap, I'm looking at PE hitting 21 years, but the Stones are hitting close to 50 years, or something like that. If you want to take it further, BB King is still getting down at 80-something. **People talk about Elvis and rock 'n' roll, but you realize that you have Chuck Berry, Little Richard ... guys who are still alive and doing gigs. That boggles my mind. We're only in our forties, there's no excuse not to throw down.**

*But the hip-hop audience has changed. It's not like in the 80's when many people were politically correct, while others were just out there having a good time partying. The music and the genre have changed. Little Wayne can sell a million units in one week, but to me, the album is not that great. What does that say about the mentality of the hip-hop audience?(continued)*

# Music Store

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The genre is always changing. The few majors (labels) and marketing departments that exist are afraid to take the daring move to diversify the music. They want something that works all the time, but you end up with diminishing returns if you don't expand the envelope. The perception of rap music is a one-trick-pony type of thing and that's a travesty to the music, all music. Most people are more diverse and complex than that.

*Do you find more acceptance in the European market than here in the U.S.?*

From day one. Most Americans make the mistake of thinking the rest of the world is Europe. I feel more accepted by the Brazilian market than the United States. Simply because Brazil has more black people. But how many Americans are even aware of that? We're only about thirteen percent of the population here in the U.S.

But most Americans are poor on geography and history. So therefore, to have our legacy mixed up with a whole bunch of people who don't know geography or history is why I have to tell people, "Don't believe the hype."

*I hear that. But here in America, I saw you guys on Jimmy Kimmel and I look out in the audience and I don't see any of us, so...*

Well, black folks follow whatever happens to be on BET, whatever happens to call itself an urban radio station, magazines like *Ebony* or *Sister to Sister* and that's it. If you move on those three equations, people know what you are doing. That's the power of media; show the same thing eight times a day and eventually it will break through and become watched religiously.

*What about DeLaSoul? They are also about to celebrate their 20th anniversary, they've been nominated many times for a Grammy, but PE has never been honored in that fashion.*

Well, we got our first Grammy last year on a remix by Benny Benassi, which is an indirect way, but it's ok.

*But the industry hasn't just straight up given you the recognition. Has that ever affected you guys?*

No. I would have felt bad about getting one before Run-D.M.C. and Grandmaster Flash anyway. *(continued)*

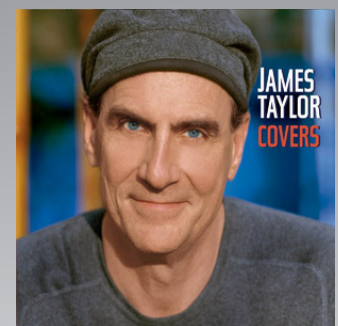
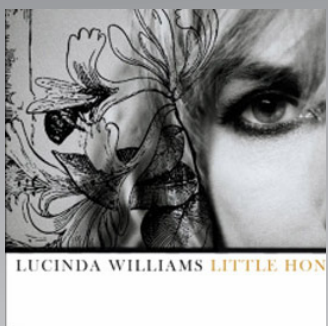
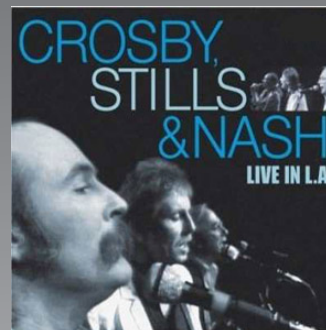
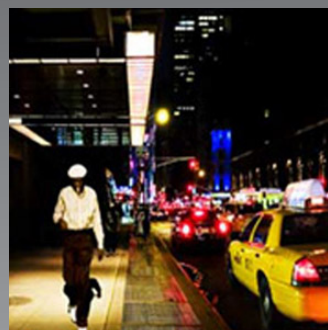
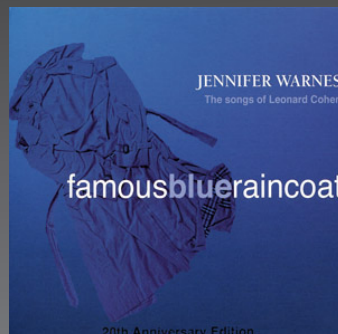
© Photo by Randall Michaelson

**"The perception of rap music is a one-trick-pony type of thing and that's a travesty to the music, all music. Most people are more diverse and complex than that."**



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*Why is that?*

I felt Run-D.M.C. deserved the Grammy in '86. I saw them storm out. Not only did they not win a Grammy, they didn't win a Soul Train Award, or an American Music Award. So it just showed me just how fake and phony these award shows are. I've worked with the Grammy association, but it's not about me. It's about the genre. The genre is important. So anytime a rapper's able to do something to get a Grammy and bring something back to the genre, I think that's good.

*How about Slam Jamz? Because that's your current thing, right? And you're bringing a lot of artists in from different places. How are you getting these people heard and out there?*

We know we can't get it on the radio or in front of the people who produce the videos, so back in the Nineties we started thinking about how to use the tools on the Internet to evolve into our own multimedia station and just promote that. **Now, we are using YouTube and MySpace to interject our point of view and get the word out. If you have 20,000 friends on MySpace, you can get your video to 20,000 people.**

This approach has really given things a lot of spark, because now you can check it out on your own time rather than waiting for our video on BET at 7. I dig the whole technological blizzard that's taking place. *(continued)*





“Partnerships are the way to work, instead of having somebody dubbing your masters. That doesn’t work any more.”

© Photo by Walter Leaphart

So I don’t fret that I can’t get a video on MTV where they can blast it to 30 million people in one or two shots; I can’t kick myself for that. I can’t afford the price tag anyway and I ain’t gonna get on my knees and beg for it.

*How do people get involved with Slam Jamz?*

It’s not as open as it used to be. Our inner staff makes the call. We opened Rapstation in 1999 to be a place where people could sell content, and it was a precursor to what now exists on MySpace. Ninety-five percent of the content will be digital (downloads) and the rest physical product.

I’m spending the bulk of my time on groups that are really different, like Crew Grrl Order. They are one of the few all-women hip-hop crews and are in New York working on a video right now. I have three places. Roosevelt, Atlanta and California.

*So you are completely independent, doing your own mastering and distribution?*

For about twelve years now. But nothing is completely independent, because it’s all about partnerships. I’ve worked with major labels as opposed to working for them. They have to adhere to your structure and you have to adhere to theirs. Partnerships are the way to work, instead of having somebody dubbing your masters. That doesn’t work any more.

It’s equally important for artists to license their music for television, commercials, video games, and the other industries that actually pay for the use of music, as opposed to simply selling physical product. We want to step up the business of music and we are there. Why would someone bother to buy the CD when they know they can get their favorite artist off Limewire or something similar? *(continued)*





# Half the country owns an iPod.

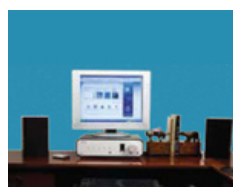
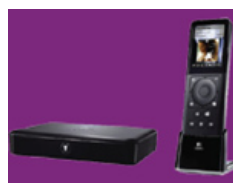
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Projecting unreachable goals with ridiculous numbers that you have to finance heavily up front capsizes business anyway. We want to do it organically.

*With the corporate approach, the artists are only seeing pennies on the dollar anyway. Are you seeing a greater return on investment doing it your way?*

Yeah, it's always a smaller quantity with more profit per unit in an independent situation. Unfortunately because the major record companies rarely spend money on artist development, the person who wants to watch hip-hop live won't bother. How it will keep people's attention in this manner going forward is debatable. Much of the entertainment factor has been removed from the game.

*That's because no one's dancing any more. The artists just get on stage and start to spit! But PE is known for putting on a great show and that makes a big difference.*

Once you get up on it and look at the audience, you have to figure out why you're there. We always tell that to the artists that we try to develop, that they better be up on that stage, too.

The standard and integrity of entertainment has slipped to the point that the entertainer is really not that much different than the person checking them out.  
(continued)



If you see someone on the stage and you think you can do a better job than him or her, why would you pay your money? Why would you even care? The thing that separated the audience from the performer is the skill and the ability to entertain.

A rapper might come out and he might be reachable in talent and skill, but the fact that he can whip out a \$200,000 watch, roll up in a Bentley, and have six or seven fly chicks around him, that goes into another area of leaving people awestruck.

*Let's flip the script for a second. With Barack Obama so close to the White House, do you think people are still in fear of a black planet?*

**Yeah, but I think people have to be aware of a planet period. And once you're aware of the planet, you'll know that it's already a black planet. It's a planet of color. But I think that Barack Obama understands that he's a citizen of the planet and knows that to get the country on some kind of track, he has to step up the foreign policy.**

*When you guys first started, Reagan was in control...*

Margaret Thatcher was in charge in the U.K. Nelson Mandela was still in prison and apartheid was still reigning in South Africa. The Berlin Wall was still up! It was a totally different world. There were some places we were prohibited from playing.

*Like where?*

We couldn't go into Eastern Europe because a lot of our music was black marketed coming out of the country that was on the border. Our music was strong in Africa, but there was no music industry to support it; it was another black market situation there. When we went there, it went well, though.



We were told not to do a festival in Glastonbury in the UK, but when we went there in 1992 for the reggae festival we had the power and speed to deal with it. I told them that we had been doing festivals in the African townships of 50,000 people routinely, but white people don't count mass gatherings of black people. So what's the difference? 50,000 people is still 50,000 people.

*Back to music. Everybody knows you love Coltrane and James Brown. Your drummer Mike Faulkner and I were sharing some musical interests the other day...*

Mike is a great guy. I'm so happy that we have him and sometimes I wish that we could tour all the time, but we're in eight different parts of the country. We try to come up with a schedule and I wish we could be out on the road more.

*What music do you like that might surprise some people?*

Dionne Warwick, a lot of country and The Carpenters; great arrangements. It's great that we can walk around with 10,000 songs in our pockets. We couldn't do that ten years ago.

*Who's your favorite rapper?*

Aaaah. Hmm. Well. I respect Nas. And what he's doing.

*What are your plans for the future?*

Recording people, places, and things.

*I'll be looking forward to the next cut. But I gotta tell you, I still like putting my fingers on the vinyl. When I see these cats with their CD turntables I feel like John Henry.*

You gotta let 'em know, man. You just gotta let 'em know. ●

© Photo by David S. Rubin



# Club Mix

By Scott Tetzlaff

## Mixed Bag

Here's a tip for those of you reading "Club Mix" for the first time: Each column has a carefully crafted theme that runs through the critiques. The music presented is influenced by what I've been hearing in clubs and at fashion shows in the U.S. and Europe. While many of these discs are obscure treasures, others appear in the latest car commercials.

This issue, I'm mixing it up a bit. So many of my favorite artists have just come out with new discs that all of these are new releases, with no regard to one particular style. Enjoy.



## David Byrne and Brian Eno

*Everything That Happens  
Will Happen Today*

TodoMundo Records,  
CD and Download

So what do Byrne and Eno have in common with Cocoa Krispies? I once liked all three of them and remember them fondly. But while the Cocoa Krispies romance ended with sad disappointment when I sampled some after a long absence from the cereal bowl, I found the new Byrne and Eno disc to be quite tasty. At least one great childhood memory remains intact.

Their self-produced CD is the first collaboration of these two mega artists in almost 30 years, picking up where *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* left off, using unfinished works meant for that project. The results are what both Byrne and Eno have been referring to as "electronic gospel." In 1980, this stuff was considered pretty avant garde, but now this groove feels pretty comfortable. What's left is a pair of seasoned, creative people, buffeted by age and wisdom, revisiting a pet project.

There was a strict division of labor on this record, with Eno writing the music and Byrne, the lyrics. The collaboration was mostly via email and produced an album that has an excellent mix for long-time fans, yet is different enough to bring in some new ones. It never gets boring or too familiar.

"Home," the first tune, starts right in with Eno's layered, ethereal soundscape blended with Byrne's acoustic guitar and such trippy lyrics as: "Home, with the neighbors fighting, home, always so exciting. Home with my parents telling the truth. Home with our bodies touching, home with the cameras watching." And it just gets better from there. On their Web site, Byrne says, **"In the end, we have made something together that neither of us could have made on our own."**

The bottom line is, if you liked them before, you'll probably like this CD a lot. You can purchase *Everything Happens* in a number of different formats via their site, [www.everythingthathappens.com](http://www.everythingthathappens.com). Physical media is due out mid-November, but if you order one now, you get a code for a free copy of the album as a 320kb/sec download that you can enjoy right now.




**Mr. Scruff**
*Ninja Tuna*

Ninja Tune Records, CD

**M**r. Scruff fans, rejoice. It's been three long years since his last release, *Mr. Scruff*, but time flies when you're having fun spinning records all over the world. The tunes on *Ninja Tuna* are just what you'd expect from Mr. Scruff: great stylish beats with a heavy mixture of kooky jazz riffs mixed in at the perfect tempo. The second track, "Music Takes Me Up," showcases be-bop vocals from Alice Russell, and if not for the smooth piano grooves, you might mistake it for one of those compilation dance CDs for sale late at night on VH-1.

Quickly switching gears, Mr. Scruff gets some help from Quantic on "Donkey Ride," a cut that is sure to bring back memories of his earlier album, *Keep it Unreal*, while taking his signature sound to another level of texture and density. The final track, "Stockport Carnival," weaves a great bass line, while channeling '60s Herb Alpert. This is Mr. Scruff at his finest.

**Thievery Corporation**
*Radio Retaliation*

Eighteenth Street, CD

**A** topic of conversation in clubs all over the world, the fifth studio album from Thievery Corporation is a return to the classic sound on which they built their reputation. If this is your first experience with Thievery Corporation, you should know that their last two albums were much more exploratory, with *Versions* (2006) having more of a Middle Eastern sound and *The Outernational Sound* (2004) feeling more Brazilian.

*Radio Retaliation* compares favorably with their *Richest Man in Babylon* (2002) CD with the same elements present: great dub tracks, international lyrics, and an all-star supporting group of far-flung musicians. The initially subtle differences in *Radio Retaliation* become more apparent the more you step back. This is Thievery Corporation's most cohesive and thematic work yet.





**Stephane Pompougnac***Hotel Costes 11*

Wagram Records, CD

I'm always ready to celebrate when a new entry in the Hotel Costes series arrives. This one pushes the boundaries even further than the last, continuing the trend towards a more electro-folk feel, hop-scotching back and forth between lyric-heavy folkish tracks and a more traditional house style. Some tracks, such as "How Many Loves," could be an outtake from a Duran Duran record. A quick perusal of the track list reveals tunes from Kraak and Smaak, Ben Harper, and Lena Horne. I told you this one was out there.

I must warn you that the wide variety of tunes on this disc—which really kept me interested—may rub hard-core Hotel Costes fans the wrong way. If you've been collecting the series, give the 30-second snippets on iTunes or Amazon a quick listen before you hit the bar that releases the food pellet.

**Claude Challe and Jean Marc Challe***Select 2008: Music For Our Friends*

Wagram Records, CD

Claude Challe is a long-time tastemaker on the Paris music scene. Together with his brother Jean Marc, they search Europe, the Middle East and North Africa for great tunes to remix, always with excellent results. This year's haul is divided into two discs: "Music For Our Chill Friends" and "Music For Our Party Friends."

The "Chill" disc is just that, favoring tracks with dreamier vocals, slower rhythms and sparse arrangements, with something of an Indian feel. The penultimate track on this disc, "Apache in Marrakesh," is a kind of spy thriller mashup with Indian backbeats.

The "Party" disc is more uptempo, after a slightly slow start on the first track, "Partiazani," which sounds like something you might hear in an Italian restaurant. DJ Disse does a great remix of the famous Doors classic, "Break On Through," that also includes some samples from the Doors release, *An American Prayer*.

The moods are so different on these discs, they could almost have been separate releases. If you haven't heard the Challe brothers, but have heard the *Buddah Bar* series, you will enjoy this set. Be prepared at checkout time though. For now, this is available on Amazon.com and most record stores as a pretty pricey import at \$40. As always, being on the cutting edge of hip has its price.





# Lindsey Buckingham

**September 10**

**Newmark Theater  
Portland, Oregon**

Article and Photo by Jeff Dorgay

It's always a treat seeing Lindsey Buckingham perform solo. Always the team player and the glue binding Fleetwood Mac together, Buckingham stretches out a lot more musically as a solo headliner. The Portland crowd was treated to about half of his new album *Gift of Screws*, opening with "Great Day" and "Love Runs Deeper." He took a brief detour back to his previous solo material, as he performed the radio familiar "Trouble," followed by a haunting rendition of "Go Insane."

The tour had just begun in Seattle the night before and Buckingham was in great spirits. He spent a lot of time chatting with the audience, reflecting on his life and music. After playing a few Fleetwood Mac tunes, he came back to the new album, announcing "Did You Miss Me." "This is probably the single, but I'm not sure what that means these days," he said, laughing. "The record business has changed a lot."

Just when I thought the level of musicianship couldn't get any higher, Buckingham took it to another level with a guitar solo at the end of "I'm So Afraid" that had the whole crowd on their feet screaming. Finishing up with "Go Your Own Way," he came back out for a three-song encore that took him full circle, concluding with material from the new album—an acoustic version of "Treason."







**September 13**

**The Aladdin Theater  
Portland, Oregon**

Article by Marc Phillips Photos by Jeff Dorgay

I last saw Alejandro Escovedo perform nearly 25 years ago, back when his seminal cowpunk outfit Rank and File joined X for a free outdoor concert at my college, Cal State Fullerton. Seeing Alejandro again was unusually poignant for me, especially after seeing X perform an almost flawless set at the Crystal Ballroom just a few months ago.

# Alejandro Escovedo & Carrie Rodriguez



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

Escovedo, now 59, has come back from a long and nearly deadly bout with hepatitis over the last few years and is now playing with a straightforward vigor that immediately connected me to my own LA punk roots, as well as that memorable college show back in 1984. Invigorated by the critical success of his new album, *Real Animal*, Escovedo performed with the confidence and swagger of a true rock 'n' roll statesman, albeit one who has flown under the radar for too many years.

Starting off with songs from *Real Animal*, which was co-written with Chuck Prophet, Escovedo and his band (David Pulkingham on guitar, Hector Munoz on drums and Josh Gravelin on bass) moved into a lovely and sedate middle section featuring a pair of instrumental ballads which explored his Hispanic roots. **He even, dusted off "Castanets" for this tour, the song he famously banished after it was discovered on Dubya's iPod.** The highlight of the evening may have occurred at the encore, when Escovedo and his band played an emotional version of Mott the Hoople's "All the Young Dudes." Between the songs, Escovedo offered anecdotes about Iggy Pop, Sid Vicious, David Bowie, Joe Strummer and others.

Carrie Rodriguez, who grew up in the Austin music scene playing with both her father David and with the songwriter Chip ("Wild Thing") Taylor, opened the show. Her new album, *She Ain't Me*, is a solid and confident mixture of Americana, country and rock, but her live set took it to another level by revealing this accomplished singer-songwriter-musician's range and stage presence. *(continued)*



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With a polished, energetic band including Hans Holzen on guitar, Kyle Kegerreis on stand-up bass and Eric Platz on drums, she delivered a strong set that ran just under an hour. We were treated to two more hours of her talent when she played in Alejandro's set as well.

A few days later, I spoke with Carrie and brought up her endurance. "I gotta stop wearing high heels on stage," she responded.

Rodriguez commented on the synergy between her and Escovedo. **"With Alejandro you really have to set aside any insecurities or doubts and throw yourself into that music,"** She said. She mentioned David Pulkingham and how he plays every solo as if it's the last set of his life. "That's the way Alejandro plays," she said, "and we all have to keep up." Carrie has rediscovered her classical roots playing with Escovedo. Explaining how he wanted her to "play like Prokofiev," she said she came up with a sound that's "more Bela Bartok than Jonny Gimble."

Might she and Escovedo record an album together in the near future? "Nothing is set in concrete," she said, "but I would love the opportunity." Until then, try to catch these two playing together if you can. In a year of great live music, this has been the most surprising and rewarding performance I've seen.



# TK Webb and the Visions

**September 5**

**Ash Street Saloon  
Portland, Oregon**

Article by Marc Phillips

Photo by Jeff Dorgay

*"Yesterday's gone,  
yesterday's gone..."*

As Thomas Kelly Webb sang those lines from the song, "Teen Is Still Shaking," I couldn't help but note the irony. TK Webb and the Visions are one of those swampy, spacey, feedback-drenched power quartets that have stepped right out of 1974 and into the 21st century complete with porn star mustaches, yolk shirts and an earthy confidence bathed in stage sweat, cigarettes and Southern Comfort. Borrowing equally from *Lynyrd Skynyrd* and *White Light*, *White Heat*, this Brooklyn-based band hit the stage at the Ash Street Saloon in downtown Portland with a weary sense of commitment that comes from being on the road for too long, yet having nothing to lose. And they rocked the place.





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TK Webb's songs reveal his Midwestern roots, and this favorite son of Kansas City toured for years with a softer, more acoustic approach. **The need to form the heavier and more expansive Visions sound came from Webb's feeling that gravity was "pulling the sound towards being bigger."** Tired of being billed with "bland half-baked folk acts," he grabbed Brian Hale (guitar), Jordan Gable (bass) and Ben McConnell (drums) to create a sound that is both visceral in its swagger, and remarkably laid-back.

The band opened the show with "Teen," the closest thing this band might have to a radio-friendly single, the first cut from their new CD, *Ancestor*. Catchy and accessible, it immediately defines the band's sound; sloppy and a little drunk, yet undeniably powerful, with Ash Street's stale, smoke-filled vibe contributing here. Through the rest of the show, the band relied a bit too heavily on explorations in feedback—a surefire way to disconnect with roughly half of an audience these days—yet the energy level remained high, along with the audience, who appeared to shop in the same vintage clothing shops as the band.

TK Webb and the Visions offer a nearly authentic trip back to the past, complete with old Strats and Orange amplifiers. Throughout the show I kept thinking that I went to high school with these guys, but they're much younger than me. If the return of Mudcrutch was a little too wimpy, this is the band for you. Yesterday isn't gone, it's driving around the country in a beat-up van, looking for a place to play.





# Squeeze

**September 15**

**Wonder Ballroom  
Portland, Oregon**

Article and Photo by Jeff Dorgay

**Y**es, they played “Tempted” as well as all of the other hits that made Squeeze famous in the late 70’s and early 80’s when new wave was alive and well. Performing as solo artists since the last incarnation of Squeeze broke up in 1999, Glenn Tilbrook and Chris Difford got back together to perform as Squeeze again in the fall of 2006 and have been touring on and off ever since.

Difford and Tilbrook, talking before the show, made it clear their performance this evening would not include any of their solo material. Tilbrook said, “It’s nice to do the earlier songs the way they were meant to be done. I can’t remember them having this much energy the first time around.”

**When asked if their getting together again involved a few drinks and perhaps a punch or two, Difford laughed and said, “Knives, actually”.**

Differences resolved, the duo took the mobbed stage supported by John Bentley on bass, Simon Hanson on drums and Stephen Large on keyboards. (Hanson and Large are members of Tilbrook’s current band, The Fluffers). Powering through their two hour set, they didn’t miss a beat or any of the crowd’s favorites. Watch for a new Squeeze album and another tour next spring.



**September 23**  
**Marquee Theater**  
**Tempe, Arizona**

Article by Joe Golfen Photo by Paul Golfen

**B**eing transformed from preppy kids in New York to music heroes in just over a year can be difficult, but you wouldn't know it from the smiling faces of Vampire Weekend as they arrived onstage at Tempe's Marquee Theater. Their mix of indie rock, afro-pop and great lyrics have spread through the music scene at a startling rate, almost all on the power of the top music blogs. (Stereogum was one of the first to praise the band early in 2007.)

Vampire Weekend proved wrong anyone who might have suspected their clean, bubbly sound wouldn't translate into a great live show. Lead singer Ezra Koenig stood on his tip-toes to reach the microphone as he belted out their catchy tunes in his distinctive tenor. Live, the songs rocked even more than on the current album, *Vampire Weekend*, with the clean guitar and keyboard riffs firmly in place.

Their set lasted slightly longer than an hour, giving them enough time to deliver the new album, a few B-sides and a couple of promising new tracks. The band fed on the fevered applause and seemed grateful for the warm response. "I think the last time we played in Phoenix, we were at a tiny sports bar," said a smiling Koenig, as he looked out over the crowd in the large theater. "So, we're really glad you all came out tonight."

Pearl

# Vampire Weekend



# FLEET FOXES

**October 19**

**The Moore Theater  
Seattle, Washington**

Article by Marc Phillips  
Photos by Jeff Dorgay







An enthusiastic supporter of the Fleet Foxes debut album, I was enthused to have a second helping this evening. The enigmatic yet familiar sounds from this Seattle quintet have been churning in my brain for months now, causing me to reevaluate them; some days they remind me of Buffalo Springfield, on others, Fairport Convention.

But the real treat with the Fleet Foxes is their live performance. What impressed me the most was that they used traditional instruments to get their signature sound, not ancient artifacts discovered in some abandoned chapel. They gave their all this evening, as it was a homecoming, after a long summer of touring. Many of the shouts from the audience initiated a friendly and familiar response from a member of the band—these were friends, family members and even grade school teachers that came to congratulate the Foxes on the extraordinary impact they've made on the indie music scene over the last few months.

Playing a set that was heavy with songs from the eponymous debut LP, the Fleet Foxes also stole a song or two from their EP *Sun Giant*, and played a couple of cover songs as well. Frontman Robin Pecknold boldly grabbed his acoustic guitar and stepped far away from the microphone to sing the traditional folk song "Katie Cruel," a very unplugged performance that was heard clearly by everyone in the 1,900-seat venue. An unusually passionate and committed singer, Pecknold also stunned the audience with the haunting "Oliver James," which sent chills down my spine every time he shouted "No longer!" (continued)



XF



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THIS IS THE NEW JAGUAR

While the rest of the band (guitarist Skyler Skjelset, drummer Josh Tillman, keyboardist Casey Wescott and bassist Christian Wargo) certainly adds vital contributions to the overall sound of the Foxes, Pecknold has a commanding presence on stage that simply can't be ignored.

Traditional blues artist Frank Fairfield opened the show, and while his turns on banjo, fiddle and acoustic guitar didn't explore new musical territories, they did serve as a muse for the main attraction, with one of the Foxes describing his performances as inspiring and energizing. The audience, however, was one of the most unusual I've ever witnessed. While certainly raucous and supportive of the band between songs, every person was unusually still, almost hypnotized as the band performed. Not a single head bobbed or swayed. **The crowd was even perfectly silent while Pecknold tuned his guitar between each song—it's as if they wanted to absorb every note, accidental or otherwise.**

If you found the Fleet Foxes album mesmerizing on your home system, you must see them live. Our US readers are out of luck for now, but our European readers are in for a treat, they are headed your way. You can see the schedule at: [www.fleetfoxes.com](http://www.fleetfoxes.com)



# Al Stewart

**September 14**

**Aladdin Theater  
Portland, Oregon**

Article and Photo by Jeff Dorgay

**W**ithin minutes of Al Stewart taking the stage, it became clear that this performance was going to be more like an episode of VH-1's *Storytellers* than merely a concert. Backed up with obscure guitar virtuoso Dave Nachmananoff, the pair embarked on a two and a half hour journey through Stewart's career, including songs from his just released album *Sparks of Ancient Light*.

It was a fun and intimate evening with Stewart talking about when he started in the music business and ended up backstage at a Beatles show once, hanging out with John Lennon and even playing his guitar. He shared his passion for history and wine collecting and performed a song that the local audience could relate to, "Katherine Of Oregon," from his *Beach Full of Shells* album.

At 63, Stewart's voice is as rich as ever, and even though Nachmananoff takes care of most of the solos, Al is no slouch on acoustic guitar either. If this music was part of the soundtrack of your life, make it a point to put Al Stewart on your calendar.





# Dr. Dog

**August 27**

**The Bowery  
New York, N.Y.**

Article and Photos by Brian Hughes

I couldn't resist catching a glimpse, on YouTube, of a Dr. Dog performance from last year's tour before going to their show, but – at least on my MacBook Pro screen — this band that I love was loose and unsure. However, a year later at the Bowery Ballroom on New York City's lower east side, the band was extremely tight, focused and motivated to entertain the crowd. And the acoustics at The Bowery were fantastic to boot.

This Philadelphia-bred band of Scott McMicken (lead vocals, guitar), Toby Leaman (lead vocals, bass), Zach Miller (keyboards), Frank McElroy (guitar) and Juston Stens (drums), has that rare ability to draw on great music from the past, wrapping it into the present and future. This band knows songwriting; their music is full of complex, yet pleasurable song structures, beatific harmonies, and global themes of regret, love and life.

Their performance mirrored that of their most recent television appearances, full of energy and bounce, with the band members hopping up and down across the stage in a fit of rock and roll euphoria. Rarely did the group converse with the audience - allowing their expert musicianship to do the talking.

The set list drew heavily from the stellar songs on *We All Belong* and their latest release, *Fate*. Standouts were the high voltage performance of "The Girl" (recently remixed by Beck), the chant infused chorus of "The Old Days," and the rapturous two-song fusion that closes *Fate*, "My Friend."

Dr. Dog's fan base is growing, thanks to their three recent albums and polished live performances. It's exciting to see this band mature so quickly, and to gain the critical acclaim it deserves.



**October 1**

**Triple Door Arena  
Seattle, Washington**

Article and Photos by Jeff Dorgay

A photograph of Todd Rundgren performing live on stage. He is wearing a black t-shirt with a large white bullseye graphic, dark pants, and sunglasses. He is playing a bright green electric guitar with a black pickguard. The background is dark with stage lights in shades of blue and red. A drum kit is visible behind him to the left, and a microphone stand is to his right. A guitar amplifier with the 'LINE 6' logo is in the foreground at the bottom.

Todd Rundgren





You never would have guessed that it was the first date on the tour for Todd Rundgren's new album, *Arena*. He and his band took charge of the stage from the second the lights came up, starting the set with a revved up version of "Love in Action." Rundgren played with the crowd, telling us we were in a time machine as he blazed through a few more songs, showing his great sense of humor and musical diversity with great covers of The Call's "The Walls Came Down" and Red Ryder's "Lunatic Fringe." "I Saw the Light" was the last tune in the time machine sequence before he played the new album *Arena* in its entirety.

As someone who has been attending Rundgren's shows since the mid-70's, I can say that this was the best show I've seen of his. I don't know what he does to keep his voice in shape, but it works spectacularly – he hit all the high notes flawlessly and had plenty of range.





There was an interesting addition to the lineup that he had on tour last year, featuring Jesse Gress on guitar, Prairie Prince on drums and Kasim Sulton on bass: Rachel Haden, the daughter of legendary bass player Charlie Haden. Having her on bass changed the dynamics of the band tremendously, with Sulton now on keyboards and rhythm guitar.

While Haden seemed a little shy this first night of the tour, her playing was not. She blasted through the opening bass riffs of "Afraid" with a wall of thunder that rocked the house. She also proved to be the perfect additional backing vocal to the group.

This extra layer of vocals, atop Sulton's great keyboard fills, added that last bit of texture that was missing when I saw Rundgren last year. Four musicians can only make so much sound, and considering how much depth his studio recordings have always had, this gave the mix much more substance.

Speaking of mix, the sound quality at the Triple Door was outstanding. The last time I got to witness Gress' talent, he was buried in the mix. This time around, I could hear Todd, Jesse and Kasim clearly.

With a lot of acts from the 70's and 80's pale shadows of their former selves, Todd Rundgren has found the fountain of youth.

### Backstage ...

After the show, Todd Rundgren took a few minutes to answer a few of my questions.

*How are you feeling after kicking the show off in Seattle? It seemed like the audience responded well and everyone I talked to in line before the show had already purchased the new album, which was released yesterday.*

It's been surprisingly well received for an unfamiliar batch of music. The release was originally supposed to be in July, so we expected to be playing for an audience more familiar with the material. I guess the word of mouth has been good, or we never would have made it back to Seattle.

*You mentioned the album is a bit of a continuation of what you started with Liars. I guess the Socrates quote about the "unexamined life isn't worth living" does not apply to Todd Rundgren?*

I have selfish reasons for making my records. Sometimes it's just self-entertainment, but I'm usually trying to externalize my own thoughts. It helps me figure out to what degree I'm bullshitting myself — it can be very revelatory to hear what you think said out loud.

*Though Liars and Arena are part of your ongoing self-exploration, they are very different texturally, with Liars being a much more keyboard-oriented record and Arena being a heavy guitar record. What led you down this path? (continued)*



# Get More Ben

TV LAND

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## Music of the TV Generation

by **Ben Fong-Torres**

(former senior editor at Rolling Stone)

[www.tvland.com](http://www.tvland.com)

When the New Cars prematurely ended the first tour because of Elliot (Easton's) collarbone accident, I was looking at a summer with no gigs. I put together a guitar quartet with Jesse Gress, Tony Levin and Jerry Marotta and toured across Canada for a few weeks. The response was so enthusiastic that I continued the format in the U.S. and Japan. **People seemed to like the return to the '70s approach, so I knew when I got around to recording that the guitar would be the featured instrument.**

*As always, you had a great choice of material last night, but where did "Lunatic Fringe" come from? Didn't think I'd ever see you doing that song, but it was killer...*

Sometimes a great song will go unplayed because the original act (in this case, Red Rider) has ceased touring. I like to adopt one or two of these orphans every once in a while, especially if the subject matter fits in with what I'm doing with my own material.

*How did you meet Rachel Haden, (daughter of bassist Charlie Haden) and decide on her to play bass in the current band?*

I met Rachel last winter when she was on Kauai visiting her brother-in-law, Jack Black (he was filming *Tropic Thunder*). I didn't know she was a bass player at the time, but her name came up when we were looking for a replacement for Kas when he went out with Meat Loaf. Someone suggested we hire a girl for the position and the idea intrigued me. While there were other candidates, I took our prior connection as a sign and asked her to do the gig. *(continued)*



*Are you doing everything on Arena: playing, singing, mixing, etc., or are some of the guys from the current band playing on it? I could swear I hear some Kasim backing vocals!*

**Once again, it's all me. Living in Kauai, it's hard to just call a session and have people hop over. If I had been on the mainland, I likely would have incorporated other players.**

*You've been doing the solo thing on and off for a long time. Is it easier or more difficult to work alone? How hard is it for you to say, "That's it, I'm done" when you know you can always do one more track? Are you the consummate perfectionist or a pretty task-oriented guy?*

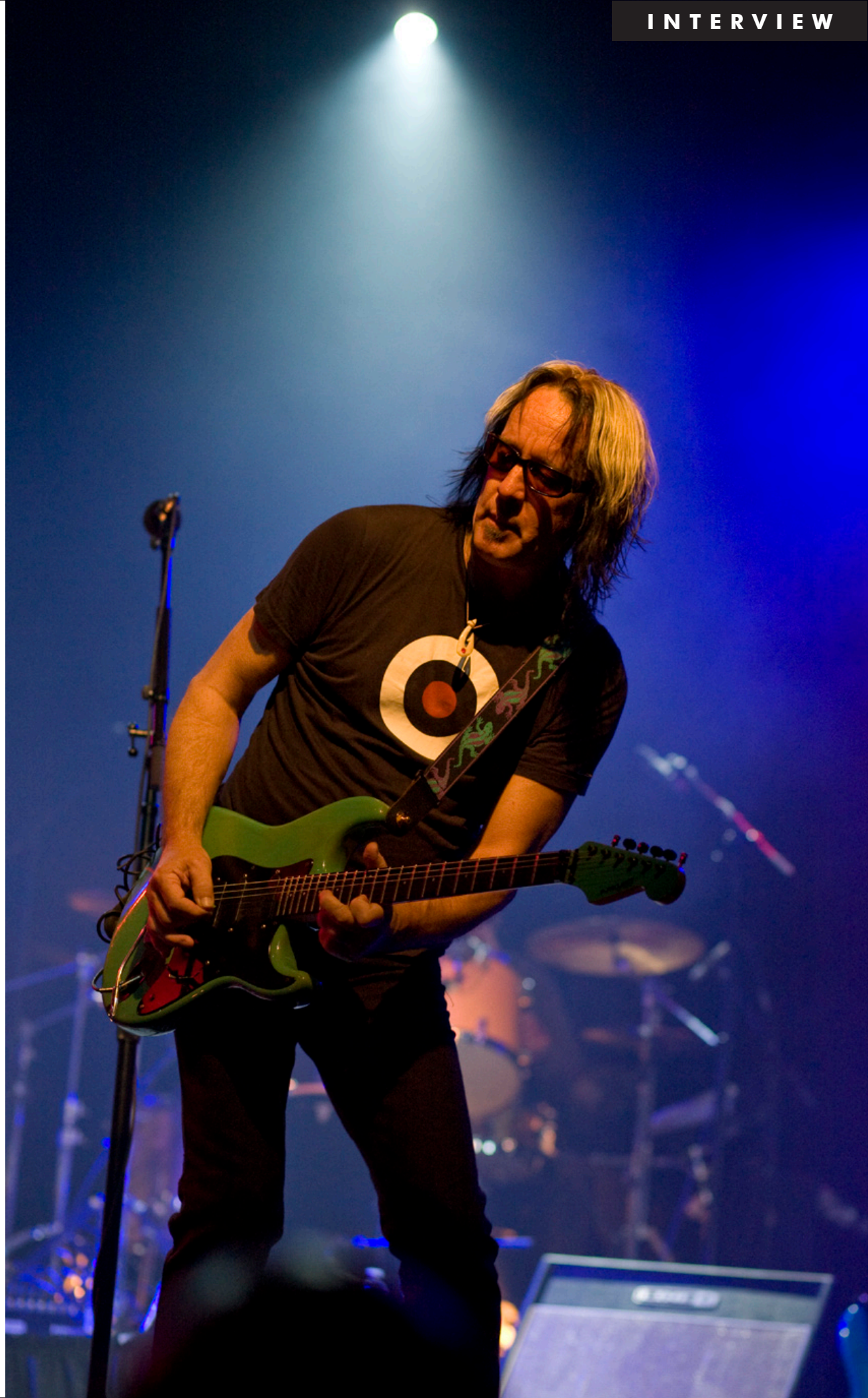
It always depends on what I'm going for. Often, spontaneity is not the principal goal; recording can be an exercise in precision since the result can be so carefully examined. For a record like *Nearly Human*, spontaneity was the principal goal. *Arena*, not so much.

*How has your style of working changed since Something/Anything? Do you still write, compose and play in the same way or has your thought process changed dramatically over the years?*

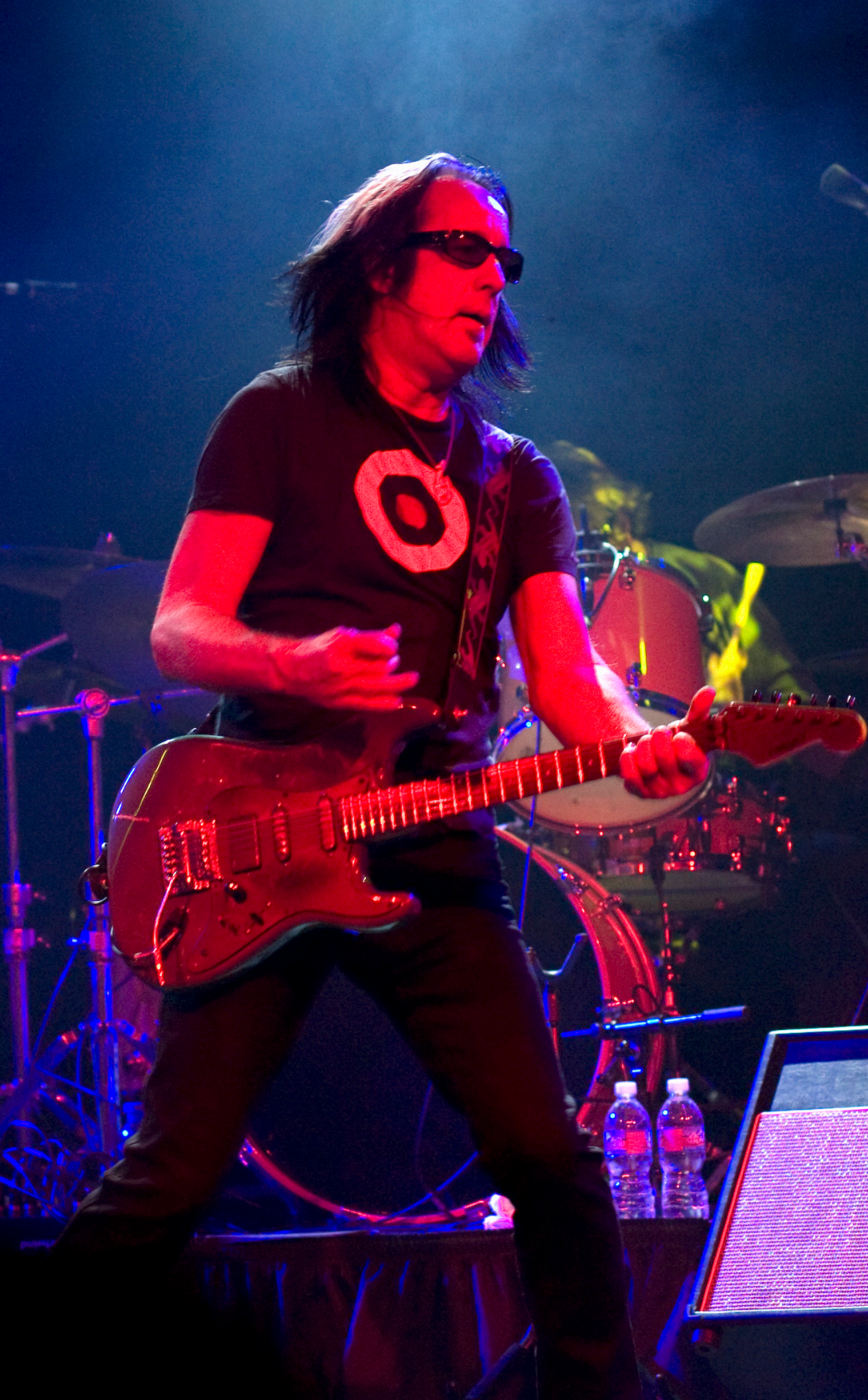
I was a more conventional songwriter in the *Something/Anything* days, probably because most of my writing was done outside the studio. The more I had continual access to the studio and the more flexible the tools became, the more composition became a part of the recording process. Now it's hard to distinguish between recording and composition.

*Digital tools have changed the audio and visual world and you've been an early adopter of both. Has the digital world helped you maintain your level of innovation and set you free creatively, or do you have more limitations now?*

I was never an analog nut, so I'm perfectly used to the digital approach. A greater range of tools in all price ranges has changed the game the most.  
(continued)







*Arena* was done entirely on my laptop, and from a budgetary standpoint is probably the cheapest and easiest record I've ever produced.

*I hope this isn't a sore spot, but seeing that you have always been such a technically oriented guy, why don't you have a major Web presence? Is it just too much to deal with these days?*

**I don't, as some people assume, have a slavish fascination with technology. I don't own a cell phone, and I hate driving.** There was a time when the effort and skills needed to build a Web presence were beyond the average person. Now everyone in the world is contributing to the noise. The digital soapbox is sometimes occupied by some truly nasty personalities, which has made me something of a digital hermit.

*Speaking of creativity, how much has the move to Hawaii changed your life? It seems that instead of slowing down, you've done just the opposite. What's the next big idea on the horizon?*

My location doesn't seem to have a major effect on my creative juices. It's still the same culture that gives me most of my ideas. The isolation does make it a bit more difficult to collaborate, but I travel enough to make up for that.

*What are you doing to take such good care of your voice? While some guys your age (and younger for that matter) are really struggling to belt it out, you're singing better and stronger than ever.*

In some ways, I'm not taking care of it. It's just a set of muscles, and like body building, you sometimes have to abuse them to make them stronger. The tour in Japan last spring was pretty abusive, with ten shows over six nights. As long as I don't try to fix my voice artificially, by using drugs to get through a show, a little rest is usually all I need.

*Do you still stay in touch with Willie Wilcox and Roger Powell? Is there any chance of one last round of Utopia shows with the original lineup?*  
(continued)



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That is the 64 million dollar question. Every couple years we discuss the possibility, and something usually happens to end that discussion. For my foreseeable future I'm playing with the Arena lineup.

*Have you been producing anyone lately, or is that period of your life over? You did a lot of great records over the years.*

We still have discussions with potential production partners. Scheduling is always a problem, especially with my current touring itinerary. There are some possibilities after this year.

*Though you are known best for being up front and center with a guitar, what's your favorite instrument to play after all these years? Is there anything you hate to play?*

I've learned not to play the piano live any more. I've never been able to develop that Billy Joel/Elton John comfort level. **I put too much focus on the singing and any instrument I'm playing is going to suffer. With only six strings, the guitar has fewer mistakes available to make.**

*Is there anyone that you are listening to these days that you really enjoy?*

I'm just trying to get some listening time in, period. It took me an awful long time to mix the live show we videotaped in Boulder, and now I'm supposed to be recording these Robert Johnson songs. I'll probably be able to absorb some new music sometime in December or January.



# Current Releases

By the TONEAudio Staff

## Jefferson Starship

*Jefferson's Tree of Liberty*

The Lab Records, CD

Jefferson Starship's latest CD goes "forward, into the past," as we used to say about a retro radio show I used to do on KUSF, the college station at the University of San Francisco.

*Jefferson's Tree of Liberty* collects a wide range of music, but its core is what might be called folk songs of revolution, protest numbers and traditional songs, by the Weavers, Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, by Bob Dylan and Richard Farina, by John Lennon and Bob Marley (in a medley of "Imagine" and "Redemption Song," and by town criers in various corners of the world, including Tomas Borge, lyricist of "Comandante Carlos Fonseca," in tribute to the founder of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua.

In short, this is an album Paul Kantner, co-founder of both the Jefferson Airplane and Starship, probably has been wanting to make even before he helped form those bands. There were bits of folk in the earliest albums, that rock—and Kantner's utopian sci-fi fantasies—soon took over. Now, it's back to the roots, with Kantner's fiery and throaty vocals dominating. Kantner is no Marty Balin when it comes to singing, so it's good to hear Balin's track, "Maybe For You," with Jack Casady on bass. It's a partial reunion of the Seventies Starship. A hidden last track has Grace Slick singing hesitant lead lines on "Surprise, Surprise."



But mostly it's Kantner and the post-Slick vocalists. The newest one is Cathy Richardson, who portrayed Janis Joplin in the stage production, *Love, Janis*. She shines on "Imagine Redemption." Previous female singers Darby Gould and Diana Mangano are aboard, too, along with Starship faithful David Freiberg (vocals, acoustic guitar) and such welcome guests as David Grisman on mandolin. On Guthrie's "Pastures of Plenty" and David LaFlamme (It's a Beautiful Day) on violin on the Weavers' "Wasn't That a Time."

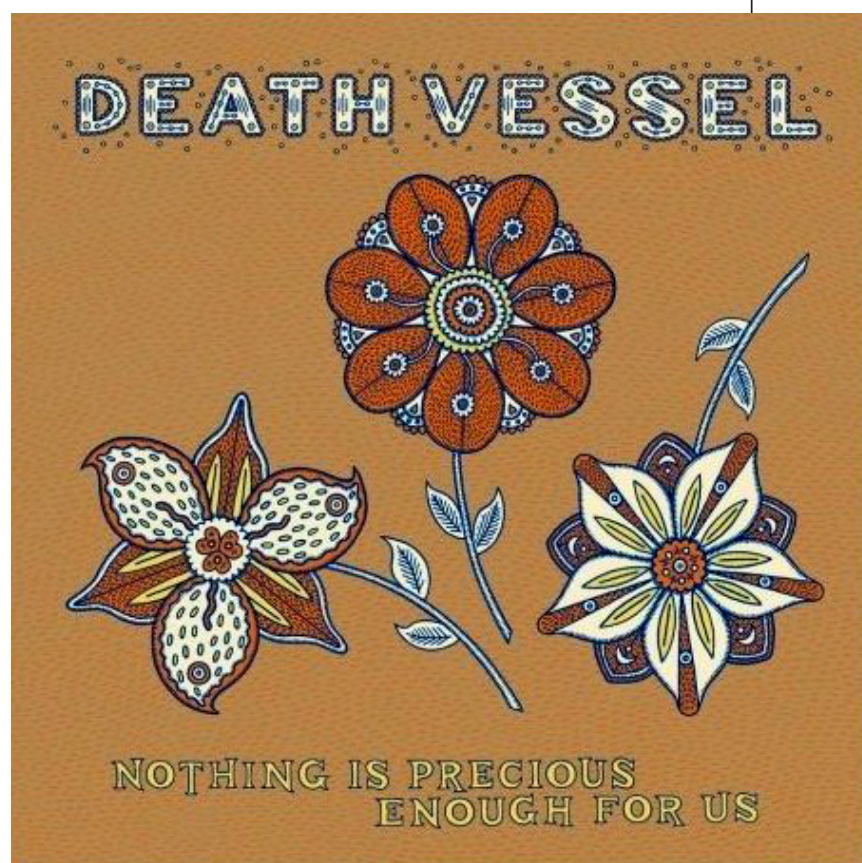
It was, and with sure musicianship and solid production, Kantner, along with co-producers Freiberg and Michael Gaiman, hopes to bring back the concept of music with messages; songs that can stir people to social action.

The album's title is from something Thomas Jefferson once said: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, by the blood of patriots and tyrants." — Ben Fong-Torres

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*Jefferson's Tree of Liberty* collects a wide range of music, but its core is what might be called folk songs of revolution, protest numbers and traditional songs...





### Death Vessel

*Nothing is Precious Enough for Us*  
Sub Pop, CD and LP

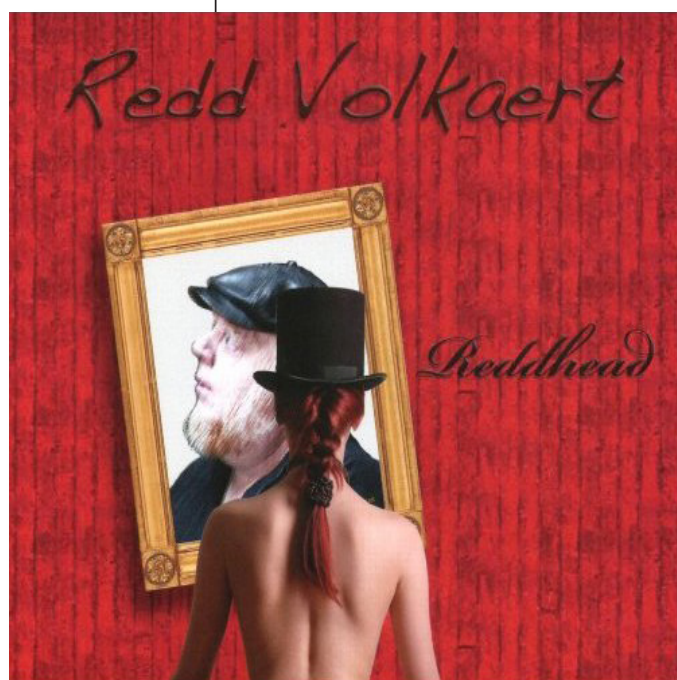
**Death Vessel** is really only one person, in the same vein as Nine Inch Nails or Bright Eyes and no, he's not a girl. Joel Thibodeau puts a gender-bending supranano spin on this folk album, making the vocals challenging and strangely compelling. **Though it is inaccessible and even uncomfortable at times, you won't be able to stop listening to it.**

The album opens to a woozy, electronic beep that gives way to a bright, fingerpicked guitar with "Block my Eye." Thibodeau has put his strongest song on the album first. The Iron and Wine style starts to make sense until Thibodeau chimes in with his delicate, childlike voice, weaving its way through the intricate guitar work. It sounds androgynous, with lyrics that are vague and somewhat unclear, but his voice forces you to pay attention. The focus of this album is much more on the voice and texture than on the lyrics being sung.

While you might brush this lightness off as hipster silliness, repeated listening uncovers the darkness that is wrapped in the ambiguity of the lyrics. There is definitely a hidden violence (perhaps even sexual deviance) hidden in "Bruno's Torso" and "Peninsula." Today these themes aren't all that unusual, but they do lend a creepy feeling to the disc. This uneasiness is the strength of the album, but it keeps the listener at an awkward distance, preventing the songs from rising to true greatness.

Perhaps what is most important about Death Vessel is not Thibodeau's music, but the challenge he presents. Even those who consider themselves well-versed in Western music have probably come to expect certain things from performers, no matter how outrageous. But a voice like Thibodeau's is truly unusual, and he uses it to both attract and repulse. Either way, it is a powerful tool. — **Joe Golfen**





### Redd Volkaert

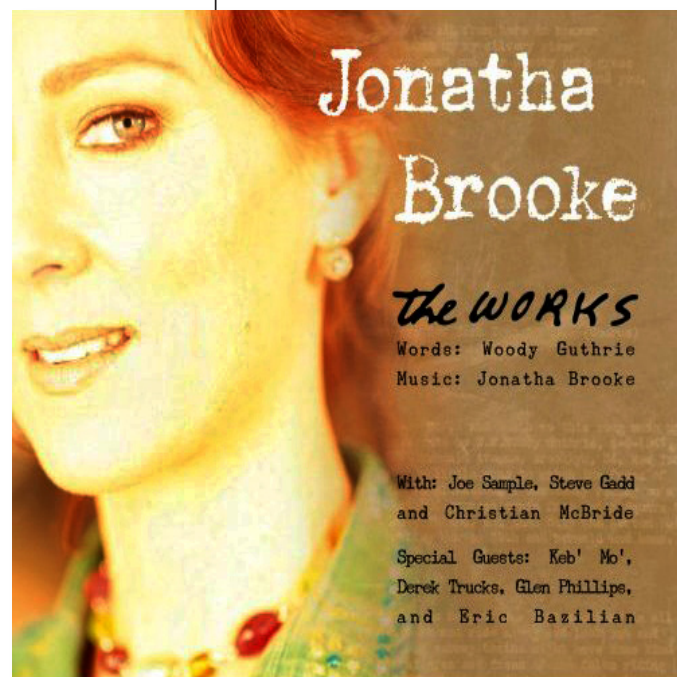
*Reddhead*  
Telehog, CD

**A**fter cutting his Telecaster teeth on Nashville's Lower Broadway, Redd Volkaert went on to play guitar for Merle Haggard, and appeared on Brad Paisley's Grammy-nominated *Mud on the Tires* CD. Now, Volkaert has released *Reddhead*, an album obviously meant to show that he's more than just a sideman.

Volkaert is certainly no threat to anyone as a vocalist. But he can definitely play. This CD showcases his ability to play just about any style well, but falls a little short in the area of song selection, with material that doesn't flow well in terms of playing order. But all is forgiven when Volkaert starts ripping off some nice runs that show his mastery of the fretboard.

Volkaert's great strength is his ability to blend different types of scales without sounding forced. He can make a pentatonic scale sound bluesy and melodic at the same time, and uses cool outside passing notes effectively in situations in which others sound like they're making mistakes.

Volkaert is all over the map on *Reddhead*, playing blues-rock in "Call the Pound," western swing ("Is Anything Alright"), and even a fairly decent version of the Box Tops nugget, "The Letter." In the end, this CD seems a little disorganized, but Volkaert can, and does, play his butt off. — **Rick Moore**



### Jonatha Brooke

*The Works*  
Bad Dog Records, CD  **Purchase HD Download**

**O**ne never knows what to expect next from Jonatha Brooke. From complex harmonies with folk-rock duo The Story to covering Beach Boys and James Taylor songs on her *Back in the Circus*, she's always stretching. But her new recording, *The Works*, is not only groundbreaking for her, but is one of the most ambitious undertakings of the year by any artist.

Comprised of songs with formerly unpublished lyrics by Woody Guthrie from the Woody Guthrie Archives, and set to music by Brooke, *The Works* is established from the first track as a rock-solid rhythmic affair by the rhythm section of legendary drummer Steve Gadd (Steely Dan, Paul Simon) and bassist Christian McBride (McCoy Tyner, Sting). Brooke's vocals on this jazz-tinged set are excellent, and guests such as Keb' Mo' (dueting on "All You Gotta Do Is Touch Me") and Derek Trucks (slide guitar on "New Star") turn in stellar, if understated, performances.

In the end, the songs are the stars. Brooke has put her own stamp on every tune, while breathing life into Guthrie's lyrics in a way that we can only hope would win his approval. This CD, which is co-produced by Bob Clearmountain, should make some of the year's 10 best lists. — **Rick Moore**





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**Charlie Haden,  
Family and Friends**

*Rambling Boy* Decca, CD

 **Purchase LP**

**M**an, what a nice record. Charlie Haden has been known for five decades as the go-to guy on the upright bass, the man the jazz legends have called on for their bottom. But the new CD *Rambling Boy* finds Haden returning to his traditional musical roots as a boy in Shenandoah, Iowa.

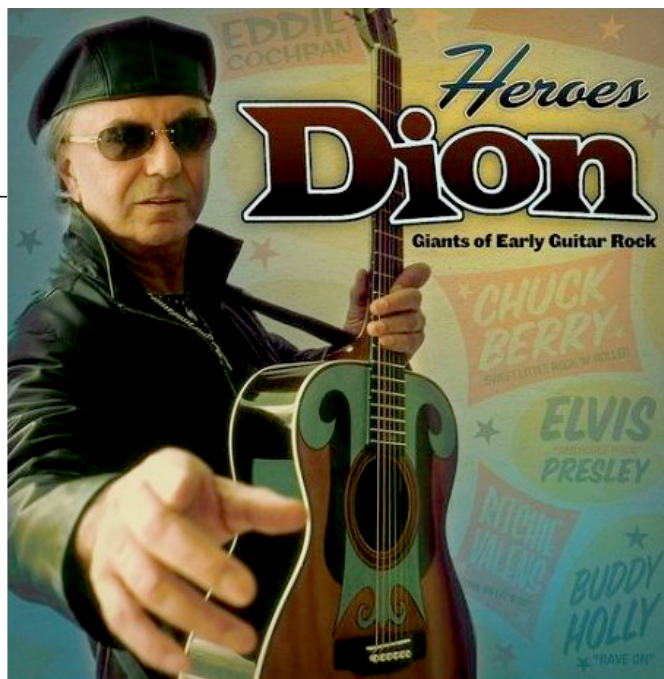
A CD of mostly country, gospel and folk standards featuring such artists as Ricky Skaggs (on “Road of Broken Hearts”), Rosanne Cash (“Wildwood Flower”), Elvis Costello (“You Win Again”) and longtime collaborator Pat Metheny (with a long electric solo on “The Fields of Athenry”), *Rambling Boy* has Haden in a strong supporting rhythmic role, showing that he really knows how to focus on the song and the singer.

Haden’s triplet daughters, all fine artists in their own rights, appear on the CD, as does vocalist/bassist son Josh. And Haden’s son-in-law, actor/musician Jack Black, even weighs in with a rousing version of “Old Joe Clark.” Who’d’a thunk it – Jack Black and Pat Metheny on the same recording.

*Rambling Boy* is a really fun project from one of the great veterans of music and his family and friends. Highly recommended, and perfect for a Sunday drive.

– Rick Moore





## Dion

*Heroes – Giants of Guitar Rock*

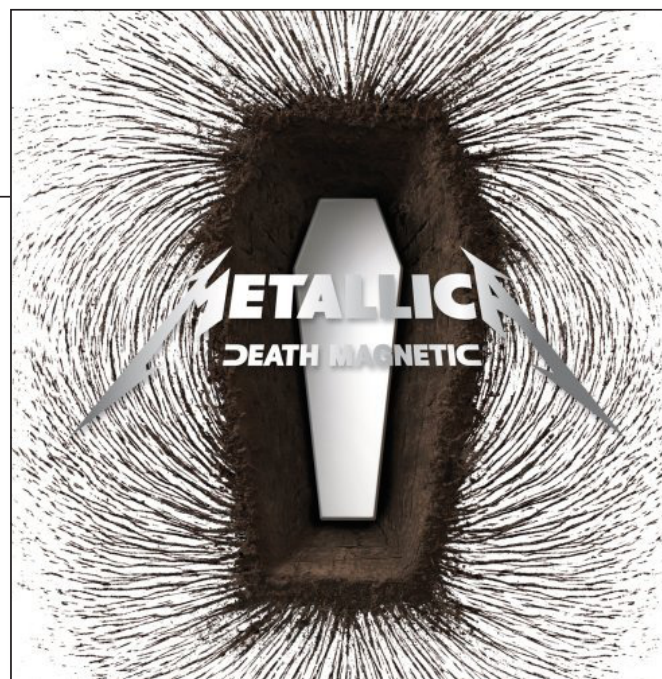
Saguaro Road Records, CD

 **Purchase HD Download**

If you told me that I would enjoy listening to a legendary 69 year-old rocker playing covers of other, mostly deceased, legendary rockers, I'd say you were off your rocker. It's so nice to be this pleasantly disappointed. Bona fide Rock and Roll Hall of Famers originally recorded all of the songs found on *Heroes: Giants of Guitar Rock*. Dion did something that most people who do covers don't adhere to. He kept the spirit, fire and passion of the songs intact. Covers of Eddie Cochran, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Elvis and other artists we know, love and admire are all given the full throttle of pure musicianship through a minimalist approach.

Dion is using this CD to celebrate his 50 years in music by giving accolades to his own heroes. To ensure that fans fully enjoy this collection, the compilation comes with a DVD that delves into how this project came about. Dion DiMucci is a man who toured and played with Ritchie Valens and Buddy Holly, knew rock 'n' roll from the inside, and rubbed shoulders with many of the great ones.

Whether you are looking for a helping of nostalgia or great fun, you'll find plenty of both on this CD. It's good to show the current generation that there are still people in bands, playing together, showcasing their craft. This one is a guaranteed hip swinger. – **Richard Simmons**



## Metallica

*Death Magnetic*

Warner Brothers, CD and LP

 **Purchase LP**

 **Purchase HD Download**

*Death Magnetic* is the perfect example of two rights making a big wrong. Rick Rubin and Metallica — that has to be great, right? *Blechh!*

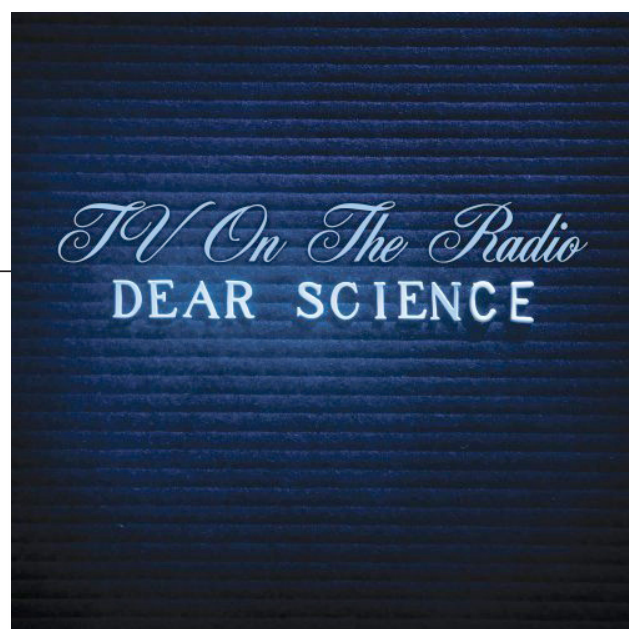
It's not like the guys from Metallica have gone soft, but they have chilled out on this record, sacrificing fire for polish, and I fear that this could alienate them from the majority of their fans. I guess you can only stay so pissed off for so long. I dove right in and bought the vinyl to show my solidarity to the band, but the minute I dropped the stylus in the groove I knew I made a huge mistake. This has to be one of the worst sounding pieces of vinyl I've heard in a long time. The mix is so bright and compressed, it's even dreadful by CD standards.

From a performance standpoint, these guys haven't broken any new ground. I can't believe it took them five years to come up with this record.

It should be titled *Death of Metallica*. I'm hoping that they don't suck on their current tour and that this legendary band still has one great album left in them. (And that it doesn't take five more years for us to get our hands on it.)

If I ran the world, whoever mastered this album would be fired, immediately. There's just way too much talent between Metallica and Rick Rubin for something like this to get to the record stores in its current form. – **Jeff Dorgay**





### TV on the Radio

*Dear Science*

DGC/Interscope, LP and CD



**Purchase LP**

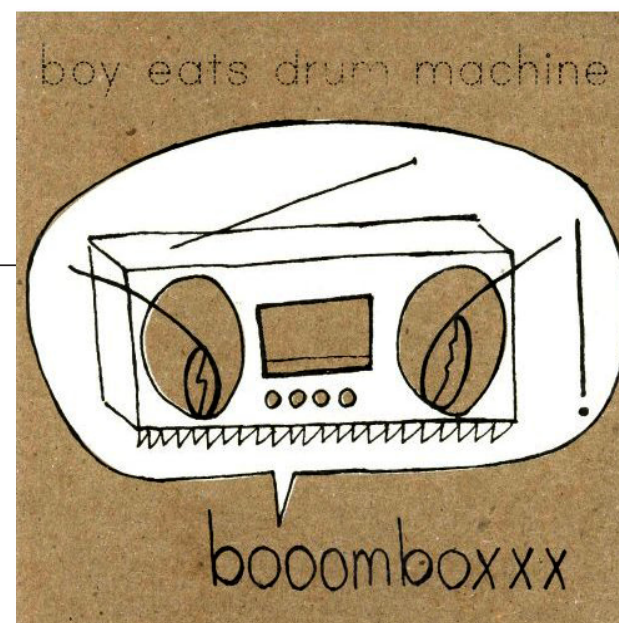


**Purchase HD Download**

After 2006's earthy and exotic *Return to Cookie Mountain*, TV on the Radio has been called one of the most unique and exciting art bands in indie rock. This accessible and joyful follow-up should expose the talents of this New York band to a wider audience. While *Cookie* was tribal and percussive, with a stunning sense of momentum, it was filled to the brim with enough alien artifacts to land it firmly in the "challenging" column. *Dear Science*, however, is more firmly grounded in its funk and R&B influences. With a full complement of synthesizers and drum machines, it sounds as if the band traded their sorcerers' caps for lab coats and dancing shoes after listening to *Around the World in a Day* and *Young Americans* for the first time.

This new album has made me rethink the band to the point where the former album has become a completely new experience. The Bowie influences are still here—the album's opener, "Halfway Home," sounds like it would be at home anywhere in *The Berlin Trilogy*—but the soul quotient has been raised considerably. "Crying," with its horn section, funky beats and falsetto harmonies, would seem utterly out of place on *Cookie*, for example, and while *Science* is much more consistent from song to song, it doesn't quite hit the same peaks as its predecessor did with tunes such as "Hours" and "Province." "The Golden Age," the best track on the album, certainly comes close with its urgent, Peter Gabriel-esque drive.

If *Dear Science* isn't quite the eye-opener that *Cookie* was, it's still at the top of my "brainiest records ever made" list. TV on the Radio still knows how to end songs in interesting and entropic ways, which may prompt you to turn back and reconsider each song more than once. Purchasing this album on LP entitles you to an access code so that you can download the entire album in the MP3 format over the Internet. It's a compelling offer from an intriguing band. — Marc Phillips



### Boy Eats Drum Machine

*Boomboomxxx*

Tender Loving Empire, CD

Boy Eats Drum Machine is a great introduction for music fans who are still reluctant to embrace the world of dub and turntablists. Jon Ragel, a Portland, Oregon native, combines rare and intriguing samples with complex break beats ("mooched and tweaked" from local drum resource Bridgetown Breaks), adding his own saxophone, guitar, organ and percussion tracks. His voice sounds more suited to mainstream rock than sampling, supplying a warm and inviting texture to the production.

Ragel's creations are less moribund than most offerings from the hyperdub world. There are no gritty, expansive soundscapes or tortured vocal samples here, with a traditional sense of song structure present more often than not. Still, this isn't dub watered down for the masses, and the constant leaps of energy may slap you out of your musical complacency. Take the koto samples from the opening title track, which are bent and spliced to venture just out of the realm of the natural, threatening to implode under the weight of their own drama. It holds together, but just barely, and it creates a nervous joy that's largely absent from a substantial chunk of the DJ scene.

If you have been turned off by the lo-fi feel that defines a lot of dub music, you will be surprised by how dynamic and well-recorded *Boomboomxxx* is. Ragel's live contributions certainly jump out from the mix, but you might be thrown off by how clean the Bridgetown Breaks tracks sound in comparison. This is a great introduction to what's coming out of a pair of turntables these days. — Marc Phillips



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### Jean on Jean

*Jean on Jean*

Kanine Records, CD

**T**ake some straightforward pop songs with a few simple chord progressions, add a whisper-sweet, multi-tracked teenaged girl's voice along with some sophisticated string arrangements, and you'll probably wind up with something on Disney Radio. Add a measure of melancholy and maturity to lyrics that deal with living a life of quiet desperation and you'll wind up with a complete animal. Cellist Molly Schnick, formerly of Out Hud, has used this strategy to create a winning sound, one that seems sunny and glossy on the surface while hiding undercurrents of regret and loneliness.

The third song, "Change," is the album's solemn anchor, led by Schnick's tense and lubricious cello. Lines such as "I was so bored that I started fantasizing when I got to work/That I wasn't there" will certainly strike a chord with a majority of twenty-somethings, as will fleeting references to "the land of smiles and money." (*continued*)



The deceptively cheerful choruses keep the proceedings from sliding into a dirge, underlining the fact that these songs are not about getting swallowed up by our surroundings. Schnick is merely expressing the apprehension and fear that goes along with profound changes and starting new chapters in one's life.

Rafael Cohen, formerly of Supersystem, helped Schnick to get these songs recorded, and there are musical contributions from Olivia Mori and Eric Emm.

While this quartet ostensibly makes up Jean on Jean, this is still an intensely personal effort, made by a young woman who carefully crafted and added to each track over a long period of time. The closer you listen to these songs, the more you feel Schnick's commitment, and soon the strength of her poetry outshines the breeziness and simple beauty of this impressive debut.

Watch for Schnick and Cohen on tour as Jean on Jean later this year. – **Marc Phillips**

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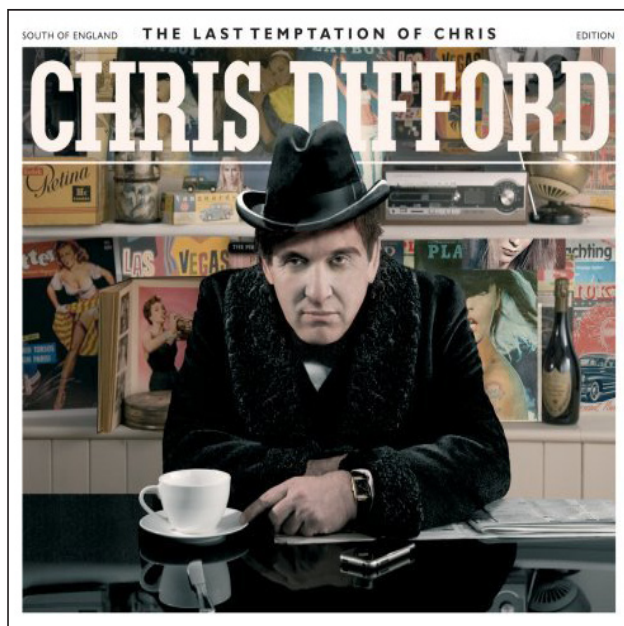
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### Chris Difford

*The Last Temptation of Chris*  
Airline Records, CD

**C**hris Difford and Glenn Tilbrook wrote some great songs together as Squeeze in the late 70's and early 80's and were often compared to Lennon and McCartney. If you agreed, and have been itching for some new, Squeeze-like material, I suggest Difford's newest release, *The Last Temptation of Chris*.

This record took care of a major Squeeze fix that I found myself needing after seeing them perform their greatest hits live in September. At least the fourth track did. "On My Own I'm Never Bored" has a Squeeze-like chorus groove.

But the comparison to a Squeeze album ends there. The rest of the record has a much more even temperament and almost feels like Billy Joel's *Piano Man*, with similar sparse instrumentals and arrangements. Difford has a warm, comforting voice that makes you feel like he's pouring his heart out directly to you.

*The Last Temptation of Chris* is a great collection of clever pop songs that center on life, relationships, getting older and of course, romance. The romance gets complicated with the opening track, "Come on Down," on which he mixes finance with love and says, "I can't pay back the money, but I love her every night." On "The Other Man in My Life," he ponders the problem of being involved with a woman who has another lover, wondering what is going through his mind.

Difford exhibits his sense of humor when he sings, "I'm never thin, I'm never svelte, I've always worn the bigger belt" on "Fat as a Fiddle," and ends this album on an up note in "The Party is Over," declaring, "The party is over, but we can come back again".

Whether you're a Squeeze fan or not, this one should be part of your collection. — Jeff Dorgay

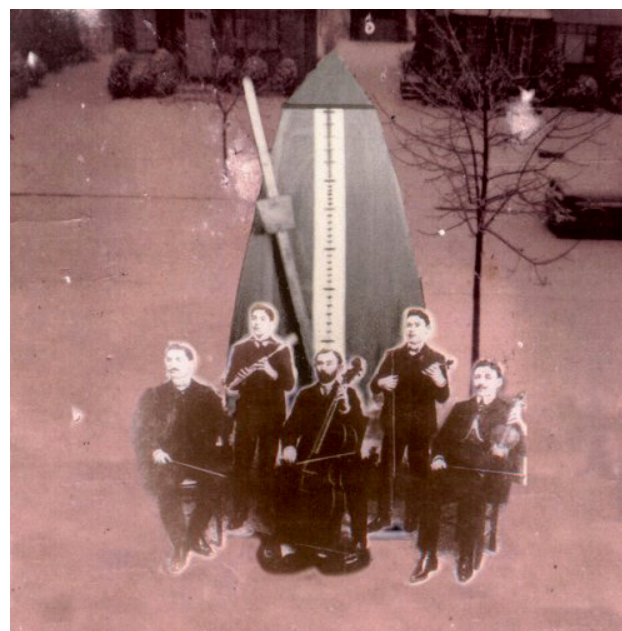
### The Music Tapes

*Music Tapes for Clouds and Tornadoes*  
Merge Records, CD

**H**ave you been wondering what happened to the daffy geniuses behind Neutral Milk Hotel's indie pop landmark *In an Aeroplane Over the Sea*? Well, the new album from The Music Tapes is one piece of the puzzle. Julian Koster, who played the banjo, bass guitar and singing saw for Neutral Milk Hotel has been recording music under The Music Tapes moniker since he was 16. *Music Tapes for Clouds and Tornadoes* is his first offering since 2002, and if you're a fan of singing saws, 7-foot metronomes and bouncing balls used as percussion instruments, you'll instantly fall in love with these raw yet whimsical songs.

If you're looking for an audiophile rendering of Koster's magic saw, however, you may be in for a disappointment. Not only is *Clouds and Tornadoes* recorded in mono, but it's been recorded on a combination of antique devices including an 1895 Edison wax cylinder and a wire recorder from the 1940s. The result is a haunting, ancient-sounding work that's more found art than anything remotely close to pop music.

Whether or not you connect emotionally to *Clouds and Tornadoes* will depend on how you feel about Koster's voice. His wobbly, fragile singing style is full of sorrow and vulnerability, but he's not what you would call classically trained. It's easier to acquire this particular taste in smaller doses than to try to digest the entire CD in one sitting. That said, the new Music Tapes album certainly cleanses the palate between more mainstream offerings and provides a strangely compelling soundtrack for a new generation of hard times. This is almost ageless music that should be performed behind the barn or on the back porch—or even an abandoned railroad car. — Marc Phillips





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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.

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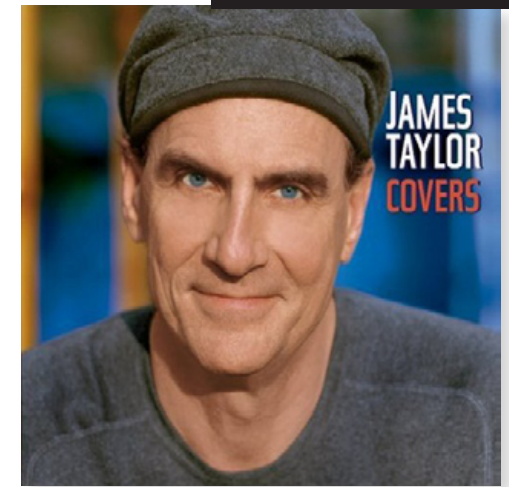
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### James Taylor

Covers Hear Music, CD

 **Purchase LP**

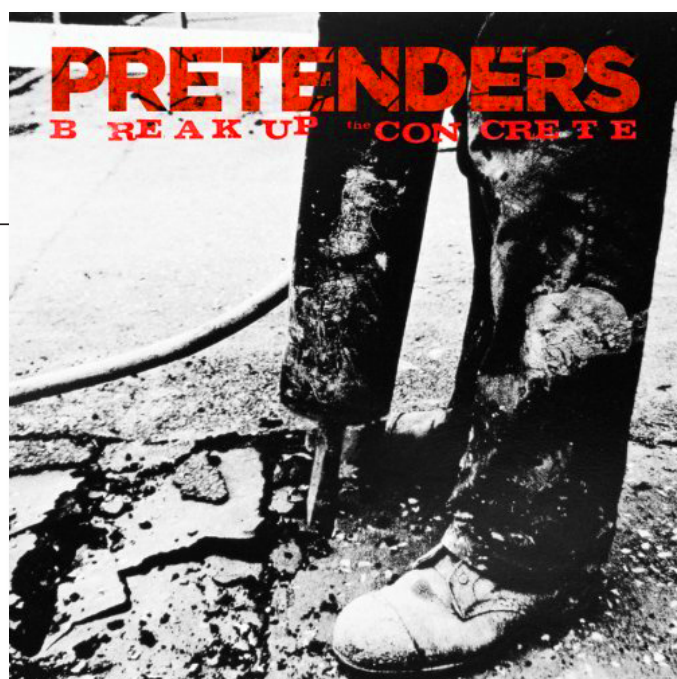
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It's ironic that this record is entitled *Covers*, since so many of James Taylor's big hits have been covers, such as "Handyman" and "How Sweet It Is." What could easily be mistaken for happy, poolside listening involved a year's worth of planning to execute. Taylor rustled up an all-star band and put them in a barn in Massachusetts for two weeks to produce a record that was basically live, a nice throwback to a time before there were an infinite number of tracks on the mixing console.

The covers include R&B chestnuts like "On Broadway," and the Temptations' "It's Growing," and roam from "Wichita Lineman" to "Summertime Blues." These are songs Taylor has been playing in concert for years. The tunes are all in the same tempo and are well recorded. I must admit I almost got sucked in. Taylor's rendition of "Wichita Lineman" feels like it could have been an outtake from *Sweet Baby James*, but I had to draw the line at "Not Fade Away."

In the end, I'm sure a couple of these cuts will make it onto the soundtrack of *House* or something similar, and Starbucks will sell many copies of *Covers*. You won't see this disc on my coffee table, but I know my parents will love getting a copy from good old Santa. — Jeff Dorgay





### The Pretenders

*Break Up The Concrete*

Shang-ri-la Music, CD  **Purchase HD Download**

This is The Pretenders' first release in eight years, and it may be their best since *Learning to Crawl*.

*Break Up the Concrete* lacks the start-to-finish punk edge that their first album *The Pretenders* has. It incorporates a wider range of styles, similar to *Pretenders II*.

The opening cut, "Boots of Chinese Plastic," has a straight-ahead rock groove, reminiscent of Elvis Costello or Nick Lowe at their finest. Drummer extraordinaire Jim Keltner keeps the beat going throughout. (He is with The Pretenders for this record only, and will not be joining them on tour.) "Don't Cut Your Hair" is almost a dead ringer for "Bad Boys Get Spanked." Long time Pretenders fans should smile when they hear this one.

Hynde's voice is strong, with her signature vibrato intact. While this record may not have the couple of catchy hits that the first Pretenders record did, the level of musicianship is excellent from start to finish. There isn't a single clunker on the disc, so here's to one of the best female voices in rock being back on the charts again. — **Jeff Dorgay**



### Oxford Collapse

*Bits*

Sub Pop, CD and LP  **Purchase HD Download**

Everything old is new again. When The Strokes first landed on the scene in 2001 they started a new era of "vintage rock" with their scruffy, Velvet Underground-inspired sound and inspired another generation of kids with skinny jeans and cheesy mustaches.

While Oxford Collapse pays homage to the 60's, they also take the best of the 80's, with their loose, lo-fi attitude. You can hear the lineage from The Replacements, Husker Du and R.E.M. as you go through the tracks on *Bits*. On this sophomore release on Sub Pop, there are more than enough shouting choruses and fuzzy guitars to fill a Minneapolis punk club.

We definitely see their talent stretch out more this time around. Frontman Michael Pace has expanded his musical palette considerably, although some of these songs still have an unfinished feel to them. In the opener, "Electric Arc," Pace and bassist Adam Rizer repeat the chorus, "I can't remember things, I can't remember things, I just don't know what to do," 14 times throughout the song.

By the fourth track, they deliver the goods with "Young Love Delivers," with the perfect sloppy balance of classic punk rock and modern charm. Pace says, drearily, "My love came back from China/brought me a pocket camera," with plenty of three-chord distortion in the background. But the one that catches you off guard is "The Wedding," a sleepy love song that has a haunting cello in the background. It could easily be part of a Wes Anderson film soundtrack.

Still a little loose, Oxford Collapse captures the spirit, energy and at times the sound of classic, unadulterated rock and roll. — **Joe Golfen**





### Chad VanGaal

*Soft Airplane*

Sub Pop, CD and LP  **Purchase HD Download**

A joyful, lilting banjo rings out on the first track of *Soft Airplane*, but the sweetness of its tone is soon interrupted by VanGaal's strained, wavering falsetto, causing a clash of richness and starkness that grows throughout the record.

Finding a unique voice in the crowded singer-songwriter genre is not an easy task. For a guy who reportedly doesn't spend much time outside of his basement, VanGaal has done a good job at carving out a niche with his lo-fi folk songs. The influences of Pedro the Lion and Sufjan Stevens hang heavy in the ornate and whispered arrangements of *Soft Airplane*, along with a sense of loneliness. But while Sufjan and Pedro often augment their sorrowful tunes with hopefulness in God or human virtue, VanGaal offers none of this, filling his songs with death, fear and anxiety, giving the record a sense of weight and honesty.

VanGaal plays every instrument on the album, and relies on his tape machine and JVC boom box to capture it all for us, as he did on his two previous records *Infiniheart* and *Skelliconnection*. More confident than on his past releases, he fills every track to the brim with a thick layer of electronic blips and flickers; the music rises beautifully while the lyrics express isolation and death. The music swells with so many glistening sounds that lines like "I can hear the cries of the dead, maybe it's your neighbor beating his dog in the basement," blindsides you. Definitely a complex dude.

While many self-produced bedroom musicians tend to find a sound and stick to it, VanGaal has a wide range of musical styles, ranging from the stripped down "Willow Tree" to the electronica-esque "Phantom Anthills." VanGaal's yelping vocals can wear on you at times, but his powerful songwriting and gorgeous arrangements carry the day. — Joe Golfen



### Blitzen Trapper

*Furr*

Sub Pop, CD and LP

 **Purchase HD Download**

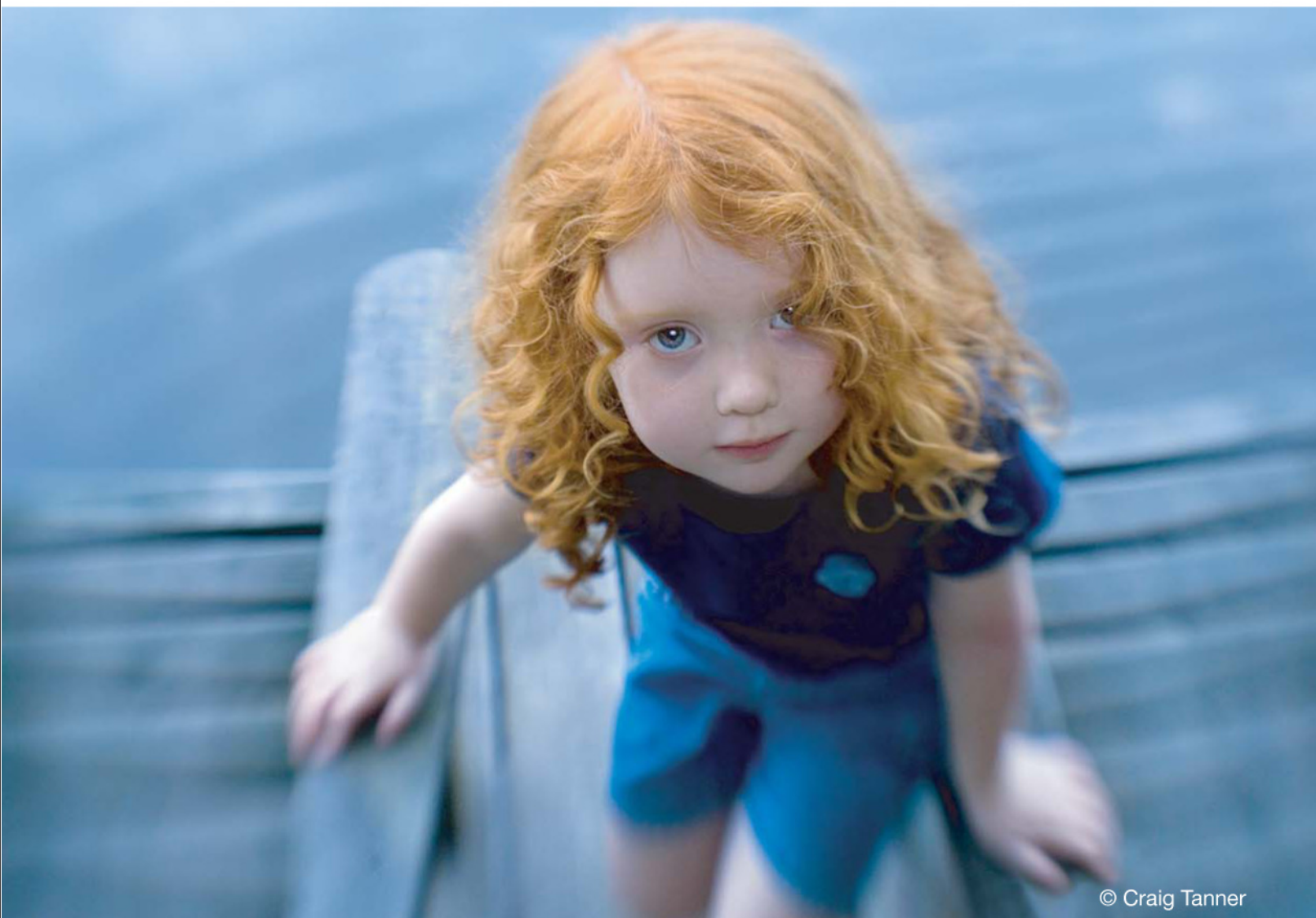
 **Purchase LP**

The title track of Blitzen Trapper's fourth album is a werewolf tale. It's the story of a boy lost in the woods who embraces life as a wolf, until a beautiful girl convinces him that being human might not be that bad after all. This song reveals the character of Blitzen Trapper, a band whose members constantly morph themselves into various musical creatures, ready to tackle everything that they go after. This is an album that keeps you guessing – and smiling.

Recorded in an old telegraph building on the banks of the Willamette River in Portland, Oregon, *Furr* is the result of the songwriting schizophrenia of Eric Earley. As he did on 2007's critically acclaimed *Wild Mountain Nation*, Earley boldly stabs at a wide range of sounds while retaining his signature country style, a difficult task with the tunes he takes on. (continued)



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Listening to *Furr* almost makes you forget the songs are all by one band. The Guided by Voices pop of “God + Suicide” is followed by the choppy rock of the Pavement-esque “Fire +Fast Bullets.” After that, Earley and Co take on the smooth, hip shaking ““sha-na-nas” of “Saturday Nite” before chugging out the driving, country murder ballad “Black River Killer.” **Each song is flawlessly executed with Earley’s voice shifting from a frantic tenor to a weary baritone, depending on the mood.**

Occasionally, he piles all of these moods into one song, as on the opening tune, “Sleepy Time in the Western World.” A joyful Apples in Stereo chorus sinks into an Elton John break, before a wailing Mountain-inspired guitar line sends the whole thing spiraling up again. At times it gets out of hand, but the ambition can’t be ignored.

*Furr* has so many different styles, it loses its personality after a while. Individually, the songs are all interesting, but mixed together loses its way somewhat. Beneath all of their wizardry lies a great alt-country band, and the more straight-ahead tracks shine the brightest. The piano ballad “Not Your Lover” is a delicate tune that is so captivating, you wish they did this more of this kind of thing. — **Joe Golfen**



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**Danava**  **Purchase HD Download**  
*Unonou*

Kemado Records, CD and LP

**W**hile *Unonou* is split into seven long cuts, Danava probably could have just made this record one long track. The endless churning guitar and synthesizer riffs never let up; mixed in with an overly healthy dose of crashing drums and soaring vocals that rarely find a cohesive path.

Though they don't like to be referred to as a metal or prog band, Danava have certainly painted themselves into a corner here. Their spaceship-riding excellence led them to great moments on their self-titled debut, and the track "By The Mark" was indeed stellar, but nothing on *Unonou* ever rises above the directionless din.

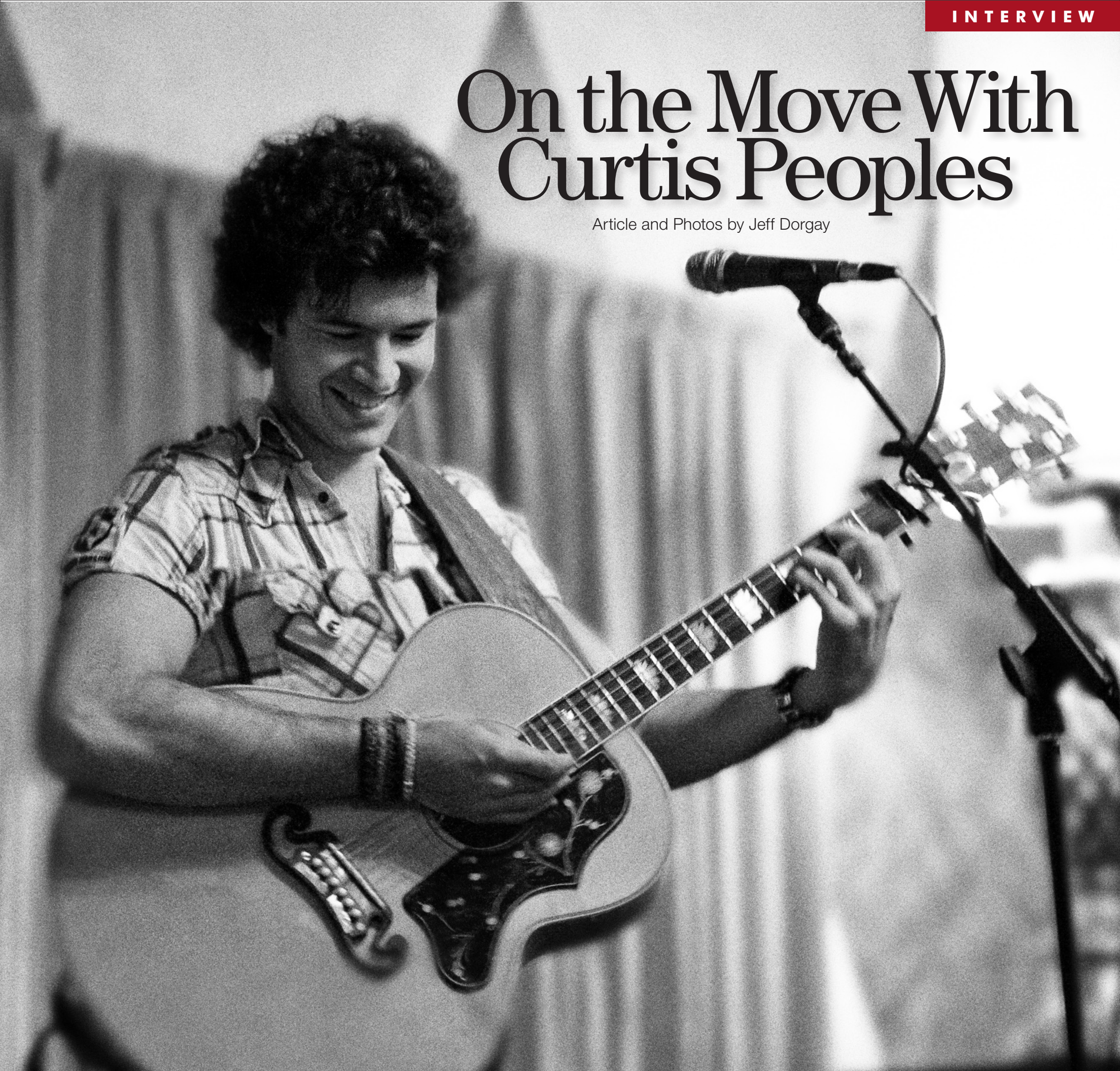
Lead singer Dusty Sparkles borrows heavily from the Ozzy book of tricks, but where Ozzy ties it together with sinister black magic, Sparkles is just up there wailing. The lyrics are barely distinguishable because he's singing so high. Whatever cleverness may be up there isn't coming across. Some of this could be waxed over if there were some killer guitar solos, but there are too many choppy, repetitive riffs where blistering six-string magic should be.

The standout track, "A High or a Low," is also one of the shortest on the disc. The vocals are tight, and the riffs don't wear out their welcome. More of this would help the band take better aim at the demonic heights that *Unonou* only hints at. – **Joe Golfen**



# On the Move With Curtis Peoples

Article and Photos by Jeff Dorgay





recently had the pleasure of seeing and hearing Curtis Peoples, one of Manhattan/EMI's newest talents. His record, *Curtis Peoples*, has been out since August, and he's been getting a lot of good buzz on the Internet, including a five-star rating on Amazon.com. A great showing on MTV's song-writing show, *Score* and constant touring has helped this hard working musician to get established in a relatively short period of time.

Although a recent show in Portland got cancelled, he decided to make the trip up from San Francisco anyway, without his touring band, to play an acoustic set at a Portland club that's emphatically named Imbibe!

People's CD has a straight ahead rock feel, so listening to him playing the same material acoustically, with a different groove, was most impressive.

Peoples, a warm and friendly young musician, offered some insights into his career and the state of the music scene from his perspective.

---

*How's it going after the release of the album?*

Everything is coming together, now that the record is out and I'm working my ass off, but I'm really enjoying it.

*What else have you been doing to support the album?*

You have to do a lot more than just play music today, you need to get your music on a TV show, too. I've been out auditioning to get my music on TV, whether it's just used as background music, or me performing. There are a few opportunities where I may get to be on a show as me, or as a musician modeled after me that is performing one of the songs from the album. I'm auditioning in front of a lot of TV people these days.

*The equivalent of showcasing for AOR guys in clubs 25 years ago?*

Exactly, and with my fan base, that's what we are going for. Who knows, maybe a Scion ad or a spot on Grey's Anatomy. It's really exciting; you just have to get used to the way things are in the 21st Century.



*How do you feel about the move away from physical product?*

Even though I grew up in the '90s, I still get annoyed that people aren't buying my record; they just go to iTunes and download it. The best part of buying music for me when I was younger was going down to the record store and taking something I loved home. It just takes some getting used to. You have to embrace the future. *(continued)*



*So, who is buying your CD (as physical product)?*

Young kids and parents. Even though I'm told that my target market is college kids, I never sell CD's when I play a college; they all listen to music on their iPods and laptops.

*Speaking of physical product, do you have a turntable at home?*

Yeah. I love the sound of analog. I don't have as much time for it as I'd like to, but I enjoy the sound. I even inherited my parents' record collection. I have a few friends with major record collections and they always invite me over to be the DJ. My first memory of music is my dad playing *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* on an LP. He loved The Doors, too.

*What do your parents think of how your career has progressed?*

They have been unbelievably cool about it. My mom gives my CD's to random people in the grocery store when she's out shopping. How about that?

*Have you seen anything on the tour that has made you wish you had just stayed with college and got a marketing degree instead?*

No, I've wanted to do this since I was 15 and I love it. But it does take a lot longer than anyone thinks it will, there's no way around that.

Curtis Peoples is out on tour again, starting October 21. He says "the only way you can stay in front of the fans is to stay in motion." You can see his schedule here:

<http://curtispeoples.com/tour>





# 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 album art and it will take you directly to the Acoustic Sounds website.**



**Miles Davis** – *Cookin' With the Miles Davis Quintet*

**Sonny Rollins** – *Saxophone Colossus*

Analogue Productions, SACD

**T**his is the start of a beautiful relationship. Chad Kassem from Acoustic Sounds Analog Productions is the king of high quality jazz reissues on LP, but for those of you that would like your music served on a silver platter instead, this is the perfect solution. If you have an SACD player, that is.

These two discs are the beginning of AP's latest series of Blue Note reissues (originally out on 45 r.p.m. vinyl) on SACD. Considering the titles on LP are \$50 each, the SACD's are a bargain at \$25 each. Analog Productions will be releasing about three titles a month on SACD, so you can buy them individually or sign up to have them charge your credit card and ship them to you as soon as they are released.

I auditioned the discs on my Wadia 581i SE player and felt that the sonics were every bit as good as the LP's that I have from this series. Hardcore analog fanatics might still prefer the vinyl, but for me, it's SACD all the way for the rest of this series. That last bit of analog goodness (and flipping the album every nine minutes) does not outweigh the convenience of putting an SACD in the tray and pressing play.

Considering that many of these original Blue Note LP's are fetching four-figure sums, this has to be the music bargain of the century. Now you can leave those gems for special occasions and enjoy these every day. Bravo to Chad for giving us two great choices.







### Frank Sinatra

*Nice and Easy*

Mobile Fidelity, 24kt Gold CD

Even a headbanger like me can't resist this record. Shawn Britton and the crew at Mobile Fidelity did a flawless job on remastering what would be Frank Sinatra's last original recording on Capitol, which released it in 1960.

Sinatra worked with Nelson Riddle and his orchestra to produce a record that is the textbook definition of smooth. Even those familiar with Sinatra's work will be surprised at how well the delicate phrasing and tonality of his voice is captured here; it gives you a new appreciation of what a superb vocal talent this man possessed.

This disc has great extension at both ends of the frequency scale. The instruments, especially the piano and strings, just float between your speakers. MoFi must have had a pristine master tape to work with, as there is barely any audible tape hiss, even in the quietest parts of the recording.

If you are looking for a new disc to show off what your HiFi system is capable of, this is it. Britton is the tonemaster. This disc is one of those rare jewels that fools you into thinking you are actually listening to Sinatra in the room when you close your eyes instead of just a recording.

### Little Feat

*Sailin' Shoes*

MoFi 24kt Gold CD

Continuing down the path with Little Feat, MoFi adds their second album to their catalog. The opening cymbal crashes are slightly crunchy, but my original LP revealed the same sounds. This must have been distortion on the master tape, so I won't hold the MoFi crew's feet to the fire.

*Sailin' Shoes* was originally recorded by the legendary Ted Templeman. You can see how Little Feat's style progressed from the basic bluesy style on their first album, *Little Feat* in 1971 to the more complex arrangements just a year later on *Sailin' Shoes*, blending in a dose of heavy rock.

Kudos to MoFi for doing an excellent job restoring this classic performance. Though my original LP is still in excellent shape, the sound quality leaves a lot to be desired, another victim of too much compression, and radio friendly EQ. Thanks to the extra layers of piano and guitars that are present, and a much fatter sound overall, you can finally hear what's going on in the mix.

By the way, *Sailin' Shoes* was the first record for which Little Feat enlisted the talents of artist Neon Park, who went on to produce most of their remaining album covers.







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### Linda Ronstadt

*Prisoner in Disguise*  
MoFi, 24kt Gold CD

Originally released in 1975, *Prisoner in Disguise* was two albums into a nice, ten-year run of gold and platinum albums for Linda Ronstadt. I did not have this one in my collection, but a quick trip down to my local used record store turned up a fairly scratch free LP and a mid-80's CD for comparison; both had a harsh, crunchy high end and were very compressed. Considering the amount of airplay this record received – the album produced two hit singles, “Heat Wave” and “Tracks of My Tears” – I’m not surprised at the mastering priorities.

If you love Linda, you will really enjoy this record. The MoFi release showcases the care that went into the original master tape, and you can hear some of the best studio musicians of the 70's at their finest.

Like the Sinatra record above, there is much more air in this recording. On my original LP, you can barely hear Emmylou Harris singing backup on track 8, “The Sweetest Gift,” but on the MoFi disc she has her own distinct space, almost sounding like she's standing right behind Linda. I am always amazed by records like this, and by the amount of music that was still on the master tape that we never got to hear the first time around.



# AMERICA



## America

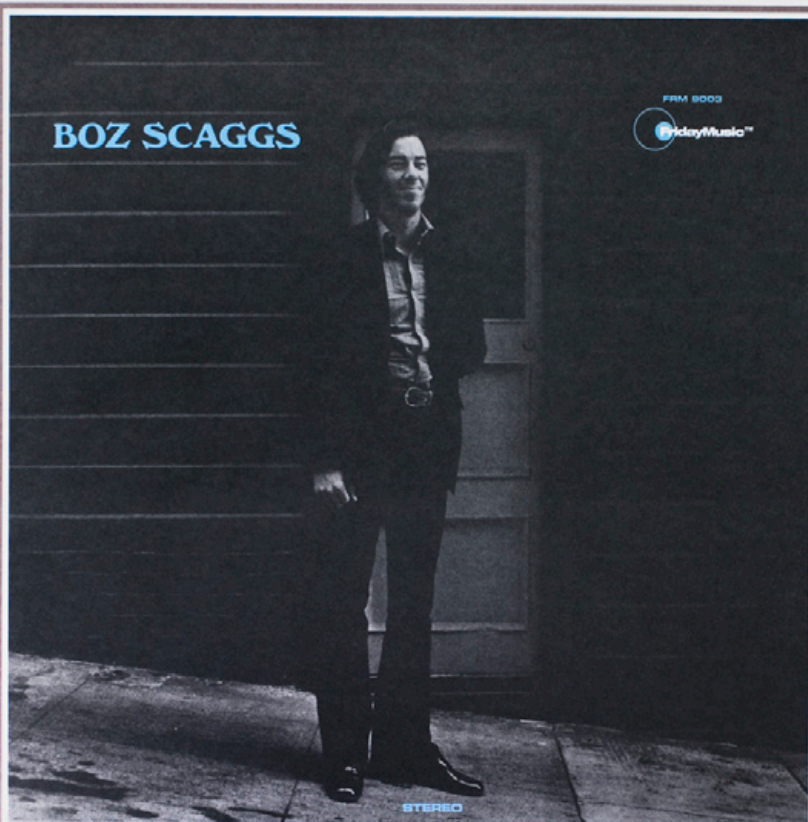
*America*

Friday Vinyl, 180g. LP

**T**his is my first experience with the Friday Vinyl label, and it's not spectacular. The sleeve says that this record is half-speed mastered, but I suspect from the sound quality that it was from a digital safety master, not the original. I've got a 7 ½ i.p.s. pre-recorded reel-to-reel tape from Columbia House that sounds way better than this one.

While there is some air in the recording, with some exaggerated stereo effects from the original intact, the overall tonal balance is very bright. I suggest you pass on this one and dig through the used racks to try and find a clean original. Definitely not up to audiophile standards.

## BOZ SCAGGS



## Boz Scaggs

*Boz Scaggs*

Friday Vinyl, 180g LP

**P**ick your poison. The original recording of Boz' second album is extremely dark and this remaster from Friday Vinyl is way too bright. I don't know what these guys are using for monitors in the mastering room, but I'm scared. On a positive note, the jacket printing was good and the record surfaces are nice and quiet. However, I just can't imagine this record passing audiophile muster with anyone but the most rolled off sound.

Until we can get more information on Friday Vinyl, I suggest avoiding this label.



# Classical Music A to Z

By Dan Babineau



## **Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky: The Ying and Yang of Russian Classical Music**

**A**s a scientist, I love contrasts. They are one of the best ways to determine progress, no matter what the field of study. Often in classical music I like to analyze a composer by who they imitated or worked in contrast to. Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky are perfect examples of this. Peter Tchaikovsky decided on his musical path early in his life and spent his career refining his technique and variations on his early themes.

A complete contrast, Igor Stravinsky spent his musical life diversifying, innovating and inventing an entirely new way to perceive music throughout his life. He was a renaissance man capable of writing in every imaginable era of classical music from pre-baroque to the 20th Century and beyond. Stravinsky honored Tchaikovsky in a few of his scores as if to bow down to the master of Old Russian music and then rocket off to the next century.

## **Igor Stravinsky** (1882-1971)

**N**o other composer exemplifies diversity in classical composition better than Igor Stravinsky. He was sort of a musical chameleon, jumping from one era to the next, soaking up the color of the music and then transposing it into another unique masterpiece.

While his parents insisted on obtaining a law degree, Stravinsky had far greater desires and music won in the end. When his law university closed, Stravinsky came under the spell of Rimsky-Korsakov. Studying under him for a number of years, Rimsky-Korsakov was significant in Stravinsky's development as a composer as well as being an influence on his private life.

Stravinsky's early works, *Fireworks* and *The Firebird* employ a texture and precision that mirrors Rimsky-Korsakov to a tee. Stravinsky's first ballets were very nationalistic in nature but as he began to travel and soak up the atmosphere of other lands, his musical creations evolved. (*continued*)



*The Rite of Spring* was the first example of Stravinsky's ability to stretch the envelope of Russian folk music and create a score that was so original it offended many people when it was first performed.

The audience of his day was not ready for Stravinsky's explosion of rhythm, pace and tonality. The polytonality exhibited in *Petrushka* is another example of Stravinsky's desire to move out of the shadow of 19th century music and open the door to the future of classical music.

When Stravinsky gained notoriety, he then began writing in a neo-classical style, perhaps to confuse us all. I often wonder if this was a rational inconsistency, or did the spirit of Mozart, Haydn or even Bach invade his soul? No one really knows the answer, but we are left with some absolutely gorgeous music as a consequence of this shift.

While Prokofiev hit the neo-classic button in his 1st symphony, Stravinsky set the scene for some of the most elegant wind music ever written. *Pucinel-la*, *Octet*, *Duet for Bassoon* and *Fanfare* are perfect examples of this shift back to the 18th century, with smaller ensembles taking the place of larger orchestras, as Stravinsky redefines this *Classical* era of classical music. *Oedipus Rex*, *Apollo* and the three symphonies composed during this period have been influenced by Greek mythology.

It might be difficult to fathom the transition from the large scale orchestra necessary to perform the "Rite of Spring" to the stripped down ensembles that make up this period of Stravinsky's work, but he executes it magnificently, only to take it further toward a new concept in musical composition – serialism.

Dodecaphony was the twelve-tone technique developed by Arnold Schoenberg that sent many music fans away shrieking but Stravinsky embraced Schoenberg's new concept of serialism and made it his own. Again, his remarkable ability to innovate and evolve was his ultimate gift. Toward the end of his life Stravinsky was influenced by the jazz movement in America, causing yet another metamorphosis in his work.

I can't end my dissertation on Stravinsky without mentioning the traditional Russian folk songs that he brought back to life in a way that may never be rivaled. My favorites are "Ava Maria," "Les Noce" and "Oh Mother My Little Head Hurts!" I doubt there was anything Stravinsky couldn't handle and I firmly believe he single handedly opened the door to modern music.

**Toward the end of his life Stravinsky was influenced by the jazz movement in America, causing yet another metamorphosis in his work.**



## DAN'S PICKS:

Philips Catalog #468035

**Rite of Spring** – Gergiev and the Kiro Theater Orchestra

Telarc Catalog #80587

**Firebird Suite** – Paavo Jarvi and the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

RCA Catalog #68168

**Song of the Nightingale** – Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Koch Int. Catalog #7438

**Fanfare, Octet, Duet for Bassoon** – Richman Harmonic Ensemble

RCA Catalog #57127

**Petrushka, Fireworks** – Maazel and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

CBS Catalog #42434

**The Three Symphonies** – Stravinsky and the Columbia

Sony Catalog #89649

**Concerto for Violin in D major** – Hahn, Marriner and the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields

Mercury Catalog #432012

**Tango, Fireworks** – Dorati and the London Symphony Orchestra

Chandos Catalog #10193

**L'histoire du soldat** – Neeme Jarvi and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra

Bridge Catalog #9051

**Music for Piano** (Rag-time) Karis, Lubin

Hyperion Catalog #66410

**Les Noce and Chorale Music** – Wood, Shepel, the New London Chamber Chorus etc.





**Tchaikovsky was the conduit to combine the styles of the era before him into something new.**

## Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

I am always puzzled why Hollywood has never made a movie of Tchaikovsky; his life was far more interesting than Batman. Yet like Batman, the music of Tchaikovsky exudes a vivid imagery that is difficult to let go. A hero of the Romantic period, Tchaikovsky led music lovers out of the classic genre of Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart, setting the stage for an entirely new set of emotions.

While many have accused him of being too honey dipped and overly romantic, without him, the romantic movement would have gone into a holding pattern. Tchaikovsky was the conduit to combine the styles of the era before him into something new.

Not a member of the famous *Russian Five* (Balakirev, Cui, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin) of his early years, Tchaikovsky was a loner in all respects – musically, spiritually and in life in general. Another child prodigy, it was obvious at an early age that he would make music his life despite the consequences of his being homosexual in an era that was not forgiving of this lifestyle. Perhaps it allowed him to reach beyond the threshold of his innate creativity.

I've always felt that Tchaikovsky was a master of timbre and tone. His music captures the spirit of Russia with an atmosphere full of vivid emotions. Joy, sorrow and success are all combined in his compositions; no one can bring down the house better than Tchaikovsky. Unlike the aforementioned five (that generally relied on Russian folk music as a catalyst), Tchaikovsky's ability to turn within is much of what makes him so unique. Even the beginning enthusiast of classical music can distinguish his melodies quickly.

Through his work we are exposed to the emotional perils of his short life. Just like Elton John, he was married to a woman (one of his music students) for a brief period of time. Emerging from this debacle came a more refined Tchaikovsky, even more powerful and intense than before and many think he became psychotic at this time. By the time he had composed his 4th Symphony you can feel his sense of utter hopelessness.

However, Tchaikovsky's life in general, was actually quite good when compared to the average Russian of his time. Just as his life was headed for hard times, Nadezhda von Meck came along and supported Tchaikovsky for over ten years, both financially and emotionally. *(continued)*



Tchaikovsky received a yearly stipend, which allowed him to enter the prestigious Moscow Conservatory and further hone his already incredible musical gift.

Von Meck became a confidant of sorts and wrote many letters to Tchaikovsky acting more like a surrogate mother, comforting his many emotional quirks and constantly reassuring him of his musical genius. It is interesting to note the rumor that the two never actually met in person in all of the years of her support. Von Meck insisted on a long distance relationship and Tchaikovsky honored her wish. It is also interesting that just as Tchaikovsky became famous throughout Europe and no longer needed her help, she declared bankruptcy. Again, Tchaikovsky had to endure emotional hardship and we hear his loud cry of despair in his last Symphony Number Six.

Tchaikovsky studied and greatly respected Mozart as well as the likes of Rossini, Verdi, Bizet and even Beethoven. All six of Tchaikovsky's symphonies are masterpieces in their own right. The second, *The Little Russian*, the fourth, fifth and sixth – *Pathétique*, are my favorites.

These are grand works that require a full orchestra and command a force that few composers ever managed to accomplish. His ballets are amazing but certainly overplayed. Who can blame people for playing music that is so easy to enjoy? While the public at large has really latched on to "Romeo and Juliet", "Swan Lake" and even "The Nutcracker", because they hit the correct spot in your brain, I think the "1812 Overture" should only be played at ceremonial events. I'd love to hear that at half time during a football game, though Tchaikovsky actually despised the piece, feeling it lacked soul. Clearly the conclusion of a tortured soul.

Don't forget to explore beyond these warhorses and sample some of his chamber music: "Capriccio Italien," "Marche Slave," "Rococo Variations," "Serenade for Strings" and both the violin and piano concertos show off a happier and more playful Tchaikovsky. The operas are fun, especially "Eugene Ornegin." Finally, don't forget a dose of his choral music, one of my favorites being Opus 68 from the "Queen of Spades" "Will we drink and be happy"! This always brings a smile to my face during a good meal and I suspect it will to you as well. ●



## DAN'S PICKS:

Sony Catalog #4832

### **Violin Concerto in E major** –

Bell, Tilson Thomas and the Berlin Philharmonic

EMI Classics Catalog #86531

**Symphonies One and Six** – Giulini and the Philharmonia Orchestra

DG Catalog #449816

**Piano Concerto Number One in B Flat Minor** – Argerich, Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra

Philips Catalog #456580

**Symphony Number Six** and **Romeo and Juliet Suite** – Gergiev and the Kiro Theater Orchestra

Sony Catalog #63162

**Nutcracker and Swan Lake** – Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic

Philips Catalog #462905

**Symphony Number 5** – Gergiev and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Sony Catalog #61556

**Symphony Number 4** – Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic

Md&g Catalog #3211008

**Serenade for Strings** – Davies and the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra

Hyperion Catalog #66617

**Songs** – Joan Rodgers, Roger Vignoles



# A Visit to Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab

By Jeff Dorgay





Hard-core audiophiles and seasoned music lovers all crack a smile when you mention the words “Mobile Fidelity.” Many people think that MoFi started with their 1979 release of Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of The Moon*, but their history goes back much further than that. Mobile Fidelity actually started in the late ‘50s with founder Brad Miller’s love for capturing the sounds of trains. You can read MoFi’s full history here:

<http://www.mofi.com/productcart/pc/viewcontent.asp?idpage=14>



*DSOM* was actually the 17th release on the label and their first popular music title was number 005, Supertramp’s *Crime of the Century*. I happened to be working at Schaak Electronics in Milwaukee, Wis., when the first MoFi boxes came in containing the Supertramp release, John Klemmer’s *Touch* and Steely Dan’s *Katy Lied*.

Sixteen dollars for a record seemed pretty crazy when the local record shops were getting a third of that price, but being an audio nut, I bought all three. Little did I know that the copy of *Katy Lied* would be worth about seven hundred dollars in 2008! All skepticism went right out the window the minute I put the stylus down on the Supertramp record. There was a lot more information on those grooves that I wasn’t getting from the standard issue.

The next day, I was back at work telling all of our customers that they needed to buy these discs. When asked if I would pay that kind of outrageous price for a copy of *Katy Lied*, I could look them right in the eye and say, “Absolutely.” And that, my dear readers, is how it all began. I’ll venture that many of you in the 50-something crowd were right there with me.

MoFi went on to release about 200 LP’s between 1978 and 1984, switching to providing the same care and attention to detail with the compact disc in 1984 and the 24kt gold CD in 1987.

In 1994, they returned to LP production, issuing about a dozen more titles before going bankrupt in 1999. All these records are now collector’s items, and many easily fetch 10 times their original price on EBay and other auctions.

Fortunately, you can’t keep a great group of music lovers down forever. In 2001, Music Direct purchased the assets and intellectual property of MoFi and their store provided the perfect distribution chain as well. The key former employees came back to work, a new LP cutting system designed by Tim deParavacini was installed, and they were back in action.

Mobile Fidelity has traditionally kept their mastering engineers behind the scenes over the years, with Stan Ricker doing most of their initial work. But Shawn Britton has been working there for more than 20 years and was moved up to the big chair in 2001 when they opened their doors again.

I’ve been very impressed with Britton’s work over the years, but what impressed me most during a recent trip to MoFi’s headquarters in Sebastopol, California is what great music lovers Shawn and the rest of the crew at MoFi are. *(continued)*

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**What impressed me most during a recent trip to MoFi’s headquarters in Sebastopol, California is what great music lovers Shawn and the rest of the crew at MoFi are.**





The staff was gracious enough to give me a entire day of their time. They gave me a complete tour, let me fondle some master tapes as well as listen to them, and best of all, we enjoyed some great yellow curry just down the street along with a few good laughs.

#### **Here's what Shawn had to say about his tenure at MoFi:**

*First, how long have you been at MoFi, and what brought you here?*

(Laughs) Since 8:30 this morning. But seriously, since 1985, when they relocated to Northern California. I was a local musician and heard that they were hiring people to duplicate cassettes.

What really drew me in was listening to an Original Master Recording of Eric Clapton's Slowhand over at a friend's house. When MoFi turned up in Petaluma shortly thereafter and wanted to hire me, I was all over it.

*How was the pay back then?*

Less than I was making at my current place of employment, but this was a chance to make records!

*What do you play?*

I'm a drummer, actually.

*What were you into, as far as the audio world back then?*

I had been building Dynaco amps and Heathkits since I was a kid. At one time I was considering becoming an electrical engineer.

*How about today?*

I have a pretty basic system at home, because after a long day here, I usually want to relax or go out and play music.

*What about the arguments surrounding the half-speed mastering process? I certainly have plenty of your records that sound great.*

It has a lot to do with EQing an octave down and thinking the process through. When you run the tape machine at half speed, you have to EQ everything an octave down. As long as you take care of this properly, the results are great. Same thing for the high end; if you want to EQ at 20k, you make the adjustment at 10k. And there is information up there.

Our system here will cut at half speed and at real time. I've done plenty of tests and while there will always been some critics of the process, I still feel it provides the best results.

**The best way to kill music is to have competing formats.**

*To inform our readers who aren't familiar with your half-speed mastering process, how did it originate?*

It was developed by JVC to be used for the original Quad records. We had CD-4, SQ and QS. Stan Ricker was in charge, cutting records in the Capitol building.

*How about Stan Ricker and MoFi these days?*

He's MoFi's Yoda; he knows it all. He's taught me the craft of cutting records. He still works on some of our projects. He did the Dave Alvin record.

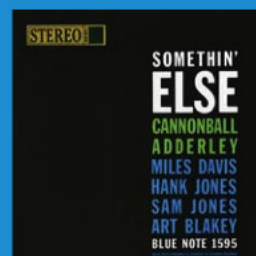
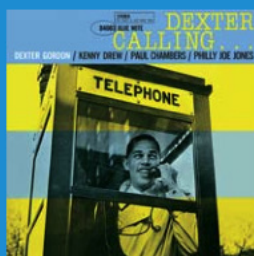
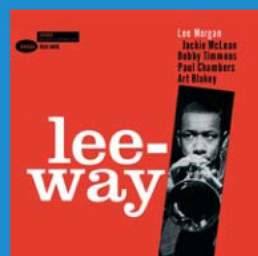
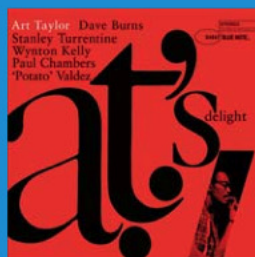
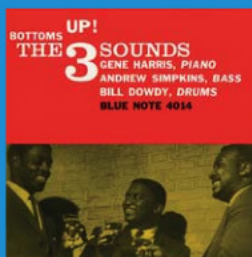
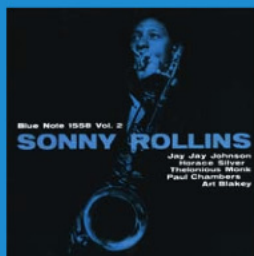
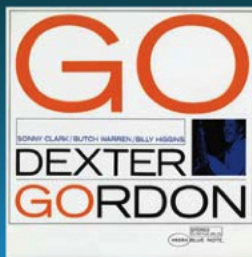
*More competing formats, even back then?*

Yep, the best way to kill music is to have competing formats. The audio industry keeps shooting itself in the foot. It's a shame that SACD and DVD-A could never work it out.



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How did MoFi make their way into DSD?

I attended a demonstration with John Wood put on by David Kawakami of Sony and we were very impressed, but there wasn't a disc to encode DSD onto yet. At the time we had been already experimenting with 24/96. The original Sony gear had a bit of dryness to it and it was just an archival thing, but showed lots of potential. Once Ed Meitner was brought in, the whole project moved up to a whole new level.

What do you use in the mastering chain here?

Historically, we haven't talked about it a lot because it starts an endless round of debates. As it is, we still have plenty of people who argue about the choices we've made.

Speaking of SACD, historically, MoFi has always been an SACD shop instead of getting behind DVD-A. Why did you choose SACD?

Glad you made that point. John Wood is our director of product development and back when we were doing gold CD's, we put a lot of time and money into developing 24/96. Theta built us some killer converters and we still have them. We did the first demo disc for DVD-a that we launched at CES as a technology showcase, but still we were looking at it as an archival backup medium. Then DSD came along and Ed Meitner with gear that sounded much better than the stock SONY stuff.

But it wasn't tied to a workstation. Everything was proprietary and used AIT tape as backup; 25 GB on one tape. (continued)



When we started with a digital audio workstation, a 700mb drive was three grand. I still have them; I'm kind of a pack rat.

*Along with the standard mastering gig, do you ever have to restore the original master tape before you can work?*

People don't realize that half the work we do is forensic.

*That was pretty amazing that you guys did Chuck Berry, Roy Orbison and Little Richard. I'll bet that was a major sales job to the bean counters.*

**People don't realize that half the work we do is forensic.**

Well, I'm just glad we got it done. For a brief period of time, we had the holy triumvirate of Rock 'n Roll in our safe. How cool is that? That's why I got into this business in the first place. It has turned out to be one of our best sellers too, which always helps.

*Did you find anything wacky searching through the tape vaults for those records?*

Oh yeah! We had to go through tons of outtakes and different reels before we found the original masters. We even heard a version of "Johnny B. Goode" that didn't have a lead guitar track on it. It was listed as an underdub. Amazing. Stan jumped back when we played this the first time and then heard his vocals blast in. Stan screamed "Jesus Jenny," and that remained the working title of the song.

*What about all of the arguments on the internet about your deviating from the original master tape in terms of adding EQ or keeping it flat? Is it on a case-by-case basis, or is there a MoFi "house" sound?*

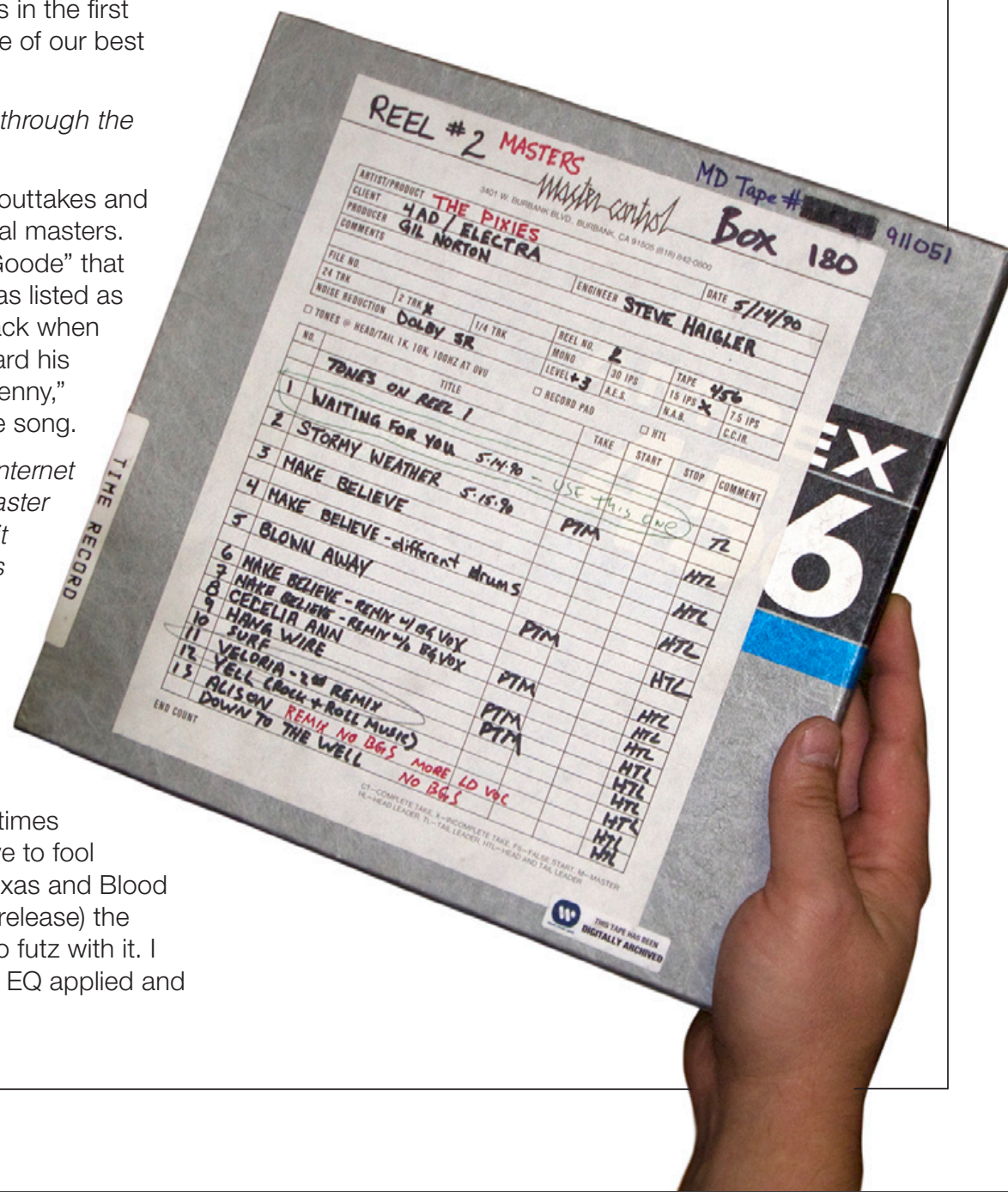
First, I wish people would just send us an email and ask. Things get pretty fast and furious out on the web and it's almost always wrong. Send us an email, we'll tell you the real story!

It is always a case-by-case thing. Sometimes the original tape is so good we don't have to fool with it, say in the case of Santana's Abraxas and Blood Sweat and Tears, (actually, their second release) the master sounded so good, I didn't want to futz with it. I tried a few different versions with a bit of EQ applied and I liked the straight transfer better.

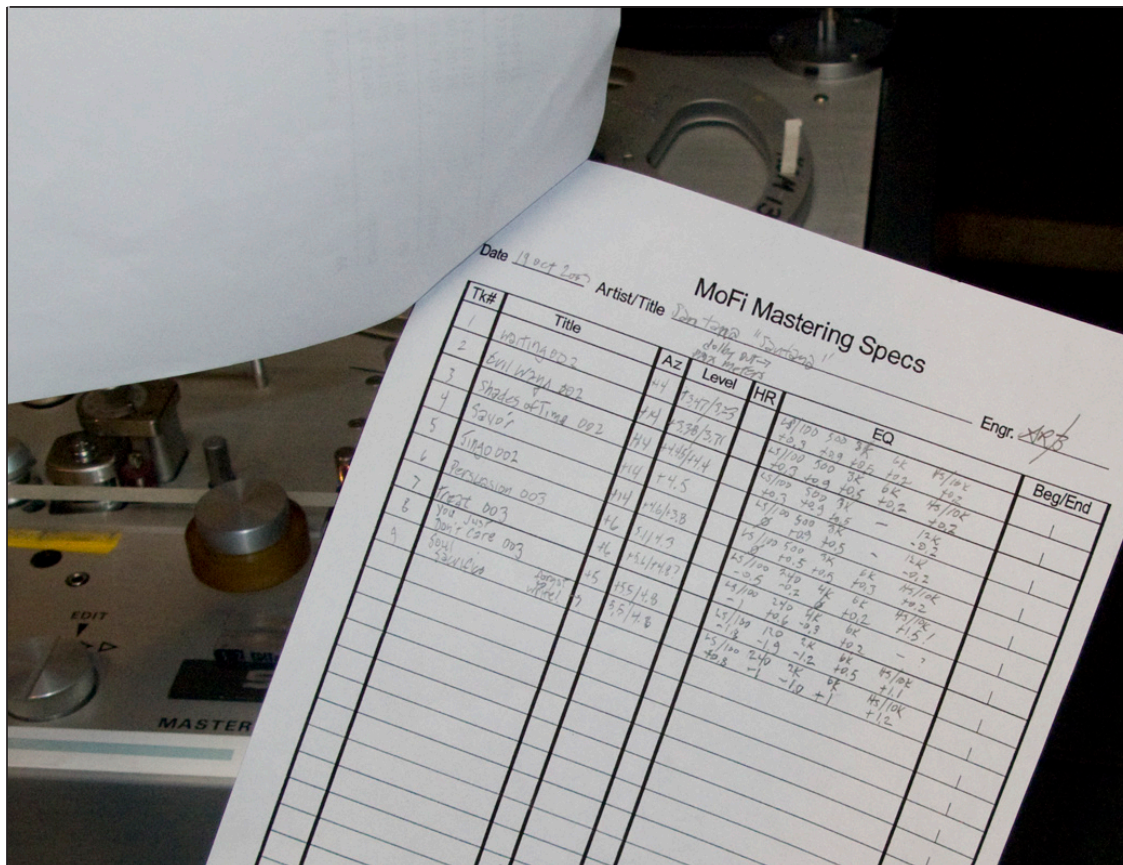
But sometimes, we like to make some minor changes in the interest of better sound and album consistency. Keep in mind though, these are surgical equalizers that we use, all custom built with very low noise, minimal distortion and extremely wideband frequency response. If possible I'll use a different set of interconnects to change tonality slightly.

*Are these slight changes made to allow you to fit more information on an LP?*

Definitely, in the case of the lower frequencies. It is always a battle to get as much as you possibly can on the record without any compression. That's part of the essence of an audiophile master. (continued)







*How do you feel about the vinyl resurgence? What's it going to take to keep it going?*

It's great to have so much work! But the issues we face today are more physical. There is only one guy left in the world that can service the Ortofon cutting heads that we use. And he goes on vacation a lot. That's the scary part.

**Vinyl isn't going to die because of lack of interest, but it will die from lack of raw materials.**

Here's a reality check for the vinyl resurgence and I hope it doesn't bounce. With so many single-source vendors for the technology and raw materials, we are hanging in the balance. Most people use Neumann or Westrex heads that you can get repaired in the states. We have to go to Europe to get our cutter heads. That's why I always keep three here on the shelf. It's like high-end audio cables, these babies aren't cheap.

My other biggest fear is the raw materials to actually press records. There aren't many sources for good vinyl anymore, and I'm always panicked that the sources are going to dry up or OSHA will decide that there's something in vinyl that workers can't be exposed to anymore. And the lacquers that we use for test pressings are coming close to being a single vendor item as well. Maybe I worry too much.

Vinyl isn't going to die because of lack of interest, but it will die from lack of raw materials. I'm really hoping that we might get a few more vendors in the next few years if this momentum keeps up.

It's the same thing for SACD. Only a few places left to keep producing them, but we will stay committed to the format as long as we can get the raw materials.

*Why do some of the master tapes survive over time better than others. Is it just storage conditions?*

The tape formulation has a lot to do with it. It was primarily a problem for Ampex, but I've seen it with other tapes, too.

*I know you have a cool job, but have you had a pet project lately? Is there something you really want to get your hands on and produce at MoFi?*

Well, there are still those unsubstantiated rumors about the Beatles catalog. That's the Holy Grail. But seriously, I have the best job in the world. I love it. Dark Side of The Moon was really the record that drew me into this business. Early Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath too. I have a short list that you will probably see soon.

My day at Mobile Fidelity ended on a high note. With an hour left before I had to get on the freeway, Shawn brought me back into the control room and let me listen to the original master tape of the first Santana album right from his console chair. It was an awesome experience.

So you can rest assured that these guys are really obsessed with music. If you haven't had the pleasure of checking out any of their discs, head to **www.mofi.com** and peruse their catalog. I'm sure there will be something there that will interest you. These days, inflation has caught up to MoFi and their discs are just less than twice what the standard issue discs cost. An even better bargain! ●



Keeping the ball rolling with fun and stylish things for you to peruse, we follow up the Bentley/Naim autosound environment with another great British pair, Jaguar and Bowers and Wilkins. We have an incredibly cool record cabinet, a pair of reasonably priced yet high-performance cameras from Canon and some great T-shirts.

We've also taken a look at the new iPod Nano from Apple, and the maker of the Loiminchay Speakers, reviewed later in the issue, sent us a few of his gorgeous writing instruments. If you are a pen lover and collector, I think you will be green with envy.

*Enjoy!*





# Bowers and Wilkins goes Mobile with Jaguar

By Jeff Dorgay

**The 2009 Jaguar XF with Bowers and Wilkins sound system, starting at about \$50,000**

If you aren't quite in the salary range to commission a new Bentley, but you still crave some great British sound and style, the Jaguar XF might be a candidate.

The last time we had a Jaguar delivered to our doorstep, my daughter was five years old. When I picked her up from school, she looked at the logo on the steering wheel, beeped the horn and asked me, "Daddy, why doesn't it meow when you beep the horn?" At 15, her response was quite different: "Come on, teach me how to drive in this thing!"

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**Fortunately, I did keep the keys away from the future CEO of TONE Publications, but I did have to fight the current one (our art director) for my fair share of seat time.**

## **The Car**

While the Bentley is just as much fun sitting in the rear compartment, the Jaguar is much more engaging in the front. With a 300-horsepower V-8 and your choice of luxury or sport modes, you can cut through in-town traffic or unwind twisty roads with ease. With the standard XF luxury model, starting at \$49,975; the XF Premium Luxury model, starting at \$55,975 (tested here); or the XF Supercharged, starting at \$64,475, there are quite a few ways to configure your Jag.

The XF Supercharged offers an additional 120 horsepower, beefier brakes and suspension, and a top speed of 155, where the two normally aspirated cars are limited to 121 mph.



At first, I balked at the mere 121 mph top speed, as I had a few white-knuckle excursions planned for the big green cat. But this car is so well-tuned for performance between 20 and 100 mph, I never really felt much urge to go faster. I love a 600-horsepower twin-turbo ride as much as anyone, but unless you have the financial wherewithal to buy your way out of triple-digit mishaps, it can be very frustrating.

The XF is a blast to drive around town or on a road trip. To confirm this and spend some time with its excellent Bowers and Wilkins sound system, which consists of 14 speakers and 440 watts of power, we took our favorite trip to the coastline of Cannon Beach, 90 miles from the TONE office.

The comfort and performance become addictive in a hurry. In sport mode all the way, the XF made for some spirited passes through the curves, while the leather seats kept our backs and behinds comfy. Upon reaching Cannon Beach's main street, we immediately selected the luxury mode to relax even further. Compared with the luxury mode, the sport mode launches from stoplights a bit more vigorously and holds the gears longer before upshifting. At speed or in town, the XF did an excellent job.

The route to Cannon Beach is an interesting test track because the road conditions vary tremendously, with about half the pavement being quite smooth and the other half in serious need of repair. Definitely real-world conditions.

### The System

The 14 speakers that make up the XF system consists of a subwoofer on the rear deck, four mid-range drivers (one in each door panel), three tweeters and a pair of midrange fill speakers up on the rear panel. This system was a departure for Bowers and Wilkins, who had in the past worked within the constraints of cars' interiors. Their engineers worked with Jaguar to design this system from the bottom up and it shows. Behind the speaker grilles you can see the trademark Kevlar cones also found in Bowers and Wilkins top home speaker systems. *(continued)*



**Behind the speaker grilles you can see the trademark Kevlar cones also found in Bowers and Wilkins top home speaker systems.**



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The Bowers and Wilkins system did a great job with imaging, thanks to optimum tweeter placement. Because a car system is so much like driving in a gigantic pair of headphones, I tend to listen to music more suited to headphones while evaluating a car stereo. This meant a lot of Kruder and Dorfmeister, Pink Floyd and Kraftwerk. The B&W system offered up a wide stereo image that seemed to float about a foot in front of the dashboard at all times and throw a soundfield that extended from side mirror to side mirror.

**Bass response was also excellent, with plenty of weight and control.**

This is tough to achieve in the car environment because you are always forced to deal with a certain amount of road and wind noise cancelling low frequencies. I was very impressed with the resolution in the mid bass when I selected the new Charlie Haden album *Rambling Boy*. Certainly not the one-note bass so often heard in those "boom boom cars" with their multiple 15-inch woofers. We're audiophiles, remember.

The final test was to play some more acoustic music for a grasp of the system's overall tonality, crossover/driver integration and sound deadening. This one was a mixed bag but not without a solution. MoFi's latest Frank Sinatra release, *Nice and Easy*, and the self-titled Fleet Foxes album were well-suited to this task. *(continued)*





**I was most impressed with the way the Bowers and Wilkins system seemed to disappear in the car environment.**

Frank's vocals were right in the same spot of the mix as they are in my home system, and the Bowers and Wilkins system did an excellent job with the layered harmonies from the Fleet Foxes.

I was most impressed with the way the Bowers and Wilkins system seemed to disappear in the car environment. But a lot of the hard work that the Bowers and Wilkins engineers put into this system will be lost for those of you who must endure the rough roads in the Northwest because of the overly stiff, run-flat tires installed on this car.

When was the last time you had a flat anyway? For my money, if you are a true music lover, ditch the run-flats for normal tires, buy a can of Fix-a-Flat for the trunk ("boot" to our British readers) and spend 85 bucks on a AAA membership. Then, you can bask in the glory of the fine sound instead of the racket from the tires. Along with being able to hear the oboes in the orchestra much better, you will be treated to much better grip when zooming around corners. Meow!

Bottom line - Great car, great system. If you happen to have Bowers and Wilkins speakers in your home system, I would compare the sound in the Jaguar to a pair of 805S's with a great subwoofer and a powerful amplifier.

[www.jaguarusa.com](http://www.jaguarusa.com)

[www.bowersandwilkins.com](http://www.bowersandwilkins.com)





# LOIMINCHAY

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## FOUNTAIN PENS

Article by Ken Kessler

Photos by Jeff Dorgay

Business tradition usually follows like this: enthusiast forms company or buys company. Cars, watches, HiFi, whatever, the product doesn't matter. But once the name is established, he or she often marks the achievement with the production of something that embodies the brand but has no relation to the core products. A fountain pen is typical. So is a wristwatch.

Hong Kong-born Patrick Chu – a hard-core audiophile, collector and all-around luxury-toy devotee – did it in reverse. His recent arrival on the audio scene with a series of outré loudspeakers, (the 53 thousand dollar Chagalls are reviewed in this issue) is his way of celebrating his primary business concern: fountain pens.

Patrick has been a hard-core audio enthusiast for many years. It's just that he chose to enter the world of manufacture with the target of another passion, and his love for fountain pens rivals his adoration for HiFi. But he's consistently devoted to whatever catches his fancy. His enthusiasm and his passion permeate all that he undertakes.



The pen world is at best a bit grandiose and at worst a tad precious. But Patrick is unlike any other pen manufacturer.



I never will forget our first meeting, which happened in 2002. The location was a Manhattan coffee shop, nothing fancy, just a place where worker bees grab a swift latté to take back to the office, maybe a tuna melt for lunch. Chu arrived holding a slim briefcase. The lack of pretence isn't what you'd expect from someone who, even then, was the purveyor of some of the world's most exclusive – and expensive – fountain pens. The pen world is at best a bit grandiose and at worst a tad precious. But Patrick is unlike any other pen manufacturer.

That briefcase held a dozen Loiminchay pens, each in its own compartment. A quick calculation valued its contents at more than \$40,000.

"This," he said, with barely contained enthusiasm, "is the Mandarin Supreme. It took longer to make than we expected."

I didn't have to know anything about writing implements to appreciate the breathtaking beauty of the eye-searing-yellow ink torpedo he cradled like a new-born baby. Its massive size alone – 6.5 inches from end to end – told me that deep pockets were required in more ways than one.

"The cadmium yellow lacquer, we finally found precisely the right color, and a way to make it durable..." He drifted off, lost in the pen itself. Perhaps hard to believe if you're a chronic BiC user, but the pen was precisely the sort of objet d'art which can have that effect on appreciative observers.

At that point, Loiminchay pens had been around for barely two years. In the intervening period, Chu's company has become, in pen-collector terms, the equivalent of Dufour in wrist-watches or Pagani in cars. A steady flow of limited editions made entirely with artisan techniques found in other, unrelated fields has seen to that. Woods, porcelain, rare lacquers, jade, gems, Chu always seems to go two steps beyond what even the big guns in the pen community are prepared to consider.

*(continued)*



That now sold-out Mandarin Supreme is a perfect example of what Chu brought to the pen world. Like all Loiminchay pens, it was issued in an extremely limited edition, with only 115 pieces produced.

In creating the Mandarin Supreme, the challenge for Chu was finding a master able to apply the appropriate yellow lacquer.

“With the Mandarin Supreme, like the earlier Golden Lotus, there is only one master who can apply the lacquer,” Chu explained. “That is why this pen has taken so long to produce.” Chu explained that the lacquer has to be built up layer by layer to give richness and depth to the color and durability to the finish.

Chu coordinates what is a genuinely multinational effort from Flushing, New York, by synchronizing the assembly of pens that use nibs from Germany, ebonite barrels shaped in France, jade clips from China and lacquer finishes from Japan. Overall assembly takes place mostly in France, some in Italy, or wherever else is appropriate, with final quality control undertaken by Chu personally in New York.

Every year, Chu directs his attention to some other lost or nearly forgotten technique, creating a challenge that most pen makers wouldn’t even consider. His simple rule is this: “I make pens that I would like to own.” And he’s done that consistently, averaging each year five new “collections.” The term stolen from the fashion industry applies accurately to his annual endeavor. Every collection sells out its allocation. By my reckoning, he’s now released more than 30 new series in a surprisingly short period.

Chu launched Loiminchay – the name combines the Chinese characters for “internal core issue,” “understanding” and “space” – in early 2001, rapidly winning awards and earning magazine covers for his creations. In swift succession, he delivered the YuQi collection of 257 pens finished in Urushi lacquer in color schemes from the T’ang Dynasty, the Golden Lotus bearing erotic drawings in Maki-e finish in an edition of just 69 pieces, and 220 Qian Long pens named after the 18th Century emperor.

*(continued)*



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**PORSCHE**

Issued just prior to the Mandarin Supreme was the Zitan, its barrel made from the world's rarest wood, a form of rosewood found only in India's most remote regions. Just 200 were made.

Differing in finishes, the majority of Loiminchay pens share a common barrel shape, reminiscent of the classic Chinese art that Chu reveres so passionately. Another signature of Loiminchay pens is the pocket clip carved in the shape of a dragon and available in precious metals or pure jade in assorted colors. All Loiminchay pens are fitted with two-tone 18k gold and rhodium nibs, the ink arriving at the nib through an ebonite feeder. And each bears its own serial number on its base.

**If it seems that such finicky production is a tad masochistic, Chu concurs.**

"We found with the Zitan that different climates – too dry, too humid – may possibly have an effect on the wood itself," he said. "So I ended up stocking 200 spare barrels just in case any Zitan barrels ever need replacement due to climatic change." Only an inveterate pen collector producing the sort of pens he wants to own could appreciate such details.

In 2008, Chu enjoyed a major coup, winning for his company the honor of "Official Pen of the Beijing Olympics." He responded with a plethora of designs, including a Chinese porcelain pen adorned with ancient Greek Olympic sportsmen figures, another in precious metals filigreed to honor weightlifting, Judo, Tae Kwan Do, *(continued)*



Fencing and Shooting, a series of lost-wax metal relief pens for Diving, Cycling, Swimming, and Track and Field, yet another employing that most cherished of lacquering techniques, Maki-e. The techniques add to the global flavor of the Olympics as well: the gilded pens and the porcelain pens were all hand-crafted in China; the filigree and the lost-wax pens were by Italians; and, naturally, the Maki-e pens were decorated by Japanese Maki-e masters.

While these represent Loiminchay's upper reaches – the Olympics pen set sold for \$160,000, for example, and 2006's hand-carved, solid Burmese jade Nine Dragons sold for \$250,000 – Chu also produces more-attainable ranges, including his new sub-brand, called the Patrick Babe. Produced in Italy, the resin, celluloid and metal Babe is modern and colorful, a break from the mystery of the traditional Loiminchays. For those who prefer the classic Chinese shape, a good place to start would be with one of the dazzling Mini Qian Long pens. The Patrick Babe retails for about \$1500, while the Mini Qian can be yours for about \$700. Hey, it's not like buying \$8000 power cords.

Not surprisingly, one Loiminchay isn't enough. Chu understands the mind of the collector with crystal clarity. After all, he's a pen aficionado to the marrow.

**Loiminchay New York Office:**

(1) 212-941-7488 or  
e-mail [loiminchay@gmail.com](mailto:loiminchay@gmail.com)

Not surprisingly, one Loiminchay isn't enough. Chu understands the mind of the collector with crystal clarity. After all, he's a pen aficionado to the marrow.





# Premium Storage!



## The Atocha Record Cabinet Approx. \$12,000

Just when you thought \$5,000 power cords were the end of excess, here is a temple for your favorite records. Depending on how you configure it (records and CD's, just records or just CD's) roughly \$12,000 buys you a shrine for your favorite music. I say *favorite*, because it only holds about 800 albums. Those of you readers with 5,000 to 10,000 albums will need to cash in your retirement accounts to hold them all.

**Jennifer Levin Atocha, the owner and designer of the cabinet, said, "Think of The Record Cabinet as a place to store your greatest hits."**

Individually made by furniture craftsmen, The Record Cabinet features hardwoods throughout and the drawers have soft-touch glide mechanisms. Nothing will look better next to your Barcelona chairs or Noguchi table. Its mass has been designed from Step 1 to accommodate the weight of so many records. With all this mass, I'll bet you could make your vinyl shrine complete by putting your favorite turntable on top.

What really makes this cabinet so user friendly is the way it displays your records. All of the drawers display the records vertically so you can flip through them as you would at your favorite record store.

Once you take a peek at the Atocha website, you will be hooked. This is the ultimate storage medium for LP records.

[www.atochadesign.com](http://www.atochadesign.com)





# A Tale of Two Compacts

## The Canon G9 and G10

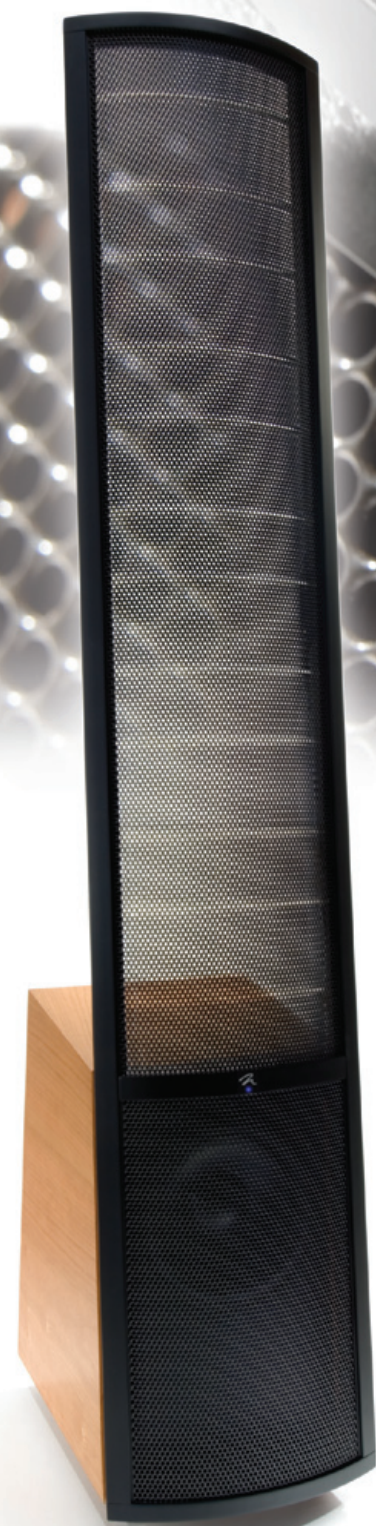
By Jeff Dorgay



Canon is keeping pace in the ongoing megapixel race with their G9 and G10 compacts. The G9 has been in Canon's product mix for about a year and the G10 was just released. Both have the same MSRP (\$499) and while the G9 can often be found discounted down to about \$400, the G10 will stay at retail for a while, being perceived as the latest, greatest in the lineup.

Whether you are a working professional photographer or just someone who enjoys taking vacation and party pictures, an advanced compact digital camera is a wonderful thing. As cool as it might be to have that Leica M8 that we reviewed last issue, not everyone has \$6,500 bucks to shell out for a compact camera. I've been earning my living with a camera my whole life and as much as I adore Leicas from afar, I can't bring myself to write the check. I've been using the G9 for the past year with great results.





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## Pixels Aren't Everything

Both of these cameras possess more megapixels than even a seasoned pro would need, theoretically, with the G9 having a 12 MP sensor and the G10, a 15 MP sensor. Heck, my outdated Canon EOS5 D, which I use to shoot almost every picture in this magazine, has only a 12 MP sensor.

**But just like in the world of high-end audio, it's all about fidelity, accuracy and signal-to-noise ratios.**

The smaller image sensors found in these compact cameras squish those little pixels a lot closer together. The additional generated heat adds more noise, which takes away from the dynamic range. Just like your HiFi, those nice black backgrounds are no longer there and the colors you do have smear. Fascinating, captain. *(continued)*



## Compare and Contrast

After putting the G10 through its paces, even with the higher megapixel count, the images are of no better *quality* than the G9. Below ISO 400, everything is great, with very nice color, contrast and shadow detail. But the rubber meets the road when you turn the dial to 800, and the pics are marginal at best when shooting at ISO 1600. Bottom line, you won't get any low-light shots of Bigfoot with this camera that CNN will run. The noise comes way up and the detail goes way down. Personally, I'd love to see a truly fantastic eight-megapixel compact that took clean photos at ISO 1600.

Here's another small problem with the G10: you can shoot in RAW mode, but Photoshop CS3 does not yet support the images. I'm sure at some point it will, but for now, to take maximum advantage of this camera, you must install Canon's proprietary software, which is cumbersome.

All sniping aside, the G10 has the bright 3-inch view screen from the G9, which has the best quality I've seen in a compact at any price. Even that \$6,500 Leica doesn't have one of these. To make the G10 even more user friendly, they have taken the +/- exposure correction out of the menu list and put it up on a dial on top of the camera where it belongs. Overall, Canon has taken the superior ergonomics of the G9 a step further with the G10.

With similar image quality between the two, your shooting style and priorities will ultimately determine whether you buy the G9 or the G10. The G9 has the equivalent of a 35-210mm zoom lens on a standard 35mm camera and the G10 has the equivalent of a 28-140mm zoom, with both having a maximum aperture of 2.8 at the wide-angle setting. If you shoot a lot of landscape and architectural photography, the G10 will probably suit your fancy, but if you like to shoot people and sports, you will probably go with the G9.



Both cameras use an SD card and proprietary rechargeable batteries. Canon replacements are about \$80 and generics about half that. While I didn't shoot enough images to completely run the battery down in the G10, I know I can usually get 500-600 shots with my G9 if I'm not using the flash a lot and keep viewing times short.

## Two great choices

There you have it, Two great compact cameras for the rest of us. Regardless of which one you choose, I think you will be impressed with the G9 or G10 if you use it within the parameters for which it was designed. For many of you who never make a print larger than 8½ x 11 inches, this may even be all the camera you ever need, period. And it's much easier to lug on vacation than an SLR. ●

Click here for full specs on both models:

<http://www.usa.canon.com/consumer/controller?act=ProductCatIndexAct&fcategoryid=113>

**The G10 has the bright 3-inch view screen from the G9, which has the best quality I've seen in a compact at any price.**





# The Nagra VFS

**For the Nagraphile Who Has Everything \$1,500**

**W**e've reviewed our fair share of Nagra gear in TONE over the past couple of years, and I must admit that I am fond of the brand for a number of reasons. I hope that the people at Nagra won't mind me comparing them to Leica cameras, as I see some amazing parallels: both companies share long histories in their respective industries, they are committed to engineering excellence and they offer elegant compact design solutions in a world where bigger physical size is often mistaken for better performance.

Most components, no matter how well designed, always seem to benefit somewhat from vibration control. When John Quick from Nagra USA let me know that Nagra had taken the technology that they developed for their CD players and put it to work on a vibration-reduction platform, I got excited. In a reserved Swiss sort of way, of course.

The Nagra VFS (Vibration Free System) works with two plates of finely machined and anodized aluminum that is identical to what the cases of Nagra electronics are made from, separated by small pods of Nagra's Alpha Gel material, used in the transports of the Nagra CD range. Each plate uses a different density of Alpha Gel to achieve broad-bandwidth vibration control, and the VFS system includes a set of Nagra's delrin-tipped Arcap conical (spikes?) feet, identical to the ones pictured on the bottom of the Nagra VPS phono stage that I reviewed in TONEAudio #17. (The VFS spikes are available separately for \$349 for a set.)



## 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.



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

Just when you thought your current Nagra gear couldn't get any better, you are in for a treat. There is an immediate increase in musicality when you place the VFS beneath the VPS phono stage or the PL-L linestage. I have had good results with other vibration-control devices before, especially with electronics that have vacuum tubes inside, but the VFS that's designed specifically for Nagra worked the best.

When unwrapping the VFS, I was somewhat skeptical. But knowing how anti-tweak Nagra has been historically, I figured this had to be good or Nagra wouldn't bother. I spent the majority of the first few days making everyone listen to records with the VPS with the VFS switched in and out of the system.

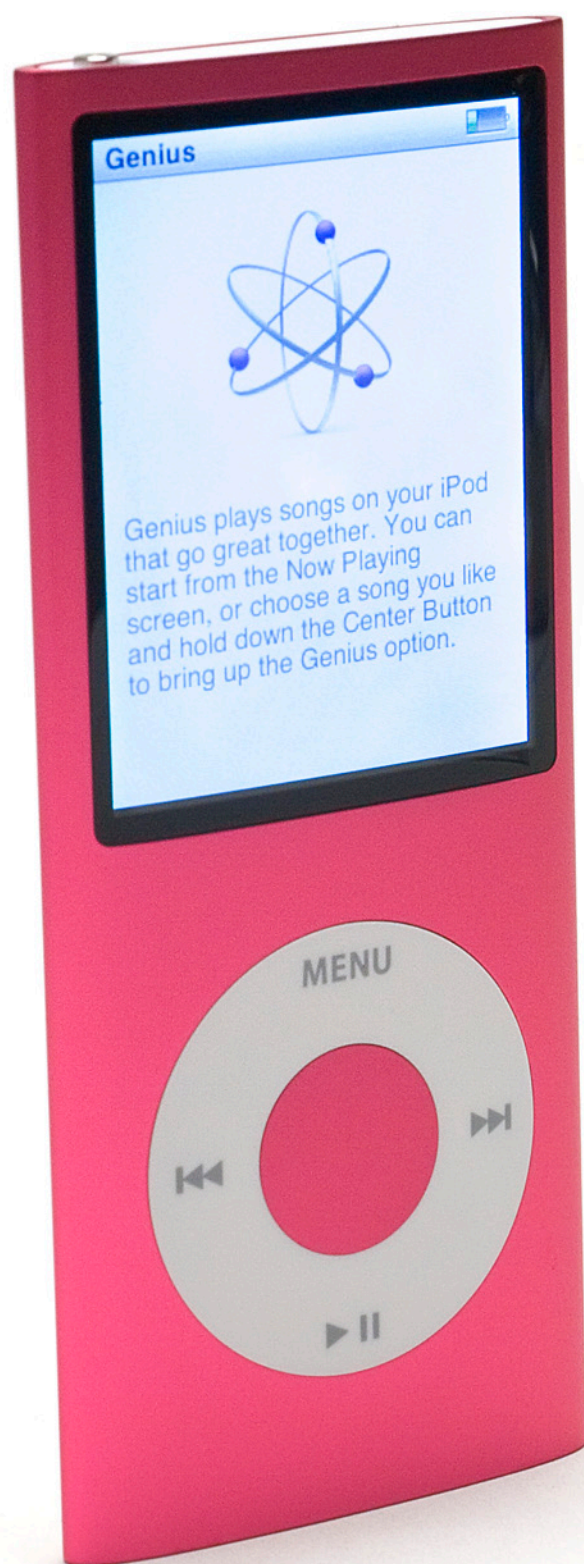
### **Everyone agreed that the effect was not subtle.**

As good as the VPS phono pre-amplifier is, backgrounds immediately became quieter and minute detail was easier to discern. Up on the top end of the frequency spectrum, things were even more easily defined. While I would never call the Nagra VPS the least bit grainy, things took on a greater degree of smoothness and had an even greater sense of realism than before, especially with acoustic instruments.

Anything else looks clunky and out of place, and most other solutions that actually work cost almost as much, so why bother when you can have the VFS? Granted, \$1,500 is not small change, but I guarantee you will find this a worthwhile upgrade.

The VFS is not appeared on the Nagra website yet, so contact your nearest Nagra dealer for the details.





# iPod Nano

**\$149 (8GB) - \$199 (16GB)**

**T**he Microsoft Zune may be starting to take a chunk out of Apple's market dominance, but it has nowhere near the style points that this little bit of the musical rainbow has to offer. There are seven cool colors from pink to purple along with dark grey and silver for those of you who prefer something more subdued. The minute you pick this one up, it will have you under its spell. You'll buy one whether you need it or not, it's that adorable.

While the sound seems to be better than the last generation of iPod, the key word here is features. Forget about Apple's Genius feature, unless your taste in music is incredibly predictable and linear it's pretty wonky. What's really cool about the Nano is the big, bright screen and the way it changes orientation when you turn it sideways, just like your iPhone.

**But the big fun with the iPod Nano is the way you can shuffle your music. Just shake it and something completely new comes up for you to listen to. Let's see that dork in the PC ads beat this.**





# DJ Shirts

**\$5-\$25**

**W**ho says you have to spend big money to have style? Show your love of vinyl by donning your favorite DJ shirt. I've been perusing EBay and came up with a few things that look pretty cool. There are more on the way from all over the globe, so plan on seeing more of these in future Style sections.

This first one is a classic Technics SL1200 shirt. The second has a great image of Japanese DJ Hiroshi Fujiwara, referred to by many as the O.G. of Japanese streetwear. Wear one of these to your local high-end store, if you have the nerve.



# Focal's XS

## The King of Desktop Sound

By Jeff Dorgay



like huge speakers, racks full of beefy amplifiers and audio cables thick enough to be gold plated and worn around the neck of a hip-hop star. But not all of us have room for that sort of thing and instead wind up with space-challenged HiFi systems, most of which have a major problem: they sound dreadful.

JM Labs/Focal stirs up visions of their giant Utopia speakers. By the time most of you read this, I'll be beating back the crowd at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest to hear Focal's latest flagship speaker, which is going to run about \$180,000. Yet the smaller XS you see here is just as exciting. It takes a company with this kind of manufacturing depth and experience – not to mention their expertise at making drivers for automotive use that regularly win sound-off competitions around the world – to extract this much sound from such small containers.





**It's quite impressive, just running off the USB connection of your laptop or an iPod in the conveniently placed dock.**

Remember the iCub from Focal? It was a super-cool 8-inch powered sub with a 75-watt-per-channel amplifier and built-in DAC that cost just \$995. This was a killer product, with a giant volume control that glowed blue in the dark. I think the folks at Focal were a little bit ahead of the curve with this product because it eventually got pulled from the U.S. market. Close friends that bought them on my recommendation won't part with their's for anything. Compact, high-performance HiFi is attainable; you just need to know where to look.

#### **Version 2.0**

With the new XS, the engineers at Focal took this concept up to the next step. XS has a slightly smaller woofer (6-inch), which is claimed to go down to 39hz, and a pair of two-way satellites

that incorporate a 3-inch paper-coned midrange and a three-quarter-inch dome tweeter. All housed in stylish enclosures that would look right at home on top of your desktop alongside a computer monitor.

Prepare for the shock when you power these up for the first time. It's quite impressive, just running off the USB connection of your laptop or an iPod in the conveniently placed dock. With uncompressed and Apple Lossless files, the soundstage extended about three feet beyond the speakers on either side of my 30-inch Apple Cinema Display.

#### **Very Versatile**

The XS offers three different ways of operation. The iPod dock built into the right speaker lets you listen to your music as well as keep your iPod charged. *(continued)*



Using the USB jack at the rear of the dock, you can connect the XS to your computer and use it for your computer's sound system. In addition to using iTunes from your computer, a click of the sync button on the back of the right speaker lets you easily move music to your iPod while it is docked. The XS automatically switches between whatever source you have playing and gives the docked iPod favored status, so you do not end up with one source playing over the other.

I wouldn't be a hard-core audiophile if I didn't try to add a turntable into the mix, and the XS makes it easy with an aux input. You will need a one-eighth-inch to RCA adaptor to use this aux input with your favorite phono preamp and cables, but that's an easy hurdle to clear. Using a pair of three-meter DH Labs BL-1 interconnects, I added the SOTA Sapphire turntable/REGA RB1000 arm and Lyra Argo-i cartridge playing through the Dynavector P75II phono preamplifier.

There are plenty of cute little computer speakers with decent functionality, but what sets the Focal XS way out in front of its competitors is the sound quality. This is a true high-performance audiophile component.

While I had a ton of fun listening to my turntable through this system, it was no slouch while listening to digital files through the iPod or my Power Book. *(continued)*



*www.ZuAudio.com*



This music collection is a combination of uncompressed and Apple Lossless files, with a couple of MP3's from the iTunes store thrown in for good measure. The resolution of the XS will reveal the difference between your compressed and non-compressed files with ease, so it may require you rethinking your future download options.

Whether listening to analog or digital, I was continually amazed at how much resolution the XS delivered. Not only does it offer a massive sonic landscape when listening nearfield, it has great tonality as well. Acoustic instruments have a sense of realism that I've never heard at this price point, along with much better bass definition than I expected.

Imaging was well-presented and preserved a lot of the spatial organization that I am able to achieve on my reference system. When listening to a lot of discs that I know very well, the stereo image spread out left to right the same way it does on a much bigger system, with a very nice helping of front-to-back positioning as well.

The XS held its poise when the program material became heavier. I played Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* and Dungen's *Dungen 4* loud enough to get any cube dweller a pink slip, and with no compression creeping in. Again, the mark of a true audiophile component.

Keep in mind that when using the XS on your desktop, make sure you adjust the computer's various alert sounds to a very low level. The first time I was blasting Van Halen and the new-mail chime sounded, it almost blew me off of my chair!

### Limitations

In the realm of desktop systems, the XS has none; it's first class all the way. It won't replace your six-figure reference system, but it does such a great job with the musical fundamentals that it will make the hours you spend away from your reference system enjoyable rather than tortuous.



It rounds off a little bit at the extreme top of the frequency range, but it does so in a very gentle way without sacrificing tonality. The Focal engineers nailed this perfectly because while the speakers will be somewhat forgiving for users with a lot of MP3's in their collection, it has enough resolution and musicality on tap to reward those with high-quality source material.

The Focal XS sets the standard for high-performance audio on your desktop. After living with them for a while, I'm hooked. Listening to these little jewels nearfield (especially with an analog source) is a sonic treat of epic proportions. They do it all: great sound, great looks, bargain price and tip-top build quality by a legendary audio company.

Oh yeah, and let's not forget what this system costs. Sitting down? \$599. This is the most engaging sound I've ever heard for anywhere near this modest amount of money. I'm happy to give the XS one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2008. ●

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**Listening to these little jewels nearfield (especially with an analog source) is a sonic treat of epic proportions.**



The Focal XS active speaker system/iPod dock MSRP: \$599

#### MANUFACTURER

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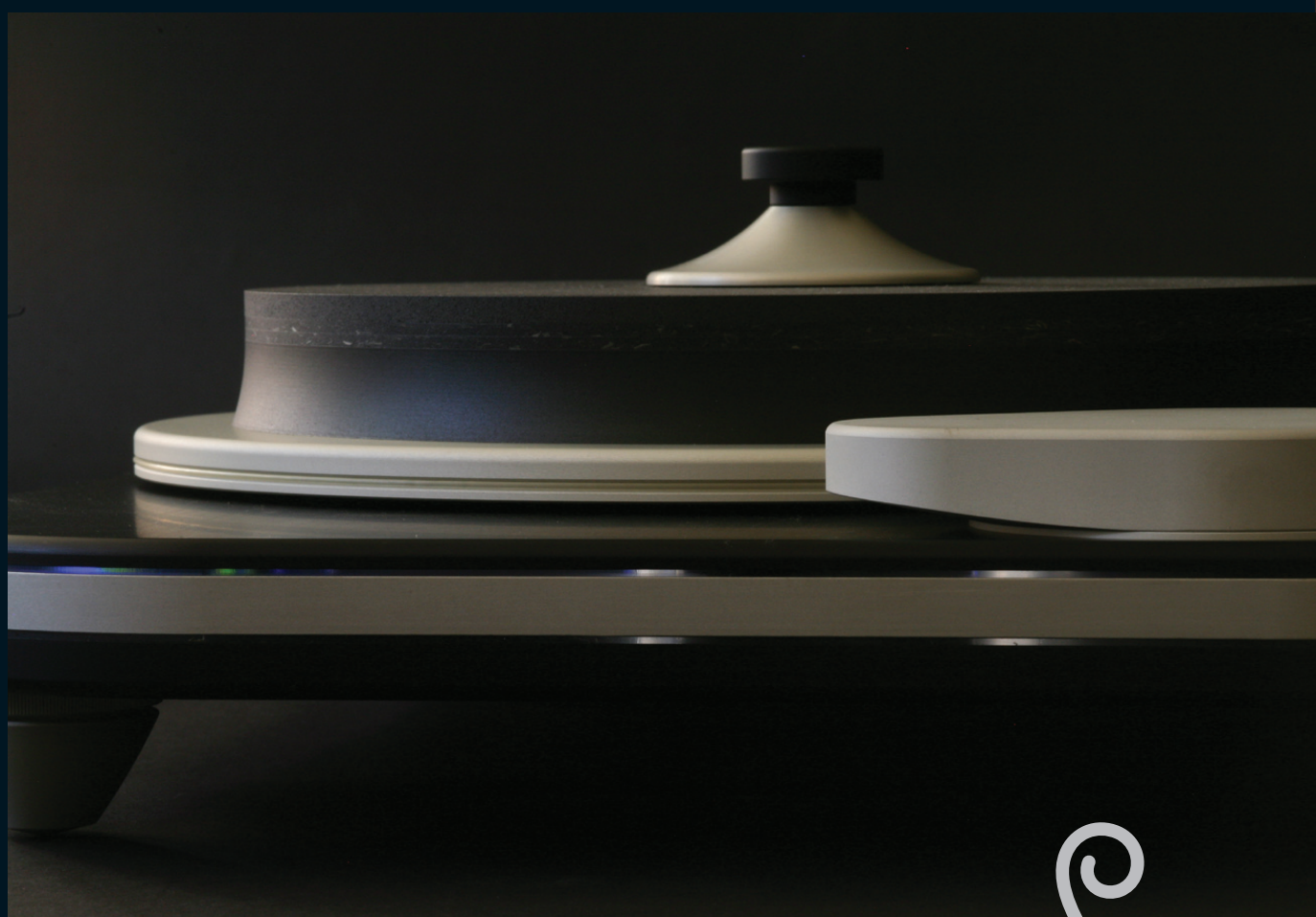
**Digital Sources:** 160GB iPod Classic, Apple MacBook Pro

**Analog sources:** SOTA Sapphire w/Rega RB1000 arm/Lyra Argo-i cartridge and Dynavector D-75II phono preamplifier

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SPIRAL GROOVE



# Exquisite in Form and Function

## **The Loiminchay Chagall**

By Jeff Dorgay





**P**atrick Chu, the founder of Loiminchay, is first and foremost an artist. His handcrafted pens are meticulously built, owned by collectors and dignitaries the world over. Some of them cost as much as a good entry-level audio system. But pondering such matters would be missing the point. They are things to be cherished.

I suspect he is going to have the same results with his line of speakers. At \$48,500 a pair, these are not for the casual investor. Nor are they for the audiophile who is buying a pair of speakers strictly for audio performance. In case you are wondering about the name, Loiminchay is derived from two Chinese words: Loimin (delightful, understanding) and Chay (atelier, group).

Great art always provokes a reaction. You can't look at Andy Warhol's *Mao* or Dali's *Persistence of Memory* without responding one way or another. It either pulls you in or repels you. Named for one of the 20th Century's great artists, Marc Chagall, the Loiminchay Chagalls are the same way; you instantly respond to them. Their tenure here was mostly positive. Though a few said "not in my house," the majority loved them and most spent a long time examining them. Everyone wanted to touch them. That's great design.





## An Artistic, Holistic Approach to Speaker Design

A good friend of mine who is a master cabinetmaker commented, “That must have been a *bitch* to laminate and get it to conform to those curves.” When I told him that these cabinets are built up layer-by-layer, then bored out to accommodate the drivers and crossovers, he responded with, “Well open ‘em up. I want to see how he did it!” That’s when adoration has to stay just that. We did *not* pop one of the woofers to take a look inside.

All of the great speaker manufacturers have their own method of taming cabinet resonance. Add Loiminchay to that list. The combination of the multiply cabinet, covered in a matte-finish lacquer inside and out, does an incredibly effective job at damping cabinet resonances. The speakers are available in the finish you see here (which is 16 coats deep) or in piano black. “Even the cabinet finish affects the final sound,” Mr. Chu explains, so that a slight adjustment must be made to the crossover of the black version.

A quick tap on the cabinet reveals a highly damped “thunk.” The 8.6-inch ported woofer is mounted to a one-inch-thick slab of concrete wrapped in leather, then attached to the cabinet. The speakers’ svelte shape is highly misleading; at a little over 150 pounds each, they require two people to unpack and move them around. *(continued)*

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**The 8.6-inch ported woofer is mounted to a one-inch-thick slab of concrete wrapped in leather, then attached to the cabinet.**



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The upper chamber of the Chagall is mounted to the woofer cabinet with three heavy-duty hollow pegs holding a 6.8-inch ceramic midrange and the 1.2-inch diamond tweeter. If you don't have the space in your living room or on your Visa card, you can buy the top module alone as their entry model Degas. However, you can't add the woofer module later, should you start with the Degas.

**Both the Chagall's tweeter and woofer have level controls, adding a few db of boost or cut, which proved to be handy in my room to get perfect balance.**

In addition to the level controls, there are a pair of beefy WBT style binding posts at the bottom of the cabinet, so you will need to fashion some jumpers or use speaker cables with bi-wired terminations. My reference MartinLogans are the same way, so I had plenty of cable choices at my disposal.

## That Word Exquisite Again

Much like the experience I had with the Lyra Olympos cartridge, the Chagalls had this way about them that they just seemed to melt away and reveal the music in my recordings. Everyone has some kind of bias or expectation with HiFi components, and I'm no different. I want as much detail as I can possibly get, yet I want as much musicality as I can get without the presentation being rounded off or getting gooey. (Which is why I ultimately lost interest in the SET thing.) And throw in a healthy dose of dynamics while you're at it.

*(continued)*



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I can count on my 10 fingers the components that deliver this balance and still have a few fingers left. Thanks to the Loiminchay experience, I now have one less finger to spare.

The Chagalls were easy to set up in my 16 x 24 room. The optimum spot ended up being about nine feet apart, much like my MartinLogan Summits, but about 18 inches closer to the rear walls, putting my listening position about 10 feet away from the tweeters.

**These speakers will work well with tube or solid-state electronics, but because they reveal so much information, I'll stick my neck out and suggest tubes here.**

This is where that bass control really came in handy. With the controls set in their center position, the spot that gave me the most bass reinforcement gave up a little bit in imaging and

overall tonal balance. Being able to bring the speakers out that extra six inches and turn the bass level up to the maximum made for perfection!

As I mentioned, these speakers will work well with tube or solid-state electronics, but because they reveal so much information, I'll stick my neck out and suggest tubes here. When I first heard the Degas at this year's Consumer Electronics Show, Mr. Chu was using Nagra tube monoblocks with excellent results. My reference combination of CJ's Act 2 and Premier 350 was good and extremely powerful, but after trying a number of different combinations, I settled on the new BAT VK-32SE and VK-55SE as my favorite.

These speakers are not terribly cable sensitive either, but again, my favorite results were with the Furutech Reference III-N1's, offering up the perfect balance of openness and detail. My reference Shunyata Orion cables went just a touch dark, so the Furutech was the winner here. Once a number of combinations were auditioned, I stuck with the BAT gear and the Luxman D-7 combination player so that I could easily swap between digital formats with one player. The Raven Two/ Dynavector XV-1s and Nagra VPS took care of analog duties. *(continued)*



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## Speakers That You Can Lose Days To

Aside from being such beautiful works of art, the Chagalls were easy to consume days on end. Dave Wilson of Wilson Audio likes to say that if a speaker is properly designed, they will sound great with *any* kind of music, and I couldn't agree more. However, I cannot listen to classical music for hours on end on anything less than phenomenal speakers. If the tonality is not right, it drives me straight up the wall and I have to switch program material.

**I'd chalk up much of this tonal quality to Loiminchay's implementation of its diamond tweeter.**

I have heard only two other speakers with a diamond tweeter (B&W and Avalon) and neither did as good of a job seamlessly crossing over to the diamond tweeter as the Chagalls do. This speaker also does a fantastic job at sounding perfectly natural. I probably listened to the whole HDTT collection of 24/96 recordings on DVD in a matter of a few days. It's rare that acoustic instruments sound this good!

One of my personal favorites in the collection is Sibelius' *Symphony No. 5*. This is a great piece of classical music for someone just dipping their foot in the classical pond. Not too wild and crazy like Mahler or Shostakovich, but not as mellow as Brahms, with a good amount of movement throughout. Another somewhat obscure favorite on LP is the Netherlands Wind Ensemble performing *Beethoven Wind Music*. (continued)





Yes, these speakers do a fine job with Mahler too, but listening to their balance of spot-on tonality, with just the right amount of air and detail, was intoxicating; I was always able to melt into the couch and forget about the system, something I am rarely able to do with classical music.

Spinning the Naim Records LP, *Charlie Hayden-The Private Collection* again reinforced how well these speakers do with acoustic instruments in a real space. Cymbals, piano and guitars were “reach out and touch it” real, with enough resolution to delineate the instrument, but not too much. This is what allows

these speakers to recreate spatial relationships in a way that with the right recordings

will fool you into thinking that you aren’t listening to a HiFi system anymore. And that’s what you pay the big bucks for.

**I was always able to melt into the couch and forget about the system, something I am rarely able to do.**

Rest assured these speakers will do a great job with your favorite rock or pop music, too, though if your favorites range more towards Led Zeppelin (played at extremely high volume) and such, this will reveal the only limitation of the Loiminchays. They will play pretty loud, but they will not offer up unlimited dynamics. One 8.6-inch woofer will only move so much air. So, for 97 percent of the music you will probably listen to, it’s all good.

What really excited me about these speakers was how detailed the bass sounds, much like what you would experience with the Magnepan 20.1 or the new CLX from MartinLogan. Fast, detailed and accurate, with the necessary amount of weight to sound lifelike. Spin a disc with some great stand-up-bass riffs and you will see what I mean. It’s organic sound that has the same amount of air and speed that the mid-range possesses. *(continued)*



Balance is the key with the Chagall. No one region of sound is favored, and these must be among the most seamless three-way speakers I've heard.

### **Not Just a One-Person Luxury**

Overall, the endless layers of detail that the Chagalls presented kept me hypnotized. Listening to a number of my more trippy favorites from Dave Stewart, Brian Eno, The Art of Noise and Thomas Dolby, I was able to hear so many little tidbits that end up buried with most speakers. Listening to Frank Zappa's *Joe's Garage* was almost sensory overload; there was so much happening! I must admit that the Chagalls have allowed me to hear further into most of my favorite recordings (without any harshness or fatigue) than I've experienced.

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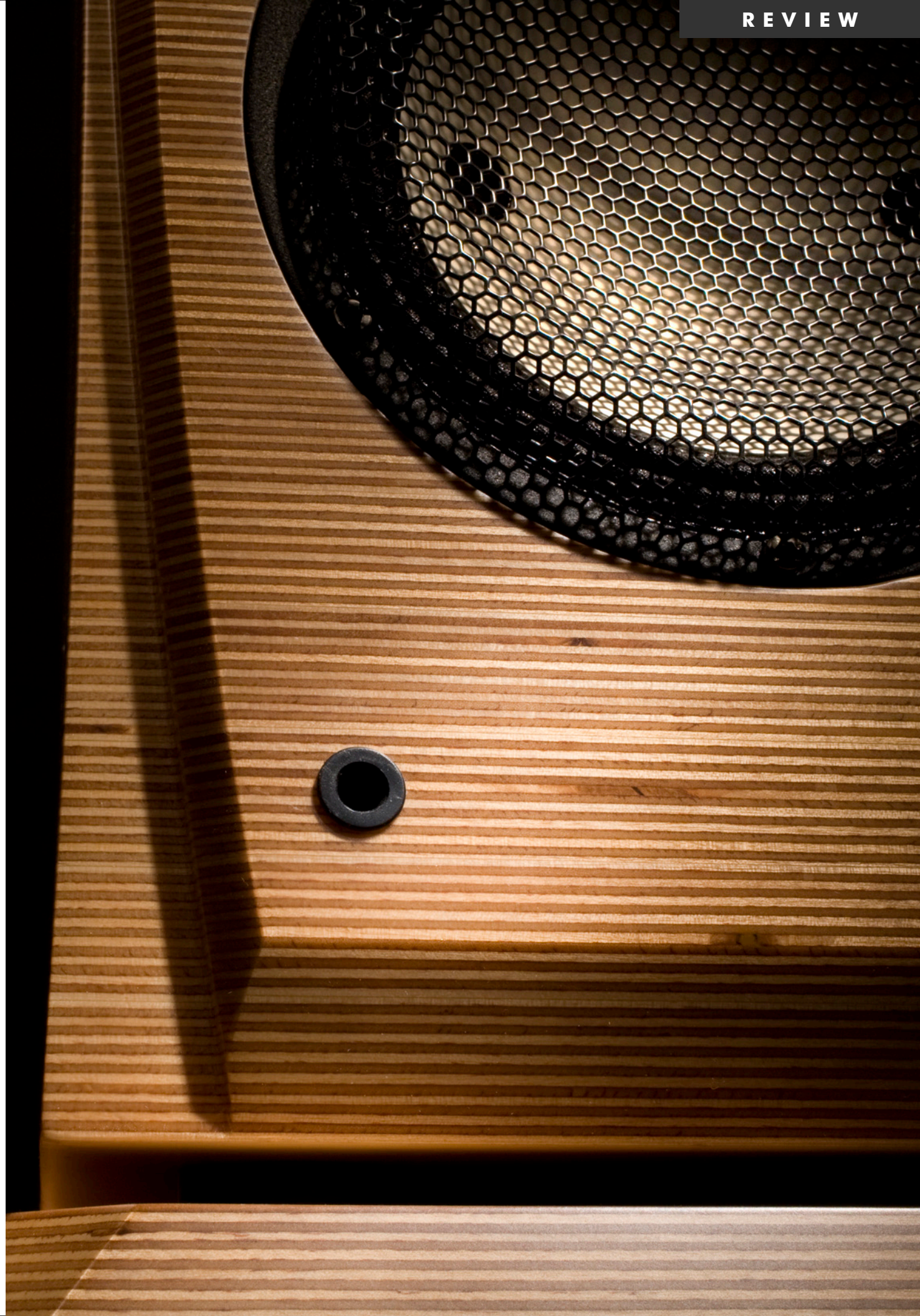
**Fortunately, that big soundfield fills the room in a way that all three people sitting on my listening-room couch can have a great experience.**

I love my panels, but they are one-person speakers. So the Chagall's are not a selfish indulgence. These speakers also do a great job conveying height to the presentation, both when you are listening and when you stand up. Even when giving up the couch to visitors and sitting on the floor, the image stays intact thanks to the excellent dispersion characteristics of the Chagalls.

### **Something special, indeed**

Just like one of Mr. Chu's pens, when you get a chance to audition these speakers, you will agree that they are very special, a visual treat with glorious sound to match. The price tag is appropriate for such craftsmanship. You might find a pair of speakers for a few less dollars, but they won't be this gorgeous.

So if you are a discerning listener that values aesthetics as much as sound, with a venue to showcase them, look no further than the Loiminchay Chagall. ●





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#### MANUFACTURER

##### Loiminchay

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#### PERIPHERALS

##### Analog Source:

TW Acoustic Raven Two with two SME iV.Vi arms, Dynavector XV-1s cartridge and Lyra Olympos cartridge, Nagra VPS phono preamplifier, Furutech AG-12 phono cables

##### Digital Source:

Naim CD555, Luxman D7 Combination player

##### Preamplifiers:

Conrad Johnson ACT2/series 2, Nagra PL-L, BAT VK-32SE

##### Power Amplifiers:

Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, BAT VK-55SE, Nagra PSA (Luxman 590A-II integrated)

##### Interconnects:

Cardas Golden Reference, Audience AU24, Shunyata Anteres, Furutech Audio Reference III-N

##### Speaker Cables:

Shunyata Orion, Furutech Audio Reference III-N (all cables elevated with Shunyata Dark Matter Cable elevators)

##### Power Cords:

Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda vm Helix

##### Line Conditioning:

Running Springs Dmitri, Jaco

##### Vibration Control:

Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks, Cerepucs, Cereballs, Nagra VFS (under Nagra VPS phono)

##### Acoustic Treatment:

GIK Tri-Traps, GIK 242 panels, Sonex Classic



**Whest**  
Reference Series Phonostage

# The Whest Audio PS.30R Phono Stage

By Randy Wells

**N**ow that we are deep into a vinyl resurgence, analog aficionados are in pig heaven. Turntables and cartridges are flying off the shelves at audio dealers, and buyers are looking for that perfect phono stage to place in their system, one that will amplify all the musical information from the grooves of their treasured LPs and release it for their listening pleasure. Welcome to my next adventure in analog: the Whest PS.30R.





Using software available from Whest, you can transfer your vinyl collection to your computer hard drive. Neat!

### Building on a Reputation

Whest Audio designer James Henriot is known for building phono stages with extended response and ultra-wide bandwidth. These effects are accomplished by incorporating a hybrid RIAA filter that takes advantage of all the frequency extension available from cutter heads and modern-day cartridges. The PS.30R is reportedly based on Whest's much more expensive reference MC REF V platform, hence the "R" in its name.

While the flagship MC REF V uses what the design team calls a buried discrete differential input stage, the PS.30R uses a "bipolar matched" input stage to achieve its low input-stage noise level, a stated 1.0nV sqHz. This means that when using a low-output moving coil cartridge, you'll have the gain you need (adjustable up to 72dB) and still have quiet backgrounds. Whest claims the working bandwidth to be 15Hz - 85Khz with a total harmonic distortion of 0.006%. The Whest PS.30R phono stage also sports both RCA and true balanced output, high-quality capacitors and low-noise voltage regulators, along with six cartridge-loading switches and six gain-selection switches for each channel. In addition, the PS.30R comes with an interconnect to plug into your computer soundcard analog input. Using software available from Whest, you can transfer your vinyl collection to your computer hard drive. Neat! *(continued)*





Initial listening impressed me with this phono preamplifier's detailed and dynamic presentation...

British built and solid state, the PS.30R is an attractive single box MC/MM dual mono design of minimal height and weight, which was easy to move around and place in my system. The front panel, featuring a logo and a single red power light, is very clean and elegant in its dark-gray aluminum finish. The back panel has a single pair of RCA input jacks and two pairs of output jacks: one RCA and the other balanced XLR. On either side of these are a turntable ground post and the power switch and inlet. Inside you will find user-accessible gain and loading switches for mating with either moving-coil or moving-magnet cartridges. Available for each channel are selection switches for 40, 50, 55, 60, 65, and 72dB gain loading, as well as 50, 100, 470, 800, 1K, 47K ohm resistance loading.

#### Setting the Gain and Load

Initial listening impressed me with this phono preamplifier's detailed and dynamic presentation, but I felt it was lacking some weight and textural substance in the lower mid range. I also noted a very subtle hardness to the upper midrange. Upon further investigation, I opened the unit's top to verify the gain and load settings. I found that gain was configured for the standard 60dB MC setting, but resistance had been set to the non-standard MC setting of 470 ohms. Since my Koetsu moving-coil cartridge usually works better with a setting of 100 ohms, I made this change by flipping small switches for each channel. *(continued)*



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With the lid back in place, I also substituted an Audience Au24 RCA interconnect between the PS.30R and my VTL TL5.5 pre-amp. The sonic improvement from making these two changes was immediately apparent, and I settled into an evening of listening to some favorite LPs.

## Time to Rock

First to hit the platter of my Rega P9 was Acoustic Sounds' superb reissue of Yes *Fragile*. Through the Whest PS.30R, this LP sounded tight and dynamic with fantastic inner detail and snappy bass. The treble on Roundabout was particularly airy and extended. Next up was 10cc *Original Sound-track* (original UK Mercury pressing), which was rendered very cleanly with every nuance revealed and spread across a wide and deep soundstage.

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**I really could not have asked for a more compelling and satisfying presentation of this album.**

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The Beatles *White Album* on German white vinyl had me totally engaged, although this particular DMM pressing sounded slightly too bright at times. Still, the bass on "Dear Prudence" was subterranean, and every instrument occupied its own separate space in a wonderful cavalcade of sound. In particular, Ringo's drum fills were conveyed with distinct, powerful impact and fast transients.

The PS.30R dissected with surgical precision The Flying Burrito Brothers *The Gilded Palace of Sin* (original US A&M pressing). Yet all the wry wit and heartfelt country-rock singing of Gram Parsons was rendered emotionally intact. (continued)





If you value black backgrounds, superb inner detail and fantastic imaging, this one definitely has some serious ear appeal.

You might think that the Whest would be forward sounding with all that detail retrieval, but the soundstage it creates strikes a nice balance between up front and laid back. When I played the cut “Angel Sea” on Cat Steven’s *Catch Bull At Four* (original UK Island pressing), drums, guitars and vocals exhibited great pace and timing. The Whest also honestly, directly and completely translated the wonderful mono recording of Otis Redding’s *Otis Blue* (original US Volt Pressing). My copy does not have silent surfaces, and the audible ticks and groove noise were just a tiny bit more apparent through the PS.30R.

### **An Ambitious Imaging Achiever**

Along with its ruthlessly revealing nature, the Whest has some pretty impressive attributes. With the best recordings and pressings there is an almost microscopic examination of subtle background clues, along with holographic imaging of the type an analog junkie might wish for, especially considering this unit’s price.

Before you start wondering if I only have pop records in my vinyl collection, I did play a Columbia WLP of Miles Davis *Kind of Blue* and an original Mercury Living Presence LP of Prokofieff’s *Love for Three Oranges/Scythian Suite*. Spinning each of these canons from the Jazz and Classical catalog, I was duly impressed with how the Whest laid bare these effortless performances and expansive recordings. Micro dynamics are obviously one of this phono stage’s strengths, as is soundstaging. All instruments were spread out within their respective layers and rendered in a tight, compact and distinct way. If you value black backgrounds, superb inner detail and fantastic imaging, this one definitely has some serious ear appeal. *(continued)*



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Helmut Rohrwild  
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**I found that power cleanliness  
is crucial to getting the best  
out of the Whest PS.30R.**

Plugged straight into the wall outlet, it conveyed a smaller sound-stage, somewhat reduced dynamics and an upper midrange that sounded slightly hashy. But when fed with clean power via a Running Springs power conditioner and power cord, the music was open, smooth, unfatiguing and balanced. On a similar note, recording quality did become a consideration when listening to LPs with the Whest in place. For example, a slightly muddy recording such as Jackson Brown's *For Everyman* will benefit from this component's detailed presentation. However, a bright and compressed recording will not be improved by the resolution that this phono stage has to offer.

### Good to the Last Drop

In short, the PS.30R will lay everything out for you to hear. I would even say that if you have a record collection full of average-condition '80s and '90s domestic LPs, this may not be the best phono stage for you. But if your collection is top notch and filled with the best all-analog original pressings and reissues, it will be well served by the scrutiny under which the Whest will examine those qualities that make vinyl the hi-rez medium of choice for many discerning audiophiles. It really is a matter of taste when it comes to cartridges and phono stages, and this component is no different. If you favor a more polite and forgiving presentation, then a tubed or battery powered phono preamplifier may well be your best choice. *(continued)*





However, if you want everything revealed, warts and all, the solid state Whest will expose it for you. With a well-mastered tube-cut audiophile pressing, you will be able to hear deep into the mix and be treated to ultra-extended, silky-smooth highs; deep, tight and tuneful bass; and an engaging mid-range. It might even have you snorting with pleasure.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the Whest PS.30R; it's easy to use and sonically involving. It's also very competitive with what is out there in the \$3,000 - \$4,000 price range, and may be deemed best by many. But at this price point and below, any phono stage is likely to have some compromises. It's only at or above the \$6,000 mark that I've heard state-of-the-art sonics with everything I would want from a world-class phono preamplifier. With the PS.30R in my system, I was entertained with outstanding control, definition, focus, soundstaging and transparency. What I didn't experience was the ultimate in realism, texture and weight. It may well be that Whest's flagship MC Ref V phono stage (\$12,000) has it all. I'd love to review it and find out.

While the PS.30R doesn't sound thin or dry, it does tend towards the analytical rather than the romantic side. Some will love this component for exactly these qualities, while others will not. Either way, I would recommend that you audition it if only to see what all the fuss is about. The Whest PS.30R really is a special product for the money and may well be the "perfect" phono stage for you and your system. ●

The Whest Audio PS.30R Phono Stage  
MSRP: \$3500

## MANUFACTURER

### Whest Audio

London, UK  
www.whestaudio.co.uk

## PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier:** Vacuum Tube Logic TL-5.5 line stage

**Power Amplifiers:** Vacuum Tube Logic Signature Triode MB-250 monoblocks

**Speakers:** Magnepan MG 3.6, Revel Performa B-15 subwoofer

**Analog Source:** Rega P9 with RB1000 arm and Koetsu Rosewood cartridge

**Other Phono Stages:** Naim Superline with Supercap, Cary PH302

**Interconnects:** Audience Au24, Harmonic Technology Magic Link One, Grover SC

**Speaker Cables:** Transparent Audio 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 rollerblocks, Mapleshade platforms and Isoblocks, DIY air suspension, Target wall stands



**Let's Get Small:**

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# The Paradigm Reference Signature S1

By Jeff Dorgay

I have always considered a great pair of small satellite speakers with an equally good subwoofer as a fine way to skin the audiophile cat. Granted, those little speakers can't move as much air as a big pair of floor-standers, but an excellent pair can usually image like nobody's business. And a separate subwoofer can offer more options to optimize the bass response in a challenging installation such as a desktop system or small room.





**With their new pure-beryllium 1-inch tweeter and cobalt-infused aluminum-cone 6-inch woofer, this speaker is capable of tremendous detail without sacrificing musicality.**

Enter the Paradigm Reference Signature S1. With their new pure-beryllium 1-inch tweeter and cobalt-infused aluminum-cone 6-inch woofer, this speaker is capable of tremendous detail without sacrificing musicality. After spending a lot of time with the outstanding Sterling Broadcast LS3/5a, the bar for what a small speaker could achieve was set pretty high. At \$1,699, the S1's were right in the ballpark with the Sterlings at \$1,799.

The front face of the S1's cabinet is an aluminum casting that not only looks very cool but acts as a heat sink for the drivers as well. I performed all of my listening with the grilles off because I did not want to hide those drivers from view!

### Setup

First the bad news. These speakers are not easy to set up for a number of reasons. I'm sure that all of the curved surfaces help to eliminate resonances, but it eliminates the use of other than the Paradigm stands, which attach at the rear of the speaker. These are the stands that you've seen in all the Paradigm ads. They are gorgeous but somewhat flimsy and take forever to assemble. Keep the speakers in their foam-lined boxes until you have the stands fully assembled.

To add insult to injury, once you mount the speakers to the stands, forget about using speaker cables with spade lugs; it's impossible to attach them due to the cramped space behind the speaker where the binding posts get in the way of the stand. It's banana plugs or nothing for these speakers or I guarantee you will utter some choice words. Once on the stands, these speakers are still a bit wobbly, so I would suggest keeping them out of the major traffic pattern in your listening room.

Finishing the assembly process, I was ready to start the break-in process. Connected to the rest of my system with a pair of Cardas Golden Reference speaker cables, I let Ice-T's *Power* play on repeat for about 100 hours and the S1's were ready to roll.



m y s t è r e

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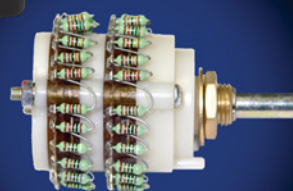
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m y s t è r e



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 in this price category.

I enjoyed the S1's even more as time went by, but they do have a bit of an up-front tonal character. So to get them to perform at their musical best will require source components that range from warm to neutral. If these speakers are matched with amplification that is a touch on the bright side, the result might be a bit too etched.

Same thing with cables. I tried a few different things from Cardas, TARA Labs, Transparent and Shunyata, all with good luck, but when the DH Labs Silver Sonic cables were installed, I ran out of the room screaming — way too much detail!

## Now the Great News

While these speakers have a somewhat unconventional shape and the stands leave a bit to be desired, the sound more than makes up for any aesthetic challenges.

**Keep in mind that they do require a subwoofer; even in a small room, there just isn't enough bass extension to be terribly useful.**

The spec sheet lists the frequency response of the S2's as +/- 2db from 72 - 45kHz, and judging from their relative lack of bass, I would concur with this. A Paradigm Signature subwoofer was sent along with the S1's but we were not able to get this giant 15-inch servo sub to mate seamlessly with the S1's. I had much better luck with a couple of the smaller subs I had on hand from Tannoy and MartinLogan. If you want a pair of S1's for two-channel use, you would be well-served with one of Paradigm's smaller subwoofers.  
*(continued)*



However, if you were using four S1's and a Paradigm center as part of a home theater setup, the Signature sub would give you floor-rattling results.

Comparing the S1's to the LS3/5a's, the Paradigms are a polar opposite but equally exciting to listen to. Where the Sterlings are a bit richer tonally, the Paradigms offer a lot more resolution and do it without being harsh or shrill, which is no mean feat.

Though I had some great luck with the S1's in my living room (11 x 17 feet), they ended up in the same place as the Sterlings: on top of my desk, between my 30-inch Apple Cinema Display, listening nearfield. This really was an amazing setup and I felt as if someone had shrunk my MartinLogan Summits and put them on my desk!

Because the S1's are so revealing, using them with first-class electronics really shows off their capabilities. My "desktop" system consisted of the Nagra PL-L linestage, Nagra PSA power amplifier, ARC PH7 phono preamplifier, Rega P9/Dynavec-tor 17D3 and a Wadia 581i SE disc player. The MartinLogan Grotto i subwoofer was also a part of this system, with excellent results. I ran the S1's full range with the PSA's 100 watts per channel on tap. 60hz ended up being the magic crossover setting for the sub.

*(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**



## Big Sound in a Small Space

What consistently amazed me was how much I could achieve the illusion of a big system in a big room on my desktop. I had the same results in a small room; everything sounded much bigger than I expected. Playing some of my favorite hard-rock records, these speakers had plenty of dynamic range and slam without fatigue.

**Switching the mood to jazz or something more ethereal, the width and depth were of such huge proportions that I was often tricked into thinking I was listening to my reference system.**

A good example of this phenomenon was with Jean Michael Jarre's *Zoolook*. On the second track, there are some running water/droplet sounds out front with some synths in the middle and some reversed tracked vocals from Laurie Anderson right out front. In a system lacking good resolution, all three of these events appear to take place on the same plane, but it was no problem for the S1's to separate them. These little speakers throw a very wide soundstage, too. The effect was almost surreal, which is just how I like it. Listening to Prince's "Alphabet St." there were some little vocal and guitar bits floating all around my head, like I had a surround setup.

When I sent them over to staff writer Marc Phillips for a week, his first comment was about the big, wide sound. (He also grumped a bit about the stands and binding posts..) *(continued)*



## If You Like to Rock

As time goes by, I continue to be amazed by the S1's dynamic range. I could play these speakers at a level that would have left the Sterlings lying dead on the side of my desk with their tweeters hanging out.

If you like music with lots of dynamic contrast, the S1's will not disappoint you. Whether I was listening to the snare crashes at the end of Little Feat's "All That You Dream" or Metallica's "Master of Puppets," the S1's delivered the goods. They could handle the loud passages without compression and the quiet ones without the details fading into the background. They also stayed composed with fairly complex music, too. This is where a small speaker will fall down on the job if not well-designed.

This extended dynamic range is what allows the S1's to have a huge helping of detail no matter what volume you choose. They don't need to reach a threshold point before the music starts to happen. It's all good.

## Sets the Standard

The Paradigm S1 is definitely at the top of the range for a small speaker in the under \$2,000 category. Granted, there are other speakers at this price point that possess more bass drive, but none of the ones I've heard have the level of resolution that these have or the dynamic range. I'd rather add a subwoofer with a speaker of this size, so it's not a deal breaker for me anyway.

The only thing holding these back from being one of the most amazing small speakers ever are those flimsy stands. I know Paradigm has the resources to address the problem, so let's hope the next iteration of S1 has this issue fixed.

I'll give these an A- for now. Match these speakers up with a great small subwoofer and you will have way better sound than you deserve for this kind of money. ●



The Paradigm S1 MSRP: \$1,699

**Paradigm Electronics Inc.**  
www.paradigm.com

## PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifier:** Nagra PL-L

**Power Amplifier:** Nagra PSA, Conrad-Johnson MV-75, Croft Polestar 1, Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature

**Digital Source:** Wadia 581i SE, Sooloos music server

**Analog Source:** Rega P9 w/RB1000 arm, Dynavector 17D3 and ARC PH7 phono stage

**Interconnects:** Cardas Golden Reference

**Speaker Cables:** Cardas Golden Reference

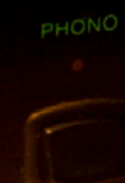
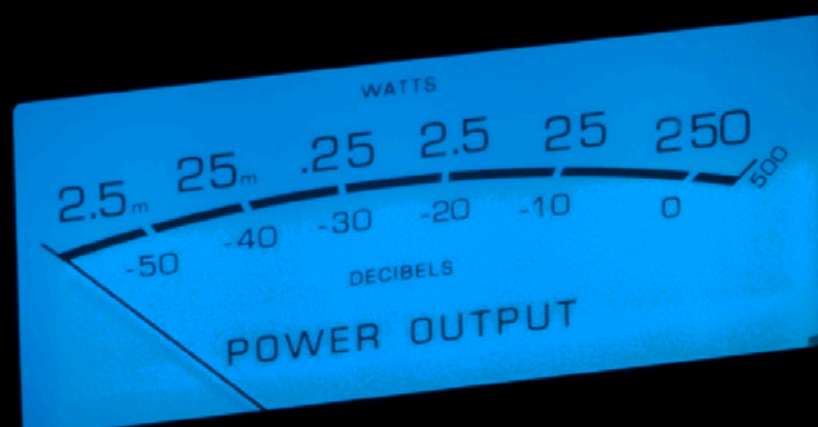
**Power Conditioning:** Running Springs Danielle

**Subwoofers:** Paradigm Signature, Tannoy TS8, MartinLogan Grotto i



McIntosh  
MA7000  
INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

POWER OUTPUT



# THE MCINTOSH MA7000

## A Boost For Your System

By Jerold O'Brien





I love McIntosh equipment for the same reasons I love vintage BMWs: they are built well, perform well and have a rabid following of obsessed fans who keep resale values high and spare parts available. The McIntosh MA7000 is a serious piece of gear and, unlike recent BMWs that are weighed down by Chris Bangle styling, it's a proper addition to a long evolving heritage at McIntosh Labs.

The MA7000 is the top dog in McIntosh's line of powerful and versatile integrated amplifiers, with 250 watts per channel on tap at 2, 4, or 8 ohms. Speaking of taps, the MA7000 uses McIntosh's famous Autoformers in the output stage, just like their massive power amplifiers.

I spend a lot of time tinkering with tube amplifiers, modding and rebuilding old Dynacos, Eicos, you name it. A recent acquisition of a McIntosh MA230 integrated amplifier rekindled my interest in the brand, and being a tube/transistor hybrid, it eased my final step to transistors with the MA7000.

Mac gear isn't cheap, and the MA7000 will set you back \$7,500. Weighing just under 100 pounds, this thing's a beast and features the same giant rack handles as the big McIntosh power amplifiers. It certainly *looks* as if it's worth this kind of dough. *(continued)*

**Weighing just under 100 pounds, this thing's a beast and features the same giant rack handles as the big McIntosh power amplifiers.**



## Stop by for the Equalizer, Stay for the Power

I've been enjoying my Strata Mini speakers from AV123 with the MA230, which offers up a very warm, musical sound indeed. But my home is kind of a ski chalet, hence bizarre acoustics. The recent girlfriend will not go for tube traps and such, so I was initially intrigued with the five-band equalizer on the front panel of the MA7000.

That's right, equalizer. You guys who grump about equalizers usually have just four records that sound good on your system, so shut up. A little boost at 50hz, a little push at 1500 hz and Foghat never sounded better. The other controls are at 150hz, 500hz and 10k. That 10k control really comes in handy for CDs that are too harsh or 78s that are really noisy. Once you get used to it, you will never go back. Here's a little more push for the audiophiles in the crowd that question the EQ; when the knobs are set to the center detent, they are switched out of the system. If you only need to boost or cut a band or two, you aren't paying as much of a penalty for introducing the EQ into the system. Pretty smart thinking.

All this control is cool, but what really won me over was the power. I love my BMW 2002tii and will always wax poetic about how the little 2-liter engine with it's basic Kugelfischer injection is all I need to get by. That is, until I get behind the wheel of my brother's new M3 with its 414-horsepower V-8. Absolute power does corrupt absolutely.

Just as I've always been a 4-cylinder BMW guy, I've always been a 30-50 watt tube amplifier guy. But what a difference having all this power. Our publisher teases me by saying, "Power is your friend," so I guess it's my turn to shut up.

My Stratas have never sounded this good, exhibiting a new level of finesse with all of



that power on tap. They have a powered subwoofer built in, so just to see how well the MA7000 does with control in the lower registers, I carted up my old JBL L-166's from the living room. These are notoriously power hungry, but listening to my favorite rock records was very exciting indeed. I wish I had this amplifier back in the '70s!

I always thought the JBLs had a loose, uncontrolled bass response, but now they sounded tight and extended with much more detail that I ever thought possible with these vintage speakers.

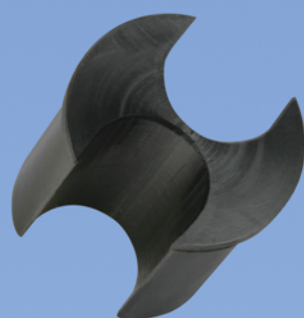
## No Longer a McCurmudge

This is McIntosh's biggest integrated amp to date: 250 watts per channel delivered into 8, 4 or even 2 ohms with no more than 0.005% total harmonic distortion to rated power. With 2.0 db of headroom, you have more than enough juice to power most any speaker system on the market. Of course, it features a gigantic pair of blue meters, so the MC7000 takes command visually as well as dynamically. *(continued)*

**A little boost at 50hz,  
a little push at 1500hz  
and Foghat never  
sounded better.**







Cardas Clear

I'm definitely a convert to the current McIntosh way of doing things. McIntosh gear of days past have that wonderful, romantic quality that seems to make everything sound great. The MA7000 builds on that strength and adds major dynamics and some resolution to the mix without sacrificing the musicality. Transient attack is faster than any Mac I remember and the noise floor is super quiet. It's amusing to crank up "Dance Me In" from *The Repulsion Box CD* and show someone the SPL meter hitting peaks over 100db during your conversation.

### **The MA7000 plays loud, but it's clean.**

McIntosh's Power Guard circuit is a very intuitive soft clipping circuit that steps in if your enthusiasm with the volume gets out of control. A 250-watt-per-channel power amplifier can sizzle tweeters if not treated with respect. I had to push the MA7000 way beyond reasonable levels listening to UFO's *Lights Out LP*. Sure enough, I made those PG lights come on. When I turned around, I noticed that I also had cleared the room.

Even after a few marathon brain-damage listening sessions, the MA7000 remained fairly cool to the touch, testament to the stout build quality of this amplifier. In homage to the many McIntosh power amplifiers that performed their duties admirably in the PA systems of the Grateful Dead and other rock bands, this one can work hard without breaking a sweat.

### **More Features Baby!**

The EQ is great, but only the tip of the iceberg. The MA7000 has an outstanding headphone amplifier for when you can't crank the tunes. *(continued)*





Precious few components have an onboard headphone amplifier these days and considering the rebirth of the headphone industry over the last five years, this is an awesome bonus feature. Add that equalizer and you can get just about any set of phones to sound great.

An excellent moving magnet phono stage is also included with the MA7000, so those of you with a decent table and vinyl collection will be pleasantly surprised. Adding my Rega P3-24 table (with TT-PSU power supply) and Rega's best MM cart made a very pleasant analog front end indeed. While I have a huge vinyl collection, I've never invested in a killer turntable. With the Rega, I have just enough analog to keep me happy, yet not enough to stress me out towards the next upgrade. If you are this kind of vinyl lover, you will be thrilled with the onboard phono stage in the MA7000.

There is plenty of flexibility on the back panel too. A set of pre-out, main-in jacks are there in case you feel the need to bi-amp your speakers and add another giant McIntosh power amplifier to the mix, or drive a line level subwoofer. (there is also a set of

balanced XLR preamp outputs as well) In addition to the six RCA inputs, there are two pair of balanced inputs, so you should be able to accommodate whatever combination of sources you have. There is also a fixed level output marked "REC" that can easily work with your favorite music server or tape recorder. Remember, we vintage McIntosh guys still have them!


I must admit though, after borrowing our publisher's MS750 music server for a while, my reel-to-reel tape deck may be going up on EBay! Thanks to the data ports on the back, everything connects together and you can use the MS750's remote to power up and control the whole system. While my inner caveman bristles at the thought of only *one* remote, it is very handy. I should also mention that my inner nerd really appreciated the well-thought-out and illustrated manual. Just don't tell my buddies I used it.

### 99 Percent Perfect

The MA7000 should keep its owners very happy, but it's my job to criticize. My complaints are minimal and few, but for the price of a nice used BMW motorcycle, I want it all. *(continued)*

**While my inner caveman bristles at the thought of only one remote, it is very handy.**





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On the next round of this amplifier, I'd love to see a second set of speaker outputs. With this much power on tap, I'd love to run another pair of speaker cables downstairs to my living room. Last but not least, I wouldn't mind that phono section to have a moving coil option too. This is an expensive enough amplifier that I don't want to get another outboard phono preamp should I get the urge to upgrade my turntable.

#### **A Mac For Most of Us**

Considering that you get a great MM phono stage, a very good headphone amplifier along with a preamp and power amplifier all on one chassis, I think the MA7000 is a tremendous value. That eliminates a few extra boxes to buy as well as a couple sets of expensive interconnects and power cords, making for much less clutter in the man cave.

The MA7000 is built like a tank, sounds great and is easy to live with. I know that if I add one of these to my McIntosh collection, when my grandkids finish fighting over who gets it, McIntosh will still have spare parts on the shelf. Just like my trusty 2002ti, and that's a comforting feeling. ●

**The McIntosh MA7000**  
MSRP: \$7500

#### **MANUFACTURER**

**McIntosh Labs**  
607-723-3512  
[www.mcintoshlabs.com](http://www.mcintoshlabs.com)

#### **PERIPHERALS**

**Digital Sources:** Rega Saturn, McIntosh MS750, Apple iPod Classic w/Wadia i170

**Analog Source:** Rega P3-24 w/TT-PSU, Rega Exact cartridge

**Speakers:** AV123 Strata Mini

**Cables:** Audience Maestro interconnects and speaker cables, PowerChord power cords



# A Quick Turntable Upgrade

## The Furutech AG-12 Phono Cable

By Jeff Dorgay





One of the most overlooked segments of the analog world is the tonearm cable.

Many turntables come with a halfway decent cable. Some, such as my Rega P9, have a permanently attached cable that can't be swapped for something else. But if your tonearm has a standard DIN plug or a pair of RCA jacks, here's an upgrade you won't want to miss.

In today's world of mega-priced cables, the Furutech AG-12 is a steal at \$429. Judging by build quality alone, this cable looks like something that costs \$1,000, if not more. It uses Furutech's Alpha silver plated  $\mu$ -OFC wire with a polyethelene dielectric material. Of course, it is treated with Furutech's Alpha Cryogenic and Demagnetizing processes, along with four layers of shielding.

What does all this mean to you? Take it from me, it sounds *damn* good. Actually, this cable does a great job at not having a sound. If you take a peek at the Furutech website ([www.furutech.com](http://www.furutech.com)), you can get the in-depth techie explanation explaining all the minute details about the construction details of the AG-12.

### Speaking of Minute Details

Thanks to my TW-Acoustic Raven Two turntable, I have a pair of identical SME tonearms at my disposal and a couple of pairs of identical cartridges, so where it might be easy to be fooled into thinking this cable is all placebo, a simple switch between input A and input B on my ASR Basis Exclusive phono preamplifier made it a snap to discern the difference.

I can't write an encyclopedia about a turntable cable, but I can tell you that the Furutech AG-12 is the most cost-effective upgrade I've made to my analog front end. Ever. This cable strikes the perfect balance for me; it offers more musical detail without being even the tiniest bit harsh.

To hear instantly the effect of the AG-12, put on your favorite record with a lot of cymbals, or even (heaven forbid) a breathy female vocalist. Not only will you hear further into the recording, but you will hear more air and decay. *(continued)*







The whole musical presentation is bigger, almost as if you moved your listening-room walls out two feet. Tonality is spot on without any timing issues being altered.

Going back and forth between the stock cable that came with my SME V tonearm (now used on my iV.Vi arm) was as different as night and day, as if a substantial veil was lifted from the upper registers. I tried this test with a pair of Dynavector XV-1s cartridges as well as a pair of Dynavector 17D3 cartridges, so you do not need a stratospheric cartridge to hear more music with the AG-12. A very nice side benefit of having the Furutech cable in my system is that extra resolution makes it even easier to dial in VTA. Booya!

### **So, perk up your analog rig!**

Using the Furutech AG-12 has been such a good experience, I'll be buying two of them (one for each arm) to use in my reference system. I applaud Furutech for offering a cable with this level of build quality at a price point where most audiophiles can take advantage of it. I'm happy to award this cable one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2008. ●

**Furutech AG-12 Phono Cable, MSRP: \$425**

### **MANUFACTURER**

**Furutech Co. Ltd.**  
Tokyo, Japan  
[www.furutech.com](http://www.furutech.com)

### **PERIPHERALS**

**Electronics:** C-J Act 2/Series 2 and Premier 350, Nagra VPS

**Speakers:** MartinLogan Summit, Martin Logan Descent i, Loiminchay Chagall

**Analog Sources:** TK Acoustic Raven Two turntable w/SME iV.Vi and SME 309 arms, Dynavector XV-1s and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood cartridges, Spiral Groove SG2 turntable w/TriPlanar VII arm and Lyra Skala cartridge

**Interconnects:** Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, Audioquest Sub 3

**Speaker Cable:** Shunyata Orion

**Power Cords:** Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda Helix Alpha

**Power Conditioning:** Running Springs Jaco & Dmitri

**Room Treatment:** GIK 242 panels, GIK Tri-Traps, Sonex Classic

**Racks:** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature

**Accessories:** Furutech LP Demagnetizer, Finite Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators Nagra VFS (under VPS)



# A Very Intriguing Newcomer

## THE FICION F200SE

By Jeff Dorgay

Just when you think you've seen everything, something new and exciting catches your interest. When I was wondering the halls a few months ago at the VSAC show here in my hometown of Vancouver, Washington (five minutes from Downtown Portland, Oregon for those of you that have no idea where Vancouver is) I wasn't seeing much that caught my eye until I walked in the room where these understated little speakers were playing. While we never give "best sound of show" awards, these speakers were easily the most intriguing thing I heard at the VSAC show. I took a business card and filed it away for good measure. A month later when Robert Stephens, their local sales representative sent me an email to put together a review, it came front and center again.







Designer Peigen Jiang lives just outside of Seattle and has the speakers assembled in China. There are two models, the one you see here (the SE version) which retails for \$3850 and is made from laminated bamboo, while the standard F200 is made from MDF. The Eficion website claims the SE version has “slightly tighter bass response, due to the additional stiffness of the bamboo cabinet.” External veneer is available in Cherry or Santo Rosewood. The matching stands are another \$400. Should you be placing these speakers in a bit more design conscious environment, I suggest the factory stands, they are very attractive.

The F200's have an understated style and are wider at the bottom (10") than the top (8") about 14" deep and 17" tall. Solidly built, they weigh about 35 pounds each, with some very heavy duty binding posts on the back that allow for bi-wiring. They feature a 6.5" woofer with a 2" voice coil that is crossed over to a ribbon tweeter at 2khz. A black grille is included, but the speakers are so well finished and attractive, I can't imagine ever using the grilles. Sensitivity is claimed to be 88db and our listening confirmed that they present a fairly easy load to drive, working with everything in our amplifier arsenal equally well.

**Sensitivity is claimed to be 88db and our listening confirmed that they present a fairly easy load to drive, working with everything in our amplifier arsenal equally well.**

### Break In and Setup

The brand new pair I had was stiff out of the box, but don't panic, they just need some hours on the clock. The F200's eased up quite a bit after the first 24 hours of continuous play and were a lot better at the 100 hour mark, but really need about 200 hours to sound their best. Leave them play while you are at work and in a week or two, you will be ready to fully enjoy them. Don't be discouraged by what you hear straight out of the box.

We make it a point to audition every speaker that comes by with a very wide range of amplifiers, both in power and in design to see where possible synergies and/or incompatibilities exist. Any good tube or solid state amplifier in the 30-60 watt range should be more than adequate to make magic with these speakers, but as they are quite revealing, the quality of your source components will determine your final outcome. *(continued)*



## NEW PRODUCT

# SKY SERIES

signal cables

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

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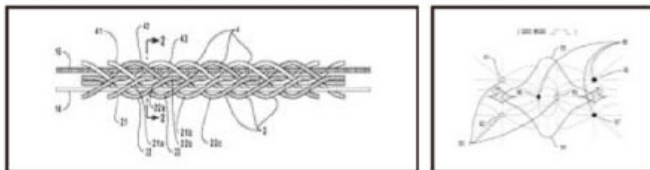
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating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

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

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

*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.



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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.

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Even in the studio, with my reference Conrad-Johnson ACT2 pre-amplifier and Premier 350 power amplifier, the F200's held their own.

I ultimately settled on the combination of 30.2 Signature amplifier and Isabella Preamplifier (with built in DAC) from Red Wine Audio in my living room system once the break in was complete, as I had been using this combination with my Harbeth compact 7ES-3 speakers for quite some time. I had excellent luck with Empirical Design 422 interconnects between amp and preamp, Empirical Design 213 speaker cables and ALO Audio's newest digital cable from the Sooloos to the Isabella. As these are both battery powered, no upgraded power cords were necessary and a Shunyata Guardian 4 took care of power for the Sooloos. A pair of 24" Sound Anchor stands kept the speakers firmly planted on the hardwood floor.

### A Very Interesting Little Two Way

Having owned Apogee speakers as well as later model Magneplanars with ribbon tweeters, I am definitely fond of the speed that a ribbon tweeter can offer, though they sometimes come off harsh sounding. The crossover in the F200 does a perfect job of mating to the 6" woofer, and I'm sure a big part of the seamless sound these speakers exhibit is due to the small woofer being fast enough to keep up with the ribbon tweeter.

The Red Wine gear is very high quality and very revealing of source components, however the 30.2 Signature amplifier is sensitive to what you mate it with.

(continued)



It's magic with the right speakers but can either come off as a little thin or a little dull with the wrong speakers, much like the VTA on your turntable improperly set. Happily, the match with the F200's was fantastic, just like it was with my Harbeths. Though my living room is a hell hole for acoustics, British monitors seem to do very well there and now I can add the F200 to my list.

The Harbeth Compact 7 is one of my favorite speakers in the world at *any* price, so the F200's were facing some stiff competition indeed. After a few months of listening on a very wide range of program material, I am very pleased with the F200's but it is a completely different listening experience than the Harbeths.

I've had a lot of small two-ways in my living room over the past five years and I have to say the the F200 joins my short list that includes the B&W 805S and the Harbeth

Compact 7. All three of these speakers have great virtues, precious few weaknesses and in a small room with the right gear can offer up a very large helping of what a much larger system can do at modest volume levels.

### Dynamic and Versatile

Even with the 30 watts of the Red Wine power, I was able to really crank the F200's. Substituting the 30.2 for my Nagra PSA power amplifier with 100 watts per channel on tap, I could blast these speakers in my 11 x 17 foot living room with no sign of strain. Even with the PSA's clipping lite flickering on occasion when I was playing Van Halen, the F200's showed no sign of distress.

Thanks to the Isabella's built in DAC, I used the Sooloos Music Server as a source, so I could cover a lot of musical ground in a very short period of time. I now have a "test" playlist that has about 100 favorite songs on it from classical to rock with everything in between which makes it very easy to get a read on a new component.

This speaker has a neutral character, but is very revealing as well. Where the Harbeths are the slightest bit forgiving, the F200's were not with the solid state system. I was able to get a more mellow overall sound, switching to the Conrad Johnson MV75 power amplifier, so these are very versatile speakers indeed.

(continued)

**Though my living room is a hell hole for acoustics, British monitors seem to do very well there and now I can add the F200 to my list.**





I had the same results with the Mystere ia21 integrated amplifier, which is all tubes, so if you want a bit more romantic sound, these speakers are neutral enough that you can tune your system either way.

That ribbon was very clean through the midrange. Listening to a ton of male and female vocals, I found the midrange very natural and lifelike. KD Lang, Tom Waits and Tom Jones sounded as they should. Where I felt the F200's really shine is with very dynamic, punchy music. This speaker is very fast overall and whenever I listened to anything with a lot of natural attack and decay. Zooming through my favorite Brand X, Dixie Dregs and Joe Satriani albums at fairly high levels proved that the F200's could keep their composure when the music got complex.

These speakers have a claimed lower limit of 38hz, and with a little bit of corner loading in my living room, they did a very impressive job when I was listening to Peter Gabriel's *Security* and *Into the Labryinth* by Dead Can Dance. I'm pretty confident that whatever music you enjoy, the F200's will keep you very happy. Their limitations are very few; they won't produce Earthshattering SPL's and they don't offer that last octave of bass response, but neither do any of it's competitors. This is another great example of a designer concentrating on getting the main 85-90% of where we listen right, rather than sacrificing overall quality for that last bit of bass extension at this price level. If you want that last bit of bass, these speakers will mate up exceptionally well with any good subwoofer.

**Where I felt the F200's really shine is with very dynamic, punchy music.**

### A Great Little Speaker From The Pacific Northwest

Much as I feel like if you take a comparable Lexus and BMW for a test drive, you will probably respond more strongly to one than the other. While the Harbeth is more organic in presentation, the F200 is a bit more detailed and extended on top. If you are someone who needs a very resolving, high performance speaker to work in a small space and you do not like the Harbeth/Spendor/ProAc way of doing things, I can't suggest the F200 highly enough. With this kind of a first effort, we sincerely hope the people at Eficlon join the ranks of great speaker builders as time goes on. ●





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### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Source:** Sooloos Music  
Server, Meridian 808

**Preamplifiers:** Red Wine Audio  
Isabella, Nagra PL-L, BAT  
VK-32SE

**Power Amplifiers:** Conrad  
Johnson MV-75, Nagra PSA,  
Red Wine Audio 30.2 Signature

**Interconnects:** Empirical  
Design 422, Furutech Audio  
Reference III-N

**Speaker Cables:** Empirical  
Design 213, Furutech Audio  
Reference III-N

**Line Conditioning:** Shunyata  
Guardian 4



# Major Versatility

**THE RED WINE AUDIO ISABELLA**

By Jeff Dorgay

 Red Wine Audio



Isabella





**W**e had a great time listening to the Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature power amplifier last year. I purchased this little jewel and it's been playing around the clock in my living room system ever since. Vinnie Rossi, the owner and head designer at Red Wine has hitched his star to battery power with his full line of products, and he hasn't looked back. In a recent conversation he said,

**“Getting off the grid just solves so many problems from a designer’s standpoint. With low noise as a given, it allows us to concentrate on other areas of design.”**

The new Isabella preamplifier costs between \$4,000 and \$6,000, depending on how you have it configured. The basic preamp alone is \$4,000, adding the onboard Isabellina DAC module raises the price to \$5,500 and taking it all the way, adding a headphone amplifier bumps the price to an even \$6,000. If you have *any* inclination towards getting a good pair of headphones, add this option right now.

Thanks to an update to RWA's SMART battery charging, the Isabella will switch automatically to AC power and start recharging the batteries when they run out of juice, which typically takes between six and eight hours. This was my only complaint with the 30.2 Signature amplifier: when it's out of gas, you have to wait for it to recharge. The ability to run on AC power when recharging the batteries is a nice touch, especially if you run your system all day, but once you get hooked on the battery sound, you won't want to listen when the Isabella is running on AC. I had the same experience with the ASR Basis phono preamplifier, also battery powered. *(continued)*





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"For starters, the 840C doesn't sound like anything in its price range. It had a resolution, refinement, ease, grace, and musicality that were instantly recognizable as being different from every other product in the category. (...) Not only is the 840C easily the greatest value in digital sources in my experience, it must be considered one of the greatest bargains in all of high-end audio."

**"In fact, I could easily live with the 840C at the front end of my \$100K reference system – it's that good."**

Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07

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To stifle any fears you might have about the batteries, when they do need replacement after about a three-to-five year lifespan, having RWA match, test and replace the pair will set you back \$100. Do it yourself, and a pair of batteries cost about \$50.

**Keeping things simple, Vinnie uses the same batteries in the 30.2, so you are assured of finding replacements in the future.**

Towards the rear of the Isabella's top panel, there's a small glass window that if you watch closely glows bright red for the first 45 seconds of operation, muted while it is warming up. Inside that window is a pair of 6922 vacuum tubes. They run at 24 volts, well below their design maximum, with no DC-DC converters to add noise, so I anticipate tube life will be incredibly long. The standard issue tubes are JJ E88CC's, but that handy sliding door would make it easy for those who feel compelled to experiment with their favorite flavor of tube type.

## The Quick Tour

Exactly the same size as the 30.2 – 12 inches wide, three inches high and 10.5 inches deep – the Isabella can sit right on top of your 30.2. There are no big power transformers or power supplies to interfere with each other. No power cords either, just a pair of cables that go downstream to the battery chargers. Thanks to this feature, you will need nothing but the supplied power cords for the battery chargers, saving you quite a bit of money on an all-RWA system.

Inside, the Isabella is a powerhouse. *(continued)*





With a DAC, headphone amp and a pair of SLA batteries in addition to the preamp circuit under the hood, every millimeter of space is fully utilized, much like my own Nagra gear.

The rear panel has three sets of Vampire RCA inputs for line-level sources and two sets of outputs, but if you've had the DAC installed, there are three digital inputs for an optical, BNC and USB source – all controlled from the front panel. A socket for the battery charger and a pair of toggle switches round out the densely packed rear panel, which looks interesting, having no IEC socket for a power cord.

One big change in the Isabella that I enjoyed was the addition of a continuous motorized volume control (featuring an ALPS potentiometer) in place of the stepped attenuator that can be purchased with the 30.2 Signature. This did not have enough steps for my liking and felt too clunky for a product that otherwise has such a luxurious feel. It does make the remote easier to use.

The Isabella also features a switch on the rear panel offering 0db gain or +12db, allowing maximum use of the volume control's range. I found this especially helpful while testing different headphones.

### Style and Function

Combining everything on one chassis has some huge benefits, my favorite being style. The older I get, the less I want a big wiring loom in my listening area. The more time I spend with the Red Wine gear, the more I enjoy having two simple boxes to power my living room system. Now that I don't need a big power conditioner and all those bulky power cords, I can get by with a nice, tiny Shunyata Guardian 4 for my Sooloos music server, a digital cable from the Sooloos to the Isabella and a pair of speaker cables.

As someone who is always looking for a good rationalization, what you save by eliminating a few pairs of interconnects, a few beefy power cords and a high-capacity line conditioner, should you choose the matching 30.2 power amplifier, you are almost getting the Isabella at no cost.

In the end, style and functionality is wasted on a product that does not perform. Fortunately, the Isabella is a stunning performer indeed.

### Listening Environments

I spent a lot of time with the Isabella in my main listening area as well as in my living-room system.

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**The more time I spend with the Red Wine gear, the more I enjoy having two simple boxes to power my living room system.**





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The living-room system utilized the RWA 30.2 Signature power amplifier, Harbeth Compact 7 speakers and the Eficion 200SE speakers, along with the Sooloos music server. Before this, I had been using the Nagra PL-L linestage, which I consider world class and retails for \$7,500. DAC's used here were the Wadia 521 and the Channel Islands VDC•2. I have also spent a lot of time with the Naim SuperNait in this room with these two speakers, so some great, somewhat-comparable equipment has set a high standard.

After I had drawn my conclusions here, the Isabella was used in both my desktop system and the main reference system, where it substituted for the Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series two preamplifier and the new VK-32SE from BAT.

### Its own flavor

If you haven't spent any time with battery-powered components, they definitely have a texture all their own. Now that I have lived with a handful of them from various manufacturers, I feel that taking a component off of the grid tends to somewhat minimize the sound differences between tubes, transistors and chips.

---

**However, all but the very best components have a few compromises, and the Isabella is no different.**

While it is much quieter than anything I've heard at this price point, the Isabella and every other battery-powered preamplifier seems to lose just a little bit of dynamic oomph through the loudest bits of a full-scale symphony or orchestra or brain-damage rock music. This is what you get with the price-is-no-object preamps with the giant, overbuilt power supplies.  
*(continued)*





To be fair to the Isabella, I didn't notice this until I placed it in my main system, driving the C-J Premier 350 and my MartinLogan Summits with the Naim 555 as a source component, which is probably way beyond the reasonable expectations for this preamp. In the living-room system with the Harbeths, I was happy with the presentation in conjunction with the RWA Signature 30.2 amplifier.

The tonality of the Isabella is excellent, though. When listening to those same acoustic instruments, the stringed instruments, especially violins, sound convincingly real and that's no small feat for a pre-amplifier at this price point. I firmly believe this is due to the lack of grain from power-supply artifacts coloring the signal.

Speaking of flavor, though I tried my hand at rolling in a few different types of 6DJ8's – 6922 and 7308's are also compatible here – I preferred the Isabella just the way it comes voiced from the factory. You can alter the tonality by switching tubes, but I found gains made in one area meant sacrifices elsewhere. Maybe I'm just losing some of my audiophile picnic spirit, but I'd keep it stock.

### Back to the DAC

Red Wine Audio takes a somewhat different approach to their Isabellina DAC, but it works very well. Vinnie uses a NOS (new old stock) 16-bit non-oversampling and non-upsampling digital-to-analog

chip with no digital filtering to get the job done. Don't bother taking the lid off in an attempt to reverse engineer what he's done: the chip has all of its numbers wiped clean.

Many of today's CD players and DAC's take the oversampling route, but Vinnie feels that this implementation, combined with the battery power, provides a very musical approach. Another nice touch is the class-A, discrete output stage, with no op amps or feedback in the signal path, a basic approach that has been meticulously implemented.

I was immediately impressed with the USB performance of this DAC. Converting directly to I2S to feed the DAC without an intermediate s/pdif stage, the Isabella has the most musical sound I've yet to experience when feeding from a laptop via USB. This part of the equation usually falls down on the other DAC's I've tried, with the USB input being designed more for convenience than high performance. The Isabella even features its own +5 volt power for the USB bus, so a fairly long USB cable can be used without issue. Another nice touch that eliminates noise further. *(continued)*

**The Isabella has the most musical sound I've yet to experience when feeding from a laptop via USB.**



The optical input is not quite as resolving as the other two inputs, but it worked well with the devices I tried it with. I still prefer the USB input for any kind of computer interface, but the Isabella's optical input worked wonders with my mini disc player.

Using a number of different digital sources to play music from hard disc as well as shiny CD's, I was always pleased with the musicality of the Isabella. It worked wonders in my living-room system with the Sooloos, which has a notoriously average DAC, improving the sound quality tremendously in every way. Dynamics, tonality and musicality went from the definitely digital sound of the Sooloos' analog outputs to something that was much less fatiguing.

I would say the DAC in the Isabella is on par with any of the CD players I've heard in the \$2,500-3,500 range. The fact that you can add it internally for \$1,500 makes it a great bargain, and for many, it will be all the digital performance you will ever need.

### Between the Ears

As much as I enjoyed the Isabella's DAC section, I was quite smitten with the headphone amplifier section. I managed to put it through its paces with my standard pack of phones; the Grado GS 1000, the AKG 701's and the Sennheiser 650's all worked just fine.

I am not the world's biggest fan of headphones, and as much as I enjoyed the TTVJ headphone amplifier we reviewed last issue, I would never spend \$6,000 on a headphone amplifier. If you are on my side of the fence, you will freak out over the quality of what lurks in the Isabella for a mere \$500 upgrade. I've heard a lot of the best and most expensive headphone amplifiers now, and I'd put this one right at the top of the list, regardless of price. Perhaps it's that battery thing again, but this is the least fatiguing headphone amplifier I've ever heard.

### So, just how good is this thing?

When you put more than one thing in one box, there is an obvious scale of economy and I don't feel that it's fair to judge the Isabella against other preamplifiers in the \$5,000-\$8,000 range.

Or for that matter, DAC's in that range. So trying to make this as objective as possible, while I did compare the Isabella to a few reference-quality preamplifiers (the C-J ACT2/Series 2, the BAT VK-32SE and the Nagra PL-L), I also compared it to a few like-priced products: The ModWright 9.0SE, the Classe CP-500, The Croft Precession 1 (also battery powered) and the brand new C-J Classic.

I have just one complaint with the Isabella and it's minor. The remote. While I fully understand Vinnie's priorities of putting all of the money in the box, and that's a commendable priority, the \$6,000 preamps from BAT, CJ and McIntosh have killer remotes. For that matter, the \$3,000 Classe preamp has a great remote. Seeing that Isabella is such a stylish preamp, it should have an equally stylish remote to accompany it. Rather than the big, beefy remote that is standard issue with the majors, the Red Wine Remote is more like a "valet remote", only controlling volume and power on/off.

As I mentioned earlier, HiFi gear that is battery powered has a unique sound, offering a presentation that is completely quiet and redefines the audio cliché "black backgrounds." All of the battery-powered gear I have owned or reviewed does well with revealing the inner detail of a recording because the noise floor is lower. Thanks to the complete lack of op amps in the Isabella, it has a very open sound as well.

When listening to some of my favorite acoustic recordings, and even with some of the new Blue Note SACDs, I could really hear the decay of cymbals fading smoothly off to nothing in a way in which only the best AC-powered gear is capable.

If you are accustomed to listening to components in the \$3,000-5,000 range, you most likely will be excited about the Isabella and quite possibly become just as addicted to the "battery sound" as I am.

If you want a compact, yet high-performance audio system with minimal associated cables and all of the advantages that a battery-powered system offers, look no further. The Isabella combined with the 30.2 Signature would be tough to beat without spending a lot more money. ●



**The Isabella combined with the 30.2 Signature would be tough to beat without spending a lot more money.**



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## MANUFACTURER

### Red Wine Audio

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203-440-4944  
[www.redwineaudio.com](http://www.redwineaudio.com)

## PERIPHERALS

**Digital Sources:** Sooloos Music Server, iPod Classic with Wadia i170 dock, Wadia 581i SE, Apple MacBook Pro

**Pre Amplifiers:** Modwright 9.0SE, Classe CP-500, The Croft Precession 1, C-J Classic, C-J Act 2/series 2

**Power Amplifiers:** Red Wine Audio 30.2 Signature, Nagra PSA, McIntosh MC275, C-J Premier 350

**Speakers:** Harbeth Compact 7ES-3, Eficion F200SE, Loiminchay Chagall, MartinLogan Spire w/Descent i subwoofer

**Digital Cable:** ALO Audio

**Interconnects:** Cardas Golden Reference, ED 415, Furutech Audio Reference III-N1, Shunyata Anteres

**Speaker Cable:** Shunyata Orion, Furutech Audio Reference III-N1

**Power Conditioning:** Shunyata Guardian 4



## RAISING THE BAR

# The Running Springs Dmitri

By Jeff Dorgay

Power-line conditioning is one of the hottest topics these days on internet audio forums. Flipping through any audio magazine reveals quite a few choices. People who have purchased various brands often claim that one is quieter than the other, while another brand offers “thunderous bass,” etc., etc.

My take on power-line conditioning is simple. The perfect PLC should do no harm to the sound of your system. There should be an overall reduction in noise but not at the expense of tonality or dynamics. I reviewed the Running Springs Jaco in Issue Two and have been a convert to their products ever since. I now own four of their PLCs that are installed in all three of my systems, and I feel they more thoroughly address the issues than anything else I’d tried.



running springs audio





So when I heard about the Dmitri's introduction, the instantaneous audiophile knee jerk was that I must have the latest, greatest new thing. However, the tiny part of my brain that questions the practicality of all things related to financial outlay wondered what possibly could be improved.

The RSA Dmitri is \$3,995 without a power cord and \$5,795 with their new high-performance power cord, a significant step up from the Jaco at \$2,500, which includes one of their Mongoose power cords. The Dmitri has 10 outlets on the back panel, while the Jaco has eight and the Danielle has 12.

While it has nothing to do with the sound of the Dmitri, it does have a very cool, carbon fiber front panel. However, RSA's new carbon fiber feet *do* improve the sound slightly and should be available soon to replace the squishy feet on your current RSA products. They make a nice improvement to your other components too!

### The Obvious Question

One of the most difficult things that any high-end audio designer faces is how to handle a new product that offers higher performance than their existing product base. I see people agonizing over these kinds of purchases every day. Especially in these wacky economic times, the last thing anyone wants to do is spend a major sum of money on a component only to feel as if the new model has made their current one nearly worthless.

The Dmitri is merely an extension of the product line, and while it doesn't render the others obsolete, it does offer more performance than their others. As I mentioned, dynamics and tonality have never been an issue with RSA. What I experienced with the Dmitri was the way it took another level of haze out of my system and quieted everything down even further without rounding off the edges of fine transient details.

### Quiet Indeed

My reference system uses a pair of 20-amp dedicated lines; one for the power amplifier, MartinLogan speakers (which have powered subwoofers) and a MartinLogan Descent i subwoofer. The other line runs my linestage and source components. A Jaco takes care of the amplifier and speakers while the Danielle handles the source components.

I usually make it a point to test any PLC with the power amplifier first by playing a lot of loud music, switching back and forth between the test cord or plugging straight into the wall. I listen closely for any compromise in dynamic swing. This was a test the Dmitri passed easily. My next test is to play music with plenty of quiet passages while running an electric power drill plugged into the same line. I do this with a long extension cord and make the drill user go out behind the studio. This is a quick though not terribly scientific way to see how well a PLC filters grunge, especially with an analog source. Again, the Dmitri passed with flying colors. *(continued)*

**What I experienced with the Dmitri was the way it took another level of haze out of my system and quieted everything down even further without rounding off the edges of fine transient details.**



# DeVORE FIDELITY



All of the familiar audiophile clichés about velvety black backgrounds apply here, and then some.

The Dmitri ended up having the most effect on my system in the front end, with my current setup, as I have a tubed preamplifier and phono stage. Since my Premier 350 power amplifier is very quiet to begin with, the difference between the Jaco and Dmitri was not as large as it was on my front end. But when I switched to a few of the tube power amplifiers here, I noticed more of a difference between the two PLCs. Again, if you want the ultimate, it's worth having a Dmitri everywhere you have a separate circuit if you can afford it.

Using the Dmitri in my front end was a big treat. Even my Naim 555 CD player, which possesses a massive power supply, took another step forward in noise suppression. Everything got bigger and quieter. Remember, dynamic range isn't just about playing loud, it's also about playing quietly.

---

**What initially feels like your system playing louder with the Dmitri is actually its ability to let your components dig deeper into the music they are reproducing.**

---

When you play your favorite vocal records, or any kind of acoustic music with a lot of air, you will hear the effect immediately. There's more texture on those violin strings than before. You can hear hall echo die off more gradually. Everything takes another step toward sounding more real, and those of you with world-class systems will have a few more of those moments where your HiFi system tricks you into thinking that, somehow, you are hearing the real thing.

*(continued)*

# The Nines





### Standard or High Zoot Power Cord?

I made it a point to listen to the Dmitri with both the Mongoose power cord and their new HZ model to see how much of the performance gain was just the box alone. I also tried the Jaco and Danielle with both power cords. If you are planning on upgrading to a Dmitri and don't want to stretch all the way for the power cord just yet, you will get about 75 percent of its effect without the HZ power cord. Consequently, if you want to keep your existing RSA box and buy only the power cord for now, you definitely will notice a decrease in noise there as well. But the killer combination is to have both.

### Should I Get Out My checkbook?

My position on mega cables and power-line-conditioning products has not changed: This is the icing on the cake and the last thing you do to your system when you have everything else dialed in. I believe the Dmitri represents the state of the art in power-line conditioning. If you have a system capable of very high resolution and musicality, it will take your system to another level, even if you thought it couldn't get any better. ●

### The Running Springs Dmitri Power Conditioner

**MSRP:** \$3,995 without power cord  
 \$4,499 with Mongoose power cord  
 \$5,795 with HZ power cord

### MANUFACTURER

#### Running Springs Audio

1800 E Via Burton St.  
 Anaheim, CA 92806  
 949-582-8072  
 www.runningsspringsaudio.com

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifiers:** Conrad Johnson ACT2/ Series 2, Nagra PL-L, BAT VK-32SE

**Power Amplifiers:** Conrad Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, BAT VK-55SE

**Phono Preamplifier:** Nagra VPS, ASR Basis Exclusive, Rega los

**Speakers:** MartinLogan Summit, Martin Logan Descent i

**Digital Sources:** Naim CD555, Meridian 808, Sooloos Music Server, Wadia 581i SE

**Analog Sources:** TK Acoustic Raven Two turntable w/SME iV.Vi and SME 309 arms, Dynavector XV-1s and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood cartridges, Spiral Groove SG2 turntable w/TriPlanar VII arm and Lyra Skala cartridge, Furutech AG-12 cables

**Interconnects:** Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, Audioquest Sub 3

**Speaker Cable:** Shunyata Orion

**Power Cords:** Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda Helix Alpha

**Power Conditioning:** Running Springs Jaco & Danielle

**Room Treatment:** GIK 242 panels, GIK Tri-Traps, Sonex Classic

**Racks:** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature

**Accessories:** Furutech LP Demagnetizer, Finite Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators





## Supreme Subwoofer Solution

# The Audioquest SUB-3 Cables

By Jeff Dorgay

**M**any people follow the conventional wisdom that because the interconnects feeding a subwoofer only have to accommodate frequencies up to about 80hz, the cable isn't terribly important. For a long time, I was using a fairly inexpensive cable to run the 20 feet from my preamplifier to the MartinLogan Descent i subwoofer in my listening room and was perfectly happy.

Harvey Gilbert, our local MartinLogan rep, was assisting me with the final setup of the Descent, when he said, "You have to get a pair of those Audioquest SUB-3 cables; it will give you much better bass response."



After they arrived a week later, I replaced the cheapies with the SUB-3's and was quite pleased with the difference. This is not a mega-expensive cable upgrade for your system and some of you may need only a single cable, not a pair as in my system. The SUB-3's are Audioquest's best subwoofer cables and run from \$220 each for a 2-meter length up to \$610 each for the 15-meter length. The 9-meter pair in my system retail at \$860 for a pair of them, but this is probably a lot longer than most of you will need.

**I'm sure you are thinking, why do I need a fancy subwoofer cable?**

The easy answer, as Gilbert noted, is that it greatly improves the bass response.

But if you don't want to follow me blindly and order these right now, here's the long version. The SUB-3 uses three solid conductors that are 6.1-percent silver. As I mentioned earlier in the issue, I'm not usually a fan of silver or silver-plated anything, but when used exclusively in the lower frequency section of your system, there isn't any of the harshness usually associated with silver cables.

Matter of fact, it tightens up the bass response of your subwoofer and offers up a healthy dose of detail, too. For those of you who happen to be bass players, I'd compare the change in sound that this cable makes to the difference between playing on a vintage Ampeg SVT cabinet with paper-coned drivers to a current Gallien-Krueger cabinet with aluminum-coned drivers.

Incorporating Audioquest's DBS (dielectric bias system), which keeps a constant 36-volt charge on the dielectric of the cables at all time, the sound will not change over time. Granted, this was a subwoofer cable, but I didn't notice much difference in the sound after about 24 hours and they sounded great out of the box.

Adding the SUB-3 to your system will not give you more bass, but it will improve your subwoofers texture and transient response, giving you less of that "one-note bass" sound that is often associated with subwoofers. I tried these cables with five different subwoofers ranging from the Tannoy TS-8, which has only a single 8-inch driver and costs about \$400, all the way up to the MartinLogan Descent i, which uses three 10-inch woofers and costs \$3,000. In every instance the difference was immediately noticeable; I was experiencing more resolution in the lower registers and less boom. *(continued)*

**Adding the SUB-3 to your system will not give you more bass, but it will improve your subwoofers texture and transient response...**







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The SUB-3 cables are that good. Whether you are unhappy with your current subwoofer or contemplating an upgrade, I urge you to try these cables first. If you are thrilled with your present setup, I think you still will be amazed at the results. If you are going down the subwoofer path for the first time, buy the SUB-3 and you will never need another subwoofer cable.

A pair of SUB-3's is a bargain. If you only need one, it's a steal. In this day of four- and five-figure cables, I'm thrilled to see a product by a major manufacturer that offers this much performance for a reasonable price. I'm happy to award the SUB-3 one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2008. ●

**The Audioquest SUB-3  
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## PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifiers:** Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra PL-L, BAT VK-32SE

**Power Amplifiers:** Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, BAT VK-55SE

**Phono Preamplifier:** Nagra VPS, Rega los

**Speakers:** MartinLogan Summit

**Subwoofers:** MartinLogan Descent i, MartinLogan Grotto i, Tannoy TS8

**Digital Sources:** Naim CD555, Meridian 808, Sooloos Music Server, Wadia 581i SE

**Analog Sources:** TK Acoustic Raven Two turntable w/SME iV.Vi and SME 309 arms, Dynavector XV-1s and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood cartridges, Spiral Groove SG2 turntable w/TriPlanar VII arm and Lyra Skala cartridge, with Furutech AG-12 cable

**Interconnects:** Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Antares, Audioquest Sub 3

**Speaker Cable:** Shunyata Orion

**Power Cords:** Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda Helix Alpha

**Power Conditioning:** Running Springs Jaco & Dmitri

**Room Treatment:** GIK 242 panels, GIK Tri-Traps, Sonex Classic

**Racks:** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature

**Accessories:** Furutech LP Demagnetizer, Finite Cerapucs and Ceraballs, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators



# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

Because the vinyl resurgence has no sign of slowing down, many people have turned to vintage cartridges to play their favorite records, trying to recapture that old-school feel.

A quick search on EBay and my favorite audio message boards revealed quite a few treasures. Next issue, we will mount them on a current vintage Technics SL1200 to see if these two artifacts are indeed treasure. I hate to admit it, but back then, I went for the deal; like most people in 1974 I hadn't woken up yet to how critical the turntable was in the playback chain. That wouldn't happen until 1977.

For now, here's a little visit to vinyl's past. Styli for both of these are still available at The Needle Doctor.  
[www.needledoctor.com](http://www.needledoctor.com)

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— magazine-audio, 2007

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— SoundStage!, 2006

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— Ultra Audio, 2005



Stereo Times Most Wanted Components, 2007 :: SoundStage! Reviewers' Choice Award, 2006  
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### Shure M91ED cartridge

EBay — \$40

**W**ith a retail price of \$29.95 in the 1975 Allied Radio catalog, you could usually walk into any HiFi store and get them to throw Shure's M91ED cartridge in with a turntable purchase for about \$15. A replacement N91ED stylus could usually be had for about \$10, so you could replace it yearly. Back then, this was one of the better phono cartridges made. Pretty amazing in the day of \$10,000 phono cartridges; I think my parents paid \$3,300 for their Buick LeSabre in 1975...

### Empire 999 se/x cartridge

Audio Karma classifieds — \$40

**A** direct competitor for Shure, the Empire 999 se/x was second in their line only to the 1000 se/x. Of course, it was one better! I used to sell these like crazy when I worked the retail counter at Schaak Electronics. Guys would always come in and want "the sex cartridge". We even sold two for \$39.95 if you came in at 2a.m. as part of our midnight madness sale. ●





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

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Acoustic Sounds: [www.acousticsounds.com](http://www.acousticsounds.com)

ALO Audio: [www.aloaudio.com](http://www.aloaudio.com)

Audience: [www.audience-av.com](http://www.audience-av.com)

Aurum Acoustics: [www.aurumacoustics.com](http://www.aurumacoustics.com)

AV123: [www.av123.com](http://www.av123.com)

B&W Music Club: [www.bowersandwilkins.com](http://www.bowersandwilkins.com)

Benchmark: [www.benchmarkmedia.com](http://www.benchmarkmedia.com)

Cambridge Audio: [www.audioplusservices.com](http://www.audioplusservices.com)

Cardas Audio: [www.cardas.com](http://www.cardas.com)

Coffin and Trout: [www.coffinandtrout.com](http://www.coffinandtrout.com)

Conrad Johnson: [www.conradjohnson.com](http://www.conradjohnson.com)

DH labs: [www.silversonic.com](http://www.silversonic.com)

Decco labs: [www.signalpathint.com](http://www.signalpathint.com)

DeVore Fidelity: [www.devorefidelity.com](http://www.devorefidelity.com)

Echo Audio: [www.echohifi.com](http://www.echohifi.com)

GamuT: [www.gamutaudio.com](http://www.gamutaudio.com)

Immedia Sound: [www.immediasound.com](http://www.immediasound.com)

Jaguar: [www.jaguar.com](http://www.jaguar.com)

JM Labs/Focal: [www.audioplusservices.com](http://www.audioplusservices.com)

Lensbabies: [www.lensbabies.com](http://www.lensbabies.com)

Martin-Logan: [www.martinlogan.com](http://www.martinlogan.com)

McIntosh: [www.mcintoshlabs.com](http://www.mcintoshlabs.com)

Meridian: [www.meridian-audio.com](http://www.meridian-audio.com)

MusicGiants: [www.musicgiants.com](http://www.musicgiants.com)

Nagra: [www.nagraaudio.com](http://www.nagraaudio.com)

Naim: [www.naimusa.com](http://www.naimusa.com)

NePlusUltra: [www.neplusultrainc.com](http://www.neplusultrainc.com)

Nik Software: [www.niksoftware.com](http://www.niksoftware.com)

Penaudio: [www.penaudio.fi](http://www.penaudio.fi)

Pearl Audio: [www.pearlaudiovideo.com](http://www.pearlaudiovideo.com)

Porsche: [www.porsche.com](http://www.porsche.com)

Red Wine Audio: [www.redwineaudio.com](http://www.redwineaudio.com)

Rega: [www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com)

Running Springs Audio: [www.runningspringsaudio.com](http://www.runningspringsaudio.com)

Salagar Speakers: [www.salagar.com](http://www.salagar.com)

Save the Music: [www.vh1.com](http://www.vh1.com)

Shunyata: [www.shunyata.com](http://www.shunyata.com)

Sooloos: [www.sooloos.com](http://www.sooloos.com)

SoundstageDirect: [www.soundstagedirect.com](http://www.soundstagedirect.com)

Todd The Vinyl Junkie: [www.ttvj.com](http://www.ttvj.com)

Upscale Audio: [www.upscaleaudio.com](http://www.upscaleaudio.com)

Verity Audio: [www.verityaudio.com](http://www.verityaudio.com)

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