

# TONEAudio.

A photograph of Daryl Hall singing into a microphone and playing an acoustic guitar. He has long, light-colored hair and a beard. The background is blurred, showing stage lights and equipment.

The e-journal of analog  
and digital sound.

no. 20

2009

**BEN FONG-TORRES**  
A GLIMPSE INTO HIS  
UPCOMING BOOK ON  
QUINCY JONES

**SMALL BUT SUBSTANTIAL**  
THE NAGRA BPS PHONO  
STAGE

**WILD MAN FISCHER**  
NOW ON CD!

**CONCERTS:**  
**FOUNTAINS OF WAYNE**  
**SUPREME BEINGS**  
**OF LEISURE AND**  
**CROSS CANADIAN**  
**RAGWEED**

**PANEL POWER!**  
THE MAGNEPAN 1.6

**TONE STYLE**  
WATCH SHOPPING IN  
SWITZERLAND

**HP TOUCHSMART**  
A BRILLIANT MUSIC SERVER

**MORE GEAR, MORE**  
**MUSIC!**

Daryl Hall  
talks to Michele Rundgren  
about Live At  
Daryl's House

# TONEAudio



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**(on the cover)**

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# CONTRIBUTORS

## new in tone this issue

### MICHELE RUNDGREN

Michele is a self professed "has been", having been a trapeze artist, a singer and dancer on Broadway, a member of The Tubes and backup singer for Todd Rundgren, who she has spawned successfully with. She has also appeared on "The David Letterman Show" and MTV many times.

Currently Michele is writing a musical and a play while maintaining dual residency in San Francisco and Kauai. We are proud to have her on the team, and you can see more of Michele at [www.michelerundgren.com](http://www.michelerundgren.com)

### BOB GOLFEN

It's been a long time since Bob Golfen's writing has graced our pages, but he joins us now in a more mission-critical role. Recently retired as the automotive editor for the Arizona Republic, Golfen takes the reins as our editor in charge of the Gear and Style sections. He brings a high level of expertise and passion for the written word honed by meeting the deadlines of a major metropolitan daily.

Bob will be taking care of everything but music, which still falls under Mr. Fong-Torres' ever watchful eye.

### RICH KENT

A Seattle native, Rich joins us as our newest HiFi reviewer. However, with his considerable expertise in the world of digital photography, as director of the Wedding Photography department of Yuen Li Studios, his first assignment was to review the new Canon EOS 5D mk. II for the Style section.

Rich's love for music is evident the minute you walk in his front door, with a grand piano front and center. He says "The pull of photography was too strong, but I still play as much as I can."

## 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.

### THE NEW TONE SITE UNVEILED

**Announcing our new and improved web site redesigned for fast and friendly access.** We've formatted the bonus content so you can read online reviews and concert tour coverage quickly. Our index has been completely overhauled with photos and short descriptions to help you effectively find the gear you're interested in.  
Happy Browsing!



Lord Crumwell's Oddfellows  
The Artists Collection  
[jailbreaktoys.com](http://jailbreaktoys.com)

# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

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## **A lot has changed since the last time we talked.**

**C**hristmas and the Consumer Electronics Show are over (whew!) and we have a new president. We are definitely in the middle of some challenging and troubled times on many levels.

Ever the optimist, I think we will pull through as we have in recessions past. But it's going to be tough for both the Music and High End Audio industries in the meantime. When things get tight, our hierarchy of needs pyramid gets skewed more in terms of survival and I understand that completely.

However, we won't discontinue our coverage of the extreme high end of the audio world. There are still people in that demographic with purchasing power and for the rest of us, it's still something to dream about while we slug it out. There aren't as many mega pieces of gear in this issue, but there are a few on the horizon. As always, we like to mix it up.

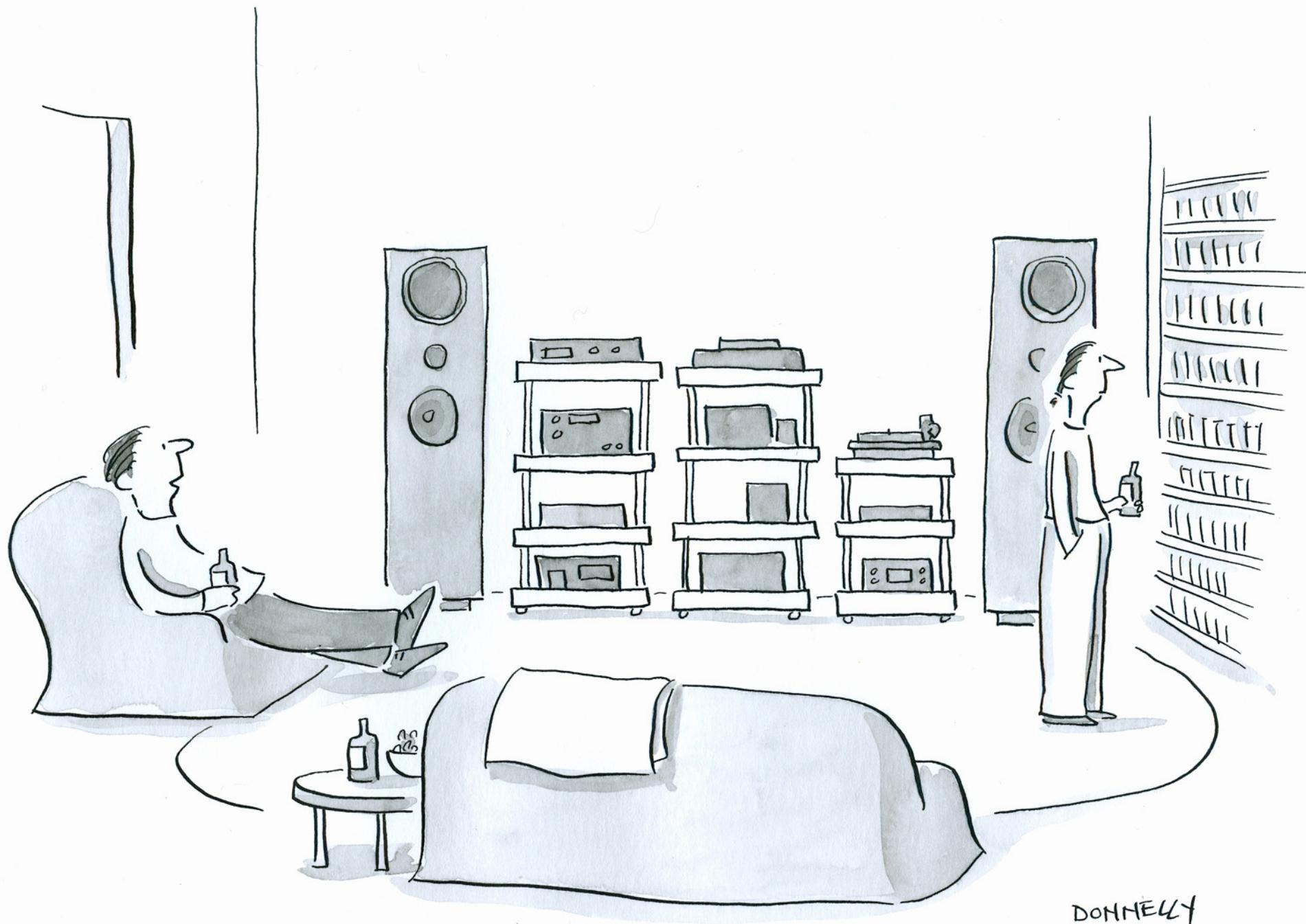
By the time you read this, our new website should be online. We hope you enjoy the format change, it's all in the interest of making our information easier to read. We have been working hard on this along with our friends at Bloody Monster Design ([www.bloodymonster.com](http://www.bloodymonster.com)) and will now have the ability to add more content more often.

We also have a few new fun people to keep you entertained, so take a peek at the new contributors page when you get a second. And we have more surprises for you over the course of this year; TONEAudio is ever evolving.

In the end, your music collection and HiFi system should offer some solace when things get stressful and help you block out the rest of the world for a little while. Going forward, we are fully committed to our readers, whether your system or music collection is small, medium, large or supersize!

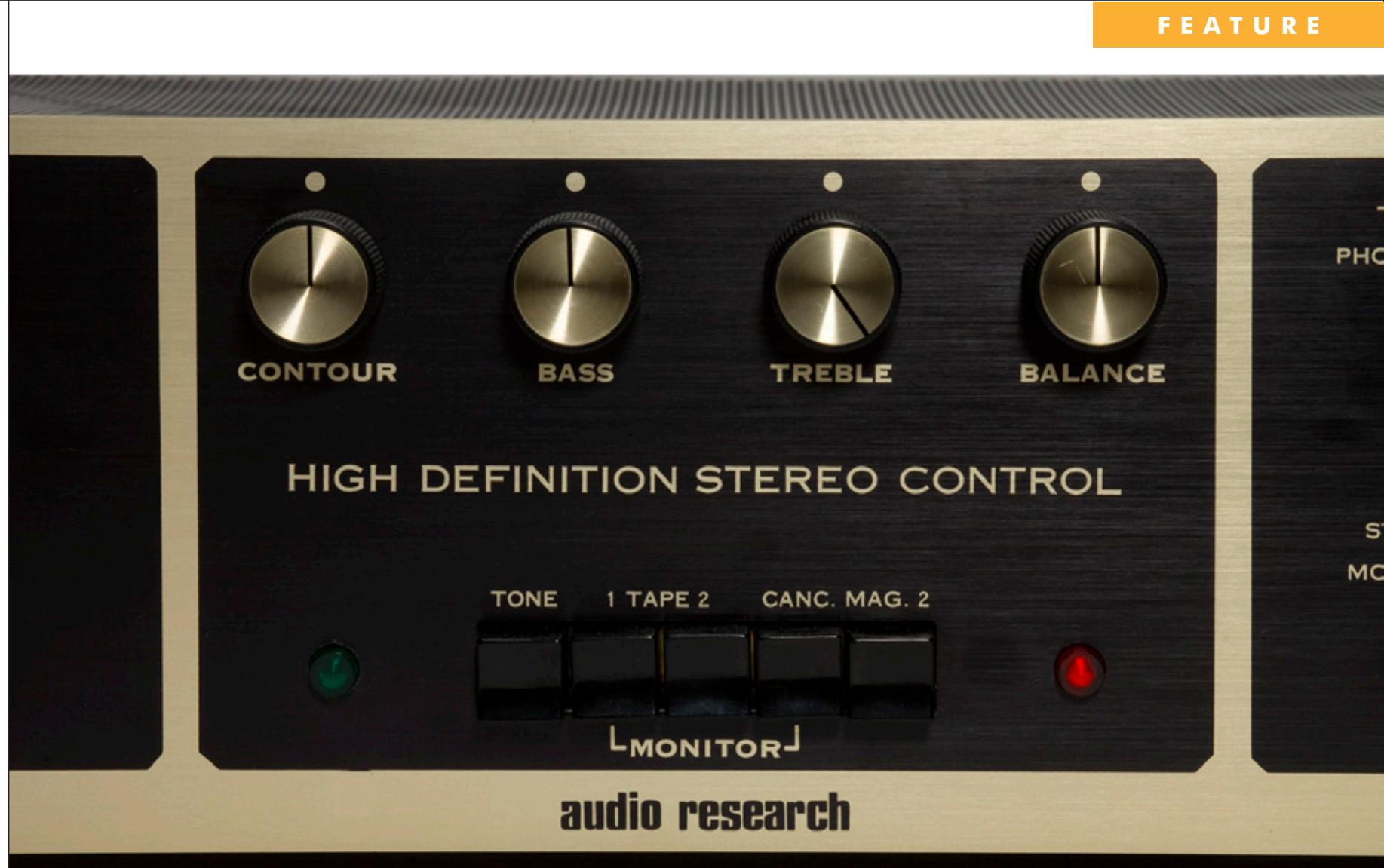
As always, we thank you for reading.





*"What do you have that sounds good with a recession?"*

OLD SCHOOL

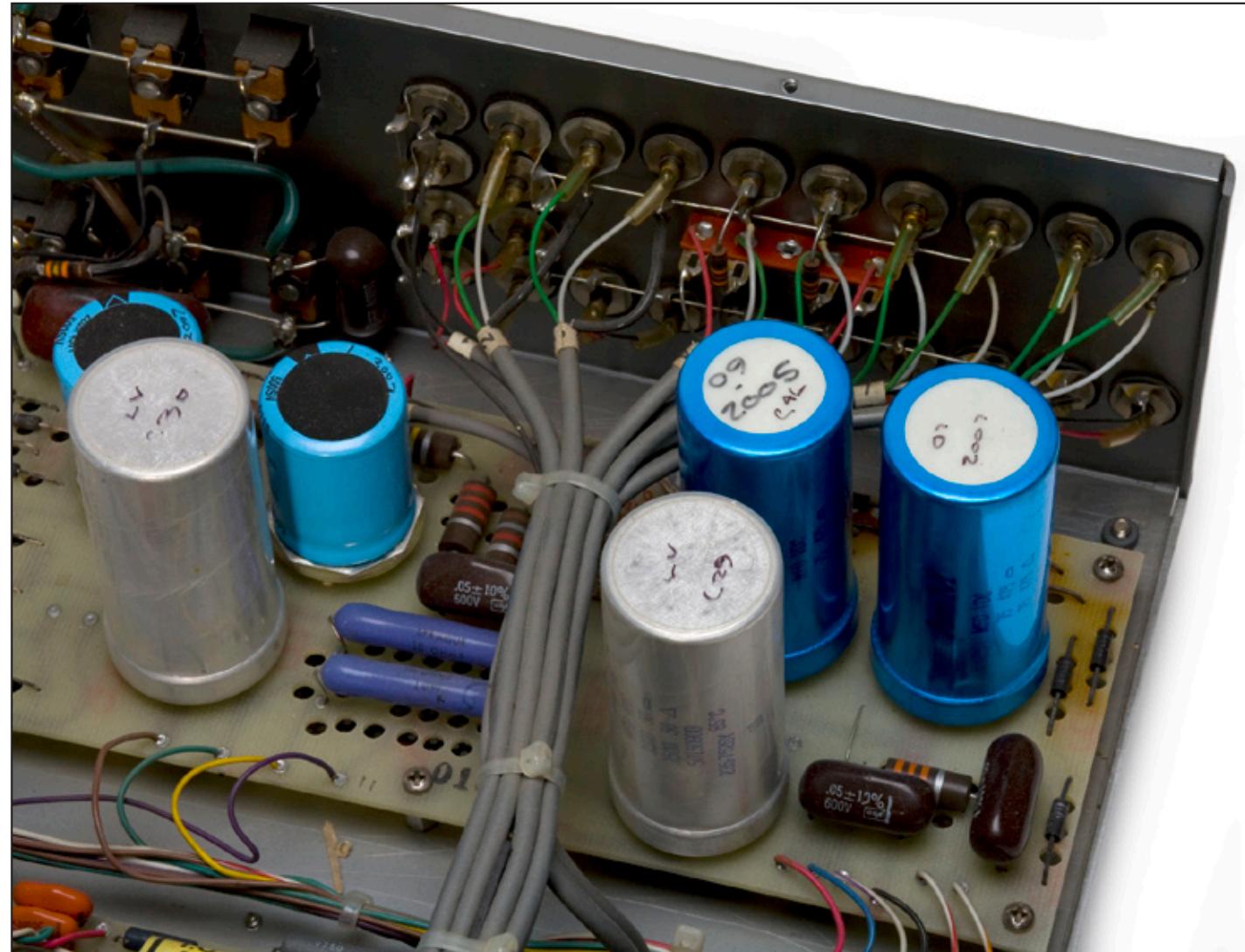


# Audio Research SP-3 Preamplifier

By Marc Phillips

Back in the mid 1970s, the idea that a preamplifier could provide "straight wire with gain" was an elusive goal. The idea that such perfection could be achieved from a valve model seemed even more unlikely. Yet when the \$595 SP-3 preamplifier arrived on the scene in 1972, many audio reviewers proclaimed that such perfection was well within reach. The SP-3 wound up being one of ARC's most popular products ever, and they sold thousands and thousands of them until the model was discontinued in 1976.

# OLDSCHOOL



Until just a few years ago, you could buy an ARC SP-3 preamplifier in fairly good condition for \$400 or \$500. Unfortunately for bargain hunters, the legendary status of this all vacuum tube preamp has been revived and a unit in perfect working order with excellent cosmetics can now cost upwards of \$1200 to \$1400. Our SP-3, supplied by Kurt Doslu at Echo Hi-Fi in Portland, had been recently serviced by Audio Research and was a particularly pristine example. The cosmetics, however, were straight out of the '70s—a boxy design with plenty of knobs and plastic buttons. (Compare this to the solid-state SP-4, which still looks like it could be part of the current lineup.) The six 12AX7s and 2 12AX7 LN tubes, easily spotted through the top mesh plate of the case, also seem a little strange in comparison to modern designs that feature only three or four valves at most.

I plugged this 35-year-old into a fairly heady system including the Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 power amplifier, Harbeth Monitor 40.1 loudspeakers and the new McIntosh MCD500 CD/SACD player. My goal was to investigate those lofty old claims of near-perfection to see how much the bar has moved in the last 35 years. Surprisingly, it hasn't moved as far as you might think – we were all impressed at how good this preamp sounds.

The first thing I noticed about the SP-3 was how quiet it was. When I've dealt with vintage amps and preamps in the past, there's always a bit of noise that reminds you that you're listening to something old, something tubed. This wasn't the case with the SP-3. I was genuinely amazed at the utter silence, even with the volume knob turned way up. *(continued)*

---

**I was genuinely amazed at the utter silence, even with the volume knob turned way up.**

# OLD SCHOOL:



Once I started playing music, I was instantly treated to a warm and slightly liquid presentation. While this sounds like a more typical description of vintage tube amp sound, I also noticed no loss of resolution and detail. In many ways, the SP-3 sounded very close to some of the finer contemporary tube preamps I've had in my system over the last couple of years.

I played a wide variety of musical selections with the SP-3 including Holly Cole, Thom Yorke,

Primus and Midori. I even pulled out the soundtrack of *Born on the Fourth of July*, the one John Williams score that doesn't overwhelm me with that Spielberg-like sense of false wonder and awe. The SP-3 excelled at spreading the string orchestra out in a panoramic manner, letting me hear separate groups of instruments interact and support the main theme of the lone, plaintive trumpet. With intimate jazz and chamber music, the SP-3 provided all of the transient detail and tonal accuracy I've come to expect of the finest equipment available today. (*continued*)



# See in a new way.



© Craig Tanner

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Where the SP-3 falls short (which you can probably surmise from my “intimate jazz and chamber music” comment) is in projecting deep, textured bass. The SP-3 ran out of juice when it came to delivering the lowest registers of Tony Levin’s Chapman Stick on the title track of Paula Cole’s *This Fire*. On “Black Swan” from Thom Yorke’s *The Eraser*, bass lines felt a little chunky and two-dimensional, especially when the volume was cranked up. Much of this information was successfully retrieved once I substituted a more modern and much more expensive preamplifier (our publisher’s Conrad-Johnson ACT 2/ Series 2) back into the system. Still, the SP3 was very impressive and highly musical at all times.

**Still, I can’t think of a single preamplifier in the \$1000 to \$1500 range that offers such a natural, involving and seductive sound.**

In fact, there aren’t a lot of new preamplifiers in this price range anymore since most audiophiles start to consider integrated amps once they drift toward this price point. Even at an asking price that’s now two or three times its original cost, the SP-3 is still quite the bargain. It also speaks volumes about ARC quality that this particular unit is running as strong and as sure as the day it was made. With more and more audiophiles turning to Chinese products in order to save a few dollars, it makes much more sense to go with a proven winner like the SP-3. ●

# Cambridge Audio's DAC Magic

By Jeff Dorgay



It's a running joke that one dog year equals seven people years. Using that as a yardstick, I'd say that one digital year equals about 20 analog years. Don't get me wrong, but what advances have we really had in analog lately? While we have some of the most amazing turntables on the market ever, I see the advances there as ones of evolution and refinement, not dramatic paradigm shifts in technology.

Digital is starting to enter the same era, but unlike our economy, the trickle-down effect has been a big bonus for music lovers. The proliferation of millions of game consoles has made it easier and cheaper to get a good DAC chip. So we all benefit.

# BUDGET GEAR:



A quick peek under the hood reveals top-quality parts in this \$449 jewel: Wolfson WMB8740 24-bit DAC's (identical to Cambridge's award winning 740C CD player) and a pair of adaptive time-filtering processors from ATF in Switzerland. I was impressed with the performance of the Aurum Acoustics DAC that we reviewed 40 ... I mean, two ... years ago featuring this technology, so by the time the photos were taken, I was getting stoked to see what this little DAC could do.

### Features Galore

The DAC Magic has three sets of inputs. Two of them offer you a choice between Toslink and RCA/SPDIF and the third is a USB input. Thanks to those dual differential Wolfson DAC's inside, the balanced outputs on the back are true balanced outputs, not a kluge. If your system has balanced inputs, go for it. This DAC does sound a bit more transparent in balanced mode.

You can choose between three filtering modes on the front panel, which unless you are as curious

as my Lakeland terrier, leave it in the default mode and just dig the music. I was impressed with the absolute phase switch. Just hold down the filter button for a couple of seconds and the DAC Magic will change absolute phase. Heck, my \$32,000 Naim CD player doesn't even have an absolute phase button!

Finally, those of you considering using the DAC Magic in a computer/desktop system, Cambridge has included a handy stand that lets you use the DAC Magic vertically. It will nestle next to your monitor quite nicely, and it spent some time in my desktop systems plugged into a Mac and a PC without issue.

### Lofty Expectations

I'll admit it, I'm spoiled. I have awesome digital hardware to listen with every day, and while everyone else is preaching the vinyl gospel, I'll take great digital over everything but the absolute best analog any day of the week. Just kicking a little reality. *(continued)*

**Thanks to those dual differential Wolfson DAC's inside, the balanced outputs on the back are true balanced outputs, not a kluge.**



# MUSIC STORE

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[www.naimusa.com/hdx](http://www.naimusa.com/hdx)

So the first major shootout was to unplug the digital cable from the back of the \$12,000 Burmester CD player and plug it into the DAC Magic. Nope, you still can't have a \$12,000 digital player for \$450, but this is *damn* good digital. Even using my iPod/Wadia 170i combination, which is probably a lot more likely combination for someone buying a \$450 DAC, I was still impressed with the sound through my reference system.

**Listening to The Tubes'  
“Mondo Bondage”  
(MoFi version) revealed  
the textures in the multi-  
layered recording that is  
essential to The Tubes  
experience.**

Switching to Windham Hill and spinning some vintage Michael Hedges showcased the DAC Magic's ability to do a good job with the complex attack of his guitar playing. *Damn* good.

Moving along to the “real-world” HiFi system in my living room was even more impressive. Featuring the outstanding combination of the Rega Elicit amplifier and a pair of Harbeth Compact 7ES-3's, the DAC Magic made a spectacular showing for itself. Using my ultra-budget Pioneer 563 player as a transport, (\$40 used, Ebay) revealed the true magic of the DAC Magic; those of you with older mass-market CD players will notice a dramatic increase in performance.

*(continued)*

NEW

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## What You Get and Don't Get for \$450

Using the DAC Magic with a budget transport, Wadia 170i or laptop, you get the equivalent of about a \$1,000 CD player, so if you are thinking along these lines, you will not be disappointed. The DAC Magic does an excellent job on the musical fundamentals. Compared to the big-bucks players, it's still somewhat compressed and well, digital sounding, but nowhere near as harsh as \$1,000 CD players did back when people rode horses to work.

---

### Tonality is good, and the DAC Magic presents a fairly big soundstage.

Thanks to its ability to process 24-bit/96k files, I was impressed by the dynamics presented with some of my 24-bit demo files, especially the current Nine Inch Nails album, *The Slip*.

What I found so impressive about the DAC magic was its overall level of musicality. If I had to draw a parallel, I'd compare it to a pair of Vandersteen 1C's; it does little harm to the music you hear and sounds way better than you would expect from a DAC at this price.

I'm happy to give the DAC Magic one of our Exceptional Value Awards because this is the only component I've heard at this price that lets me use the words digital and music in the same sentence. For this fleeting moment in the digital world, this is as good as it gets. •

# Fountains of Wayne and Jon Auer

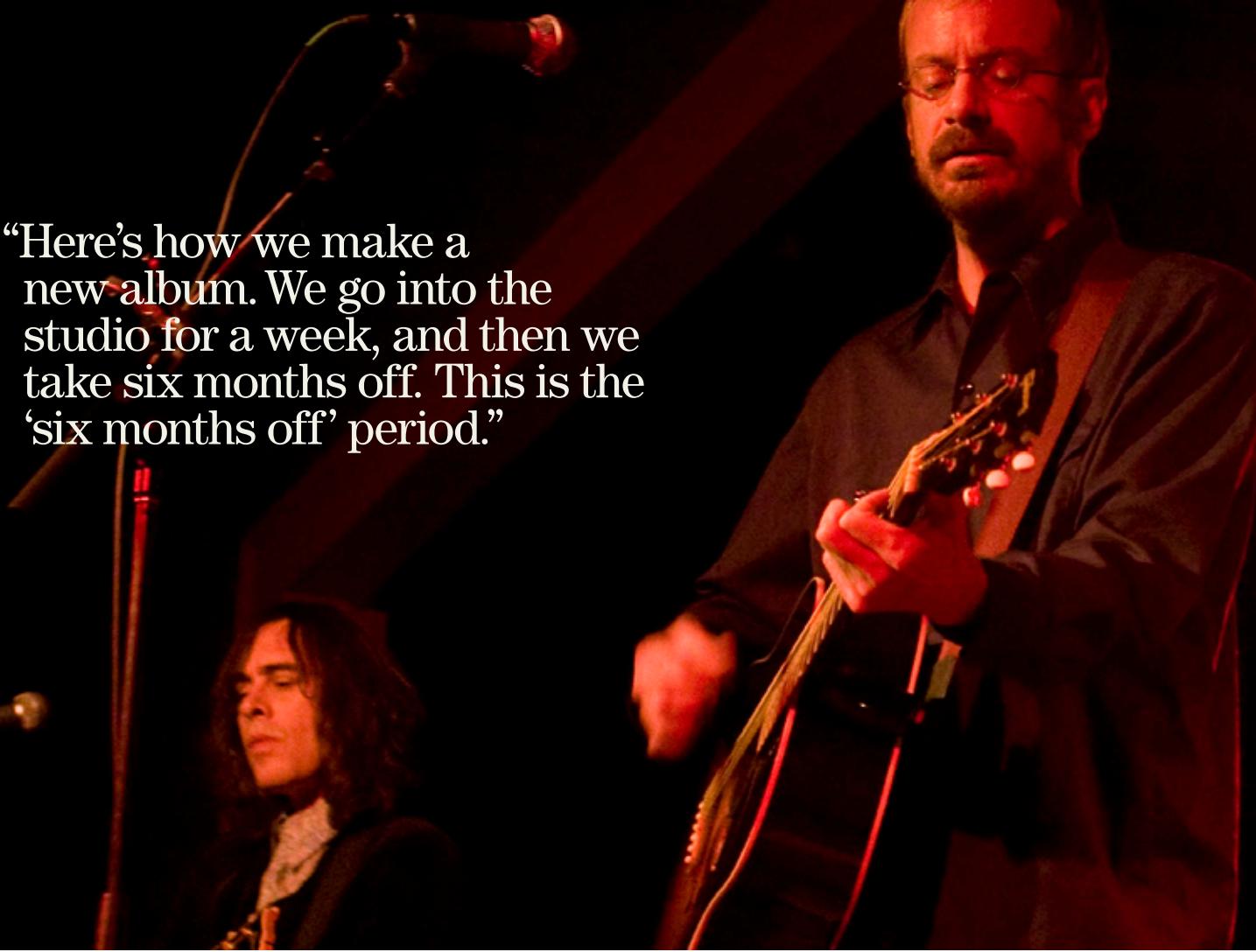
Wonder Ballroom  
Portland, Oregon

**January 16, 2009**

Text by Marc Phillips  
Photos by Jeff Dorgay



“Here’s how we make a new album. We go into the studio for a week, and then we take six months off. This is the ‘six months off’ period.”



While Fountains of Wayne bassist and co-founder Adam Schlesinger did get a big laugh with that comment, the advantage of such an approach was not lost on the enthusiastic crowd at the Wonder Ballroom in Portland. The New Jersey quartet tried out a number of new songs from their upcoming and still-untitled album, using a “full-band acoustic” format that added an extra measure of intimacy and calm to their confident performance. The devoted crowd (most of the audience members were wearing FOW swag) showed their appreciation for being included in the creative process, as they worked through musical ideas in a humorous yet professional manner.

The acoustic format offered more texture to Fountains classics, “Bright Future in Sales,” “Hackensack” and “I-95.” They saved “Stacy’s Mom” for the encore, changing it from a mid-tempo rocker to a sultry, jazz-tinged meditation that changed the overall tone from bounding teenage exuberance to a rumination about a missed romantic opportunity or at least a more sophisticated strategy to get the target mom into the sack.

Having Jon Auer open the show made the evening even more memorable. Auer is one of the co-founders of the Posies and plays guitar in the latest incarnation of Big Star. (He also tours with Depeche Mode occasionally, and worked on *Has Been* with William Shatner and Ben Folds.) Playing songs from his new solo album *Songs From the Year of Our Demise*, Auer provided a deep and emotional counterpoint to Fountains of Wayne’s lighthearted tunes with songs about alcoholism, troubled childhoods and lost love.

Auer has worked and toured with Fountains of Wayne in the past, and he described his role with them as that of “the depressed cousin who comes along because he has nowhere else to go.” Despite the seriousness of his music, he was lively and engaging between the songs, and told humorous stories about Alex Chilton, touring with Depeche Mode and having his song “Six Feet Under” dissed by screenwriter Alan Ball—the creator of the hit series of the same name. He and backing keyboard player Gavin Guss also joined Fountains of Wayne on stage for a few songs at the end of their set, adding power and depth to an already layered performance.



# Cross Canadian Ragweed

## Cannery Ballroom

Nashville, Tennessee

**January 22, 2009**

Text by Rick Moore

Photo by Cheryl Anderson

Nashville can be a tough town to play for a band starting to work its way up the charts; Music City denizens are accustomed to major-league pickers on a regular basis. This was the case with Cross Canadian Ragweed's show at the Cannery Ballroom on January 22. Although the venue was packed nearly to capacity, Cross Canadian Ragweed didn't generate the excitement that it does a little further off the beaten path.

Opening with "Wanna Rock & Roll," a tale of dance floor jealousy and murder from their *Soul Gravy* album, CCR frontman/writer Cody Canada had some of the college-age girls gyrating to the "shake that thing" hook, and some of the guys raising their beers up and pumping their fists – but only some.

Owing almost as much to AC/DC or the Stones (at least rhythmically) as they do to Merle Haggard, this Oklahoma quartet, which spends more than 200 nights a year on the road, lived up to its reputation of being tighter than George Strait's Wranglers.

Diehard fans sang along with the "maybe I miss your body" chorus from "Alabama" from CCR's *Back to Tulsa* CD, and Canada made it perfectly clear that the corporate music industry that helps feed him can still kiss his ass on "Record Executive," from the band's latest CD, *Mission California*.

The band left the stage after a two hour set, and that was enough for the crowd. The encore call never came. I've seen audiences in Denver and Chicago clamor for more CCR, but not here in Nashville. Canada is a great lead singer, but while CCR is still far above club band status, they are still not quite world-class. It takes more than a fine performance from a veteran band to get the Nashville crowd to get their lighters out.

**Someday Lounge**

Portland, Oregon

**February 2, 2009**

Text and Photo by Jeff Dorgay

It wasn't looking good for The Supreme Beings of Leisure when they blew off their in-store appearance at Portland's Music Millennium at 5:30 p.m., claiming the stage was "too small." To smooth things over, they offered to put everyone who came to Music Millennium on the guest list for the 10 o'clock show at the Someday Lounge. The band also stuck around to autograph CD's and talk to the crowd. When I asked singer Geri Soriano-Lightwood, if this was the start of a major tour, she answered, "No, we're just doing a couple of quick shows and then going back into hibernation." Leisurely, indeed.

Things started unraveling again when local artist DJ Santo took squatters rights on the stage, playing a dirge of monotonous beats until 10:45. Fortunately, Supreme Beings of Leisure exploded on stage with a string of tunes from their current disc, *11i*. Soriano-Lightwood then sauntered through a sultry version of "Never the Same," from their first album. After singing, "I'm not the same girl you fucked last night," she laughed lustily and told the crowd that she was feeling "a little naughty."

Where most trip-hop bands rely on a turntable, drum machine and a rack of effects processors, SBL uses real instruments, giving them a more organic feel than many of their contemporaries. Bass player Sheldon Strickland and drummer Jason Graham (who played on *11i*) gave the live show a more intimate groove. Co-founder Ramin Sakurai played keyboards and had a bank of laptops at his disposal; he did a great job of fleshing out all the textures that make up the ensemble's soundscape.

The hour and fifteen-minute show came to an end way too early, and after doing a short encore, the band thanked the crowd for staying up late on a work night and promised to return to Portland. At their leisure, of course.



# Supreme Beings of Leisure

A photograph of a man with dark hair and a beard singing into a microphone. He is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt. He is holding a yellow acoustic guitar. The background is dark with some stage lights visible.

# Jon Auer and the Year of His Demise

Text by Marc Phillips Photo by Jeff Dorgay

Singer-songwriter Jon Auer has quietly been influencing and helping to shape the indie scene for the last few decades. With Ken Stringfellow, he co-founded the Posies, one of the first great bands to emerge from the Bellingham, Washington area. He's also played with such bands as Sky Cries Mary, the Squirrels and Lucky Me, while producing for such bands as You Am I, Redd Kross and Love Battery. He's played guitar for Depeche Mode and has contributed to the William Shatner/Ben Folds release *Has Been*. Auer and Stringfellow also had the pleasure of joining Alex Chilton and Jody Stephens for the lastest incarnation of Big Star.

Auer has been touring in support of his recent solo album, which is ominously titled *Songs From the Year of Our Demise*. I spoke with him after his recent show at the Wonder Ballroom in Portland, where he opened for Fountains of Wayne, yet another act he has been associated with.

## “Life to me is a continual juxtaposition. **Even in my solo shows, I put the jokes right next to really confessional, revealing songs.”**

*I really enjoyed your version of Big Star’s “Thirteen” at the show—it was very heartfelt and honest. Are there any other Big Star songs that you like to play when you’re performing solo?*

I love playing “I Am the Cosmos” by Chris Bell, and have for years. I found it on a bootleg cassette before it was re-released and thought it was one of the most heartbreakingly beautiful songs I’d ever heard. It’s not technically a Big Star song, but we play it at Big Star shows anyways so I’m thinking it counts. The Posies recorded a version as well.

*I’ve read some reviews of your new album that say it’s about the disintegration of your marriage. While it may be hard to fit all of that into a short answer, perhaps you could say what it’s really about.*

It’s kind of like the audio version of an emotional snowball that rolled down a hill until it became a glacier. The snowball started with me. It took a fair bit of time, but after much trial and error as to how and why it came to be, the glacier eventually melted and I could be open to what was next in my life.

Then I realized it was all part of the process. Let’s just say *Songs from the Year of Our Demise* is about letting go and moving on, and that there is indeed a light at the end of the tunnel, however long and dark that tunnel may be.

*I noticed the lyrics from “My Sweet Unknown” that said, “Together you and I/We could watch each other die/And be happy, truly happy.” That’s almost Morrissey-esque and reminds me of “If a ten-ton truck killed the both of us/To die by your side, well, the pleasure, the privilege would be mine.” Is your line meant to be wry as well, or are you aiming for something bigger?*

I’m glad you see the Morrissey in that; the Smiths were a huge early influence of mine! I find that joy and pain often end up as two sides of the same coin, or at least exist side by side. The same could be said of humor and sadness, I guess. Perhaps it’s what makes life so affecting—the bitter and the sweet, the whole yin and yang thing. Life to me is a continual juxtaposition. Even in my solo shows, I put the jokes right next to really confessional, revealing songs. It’s a perfect example of how sometimes you want to cry so much you have to laugh, and vice versa, although the lines you mention from “My Sweet Unknown” are certainly more from the desperate end of the spectrum, more about how difficult it can be to let go of an unhealthy relationship even though it’s making you sicker. *(continued)*

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Any amusing anecdotes about your time with William Shatner while working on *Has Been*?

The cool thing about Shatner was how much energy he had. He was always on the go, doing stuff, interested, involved, and he's easily 15 years older than my dad. I literally thought he was on meth during the sessions. It really kicked me into gear, seeing how hard he works. The craziest thing was when he would speak and say a phrase as common as "Would you please pass me that Diet Coke on the table by my notebook over there?" or "**I'm going to Baja Fresh—what do you want on your burrito?**" but it would be with that voice, that unmistakable, ultra-distinctive, *Star Trek* voice. At first when that happened, it would take me a few seconds to re-ground myself, it was so surreal. Getting to watch him and Henry Rollins create their spoken word "duet" from ground zero to completion was rather amazing as well.

*Anything in the works for the Posies, Big Star or Depeche Mode? Or is it time to focus on your solo career?*

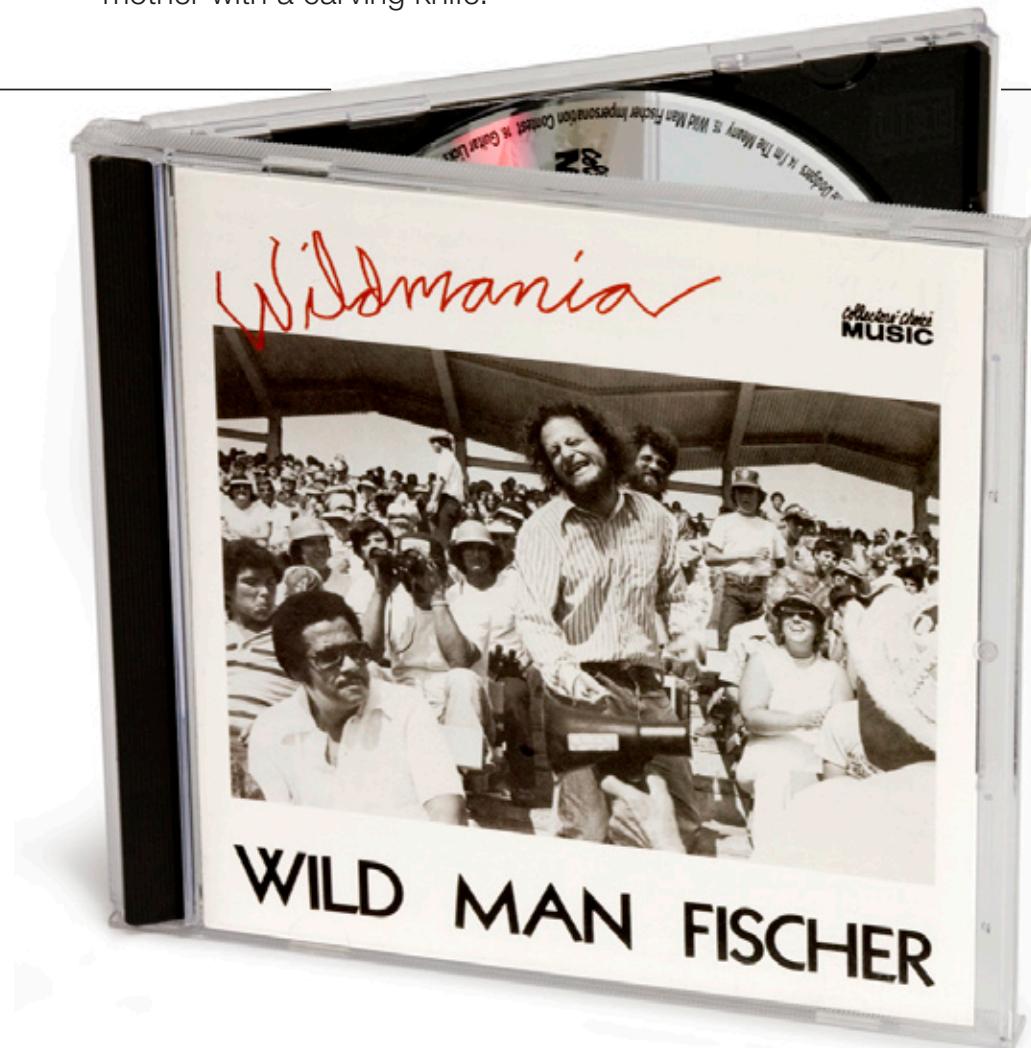
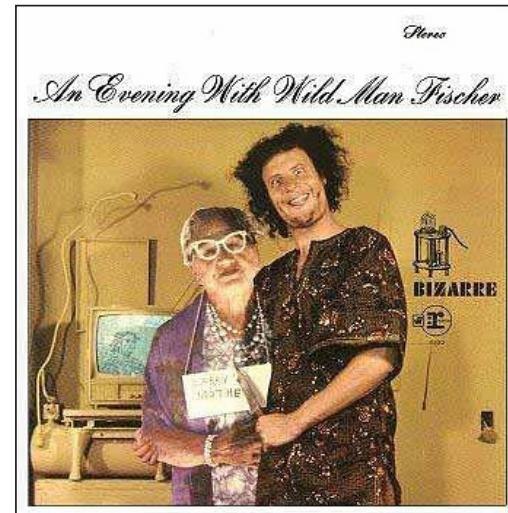
I'm lucky—I have many different outlets musically and I like it that way. It keeps me busy and allows me to do stuff I enjoy, not because I have to or feel obligated, which is nice. And, besides the bands and solo stuff, I produce records as well, which I love. But, at this point it's true I think of myself as a solo artist in bands instead of a guy in a band who does other stuff on the side. I'm headed to Spain in April for a few weeks of touring – some solo, some with the groups I play with.

Check out [www.myspace.com/jonauermusic](http://www.myspace.com/jonauermusic) for updates. •

# The Wild Man Is Back

By Jeff Dorgay

**O**ne of my favorite obscurities from the late 60's is Wild Man Fischer. Discovered by Frank Zappa in 1968, Larry "Wild Man" Fischer, used to perform on the streets of Los Angeles and at occasional Dodgers games. It's rumored that Zappa found him at one of the ballgames. Zappa produced his first album, *An Evening With Wild Man Fischer*, in 1969. The cover of *An Evening...* is particularly ironic because Fischer was originally diagnosed with bipolar disorder after trying to attack his mother with a carving knife.



It'd be 1977 before Fischer produced a second album. *Wildmania* came out on Rhino Records, after Fischer had done a single promoting the L.A. record shop, called, oddly enough, "Go to Rhino Records." Hard core WMF fans probably remember him best for his two almost hit songs, "My Name is Larry" and "Merry Go Round," often in heavy rotation on the Dr. Demento radio show.

By the end of 1978, Fischer had faded back into obscurity, but would resurface again in the early 80's with a pair of releases on Rhino. *Pronounced Normal* was issued on March 25, 1981, and *Nothing Scary* on February 10, 1984. Though these two albums didn't have quite the level of creative genius (or madness) that were on the first two, *Pronounced Normal* did feature the song "I'm a Christmas Tree," which has become a favorite of WMF fans. *(continued)*

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Fischer again disappeared back into city life until late 1999, when Rhino's Handmade division released a limited edition of 1,000 CD box sets titled *The Fischer King*, a complete collection of Fischer's 100 songs. This set is very rare and has fetched upwards of \$1000 on eBay. In addition to WMF's catalog, it has 15 previously unreleased tracks and a 20-page booklet.

Fischer's work has had substantial staying power in the collectors market, with his LP's trading in the \$85-\$200 range, and the Rhino CD's selling for between \$25 and \$75. Unfortunately, the recording quality of his songs is generally dreadful, so this is a painful purchase for all but the most dedicated collectors of the obscure.

Another oldies label, Collector's Choice [www.collectorschoice.com](http://www.collectorschoice.com), has good news for those who miss The Wild Man, but not enough to shell out big bucks to revisit his catalog. Though they don't offer his first album, they have reissued the other three on CD, for about \$12 each.

So, for those of you needing a WMF fix, it's now only a mouse click away. And who knows? If these three sell successfully, we might just see his first album back on CD – at a lower price – as well. ●

# Current Releases

By the TONEAudio Staff

## U2

*No Line on the Horizon*

Universal, CD and 180-gram LP

U2's last few albums proved their continued relevance – check out their "we can still rock" stance on 2004's *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*. Now, their first album in nearly five years clearly shows that the boys from Dublin can still break new ground. *No Line on the Horizon* is the band's biggest step forward since *Achtung Baby*, sounding more like a collaborative effort and less like the newest incarnation of Bono and the Other Guys.

The Edge's guitar work, in particular, is more nuanced and supportive than ever before. His signature sound is intact, evident by the stray power chords in "Moment of Surrender." They're a reminder that he is still creating varied and unusual soundscapes that make you forget they are coming from a guitar amplifier. Even when he goes back to familiar arpeggio structures on "Unknown Caller," it sounds fresh, and The Edge comes off like a long-lost friend who's returned from a sabbatical looking tanned and healthy.

Other songs, such as "Get On Your Boots," the first single, are so firmly rooted in the 21st century that you'd never guess it was U2 without Bono's unmistakable vocals. Drum samples and '80s synthesizer outbursts are mixed with a steady rhythm guitar onslaught that will conjure any number of today's hottest indie rock bands. The power riffs and guitar solo from "Stand Up Comedy" may have you wondering whether Jimmy Page accidentally wandered into the studio. The moody and atmospheric opening for "Fez—Being Born" fits easily into the hyperdub genre before the gears are suddenly shifted and the song jumps into a mechanized and frantic beat. On the lovely, folk-tinged "White As Snow," each band member has a chance to affirm his contributions to the past and present, while creating something completely new. (*continued*)



*No Line on the Horizon* is full of dense, exciting textures and ideas, neatly illustrating why U2 has been part of the rock vanguard for so long.



## GamuT S5

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The rhythm section of Larry Mullen Jr. and Adam Clayton gets buried in the mix on occasion, but they break some new ground on this album as well, as on the energetic rocker "Breathe." From song to song, Mullen and Clayton remain the most unbreakable link to U2's past.

Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois are back as producers, which may be a mixed blessing for some fans. *Horizon* is full of dense, exciting textures and ideas, neatly illustrating why U2 has been part of the rock vanguard for so long. If you've always been frustrated with the muddy, homogeneous sound of *The Unforgettable Fire* and *The Joshua Tree*, there's no reprieve here. The recording quality of *Horizon* is a step back from the claustrophobic wall of sound that plagued *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, but I'd love this band even more if they injected a bit of air into the mix. I'll be anxious to investigate the LP when it becomes available. I do question whether or not Eno and Lanois are solely to blame, since Steve Lillywhite used to commit the same sins back in the early '80s. Maybe that's just how the band likes it.

In an era when artists that were so vital 25 years ago are venturing into the studio and putting out another record simply because they can (Bruce Springsteen, I'm looking at you!), *Horizon* stands as a beacon of hope. There's a wholeness and consistency to this album that instantly places it at the forefront of their best work. U2 has often been criticized for getting too big for its own good, but *No Line on the Horizon* proves that this band knows how to go into the studio and produce something of substance and meaning, even after 30 years together. — Marc Phillips

**Chris Cornell**

*Scream*  
Universal, CD

Fans of Soundgarden and Audioslave may scratch their heads in disbelief over singer Chris Cornell's change of direction on *Scream*. Cornell enlisted, as producer, Timbaland (Justin Timberlake, Madonna, and Missy Elliot) to create something completely different. Heavy with sampled beats, synthesizers and an energy level that suggests lots of back-up dancers and lip-synching, *Scream* is an unexpected meshing of disparate elements that works occasionally and confounds frequently.

**After a couple of minutes of the opening cut, "Part of Me," you may wonder if the factory robots at the CD plant accidentally placed the wrong disc in your jewel box.** This song is full of basic drum machine beats, with layers of synthesizer melodies that could easily have come from outtakes from your favorite Erasure album. When Cornell's raspy, authoritative voice starts chanting, "That bitch ain't a part of me," you realize you haven't turned down the wrong street after all; it's just that the old neighborhood's been burned to the ground.

I found it perplexing that Cornell insists on hanging onto his familiar hard rock style throughout the record. When he retrieves some of the momentum closer to his metal roots on "Enemy" and "The Other Side of Town," it feels like a Chris Cornell record again. He throws in a traditional rocker, "Climbing Up the Walls," to help us with the transition to his new direction. On "Take Me Alive," Timberlake shows up for backing vocals duty, conforming more to Cornell's vocal style than vice-versa.

It's always tough for an artist with such an established style to break new ground. Listeners will most likely be divided into a group that applauds Cornell getting out of his comfort zone, or those loyal to his original style that just want another "Spoonman." Perhaps Cornell is banking on a third group that will discover and embrace *Scream* without expectations from his past. But without his distinctive voice, it's pretty standard pop. As for me, a spin of "Rusty Cage," from the 1992 Soundgarden album, *Bad Motorfinger*, is sounding pretty good right now.

— Marc Phillips

**Bruce Springsteen**

*Working On a Dream*  
Columbia, CD and LP

When Bruce Springsteen hit the scene in the mid '70s, a fireball of emotion, I wondered what he'd write songs about when he was rich, famous and no longer an angry young man. Now we know. We get a strong hint with the opening track of *Working On a Dream*, "Outlaw Pete," which goes about five minutes longer than it needs to.

I wish Bruce Springsteen could bring some more of that raw emotion back; he certainly still has it when you go to see him in concert. I wish I knew if songs like "Queen of the Supermarket" are there to fulfill the hopes of Springsteen's audience, many of whom may still want songs like "Born to Run." I just can't identify with that part of his persona anymore.

Towards the end of the disc, Springsteen channels a Dylan/Petty/Byrds groove and shows us that he's still got the stuff. The last six songs are fantastic, with grittier vocals and a sparser feel; it's just unfortunate that we have to wade through seven tracks of tired arena rock tunes to get there. This more mature side of Bruce Springsteen is much more believable than the one in which he fantasizes about the checkout girl at Safeway. — Jeff Dorgay



## Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock, Jack DeJohnnette

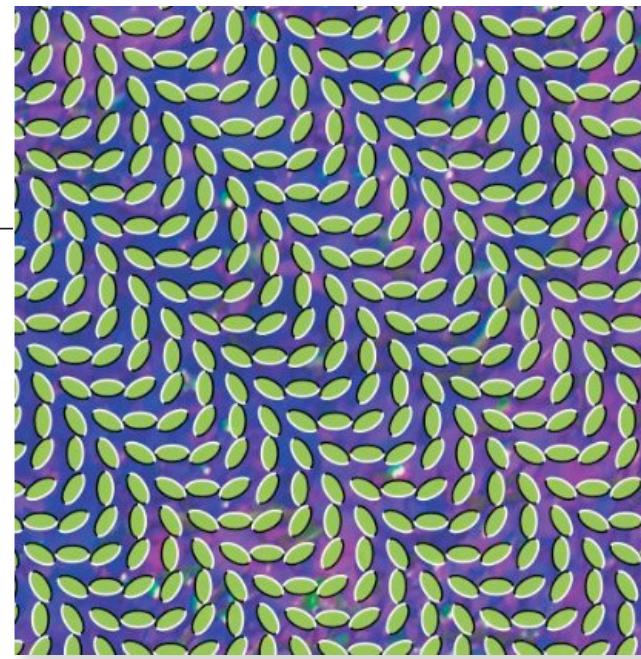
*Yesterdays*  
ECM, CD

As a life-long jazz fan, I sometimes despair that nothing new is coming down the pike. After the fusion era of the '70's, the ensuing decades haven't offered much more than bop redux, tributes, compilations, and remasters.

But when real masters revisit the repertoire, as in *Yesterdays*, the latest from Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette, the results are anything but a retread. Between working with their own groups and other marquee jazz names, the trio has been touring together for over 25 years. Those tours have generated more than a dozen often Grammy-nominated releases for the prestigious German jazz label ECM, under the guidance of famed producer Manfred Eicher.

Recorded at two appearances in Tokyo, mid-tempo numbers like "Scapple From The Apple" and "Sleepin' Bee" swing with cheerful energy. Jarrett opens a blistering "Shaw Nuff" with the original two-horn intro, and then rolls into a combination of 'comping and stride in the left hand so rapid-fire that it sounds like counterpoint under the melody. Toward the end, DeJohnette unleashes the energy and creativity he's known for as he "trades eights" with Jarrett and Peacock.

Though the players' virtuosity on the burners is thrilling, their work on the ballads is what sticks in the mind long after the set is over. "Yesterdays." "You've Changed," and "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" brim with a bluesy, rueful poignancy, enhanced by the experience of age and a familiarity between the three musicians that only a decades-long partnership can produce. – Anne Farnsworth



## Animal Collective

*Merriweather Post Pavilion*  
Domino, CD

This Maryland-based band has long been at the vanguard of the neo-folk movement, exemplifying an anything-goes attitude that makes this nebulous genre so exciting. Truly a musical "collective," the core members of the band have come and gone freely during the bands tenure, with the multi-instrumentalist trio of Panda Bear, Geologist and Avey Tare settling in for their eighth release since their debut in 2000. The result is an accessible yet almost indescribable collection of songs that is much larger in scope than anything they've ever attempted.

Named for a Columbia, Maryland outdoor music venue that provided a lifetime of memories for the band members, *Merriweather Post Pavilion* is a complex recording. It has a dense, wall-of-sound approach that would make Phil Spector proud.

Animal Collective has always mined the physical world for lost and unusual sounds, and *Merriweather* feels like the excavation is caving in under the weight of endless innovation. While it's nearly a miracle that all of these dreamlike yet busy and frantic sounds are pulled into coherent song structures, this is also one of those recordings you can visit repeatedly and discover hidden treasures each time.

The thread of happiness that runs through this album sets it apart from its avant-garde brethren. The opening track, "In the Flowers," features delicate samples dancing around the edges of the music until a propulsive synth crescendo roars and produces a feeling like being shot out of a cannon into a beautiful, sunny afternoon. "Summertime Clothes" combines a *Sgt. Pepper* sensibility with more ancient folk traditions that may compel you to grab a partner and spin into the ether.

This record may not appeal to those who stand on convention and frown upon "casual Fridays." But if you occasionally fantasize about ripping off your clothes running through endless fields and forests, this is an absolute masterpiece. – Marc Phillips



### Ross the Boss

*New Metal Leaders*  
Candlelight Records, CD

And now, opening for Iron Maiden, it's Wyld Stalions. No wait, it's Ross the Boss. If the thunderous guitar riffs sound somewhat familiar, they should. Ross Friedman was the lead guitarist for The Dictators and later in his career, Manowar.

While *New Metal Leaders* is full of songs about heavy metal gods, death, destruction and conquest, there's a little more depth here than what you might expect from standard metal fare.

Vocalist Patrick Fuchs has a considerable vocal range, and there is more than enough shredding going on to keep die-hard metal fans happy. To their credit, the band leaves just enough space between the notes to avoid metal fatigue.

I'd place the rockometer on *New Metal Leaders* closer to The Scorpions than Iron Maiden, and that's a good thing. To top it off, the recording quality is excellent. Connoisseurs of metal will want to put *New Metal Leaders* at the top of their playlists. – Jeff Dorgay

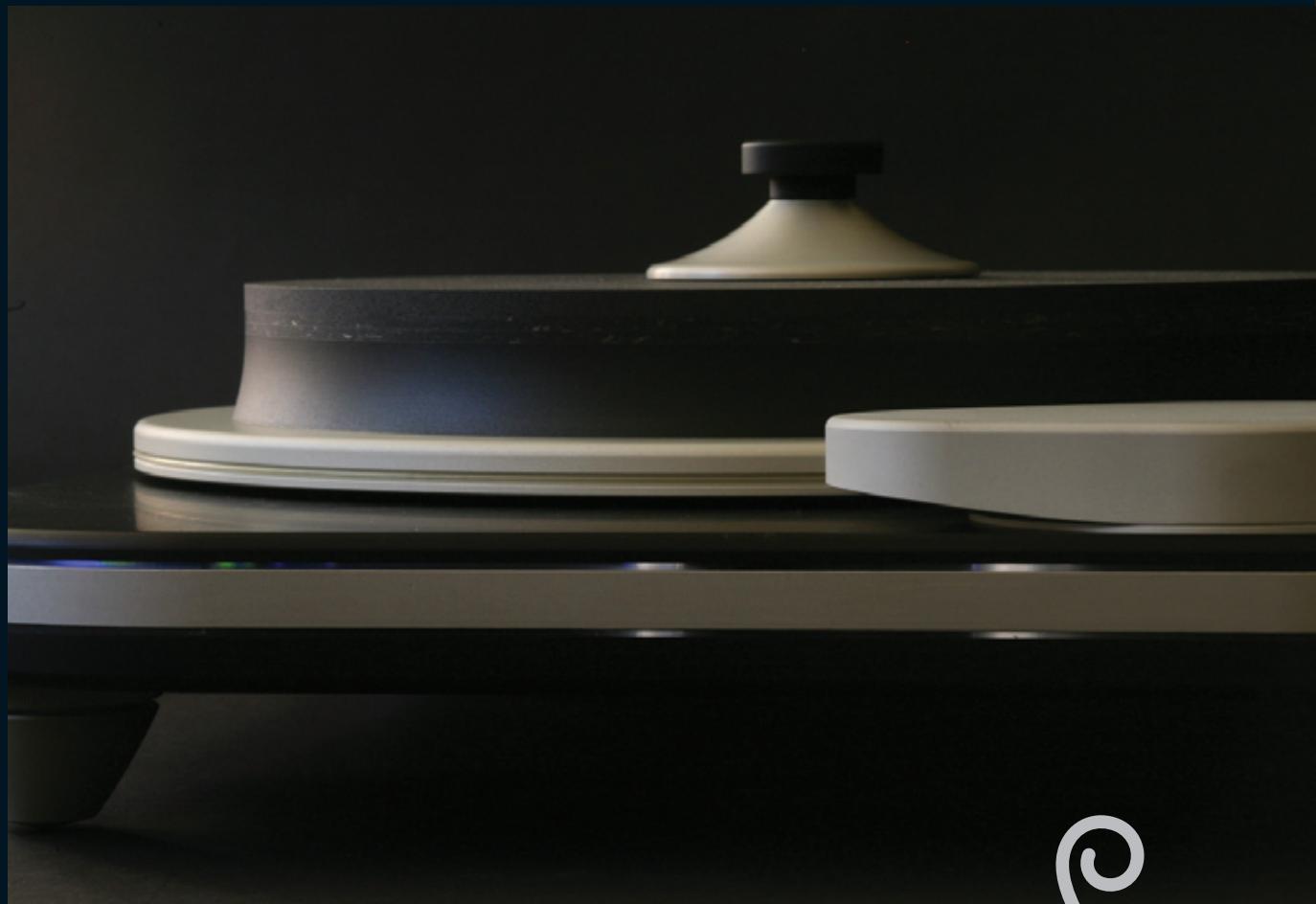
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SPIRAL GROOVE

**Jeff Beck**

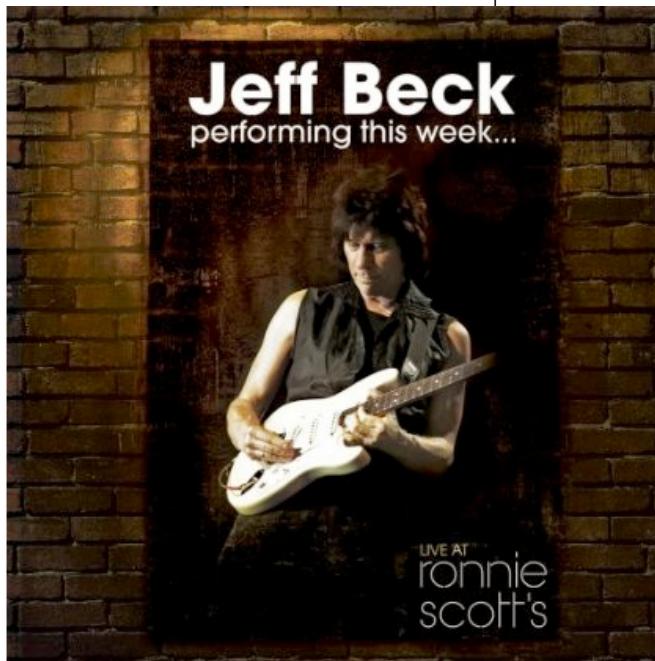
*Performing This Week - Live At Ronnie Scott's*  
Eagle Rock Entertainment, CD

Preternaturally youthful guitar hero Jeff Beck rings in the New Year with *Performing This Week - Live At Ronnie Scott's*, his 18th recording as a leader. Diehard fans ran to the stores to claim their copy the day it was released. Anyone who digs virtuoso electric guitar should do the same, because this CD is awesome.

Recorded in 2007 over several nights at Ronnie Scott's, the venerable London music hall, the result is the best of both worlds; the energy of a live concert coupled with studio-quality sound, no doubt a result of Beck's notorious perfectionism. Beck's current quartet consists of keyboardist Jason Rebello, drummer Vinny Colaiuto, and young bass phenom Tal Wilkenfeld.

Ranked 14th on *Rolling Stone's* list of 100 greatest guitarists and a 2009 inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall Of Fame, Beck was part of the legendary triumvirate with Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, whose careers interwove as they moved in and out of late era British invasion bands The Yardbirds, Led Zeppelin and Vanilla Fudge. And then there was that promising young singer Beck hired in 1966, a fellow named Rod Stewart.

Fan favorites are well represented in the 16 tracks without sounding rote or dated. "Beck's Bolero" is as magisterial as "Scatterbrain" is frenzied. The Beatles cover, "A Day In The Life," is revelatory in Beck's ability to wring as much pathos out of the melody as the original without the benefit of the lyrics. The 64-year-old vegetarian who rebuilds cars in his spare time shows no signs of faltering, with his signature finger picking, whammy bar wailing style as vibrant and energized as the best of the countless younger guitarists he has influenced. – Anne Farnsworth

**Glasvegas**

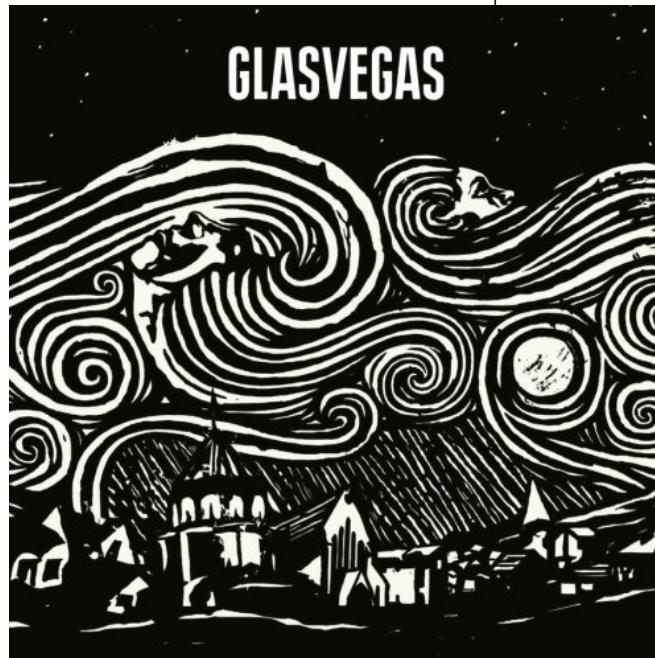
Glasvegas  
Columbia, CD

This Glaswegian quartet has been creating quite a stir in Britain over the last few months. Their moody yet somewhat schizophrenic delivery isn't quite novel enough to break new ground, but that's OK. On their debut album, Glasvegas goes heavy with the power chords, Scottish brogues and an earnest vanquishing of doom, with these twelve songs offering the most literal interpretation of "the light at the end of the tunnel" you'll hear these days.

The lyrics map out this transition from the shadows, with nearly every song beginning with lines like "There's a storm on the horizon" ("Ice Cream Van") and "Winter blues no love for you" ("S.A.D. Light"). Fortunately, help is on the way, with singer James Allan calling out for an end to "sectarianism and the hurtful racist ways." In a bold move, he even delivers a spoken-word piece, "Stabbed," against the backdrop of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. Pretentious? Maybe. But it is heartfelt, and this type of melodrama reminds me of a slightly darker version of the type of music Big Country and even U2 were producing 25 years ago.

The band scores extra points for including a version of Beck's great and underexposed "Everybody's Got to Learn Sometime." While the original version (first heard in the soundtrack of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*) deserved to be a monster hit, Glasvegas have grabbed the baton by offering a substantially less delicate rendering that may catch some major attention.

My only concern about Glasvegas is their durability. We've seen many flavors of the month emerge from the UK in the last decade (The Strokes, Franz Ferdinand, Arctic Monkeys) only to succumb to sophomore curses. If these four Scots want to be more than a blip on the radar, they're going to have to lighten up a bit. – Marc Phillips



# Get More Ben



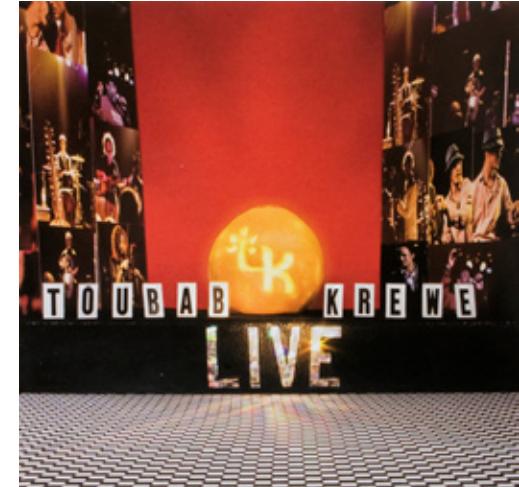
*Like a Rolling Stone*

## Music of the TV Generation

by Ben Fong-Torres

(former senior editor at Rolling Stone)

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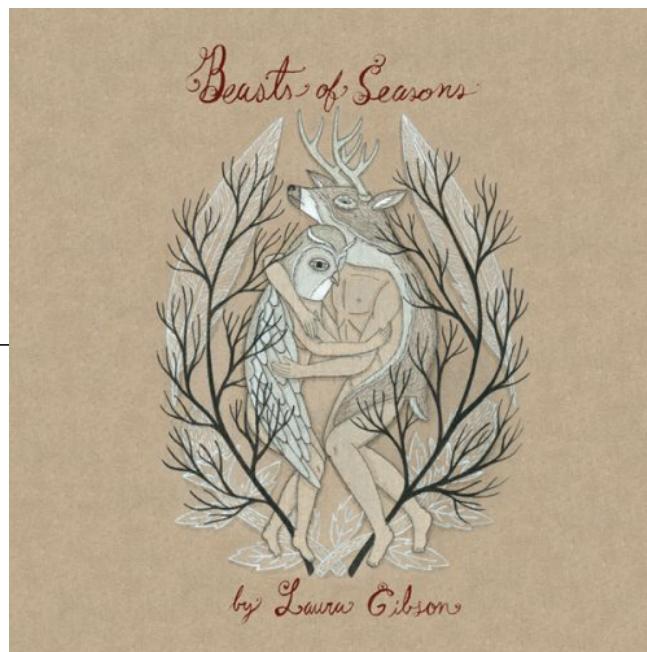
### Toubab Krewe

*Live at the Orange Peel*  
Upstream Records, CD

This American quintet plays music that they claim fuses the styles of Mali and the Southern United States. The African influence is immediately apparent, but I heard a lot more Robert Fripp and King Crimson than anything from down South. The band members live in Asheville, North Carolina, but they have spent a lot of time studying music in Mali and have played at the Festival of the Desert in Essakane, Mali.

*Live at the Orange Peel* was recorded in their hometown and produced by Grammy-winning producer Steven Heller (Doc Watson and David Holt), and consists of all previously unreleased material. The record is all instrumental, but there is a monologue in the middle of tracks 3 and 7 by spoken word artist Umar Bin Hassan.

World music fans, add Toubab Krewe to your list. If you enjoyed Mickey Hart's *At the Edge* and *Planet Drum*, I think you will enjoy this disc. — Jeff Dorgay



### Laura Gibson

*Beasts of Season*  
Hush, CD

This Portland-based folk singer grew up in an isolated logging town, and her earthy, elegiac songs maintain such distance from modern pop conventions that they feel utterly made from scratch, or at least gathered from the mud at her feet. Gibson's voice is delicate and guarded, and it occasionally cracks from a weariness that seems just a step away or two from a sobbing fit. On her second full-length release, *Beasts of Seasons*, she cultivates such a feeling of introspection that it's not surprising that her interests include beekeeping, trees and performing at nursing homes.

This may seem a bit maudlin if it wasn't for the beautiful, complex musical arrangements. Gibson adorns her spare songwriting with her own guitar, banjo and percussion embellishments while a supporting cast adds drums, bass, strings, horns, pedal steel guitars, whistling and even a singing saw (which is becoming quite ubiquitous—and surprisingly welcome—in this day and age). These are supplied, of course, in carefully measured doses so as not to distract from the intimacy of Gibson's voice.

Gibson's greatest strength is her lyrics, and many of these sad and lingering thoughts exist on their own terms as compelling poetry. Consider such cautious gems as: "With no sorrow/Ask no greater pardon/Than the pattern time is carving on your skin" ("Funeral Songs") or "Of all that is escaping us/I have never been so certain as today" ("Spirited"). These are gentle, lonesome songs for days that could have been better, sung by a quiet and equally desolate soul. — **Marc Phillips**



### Ben Kweller

*Changing Horses*  
The Noise Co., CD

After hearing his eponymous 2006 album, I'd never guess that Ben Kweller would take a shot at the alt-country/Americana scene. That last release was full of catchy pop hooks and should have made the 27-year-old singer-songwriter an instant household name--in households far removed from Nashville or Austin, that is. But Kweller, who grew up in Greenville, Texas, has the chops and the authenticity to pull it off. While many of today's singer-songwriters seem to be retreating into Americana due to its supposed simplicity and tradition, Kweller burrows inside this genre and makes it his own.

Kweller is famous for playing most of the instruments on his albums, but on *Changing Horses* he has enlisted the help of Chris Morrissey on bass, Mark Stepro on drums and Kitt Kitterman on dobro and pedal steel guitars. The result is a sound so lived in and authentic that it underlines the compromises made in the bulk of today's mainstream country music. Lyrics such as "Where's that smile at?/Where's you take it to?/I never thought that anything could hurt you" (from "Hurtin' You") could easily sound mawkish in the wrong hands, but Kweller keeps it honest and joyful, even when he's feeling blue. He captures the sense of gathering and commiseration, and the spontaneous celebration that breaks out when people share tales about their setbacks.

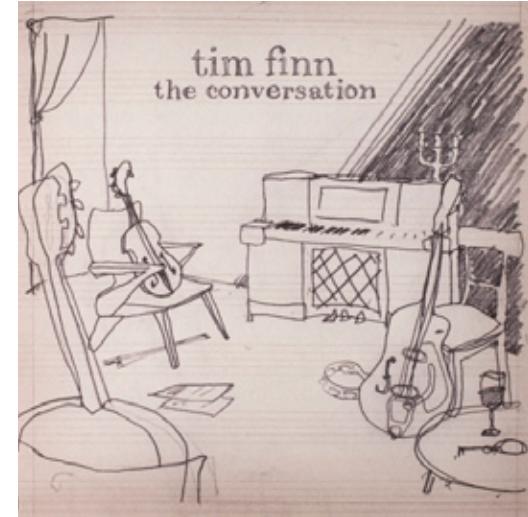
The only real criticism is that in unfettered form Kweller sounds a lot like Jeff Tweedy from Wilco, so much so that if I first heard these songs on the radio, I'd instantly assume that he was Tweedy. Since Tweedy is a fan of Kweller and has brought him along on tours, osmosis may be at play here. Then again, if every bluegrass and country act sounded like Wilco (or Robert Plant and Alison Krauss), I'd have no complaints. Kweller has produced a classic recording with stunning sound quality, and he deserves a spot on the stage. — **Marc Phillips**

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### Tim Finn

*The Conversation*  
Capitol/EMI, CD

Hardcore Tim Finn fans outside of the US have been able to buy this disc since October 2008, but it should be in domestic record stores by now. Once a member of Crowded House with younger brother Neil, Tim Finn chose not to join Crowded House on stage at Coachella 2008 during their last US tour, going his own way.

At first listen, *The Conversation* sounds more like a Crowded House record than any of Finn's other solo work. While the opening track, "Straw to Gold," feels like it could have been an outtake from the sessions that produced *Woodface*, the rest of the record is more acoustic and intimate. In "Rearview Mirror" he tells a tale about a sad taxi driver who claims, "There's no more music in the world," and ponders this thought.

The rest of the songs follow this path of melancholy, but, fortunately, the mood never gets too dark. This one's a sleeper that only gets better with repeated listening. – Jeff Dorgay

## The Bird and the Bee

*Ray Guns Are Not the Future*  
Blue Note, CD

If you were intrigued by Inara George's startlingly cool and lush collaboration with Van Dyke Parks, *An Invitation...*, now's your chance to investigate her regular gig as "The Bird" in the The Bird and the Bee. The daughter of the late Lowell George and the wife of director Jake Kasdan continues to exude a sweet confidence and sophistication that's more suited to a serious jazz chanteuse than a darling of alternative pop. While *Ray Guns Are Not the Future* may appeal to a slightly younger demographic than *Invitation*, it's clear that her seductive and striking voice should draw in fans of both musical styles.

Her partner in crime, Greg Curstin (a/k/a "the Bee"), is the secret to making this work so well. This talented programmer/keyboard player has worked with the Flaming Lips, Geggy Tah, Lily Allen and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, complementing George's smooth vocals with the same sense of retro-kitsch that made Stereolab famous throughout the '90s. He pulls up just short of the gimmickry found in most Esquivel recordings but still embraces the occasional whimsy, especially in the '20s flapper theme of "You're a Cad."

George's lyrics possess the same elusiveness as her voice. While she sings primarily of love, her attention seems to be drawn toward the abstract. When she asks her mate, "Where is the middle of your mind?/Is it the place where you just stop trying?" it comes from a standpoint more rooted in disdain than heartbreak. Then again, it's hard to get a bird to settle down in a nest when she could be out flying and seeing the world. This breezy album doesn't spend too much time worrying about heartbreak, pain or even ray guns, which makes it the perfect antidote for those who crave a bit of detachment without plowing right into the midst of ennui. Listen to it just after you waded through the nervous terror of Portishead's *Third*, and you'll understand. — Marc Phillips



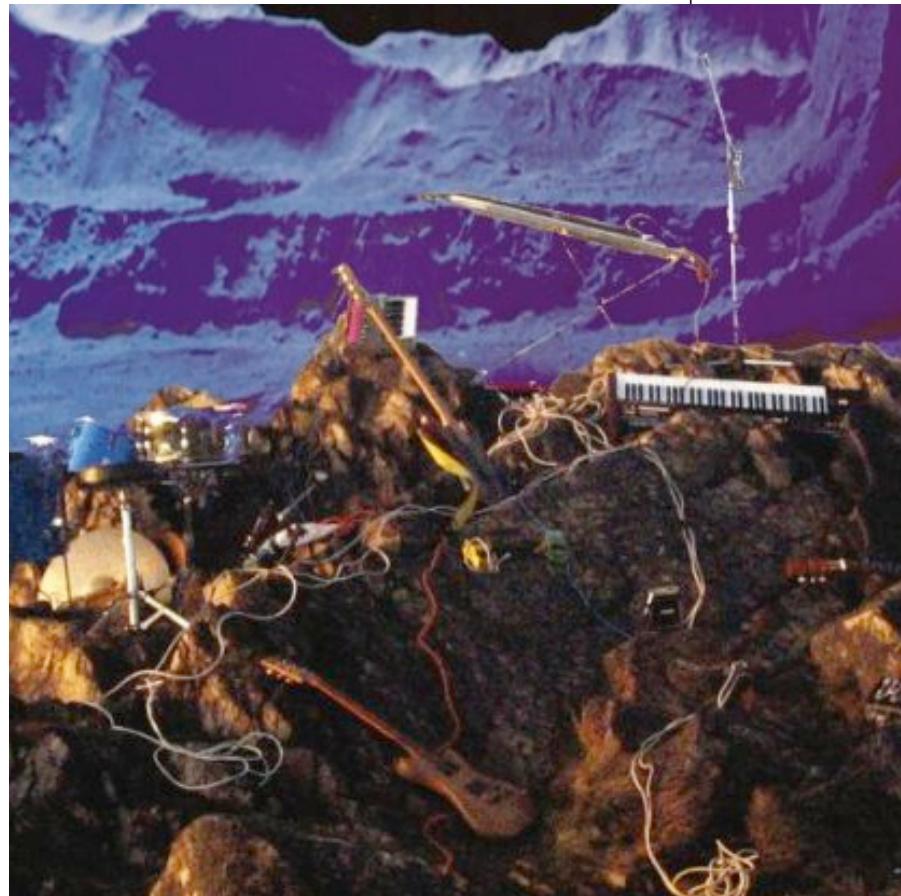
## Starling Electric

*Clouded Staircase*  
Bar/None, CD

This Michigan-based quartet originally started out as a solo act, with singer-songwriter Caleb Dillon ultimately feeling the need to expand in order to embrace his ambitions. Now championed by such noted musicians as Robert Pollard, Jon Auer and Ken Stringfellow, Starling Electric crams such noteworthy influences as the Beach Boys, Love, 10CC, the Zombies and the Byrds into a textured, almost baroque whole. Labeling themselves as "orchestral pop music," the band may remind you of every '70s band from the Who to the Association without drawing obvious comparisons to a single source.

Backed by guitarist/producer Jason De-Camillis, drummer John Fossum and multi-instrumentalist Christian Blackmore Anderson, Dillon takes these 18 songs seriously. The craftsmanship and scope of these compositions are unusual in this day of minimalism, so it's not a surprise that *Clouded Staircase* took several years to make. The relative brevity of each song keeps the proceedings from becoming overwhelmingly monumental, while maintaining the sense of excitement that comes from anticipating what's going to happen on the next track.

While it may be fun to guess the '60s and '70s influences from song to song ("All Through the Fall," for instance, is decidedly Byrds-like, and the intro to "Prince of the Puff of Smoke" sounds like it was written by Pete Townshend), modern pop touchstones do emerge. Dillon's vocals on "A Snowflake" are introspective and breathy like Guy Garvey from Elbow, and the piano on "Clouded Staircase (Part Two)" may remind you more of Ben Folds than Burt Bacharach. *Clouded Staircase* may not appeal to hipsters looking for a completely new sound, but if you're strongly connected to your musical past and believe that the best rock music was made 30 to 40 years ago, Starling Electric may remind you that what's old is new again — and worth a spin, or 18. — Marc Phillips

**Late of the Pier***Fantasy Black Channel*  
Astralwerks, CD

As frantic and overwrought as the finest glam and prog, the debut album from this British quartet is overflowing with energy, invention and, well, more energy. These guys may only be in their early 20s, but they've certainly been doing their homework by conjuring up images of Sweet, Bowie, Eno, Zappa, DEVO, and Gary Numan—often in the same song. All of this ADHD activity would be annoying if Late of the Pier weren't so talented, and listening to *Fantasy Black Channel* is a little like giving your best friend access to 300 or 400 of your favorite albums from the '70s and '80s—along with a six-pack of Red Bull and a gram of cocaine.

The question, of course, is whether or not you can hang on until the end (or listen to the whole thing in your car without hitting a guard rail or two). Alternating between furious and futuristic monster-movie instrumentals ("VW"), pure metal thrashing (the first 30 seconds of "Broken") and ambient interludes (even youngsters this manic need to catch their breaths once in a while), these guys never quite stop. **On the rare occasions when they do slow it down, it resembles downshifting into second gear while going 100 miles per hour. No doubt, your neck will be sore the next day.**

If this sounds like your idea of fun, *Fantasy Black Channel* will surpass your expectations. And if you're waiting for the next Enya album, you'll find yourselves in a previously undiscovered campsite along the shores of the river Acheron. The word is that you can't enter a dance club in London these days without hearing at least one of these tracks, so this disk may be the perfect soundtrack for your next party—even if half of your guests run for the hills. — **Marc Phillips**

# A Visit To Daryl's House

By Michele Rundgren

I first met Daryl Hall in the early 80's, when I was singing with The Tubes, and we opened a few of their shows. The ultra-cool John Oates hung out in our tour bus while Daryl ducked or flirted with the endless stream of supermodels that always seemed nearby.

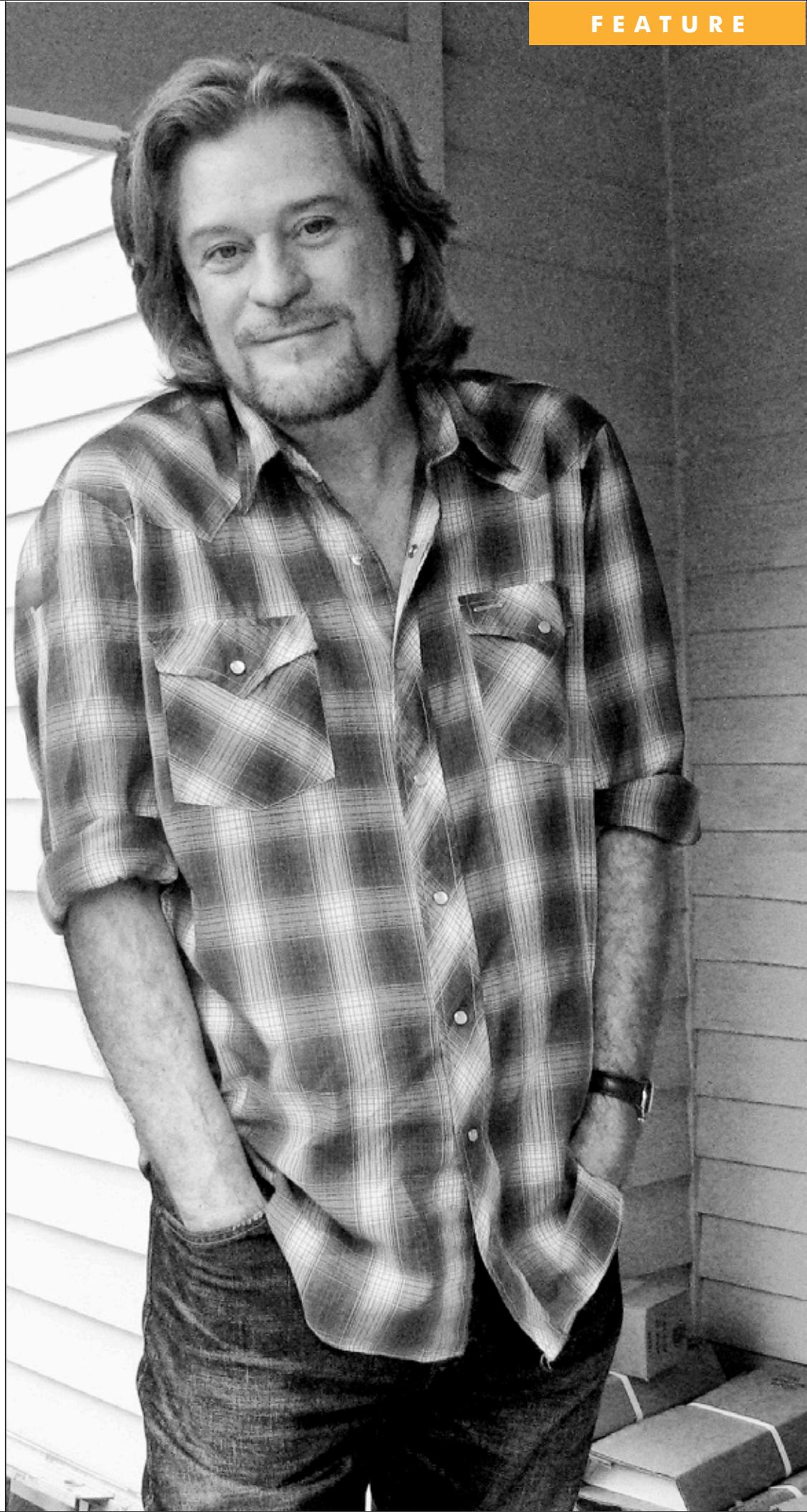
In the summer of 2005 when my husband Todd Rundgren was sharing the bill with Hall and Oates, he would join them on stage, and I was amazed to find myself still knowing all the words to their classic hits, as I sang along with the audience.

Listening to Daryl Hall's vocals, you can tell he's been singing forever, and at 62, his voice sounds better than ever.

Thirty five years of touring and playing a different town every night can make an artist long for inertness, but Daryl is a self-professed workaholic who lives and breathes music. So, he came up with the brilliant idea of bringing his worldwide audience to him by inviting them to his house. No need to pack bags or buy an airline ticket. Just go to [www.livefromdarylshouse.com](http://www.livefromdarylshouse.com), and knock.

The site features interesting performances by both new and established artists as they collaborate with Hall in his home studio. The other day, he took a few minutes to bring me up to speed with the "Live From..." site, as well as his recent performance with John Oates on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

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**MR:** First, I wanna tell you how cool your performance was on The Daily Show. (Hall & Oates sang a parody version of "She's Gone" as a tribute to Alan Colmes, who was leaving Hannity & Colmes.) You and John are the new Smothers Brothers.

**DH** (Laughs) You're scaring me, but I am starting to feel like that.

*Did you guys write the lyrics, or did the show's writers put words to your song ("She's Gone")?*

They came up with a draft and then I sort of played around with it.

*OK, but who wrote the brilliant line (Referring to Alan Colmes), "You're the only non-douchebag on that show"?*

I attribute that line to them.

*How did you guys not crack up singing it?*

I know, but the truth is if I had to do it over again I would have played it even more deadpan. It was so absurd I couldn't contain myself.

*The Daily Show gave you access to a younger audience. Does this play into the creation of "Live From Daryl's House"?*

Yes, it's a plus that it reaches a younger demographic but I think in general what I am doing with "LFDH." There was a purpose behind it. With the guests, I am really trying to do that thing with the inter-generational, sort of riding that wave of cutting edge people who are just breaking.

*It's a great idea. I love the show.*

You know, every time I do a show, I say, 'This is my favorite.' I love collaboration. I am not like Todd.... I don't like to produce other people but I love working with other people. *(continued)*

Bowers & Wilkins

*So you don't feel like you're in the producer's chair when you're in there?*

I am sort of in the producer's chair, yes. Because we rearrange things and I listen to what they say but filter it through our arrangement sensibilities. It's not dissimilar to production on one level, but quicker and more spontaneous.

*You mentioned that this was a way to bring the audience to you instead of you going to them. Did you get sick of the road?*

I wanted to be constructive and turn it upside down. The conventional idea of a performer going someplace with a stage and a fourth wall, while the audience sits there actively (or sometimes passively) wasn't enough. I wanted to break through that; do the opposite, bring everybody to me and put the audience in the middle of it all where they didn't feel at all like they were an onlooker as much as a participant.

*Is it true you actually check out You Tube to find possible guests for "LFDH"?*

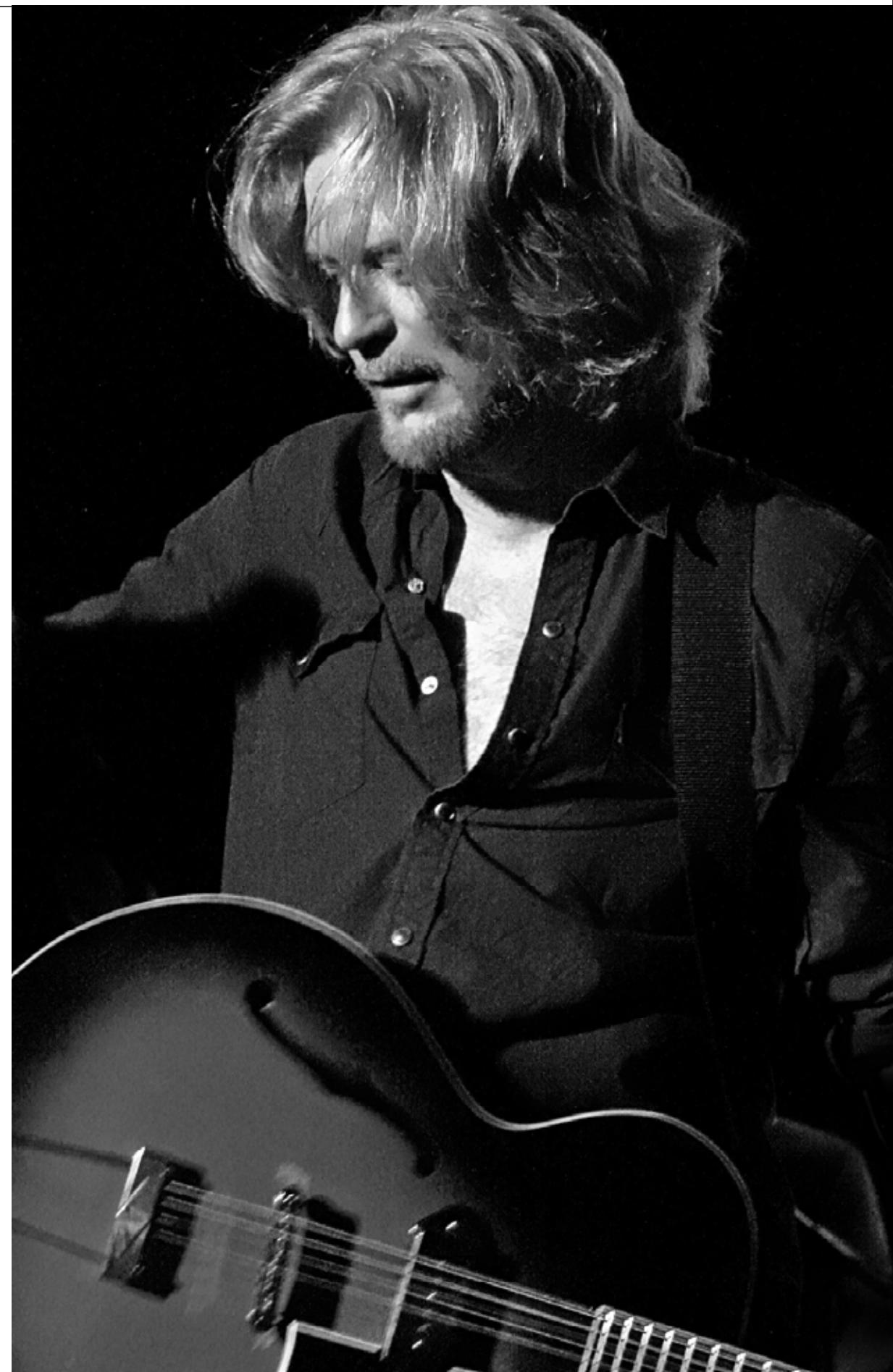
Yeah, I have found people all over the place. I don't surf to see who is around but I'll hear rumors from my stepkids or my manager Jonathan. Sometimes friends call to tell me to check out a band, and if they appeal to me, I make the call. **That's how Monte Montgomery became a guest. I saw his live version of "Sara Smile" and said, this guy is great.**

*So your stepkids are two of your talent scouts?*

Oh, yeah. They are good and at 14 and 15, they are the perfect age for it.

*OK, if I am a new artist and I am driving to your place to jam with OMG Daryl Hall... Take me through my day. I get out of the car and ...*

It's just like you see it on the show. You get out of the car and I'm usually standing on my porch. But before that when I decide what guest I'd like on the show next, I call them as soon as possible so we can discuss their availability. I like to do artist to artist and try to stay away from managers whenever possible. I usually ask the artist, "Why don't you pick some songs of mine and go as deep as you want ... and I like these songs of yours." A bit of healthy discussion follows and we tighten up the set list. I give the final list to the band members, and they do their homework and learn the songs. *(continued)*



© Mark Maglio

The day of the show, the artist arrives about one o'clock. We're already set up with lights and cameras. The show starts and we run with whatever happens.

The cameras are on all of the time. We rehearse a song and then we record it.

*No one looks nervous. How do you disarm them?*

I think the environment is so disarming. They are in my house. There's food there, we hang out, talk to everybody. I do my best to make them feel at home. I am surprised when a lot of these kids say they are nervous but they are all really cool. They all seem like really together people for their age. I would have been nervous as shit.

*You all look like you're having so much fun. You do this once a month?*

Everybody does have a lot of fun. We generally do them in blocks because of the cost, and then they come out once a month.

*Have these bands noticed any change in their careers?*

**Yes, this site is becoming, what I hoped for; a “go-to” site for record companies and managers to showcase their new bands.** When *Hits* magazine did an article about us, we were inundated with record companies, managers, and artists who all want to be on the show.

*Has jamming with younger musicians tweaked your brain musically?*

Yes. I don't do a lot of homework. I like to learn it on the spot. A couple of bands have pretty intricate music that causes you to really work figuring out their chord patterns, harmonies, and melodies.

*So, do you ever get nervous anymore?*

I get excited!

*Was “LFDH” more or less work than you thought it would be?*



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Live From Daryl's House is featured on the BBC News website...check it out now!

GO

Thirty-five years since they last performed there as an opening act, Daryl & John returned to the Troubadour in May of 2008 to find the legendary LA club nearly unchanged. For two nights, they delighted fans with unforgettable hits. This recording is available in stores, or [order it online now!](#)



Probably more work because of the organization involved. It's taken a life of its own. I sit for long periods of time trying to book acts, talking to managers, and now dealing with the idea of getting clearances and selling this thing.

*Are there specific artists you want to invite to jam with?*

I don't think that far ahead. I don't have any dream guests....I like to surprise myself.

*Do you remember your first gig?*

It was a talent show at my high school, singing some old doo wop song.

*You and John went back to the Troubadour nightclub in L.A. after 35 years. You're putting a DVD out of that night.*

It was one of those magical nights. We thought, well, we played the Hollywood Bowl so where are we gonna go? Let's go to the smallest place we can think of, back to our roots. Our first LA gig was there when we opened for Harry Chapin. It was the same. The ratty old sticky couch was still in the dressing room. It was a fantastic night, and with the DVD, everybody can get a chance to see it.

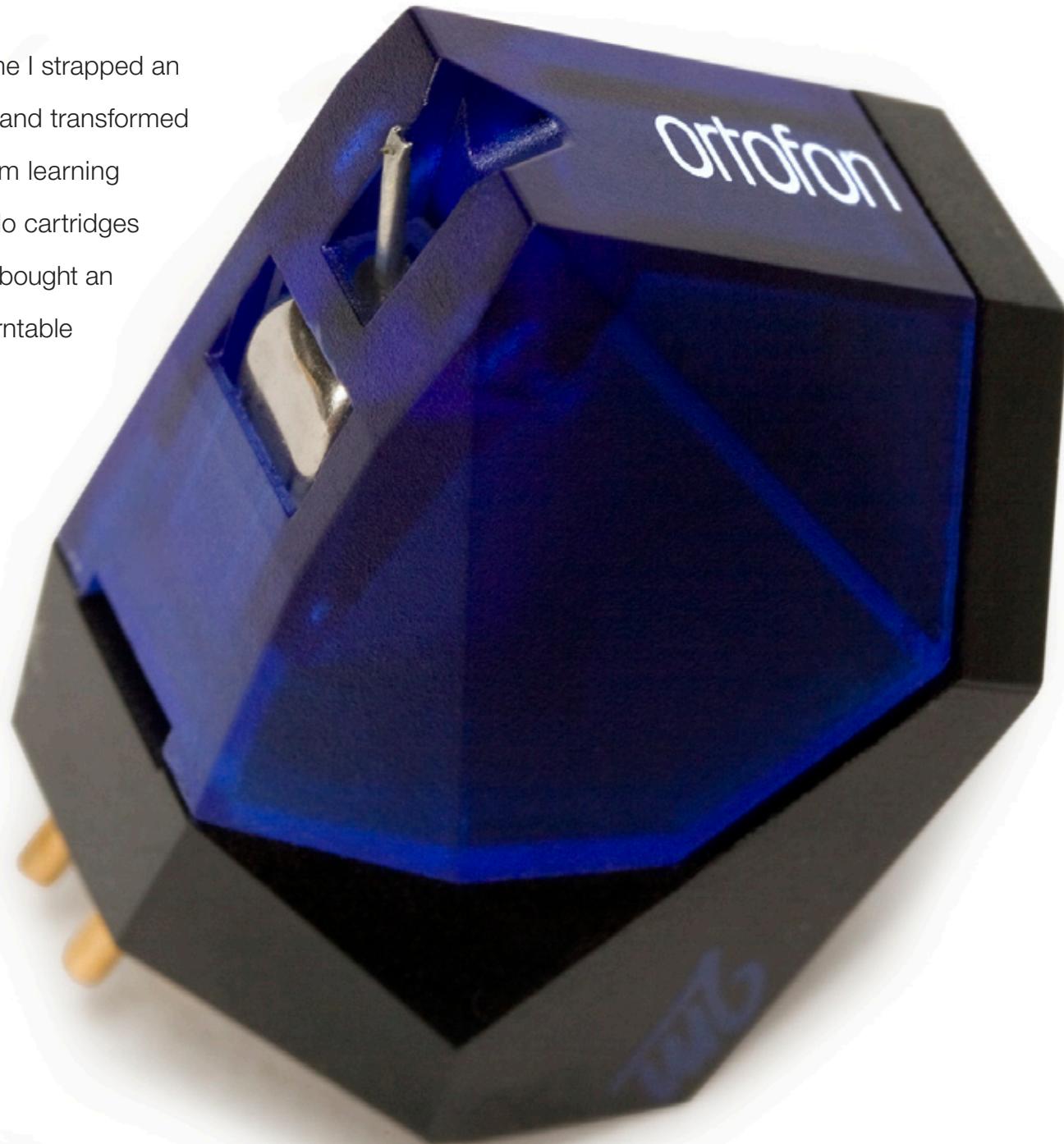
*And my last really important question: Who do you have to thank for your hair? Mom or Dad?*

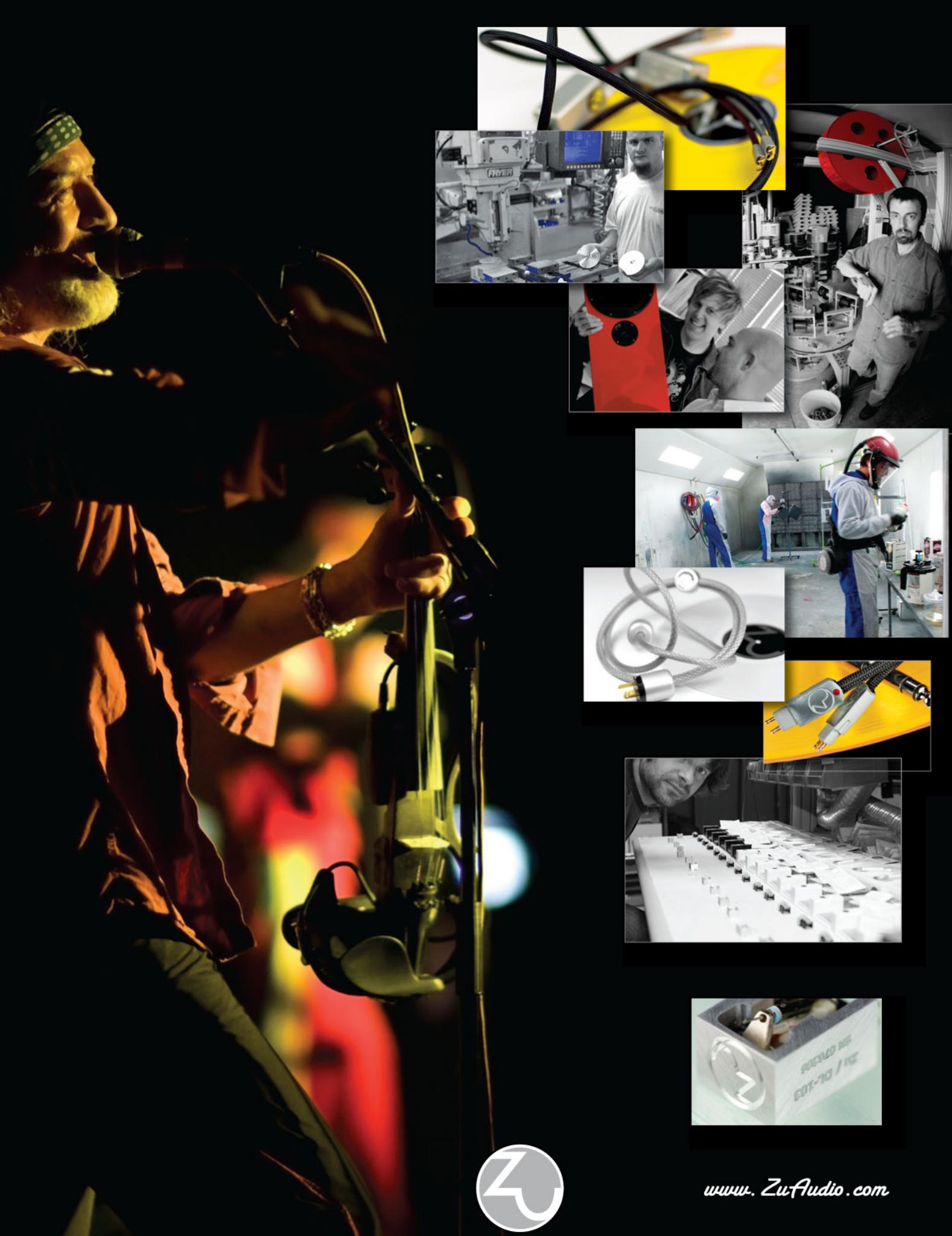
(Laughs loudly) HAHAHA! Both, actually! ●

# Singing the Ortofon Blues

By Marc Phillips

I t's been 20 years since the first time I strapped an Ortofon cartridge onto a turntable and transformed its sound for the better. Fresh from learning Audiophile Lesson #217 (that Grado cartridges may hum with certain turntables), I bought an Ortofon X5-MC for my AR ES-1 turntable back in 1989 and was instantly amazed at the richer, deeper bass and enhanced detail. While the substitution of a Premier MMT arm for the stock AR arm at the same time may have also contributed in a positive way, I still consider the X5 one of the best audiophile purchasing decisions I have made.





Here we are in 2009, and I'm surprised that once again an Ortofon cartridge has elevated the performance of a somewhat troublesome analog rig. As you probably know, I've been toying around with the world's most popular record player, the Technics SL-1200 Mk. 2, and I've used more than a dozen cartridges so far in an effort to alleviate some of that dark, dark sound. I've settled on the \$399 Zu Audio DL-103 as the most satisfying solution so far, but that cartridge is so good for the money that I feel the 1200 limits its potential. As a result, the Zu regularly sees service as the back-up cartridge on my reference rig, the mighty J.A. Michell Orbe SE turntable mated with an SME V arm.

**I'm not surprised that an Ortofon would eventually come to the rescue and provide a cost-effective yet enjoyable match with the Technics.**

I've already heard a \$1,200 Kontrapunkt B on an SL-1210 and instantly recognized its ability to produce alarmingly good sound on the Technics platform. What is surprising is that I was able make my 1200 sing with a \$200 Ortofon, as opposed to one of their much more expensive models.

#### Big Blue

The new Ortofon 2m Blue cartridge is definitely a BBW, or Big Blue Wedge. It positively dwarfs my Koetsu Rosewood. Part of a brand new moving-magnet line that also includes a Red, Bronze and Black 2m (which differ mainly in stylus type), the Blue also boasts a big output of 5.5 mV which makes it an easy match for most phono stages. *(continued)*

It's also a flat-out gorgeous cartridge with its blue see-through body made from a mix of glass and plastic, called Noryl, that complements the downright sexy wedge shape. This design was inspired by the facets of a diamond, according to Ortofon.

The 2m line was specifically designed to be an easy fit for what Ortofon refers to as "the most common turntables at the market today." Indeed, it was very easy to mount the 2m Blue on the arm of the 1200. In fact, merely pushing the 2m all the way to the front of the Technics headshell produced almost perfect alignment, although I would have liked the option to go just a tiny bit further to see how it affected the sound, especially in terms of tracking. This makes me think that there are some arms that would not be able to accommodate the sheer size of the 2m, despite what Ortofon claims.

Once mounted, however, the 2m let the sound of the 1200 open up considerably, besting even some very expensive ones. Over the past two years, my most-consistent complaint with the 1200 has been its propensity to sound dark, closed off and lifeless in its stock form. With the 2m, the 1200 seemed to break free of its chains, and produce a sound that more closely resembled that of a decent belt-drive design. Imaging was superb, although the overall soundstage remained narrow, which seems to be the hallmark of the 1200 sound. Nevertheless, for the first time ever I found myself enjoying music on the 1200, and I didn't have that constant, nagging urge to rip it out of the system and replace it with my reference analog rig.

### **Spending Time With The Big Boys**

Speaking of which, I did mount the 2m on the Michell Orbe SE and SME V. Again, it was a fairly straightforward mounting procedure. Because of the difference in size between my Koetsu Rosewood and the 2m, I had to make significant adjustments to the SME to dial in everything, probably more than any other cartridge I have used. But the 2m eventually produced a pleasing, big sound that didn't sacrifice detail for warmth and richness. While it couldn't come close to filling the Koetsu's rosewood slippers in terms of that lush, romantic quality I crave when listening to analog, it did sound full and authoritative, especially in the lower bass.

In comparison to the Zu, the Ortofon sounded a little less authoritative. The DL-103 was able to propel the music forward in a more forceful manner, clamping onto rhythms and providing a more enveloping sonic landscape. The Blue exhibited a more delicate and serene presentation but lacked power when it came to playing loud rock or complex symphonic recordings.

*(continued)*

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**With the 2m, the 1200 seemed to break free of its chains, and produce a sound that more closely resembled that of a decent belt-drive design.**



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In this respect, the Ortofon was still an excellent choice for listening to acoustic rock and jazz.

If the 2m fell short anywhere, it was in the top end. With certain recordings, the treble could sound dry and slightly disjointed from the bass. This is where you are reminded that the 2m is an affordable MM as opposed to an affordable high-output MC (such as that X5-MC I loved so much once upon a time). The tracking was just fair at best and not quite up to the level of the Shures and ATs that so many 1200 fans prefer.

### A Bit Of A Miracle

I've owned the 2M Blue for almost 18 months, and it has found a permanent home on the 1200. While I've seen quite a few Technics enthusiasts mount extremely expensive cartridges on their tables, I suspect that the majority of 1200 owners (and Music Halls owners and Rega owners and Pro-Ject owners) would rather stick in the \$100 to \$200 range when it comes to cartridges. Besides, after trying so many cartridges on the Technics, I'm know that it's time to try other solutions such as tonearm wiring, damping troughs, armboard modifications and isolation feet. While the Zu is still my favorite cartridge for the 1200, the Blue comes in a close second. The fact that it costs half the price of the 103 and doesn't require a heavier counterweight is icing on the cake.

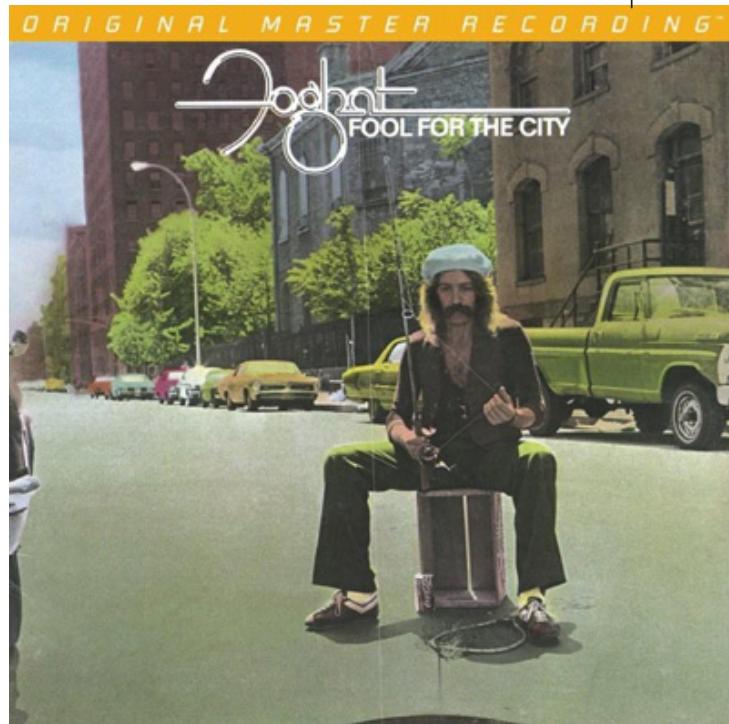
As a more general solution for a wider variety of turntables, I can't think of another \$200 cartridge I'd prefer. I am curious, however, about the latest budget offerings from Benz-Micro and Clearaudio. I'm even more curious about the 2m Bronze and 2m Black, which feature more advanced styli than the Blue's elliptical diamond. Then again, the 2M Red might be a completely viable choice for just \$100.

So once again Ortofon has come to the rescue. Not every cartridge can make me appreciate a Technics SL-1200 at this price point. In fact, none have. That makes the 2m Blue a bit of a miracle. ●



# Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay



## Foghat

*Fool for the City*  
Mobile Fidelity, SACD

The last time I heard *Fool for the City*, it was on an 8-track tape. When everyone else was in English class reading *Pygmalion*, my best friend and I were headed for McDonald's in my Gremlin with the tape deck cranked way beyond 11. Seeing a copy of this disc in the mailbox brought back some great memories. For me, *Fool* is the ultimate guilty pleasure.

To get a scientifically pure comparison, I got a copy of the 8-track on EBay. The seller, "8-track man," threw in a copy of the Who's *Quadrophenia* and Styx's *Equinox* for a total of five bucks. Sweet.

It goes without saying that the MoFi SACD sounds way better than the tape, but the good memories are still there. MoFi engineer Shawn Britton did a spectacular job on this title. 8-track jokes aside, even the original vinyl was very compressed. The SACD version offers killer dynamics and a smooth high end, combined with a wall-to-wall stereo image that will extend way beyond the boundaries of your speakers.

I'd like to thank Mobile Fidelity for giving me 38 minutes of my youth back.

And please, don't ask why I still have a machine that plays 8-track tapes.



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With optical, coaxial and USB inputs it can interface with any digital source. Products like the Apple TV, Sonos ZP-80, Slim Devices, Squeezebox and the Wadia iTransport are natural combinations, as well as your desktop or laptop computer. A traditional analog input makes it easy to connect your iPod with the standard Apple dock.

The internal digital to analog converter in the Decco offers a significant upgrade to the typical computer soundcard, making it the anchor for the perfect desktop audio system.

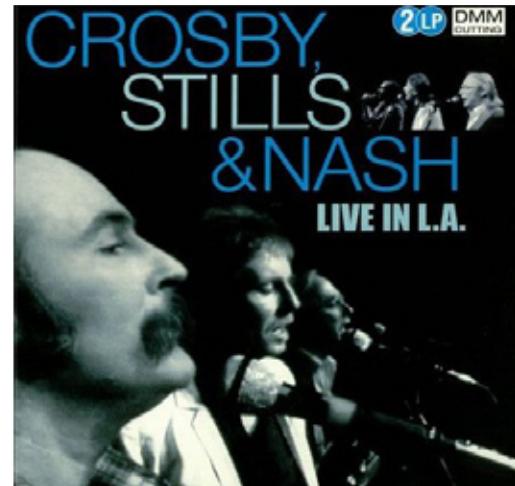
But the Decco isn't limited to your office. Its attractive styling will make it right at home anywhere you would like a compact, yet high performance music system.



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## Crosby, Stills & Nash

*Live In L.A.*

Vinyl Passion Records – LP

This performance was captured at the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles in November, 1982, featuring a number of heavyweight players in the CS&N touring band, including James Newton Howard on keyboards and Joe Vitale on drums. Crosby, Stills and Nash were at the top of their game, riding their second big wave of popularity that started with the 1977 release, CSN and continuing with *Daylight Again*, which also came out in 1982.

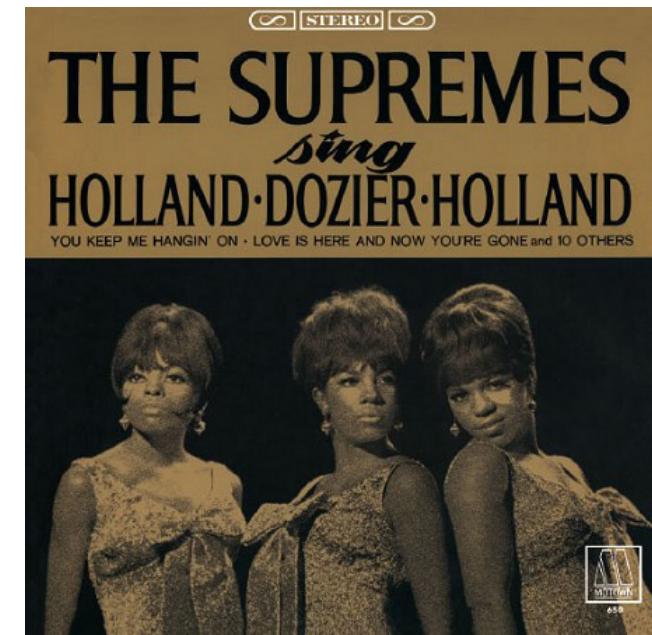
Unless you are a completist collector and just have to have everything (or possess a studio mastering equalizer), I'd suggest passing on *Live In L.A.* The recording just doesn't cut it, and this is a very expensive two-record set. Seeing the "Direct Metal Mastering" sticker on the cover, I was expecting a recording that would be somewhat bright, but I got just the opposite. This recording is just too rolled off in the high frequencies to be of any use to even the casual audiophile.

**Marvin Gaye**

*Let's Get It On*  
*What's Going On?*  
 Mobile Fidelity, SACD

Marvin Gaye was the king of smooth, and Mobile Fidelity has hit it out of the park with the remastering job on these SACD discs. **They sound so good, your turntable is going to get jealous.** The second I hit "Play" on the title track of *Let's Get It On*, my speakers melted away, and Gaye was standing in front of me. If you can't get laid playing this disc, you are a complete loser.

MoFi split the mastering tasks on these discs. Rob LoVerde took charge of the console on *What's Going On?* and Shawn Britton is responsible for *Let's Get It On*. I was very impressed that the discs had almost identical sonics; you can tell both MoFi engineers are on the same page with their artistic sensibilities.

**The Supremes**

*The Supremes Sing Holland/Dozier/Holland*  
 Speakers Corner Records – 180 gram LP

Every Motown record I have from the 60's and 70's has a very rolled off and compressed presentation. Most sound no better on my mega system than they did on my parents' Zenith table radio. The SC version reviewed here offers up a wide open soundstage, placing Diana Ross right in the center with the Supremes just slightly behind her, on each side of her mike. If you have a fairly large listening room, you will be able to hear the backing musicians placed distinctly, as if you were sitting in on the recording session.

I hope that Speakers Corner will produce more Motown releases like this one; it is analog magic at its finest. In addition to the open sound, the surfaces are dead quiet and the records arrived from Germany perfectly flat. The printing quality is exceptional, with a very nice UV coat over the top to ensure this record will look great after being pulled off the shelf repeatedly. That's been the case with every Speakers Corner record I've received.

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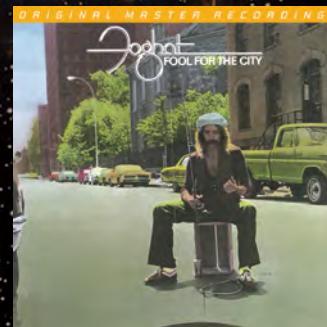
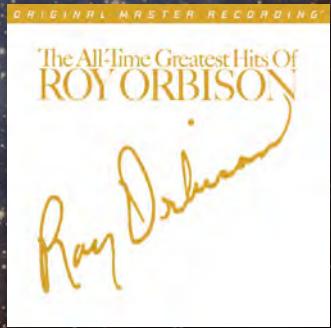
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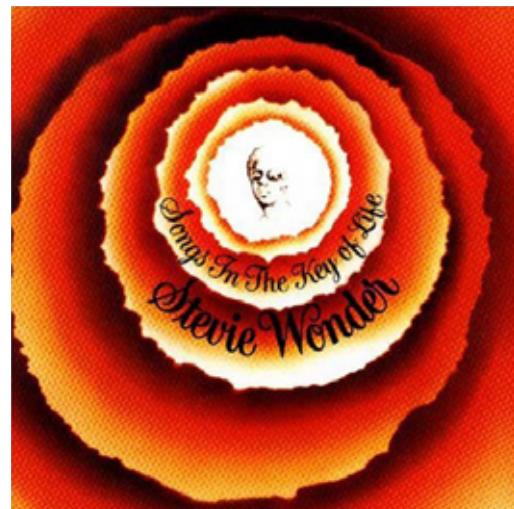
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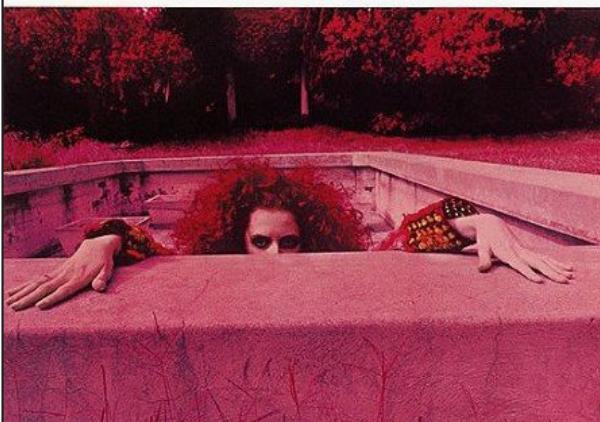
### Stevie Wonder

*Songs in The Key of Life*  
Speakers Corner Records – 180  
gram LP

I actually have a very early numbered pressing of this title to compare the remastered version with. My early LP has a more neutral high end, with the Speakers Corner version being tipped up ever so slightly, but the SC record is much better everywhere else in the musical spectrum. The remaster has been opened up considerably, and where the original LP sounds flat and compressed, the SC disc is lush, with much tighter bass as well. The surfaces on my original were surprisingly quiet, but the SC disc is flawless.

Interestingly enough, the original pressing has the sides sequenced 1-4 and 2-3, so you could stack them on a changer and play the album all the way through, only having to flip the stack of records once. The Speakers Corner version features the modern 1-2, 3-4 arrangement. Ahh, changers.

# FRANK ZAPPA



## HOT RATS

### Frank Zappa

*Hot Rats*

Classic Records–150 and 200 gram LP

Fans of Zappa should consider buying this record immediately. The 200-gram edition pressed on Classic's Quiex SV-P vinyl sounds much more lively than Zappa's standard issue fare. Classic Records does its usual excellent job with quality control as well. The record surfaces are extremely quiet, and the disc was perfectly flat. Also, the reproduction of the album art is museum quality.

Frank Zappa records are all about musical quirks and nuance; thanks to Classic's careful remastering job, they come out in the mix much better than the original LP. Jean Luc-Ponty's violin licks and Ian Underwood's percussion bits fly all around the room and Captain Beefheart's vocals on "Willie the Pimp" will growl you right off the couch.

Zappa had some of the most advanced recording studio gear available in 1969, and this record was produced with a lot of care. It's great to finally hear all of the work that went into this masterpiece. Mastered by the legendary Bernie Grundman, this is what an audiophile remaster should be – better than the original.

**John Coltrane** – *Blue Train*  
**Kenny Dorham** – *Whistle Stop*  
**Jackie McLean** – *Capuchin Swing*  
**Lee Morgan** – *Leeway*

Analogue Productions – SACD

We did a more in-depth review of these famous Blue Note reissues on 45 r.p.m. vinyl in issue 12, with TONE staff member Dan Babineau sitting in with Steve Hoffman and Kevin Grey while they were cutting the lacquers. The sound quality of these LP's was fantastic, but for those of you who lose your picnic spirit when you have to flip an album over every nine minutes, the SACD versions of these classic titles were looking better every day.

**But if these first four releases are indicative of the quality we can expect from the rest of the series, I say, "pass."** I found the high end of these discs all to be somewhat on the crunchy, brittle side, and at \$30 each, not a terribly good value either. Analogue Productions will include free shipping if you buy the whole set, but I am still unimpressed for as long as we've had to wait for these.

Unless your health prevents you from getting up off the couch repeatedly, you should just buy the LP's. ●



# Quincy Jones: ‘Leave Some Space for God’

By Ben Fong-Torres



© Michael Collopy

He may be 75, he may be associated mainly with jazz, dating back to the bebop era of the Forties, and he may be known mainly for his behind-the-control boards work as a producer, rather than as a recording artist. But Quincy Jones is a rock star.



© Michael Collopy

In public, he draws people wherever he goes. In San Francisco in December, promoting his book, *The Complete Quincy Jones*, he sat for an onstage interview with me at the Herbst Theatre, across from City Hall. On his way into the Veterans Memorial building, he was immediately trailed and surrounded by fans of all ages, wanting him to sign copies of such productions of his as *Thriller*, "We Are the World," *Sinatra at the Sands* (he arranged the music and conducted the Count Basie orchestra on stage), and the Grammy-winning *Back On the Block*, along with LP's of him with Sarah Vaughan, Ray Charles and many others. They wanted photos with him, a word of encouragement, or simply to say Hi and thanks for all the music.

After our hour on stage, he signed books for a long line of admirers, and then we repaired to 1300 on Fillmore, a new restaurant that's part of the renaissance of the Fillmore "jazz district" of decades past. Located next to the new Yoshi's nightclub, it specializes in "soulful American cuisine in a classy setting."

As Q arrived, a young jazz band was performing in the cocktail lounge. Even though the kitchen would be closing soon, he lingered in the bar, lapping up the sounds while looking over a wall of rotating photographs from the old days, recognizing faces from his past. He chatted with former mayor (and man-about-town) Willie Brown and former newspaper editor Phil Bronstein. And, soon enough, he was surrounded by customers—and the young musicians, once they realized that Q was in the house.

(You can see about ten minutes of our on-stage chat at [fora.tv](#). An hour version aired on 170 NPR stations February 15, as part of the City Arts & Lecture Series. And Bronstein conducted a nice interview with Quincy in his suite at the Four Seasons. Video, along with Bronstein's piece about Mr. Jones, can be found [here](#).)

I first met Quincy in 2001, when he had published his memoirs, *Q*. I was invited to interview him onstage at the Marin County Civic Center. We got along swell, and, now, I'm working on my own book about and with him. Over the past year or so, we've done four or five lengthy interviews, at his home atop Bel Air, in Los Angeles. Both my book and the one that just came out are being published by Palace Press. *The Complete Quincy Jones* is a scrapbook, loaded with archival material that can be removed from pages. Amazing. Mine, due out sometime next year, is more about Quincy recalling the music he's made over 60 years—and is still making. Among the projects he's got on the burners (and he has so many that he needs an Iron Chef-sized kitchen) are two duet albums. One connects Tony Bennett with Stevie Wonder; the other, Clark Terry, Quincy's childhood mentor on the trumpet, with Snoop Dogg. (*continued*)



Image Courtesy of Quincy Jones

But that's quintessential Quincy Jones, a master of unlikely projects, from his first pop hit, "It's My Party" by Lesley Gore in 1963 to a secretive new album by an actor, best known for playing an explosive mobster, who's also an excellent singer, working, right now, under the name "Joe Doggs." On stage at the Herbst, Jones said he'd force him to use his real name.

Our book is a ways away, but I thought I'd offer a sneak preview of one chapter I'm close to wrapping up, focused on Quincy the record producer, and on his concept of the job.

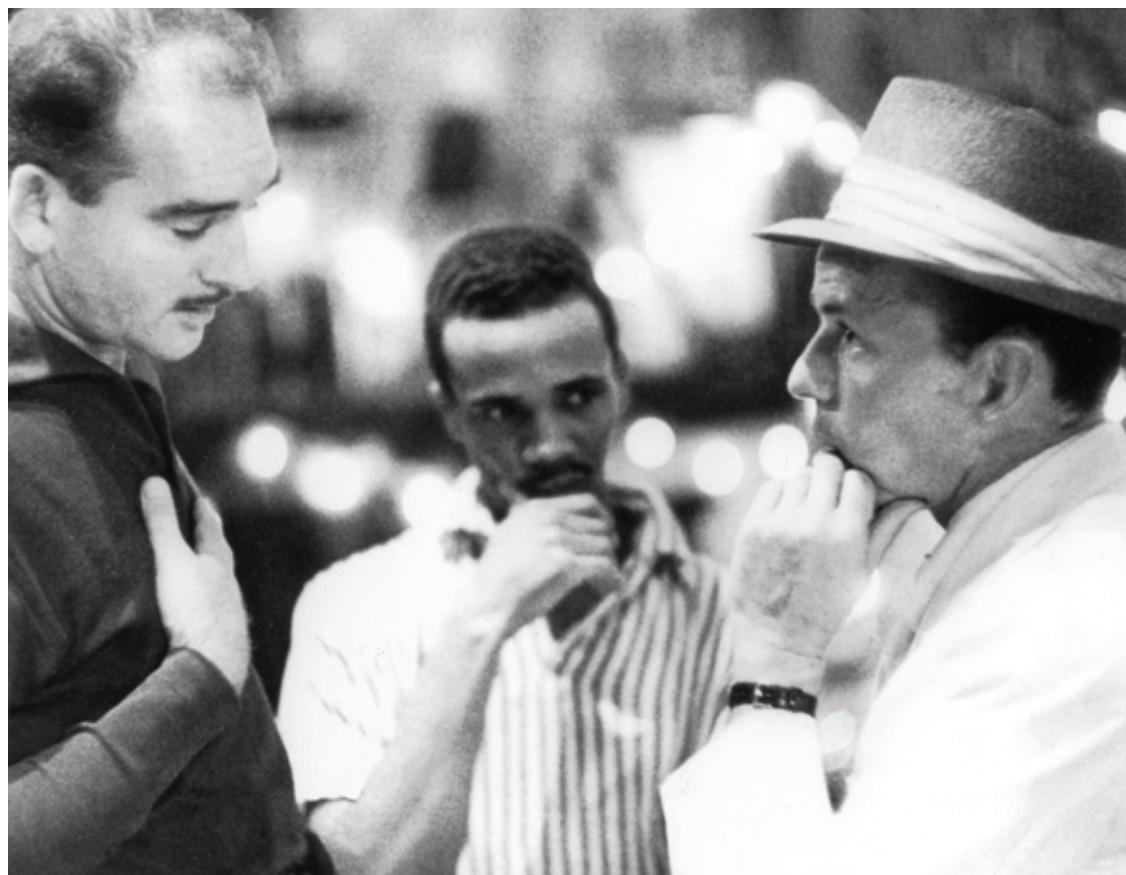
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*When Quincy Jones began producing recordings with various artists, it was years before the title of "producer" became a part of the lexicon of the recording industry. He was in the studio, having written or arranged songs. He had become a bandleader and could conduct ensembles or orchestras in the studio. He supervised recording sessions—often, early on, with visits from "guys in suits," as he described executives from Atlantic Records in the late Fifties and early Sixties, when he was working with his buddy Ray Charles and other artists for the label.*

*It wasn't until he was credited with the success of "It's My Party" that he understood that he was, indeed, a producer—even though he'd been doing that kind of work for years.*

*He began in 1955, when alto saxophonist Julian "Cannonball" Adderley and his younger brother Nat, who played cornet, visited him at home. They were natives of Tampa, Florida. Cannonball was sitting in with Oscar Pettiford at the Bohemia; Nat had just done a couple of years in Lionel Hampton's band.*

Quincy: Somebody set up a meeting for him and Nat to come by my house. I lived in a little basement on 82nd Street. I don't remember how we got together, but I remember we had dinner. I asked Cannonball, "Have you recorded before?" And he said yes, and he brought out a demo. It was a blue label, and it was a homemade record, you know, "Frankie and Johnny." I'll never forget that. I might still have it somewhere. And I had never heard anybody play like Cannonball before since Charlie Parker. Cannonball and his brother came down to my basement, and I called Bobby Shad, who was running EmArcy Records. I said, "Man, I've never heard anybody sound so much like Bird" — like that's the most commercial thing in the world, right? — "in my life. You've got to hear him. You've got to hear him, and record him." He said, "Fuck hearing him. If you like him, I like him. Write the arrangements. Do whatever you've got to do. Call the musicians. Call the studio. Call the engineer, book it for next Tuesday and go in the studio." That's what a producer does, and I used to do it all the time. (*continued*)



Courtesy of Quincy Jones

**With Sinatra, we always used to say, "Let's suggest it privately rather than say it in public." You know, because you'll embarrass a big artist if you're having an argument about what you think and what they think.**

And Bobby came in, and he just sat down at the booth and said, "Take one." And we recorded Cannonball. We put a compilation out recently, and on one of the dates, Max Roach was on it. And on piano, it said, Johnny Williams. It was *Star Wars* Johnny Williams.

So, as an arranger and a conductor, you were like the producer anyway. And you'd have to talk to the musicians — "Let's try this a little faster" or do this, and so forth.

But I wasn't cognizant of what the function of a producer was. I wasn't aware that that's a separate job you got paid for, because I didn't get paid. At Mercury Records, they said, "In no event shall you ever make more than \$40,000 as a vice president." That means if you write a hit, if you produce a hit, you don't get paid.

*Would you define the role of the producer, and what you believe are the attributes necessary to be an effective producer?*

I think the prerequisite, prime prerequisite thing for a producer is to work with love. Love enough to understand the artist's range, capabilities, and patience; to go inside to see when it's time for them to rest, when it's time to keep pushing.

With Sinatra, we always used to say, "Let's suggest it privately rather than say it in public." You know, because you'll embarrass a big artist if you're having an argument about what you think and what they think.

And you've got to be ready. Because when you go in the studio with Billy Eckstine and Ray Charles and Frank Sinatra, you'd better know what the fuck you're doing, because, man, they will kick your ass. I was ready for them, though. Frank watches every step you make, in the beginning. Then after he trusts you, you can do anything. Ray, as close as we were, he was the same way. I had my shit together, you know.

I do serious homework; you have to be aware of what everybody out there is doing.

So much of producing is instinct. It's also about judgment. Emotional connections are very powerful between an artist and a producer, because sometime you are telling, asking or suggesting that they jump without a net.

And it's just millions and millions of decisions as a psychiatrist, as an orchestrator, as everything. If a record doesn't happen, the cover is bad, it's the producer's fault. If it's too fast, it's the producer's fault. If it's too high, it's the producer's fault. So, it's a lot of jobs. It really is a lot of amazing calls. *(continued)*

*How would you deal with problem musicians, someone with an attitude or an inability to do what you wanted to have done?*

I'd just be very human with everybody. That's what I found. And that's why I say again, it's with love — and honesty. You know, just really be honest.

Working with Rob Temperton (the songwriter), the team we had was killing it in the '80s in the studio. Our secret was honesty. And when something's wrong, we don't fuck around. You wouldn't believe our sessions, man. **Just say what you feel. And when you both agree, you win. That's why we always won, because there was never any bullshit.**

Because that's what you need on a real good record when you get everything right, you know. You got a good song, a good performer, good everything, good sound. And it's exciting. It really is.

I don't like records where you can hear everything on the record in one listen. You know, I like to go back and say, "Oh, I didn't hear that before." You have something going on in the drums...I remember we told John Robinson, for the beginning of "Rock With You" – I said, "I need a one-bar drum lick that the whole world can hum."

Anyway, it's just a series of infinite details that you're dealing with. And basically it's very emotional. You know you're just reacting to a situation.

*(continued)*



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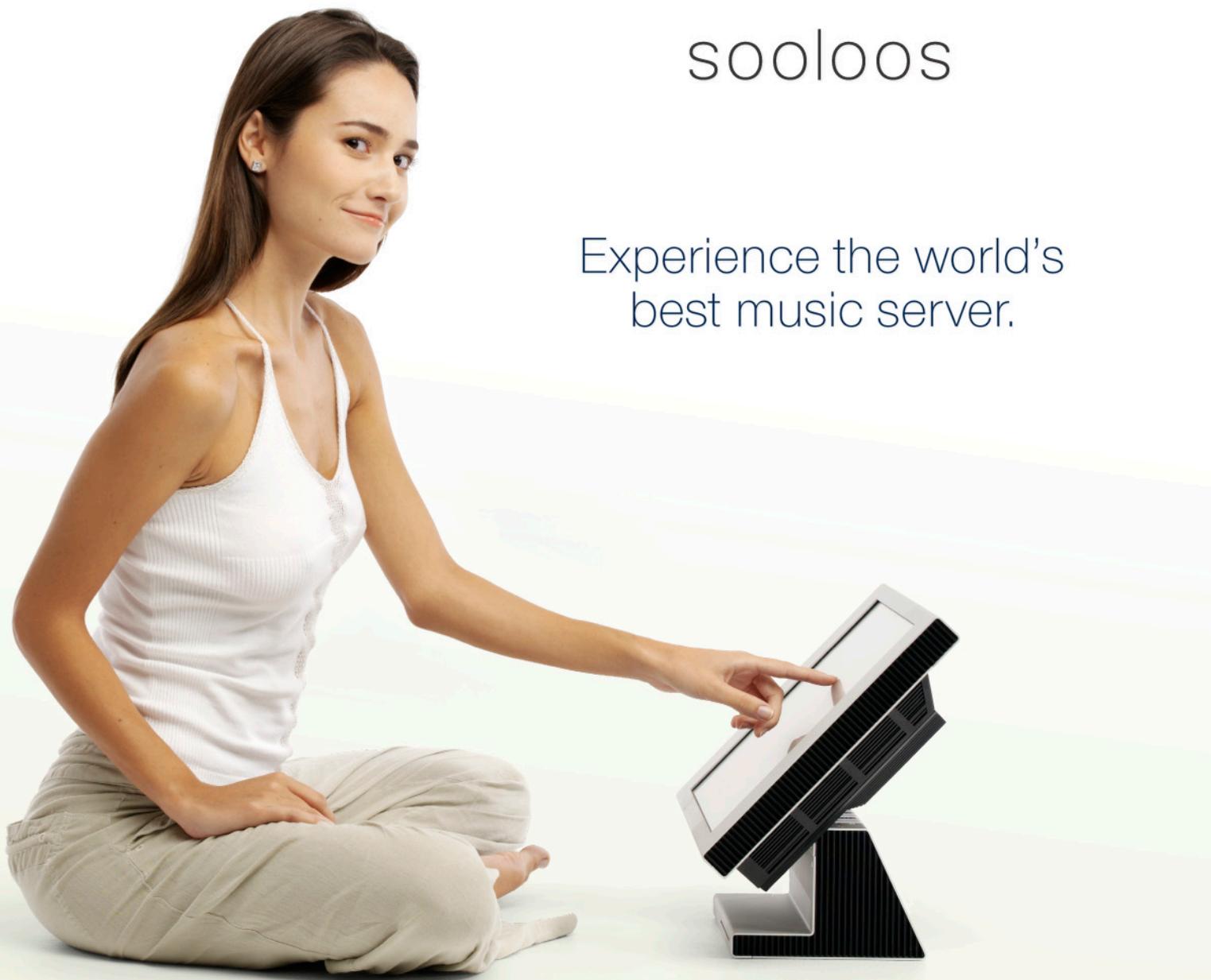
  
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*In the studio, Jones says, he is focused on the music. He doesn't give a thought to, say, the social import of a piece of music, or of the forging of voices from different generations, as on Back on the Block. And, although he prides himself on knowing what makes a hit a hit, he's not thinking about any such success.*

People don't believe that, because we have such big sellers, but I think God walks out of the room when you say, "I'm making this music to sell and sell." It's bullshit. I can put \$5 million on that piano, and you can sit there for two years. They have no interest in talking to each other at all. So you're wasting your time, so you might as well go with what the truth is about, what your affinity for the music is about, and work from a purer place that touches you emotionally. And I've always been like that.

I never wanted a studio in my home, because I think the studio is a very sacred place, you know. And you're looking for really divine things to happen in there, you know. And that's why I say that we're just terminals for a higher power. And you have to be ready to listen to God's whispers. And we always have to say to the musicians, "Leave some space for God to walk through the room."

**Music is a strange animal. You can't smell it, you can't touch it, you can't taste it, but you can feel it. It's powerful stuff. •**

# SIHH Watch Fair

By Ken Kessler

This issue, we mix things up with some stylish items from in and out of the audio world. Ken Kessler returns with coverage of the SIHH Watch Fair in Geneva, Switzerland and new writer Rich Kent compares Canon's new EOS 5D mk. II to the original.

We've included a preview of a few audio components that we feel offer an equal portion of aesthetic appeal as well as high performance in the audio domain and of course, a few toys you can't/won't want to be without.



Just as the global home-entertainment industry gathers every year at the Las Vegas Consumer Electronics Show, the watch business has its annual trade show. Although, dissent among participants nearly two decades ago caused one major group to part with the massive event held at Basel every spring. That group happened to feature Cartier – a major player in the world of luxury watches – so we're talking about a breakaway show of far greater impact than merely a temper tantrum thrown by a few malcontents.



Dubbed the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie, the event is held every year in Geneva Airport's Palexpo, and it has grown to host 16 brands, all of which are serious players. To distinguish itself from the all-embracing industry event it abandoned, the SIHH is an invitation-only affair, and its organizer is the mighty Richemont group. In addition to Cartier, the exhibitors for 2009 include Alfred Dunhill, Vacheron Constantin, Piaget, Montblanc, Roger Dubuis, Officine Panerai, A. Lange & Söhne, IWC, Jaeger LeCoultre, Van Cleef & Arpels, Baume & Mercier, The Ralph Lauren Watch

and Jewelry Company, Audemars Piguet, Parmigiani Fleurier, Daniel JeanRichard and Girard-Perregaux. That roster produces watches from around \$1500, on up to prices that would rattle even Goldmund customers. If I had to guess an average price for the pieces I saw, \$15,000-\$20,000 wouldn't be unreasonable.

In the most elegant setting imaginable for a trade event, visitors are treated to a pure, wholly watch-oriented atmosphere, reaffirming the group's original mission statement about furthering the cause of *haute horlogerie*. *(continued)*

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Imagine the world's biggest, most-luxurious watch boutique, with each brand enjoying its own "suite." Ample display space allows visitors to see the new models in ideal conditions, while various rooms play host to press conferences, one-on-one showings and general hospitality. Above all, it is utterly conducive to savoring the stars of the show: the watches themselves.

It's easy to overdose on anything that is presented to you in the manner of shows like CES: just ask anyone how they feel after four days and a few hundred new amps, speakers, CD players *et al.* Because SIHH hosts only 16 brands, the number of new items is reduced, but it's still overwhelming. With an average of 10-15 new models per brand, you're still trying to absorb nearly 200 launches.

So imagine the task of a "dream list" of only five faves from amongst all of those treasures. But it turned out easier than I expected because my own taste in watches is ultra-conservative, leaning toward the vintage and this year's primary trend seemed to fall in line with that. This new conservatism isn't a backlash against the bold or the blingy: Roger Dubuis and Parmigiani Fleurier's new watches will not suit wallflowers, while Cartier's new compilations are visually dazzling and fresh. But for me, this quintet of sublimely traditional timepieces stood out, including three that are not merely retro-styled but are actually replicas of historic models. Here are the ones that would be on my shopping list: *(continued)*



### Audemars Piguet Jules Audemars Self-winding Chronograph

I wasn't alone in swooning at the sight of this beauty: it featured just about every watch writer's list of highlights. Audemars Piguet's latest in its classic collection, the Jules Audemars self-winding chronograph stands out because of a dial that might have graced a watch in the 1920s or 1930s. Cream is a dial color we rarely see these days; it allows this watch to look both brand-new and vintage at the same time. The look is enhanced by "Breguet" numbers – a type of italic Arabic numeral – with bold black hands and seconds indicated with red digits. Available in 18k white gold with the cream dial, or pink gold with a white dial, this 41mm watch manages to be both impressive and discreet all at once. I now need to find around \$35,000-\$40,000....

**A. Lange & Söhne Richard Lange Pour Le Mérite**

Something for the seriously wealthy, the Richard Lange Pour Le Mérite features that most coveted of complications: a tourbillon movement. Not only that, it's a particularly rare type, driven by a microscopic chain called a fusée. So tricky to make is this movement type – normally found in antique pocket watches – that the latest Lange is only the third or fourth wristwatch ever to feature it. In direct contrast to normal practice, in which a cut-out in the dial exposes the tourbillon element, Lange has opted for a full dial so understated that you'll confound all but the most savvy of watch aficionados.

It doesn't get any more discreet than this, nor at around \$100,000, more exclusive.





### Panerai Egiziano (Egyptian)

Panerai has already driven collectors nuts by limiting every model it makes to absurdly low numbers, but this will cause much wailing and gnashing of teeth. Issued in a run of only 300 pieces, the Radiomir Egiziano is a near-exact replica of the most desirable of all the vintage Panerais: the original Radiomir commissioned by the Egyptian Navy in 1956. The only updates are a new movement, and a change to a lightweight titanium case, because in steel this would be truly unwearable: it's 60mm across! In practice, even lightness won't compensate for the size, so most collectors will leave them in their safeboxes, unless they have wrists like Stallone. Price is circa \$29,000.

## Girard-Perregaux Flyback Chronograph Monte Carlo

Considering that Girard-Perregaux's CEO Luigi Macaluso was European rally champion in 1972, you can understand the appearance of an utterly traditional chronograph in the lineup. A tribute to the historic Monte-Carlo Rally of 1973, this self-winding chronograph is housed in a stainless steel, 40mm case with engraved tachymeter bezel, round chronograph pushers, and a silvered dial with contrasting black subdials, accented in blue. Directly beneath the Girard-Perregaux logo on the dial is the inscription "Monte-Carlo 1973" in red, reminding you that it's limited to 250 examples. Expect to see lots of disappointed chronograph collectors who placed late orders, or lacked the necessary \$10,000 or so.





### Vacheron Constantin American 1921

Unbelievably pretty, Vacheron Constantin's newest model in its Les Historiques line rotates the watch a few degrees in the manner of what used to be called "drivers' watches", so named because you could read them without taking your hand off the steering wheel. The American 1921's 40mm 18K rose gold case is cushion-shaped – a form favored between the wars and now making a comeback, while the dial is utterly traditional: white with Breguet numerals and hands, and small seconds dial. A snip at \$24,900.

So, if fine timepieces as much your passion as mine, put Geneva on your travel calendar next spring. I guarantee you will enjoy the crowd and the shopping. ●



# The Sequel Is Better

**The Canon EOS 5D Mk. II**

By Rich Kent

A digital camera release can be just as frustrating as the sequel to a favorite movie: when the release isn't as good as the media anticipation, we end up disappointed. But not this time. The original Canon 5D was no slouch as a 12 megapixel, full-frame format SLR introduced in 2005 at \$3,500. The only other full-frame SLR at that time was its bigger brother, the 1Ds priced at \$8,000.

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The new Canon 5D Mk. II, introduced in October 2008, has an amazing feature list. A 21 mega-pixel full-frame sensor, DIGIC Pro 4 processor, 3-inch LCD high-resolution screen, automatic sensor cleaning, ISO expansion to 25600, live view along with a host of new custom functions, such as highlight priority and lens image correction, all for \$2,699. But that's not all...

### Movies Anyone?

That's right, I said movies. The Mk. II in live view mode will record 1080p high-resolution video sessions of up to 12 minutes in length. Is the dream of taking only one camera to a shoot for still and video images finally true? Well, yes and no.

Shooting video with the Mk. II is not as easy as first impressions might lead you to believe. You will need to keep the camera seven to 10 inches away from your face so you can compose from the LCD screen on the rear panel. Focus is preset with the shutter release prior to recording, or you can use the AF focus button on the back while shooting; it does not auto correct like most camcorders. The AF button method is slow and inaccurate, so I do not suggest this option. It's not all bad: using fast-aperture lenses allows you to obtain a shallow depth of field in your video that is simply amazing and unique in comparison to your typical video camcorder. A great example of this is Vincent Laforet's Reverie video shot with the Mk. II.

<http://www.usa.canon.com/dlc/controller?act=GetArticleAct&articleID=2326>.

(continued)



Still capture is surprisingly good, but expect a slight pause (1-2 seconds) in the resulting video. All things considered, this is still very handy functionality to have in a pinch situation.

### The Shootout

The new Mk. II draws its heritage from the original 5d design but with additional weatherproofing and a larger LCD screen. Initial use had me frustrated with the program menu design of the Mk. II vs. the old 5d, but this was a familiarity issue. After 5-10 minutes, the new menu was a breeze and shooting with the Mk. II was like being with an old friend.

The image quality of both cameras is excellent and remarkably similar up to ISO 400, and the 21 megapixel files of the Mk. II are unbelievable. The newer camera does penalize you in the sense that the resulting RAW image files are now 22-38 MB each. This means you will need even bigger compact flash cards, more hard-drive space and more computer processing power to work effectively. But power has its price.

In the range of 800-1600 ISO, the Mk. II pulls strongly away with lower noise and improved detail over the original 5D, so low-noise shooters take note. *(continued)*

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The extended ISO range of 25600 is a bit gimmicky and definitely noisy with chromatic aberrations, but converted to black and white, the pictures look very similar to Tri-X film pushed to 1600.

High-resolution, full-frame sensors reveal the weaknesses of older lenses and make it easier to see pin cushioning, barrel distortion and darkened edges. These are corrected in camera with the L series lenses when the Mk. II's custom correction function is activated and the files are later processed with the Canon Digital Processing RAW software that is included with the camera.

#### **The Wait is Over?**

Is this the Holy Grail in digital cameras? Well, Canon skimped on the auto focus, utilizing the same focusing system and number of auto focus points as the old 5D. It is slower than their crop frame camera, the 50D and definitely slower than the Nikon D3.

Batteries from the original 5D are not compatible with the Mk. II, so not only must you reach for your wallet to buy a spare or two, if you plan on using both cameras on a shoot, you will have to take along twice as many batteries and chargers. The good news is that the new batteries do last longer and the new accessory grip now has wireless file-sending capabilities.

In the end, the EOS 5D Mk. II is a winner. The demand still outweighs the supply, so get down to your favorite camera store and get on the waiting list. The sequel is not only better, but worth the wait. ●

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The bad news is that there is only one left of the limited production run of 200. It will still be available in black finish, so if you have your hear set on this version, be sure to take a large briefcase to where you know one is lurking.



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Only weighing a couple of pounds, the Magna Cart will carry up to 150 pounds. I have not pushed the limits of this yet, but I have used it to haul in a few big boxes from McIntosh labs with no problem. Best of all, it folds up and can be easily stored out of the way when you are not using it.





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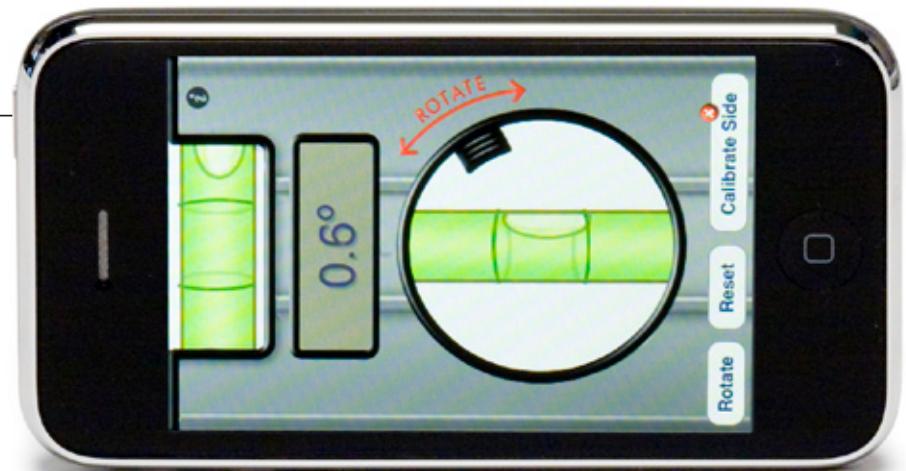
TONEAudio's art director has been enjoying the Meridian F80 for over a year now, but adding the i80 dock really makes the system complete. It connects right up to your F80 and allows full function iPod use through the aux input.

Available in standard black (goes with everything), the i80 can also be ordered in red or yellow to match your F80. Those who bought white or silver will need to visit their favorite Ferrari paint shop to get a custom cover painted. Watch for a full review soon.

# Dual Level Pro

\$4.99 the App Store, iTunes  
[www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)

The world's handiest level is only a click away at the iTunes Apple Store. The key to using this portable level that works in two planes to a tenth of a degree is to calibrate it with a level of known accuracy. Once complete, this will make setting speaker rake a breeze and allow you to dial your speakers in like never before. It's pretty handy for turntable setup as well, and for those of you always losing your favorite bubble level, Dual Level Pro is an answer to your prayers. (Or curses)



## Nagra VPS valve phono preamplifier Discover the full potential of your LP's



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\$3,295

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

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We've tried these with everything from a plasma TV, to an iPod and each combination was a winner. Super compact, these speakers barely take more floor space than a pair of mini monitors on stands in your living room. Thanks to a pair of 6 1/2" woofers and a smaller version of the same legendary electrostatic panel that powers their CLX, the Purity is highly satisfying. Review in progress.





## Adidas Adizero Adios

\$110

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

If you thought there were too many choices when buying interconnect cables, just try to buy a pair of running shoes. While there are plenty of scientific reasons for buying one pair of shoes over the other, I only have two qualifications for my running shoes. They must be a cool color and comfortable after a 12-hour day walking the floor at the Consumer Electronics Show. The Adizero's pass both tests with flying colors.

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Compact 7ES-3

Super HL5

Monitor 30

Monitor 40.1



# Primare DVD-i 10

\$2495

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

**H**ardcore audiophiles grump about all in one packages like this, but if you are challenged for space and still want great audio performance, this little jewel from Primare is the answer. It features a very capable DVD/CD player, AM/FM tuner and 75 watt per channel integrated amplifier. It also comes bundled with an iPod dock (line level only) and a very good headphone amplifier.

All this functionality comes in one small box. Add your favorite pair of speakers, subwoofer (there is also an LFE output) and a flat screen to make an outstanding 2.1 media system on a very reasonable budget. Full review in progress.

# Rega P3-24 In Lime Green

\$1,295

[www.rega.co.uk](http://www.rega.co.uk)

Almost thirty years ago, I walked into my local HiFi shop as they were unpacking a shipment of Rega turntables. I could hear one of the employee's groan, "Look at this – who would ever buy one of these?" You see, back then Roy Gandy used to put green P3's (called the Planar 3 back then) in their shipments at random as a "surprise."

Though I wasn't turntable shopping that day, I took that lime green turntable home and it is still spinning records happily at a good friend's house. Rega has now expanded the color palette to eight colors; so when you see someone getting excited about a colored Pro-ject table, remember that Rega did it first. Now, if I can only get them to build me a lime green P9...



# Mighty Mite

## The Nagra BPS

By Jeff Dorgay



The minute you see the scrumptious case in which the Nagra BPS arrives, it generates a level of anticipation reserved for something special. Popping it open does not disappoint. Lurking inside is a small silver box containing the phono preamplifier, two allen wrenches and some tiny circuit boards for phono loading, along with a 9-volt battery.

In my experience, battery power factors heavily in the magic of this preamplifier. If you think that battery power equates to very low noise, you are correct, but it also contributes to the small size, i.e. no power supply under the hood. One of my favorite aspects of Nagra products is their compact design, and the BPS takes this concept and shrinks it even more. As one who has endured large racks of gear for years, I enjoy these tiny, well-designed products from Switzerland. *(continued)*





The BPS is a compact powerhouse with one RCA input, one RCA output and a ground lug. It weighs less than a pound and measures about 4 inches wide by 6 inches deep and only an inch high. The front panel has one switch for power that also functions as a battery test.

The bottom face of the BPS features a molded rubber base that is actually the Nagra logo. This is a cool touch that I'm sure you would show your audiophile buddies whenever you got the chance. I certainly got the prerequisite number of "oohs" and "ahs" when I proudly displayed it to mine. The top face has a flow chart/schematic the preamp circuit, showing you how to set the internal jumpers for MM/MC operation and the grounding scheme.

MSRP for the Nagra BPS is \$2,395. Unlike their top of the line VPS phono preamplifier, which uses two vacuum tubes and a selectable solid state gain stage, the BPS is purely solid state. BPS stands for "bipolar" phono stage, as the BPS does not use FETs. It does use the same transistors as in the gain stage of the VPS and both preamplifiers share the same pair of low-noise step up transformers.

When I asked why Nagra chose to use bipolar transistors instead of FET's, Jean-Claude Schlup, Nagra's head designer, told me that bipolar transistors were ultimately quieter and that the use of FET's would have forced a compromise in the transformer design. *(continued)*

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**Unlike their top of the line VPS phono preamplifier, which uses two vacuum tubes and a selectable solid state gain stage, the BPS is purely solid state.**

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Used in MM mode, the BPS provides 51db of gain and 62db in MC mode, identical to the VPS. Should you have a VPS and require a third phono input, the BPS will blend into your system perfectly.

## Setup

To keep the size compact and the noise low, switching between the MM and MC mode requires moving two pairs of jumper pins. There is a blue terminal block between the jumpers to set cartridge loading, with the default setting being 47k ohms (no board installed). Three additional MC "loads" are provided at 100, 200 and 330 ohms, with more on the way. Set for MM, the default loading is 47k ohms with 100pf of capacitance.

Before plugging one of the loading cards in place, you will need to remove the allen screw securing it in place. Unless you have tiny fingers, I suggest having small needle-nose pliers on hand to assist you in setting the jumper pins. Fortunately, this only takes a couple of minutes and you will be ready to install the battery and start listening. If you are an audiophile that likes to change cartridges a lot, this could be a slight aggravation, but for those who set up a table and cartridge and just listen to music, it's no big deal.

**I suggest leaving the top panel off and the loading board allen screw out until you find the cartridge load that works best for your cartridge, and then reassemble.**

Once complete, the absence of a power cord makes the BPS easy to move to the optimum spot for your system, another nice touch.  
*(continued)*



For those curious about battery life, a standard 9-volt battery will last about 150 hours, so I would suggest grabbing a pair of your favorite rechargables so you always have one ready to go. Should the BPS discharge completely while playing, it just goes silent without a speaker-popping transient.

## **Listening**

One of my major objectives was to find out if the BPS would be an excellent "third phono input" for my VPS because with so many analog reviews on my plate, I often need an input for another turntable in my system (which, I admit, is a great problem to have). I also was concerned as to how well the BPS would stand up to the other phono stages I have reviewed in the \$2,000-\$3,000 range and where it was on the performance curve compared with the money-is-no-object phono preamplifiers.

Having lived with the ASR Basis Exclusive, which is also battery powered, and some other great examples of battery-powered gear from Red Wine Audio and Croft, there is a definite “battery sound,” and it is good. I’m a believer that you can never make a phono stage quiet enough. Because of the infinitesimally small voltages involved, this is one area where battery power really shines. Like the ASR, the BPS is one of the quietest phono stages that I’ve had the opportunity to listen to.

I used the BPS with my standard trio of reference cartridges, the Dynavector XV-1s, the Lyra Skala and the Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood. These are the three that I currently use with the Nagra VPS, so with a Skala on each tonearm of my Raven Two, it was easy to compare and contrast the differences with everything else being identical.

# Good Things Come in Small Packages

That old saying has never been truer than when the small package says Nagra on the outside. Compared to the other phono preamplifiers I've heard in the same price category, the BPS is at the top of its class.

When comparing it with the VPS, I found the sound different yet similar, if that makes any sense. There is definitely some more air around the instruments when playing acoustic music with the tubed Nagra, but what the BPS lacks in ultimate transparency, it makes up for with the lower noise floor. When listening to fairly dense rock, the two preamplifiers were quite similar in overall sound.

The VPS possessed more weight and control on music with large transient swings, but again, this was borne out on my reference system with the MartinLogan CLX's and a pair of Descent i subwoofers. When switching to system two, consisting of the Harbeth Monitor 40.1's and Luxman Class A integrated, the gap narrowed considerably. (*continued*)

**Like the ASR,  
the BPS is one  
of the quietest  
phono stages  
that I've had the  
opportunity to  
listen to.**

series 1

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However, listening to music with a smaller scale and fewer instruments, the BPS came into its own. On my favorite jazz warhorse, *The Three*, the complete lack of electronic noise that you get when unplugged from the AC mains actually makes you sit up and take notice. The way cymbals (and any other acoustic instrument, for that matter) fade out all the way to black is quite intoxicating.

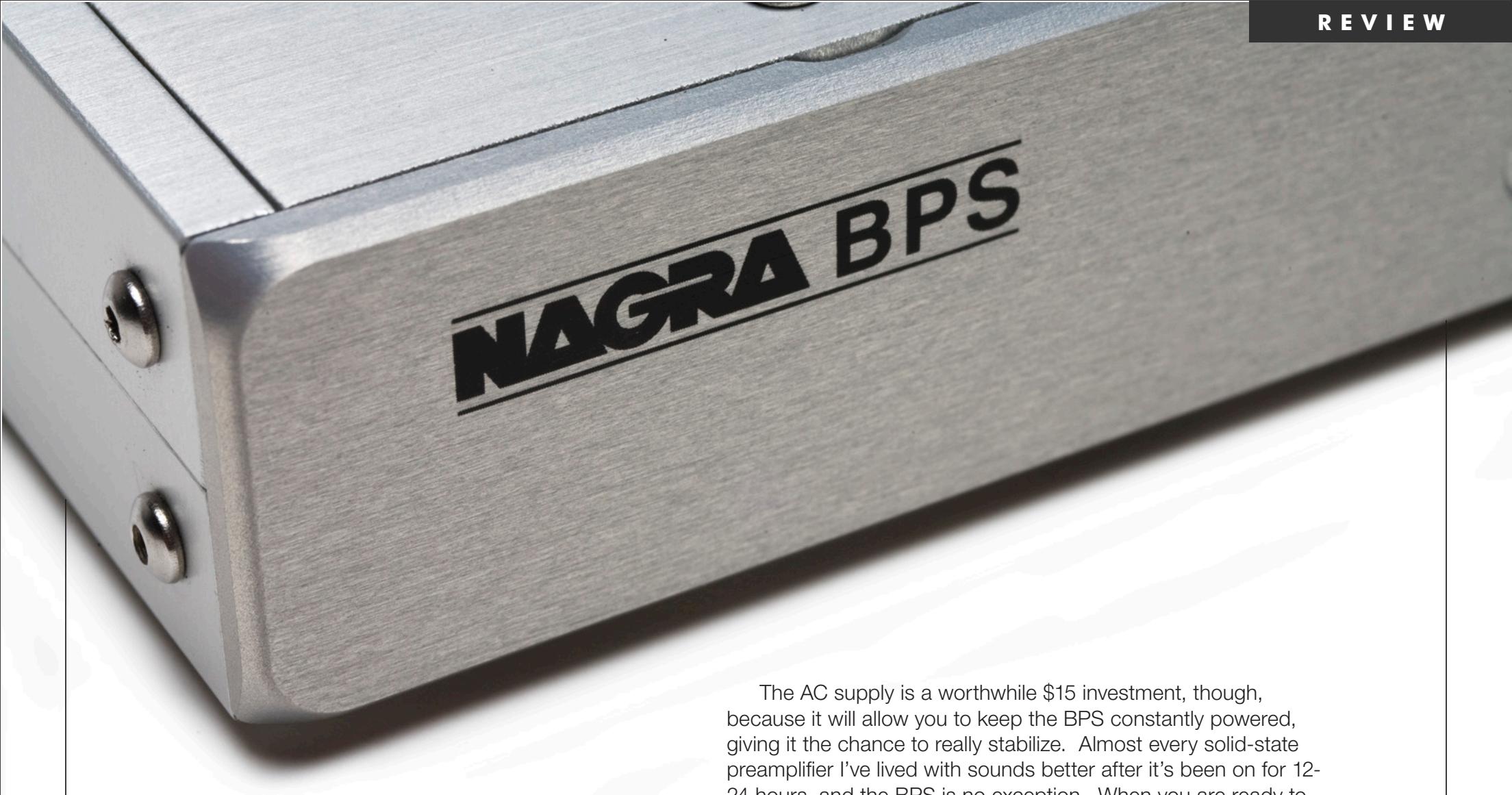
**What intrigued me most about the BPS was how similar tonally it was to the vacuum tube VPS.**

Whenever I was listening to vocalists or acoustic instruments and switched between the two preamplifiers, the overall sound did not change drastically, if at all when listening at moderate levels. This attention to detail is one of the reasons I enjoy Nagra products so much.

Of course, I want the quiet of the BPS with the transparency and dynamics of the VPS, but that's life as a tortured audiophile. Back in the real world, the BPS is a very satisfying phono stage, indeed. Much as I like the quiet of battery power, I found myself staring at the Naim Superline wondering what this miniature solid-state phono preamplifier would sound like with a huge power supply behind it.

**The AC Option**

The BPS does feature a socket to mate with a standard 9-volt power supply, for maximum flexibility. While this will work in a pinch, the sound does degrade more than slightly. The noise floor comes up and dynamics are further reduced, with a definite blurring of transients. *(continued)*



---

**You always have to make compromises at this level and the BPS has a very strong balance sheet; it offers perfect tonality over a dead quiet background, with very good dynamic range.**

The AC supply is a worthwhile \$15 investment, though, because it will allow you to keep the BPS constantly powered, giving it the chance to really stabilize. Almost every solid-state preamplifier I've lived with sounds better after it's been on for 12-24 hours, and the BPS is no exception. When you are ready to listen to music, pull the plug and spin records under battery power.

Using the BPS with battery power alone, it never gets quite all the way to its full potential. It's at about 80 percent the minute you turn it on, and after an hour or so, it makes another jump in clarity. But leaving it plugged in all the time reveals everything of which it's capable, and it will only draw a watt or two from the AC line.

#### **Trial Amongst Its Peers**

The comparison to more-expensive phono-preamplifiers helps to establish the ultimate capabilities of the BPS, but the real question answered is that the BPS definitely stands on its own merit at \$2,395. You always have to make compromises at this level and the BPS has a very strong balance sheet; it offers perfect tonality over a dead quiet background, with very good dynamic range. Factor out the cost of a decent power cord and the BPS is a steal. ●

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

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** TW Acoustic Raven Two with SME iV.Vi arms, Rega P9, Rega P3

**Cartridges** Dynavector XV-1s, Lyra Skala, Lyra Argo-i, Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood

**Preamplifier** Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra VPS

**Power Amplifier** Conrad Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA

**Speakers** Harbeth Monitor 40.1, MartinLogan CLX with Descent i subwoofers, Verity Audio Sarastro II

**Interconnect** Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Anteres

**Speaker Cables** Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Orion

**Power Cables** Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Python

**Power Conditioning** Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco

**Accessories** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature Racks, Furutech DeMag, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators

# A True Classic

## The Magnepan 1.6

By Jeff Dorgay



The Magnepan 1.6 has been around for about 10 years, and while there have been quite a few additions to the \$1,500 - \$2,000 speaker category in that time, few (if any) satisfy the way this speaker can.

I started my journey in high-end audio in 1978 with a pair of MG-1's and I've been hooked on panel sound ever since.

While some might criticize me for writing about a speaker this long in the product-development cycle, I appreciate a company that isn't re-inventing the wheel every year. While I'm sure the people at Magnepan could make a version of the 1.6 with ultra-premium parts, wire, etc., it wouldn't come in at \$1,895 and that's the magic of this speaker.

If you've been a high-end audio enthusiast for some time, chances are good you've experienced at least one model of Magnepan, or even owned a pair. But for our newer/younger readers, this is something you should investigate before you buy your next pair of speakers. If you've never had a pair of panel speakers, you will be amazed by the sheer size of these speakers and the soundfield that they produce. *(continued)*



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M-600A

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series



CONTROL AMPLIFIER  
C-1000f



MONAURAL POWER AMPLIFIER  
B-1000f

## Setup and Room Interaction

Because the Magnepans radiate sound from the front and back surfaces, placement is a concern.

**The 1.6's are only two inches thick, and weigh about 40 pounds each, so you can move them easily.**

A good starting point in an average room is a few feet from the side walls (the further from the side walls the better, but most people have to compromise here) and a few feet from the rear walls with 10 degrees of toe-in. Having the speakers on the long wall of my room (16 x 24 feet) allows the outer edge of the speakers to be about seven feet from the side walls.

Thanks to their light weight and small form factor, if you have to make a compromise as to where the speakers need to be placed, they are easy enough to move out into the room for serious listening and then back into place for casual listening when you have to share the space with others. Try that with a pair of Wilson Watt Puppies.

Not everyone has the luxury of getting their speakers this far from the side walls, but 30 years of experience with panels has taught me that the further you can get them away from the side walls, the more spacious they will sound. Another great luxury if you can afford it with these speakers, and which will allow them to play way out of their league, is some room treatments. Even if you can only damp that first reflection on the side walls, that's a big step in the right direction. A judicious use of diffusion on the back wall is also a great thing if you are able.

It is mentioned in the owner's manual not to get carried away with room treatments and I agree wholeheartedly. *(continued)*



If you can do just enough to stop the sound from bouncing around your room, but not so much that the sound just falls to the floor, that's the ticket. If you have a friend who plays drums, have him or her bring over a cymbal on a stand and set it up in your backyard. Observe how the cymbal decays in open space and then move it into your listening room. If the cymbal decays fairly naturally in your listening room, you're very close to good sound. Too much room treatment and the cymbal fades out too fast. Not enough and the natural shimmer becomes harsh. Balance is the key.

### Care and Feeding of the Magnepan

The one thing on which most Magnepan owners agree is that these speakers require an amplifier with a lot of current reserve to deliver their best performance. Last month at the Consumer Electronics Show, many of us in the audience were bowled over by the new Magnepan prototype speakers that were powered by a pair of Bryston 1,000-watt monoblocks.

The 1.6 is no different; though they provide close to a purely resistive load, you need to have a lot of juice on tap to really make them sing or you will be disappointed. It's not the speakers' fault. As I always say, power is your friend, and it's never been more true than with a pair of Magnepans.

Though I don't imagine that the average 1.6 owner is going to hook them up to a CJ Premier 350 (which puts out 750 watts per channel into a four ohm load), but it was definitely the way to roll with these speakers. I also had good luck with the more modestly priced CA-2100 from Classe (200 watts per channel into 4 ohms), but the big surprise of the review period was hooking the 1.6's up to my Luxman L 590A II with 30 watts per channel of pure Class A power and a huge power supply. Just like the old days when I had a pair of 25-watt Class A ML-2's with my Tympanis!

This ended up being the combination on which I spent most of the review, though the more reasonably priced Rega Elicit worked well, too.

The 1.6 can be bi-wired or used with jumpers if you only have single terminations at the end of your speaker cables. Thanks to the highly resistive nature of the Magnepans, they were somewhat less sensitive to speaker cable changes than some other speakers I've tried. I used the ED 213 speaker cables along with Empirical Design's ED 422 interconnects. I've found the ED cables to be one of the best price performance compromises out there for the discriminating audiophile who doesn't want to break the bank for the sake of good sound. You can pick up a 1-meter pair of 422's for about \$375 and an 8-foot pair of the 213's for about \$600.

While we are talking about cable, I'd like to suggest bi-wiring the 1.6s. Very much like the balanced vs. unbalanced interconnect question, I always see this as a case by case situation, but with the Magnepans, a bi-wire setup did result in better inner detail and better bass control.  
*(continued)*

**The 1.6 can be bi-wired or used with jumpers if you only have single terminations at the end of your speaker cables.**

I noticed this effect with three different sets of speaker wire, from the inexpensive DH Labs cable I have on hand all the way up to the \$5,000 set of Shunyata Orion cables that are my main reference.

### Panelicious!

Once set up, the 1.6's take only about 50 hours for the bass panel to open up all the way. Again, Magnepan states in the instruction manual that they will extend a few more hz once they've broken in, but it's not substantial. You will also notice the character of the bass tighten up slightly, but not to the extent that a large cone woofer changes over the break-in period.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the review, if you have never had the panel experience, this will change your perspective for box speakers. Few people are ever lukewarm with these speakers; you either respond to them strongly or reject them entirely.

The first thing you will notice is just how big and wide the soundstage is, along with a somewhat more diffuse

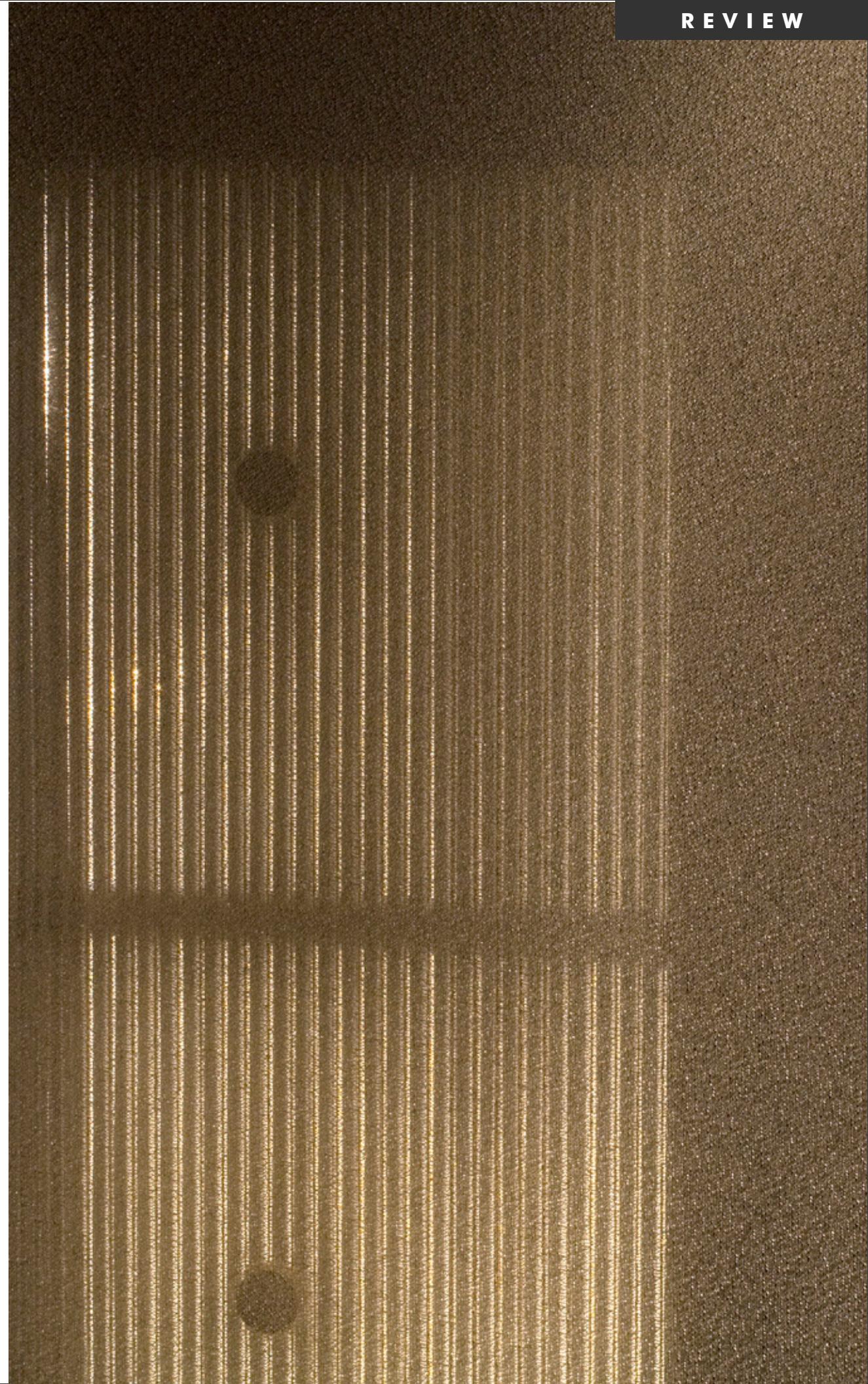
presentation than all but the best speakers provide. The 1.6 has about the same lower frequency cutoff as my Harbeth Compact 7ES-3's, but the character of the bass is different. It is somewhat faster and more articulate, even more tuneful, while less powerful or punchy than a cone speaker. Again, if you are new to the panel experience, you will constantly be amazed at how something this big just disappears into the room.

Thanks to that 600hz crossover point, mids and highs are very coherent. This is one of the big differences that a Magnepan has to offer, that smoothness from top to bottom that is definitely lacking in box speakers at this price point. Vocals are very neutral. Listening to the current release of James Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* puts JT right in the room front and center. If you love jazz and vocal music, the 1.6's will astonish you at what a great job they do with that critical midband.

The 1.6 comes with a set of resistors to cut down the level of the ribbon tweeter a bit, should you find it too harsh. I was perfectly happy with the tweeter at the factory setting and never found it at all bright.  
*(continued)*

---

**If you are new to the panel experience, you will constantly be amazed at how something this big just disappears into the room.**



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However, those of you with more reflective rooms may want to take advantage of this, so even if you don't need those resistors now, put them away for safekeeping later.

What really makes this such a great overall experience and gives you a much bigger look at true high-end sound than you ought to get at this price range is the combination of a huge soundstage, spot-on tonality and a smooth upper range. Cymbals sound correct and have a very realistic amount of air and decay. Spinning the LP of Todd Rundgren's *A Capella* put all 14 of the voices in perspective and clearly discernable, giving this acoustic performance the right amount of space, if not a bit bigger-than-life sound, which I enjoy.

## You Can't Have Everything For \$1895

Every budget component has its limitations and the 1.6 has a few, but all sins of omission. The good news is that while playing the modest Magnepans within their limits, you can easily mistake the presentation for speakers three to four times as expensive, they're that good.

**Stay away from the frequency extremes (especially the lower registers), keep the volume control away from 11 and it's all good.**

The minute you try to crank Led Zeppelin with anything but a mega amplifier though and you will be disappointed, which leads us to the major dilemma of the Magnepan; they are an inexpensive speaker that requires a top-shelf amplifier to give its all. *(continued)*



Everything but the top-of-the-line 20.1 is inexpensive in audiophile terms. Heck, one of my Shunyata Anaconda VX power cords cost more than the 1.6's.

A number of friends (a couple of them 1.6 owners) that are dyed-in-the-wool Magnepan fans heard the 1.6's in my reference system (CJ ACT2/Series 2, Premier 350 and Naim CD555) and thought I had some new prototype speaker. Maybe that is also the most exciting thing about the Magnepan 1.6, it's so good that as you travel down the wacky road of audiophilia, they are probably the last thing you will upgrade in your system as it improves. I had no problem clearly discerning the difference between the \$7,500 Nagra PL-L pre-amplifier, the \$8,500 BAT VK-32SE and my ACT2 when playing the 1.6's. I can't think of many sub-\$2,000 speakers that can pull this off. While many people claim that the Magnepans can't play loud, it's more of a function of available amplifier current. I was constantly surprised at how loud I could actually play the 1.6's with the CJ and Luxman amplifiers.

---

**While many people claim that the Magnepans can't play loud, it's more of a function of available amplifier current.**

#### An Unorthodox Solution

Big amplifier or not, there's still only a limited amount of bass that can be coaxed from the 1.6. Playing test tones on the Stereophile test disc revealed things falling off pretty quickly after about 50hz. Personally, I suggest a subwoofer if you really want full-scale performance out of these speakers. They do everything else so well, it's worth investigating.

As I write this, I fully expect the Magnepan Secret Police to come crashing through the door and drag me out into the darkness because I know they believe that mating any kind of cone with their panels is heresy. But guess what? It works very well. If you want to enjoy a wider range of music, the solution is only another thousand dollars away – pick up a MartinLogan Grotto i subwoofer. It has one aluminum cone 10-inch woofer with a 300-watt amplifier. Running the 1.6's full range and bringing up the Grotto at 55 hz was a match made in heaven. This makes the 1.6 a serious full-range system that will impress you even further. *(continued)*

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### The Magnepan 1.6

MSRP: \$1,895

### MANUFACTURER

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### PERIPHERALS

**Amplification** Luxman L590A II, Rega Elicit, Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2 and Premier 350

**Digital Sources** Naim CD555, Luxman L7

**Analog Source** TW Acoustic Raven Two w/SME 309 arm and Clearaudio Maestro wood

**Interconnects** Shunyata Antares, ED 413

**Speaker Cable** Shunyata Orion, ED 213

**Power Cords** Shunyata Python, Running Springs Mongoose

**Power Conditioner** Running Springs Dmitri

**Accessories** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators, GIK Tri Traps and GIK 242 panels

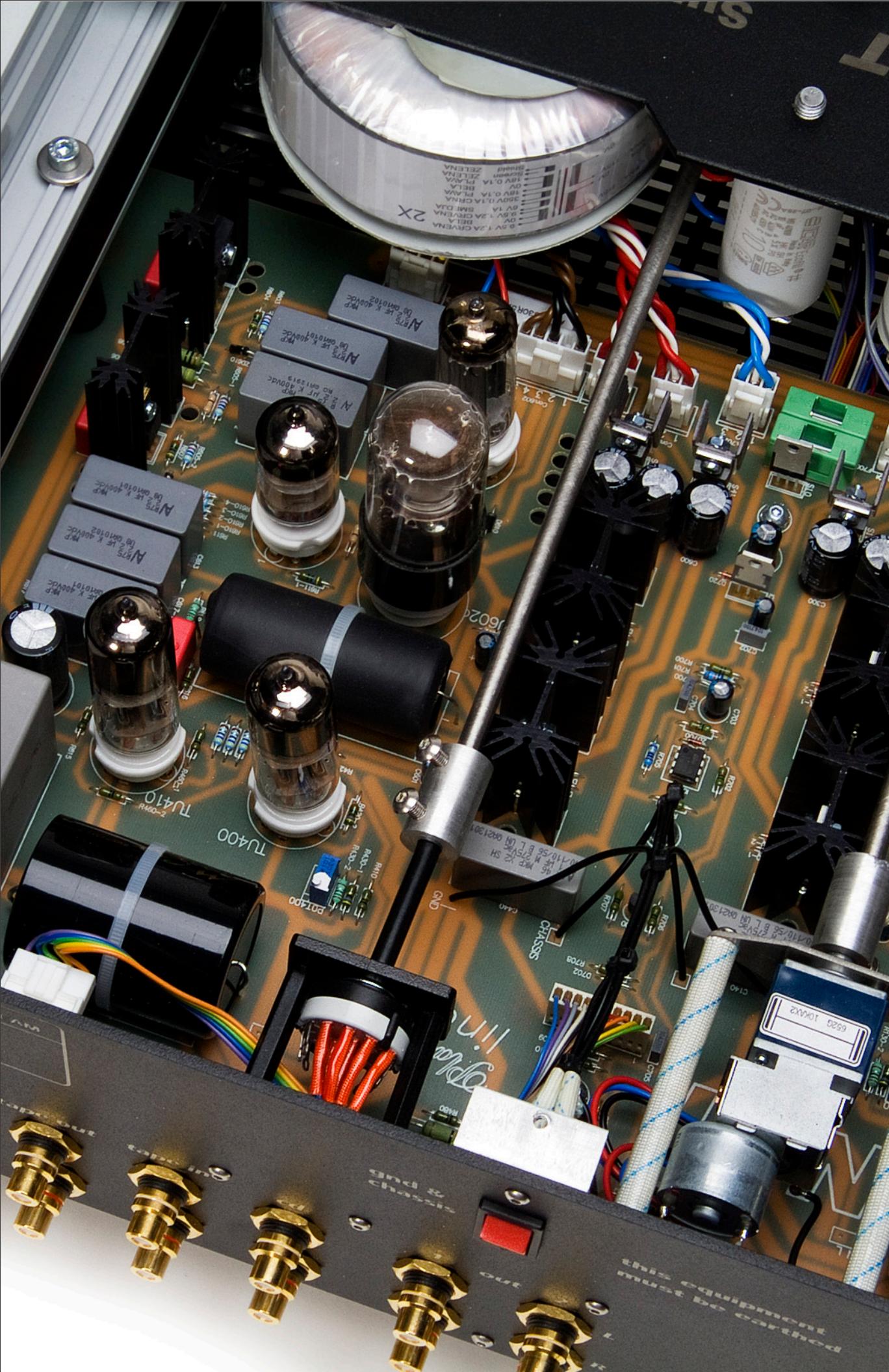


# The NAT Plasma R Preamplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

Most audiophiles have their own takes on what part of a HiFi system is the most important. Some argue the source, others say the speakers, etc. etc. I'm of the mind that all components in the chain should be equally good so that there is no weak link. If any one component is way better than the rest of the chain, you are losing resolution somewhere. I'm also a big believer in having an excellent linestage as an anchor to your system: I've never experienced truly great sound with a passive linestage.

Now that you have my preferences filed at the back of your consciousness, let's proceed.



Zed from Musical Sounds was very enthusiastic when he called about the Plasma R. Of course, he told me that it was an amazing preamp and all that. That's his job and I respect him for it. However, I've heard that a lot in the past four years, and in all but a few cases (The Nagra PL-L and the Aesthetix Callisto Signature are three of my other favorites) I always go back to my Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series Two with a big smile on my face.

**Add the Plasma R to my list of great preamplifiers; this one's a keeper.**

The name comes from the use of OD3 gas regulator tubes in the power supply. The Plasma R also features two EZ80 rectifier tubes. The gain stages feature a pair of 6N30's (similar to a 6H30) and a 6N2P-EV (similar to the 12AX7) per channel. The noise specification is -104db and while I can't verify that, I will say that this is an incredibly quiet tube preamplifier, especially for one with tube rectification.

Add some beefy casework and a spiffy remote control and after one peek at the inside, you'd swear this preamplifier is worth considerably more than the \$5,600 MSRP. Though NAT has been a bit under my radar, they have been around since the mid eighties and their products are sold through their North American distributor who maintains a dealer network in both the United States and Canada, so you can rest assured that there will be adequate support for their products.

The rear panel features two sets of RCA output jacks with variable output level and one fixed, so those with subwoofers and recorders will be easily accommodated. There are four sets of RCA inputs, all high level. The Plasma R does not feature any balanced inputs or outputs. It is also worth noting that it is fully Class A with zero feedback throughout and features a dual-mono design.

Another nice touch that impressed me with this preamplifier is the use of NOS tubes instead of budget Chinese tubes. Zed told me that they strive to use the best tubes in their preamps.  
*(continued)*

While it made a difference (much for the better) in the final sound, I am curious as to whether NAT will be able to continue to do this as their production increases and maintain the price point.

**The remote is very stout and easy to use, but it only has a volume control and a mute button.**

At this price level, I expect a bit more, as the comparably priced offerings from ARC, BAT and CJ all have full-function billet remotes that control all of the inputs as well as volume. The \$2,500 Prima Luna offers an amazingly good remote as well, so I have to nick the Plasma R here. While the build quality and feel are excellent, I'd love to see full functionality.

That mute button on the remote will come in handy, as you want to always mute the Plasma R when turning it off. Should you forget this essential step, you will be reminded by a loud "thunk/snap" that I guarantee will be enough that you won't do it again. When turning on the Plasma R, it stays in mute mode for approximately two minutes until the soft start circuit in the power supply powers everything up gently.

The distinction of a mute switch on the front panel was a little bit confusing, but when you get used to it makes sense. Considering the bad luck I've had with older ARC and current ModWright gear, I'm not a big fan of paddle switches, so this could be its Achilles heel if you aren't careful around the Plasma R. While these switches are fairly robust with short paddles, one slip of the foot if you have it placed on the bottom shelf of a rack, or temporarily set it on the floor while reconfiguring your system, could prove dangerous.

*(continued)*



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### **Break In and Setup**

The Plasma R spent about 200 hours in my living room system before I settled down to serious listening in my dedicated room. It still opened up slightly between 200 and 300 hours, but if you can be patient for the first 200 hours, you will be rewarded. My CJ Act 2 was the same way, so the Plasma R is in good company.

For the majority of the review period, I switched back and forth repeatedly between the BAT VK-32SE (in for review), my Nagra PL-L and my other reference, the Conrad Johnson ACT2/Series 2. In the past, I've also spent about two years with the Aesthetix Callisto Signature, so while I'm going on memory, the Callisto's signature is burned into my memory quite well.

When switching between the preamplifiers, the only thing that was changed was the unit itself. The same Shunyata Anaconda VX power cord was used along with my normal combination of Shunyata and Cardas interconnects. The digital source was the Naim CD555 and my analog source was the Spiral Groove SG-2/Tri-Planar VII/Lyra Skala playing through the Naim Superline/Supercap2 (also incredibly quiet).

### **Worth the Wait**

Once the Plasma R had some time on the clock, I was immediately impressed with this preamplifier's

big sound and great tone. Acoustic instruments have correct timbre and size relationships, along with plenty of natural decay on tap.

When listening to the new Lindsay Buckingham LP, *Gift of Screws*, the Plasma R did a great job of capturing the fast, plucky style of guitar playing for which Buckingham is famous. This record has an extremely big sound field with a lot of small percussive details mixed in throughout the recorded space that could easily get lost or blurred with a lesser preamplifier. Same with my favorite local band, Fleet Foxes. Their four-part, layered harmonies can blend together when resolution is lacking. Thanks to the extremely detailed (but never harsh) MartinLogan CLX's, it was very easy to pick each vocalist out in their own space distinctly. I'd like to note to our readers that this album definitely sounds more lifelike on CD than LP, as if the album was an afterthought.

The best compliment that I can pay the Plasma R is that while it offers a high degree of musical resolution, it does not sacrifice musicality and get fatiguing, even after long listening sessions.

### **Getting a Grip**

Thanks to the enormous spaciousness that the CLX's throw out in my 16 x 24 room, anything that changes in my reference system is easily and immediately heard. (*continued*)

**Once the Plasma R had some time on the clock, I was immediately impressed with this preamplifier's big sound and great tone.**

Where the Plasma R differs from my reference ACT2 is in the sheer size of the soundfield it produces and the ultimate bass control. The ACT2 is still king, but it should be for three times the cost. However the Plasma R did offer up a healthy dose of the experience from the five-figure preamplifiers I have here and was not embarrassed in any way.

The price paid in ultimate grip in the lowest of bass notes is a result of the tube rectifiers. Conversely, some may prefer the slightly warmer sound of the Plasma R to the ACT 2 or perhaps an ARC Ref 3, so that's personal taste and I won't penalize the Plasma R for that judgment call. Again, this has been the characteristic of every other preamplifier that I've auditioned with tube rectification, so this is not unique to the Plasma R.

A quick peek at any audiophile message board will have just as many votes on the side of tube rectification as solid state, so again, it's a personal choice. Many people like to roll rectifier tubes to change the sound a bit, but I spent all of the review time with the Plasma R with the factory tubes. I felt that they did a great job with tube selection, so I didn't feel the need to bother.

I really enjoyed this preamplifier mated with my CJ Premier 350 and Nagra PSA amplifiers, which are both solid state. Moving over to the BAT VK-55SE and Prima Luna Dialogue monoblocks (both in for review), the sound was a little too romantic for me, but perfect for a few of my friends who attend quite a few of the listening sessions here. Staff writer Jerald O'Brien felt the Plasma R and VK-55SE was his absolute favorite, so we are splitting rather fine hairs here.

While the presentation of the lowest bass notes was slightly warmer than the uber-preamplifiers, the dynamics and slam provided by the Plasma R was excellent. When listening to Sir Arnold Bax's 2nd Symphony, the full weight of the orchestra was reproduced well, with enough speed to convey the realism of a big concert hall. Whether you love Shostakovich or Motley Crue, the Plasma R has a big sound with more than enough dynamic swing to keep you happy. I'd chalk this up to the beefy, dual mono power supply inside. Where some lesser tube preamplifiers sound warm and polite, the Plasma R is forceful and dynamic. (*continued*)




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**Whether you love Shostakovich or Motley Crue, the Plasma R has a big sound with more than enough dynamic swing to keep you happy.**



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Also worth noting is that the Plasma R is not at all cable dependent, either in type of interconnect or length. I had no problem driving a pair of 20' long Cardas Golden Reference or Transparent Opus interconnects.

### We don't call it TONEAudio for Nothing

I felt the Plasma R offered up the finest tube sound I've had the pleasure of hearing at this price point. While \$5,600 is not a casual investment, it won't require a home equity loan either and the performance offered is well worth the money.

**What everyone who experienced the Plasma R kept coming back to whenever we'd discuss a listening session was the tonal quality of this preamplifier.**

Vocals sounded natural, yet not overly romantic or syrupy. Listening to "Delia's Gone" on Johnny Cash's *American Recordings* was perfectly haunting, as was most of my Tom Waits collection. Should your taste go more to the romantic than the spooky, you will be equally pleased with Dusty Springfield singing "The Look of Love" or Peggy Lee singing "Fever."

Acoustic instruments had the right amount of body without being overdone. I'm sure some of this is a result of the characteristics of the 6H30 tubes. They just have a more beefy sound than the 12AX7 or 6922. Everyone has a preference, but mine is the big Russian triode. *(continued)*



*"The Dmitri represents the state of the art in power line conditioning"*

– Jeff Dorgay, TONEAudio Magazine, Issue 18



### An Excellent Value

While I enjoyed my time with the Plasma R and feel it offers a very substantial helping of “8-10 thousand dollar preamplifier sound” with a much more reasonable pricetag. For 90 percent of the audiophiles out there, this could easily be your last preamplifier.

I would like to see a few things improved. I’d love a microprocessor volume control to appear on the front panel and see the paddle switches disappear (along with the turn-off thump), replaced with something more functional. The sound is good enough that bumping up the price to cover these improvements would still be well within the Plasma R’s capabilities.

Bottom line, I am awarding the Plasma R one of our first Exceptional Value Awards for 2009. I look forward to listening to their phono preamplifier; if it’s as good as the Plasma R, it will be fantastic. This has to be the best deal going in a high-performance preamplifier. ●

**The NAT Plasma R Preamplifier**  
MSRP: \$5,600

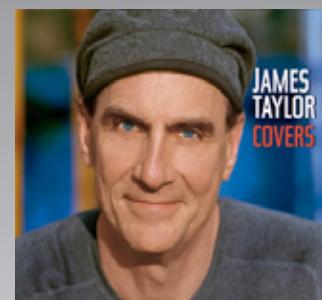
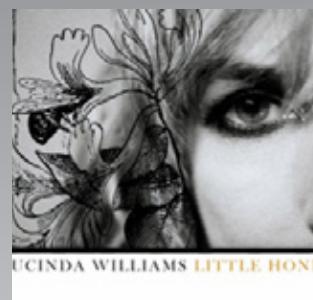
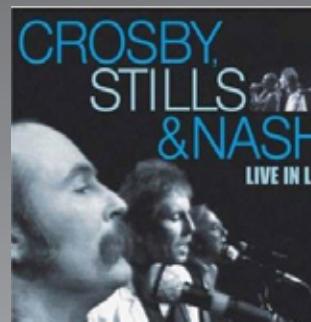
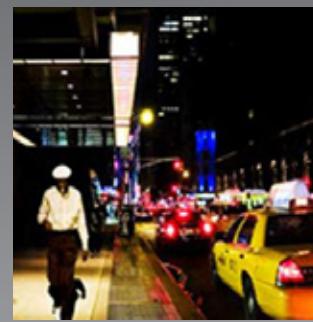
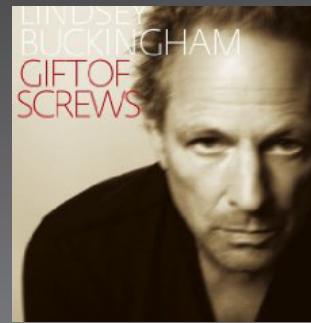
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## PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifiers** Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2, Nagra PLL, BAT VK-32SE, McIntosh CA2300, Red Wine Audio Isabella

**Power Amplifiers** Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, BAT VK-55SE, Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature, Prima Luna Dialog 7 monoblocks, McIntosh MC275

**Analog Sources** Spiral Groove SG-2 w/TriPlanar VII and Lyra Skala, TW Acoustic Raven Two w/ SME 309 (Clearaudio Maestro Wood) and SME iV.Vi (Dynavector XV-1s)

**Digital Sources** Naim CD555, Wadia 781i SE, Meridian 808, Sooloos music server, McIntosh MS750 music server

**Speakers** MartinLogan CLX w/Descent i subwoofers (pair), Verity Audio Sarastro II, Harbeth Compact 7ES-3

**Interconnects** Shunyata Anteres, Cardas Golden Reference, Furutech Audio Reference III (and AG12 phono cable), Transparent Opus

**Speaker Cable** Shunyata Orion

**Power Conditioning** Running Springs Jaco and Dmitri

**Power Cords** Running Springs Mongoose, Shunyata Anaconda VX, Shunyata Python Alpha

**Accessories** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators, Furutech DeMag.

**Room Treatment** GIK 242 panels, GIK TriTrap bass traps, Sonex Classic



# A New Twist On The Music Server

## THE HP TOUCH SMART IQ500T

By the TONE Staff

After two years I'm still convinced that the Sooloos is the best music server on Earth because of its brilliant user interface, which is helped by a touch screen. Non-geekazoids hate playing with mice and menus, they want to touch and go. Unfortunately, the high price of the Sooloos is a barrier to entry for most users.

Call me elitist, but I just can't get the least bit excited about the Squeezebox. It's cute, inexpensive and offers a lot of performance for the price, but it requires too much screwing around to enjoy music. When I had a Squeezebox in my living room, *no one* else played with it – I rest my case. We live in a visual world and a music server that can easily organize your collection will be much easier to sell to the rest of the family.

And don't even get me started on iTunes; it has always left me cold. Cover Flow is a step in the right direction, but it still has issues – and no touch screen.

## Enter the HP Touch Smart IQ500T

I first spied the Touch Smart IQ500T at Office Max during the Christmas shopping season. After playing with its touch screen, I knew this would make a fantastic music server, paired with Microsoft's Zune software. HiFi reviewers are often considered to be biased and unwilling to try new things, so I'll share a little secret with you; I'm an Apple guy through and through. Not in a religious zealot kind of way, but more of a practical way. I've always felt that anything Windows can do, Mac can do better.

Not this time. I've never been happy with iTunes as a vehicle for cataloging or listening to music. I love my iPod (especially with uncompressed music loaded), but using iTunes with a fairly large music collection is very cumbersome. Cover Flow makes it better, but not fantastic and after being spoiled by the touch screen on the Sooloos, surfing through the music collection on my Mac Mini is still uninteresting.

Computer enthusiasts take note; the Touch Smart comes in a 22-inch (IQ500T, starting at \$1199) or 24-inch (IQ800T, starting at \$1799) version. The base configuration for either of these computers features at least a 2ghz Intel DuoCore processor, 4GB of RAM and a 320GB hard drive, expandable up to a 1TB drive. The base configuration includes a 256mb NVIDIA GeForce graphics card, while the updated configuration offers the 512mb version. With the IQ500T destined for dedicated music server use only, I purchased the base version.

In case you actually need to use the TouchSmart IQ500T as a computer, it does come with all the necessary inputs and outputs as well as a very sleek wireless keyboard and mouse. (*continued*)




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**After playing with its touch screen, I knew this would make a fantastic music server, paired with Microsoft's Zune software.**



While the touch screen is essential for speedy music server use, it gets addictive in a hurry in normal desktop computing too. I wish everyone offered touch screen computing. And yes, it comes packaged with Vista, which by the way gave me no grief throughout the review period. Being a Mac guy, I'd be the first one to grump about Vista, but it ran flawlessly.

### True Audiophile Functionality

In addition to headphone and line outputs, the IQ500T also has TOSLINK and RCA SPDIF outputs. I tried the headphone amplifier with my Sennheiser 650's (recabled by Stefan Audio Art with a mini plug for convenience) and was very pleased with the sound quality. Windows trounces Mac here too, with the IQ500T offering a much warmer headphone sound than my Mac Mini and greater output.

I chose to make the IQ500T the center of my living room music system and spent a fair amount of time with it driving the BelCanto DAC 3, along with a pair of BelCanto 500 watt monoblocks and my Harbeth Compact 7ES-3's. I took it a step further and used just the IQ500T with a pair of 10 foot interconnects driving the MartinLogan Purity speakers that have built in amplification.

Adding the Bel Canto DAC to the mix definitely offered a more refined presentation, just using the IQ500T to drive the Purities offered a very satisfying and uncomplicated HiFi system that takes up precious little floor space and keeps cable requirements to a minimum. For a thousand dollars less than the cost of the top of the line BOSE system, you can have a full-blown music server and some speakers with a pedigree.

I tried the TouchSmart with a few different digital cables and also compared the USB output to the SPDIF, with mixed results. When using the Red Wine Audio Isabella, I preferred the sound of the USB output and with the BelCanto, I preferred the RCA, but the differences were fairly slight. Again, I think having uncompresssed files to play back might reveal a bigger difference.

In the end, I still appreciate HP offering an RCA/SPDIF output, for the audiophiles in the crowd that might have a somewhat older DAC that does not possess a USB input.

### Just Say Zune

While the Touch Smart IQ500T allows you to access your iTunes music as part of their Touch Smart desktop software, Zune 3.0 software is the way to go, as it offers much better organization of your music, allowing you to organize your collection by artist, album, song, genre and of course your own custom playlists. *(continued)*

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**In addition to headphone and line outputs, the IQ500T also has TOSLINK and RCA SPDIF outputs.**

## Review the Reviews...

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

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

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

Ken Kessler - *Hifi News*, July 2008

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

Jeff Dorgay - *ToneAudio Review*, 2008

Read all reviews at [www.DAC1PRE.com](http://www.DAC1PRE.com)

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Again, Microsoft has really outdone Apple in the look and feel department, right down to the choice of fonts. While iTunes to me has always had a geeky PowerPoint-like appearance to it, Zune feels a lot more like going to Nordstrom's. It has a stylish, easy to read look and much more of a "how can I help you?" vibe than iTunes has ever had. (Remember, this is the Apple guy telling you this...)

Even if you don't take advantage of the \$14.99 per month Zune pass, Zune 3.0 allows you to rip your CD's in Windows Media Audio (variable, constant bit rate, or lossless), or MP3 formats. I do wish the Zune software allowed an uncompressed option for capturing audio and feel that this will be a deal breaker for the dyed in the wool audiophile. But everyone else can live it up in Zune World.

### Add A Zune Pass

The key to really enjoying the IQ500T is the Zune Pass. For \$14.99 a month, you have access to over three million songs, which at 16 songs per CD, translates to just under 200 thousand CD's. The collection is way more versatile and deep than my experience with iTunes. I realize that 320kb/sec isn't anywhere near audiophile quality, it's actually quite fine for casual listening and as someone who's dedicated to physical media, it has probably saved me a few thousand dollars in lousy discs I didn't buy.

320kb/sec is also great for investigating an artist with a huge catalog. Don't want to buy all 48 Tom Waits albums, but curious to see what they are like? Zune is the perfect solution. (*continued*)

You don't have to download albums that you are investigating; you can just stream from the Zune site once you log in. I'm definitely converted.

We'll have a more in-depth article on Zune 3.0 software in an upcoming issue, but I'd like to point out one more exciting feature about the HP/Zune combination. I don't know if this is part of the basic architecture of Zune 3.0 or due to the fact that I was running a full 64-bit version, but I was able to download music from the Zune site, rip my own CD's and play music simultaneously without any glitches. I was very impressed by the sheer horsepower of this system.

### A Promising New Contender

I still look at music servers as a convenience component rather than an ultimate audiophile component, so I'm much more concerned with usability. I want a music server that's easy and fun to play with and HP's IQ500T fits the bill almost perfectly.

I'd like to see support for uncompressed files, and the playlist functionality expanded somewhat, but the TouchSmart IQ500T does more than anything else I've used at anywhere near this price point. And, there's still a fully functioning desktop computer under the hood! Highly recommended. ●

**The HP TouchSmart IQ500T**  
**MSRP: \$1195**

### MANUFACTURER

**Hewlett Packard**  
[www.hp.com](http://www.hp.com)

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifiers/DAC** Red Wine Audio Isabella w/DAC, BelCanto DAC3

**Power Amplifiers** Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature, BelCanto M500, BAT VK-52SE

**Speakers** Harbeth Compact 7ES-3

**Cable** Audience AU24 digital cable, ALO Audio digital cable Cardas Golden Reference speaker and interconnects

**Power Conditioning** Shunyata V-Ray w/Anaconda power cords





# WLM La Scala Monitor Loudspeakers

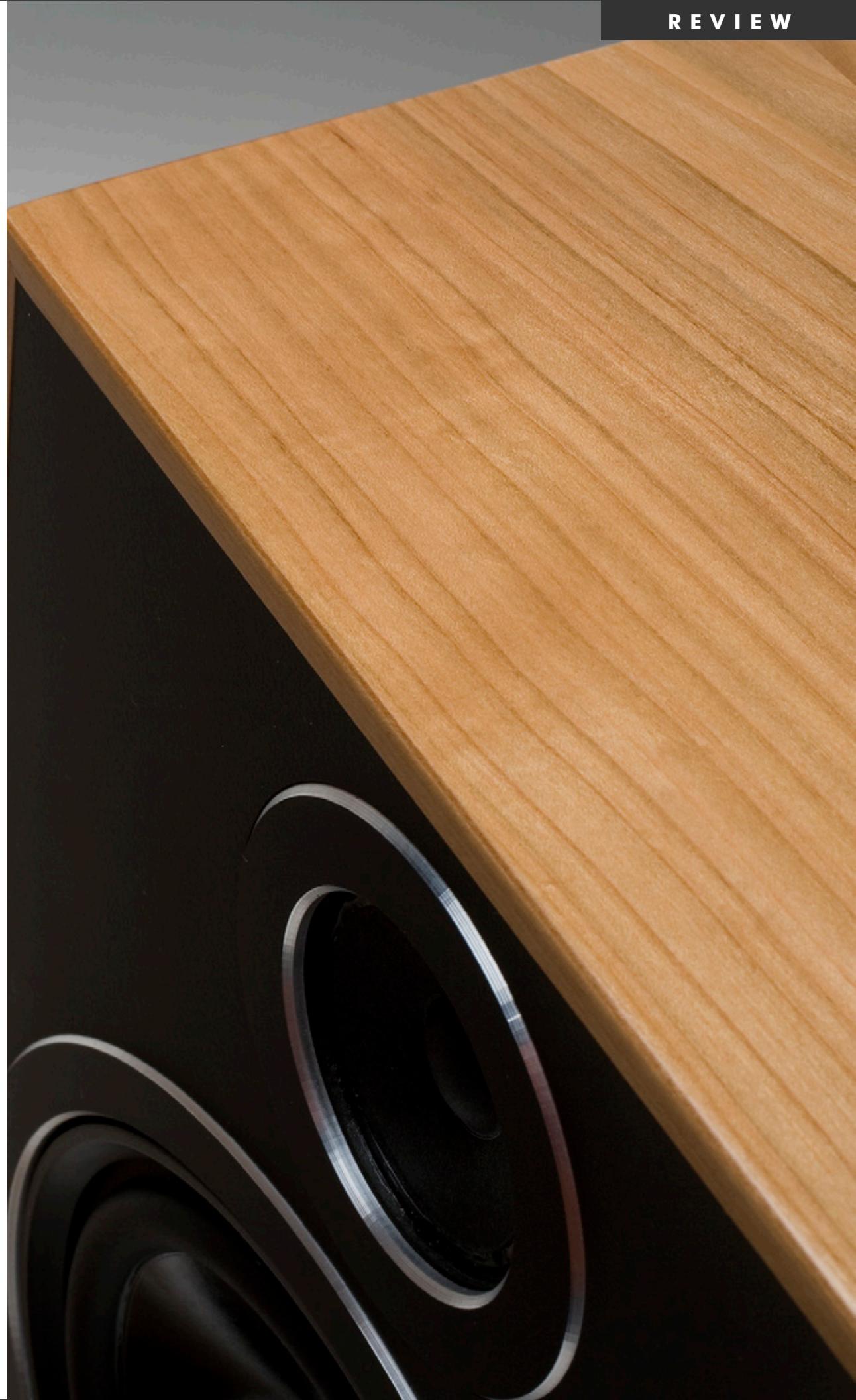
By Marc Phillips

have known about the Austrian audio manufacturer WLM ever since my SET days when I was constantly on the hunt for speakers that would work well with my Yamamoto A-08S 45 amplifier. The first WLM stand-mounted monitors I heard were costly, but they sounded amazingly warm, yet detailed and enveloping. I asked the North American distributor at the time if they were efficient, and he smiled knowingly and said, "Oh, yes." I told him I only had two watts per channel. He whispered, "That's enough."

I haven't heard much about WLM (Weiner Lautsprecher Manufaktur) in the past couple of years, but that's about to change. Vinnie Rossi of Red Wine Audio is now distributing this brand in the US, and I almost wet myself when he asked if I'd like to review a pair of the entry-level LaScala Monitors. While I no longer have the Yamamoto (yes, I do miss it), I remembered my first experience with that other pair and hoped that history would repeat itself.

#### **Not your average stand-mounted monitors**

The La Scala Monitors are a bit different in design than other WLM speakers. They don't feature that concentric woofer and tweeter configuration that may fool you into thinking they're a single-driver high-efficiency loudspeaker. The La Scalas sport a rather conventional 8-inch paper-cone woofer that is unusually stiff (not to mention shiny). While the tweeter isn't hiding behind the dust cap of the woofer like the more expensive models, it is fairly unconventional. WLM has chosen a 2.5-inch paper-cone tweeter that will remind you of loudspeakers from the '70s from brands such as JBL or Altec-Lansing. In fact, this driver may be the first thing you notice about the otherwise conventional appearance of the La Scalas. (*continued*)



## NEW PRODUCT

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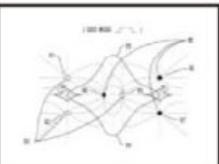
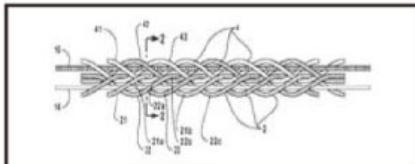
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating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



### A DEFINABLE ADVANCE IN CONDUCTOR SCIENCE

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

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

### UNIQUE ALPHA CRYOGENIC PROCESS

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

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The last time I saw a cone tweeter on a new speaker, it was on the Spica SC-30. While that was an impressive little speaker for \$330 a pair, the cone tweeter was used as a cost-cutting measure. (To paraphrase an old Subaru slogan, it was inexpensive and built to look that way.) This WLM cone tweeter, however, is a completely different animal. It doesn't look cheap at all. It was chosen because the cone material matched the woofer, providing a seamless top-to-bottom sound that was more consistent with the other models in the WLM line. The cone tweeter also goes up to 25 kHz, so there's no worry about high-frequency limitations.

**At first glance, the La Scalas may not seem like a \$4,500 pair of small stand-mounted monitors.**

They're not lavishly-designed nor do they feature provocative angles or seductive curves. For the most part, they're conventional boxes outside of those mysterious cone tweeters. They are only available in European cherry and do not include grills—both of these decisions were made to keep the costs low. Upon closer inspection, however, you'll notice an understated quality to these speakers. That cherry veneer is absolutely gorgeous up close. The fit and finish of the enclosure is exquisite. Even the cone of the woofer shines with the same intensity of the finest piano black lacquer.

### Setup and Listening

I used a couple of different types of speaker stands with the La Scalas. (*continued*)



Vinnie Rossi sent along the wonderful and affordable Skylan stands that have found favor with Harbeth enthusiasts of late. I also had a pair of 19-inch Sound Anchors as well. The only reason the Sound Anchors were put into use was that the Skylans needed to be filled with sand, and the first couple of weeks with the La Scalas were accompanied by the worst winter storm in the Pacific Northwest in 30 years. The sand would have to wait until two feet of snow melted away.

I also tried three sets of amplification with the La Scalas. First, I used my current reference, the SimAudio Moon I-7 integrated. The Moon is powerful, flexible, offers a wide variety of features and never fails to sound exciting yet controlled. I also used the WLMs with the new Conrad-Johnson LP66s power amplifier and Classic preamplifier combination to see how the speakers would react to a less-powerful (60 wpc) tube design.

Finally, I used the Red Wine Audio Signature 30.2 power amplifier and Isabella preamplifier. Vinnie Rossi chose to represent the Austrian company due to the synergy their two product lines create, so it made perfect sense to investigate.

At 91 dB and a steady 8-ohm impedance, the La Scalas aren't the most efficient speakers I've had in my listening room; the other models in the WLM line tend to gravitate toward 96 to 98 dB sensitivity. But they do react quickly to changes in volume, and I found myself pulling on the reins of attenuation more frequently than with other speakers of their size. This was especially noticeable on more powerful amplifiers such as the 150wpc SimAudio, where I'd change records and have to immediately lunge for the remote because I was getting blasted. This is where the Red Wine Audio Signature 30.2/Isabella combination beat out the other two amplification sources. With its relatively modest power rating, the RWA gear provided a more gradual and predictable way to control unexpected shifts in output levels from recording to recording.

The La Scalas also feature a control on the back that adjusts tweeter response from a 3db boost or cut, allowing the listener to compensate for the room, source material and associated components. While I had a bit of fun trying out different settings, my room is tuned fairly well and I always wound up pretty close to the 0 dB mark on most recordings. Still, this is an extremely useful feature for blending the La Scalas into almost any room.

### **With A Little Help From My La Scalas**

My first impression of the La Scalas was that they offered a more forward presentation than other monitors I've had in my room. Rather than present a soundstage located distinctly behind the rear plane of the loudspeakers, the WLMs seemed to actually provide spatial cues and musical information that existed in front of the speakers. While the presentation was not right in my lap, it was never aggressive and provided greater soundstage depth. I felt this was more effective at capturing a more thorough sense of space of the original recording venue. *(continued)*

**The La Scalas also feature a control on the back that adjusts tweeter response from a 3db boost or cut, allowing the listener to compensate for the room, source material and associated components.**

This may have been the result of the cone tweeter, which has a very wide dispersion pattern. Vinnie Rossi told me that the La Scalas were one of his favorite speakers in the world due to the open and spacious quality of that cone driver, and I'd have to agree. The La Scalas are an instrument for looking deep into a recording, almost like a fine pair of headphones. They are not an instrument for reproducing the same sonic perspective you get from your usual 20th row seats at your local symphony hall.

Bass performance was solid, though not subterranean. If I had to pick one single way in which to improve these speakers, I'd add about 10 Hz to the bottom end. Surprisingly enough, the La Scalas are available in a floor-standing version for \$5,400, and these do just that, going down to 30hz where the stand mount speakers only go down to 40hz. But with just a few exceptions, the quality and depth of the lower bass was the equal to some floor-standing speakers I've had in my listening room during the past year.

The La Scalas excelled at conveying emotional content. I pulled out my beloved UK Parlophone stereo pressing of *Sgt. Pepper*, the same one I received on my 15th birthday. Fortunately, this has been the Dorian Gray in my LP collection, remaining pristine and without surface noise despite at least 100 plays. I usually retrieve this LP to hear Paul's ripe and musical bass in "With a Little Help From My Friends," but I was struck by the child-like innocence in John's voice in "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds." His voice hung so clearly and plaintively in the space between the La Scalas that I could feel what kind of mood he was in when sang those words. This level of intimacy literally sent chills down my spine.

### **Just Close Your Eyes**

I'm definitely smitten with the WLM La Scala Monitors. You're probably tired of hearing about small speakers that sound much bigger than they are, and you're not alone. Let's face it, most small speakers need to earn that compliment before they're even allowed to see the marketplace these days. But the La Scalas do more than sound big for their size. They project a sound that can easily be mistaken for that of a much more expensive and ambitious design.

I've had several larger speakers in my listening room during the past two years, with at least half of them costing more than a thousand dollars more per pair than the WLMs. The La Scalas exhibited the same level of size, scope and presence.

When evaluating the LaScalas objectively, you have to close your eyes. Don't think about the fact that they're fairly expensive for a medium-sized monitor. Think instead about the fact that the cabinets are assembled by meticulous craftsmen who believe in Old World standards. Then open your eyes. Go up to the La Scalas and examine them closely. You'll see the quality immediately in every aspect of the design.

Now put on your favorite record, go back to your listening chair and close your eyes again. Forget about everything but the music. The WLM La Scala is *that* kind of loudspeaker. ●

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**The La Scalas do more than sound big for their size. They project a sound that can easily be mistaken for that of a much more expensive and ambitious design.**



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# A Classic Pair From CJ

By Marc Phillips and Jeff Dorgay

One of the most exciting things at this years Consumer Electronics Show was how many legacy hifi manufacturers are back making entry level products again. I'm sure some of the motivation is the economy, but I saw it as a concerted effort to help plant some seeds for this industry. Most people start their HiFi journey with modest components and work their way up the ladder as their budget grows along with their interest and music collection.

When I bought my Conrad-Johnson PV-1, it was \$500 in 1978, so in today's dollars that rounds out to \$1,933. Don't believe me, click on this link: <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>

The CJ Classic preamplifier tips the scale at \$1795 without a phono preamplifier and \$2,495 with one installed, so I'd say Lew Johnson and Bill Conrad have kept it real. Same with their new LP66S power amplifier, except the parts quality in both of these pieces are much better. Add legendary CJ build quality and reliability to the mix and you have a home run from CJ.

Marc and I had a great time with the LP66S and the Classic and were fortunate enough to compare them to some vintage CJ gear to see just how far these guys have come. Whether you are just beginning your audiophile journey or are just looking for a solid system at a reasonable price point, this is an amp and preamp that you can hand down to your kids when you are done with it.





# Keeping It Simple:

## The Conrad-Johnson LP66S Power Amplifier

By Marc Phillips

**B**ill Conrad and Lew Johnson are former economists, and their financial wisdom can be exemplified by the introduction of the new LP66S power amplifier. While many amplifier companies continue to develop their flagship designs by offering Mk. IV and Mk. V editions at ever-increasing retail prices, Lew and Bill went back toward the more-affordable end of their tube-amplifier line and created a model that offers the same level of performance, refinement and build design as their top models.

More and more books on corporate strategy focus on building value into an organization in these financially challenging times, and I suspect that CJ might have been the inspiration for at least a couple of these investment gurus.

**“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.” — Leonardo da Vinci**

CJ has accomplished this by keeping the overall design of the LP66S as simple as possible while maintaining high parts quality. The 66S uses only metal film resistors and high-performance polypropylene caps throughout the audio circuits and power supplies. Output transformers are of a proprietary high-bandwidth design. Even the internal wiring has been carefully selected and tested for maximum performance. And the build quality and finish of this amp are at the same levels as their top-of-the-line products. As you examine and caress the surfaces of the LP66S, you'll notice that it's a CJ through and through. No corners have been cut.

As I said, it's the simplicity of the design that keeps this amplifier from inching toward the five-figure range. The 66S uses only seven tubes, including four 6550s for the output stages (two per channel). Three 6922s are used in the composite triode input stage, which is then coupled to the cathode-coupled phase inverter. This driver stage is the same design used in more-expensive amps in this range. Limited negative feedback is used to reduce distortion, and discrete DC power supply regulators are used to isolate each stage from the output signal. *(continued)*

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The 6550s do require bias adjustments, but this is easily accomplished by way of a long, skinny plastic screwdriver supplied with the amp. An LED lights up next to each output tube when an adjustment is required, and the owner merely uses the screwdriver to gently turn a screw next to the LED until the light goes off. The screwdriver is long enough to insert right through the tube cage, so it couldn't be simpler (there's that word again). I had to adjust the trim on each of the 6550s three times in the first 50 hours of operation, and that was it. You'll have to adjust all over again when you put in a new set of 6550s, of course, but these babies last a long time. In other words, if you're a novice to tube amps and you're worried about constantly adjusting bias, don't be.

**"Keep it simple, stupid."**

— Richard Williams

I used two preamplifiers and three pairs of speakers auditioning the 66S. I started with the new CJ Classic preamplifier, which is an update of older CJ designs such as the PV-12 but with higher parts quality. At \$1,800 (\$2,500 with phono stage), the Classic offers the same exceptional value as the LP66S and may be the perfect match for an audiophile who is looking for high-quality tubed amplification from a well-respected American manufacturer without breaking the bank. Like the 66S, the Classic keeps the price low by keeping the design simple instead of cutting corners in quality. The only feature missing was a remote control, something I would readily forgo in order to afford this level of sound quality. *(continued)*

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



If immediacy and presence are priorities for you, then this combination will make your heart beat just a little bit quicker.

I also used the Red Wine Audio Isabella preamplifier so that I could take advantage of its built-in DAC and experiment with digital sources.

Speakers included DeVore Fidelity Gibbon Nines, Gradient Helsinkis and WLM La Scala Monitors. Both the DeVores and the WLMs were a superb match for the LP66S, offering a smooth yet expansive sound that really satisfied the tube lover in me.

**“Simplicity is the glory of expression.”**

— Walt Whitman

The LP66S/Classic combination provided a traditional “tube” sound. I’m not saying that the CJs remind me of vintage tubed equipment, which offer stunning midrange while losing some precision at the frequency extremes. I did notice an overall softness to this set-up, however, but it was beguiling and seductive. Information at the top and bottom was not at all obscured, and I was able to hear the same level of detail and texture that comparably priced solid-state delivers with ease. But I might have noticed less air and space around the instruments, especially in the way that musical instruments can interact with the walls and the floor of the recording environment.

I was able to restore some of this space by turning up the tweeter output controls on the WLM La Scalas, but the trade-off was some of that enveloping warmth.

On the MFSL LP pressing of Madeleine Peyroux’s *Half the Perfect World*, for example, the overall sound quality might have been a bit too tidy for me. I realize that Peyroux’s intention was to make a recording that sounded as if it could have been a lost classic from the ‘50s or ‘60s, but the CJ was a bit too persuasive. On the other hand, her voice took on such a tactile, earthbound quality that I wanted to walk up to this beautiful and talented woman in my listening room and ask if I could buy her a drink. If immediacy and presence are priorities for you, then this combination will make your heart beat just a little bit quicker. If you’re looking to crawl around and explore every crevice of a recording, you might want to use the LP66S with a preamp that’s just to the cool side of neutral.

That’s exactly what I did. While the RWA Isabella preamp has tubes, it’s also battery powered, with a lower noise floor than the Classic, and I was able to poke my nose that much deeper into recordings.

(continued)

**I think the ET250S is one of the two or three best amplifiers I've ever had in my system, and the LP66S came very close to scaling the same peaks.**

I do have to mention here that the RWA is much more expensive than the CJ. At the same time, I could clearly determine the common traits that the LP66S brought into the presentation. I still felt that soft, smooth flow that I heard with the Classic, but it was coupled now to a decidedly modern level of resolution. In fact, the LP66S now reminded me of the Conrad-Johnson ET250S power amplifier and its ability to inject light and meaning into musical passages. I think the ET250S is one of the two or three best amplifiers I've ever had in my system, and the LP66S came very close to scaling the same peaks. The fact that the 66S is just a little more than half the price of the ET250S should not go unnoticed.

Does that mean I preferred the Isabella to the Classic? I'm not sure I could say that because the former combination was also very alluring. I think it depends on your views of tubed amplification. The best tube and solid-state amps these days are closer than ever in terms of overall sound quality, a phenomenon that reminds me of what Buddhists say about different pathways to Nirvana. If it's something that makes you long for the days when tube amps sounded very different than transistorized counterparts, then the Classic/LP66S will take you back to that tree-lined road where the breezes are warm and soft and relaxing. (*continued*)

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**"Simplicity is the final achievement."**

— Frederic Chopin

I think it says volumes about the Conrad-Johnson LP66S that it brings out the strengths in different types of systems. Moving from preamps to speakers, the 66S added just the right amount of texture to the relatively neutral DeVores while placing the more immediate and forward WLMs into a larger and seemingly infinite soundstage. I even used the 66S to evaluate inexpensive Aperion 533-T bookshelf speakers and was mightily impressed with the results.

It's interesting that the CJ website recommends using the LP66S as the foundation for an excellent second system for audiophiles who already own one of the company's bigger amps. I can't imagine relegating this amp to such duty unless you're dealing with a pair of inefficient loudspeakers. Outside of the experience with the Gradient Helsinkis, the LP66S proved to be a supportive and flexible foundation for a wide variety of system configurations. While it does have a classic valve sound overall, it turns that particular dial just high enough to remind you of why you love tubes so much in the first place.

A \$4,300 tube amplifier may not be high on your list of priorities in this tough economy, especially if you have a modest system and want to rise to the next level. But the LP66S offers such a high level of overall performance that it could be the ideal amplifier for someone who already has a top-drawer system but can't quite swing \$10K for a high-quality tube amp from one of the high-end giants. The LP66S gives up so little to its more ambitious and complicated brethren that it's a natural – and simple – choice for audiophiles in 2009.



## Second Opinion — Jeff Dorgay

Believe it or not, I've lived with more CJ gear than even the renowned Sam Telleg, starting my journey with the MV-75 and a PV-1. I've been on the CJ bus since day one. My PV-1 is still in the care of a close friend and I recently picked up an MV-75a1 because it just seemed like a fun thing to do. However, it does allow me to put perspective on where CJ has come, having not only their latest creation on hand, but their very first. While others like to wax poetic, I prefer a more scientific comparison. With both on hand, this was an easy task.

To take the other variables out of the equation, I used my reference CJ ACT2/Series 2 preamplifier and Naim CD555 CD player along with the Harbeth 40.1 monitors

that we've had for some time. I also spent time with the Classic preamplifier in the system; while it has more of a "vintage CJ" feel than my ACT2, borrowing a friend's PV-12 for comparison revealed that while

the Classic makes no bones about its heritage, its feet are firmly planted in the current CJ Design ethos.

**Having enjoyed the previous five versions of this amplifier, I've seen it become more refined with each update.**

The LP66S even more so. Having enjoyed the previous five versions of this amplifier, I've seen it become more refined with each update. During its initial 200 hours of use, I had it on a rack above my CJ Premier 350 and hooked up to the MartinLogan CLX's just to see if it was up to the task. Then on one busy day, I was listening to the new Blue Note SACD's at a low level. *(continued)*

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When I went to shut off the Premier 350, I noticed that it hadn't been turned on. I had been listening solely to the LP66S!

Of course, when you turn the volume up and listen to material with more demanding dynamics, the difference between the two is readily apparent. But what I want to stress here is the exceptional tonality of the LP66S.

**When I switched it to a more reasonable speaker to drive, the Harbeth Monitor 40.1, the small CJ amp was able to play better to its strengths.**

Switching back to the MV-75, I could see just how far they had come.

Many who have been in the audio game for a long time can equate CJ gear with a lush, romantic midrange at the expense of the extremes. The company's first couple of products had a propensity for this, but the LP66S still has the midrange magic of the original, along with a more extended top end. It provides more detail and clarity as well, so while you can hear the family resemblance when listening to them together, you can easily hear the refinement in the latest model. Ditto with the bottom end of the frequency spectrum. Both have tuneful bass with about the same amount of weight, but the LP66S has more grip and control.

The LP66S from Conrad-Johnson is a great value, and if you have at-least moderately efficient speakers, it should make a great anchor to your system.



# The Conrad-Johnson Classic Preamplifier

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By Jeff Dorgay



The best part of giving your buddies a good deal on HiFi gear that you no longer need is that you can get your hands back on it. I happened to be on the phone with one of those friends as I was tearing open the box containing a new CJ Classic preamplifier. "Guess you'll be wanting the PV-12 back for a couple of weeks, eh?" he said. By the time I had some hours on the Classic, my good friend needed to go on a fairly lengthy business trip and my former preamp was back on its familiar equipment rack.

If you take delivery on a CJ Classic of your own, the first thing you will notice missing from the package is the remote control. Don't bother calling the factory to complain or ask for the upgrade – there isn't one. They kept it old school with no remote. Personally, at this price point, I'd rather pay less or get a few better capacitors on the circuit board for \$1,795. You heard right, \$1,795 for a Conrad-Johnson tube preamplifier, built in the USA. For \$2,495, you can get a Classic with a built-in tube phono stage featuring 12AX7 tubes, still quite the bargain, considering that some of the stuff coming from China costs more.

That's the benefit of sticking with a company that's been around for 30-plus years; they know how to do it right.

Another thing you'll notice missing on the back of the Classic is the dedicated power cord like those on older CJ preamps, such as my PV-12. Yep, the Classic has a standard IEC socket just like my ACT2/ Series 2, so you can swap power cords to your heart's content. Also missing is a balance control and a tape monitor switch, but the form factor is the same. Even the good friend with my old PV-12 loved the clean design.

#### I'll Take The Phono Option For \$750

Our test unit came with the optional phono preamp installed because I have a bunch of decent budget cartridges. For the entry-level audiophile, who's more likely to choose a turntable in the \$400 - \$1,500 range, \$750 is probably about what they would budget on a phono stage and pair of interconnects. Having it all on one chassis means less rack space taken up and potentially less noise. (*continued*)

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**That's the benefit of sticking with a company that's been around for 30-plus years; they know how to do it right.**




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**The reason I went all the way up to the Maestro was to prove a point: the Classic's internal phono preamp is easily the match for any of the similarly priced outboard phono stages we've reviewed lately.**

The phono stage has 54db of gain and adjustable loading between 200 ohms and 47k ohms. While the 200 ohm setting may not work with every MC cartridge out there – I'd suggest not going beneath .6mv output cartridges because you'd be pushing the gain pretty high – it offered splendid results with the high output MC Sumiko Blackbird, the and the Ortofon 2M Blue, mounted on my Technics SL-1200, and the MM Clearaudio Maestro Wood mounted on my Rega P9. These cartridges range from \$200 - \$1,000. The reason I went all the way up to the Maestro was to prove a point: the Classic's internal phono preamp is easily the match for any of the similarly priced outboard phono stages we've reviewed lately. And we've been through about a dozen.

Those of you who are itching to tube roll can substitute a set of Bugle Boys or something comparable for the three 12AX7's in the phono stage and take it even further. If you have a set in your tool box, fine, but if you have to go out and spend \$150 a pop to get them, it kind of defeats the economy of this preamp. But boys will be boys. *(continued)*

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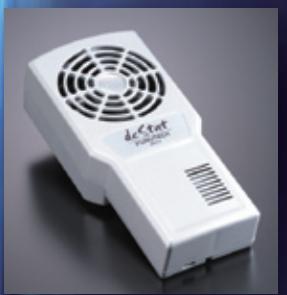
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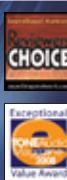
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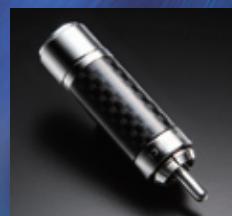


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The other two tubes in the gain stage of the Classic are M8080's, a variation on the 6C4 tube. These are plentiful as new tubes and NOS variants aren't terribly expensive either. I saw a pair of Mullards on Ebay for less than \$50, so you can be assured of a long-lasting supply of these tubes. If the Classic is like my past CJ tube preamps, you can probably expect 5,000 - 6,000 hours before you hear major degradation in sound, and probably twice that long until absolute tube failure.

No budget tube phono stage is dead quiet and the CJ is no exception, but the little bit of tube rush did not bother me and was not audible from my listening position. Sure, if I put my ear right up against the tweeter in my Harbeth Monitor 40.1's, I could hear a little tube rush, but you don't listen to records with your ear against the tweeter, do you?

If you have or have been considering a turntable, I can't suggest the phono-preamplifier option highly enough. It was very dynamic with great bass control and a very pleasant treble, definitely less veiled than my old PV-12, which sounded great until I switched to the Classic.

## An Upgraded Character

A good part of the review period was spent listening to the Classic with CJ's new LP66S power amplifier, also reviewed in this issue. Though the Classic still has more of the "modern CJ sound," it is still slightly romantic sounding, but considerably less than the PV-12, which actually sounded dark in comparison.

I felt that using the Classic with the LP66S or my trusty MV-75a1, was definitely quite tubey and good, but because I've spent so much time with their ACT2/Series too, maybe a touch too tubey for me. *(continued)*

I preferred the Classic with a few of my favorite budget solid-state amplifiers the best, but this is picking very small nits. My buddy with the PV-12 was in tube heaven when he heard the Classic and LP66 together.

To investigate the ultimate resolution, I inserted the Classic in place of my ACT2/Series 2 preamplifier and fed the output to my CJ Premier 350. Again, I doubt anyone else will do this, but it does give one a clear view of the Classic's limitations.

### Not Quite All Tubey Goodness

I'm sure part of the reason the Classic has a more modern sound, and a bass grunt that my old PV-12 does not, is due to the FET output buffer stage. This most likely is what gives the Classic the ability to drive a 20-foot pair of interconnects without a problem. I'm in favor of progress, and if a FET buffer stage does the trick and keeps the budget on track, it works for me.

Comparing the Classic with the older PV-12, the progress made on the CJ is apparent. But comparing it with a number of other preamplifiers in the \$2,000 to \$3,000 range, you realize what a stroke of genius it really is.

The best way I can describe the Classic is that it's like an ACT2 with less resolution and ultimate dynamics. But much like the LP66 power amplifier, at lower volumes and with somewhat mellow program material, you can easily be fooled into thinking you are listening to a much more expensive preamplifier. The overall sound of the Classic is very neutral, with just a touch of warmth and body that is hard to get without a couple of tubes.

When I assembled a system consisting of all comparably priced products and using my Harbeth Compact 7ES-3's, I realized that this was a preamplifier that handles the basics in an exemplary way. Acoustic instruments possess correct timbre, and there isn't a pinch of listener fatigue, even after long sessions. And that's what you should be able to purchase even if you don't have five figures to spend on a preamplifier.



### A Very Happy Ending

Our story ends with my friend coming home from his trip and ordering a Classic of his very own. The good news is that my old PV-12 has moved on to another friends house, so if either one of us is jonesing for a visit, we know where it is. Ten years later, that PV-12 is still worth enough money on the used market (even in our current lousy economy) that it was a cost-effective upgrade. It doesn't get any better than that.

I think CJ's Classic is a great value, with or without phono stage, and I am happy to award it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2009. As much as I hate the B-word, I dare you to find a better preamplifier at this price point. Considering that my 11-year-old PV-12 still works like a champ, as does my 32-year-old PV-1, I feel very confident in suggesting the Classic to you. ●

---

**Considering that  
my 11-year-old PV-  
12 still works like a  
champ, as does my  
32-year-old PV-1,  
I feel very confident  
in suggesting the  
Classic to you.**



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HiFi & Records*

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2733 Merrillee Drive  
Fairfax, VA 22031  
703-560-5360

### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifiers:** CJ ACT2/  
Series 2, Red Wine Audio  
Isabella, Audio Research  
SP3

**Amplifiers:** CJ Premier  
350, CJ MV-75a1, BAT  
VK-55SE, Red Wine Audio  
Signature 30.2, Nagra PSA

**Digital Sources:** McIntosh  
MS750, McIntosh MCD500,  
Naim CD555, Sooloos  
Music Server

**Analog Sources:** Technics  
SL-1200, Rega P3, Rega  
P9, Sumiko Blackbird,  
Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood,  
Ortofon 2M Blue

**Speakers:** DeVore Nines,  
Harbeth Monitor 40.1,  
Harbeth Compact 7ES-3,  
WLM LaScala, MartinLogan  
CLX, Verity Audio Sarastro II

**Cable:** Cardas Golden  
Reference, speaker and  
interconnects

**Power Conditioning:**  
Running Springs Jaco and  
Haley

**Power Cords:** Running  
Springs Mongoose,  
Shunyata Python and  
Venom

# Product Update:

## The Rega Elicit Internal Phono Stage

By Jeff Dorgay



Input 1   Input 2   Inp



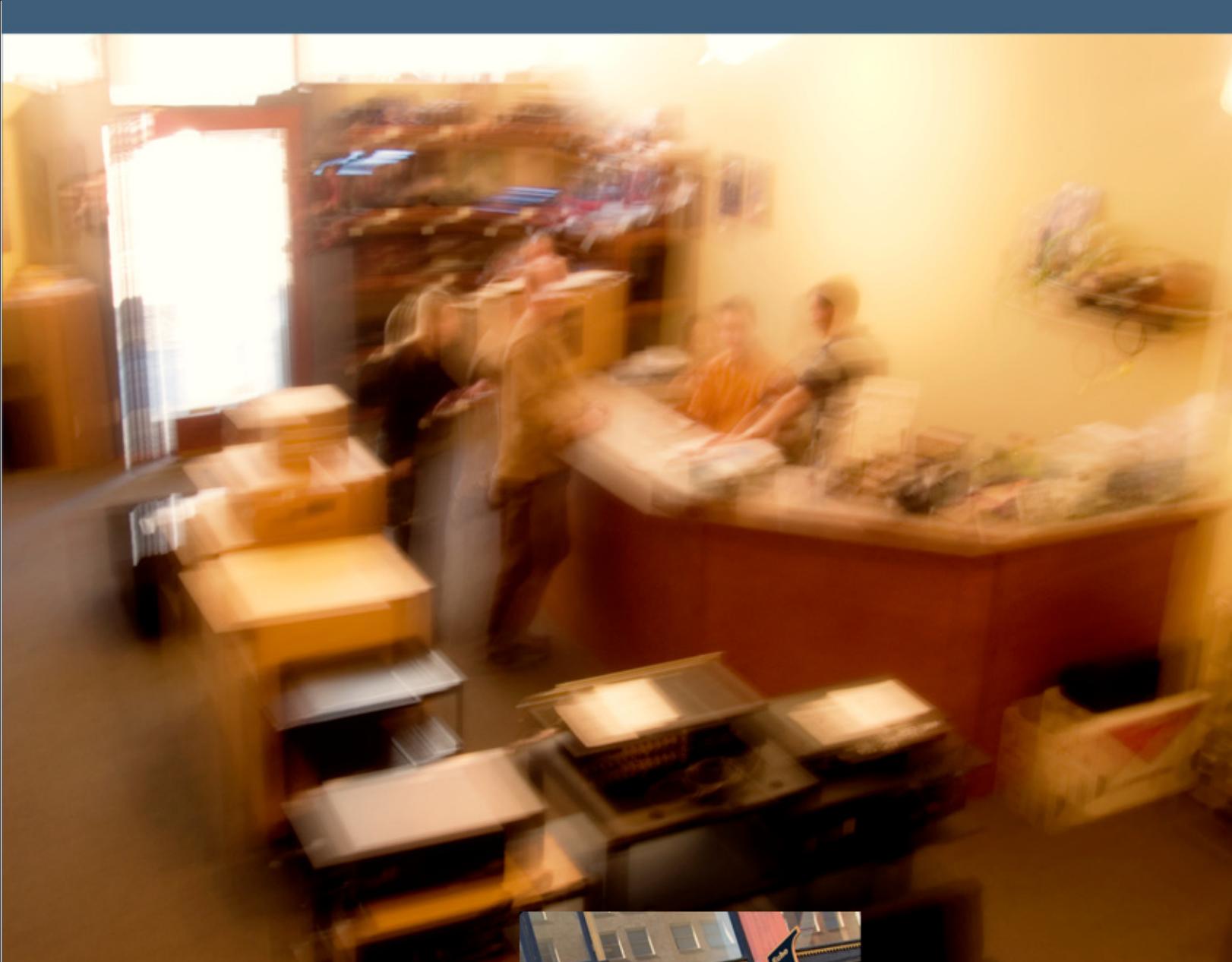


**T**here was a catch to our getting the Rega Elicit integrated amplifier before anyone else a few months ago, the MC phono boards weren't ready yet. However, we felt the amplifier was such a great product; we chose to move on the review to get the scoop and evaluated it with the MM stage. In case you haven't read the review on the Rega Elicit amplifier, it's in the gear section of our website. The Elicit puts out just over 80 watts per channel and is capable of driving all but the most inefficient speakers very well.

---

The MM phono board is a \$145 upgrade and the MC board is \$175. The MC board does not have adjustable gain or loading, but comes set at 100 ohms with a gain of 64.5 db, making it a good fit for a very wide range of cartridges. I had excellent results with the wide range of cartridges I used it with, which incidentally all work their best in the 100-200 ohm range. While I was able to perform the installation myself, the Elicit is somewhat tricky to disassemble, so I would suggest that if you are even dreaming about connecting a turntable, order your Elicit with a phono board installed!

Often times a built in phono stage is somewhat of an afterthought, but I was very impressed by the quality available here for under \$200. I guarantee that you won't find anything under about \$600 that sounds this good. For those who might question this phono stage in what Rega considers their top of the line integrated, I think it still makes perfect sense. *(continued)*



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Many people are basing their systems on digital sources, but do like to dabble in vinyl and this is the perfect solution; it keeps your rack tidy and makes a very nice combination with your favorite table. I did most of my listening with a Rega P9/Lyra Argo-i, Rega P3/Denon 103 and of course my Rega Apheta MC cartridge. Granted, the P9 was somewhat overkill, but I wanted to push the boundaries somewhat. While not the last word in resolution at this level, I still came away impressed with the level of performance this phono preamp was capable of, especially with the Apheta.

**Unlike some other phono cards I've heard in much more expensive preamplifiers, the Rega stays true to the music.**

Tonality was excellent and it was very quiet. When switching to my Rega IOS phono stage (which costs as much as the Elicit), you could definitely hear more dynamics and low-level detail, but the change reminded me a lot of putting the same cartridge in a P3 and then moving up to a P9. Great sound, you just get more of it.

The internal phono stage for the Rega Elicit plays way out of its league; when you are ready to step up to a more elaborate turntable and phono preamplifier combination, the internal will still be there for a second turntable! I can't think of a better upgrade in audio for \$175, period. ●

# The Improved Grado Master1

---

By Jeff Dorgay



They've been busy at Grado these days. Along with revamping the headphone line, Grado's engineers are also making some changes to the cartridge line as well. As Jerold O'Brien mentioned in the article on page 138, Grado tends to make evolutionary changes, but always improving the breed.

It's easy to get confused with the Grado cartridges, because they carve all the bodies out of wood and to those not completely familiar with the subtle differences, they look very similar on the outside. If you take a peek at the Grado website ([www.gradolabs.com](http://www.gradolabs.com)) you will notice two different levels of Master cartridges. The one we are dealing with here is the Reference Series Master 1, (\$1,000) which replaces the prior Master. (\$800)

The only visible difference is the Australian Jarrah wood housing, which has a slightly more red tint to the body; the rest of the goodies are inside. For the technical minded, Grado has reduced the moving mass of the generating system by 17%, with an additional 5% reduction in stylus tip mass over their lower priced siblings, the Platinum 1 and Sonata 1.

The complete Grado line features a "moving-iron" design, which has the higher output of a moving magnet cartridge, but has more of the tonal delicacy of a moving coil and does not require a low output phono stage to work properly. The Master 1 has an output of 5mv. and requires loading at 47k ohms. It is a fairly lightweight cartridge, weighing only 6.5 grams.

### **Setup**

The Master 1 has a suggested tracking force of 1.5 grams, like every other Grado I've ever used and even though I fiddled with it slightly, 1.5 on the nose ended up being perfect. Guess John Grado knows what he's doing after all of these years.

The Master 1 was mounted on an SME 309 arm and the TW Acoustic Raven Two turntable for most of the review, but did spend a little time on the Rega P3-24 and the Rega P9. I borrowed the last generation Master from a good friend, so we could do a direct comparison on the Raven and after optimizing setup on a second SME 309, we were ready to start listening.

### **Cleaner and Clearer**

Grado fans love the musicality and warmth of their cartridges, but detractors complain that Grado cartridges don't track well enough. Personally, I've never had much trouble with them, but there are a few tunes that I don't play with my Grado cartridges. *(continued)*



You can tell instantly that the mass reduction has paid off in spades. One of the first “trackability” tests for me is Joni Mitchell’s “Jericho” on the *Don Juan’s Restless Daughter* album. The minute her vocal track kicks in, the original Master mistracks just enough to be unpleasant, but the new version sails right through. Same thing with the beginning riffs of “Somebody Get Me A Doctor” on *Van Halen II*. Sure, it won’t track the last band of the Shure Audio Obstacle Course, but hardly anything will. And there isn’t a mastering engineer on Earth that cuts records that hot, so relax and dig the sound of the Grado Master 1.

If you have spent some time with Grado cartridges, you know that except for their top of the line Statement, they are on the mellow/musical/romantic side of the fence. Seriously, for most records, this is never too much of a bad thing and if ultimate resolution is your quest, you should be looking elsewhere. Grado is all about tonality.



## More Magic Than The Keebler Elves

What I found most impressive comparing the new Master 1 to the previous Master is that the Grado engineers have managed to retain the midrange magic and tonality of the original while increasing the resolution at the same time. Very impressive.

When listening to solo male and female vocals, you don’t hear the difference as easily, because the frequency extremes aren’t being challenged as much. However, dropping Weather Report’s *Heavy Weather* on the platter and going to “Harlequin” (track 4), you get all the attack of the keyboards as they come in with a bang. Staying in the fusion groove, *Livestock* from Brand X was next on the playlist. The dynamics of “Nightmare Patrol” were captured faithfully without distortion on the peaks and the cymbal crashes had excellent decay.

It goes without saying that the Master 1 works wonders on those records in your collection that are less than optimally recorded, especially some of those that were recorded on first generation digital gear, then pressed to LP.

## Truly the Master of Its Domain

I give the Grado Master 1 my highest recommendation in these circumstances: the listener that wants a slightly romantic overall presentation, no matter what they listen to, or the listener that wants a second cartridge to compliment a very highly resolving primary tonearm/cartridge setup.

The only application I would not suggest this cartridge is if the rest of your system is leaning heavily towards the mellow side. The Grado just might be too warm for you, but if you like Guinness Dark elsewhere, it might be perfect.

At this pricepoint the Grado is definitely worth the asking price. It’s easy to setup and because it doesn’t require an elaborate phono stage to give its all, is quite the bargain. ●

**The Grado Master 1**  
**MSRP: \$1000**

## MANUFACTURER

**Grado Labs**  
4614 Seventh Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11220  
718 435-5340

## PERIPHERALS

**Turntable** TW Acoustic Raven TWO w/SME 309 arm, Rega P3-24, Rega P9

**Phono Preamp** Nagra VPS, Nagra BPS, Naim Superline with HighCap2

**Amplifier** Burmester 018 Integrated

**Speakers** Verity Audio Sarastro II

**Cable** Shunyata Antares Interconnect, Shunyata Orion speaker cable, Shunyata Anaconda power cords, Running Springs Mongoose power cords

**Power Conditioning**  
Running Springs Dmitri

**Accessories** Furutech DeMag 1, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators



# The Gibbon Nines

**THEY'RE ONE LARGER**

By Jeff Dorgay and Marc Phillips

We've lived with a pair of DeVore Gibbon Super 8's for a couple of years as part of the TONEAudio reference fleet, but in our never-ending quest to get more sound, the Nines have been on our radar for some time. After a great experience with the 8's, we got a lot of email asking about the difference between the 8's and their larger sibling, the Nines.



**You don't think you need that extra power, but once you get it, you don't want to go back.**

As Marc likes to say, the Super 8 is a fantastic real-world speaker. They are relatively small in size, yet make a big sound. The cabinetry is exquisite, making this a speaker with zero WAF issues; I can't imagine anyone having an issue with a pair of these in their living/listening room. While I haven't spent quite as much time with the Super 8's as Marc, they are an extremely resolving speaker that was relatively easy to set up when I had them here. The match in his 15 x 18 room was good and the Super 8's provided good system synergy with the rest of his system.

The Super 8 was one speaker that I had better luck with on the short wall of my 16 x 24 room and felt that while I loved the natural midrange and lifelike imaging that these speakers provided, more bass extension would make this almost perfect speaker more palatable. Enter the Nines.

Only slightly larger in all dimensions (the Super 8's are 8.125 inches wide by 12 inches deep by 34 inches high and the Nines are 8.5 x 14.5 x 38), the Nines pack a much bigger punch. The front-mounted woofer and tweeter are the same drivers as in the Super 8's, but the side panel on the far side of the tweeter sports a second woofer and a second port. DeVore also claims a slightly higher sensitivity of 90.5 db for the Nines, where the Super 8's were rated at 90db. Interesting to note for spec freaks, but in the real world, half a db isn't going to require different amplification choices.

This is the missing weight that this speaker really needs and what turns the Nines into a different animal. Going from a lower limit of 36hz in the Super 8's to 29hz in the Nines is barely half an octave, but the improvement in weight and texture makes the Nines so much more intriguing. The low bass has a more natural and distinct place in the overall presentation. It's like going from a 600cc sport-bike to a 1-liter bike. You don't think you need that extra power, but once you get it, you don't want to go back.

But price is also a deciding factor. The Super 8's still retail for \$4,000 per pair and the Nines will set you back \$6,500 per pair. Is it worth it and which speaker is right for you?

#### Innie or Outie?

While speakers with side-firing woofers can sometimes be problematic in terms of room placement (my Penaudio Serenades always did better with a diagonal placement scheme), the Nines were more room friendly, though Marc and I used different placements to achieve smooth bass response. In his smaller room, inward-firing woofers with just enough toe-in so that the woofer fired towards the rearmost edge of the other speaker was the ticket. In my room, the extra woofer allowed me to move them to the long wall and face the woofers out, with about five degrees of toe-in. *(continued)*



"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**



Set up this way: the Nines were about eight feet away from the side walls and only about seven feet apart. This offered the best bass reinforcement as well as a huge soundstage. Experimentation is encouraged, but the Nines are one of those rare speakers that are tough to get horribly wrong in your room. Either way, you will be rewarded if you take the time to make a few adjustments. The real trick is setting the speakers far enough away from the room boundaries to achieve the soundstaging pyrotechnics for which the Nines are capable while adjusting the toe-in to get the best balance of bass response and integration with the lower mids.

**At 58 pounds each, they are relatively easy to maneuver, which helps in the quest for ultimate speaker placement.**

The final step is to adjust the rake angle of the speaker; the Nines need to be tilted back slightly to be all they can be. By slowly unscrewing the beautifully finished two-piece aluminum cones beneath the front of the speaker, you will be able to hear that perfect spot where the image locks in and the soundfield expands. This will vary with room size and your distance from the speaker. An assistant should be able to help you accomplish this in about 15 minutes.

Much like setting the VTA on a turntable, you will hear the stereo image lock into place and become less diffused when the rake is just right. I suggest listening to a mono recording from your listening chair and determine the optimum rake angle with one speaker. *(continued)*

Next, use a high-quality level and mark the amount of angle on the bubble with a Sharpie. Move over to the other speaker and match that angle, you will be surprised how much more precise the imaging is not only when the rake angle is correct, but identical from speaker to speaker. Take it as a tip from your favorite panel guy, it pays off.

### Highly Compatible

Between the two of us, we probably ran the Nines through their paces with about a dozen different amplifiers, so I think it's safe to say that these speakers are compatible with anything putting out about 20 watts per channel or better. When Marc used the Croft Polestar (25 wpc, hybrid design), the presentation started to thin out somewhat in the lower registers, but I had excellent luck with the Red Wine Audio 30.2 signature, which is conservatively rated at 30 watts per channel.

The good news is that the Nines are very neutral and work equally well with tube amplifiers or solid state; these speakers do an excellent job of conveying the character of whatever amplifier you might choose and reflect it accordingly.

When we tried the McIntosh MC275 and my vintage Conrad Johnson MV-75, they were warm and romantic, almost lush sounding. The Naim SuperNait (with SuperCap2 power supply) was more forward and extremely detailed, which should appeal to a different listener, or a more highly damped room situation. However, we both agreed that our favorite combination of musicality and dynamics was served up with the two Class A solid-state amplifiers we had on hand, the Luxman L 590II A and the Clayton S-40. (*continued*)



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**The good news is that the Nines are very neutral and work equally well with tube amplifiers or solid state.**

# m y s t è r e

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The bottom line is that these speakers are extremely easy to integrate into your system and they will not sacrifice what I feel is their core strength – midrange transparency and very correct tonality. You can chalk that up to Mr. DeVore being a musician, folks. As a jazz drummer, he's spent a lot of time with acoustic instruments in real space and it shows in the final product.

What I like best about both the Super 8's and the Nines is that they take up the same amount of space as a mini-monitor on a stand, but give you a lot more music. Considering what good stands cost these days, it's a no brainer.

### In the End, Midrange Magic and a Bit More

Marc and I come from rather different takes of what makes the perfect HiFi system; he's more of a British mini monitor aficionado and I'm a panel guy, but one thing we agree on wholeheartedly is the importance of getting the midrange just right. No matter what I was listening to, vocals or my favorite jazz recordings, the Nines have a transparency and believability that I've only experienced in a handful of cone speakers.

With all this talk about midrange magic going on, should you be someone that listens to orchestral music or fairly dynamic rock music, the Nines will not disappoint. These speakers possess the ability to resolve a high level of dynamic contrasts and not bog down when pressed hard, adding again to the chameleon-like ability of these speakers. *(continued)*



Whether you want to listen to Dexter Gordon or crank Audioslave, the Nines are up to the task. They will play louder than is prudent, yet retain the ability to be very resolving and pleasing at low levels, which is not an easy feat.

### Are the Nines right for you?

The two questions I'm always asked about these two speakers is "What is so different about the two?" and "Which one should I buy?" That depends on a number of things, obviously your budget being at the top of the list. All things being equal and finances not a problem, I'd wholeheartedly suggest the Nines because that extra bit of bass extension makes it a much more useable speaker to someone like me who listens to a wide range of music, from Snoop Dogg to Mahler.

Still taking budget out of the equation, your room size and music collection really will make the final call. If you have a smaller room, and do not listen to music with a lot of deep bass energy, the Super 8's might be all you need. That side-firing woofer might prove problematic in a small room as well, as it did in my 11-foot x 17-foot living room (as did the Penaudio Serenades, also with a side-firing woofer).

If you have slightly more room and amplifier power available and it won't break your budget, I'd still suggest the Nines. I prefer the bigger, weightier presentation; it's a worthwhile step up and well worth the extra expense. Plan on buying a new pair, as these rarely if ever show up used on Audiogon, another testament to how happy DeVore makes its customers. ●

---

The Nines are up to the task. They will play louder than is prudent, yet retain the ability to be very resolving and pleasing at low levels, which is not an easy feat.



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Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07



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Brooklyn, NY 11205  
718-855-999  
[www.devorefidelity.com](http://www.devorefidelity.com)

## PERIPHERALS

(Because we used so many different amplifiers and speaker cables throughout this review, I am only listing the final listening setup. The rest is referenced in the review)

**Preamplifier** Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2

**Power Amplifier** Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

**Analog Source** Rega P9 w/RB1000 and Lyra Skala cartridge

**Digital Source**  
Meridian 808

**Interconnects**  
Shunyata Antares

**Speaker Cables**  
Shunyata Orion

**Power Conditioning**  
Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco, with RSA Mongoose power cords and Shunyata Anaconda power cords

**Accessories** Finite Elemente Pagode Signature racks, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators, Furutech DeMag 1

# The Grado SR-60i

## Update of a Classic 'Phone

By Jerold O'Brien

Precious few things are cooler than cheap, I mean, *inexpensive* headphones. Much like a mint-condition grille for a BMW 2002tii, decent headphones at workingman's prices have just about disappeared from the marketplace. I blame it on those guys over at the head-fi board; they've done an awesome job of making all things headphone valid in the eyes of the audiophile. But just like finding a cheap source of parts for restoring your favorite vintage car, once everyone knows about it, the price goes up.





### An Unconventional Approach to Headphone Amplification

Fear not, there are still some good deals to be had. You don't need to spend a thousand bucks on a pair of cans to get enjoyable headphone sound. Same goes for all those expensive headphone amplifiers. Yeah, yeah, they are pretty cool. But instead, I picked up a mint Marantz 2235 to use at my desk system, where I do my headphone listening anyway.

Why a 2235 you ask? Simple. While the 2270/2275's are super cool, they are super expensive. And don't even think about a 2325 – those are out-of-this-world expensive. That vintage thing again. However, if you do have a 2325, I am not worthy of your reading my humble prose. **The 2235's can be had for about \$350 in mint shape and they have a Midrange control in addition to Bass and Treble.** The 2220's only have bass and treble; that extra control can be the key to getting superior sound out of mediocre headphones (and recordings, for that matter).

Sure, a \$400 Ray Samuels headphone amp sounds a little better, but it's tiny. The Marantz is big and beefy, with a fairly decent FM tuner and acceptable phono preamp, so you can build a nice desktop headphone system around it. Laugh all you want, I'll be in my office listening to Dokken so loud, I won't be able to hear you.

*(continued)*



**The Update of a Classic  
'Phone, the Grado SR-60 i**

For my money, the original SR-60 has always been a killer value and the best pair of headphones I've ever heard for less than \$100. The new "i" version (improved) is even better. They are so new, there isn't even any information on the Grado website yet, but Grado tends to be a company that is always steadily improving their products. Cool cat that he is, John Grado only raised the price \$10 on these. Talk about economic stimulus!

Of course, the question on everyone's mind is, "How much better does the new one sound?" The answer is moderately better. After putting a couple hundred hours on the "i", I took them to the TONEAudio studio and compared them to the publishers' stock pair of SR-60's along with a pair that have been modded by Ken Ball at ALO Audio. Ken does a stylish mod, turning some wood enclosures for the drivers and updating the cable. Of course, this will set you back about \$300 and takes the SR-60 out of the budget category. But they were there, so we did listen closely. And yes, we used a better headphone amp than my Marantz, the stellar Red Wine Audio Isabella.

Listening to all three headphones side by side with such a great source made it easy to hear the differences, though slight between the new and old models. *(continued)*





Playing some of my favorite Genesis tracks, it was obvious that the new model has more grunt in the low bass; the title track on *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* definitely rocks harder than with the original model.

The upper end of the frequency range is somewhat less grainy as well. Going through a range of solo vocalists, male and female, revealed more clarity in the presentation. **The driver in the SR-60 is very good and a good portion of the cost was minimized by using the plastic driver enclosures.** These phones respond very well to the ALO upgrade, so if you are one of the many lured to the wonderful world of headphones by the 60's, they can be taken a few more steps up on the performance ladder and still be worth your investment. The Grado SR-60 *i* is another winner. ●

**The Grado SR-60 *i***  
MSRP: \$79.95

#### MANUFACTURER

**Grado Labs**  
4614 Seventh Avenue  
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# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

This issue, we deviate slightly from our normal format in the sense that we always try to keep the items in this column below \$100, but the idea of getting a McIntosh tuner for \$179 on EBay was too good to pass up. It pays to shop the auctions that end at 3am, because almost no one is up bidding on them.



### If you want to score, you need to make the sacrifice.

The MR-73 was a solid-state AM/FM tuner that McIntosh produced from 1969 – 1971 and had a retail price of \$549. My first car cost less than that back in 1976, but to put things in perspective, the Gremster has long turned to dust and this slightly tarnished jewel is still playing the hits.

Granted, this example has a chassis that is somewhat pitted and the glass faceplate has a couple of bubbles, but it still sounds good. Had this been one of the more highly coveted Mac models like the MR-74, 75 or 77, it would be off to Terry DeWick for a full refurb.

Seeing this tuner will just be for picking up the local Portland stations, it's going over to our friends at Echo Audio for a quick tuneup, as they are well versed in vintage McIntosh tuners and can put this one back in top functional condition for about \$150.

Given McIntosh's reputation for long term reliability, I suspect this tuner will be around until the end of terrestrial radio. ●

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

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Acoustic Sounds: [www.acousticsounds.com](http://www.acousticsounds.com)  
 ALO Audio: [www.aloaudio.com](http://www.aloaudio.com)  
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 Luxman: [www.onahighernote.com](http://www.onahighernote.com)  
 JM Labs/Focal: [www.audiopluservices.com](http://www.audiopluservices.com)  
 Lensbabies: [www.lensbabiescom](http://www.lensbabiescom)  
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