

# TONEAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.34 December 2010

## The Black Crowes

**Gregg Allman:** Jaan Uhelszki Interviews the Legendary Singer and Reviews His New *Low Country Blues* Album

**Exclusive:** First Review of the Estelon XA Speakers

**Vintage:** C-J's MV-50 Returns

**Blockbuster:** New Releases from Social Distortion, Drive-By Truckers, Brian Eno, Tom Tom Club, and OFF!

**Live!** Grinderman, Beatallica, and The Raincoats

**Jefferson Airplane:** The Early Flights  
by Ben Fong-Torres



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## PUBLISHER'S LETTER

As much as I despise and try to avoid audiophile clichés, they occasionally sneak into our vocabulary. But the one phrase that I hate more than any other: “Because music matters.” DUH. Why on earth would you spend more than \$100 on a stereo system or buy more than three albums if music *didn't* matter?



To make matters worse, hi-fi stores all over the world are doing “because music matters”-themed events. It's just become another aging hipster catchphrase. What were the HiFi stores selling us for the last 30 years? You've just figured out now that music is important?

An equally tired argument pertains to whether one is an “audiophile” or a “music lover.” As if these two things are exclusive. Our aging competitors have written countless boring editorials about this subject. Enough already.

A \$10-per-month Rhapsody subscription will grant access to enough music to keep you occupied for the rest of your life, so if you are in fact strictly a music lover, Rhapsody and a pair of \$100 computer speakers will be all you need. However, if you want a compelling musical experience in your home, one that, if you're lucky, will fool you into believing that Eric Clapton or Anne-Sophie Mutter is standing right in front of you, it is going to take some decent gear.

This process requires time, effort, and expertise. And we'd like to help you. But like anything that requires a blend of art and science, gear *is* important, at least until you master it. Once complete, you can sit back and enjoy the performances. The technology has to serve the medium. Otherwise, you'll just get frustrated and start shopping for a Jet Ski. And I don't think any of us want that.

Regurgitating the mantra that “music is more important than the gear” is a copout. If you are in the high-end audio business and you're babbling this kind of crap, get another job – you aren't serving anyone.

And for the labels that are producing some of the remastered titles we've been privileged to hear of late, let's try and expand that focus as well. Remember, the best gifts are the ones that please the recipient, and not necessarily the gift you want to give. I understand that everyone needs to make a profit. And, yes, it must be cool to actually hold the master tapes of some of music's most profound recordings in your hands. But enough is enough. If you can figure out how to produce a wider variety of titles while offering more current releases produced with the same level of care, it would go a long way towards increasing people's acceptance of high-performance audio. Mobile Fidelity's recently announced Silver Label Series is a step in the right direction.

Last but not least, my challenge to *TONE's* competitors: I know you guys have some great systems in your homes, and I'm pretty sure you listen to more than the same tired warhorses you bore us with every month. How about sharing the rest of your collection with us? Moreover, I implore you to check out some new music while you're at it. Better yet, how about backing up your purported claims to be about music by actually writing about it? Three or so pages of music coverage on year-old titles at the back of the book won't get anyone excited.

No doubt, the music lover vs. audiophile debate will continue. But if people lose their interest in music, the end of the high-end audio will arrive sooner rather than later. You've all got your homework to do, so get busy.



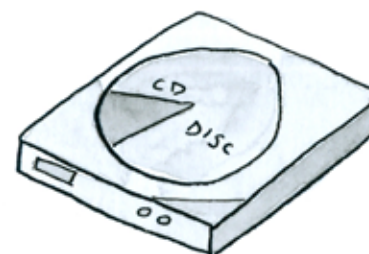
## New Year's Resolutions

1973



- buy a new van
- go to more Grateful Dead concerts

1984



- trade in Deadhead tapes
- buy a walkman CD player

1992



- buy more Jerry Garcia ties

2011



- sell all the Grateful Dead memorabilia on ebay for kids' college fund

DONNELLY

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OST MEN THAT EXPERIENCE  
mid-life crises solve their

dilemmas by purchasing an expensive sports car, haul-ass motorcycle, or wave-chopping speedboat. Some get a divorce and use hidden money and big-boy toys to attract beautiful young women to hang on their shoulders. Rogaine, Viagra, and a litany of other quick-fix drugs are available to line medicine cabinets and nightstand drawers.

Nick Cave's approach to getting older and dealing with such related frustrations is much more original, fun, and practical. While the 53-year-old vocalist/guitarist often opts for a more orchestral and grandiose style with the Bad Seeds, he sews his wilder oats in Grinderman, which brought 90 minutes of pure frenzy and noise-caked catharsis to a packed Riviera Theatre days before Thanksgiving. Before departing, the quartet left ears ringing and jaws flapping about the maelstrom they'd just witnessed.

"I called her honeybee/I called her love/But she just still didn't want to/She just never wants to/Damn!," yelled a truly possessed Cave on the humorously lacerating anthem "No Pussy Blues," his exclamatory remark greeted with a mushroom cloud of socket-electrocuting rock generated by his fellow mates. The responsive rejoinder served notice that all four men spoke the same language of forlorn disappointment and discontent. The band members also looked similar: raw, sleazy, imposing, edgy.

**Riviera Theatre**  
Chicago, Illinois

**November 22, 2010**

By Bob Gendron  
Photos by David Thai

# Grinderman



Drummer Jim Slavunos, bassist Martin Casey, and multi-instrumentalist Warren Ellis sported unruly facial hair that made it seem as if they came in fresh from living out a long, cold winter in a Spartan cabin in the Northwoods; Ellis' beard was thick and long enough to hide a child. And while the freshly shaved Cave prowled and pranced around in a snazzy suit, he was as sexually fed-up and physically primal as his friends. Grinderman didn't simply grant permission to be maniacally intense; the band's performance encouraged such behavior and reactions.

Spouting lyrics involving everyone and everything from Mickey Mouse to Marilyn Monroe and Marcel Marceau, Cave howled, yowled, grunted, and screamed as if being subject to shock treatment. He boasted of his prowess ("Two humps and then I'm gone"), followed through on sinister threats ("You were wrong!"), and inserted comical commands ("Hey! Don't do that on the carpet!") into colorful storylines that lived up to the chaotic promise suggested by Ellis' convulsing movements and Slavunos' hard-hitting beats.

Apparently, for Grinderman, the older one gets, the more dissatisfaction wells up inside. In comparison to its sole previous Chicago appearance in 2007, the group administered material with a heavier, more atonal and percussive-oriented approach. *(continued)*





Sclavunos' drum kit expanded to twice the size it was three years ago. He didn't let it the extras go to waste, ratcheting up tension and fueling clatter with a recurring battery of rim shots, cymbal smashes, and tambourine rattles. Grinderman exulted in ruckus, pushing stomping rhythms and short-circuiting feedback to extremes, the band's slow, dirty grind and jungle thrust giving Cave plenty of opportunity to inhabit the role of a spurned, deranged lothario.

Resembling Rasputin's offspring, Ellis cut through the bug-zapper-sounding din with roaring mandocaster lines and scraped violin notes, alternately conjuring gypsy passages and piercing radio frequencies. Before "Evil," he positioned himself on his back, proceeding to press and twist effects-pedal buttons and knobs all the while rolling about, a flailing turtle knocked over on its shell. At other times, he collided with Cave, each musician standing back-to-back to one another, delighting in the squealing distortion and intercourse-referencing grooves on throbbing songs such as "Get It On," "When My Baby Comes," and "Love Bomb."

Amidst the menacing setting, "Palaces of Montezuma" came on like a misplaced love letter perfumed with tenderness and devotion. The rare appearance of pop melody contrasted with the fractured blitzkrieg and heaving churn of every other song, save the minimalist "What I Know," the only misstep during an evening sparked with the energy, bite, and electricity that most rock and roll bands can only hope to deliver.



**Museum of Modern Art**

New York, New York

**November 20, 2010**

Text and Photos by Samantha Marble

FOR JUST ONE NIGHT, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART in New York City could have been mistaken for a sold-out music club. Hundreds of people packed the museum's ground floor to witness the Raincoats play in honor of the facility's exhibition "Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography." It was a memorable affair for myriad reasons—not the least of which related to a rare appearance by the post-punk pioneers.



The Raincoats



Formed in the late 70s, the Raincoats took their place alongside D.I.Y. femme-punk bands such as The Slits and Switzerland's Kleenex, enjoying a small cult following until disbanding in 1984. But their influence largely outpaced any commercial success, thanks to a sound and attitude that weighed heavily on the Riot Grrrl scene as well as the life of Kurt Cobain. The Nirvana leader brought the group back from obscurity in 1992 after writing in the liner notes to *Insecticide* about their importance and his experience of meeting them. He also inspired the band's reformation, prompted the re-release of its out-of-print albums, and invited the Raincoats to tour with Nirvana in 1994. Alas, Cobain died a week before the tour was scheduled to begin. Since then, the Raincoats have sporadically reunited at select festivals. Hence, for fans in the States, this event wasn't to be missed.

Kathleen Hanna, frontwoman of Bikini Kill and Le Tigre, started the celebration with a 90-minute DJ set, spinning 45RPM singles of dub dance tracks interspaced with vivacious female-led punk, soul, and new-wave music as people danced and toured the beautifully curated exhibit. Quite a warm-up, but the Raincoats were up to the task.



After taking the stage at 10 p.m., the band opened with "No One's Little Girl," a track off the 1983 live album *The Kitchen Tapes*. Since the latter was originally recorded in an NYC art space called The Kitchen, the choice seemed apt for the setting and drew a connective line in the sand. The exceptional "Shout It Out Loud" witnessed an upsurge in tempo and urgency, the drummer spinning

away on tom-toms while the violinist swiped at strings that, only moments ago, she'd plucked. Ana de Silva drove "Fairytale In the Supermarket" with aggressive vocals pulled straight out of the 70s punk movement. Not to be outdone, Gina Birch played dub bass lines that prized abrupt textures over fluid notes.

Near the end of the set, Hanna joined the Raincoats in paying tribute to recently deceased

Slits leader Ari Up by playing "Vindictive," one of the first songs Up wrote. Photocopies of Up's picture hung on the microphone stands while Birch taught the crowd to sing back along. "I spit on it!," she wailed, devilishly smiling as the audience spat back the refrain, "And I shit on it!" Thrilled to be part of it all, Hanna's softer vocals perfectly contrasted with Birch and de Silva's stronger, deeper timbres.

"You wouldn't believe we've been playing these instruments for 30 years," modestly stated Birch, before uttering what could serve as the Raincoats' ultimate statement of purpose. "But we like to keep it real."



# Beatallica

## **Dante's Inferno**

Portland, Oregon

**November 19, 2010**

Text and photos by Jeff Dorgay

Who's the best band from Milwaukee, Wisconsin? The Violent Femmes? Nope, they suck. Beatallica? That's right. If you like Metallica and the Beatles, and aren't too much of a zealot of either band to have lost your sense of humor, Beatallica's tasteful blending of both groups' music could very well be the most fun you have with your pants on. The quartet gave fans a taste of what they would be in for at a full-scale concert by playing a quick but spirited in-store session at Portland's Music Millennium the night before a headlining mid-November date.

Seattle's Stay Tuned opened the gig, performing a set of TV theme songs stemming from the 60s through the 80s. Though the musicianship was less than stellar, the presentation was entertaining: How do you not love a band that segues from the theme to *The Munster's* into Edgar Winter's "Frankenstein" and back? Righteous.





Beatallica lead singer Jaymz Lennfield and his crew took the stage in a timely fashion at 9:30 sharp, everyone dressed in Sgt. Pepper's era costumes and sporting round, tinted wire-rim glasses ala John Lennon. Opening with "The Battery of Jamyz and Yoko" and "Sandman," Beatallica drew heavily from its *Masterful Mystery Tour* and *Sgt. Hetfield's Motorbreath Pub Band* albums for most of the evening.

While the group opts for a Beatles look and borrows just as heavily from the Liverpool legends' song titles, its groove is decidedly heavier, featuring more Metallica than Fab Four. Make no mistake, Beatallica is not a comedy act: All four of the guys are seasoned veterans and know how to rock. By the end of "Sandman," the band was amped. Lead guitarist Greg Hammetson III charged ahead with a short solo at the beginning of "Got to Get You Trapped Under The Ice" before channeling a thrash-metal vibe with a blistering solo at the end of "Masterful Mystery Tour." He and Lennfield traded licks and poses throughout the 90-minute show. However, bassist Kliff McBurtney out-animat-ed everyone by mugging for the audience in true rock-star style.

Beatallica ended the evening with "A Garage Dayz Nite," no worse for the wear and tear. The boyz from Wisconsin left the Dante's crowd with their fists (and PBR cans) in the air, screaming for more. A job well done.





**Arlene Schnitzer Hall**

Portland, Oregon

**December 3, 2010**

Text and Photos by Jeff Dorgay

THE BLACK CROWES HAVE BEEN MAKING a fair amount of noise of late, first by releasing the career-spanning triple-LP *Croweology* and then by announcing the possibility that their present outing might be its last. Currently, the band's Web site says that the ensemble will be go a "long hiatus" after the tour, which ended in late December with a six-show stint at the Fillmore in San Francisco.

Looking and sounding tired, the band's Portland show suffered from inconsistencies and lethargy. To the Crowes' credit, ticket prices were affordable (\$37.50-\$60), and the band allowed the audience to record. Those that didn't bring portable digital recorders could purchase a show of their choice in CD, MP3 or FLAC formats from the group's Web site. A cool option for hardcore fans, and one that, unintentionally, exposes listeners to what they missed out on hearing a few months ago.

The Crowes divided the three-hour concert into two 90-minute sets, the first being acoustic and the second, electric. Band members slowly sauntered onto the stage just after the scheduled 8:00 start time. Lead vocalist Chris Robinson wore a big smile on his face and the crowd immediately rushed forward, staking out positions for the duration.







Robinson and Co. started with “Soul Singing” and drifted into some great harp playing on “Hotel Illness,” a song that made the day of a fan holding a giant cardboard sign that read “More Harp.” But the Crowes snoozed through the rest of the set, turning in a languid performance that unfortunately felt like the Eagles’ notorious *Hell Freezes Over* tour. Everyone save Robinson sat perched on stools, disappointing for a group that only a few years earlier *Melody Maker* playfully labeled the “most rock and roll rock and roll band.” Not anymore.

Indeed, every aspect of the Crowes’ acoustic portion resembled an unremarkable “MTV Unplugged” episode, with drummer Steve Gorman expending the most energy. Never a good indicator unless the band’s name is Rush. For approximately half of the set, Gorman occupied center stage, accompanying Robinson with a portable bass drum. Groovy, but not terribly exciting or captivating. On occasion, Robinson stretched out with vocal excursions that demonstrated his pipes remain strong. Too bad he didn’t see the need to invest such effort more often.

For the electric half, the band did away with the stools, and while more life-like than the opening segment, the quintet still wasn’t the Black Crowes many remember from the early days—or even the beginning of the tour. Spirited renditions of “Twice As Hard” and “Remedy” inspired the group to pick up steam towards the end of the set before returning for a two-song encore of “Feathers” and “Thick N’ Thin.” Still, it was too little too late. Sure, in giving the crowd three hours of music, the Crowes didn’t shortchange anyone. But exertion and emotion were lacking.

If you missed the band on the tour, the live downloads are highly recommended. The recordings are excellent, possessing nearly audiophile quality (though the FLAC files are only 16bit/44khz). Ironically, going back to shows played at the start of the tour unsheathes a double-edged sword. Earlier recordings reveal a band near the top of its game, and not the fatigued, listless crew that let down Portland.





SNAPSHOT

# The Sword

Kyle Shutt of The Sword is lost in the moment, just before Metallica took the stage at Portland's Rose Garden in November, 2008.

Photo by Jeff Dorgay



# Gregg Allman

## Soul Survivor

By Jaan Uhelszki

**G**regg Allman never planned on becoming one of America's most recognizable white blues singers. In fact, in the early days of his career, it was his brother Duane who did the singing in the Allman Joys, one of the first incarnations of the bands that the brothers put together prior to founding the Allman Brothers Band.

"I don't think I really grew into my voice until I turned 50," claims the 62-year-old icon, speaking by phone from his home in Savannah, Georgia while preparing to release his first solo album in 14 years. "I've always been my worst critic and would tell myself that I sound like a million other people at once. But then one day I woke up and said, 'Well, by God I do have a style all my own.'"

© Photo by Danny Clinch



Of course, many consider Gregg Allman's most significant contribution to rock's historical record is his role as the lead singer, organist, and principle songwriter for the archetypal Southern band founded by his older brother Duane in 1969. Yet the younger Allman had a parallel career as a solo artist almost from the onset of the Allman Brothers, an outfit that proved its mettle with an organic synthesis of blues, jazz, folk, rock, and country influences—and the exquisite dual guitar interplay between Duane and Dickie Betts, a tandem that got so heated on some nights that a listener couldn't tell where one musician started and the other left off.

Ironically, it was because of these very strengths that one of the band's most obvious gifts—Gregg Allman's languid blues pacing and mournful growl—was often overshadowed. Allman's solo work gave him the recognition that he sorely deserved.

"I started thinking about my solo album long before there even was an Allman Brother Band," he remembers. "A lot of the songs I'd written just weren't right for the group. I took one of the songs I wrote to the band and they didn't care for it. It was 'Queen of Hearts.'"

That winsome love song to his former wife became the cornerstone of a solo career that produced seven solo albums over the next four decades. Hardly a prolific output, but if Allman is anything, he's careful with his words. A recurring theme in many of his earlier songs is the thundering sound of silence, and his quiet resolve to communicate in spite of it.

"I was so anesthetized for so long. I just wanted to be away from it, but I wanted to *still* be there. Check in on reality, but to do that, you get loaded. A lot of people have great losses. "I didn't do the best I think I could've done." *(continued)*



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FEATURE



© Photo by Jeff Dorgay

Allman realized he finally had to clean up when, at the Allman Brothers Band's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1995, Willie Nelson came up to him and asked if he was all right.

"No. I am not all right", I told him," Allman recalls. "I think it had something to do with the vodka bottle sitting next to me. I was off dope, but I was a mess. I never believed in God until this point, but I asked him to bring me out of this or let me die before all the innings have been played. I just wish we could redo it that night. You know, let me have another crack at that acceptance speech."

Allman's life became further complicated when he learned he needed a liver transplant, brought on by the complications of Hepatitis C. The singer received a new liver last July. Before the operation, he recorded his first album since 1997, *Low Country Blues*, with Grammy-winning producer T-Bone Burnett. All but one of the songs on the record is a cover. Yet the way Allman inhabits them, you'd think that he wrote every single one.

"I did think about mortality quite a bit when I was recording. It certainly affected my song choice. But oddly enough, I was not worried. I felt protected. Plus, the doctors are such masters at doing this [operation] now, I wasn't scared."

**JU:** *When do you know when it's time to record a solo album? Do songs keep forcing their way into your psyche, or does pressure just seem to build up?*

**GA:** A lot of these poor slobos have a contract that calls for a certain amount [of albums] every certain amount of years. Of course, those ways are pretty much dying out. But it's just like you said. All of a sudden, it starts eating at you a little bit and it comes and goes. Then two, three more years pass and you feel, "Hey, boy, it's time." Those feelings won't go away, like unfriendly ghosts. You say to yourself, "What is it that I do, except travel around the freaking world busting my ass playing songs?" Then, on the other hand, you'll get a bunch of feelings like, "Gosh, I wish we played some new songs." Then, all of a sudden, you kind of have this epiphany: "Oh, I get it, it's time to record." *(continued)*



*On Low Country Blues, except for one song you wrote with Warren Haynes, you play all covers. That's a first. How do you inhabit other people's songs? How do you know what to cover?*

Well, you have a real connection with the song, and of course you have quite a yen for it, and you know immediately what you want to do with it. If you don't, you shouldn't cover it. Songwriting is such a vague damn subject. The song's there and it's not there, you know? It can go in any given second.

*You teamed with T-Bone Burnett, who has thousands of songs stored on his computer. He said he went through them and chose some for you to sort through. Was that an efficient way to work, with T-Bone doing the heavy lifting of whittling down the songs for you?*

Heavy lifting? The heavy lifting was trying to make something out of that damn thing that he sent me because there were things like old Billie Holiday songs. You could hear scratches and crackles on the old 78s that I trudged through. Plus, I didn't know it was coming to me digitally. It was tiring to go through all of that.

*You start the record off with "Floating Bridge," told from the perspective of a man drowning.*

That's a good song. That's the first one we cut, and I think it was one of the ones we did it in just one take. First takes just scare the hell out of me. I went out to LA and had just had met the guys I was going to record with. Well, I already knew a couple of 'em. But I got out there and I say, "All right guys, let's run this first one through."

They had already heard the same tired versions of this song that I had, so I wanted to just rehearse it to see what's happening with all of us together. As we ran it down I was thinking, "Man, this sounds good." You can tell right away when the musicians meld and when they don't. And they really did; it was just uncanny. We got through the song and I asked, "How's it sound in there, T-Bone?" "Come on in and hear for yourself," he says. I thought he was kidding, right? So I said, "Turn on the red light and let's take one." "No, you're finished. You've already got it," T-Bone says. "Wait a minute, man. Half of us don't even know the son of a bitch yet," I replied. He'd recorded it, and that's what you hear on the record.

*That's a Sleepy John Estes tune. For being so young, you and Duane always had sophisticated musical tastes.*

There used to be this radio station called WLAC that was in Gallatin, Tennessee that we'd listen to at night—that was the only time you could get it. They would play Howling Wolf and Little Walter and Sleepy John Estes and Magic Sam, Muddy Waters, and Bobby Bland. Everybody that today I just really revel. I was 17 years old, we were on the chitlin' circuit, playing all these funky little clubs. We had to play Beatles songs just to be able to stay in the clubs. Because if you didn't play so many Top 40 and so many Beatles songs, they'd say "You can you hit the bricks." So we did, but then on the side, my brother and I would play the blues. We had so much energy back then. We worked six nights a week and rehearsed in the afternoon. So this album [is about] the songs that I couldn't play in the clubs back then. *(continued)*

**I was thinking, "Man, this sounds good." You can tell right away when the musicians meld and when they don't. And they really did; it was just uncanny.**

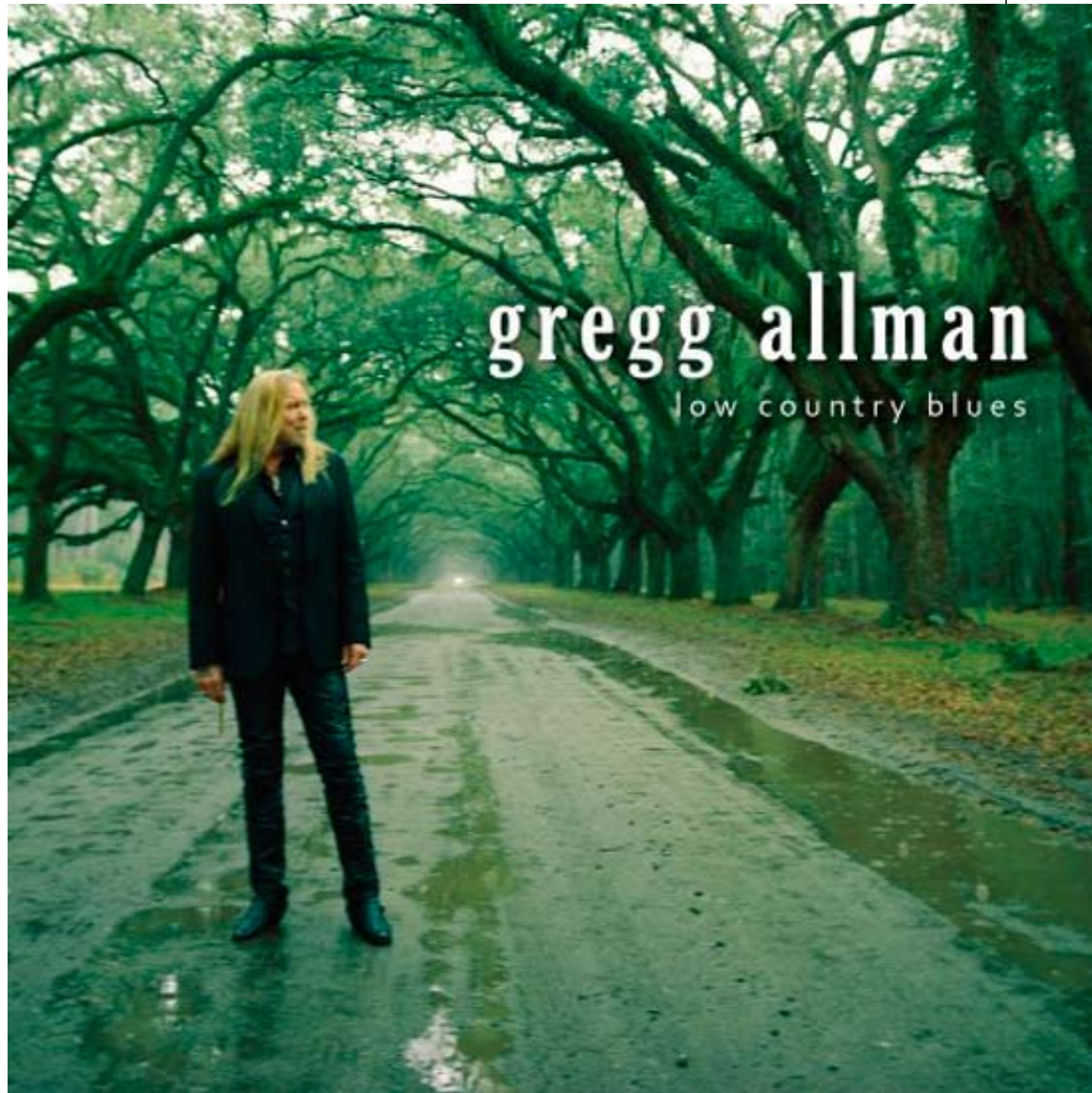


*The last producer you worked with was Tom Dowd. After he died, how did you choose somebody to work with? How did you know T-Bone was the right guy?*

He listened to WLAC. When Dowd died in 2002, I thought, man, what in the hell are we going to do now? I guess we've had it, there's no way we're going to record. I thought Michael Barbiero was an okay producer but he didn't have that "thing," like he knew what you were thinking. And with the Bone, man, he was just right there. Then, if he'd get hung up on something, I would free him loose, and vice versa.

*Your brother's spirit looms on this album. Do you think history has accurately represented him?*

Boy, I really think it has. I think for what he did, and for the length of time he did it, and as genius as it was, he made a big footprint. I would venture to say that had it been me instead of him, there wouldn't have been too many ripples in the water. No, I mean I think he's real, real happy with me that I kept on going, and I owe a lot of it to him and I feel a lot of him coming through me. I have this psychic friend that lives near me. She said that when I first met her I hated her guts because she said, "You know, your brother comes around all the time. He's always around you, can't you feel him?" And I was just like, "Who in the fuck do you think you are?" You know, telling me that even after so many years, you know, that I've longed for my brother and all that. She said he takes the form of a little bird. He wakes me up every morning. That little bird comes to my window every single morning of my life."



**Gregg Allman**  
*Low Country Blues*  
Rounder, CD and LP

Very rarely is a covers album as revelatory as Gregg Allman's *Low Country Blues*. Always very taciturn in both his songs and his speech, Allman conveys his pain, thwarted romances, and fear of dying perhaps better in these forgotten post-war numbers than in songs he's written for the Allman Brothers. There, he is usually more stoic, remote, and just plain cool.

On his seventh solo album, he is anything but. While Allman is an underrated and skilled interpreter of other people's work (think of the regret and surrender he infuses into his version of Jackson Brown's "These Days" from 1973's *Laid Back*), much of the credit for the material here goes to Oscar-winning producer T-Bone Burnett. He poured through his 3000-song library of vintage blues numbers to come up with 20 lesser-known tunes from some of the great blues, country, and R&B writers—including Skip James, B.B. King, Magic Sam, Otis Rush—for Allman to peruse, much like he did with Robert Plant and Alison Krauss for 2007's *Raising Sand*. The similarities carry over to the exquisite results.

The material simultaneously pushes Allman to new emotional heights and lows. Why? The organizing properties surrounding Allman's song choices seem to be centered around heartbreak, betrayal, and a flickering hope of reconciliation—themes that echo his recent divorce and allow him to purge some of the hurt, enflame some of the optimism, and outrun some of his demons, his seen-it-all voice cracking in recognition and harrowing psychic pain in ways it rarely did before.

On Sleepy John Estes' "Floating Bridge," Allman anticipates his own mortality in a manner he probably never anticipated. Sung from the viewpoint of a man who has just drowned, the gothic song foreshadowed Allman's critical liver transplant surgery that he underwent just one month after the recording sessions ended. His singing is spectral, haunted—much more so than Estes would ever likely have imagined.

In addition to 11 covers, Allman included one original, "Just Another Rider," penned with fellow Allman Brothers guitarist Warren Haynes. A breath of fresh air among these well-presented antiques, the tune isn't out of place, the subject matter of betrayal, resignation, and the specter of an old-fashioned blood feud right at home in this swampy low country.

—**Jaan Uhelszki**

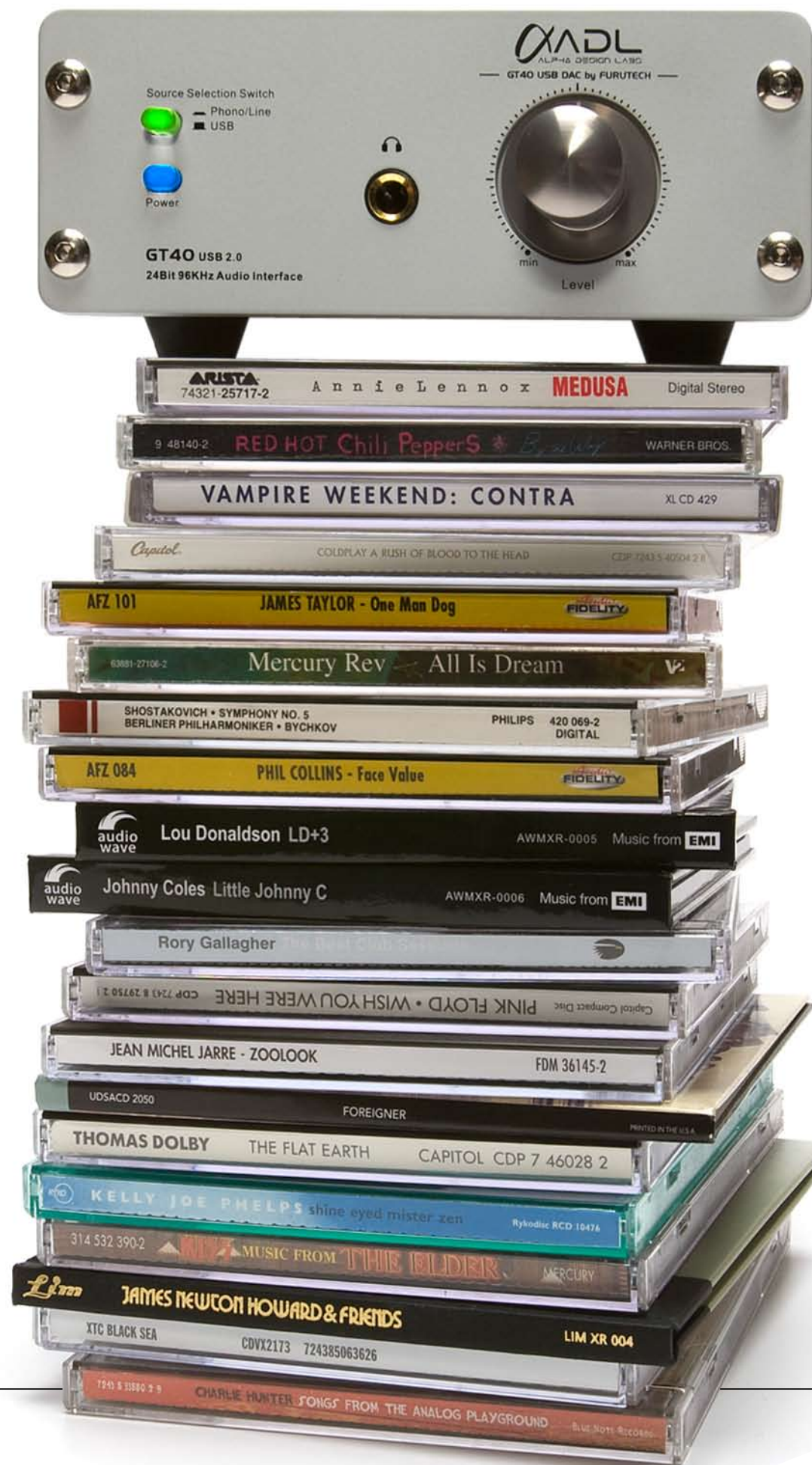


# Better Than a Swiss Army Knife!

## The Furutech GT40

By Jerold O'Brien

I always enjoy teasing our publisher about the validity of five-figure gear and his recent obsession with the dCS Paganini stack. Sure, it's great for \$60k – it *should* be for that kind of money. But what about something for the budding audiophile, or even the veteran audiophile who has to live within a reasonable budget? As I was pleading my case upon the last visit to the *TONE* studio, he just smiled and placed the Furutech GT40 in my hand. "Check this out. It's a phono preamp (MM and MC, no less), an analog-to-digital converter (24 bit/96khz) and a DAC. Has a pretty good headphone amp, too, *and* you can use it as a linestage. How's that for just under \$500?"



To be exact, \$480. Though it weighs only about a pound, it feels solidly built with a nicely finished case and precisely machined volume control. Around back, there is a pair of gold-plated RCA jacks that can be switched between MM phono, MC Phono or line level for the single input. There is also a USB 2.0 input and a socket for the 9V AC wall wart. That's how they keep it so small – no power supply under the hood.

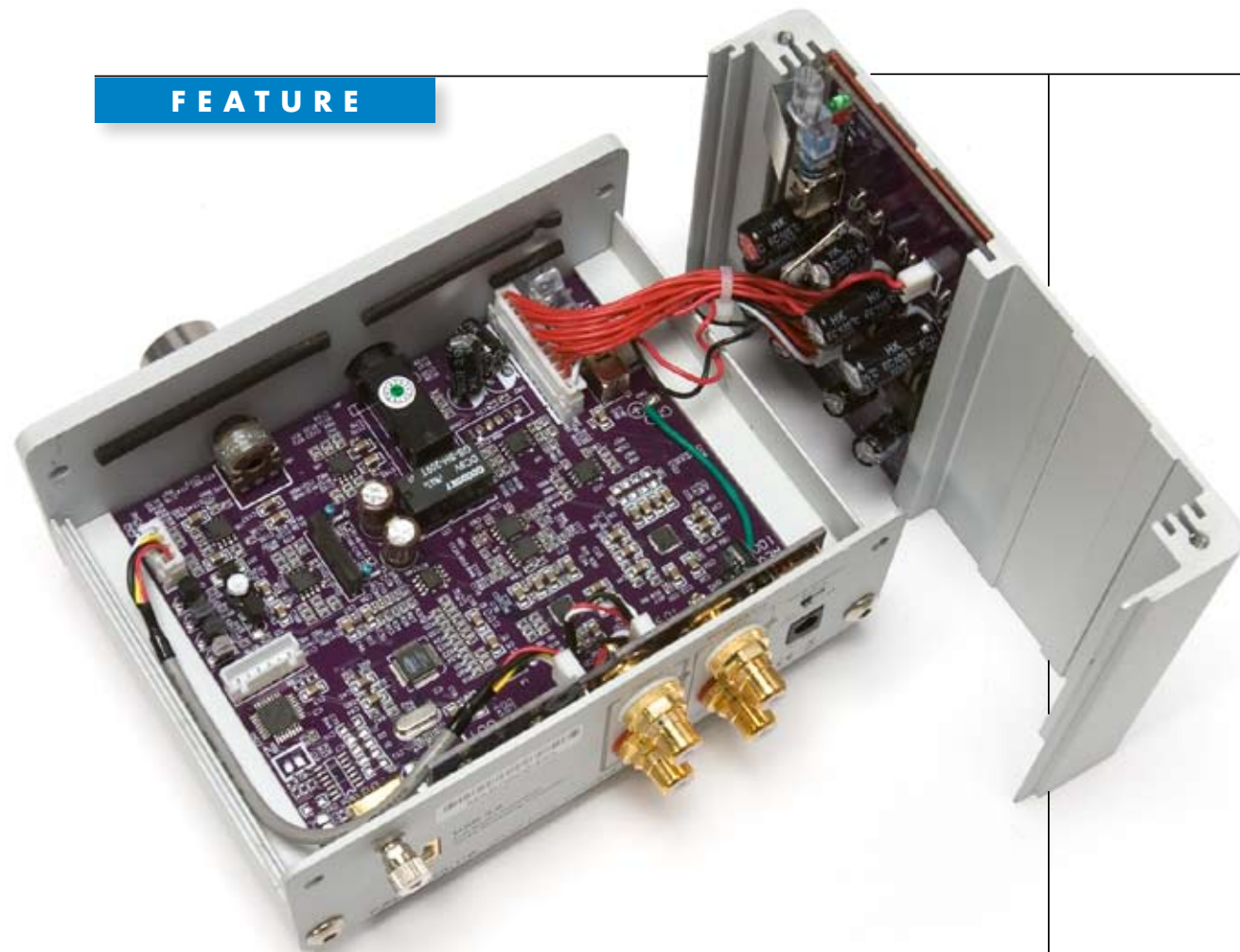
### It Really Does It All

After putting the GT40 through its paces one function at a time, I found that it performs all of its tasks well and has no weaknesses. The DAC and phono stage alone are easily worth the asking price. Breaking this down, what kind of a phono stage would you get for \$120? Or DAC, Headphone Amp or ADC? The GT40 is a bargain indeed, and after spending about an hour with it, you can see why we awarded it one of our Product of the Year awards in the budget category.

Keeping in the budget-system mode, the GT40 was used in a system comprised of a pair of Vandersteen 1C speakers, Technics SL1200 turntable (with Grado Red MM cart and Denon 103 MC cart) along with a recently refurbished Dynaco Stereo 70 and Dynaco PAS 3 preamplifier. The GT40 was also used with a handful of aging CD players to see how it performs as an upgrade, as well as my HP Netbook to see well it captures and plays back digital files. *(continued)*



## FEATURE



### Gives Great Phono

After reviewing more than my share of inexpensive phono stages this year, I'd easily pay \$400-500 just for the GT40, if it would only perform this function. MM performance is good, but the MC performance is even better. Or perhaps the synergy between it and the Denon 103R cartridge was amazing. This tiny preamp had great dynamics and drive, and my inner tweakophile kept wondering what the GT 40 would sound like with a massive power supply. As this had to be returned to Furutech, I kept the soldering iron safely locked away. Playing a few of my favorite Joni Mitchell records, I was highly impressed with the lack of grain that was present. While the sound wasn't as warm as a tube phono preamplifier, it was definitely not clinical and dry. Always good

news at the lower end of the analog spectrum. And thanks to no vacuum tubes under the hood, the GT40 is extremely quiet. Quiet tube anything means a sophisticated power supply, and you can only get so much for five hundred bucks.

### Digitastic

The digital performance, both for capture and playback, was equally impressive. The GT40 easily had enough resolution on tap to distinguish between my latest treasures from HD Tracks and their 16/44 equivalents. The coolest thing about the GT40, though, is that you can use it as an analog-to-digital-converter, going straight from your turntable into the sound-capture program of your choice. A free download of Audacity did the job nicely and kept the cost of digitizing vinyl reasonable. *(continued)*

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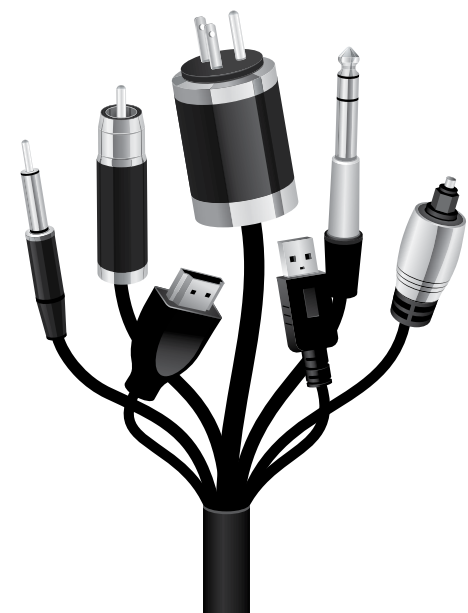


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## FEATURE



Again, if you're looking for a modestly priced ADC, the GT40 is worth the asking price if you do nothing more than this with it.

#### A Linestage Too?

As much fun as it was trying out the GT40's functions, I think the most fun I had with it was driving my Dynaco Stereo 70 direct. It had no problem driving a 10-foot pair of DH Labs interconnects from the shelf where my SL-1200 resides, and it was a great conversation starter. None of my more musically inclined buddies could believe I was running my system with "that little thing." For an audiophile on a tight budget who would like to use a budget turntable for analog and their laptop (or perhaps a Wadia 170i) as a digital source, the GT40 is tough to beat.

As mentioned at the beginning of the review, there's a headphone amp as well, which leads to another great use for the GT40; it's the perfect desktop component.

Thanks to the small size, there's no desk on which it won't fit, and if you live in cube world, it's easy to slip in your briefcase and take home at the end of the day. All the nerdtrons at work were very jealous of the GT40/Grado RS-1 combination; I *had* to bring it home with me at the end of the day or it would have disappeared.

#### A Definite Overachiever

The Furutech GT40 could very well be one of the best bargains in high-end audio today. I heartily suggest buying one ASAP before Furutech decides to raise the price. If Furutech put it in a bigger box and tripled the price, you'd still be impressed with it. And those of you with five- and six-figure systems, you need one, too. You'd be amazed at how handy it is to have a DAC, ADC, phono preamp, headphone amp and linestage all in one tiny box. Our publisher and I will probably have a wrestling match to decide who gets to keep this one! ●



# Current Releases

By the TONE Staff

Click on album covers to purchase from Music Direct

"I'm still alive/And I will survive," proclaims the nicotine-etched voice of Social Distortion leader Mike Ness on his band's seventh studio album, before adding, in his typical what-doesn't-kill-you-makes-you-stronger fashion, "just give me another day." If anyone has the right to sing about survival from a first-person perspective, it's the heavily inked guitarist/vocalist. Few musicians have kept it "real" for as long as Ness, who formed the group in 1978 while a juvenile delinquent living in Orange County.

One of the original California hardcore groups, Social Distortion soon drew from a deeper well of country and rockabilly influences than its peers, preferring melody to raw, amateurish noise. In addition to its outlaw country foundations, Ness' hardscrabble lyrics and integrity remain the other trademarks of a band that's witnessed nearly two dozen members pass through its ranks, endured the death of stalwart guitarist Dennis Danell from a brain aneurysm in 2000, battled record-label politics, and taken several hiatuses. Now 48, Ness is an American original, a throwback from the greaser era that wears his

heart on his sleeve and isn't afraid to brawl to defend his beliefs.

As a storyteller, he's fond of simple phrases and sentimental statements that, if uttered by most other singers, might seem clichéd. But with Ness, the words come on as the honest declarations of a man equally at home underneath the hood of a car or enjoying the atmosphere of a dive bar. He sings like noir novelist Raymond Chandler wrote, his hardened songs peppered with sin, malaise, destruction, impulsiveness, heart-break, bad luck, regrettable decisions, and loneliness. Yet Ness, who knows more than a little about

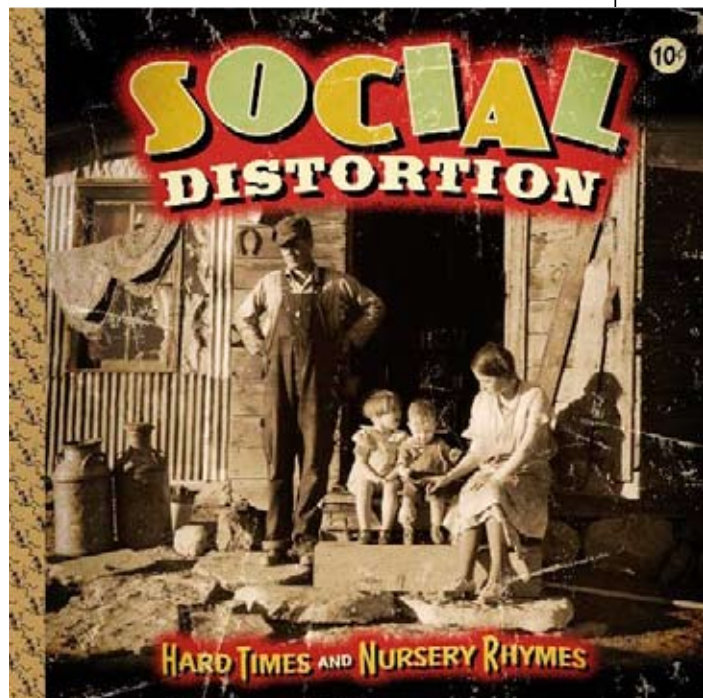
his subject matter—via his various drug addictions, and lawless episodes—frequently streaks fare with shades of hope and common sense that tattoo Social Distortion's material with uplifting, life-affirming tones.

Cigar-puffing hoodlums, sleazy pimps, staggering winos, down-and-out blue-collar stiffs, on-the-run hustlers, wounded romantics, and spurned lovers are among the crowds that congregate on the street corners of *Hard Times* and *Nursery Rhymes*, one of the most consistent, complete, soulful, and tunefully gritty records of Social Distortion's career. *(continued)*



© Photo by Danny Clinch




**Social Distortion**

*Hard Times and Nursery Rhymes*  
Epitaph, CD or 2LP

The set reflects the group's progressive embrace of organ into arrangements. As such, subtle spiritual undercurrents coarse through several tunes, particularly the hopped-up "Can't Take It With You" and swaggering "California (Hustle and Flow)." They arrive complete with gospel-style rejoinders from female background singers that give the band a Southern-fried R&B dimension that perfectly meshes with the crunching guitars, rollicking barroom pianos, and midtempo strut. Ness' hallmark take-no-mess attitude, no-frills approach, and unruffled cool ooze from wide-open spaces between the beats.

At its core, Social Distortion embraces meaty, classicist rock wherein bluesy distortion is utilized for texture, trashy chords snarl and carry, and sawed-off solos advance the song and avoid flamboyance. Compounded urgency defines the give-and-take thrust of "Gimme the Sweet and Lowdown" and blunt scrape on a desperate rendition of Hank Williams' "Alone and Forsaken," the latter continuing Ness' tradition of including a salvation-themed cover on Social Distortion records. The quartet also storms through the breathlessly catchy "Machine Gun Blues," a fist-pumping anthem that aurally and visually recreates the feel of the 1930s run-and-gun gangster world more convincingly than anything in Johnny Depp's *Public Enemies*.

Ness' romantic side emerges on the slowed-down "Bakersfield," a lament that owes as much to rootsy, amplified country as punk. Better still is the twangy "Writing on the Wall," a poignant testament to the agony of unrequited love and constant pain that accompanies being unable to let go. Ness' sincere vocals alternately whisper and cry, break and fall against a sympathetic piano-laced backdrop seemingly soaked in cheap bourbon, cigarette smoke, and tears. Love songs don't come any tougher or plainspoken.

—**Bob Gendron**

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**D**rive-By Truckers just won't quit. *Go-Go Boots* is the tireless Alabama sextet's ninth studio record and sixth album in less than eight years, a span that's also witnessed the group serve as the backing band for Bettye LaVette and Booker T. & the MGs. The latter experiences weigh heavily on this 14-track set, put on tape during the same sessions that netted 2010's *The Big To-Do*—a comeback of sorts from 2008's transitional *Brighter Than Creation's Dark*, the only effort on which the ensemble failed to completely shore up and connect its diversified approach.

Whether bowing to greasy Southern-cooked anthems or forlorn ballads, the Truckers have been mixing styles around a ragged-but-right triple-guitar guitar core ever since 2001's breakthrough *Southern Rock Opera*.

And while every previous effort features at minimum several songs tethered to urgent, gritty, paint-stripping Marshall Stacks rock that bleeds amplifiers dry, the co-ed collective changes it up here, the album exclusively comprised of material that leader Patterson Hood correctly deems "country-soul." There's good reason these songs were left off *The Big To-Do*. And it's not because they play like stale B-sides.

Longtime fans will realize that soulful currents pulsed through the Truckers' songwriting long before they caught up with LaVette or legendary Stax icon Booker Jones. Bassist/vocalist Shonna Tucker, who joined the band in 2003, pushed such influences to the forefront. Hood's father, David, founded Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, produced tunes for the likes of the Rolling Stones and Willie Nelson, and played on sides by Bob Seger, Percy Sledge, and other luminaries. Moreover, the group's Alabama homebase isn't exactly short on R&B pedigree.

Still, never has the band so utterly shifted its beefy guitars to the background or favored arrangements that prized aching lyrics, slow beats, and the Hammond B3 organ above all else. As always, the true-fiction themes, literary stories, fractured landscapes, unpredictable outcomes, and ragtag assortments of Southern gothic characters remain infallible. Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner would be hard-pressed to extract more believable detail, bathetic humor,

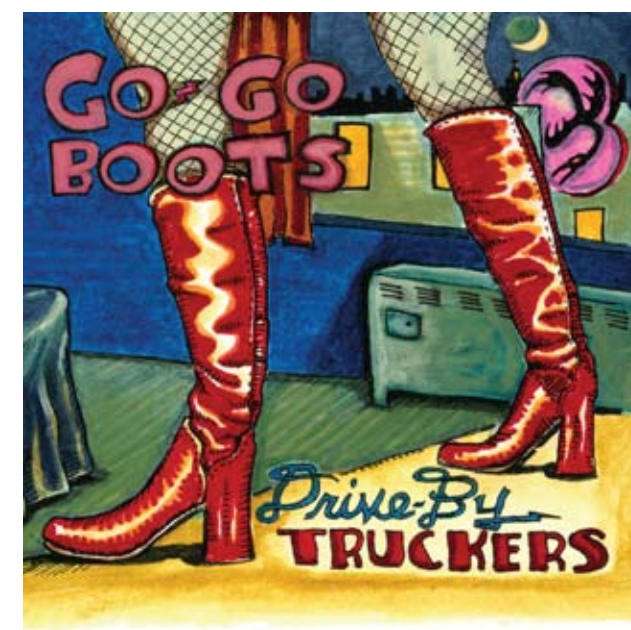
and personal fortitude from narratives reacting to modern times and normal folks' needs, desires, and decisions.

Ala the plot twist in *Fargo*, a preacher devises a scheme to kill his wife and bludgeons her with a metal instrument before justice gets served on "The Fireplace Poker." A former law-enforcement officer reflects on what once was on the despairing, compassionate, and all-too-real "Used To Be A Cop." An everyman confuses fantasy for love on the title song. A desperado tries to keep his mentally frayed head together amidst tension and frustration on "Ray's Automatic Weapon." A victim of a harsh romantic breakup gains a rare advantage on "The Weakest Man." And on "The Thanksgiving Filter," Hood delivers a holiday classic, a tale that anybody that deals with families and in-laws will find comforting as they suck down a few glasses of whiskey to help them cope.

Musically, the Truckers pass as a more-than-competent soul band, and the myriad murder-ballad country accents hit their mark with requisite drawl and roots authenticity. Alas, something is missing. A majority of songs are good; very few are great. Yes, the group spoiled listeners from 2001 through 2006 with a run of four outstanding albums. With such precedent set, and a handful of tunes on *Go-Go Boots* sounding like revisions of older gems (Tucker's "Where's Eddie" is now the third version of what's essentially the same song;

"I Do Believe" draws from a number of previous Hood confessionals; "Mercy Buckets" reflects likeable sentiments but lacks a memorable melody, riff, or hook), the forgotten link seems to be that of ex-guitarist Jason Isbell.

Neither the Truckers nor Isbell have hit their peak since the parties amicably split in 2007. Tucker assumed Isbell's role as the third songwriter, yet while she averages a single remarkable track per record, her former mate (and husband) turned in a trio of striking songs ("Decoration Day," "Outfit," "Never Gonna Change" just some examples) for every LP. A respectable detour, *Go-Go Boots* is satisfying in its own way, but no substitute for what the Truckers could be. —**Bob Gendron**



**Drive-By Truckers**  
*Go-Go Boots*  
ATO, CD and 2LP




**Brian Eno**

*Small Craft on a Milk Sea*  
Warp Records, CD and 2LP box set

**W**hat, you expected a Brian Eno record to have a title that wasn't at least moderately enigmatic? No stranger to ambient music, the musician/composer/producer/theorist's *Small Craft on a Milk Sea* may be his best atmospheric effort yet. Mixing in rhythmic residue leftover from *Everything That Happens Will Happen Today*, his 2008 collaboration David Byrne, Eno pulls out all the stops and paints massive soundscapes.

Connoisseurs of ambient music and Eno in particular will marvel at the sonic swaths planted here. The project's seeds trace back to his famous ambient series of recordings from the late 70s, most notably *Ambient 1: Music For Airports* and *Ambient 4: Music for Films*.

Designed to be experienced in chronological fashion, *Small Craft on a Milk Sea* launches with "Emerald and Lime." Its gentle texture features a keyboard melody not completely unlike the *Twin Peaks* theme, the passage slowly bubbling but never brought to a boil. The aptly titled "Complex Heaven" follows with even more sparse keyboards and looping acoustic guitar intermeshed with haunting environmental and electronic sounds.

After the brief title track further softens the mood, "Flint March" comes on with a raging techno beat and creepy vibe seemingly designed to bring listeners to attention just as they begin to chill out. Four subsequent pieces move in increasingly industrial directions that conjure the instrumental exercises of Nine Inch Nails leader Trent Reznor. The groove changes again with "Bone Jump," the mood becoming more sinister with great beats and ultra-deep bass riffs that will rattle your room if your speakers can go low enough. And that's just half of the record, which ends like it started, with the gentle textures of "Late Anthropocene" bringing it all full circle.

The album is available on CD or as a limited-edition boxed set that presents the music on two 180-gram LPs and high-resolution 24-bit/44kHz files. The deluxe bundle also includes six songs unavailable on the CD. And while the latter format sounds fantastic, fans that opt for the box set will be rewarded with dead-quiet pressings and breathtakingly gorgeous 24/44 files. Featuring Eno's artwork and printed with metallic ink and gloss varnish, the packaging is equally exquisite. *Small Craft on a Milk Sea* is as much a visual as an aural treat.

For those not requiring the packaging, the album can also be downloaded via the 24/44 wav format from Bleep.com for about \$12. Even though these tracks use the same sample rate as the CD, the additional word length of the 24-bit files gives the record's low-level passages much more texture than the 16-bit CD tracks. With the box set in short supply and costing around \$120, the high-resolution download represents the best bargain.

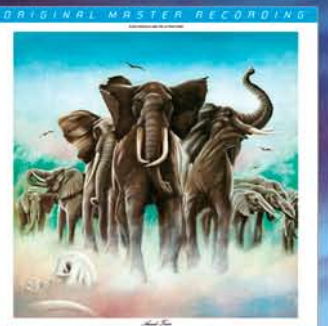
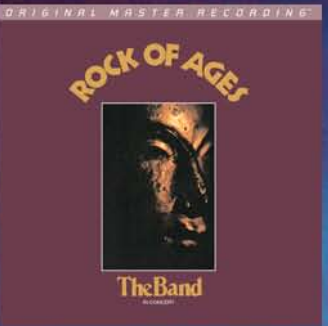
Independent of format, with *Small Craft on a Milk Sea*, Eno has created one of the most dramatic ambient records ever made. —**Jeff Dorgay**



**E**lectric Wizard will leave the guns and fucking in the streets to the punks. It just wants the dope. Once deemed the "heaviest band in the universe," and responsible for the irrepressible classic *Dopethrone*, the group breathes doom metal with an intensity matched by few peers. Nearing its 20th anniversary together, the cult-favorite English quartet offers a back-story that's nearly as interesting as its mystical lyrical matter and sludge-laden psychedelia.

Various legal setbacks (arrests for cannabis possession, police assault, and robbery charges), health issues (guitarist/vocalist Jus Oborn experienced a collapsed eardrum in concert and severed a finger doing carpentry work; a former mate suffered a broken collarbone in a motorcycle wreck), internal tension, and personnel changes (Oborn is the sole remaining original member) give Electric Wizard a Spinal Tap-esque history overshadowed only by the sheer decibel levels, occult themes, and eminently dependable elements of its music. *(continued)*





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MUSIC



Electric Wizard

*Black Masses*  
Metal Blade, CD or LP

Not that the group's marijuana fixations don't factor into the equation; its reefer habits make Snoop Dogg look like a teetotaler.

Any other immediate similarities to well-known stoner bands stop with pot. Electric Wizard embraces the dark underworld with an earnestness that makes Oborn's proclaimed desire to "kill people with sound" appear entirely genuine. If Aleister Crowley ever needed a house band, Electric Wizard would be a perfect fit. References to satanic rituals, supernatural ceremonies, apocalyptic end-times, spree murders, and from-the-crypt nightmares dominate narratives equally inspired by B-grade horror films and shaky, 70s-era necroporn movies. Images of bare-breasted women kneeling before sacrificial altars, hood-covered men seizing female prey in the forest, and unholy spell books line the gatefold sleeves of the ensemble's records. Campy? Sure. Outrageous? Definitely. Serious? Only the members know for certain.

Of course, all of the H.P. Lovecraft imagery and ancient witchcraft philosophy would simply

be creative posturing if Electric Wizard's soundscapes didn't reflect the bleak, crypto-hallucinogenic scenery. *Black Masses* continues in the more streamlined, linear direction that Electric Wizard first adopted on 2004's *We Live* and much improved upon on 2007's *Witchcult Today*. The band plays faster and tighter than it did in the past, and the material claims a melodic, song-based aesthetic that relies less on drone and more on distorted harmonic interplay between Oborn and second guitarist/B3 organist Liz Buckingham. Oborn's chant-influenced singing is also clearer, and more predominant, than during the band's first era. As for the collective's trademark thick, heavier-than-thou, mind-altering grooves? Here in spades.

The opening "Black Mass" grinds and scrapes like an earthmover plowing dirt over a toxic landscape, Oborn's cadence echoing amidst whispers and ominous, funnel-shaped tandem rhythms that moan in symbiotic fashion. Bells toll during the introduction to the feed-back-buzzing "Night Child," shadows creeping across the horizon as Oborn and Co. enters into a pact with a sonic underlord. Pulsing bass lines, dampened kick drums, and demented laughter suffice as hypnotic devices on "Turn Off Your Mind," complete with trippy interludes and backward loops. A churning low-end drags meters into the red on "Patterns of Evil," the molasses riffs loaded with enough lead-weight to sink a battleship. Ambiance matters. Wisely, the band chose to record in analog at Toerag Studios using overdriven, vintage valve amplification. Turn up the volume, and Electric Wizard's smoke-and-mirrors visions and crippling marches do everything but summon Lucifer to the table.

In keeping with tradition, *Black Masses* closes with an extended instrumental. "Crypt of Drugula" references the group's 2007 track "Satanic Rites of Drugula" and no doubt leads to what will eventually be the next chapter from a band that encapsulates the essence of 60s acid rock, 70s spliff metal, and early 80s dungeon metal with ritualistic devotion, originality, and accuracy. —**Bob Gendron**



## FU MANCHU

(godzilla's) eatin' dust



### Fu Manchu

(Godzilla's) *Eatin' Dust*  
At the dojo, CD and LP

While described by many as proponents of stoner rock, Fu Manchu's classic 1999 album features 70s-style grooves heavy on distortion, with a pinch of Beastie Boys (think "Sabotage") and a side order of Beck, served best through a pair of vintage JBL speakers and experienced with the black light on. If you squint, you may see the Orange amplifiers glowing in the background. And yes, there is plenty of cowbell.

Newly remastered with a different song sequence, the latest edition of (Godzilla's) *Eatin' Dust* begins with "Eatin' Dust" and ends with a cover of Blue Oyster Cult's "Godzilla." By all means, if suspense gets the best of you, skip straight to the killer latter cut, on which Queens of the Stone Age's Josh Homme lands an extra hand. Even if the other tracks are fairly energetic, Fu Manchu captures the essential sonic texture of the BOC anthem, but delivers it as if played by dudes popping Quaaludes. The approach works brilliantly. Now you can at least comprehend most of the lyrics. The sound quality is fairly compressed, yet doesn't distract from the presentation. Ironically, this is one of those records that almost sounds better on a lousy system. Hardcore audiophiles that can't get over themselves should probably take a pass. Then again, Fu Manchu wouldn't be their sort of band, anyway.

As for the remainder of the record? Songs tackle subjects ranging from a possible UFO sighting ("Orbiter") to birth defects ("Pigeon Toe") to driving fast ("Eatin' Dust") to kicking ass ("Shift Kicker"). Come to think of it, these topics are probably best dealt with when stoned. But unlike early Genesis records that are way too obtuse to decipher unless the listener is under some kind of influence, (Godzilla's) *Eatin' Dust* is a ton of fun no matter what condition your condition is in. —**Jeff Dorgay**



Heartbreak, cheating partners, booze, and highways have long been part of country music's lore. Before Nashville went pop in the 80s, and sacrificed geographical patois for cheap commercialism, dozens of C&W artists made their living plying those very themes and putting a vernacular stamp on smart songs that could often be interpreted as either playful or poker-faced.

Longtime Supersuckers member Eddie Spaghetti revisits and updates these good-times traditions on *Sundowner*. Those familiar with the vocalist/guitarist's Seattle-based band will already know that tongue-and-cheek humor and garage-punk influence sidle up to the hard country threads the singer sews throughout. Indeed, as suggested by their name, the Supersuckers constantly teetered on the line between gonzo farce and wiseass seriousness, the group's kick-out-the-jams party rock always game to cleverly parody trends, myths, and social contradictions as well as put witty crossover spins on pop hits—whether the lucky target be an adrenaline-rush cover of Outkast's "Hey Ya" or ferocious tour through Ice Cube's "Dead Homeiz." The ideas seem purely humorous, but the Supersuckers' fervent execution confirms the band far from a simple novelty act. (continued)

© Photo by Brian Kasnyik



Spaghetti takes a similar route on his third solo effort, balancing drunken exuberance and inward-looking earnestness on a record comprised of covers and originals. In the latter category, the jester wears his heart on his sleeve, the jaunty “Never Thought I Would” hop, skip, and jumping to a dust-kicking rhythm and declamatory statements that weigh loneliness against companionship. Amphetamine-fueled tempos and rockabilly lines punch imaginary foes on the title track, its dialed-down acoustic framework the only characteristic separating it from typical Supersuckers fare.

Yet the real draw is Spaghetti’s renditions of songs by a diverse lot of artists ranging from Johnny Cash to bizzaro punks the Dwarves, and how he makes them appear as if they fall from the same family tree. In this regard, *Sundowner* is an old-fashioned outlaw country record, even if it features the raw electricity more commonly heard in dive rock bars. Organic, stripped-down, spare arrangements play a large role in connecting the shared themes and sounds. As does Spaghetti’s lived-in Southwestern voice and trebly guitar, so alive with cottonseed twang and rootsy snarl, the edgy strings practically cough brambles, tumbleweeds, and diesel exhaust.

He approaches Dean Martin’s “Party Dolls and Wine” with the carefree flippancy of a singer that’s seen the insides of too many outdated Holiday Inn lounges, and brings a comparably loose attitude to Steve Earle’s “If You Fall In Love,” a tune replete with truths that apply to all romances. Better still, Spaghetti resurrects and nails Del Reeves’ truck-driver classic “Girl On the Billboard,” its shaking tambourines and mud-splattered honky-tonk fills wrapping around the rhymed verses and auctioneer-style drawl.

As for spots of chicken-wire-lined stage rowdiness? Cozy up to “Everybody’s Girl” and a highly improbable performance of the Lee Harvey Oswald Band’s “Jesus Never Lived On Mars.” All funny, but all invested with a sincere urgency that allows Spaghetti to claim both sides of the coin. —**Bob Gendron**



### Eddie Spaghetti

*Sundowner*  
Bloodshot, CD

The real draw is Spaghetti’s renditions of songs by a diverse lot of artists ranging from Johnny Cash to bizzaro punks the Dwarves, and how he makes them appear as if they fall from the same family tree.

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## MUSIC

If you forgot about Tom Tom Club shortly after the Talking Heads movie *Stop Making Sense*, you might be surprised to know that the band never went away. While ever-pretentious Talking Heads bandleader David Byrne went off to steal the limelight with a solo career (just like Sting), the ever-cheerful and much more fun rhythm section consisting of bassist Tina Weymouth and her husband, drummer Chris Franz, kept making funky records under the guise of Tom Tom Club. They also continued to put on shows.

Aptly, the first disc of the new two-disc set documents a live concert recorded at "The Clubhouse," Weymouth and Franz' art and music studio in Connecticut. Judging from the photos in the CD's booklet, the performance seems to have been played before a fairly small audience and staged partially outdoors—both major contributors to the record's excellent sonics. Gateway chief Bob Ludwig handled the mastering, and the disc sounds more like a band playing live in a big recording studio than a live recording captured in a club or small theater. Drums are big and punchy, replete with a substantial bass-drum grunt that accompanies Weymouth's bass, placed upfront and center. And due to the fairly large supporting cast of musicians, the album features multiple layers of vocal and instrumental textures.

*Genius of Live* starts with "Genius of Love," the song that made the group famous. A quick perusal of the ensemble's website reveals the wide range

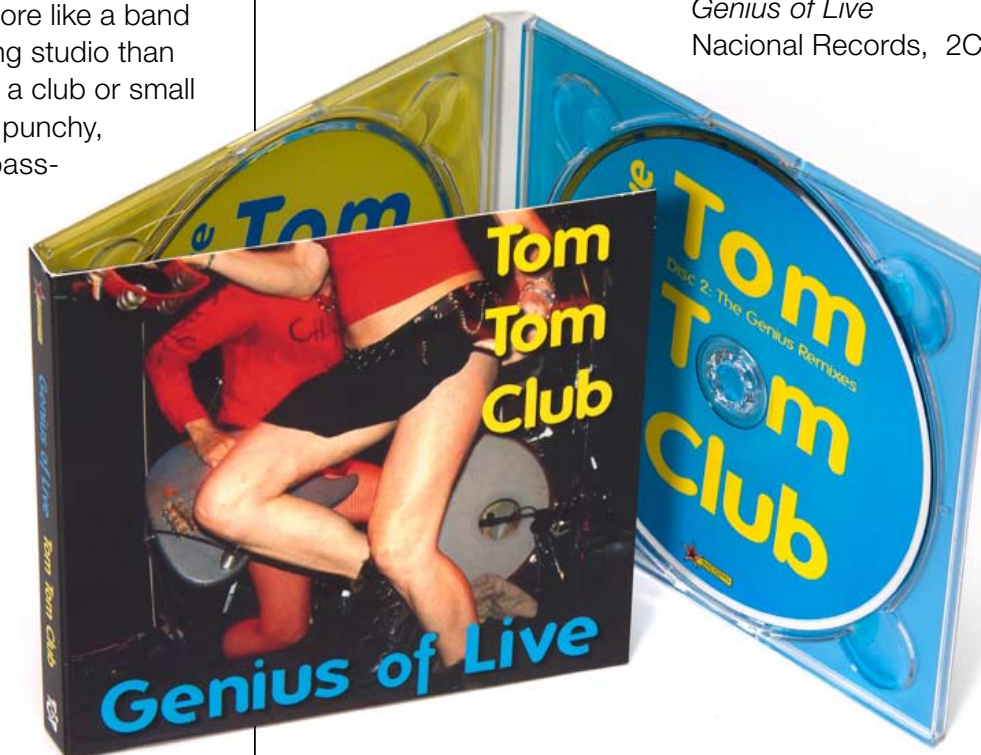
of artists that either covered or sampled the tune over the years. Franz even recently quipped in the *Wall Street Journal* that "[the] song helped put our kids through college." But he and Weymouth are far from one-hit wonders. "Time to Bounce," "Wordy Rappinghood," and "Punk Lolita" still get their fair share of airplay on college and alternative radio stations, and contribute to the infectious energy here.

Disc two features other Nacional label artists' remixes of "Genius of Love." Reminiscent of the Depeche Mode Maxi Single with nine different versions of "Personal Jesus," the overload may be too much for all but the most dedicated fans. Nonetheless, it's an intriguing concept, especially if listeners sample a few tracks at a time.

Because Tom Tom Club never stopped performing, *Genius of Live* can hardly be viewed as a comeback. The only question that begs to be asked: Why did the group wait so long to release such a great record? Whatever the reason, it's here.

—Jeff Dorgay

**Tom Tom Club**  
*Genius of Live*  
Nacional Records, 2CD







© Photo by Sean Peterson

**S**ixteen songs. Eighteen minutes. A quartet comprised of an all-star cast led by the co-founding member of Black Flag. Fervent intensity and unrepentant catharsis. No, OFF! doesn't waste a note or indulge in the slightest digression on its lean *First Four EPs* collection, the most crucial and immediate hardcore record to see release in recent memory. If Dead Kennedys, Bad Brains, Fear, or the Germs mean anything to you—and they should—consider this energy burst of a release a can't-miss opportunity to reconnect with the early 80s American movement that seeded and presaged the so-called “Year That Punk Broke” by more than a decade.

Formed by Circle Jerks vocalist (and original Black Flag frontman) Keith Morris and Burning Brides guitarist Dimitri Coats after attempts at a Circle Jerks reunion went awry, OFF! also counts Redd Kross bassist Steven McDonald and Rocket From the Crypts drummer Mario Rubalcaba among its ranks. Make no mistake: This isn't the typical story of a few old dudes getting together and attempting to relive the past by trading on their legacies. OFF! sounds as if born in an unfinished basement, the crew playing with a ferocity and purpose that can't be faked. Band chemistry is paramount. The only key differences between the tunes on *First Four EPs* and those on Black Flag's 1978 EP *Nervous Breakdown*? OFF!'s structures are clenched-fist tight, its performances sharper, and the production quality several degrees higher, all welcome improvements in step with the times.

As are Morris' cutthroat lyrics and surprisingly diverse vocals. Song titles—“Now I'm Pissed,” “Panic Attack,” “Fuck People,” “Rat Trap,” “Full of Shit”—disclose the general mood, the blast-first screeds serving as transparent reactions to today's climate. The impetus for OFF!'s rage? High unemployment numbers, public service cuts, wealthy privileges, dead-end jobs, unnecessary deaths, conservative policies, corporate subsidies, hypocrite lies, increasing income gaps. Ring familiar? Those very issues fueled hardcore's ascendancy during the Reagan era, and the same topics feed OFF!'s targeted aggression on sonic cluster bombs such as “Killing Away,” on which Morris, shouting like a hyper teenager out of Adderall, yelps “We keep on repeating the past!” as if he's Paul Revere sounding an alarm that few hear. With “I Don't Belong,” a rumbling assault that comes on like a

suit of armor crashing down a flight of stairs, OFF! has created a modern hardcore classic that takes aim at empty social conventions with wry sarcasm and biting humor.

Nothing is overdone or undercooked. Tempos feel faster than they are, as Rubalcaba keeps pace yet allows for breathing room and Coats' inside-out riffs. OFF! isn't spastic, it's direct, and there's a difference. Even when his deliveries appear on the verge of combusting, Morris' spoken-word asides and rhymed couplets remain fully comprehensible; the spring-loaded grooves contain hints of melody. The economical thrift isn't groundbreaking, but damned if it isn't vital.

In another shout-out to early hardcore tradition, *First Four EPs* is available as a seven-inch box set featuring cover and sleeve art by legendary designer Raymond Pettibon. Digital fans can purchase it via download. Either way, it's time again for California über alles.

—**Bob Gendron**



**OFF!**

*First Four EPs*

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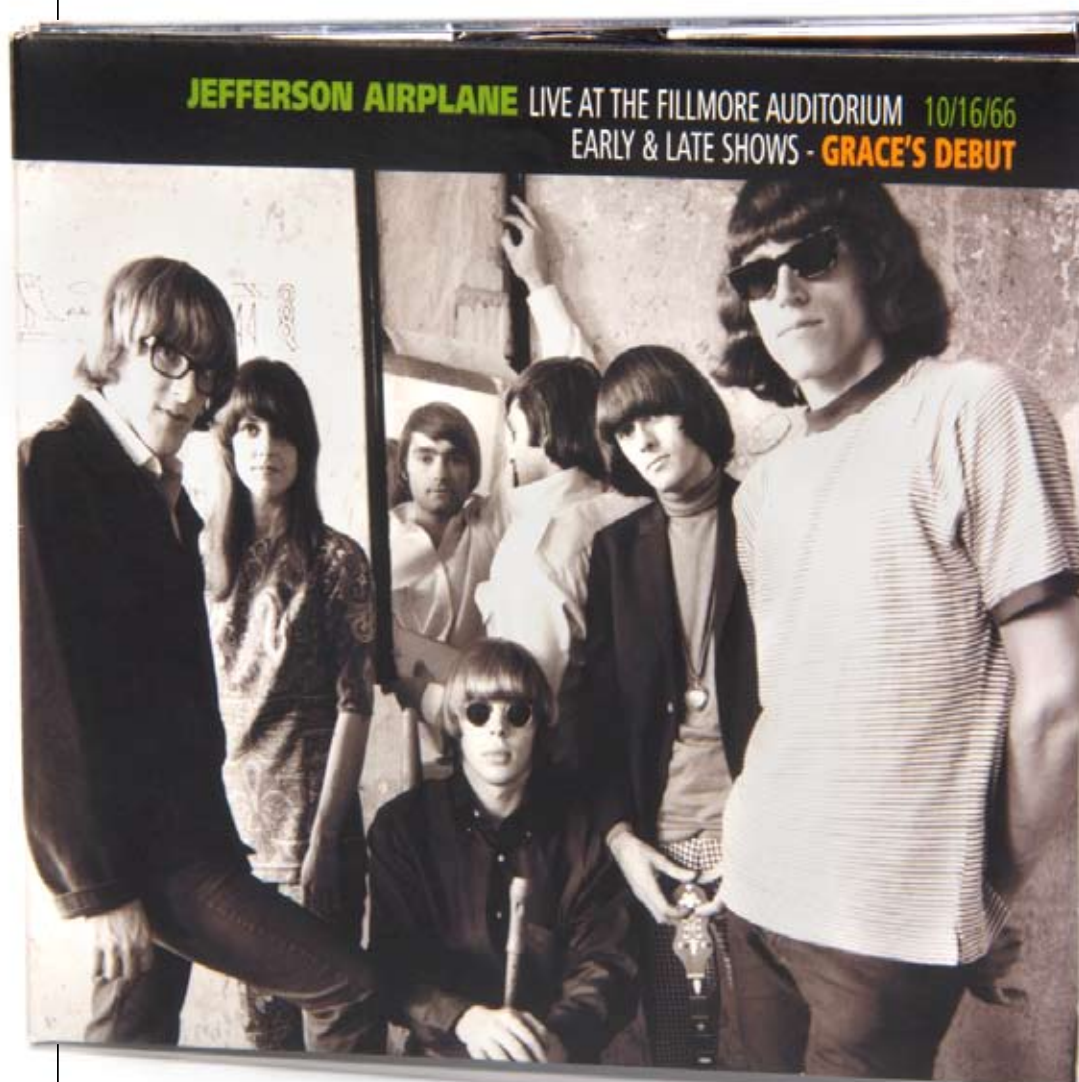
# The Great Airplane Museum

**A series of early performances from the Jefferson Airplane**

A quintessential “hippie” band, the Jefferson Airplane remains one of the early architects of the famous Bay Area sound. Five of the cumulative six concerts captured on this archival series were recorded at San Francisco’s Fillmore Auditorium, dating from November 15, November 25, and November 27, 1966. Interestingly, the last disc in the series stems from a show played February 1, 1968 at the Matrix, where the group originally made its debut in the summer of 1965.

## Jefferson Airplane

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MUSIC

While there is a fair amount of overlap between many of the discs, as the band had only been playing for a year and did not yet possess a large repertoire, it's amazing to hear the differences in the performances staged just a few weeks apart. "Tobacco Road" starts out with a Byrds-like folk feel on the first disc, *10/15/66 Late Show - Signe's Farewell*, significant for standing as lead singer Signe Toly Anderson's final performance. The vibe changes ever so slightly on the following evening's performance from *10/16/66 - Grace's Debut*, and then again a month later with the double-disc *11/25/66 & 11/27/66 - We Have Ignition*.

Within a month, the band starts to develop its signature psychedelic sound, with female vocalist Grace Slick more out front and center than Anderson. By the time the Airplane revisits the Matrix club barely over a year later, "Tobacco Road" is one of the few cover songs still in the set. By this time, *Surrealistic Pillow* had been released and the band had achieved substantial fame. Whereas Slick sounds timid on "White Rabbit" in the fall of '66, she brims with confidence in '68.

By providing historical perspective, these discs intrigue even if they offer more value to those who were actually there or part of the scene. They're also very reasonably priced. And despite spotty sonics, dedicated fans should grab them all. For those of us wishing to glimpse into the roots of the psychedelic explosion, *We Have Ignition* offers the best blend of performance and sound. — **Jeff Dorgay**





# Jefferson Airplane

## The Early Flights

By Ben Fong-Torres

Whenever I think of Jefferson Airplane, I think of Steve Miller and what he said about the Airplane when I interviewed him for *Rolling Stone* for a ten-years-after look back at the San Francisco scene and the Summer of Love. He came into town in 1966 from Chicago, where he was a professional musician, and was awestruck by what he found here—and not in a good way.

“I couldn’t understand how the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead and Quicksilver Messenger Service were playing to people,” he said, “because at that time they weren’t very good bands. And when I heard Janis, I couldn’t understand that either. I was going, ‘What is this?’ The bands weren’t in tune and couldn’t have gotten a job anywhere...It took me awhile to realize that it was a social phenomenon; it was not a musical trip.”

Well, it was a bit of both. Those bands didn’t make a splash and sign big record deals because they had long hair and enjoyed being stoned. Which they did. But they all featured seasoned musicians—Jerry Garcia, Phil Lesh, John Cippolina, David Freiberg, Sam Andrew, James Gurley, Janis Joplin, Paul Kantner, Jorma Kaukonen, Jack Casady and Marty Balin, to name only a few.

But yes, it was social, too, and in that scene, the Airplane was royalty, and its kingdom was the concert stage—at the Fillmore, the Avalon, and in ballrooms that sprouted up around the country.

The band made OK records, early on, when Balin had his way with romantic ballads (which Grace Slick thought too corny to sing), and when, with assistance from Garcia, they produced *Surrealistic Pillow* and scored hits with two songs (“White Rabbit” and “Somebody to Love”) Slick brought over from her first band, Great Society.

But it was on stage that the Airplane connected with and built its audience. At first, it was a compact stage in a tiny nightclub (capacity: 104) on the northern end of Fillmore Street. It was the work of Balin, who’d been singing with a folk group, the Town Criers. He was a fan of Bob Dylan and the Byrds, and visualized his own folk-rock band. Along with Kantner, he went through numerous players before settling on Kaukonen on lead guitar; Jack Casady on bass; Skip Spence on drums; and Signe Toly, co-vocalist.

The Matrix opened in August 1965. Balin advertised the house

band as “the sensational Jefferson Airplane” and the group took off. In the audience that first weekend was a young model, the wife of an S.F. State film student, Grace Slick. She watched Balin and Toly soaring together and thought maybe she, too, could sing. She and Jerry Slick soon formed the Great Society.

I saw them early in 1966, while still in college, at San Francisco State. I had no idea that a year or so later, there’d be a magazine called *Rolling Stone*, and that I’d be on the staff, with the Airplane as part of my beat. I covered drug busts, personnel changes, and the group’s endless fights with its record company, RCA.

The Airplane never did anything the way it was supposed to be done. On stage, the group took long minutes tuning up for a song. Between numbers, band members sometimes held meetings to figure out what to do next. But when they figured it out, the wait was almost always worth it.

The group wasn’t the flashiest of the San Francisco bands, but had two crucial things going: a willingness, despite the hip, anti-commerce veneer brushed over most of the musicians in the scene,

to balance art with business. It was the Airplane that not only scored the first hit records out of San Francisco, but helped change the way all musicians related to the industry. The group refused to be slaves to record companies. In 1966, after scoring a contract with an unprecedented advance of \$25,000, the Airplane demanded artistic freedom and stretched musical boundaries. From the beginning, the ensemble refused to set up barriers between itself and audiences.

The Airplane was creative, fiercely independent, and politically active—even activist. With success came dysfunction and many battles; break-ups and make-ups. In other words, it wasn’t all that difficult to identify with them.

Yes, the music continues to be heard, on the radio and by way of recently unearthed live recordings. And the Airplane continues to perform, with different personnel and band names, of course, but usually anchored by Kantner, Casady, and the occasional Balin sighting. Once in awhile, when Marty’s on the case, equal parts Gene Pitney and Steve Perry, you can hear a piece of the past, and the roar of those early flights out of the Matrix and the Fillmore. ●







# Resurrecting A Classic

## The CJ MV50

By Jeff Dorgay

The MV 50 was one of Conrad-Johnson's earliest vacuum-tube power amplifiers, utilizing EL34/6CA7 output tubes, with a modest power output of 45 watts per channel. As is the way at CJ, this design was steadily improved over the years in the form of the MV-52, MV-55, MV-60 (and the 60SE, which utilized 6550 output tubes for more power) to the recent LP-70 power amplifier, which also uses 6550s, and CJ's latest CJD Teflon capacitors. More about those capacitors later.

CJ's first vacuum-tube power amplifier that used 6550 output tubes, the MV-75, was introduced in mid 1979. The following year, it introduced the MV-45, which was an EL34-based amplifier. Both models then went through A and A1 revisions. The MV-50 was built from 1985 to 1990 and had a similar tube complement with an original retail price of \$1,485. I was always a huge fan of CJ tube pre-

amplifiers, starting with their PV-1. But from the beginning of my hi-fi journey, I felt that a high-powered solid-state amplifier was required to get the job done. Chalk it up to owning and selling Phase Linear back in the late '70s.

Shortly after I moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, in the late '80s, a local HiFi dealer put the full-court press on me and *insisted* that I buy an MV-50, which

sounded great in his shop driving a pair of Vandersteen 2Ci's. My Spica TC-50's didn't need a lot of juice and I couldn't play them terribly loud living in an apartment anyway, so I took the bait and brought home this stark-looking tube amplifier for the weekend. An hour later, after the tubes had fully warmed up, I was in heaven – the TC-50s never sounded so good. *(continued)*



## FEATURE

At the beginning of the week, I returned to the dealer with a wad of cash and my Adcom 555 in tow. Hard to believe that a 45-watt-per-channel amplifier with “less than one percent distortion at full output” would replace that monster solid-state amp, but I’d never been happier. It wasn’t long before a CJ PV-10 preamp was sitting on my rack to match the MV-50 amplifier, and I was a full-blown tube junkie. Like so many audiophiles, I had the itch to try something else even though I didn’t realize there was some serious magic going on here. So the MV-50 went to a good friend. It’s worth mentioning that said “friend” tormented me for years about letting go of this little jewel...

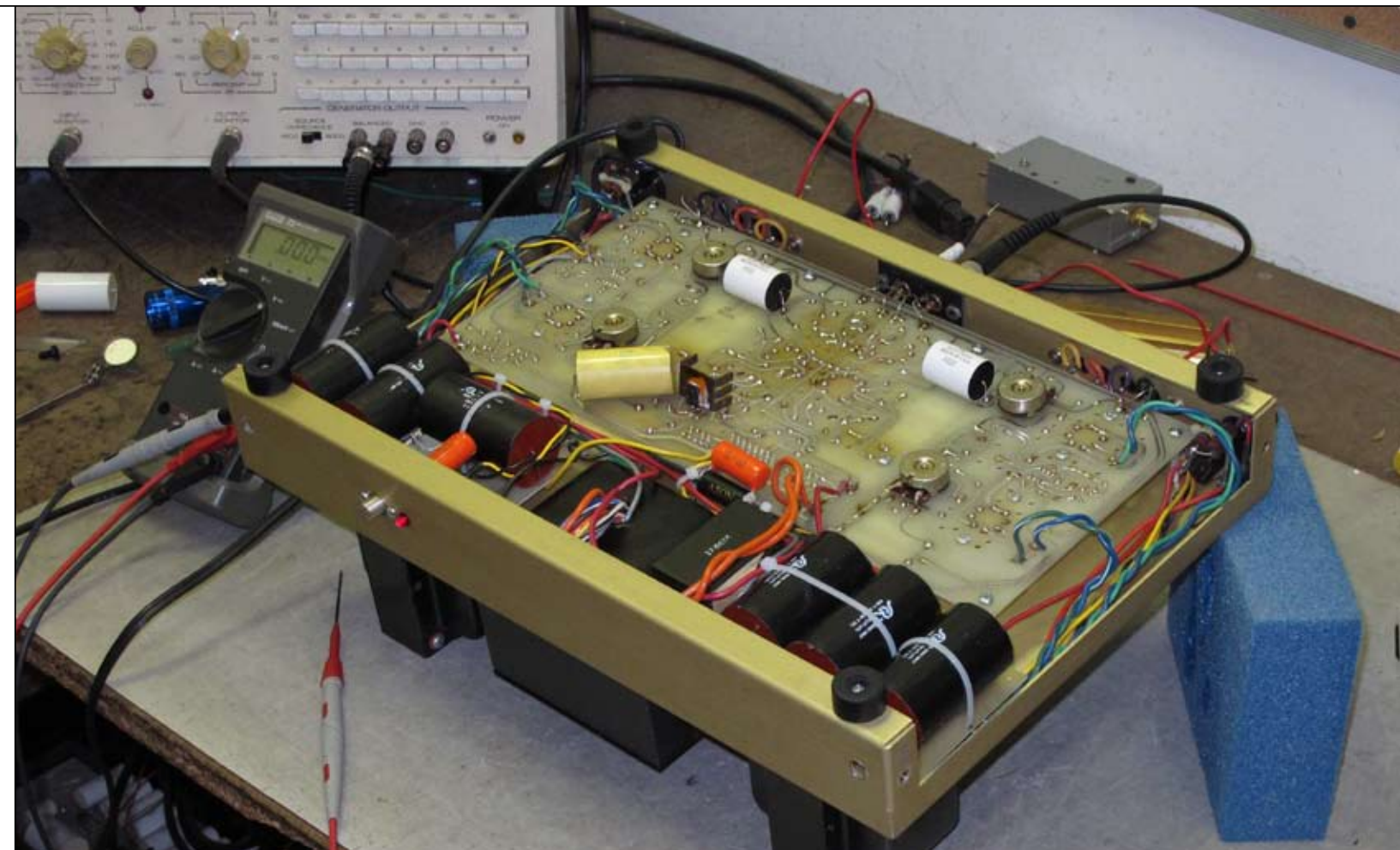
Over the years, many other amplifiers have moved in and out of my sound room, but the memory of the MV-50 remained. I managed to find another one in excellent shape. It ended up mated to my PV-1 that had been sitting on the shelf for some time, but a good friend needed a budget system and once again, I became the Santa Claus of CJ.

About a year ago, CJ announced that it would be offering an upgrade path to select models utilizing its CJD Teflon capacitors, which looked intriguing. Seeing the MV-50 on the list, the hunt began. Fortunately, it didn’t take long until I was able to find a very clean MV-50 that had a “slight buzz” in the left channel. Should you decide to follow my lead and take this path, concentrate on cosmetics, as there are no remaining MV-50 front panels left in the CJ factory. Remember, it’s going in for service anyway.

Even though this particular MV-50 did have that buzz in the left channel, it sounded just as I remembered, lush and inviting. Little did I know about the secret behind this amplifier. More on that later.

### The Upgrade Process

In 2003, CJ designed a series of Teflon capacitors for its products taking its traditional, slightly romantic tonality to a new level. None of the new products featuring these capacitors lost any of the midrange magic or tonal richness for which



CJ is famous. But the new generation featured extension at both ends of the frequency spectrum that was not present before. In addition to more transparency, the newest CJ products have more dynamic contrast and impact. Combining the new capacitors, its latest wide-bandwidth output transformers and what they had learned in more than 30 years of amplifier design resulted in today’s series of LP power amplifiers.

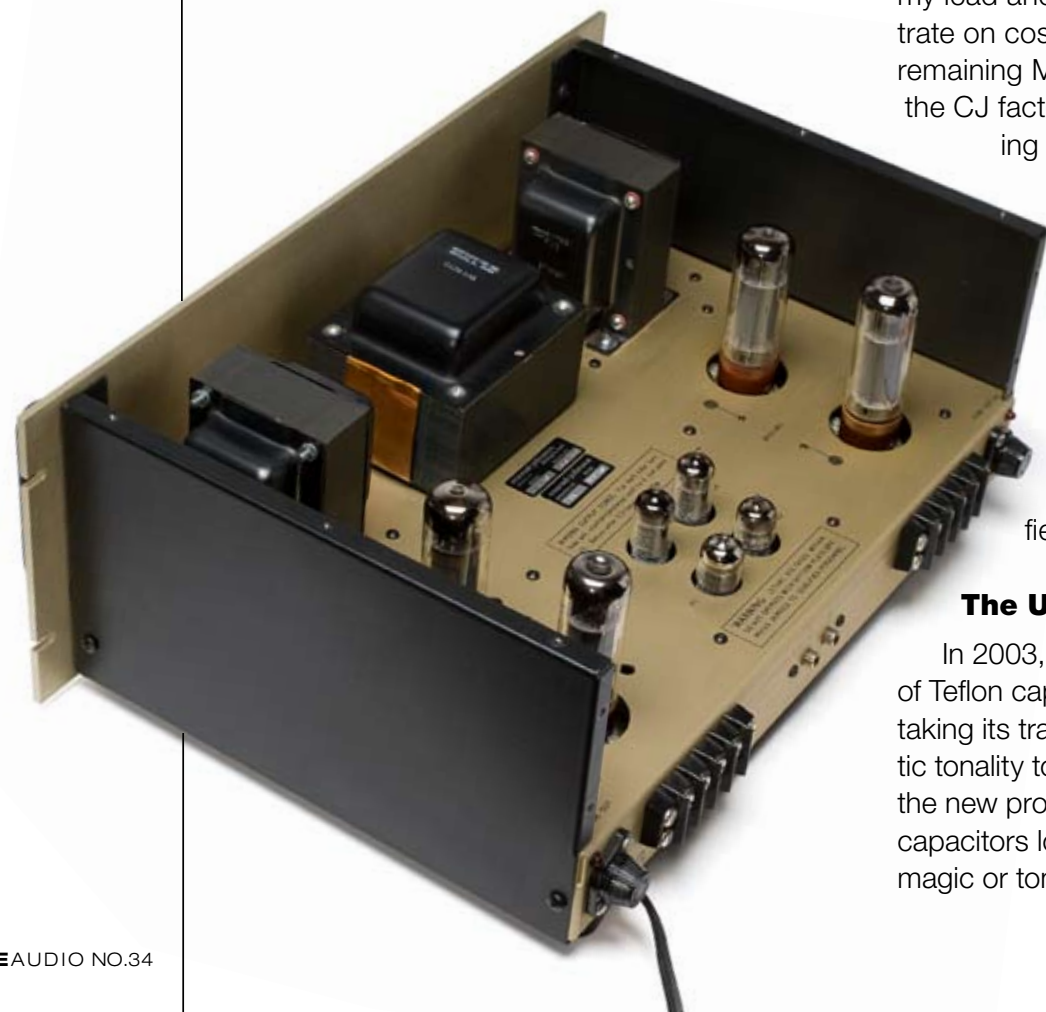
Thanks to their commitment to build quality, many of its original amplifiers are still in service today. When I visited the factory in October, there were a number of vintage CJ amplifiers in for service and upgrades. Lew Johnson told me, “Many of our customers hang on to their old gear when they

upgrade and use it in a second or even third system, so it made a lot of sense to offer the upgrade program.”

The MV-50 you see here was built in July 1987 and as you might expect, the electrolytic capacitors in the power supply are about at the end of their lives. So in addition to the C1 capacitor upgrade, I had the power supply rebuilt, too. Now featuring polypropylene capacitors in the power supply, all of the electrolytic capacitors are gone from the circuit. As I watched Lew and his senior tech Jeff Fischel measure a few things underneath the chassis, Jeff smiled and said, “With all film capacitors under the hood, this amplifier will easily last another 35 years, if not longer.”

The power-supply mod will add another \$500 to the bill, but it’s well worth the expense. It would be a shame to spend the time and expense to have the Teflon capacitors installed only to have a power-supply failure at a later date. Shipping 60 pounds isn’t cheap, and every time you put that amplifier in a box, you run the risk of loss or physical damage. So I suggest taking care of everything while your amplifier is at the factory.

CJ is making every effort to turn the amplifiers around in about 7-10 working days. In addition to bench testing every upgraded amplifier, CJ spends some time listening to it in its sound room to make sure everything is right. *(continued)*







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### A Change for the Better

I’ve been listening to an MV-50 on and off for the past 25 years, so its overall sonic signature is burned into my memory: a seductive mid-range that draws you in to the presentation, but a little bit rolled off on top with a slightly flabby bass response. But with a sufficiently efficient pair of speakers, you’d probably never notice. The folks at CJ were kind enough to put a few hours on the MV-50 before sending it back home, but as with any modern HiFi component that has Teflon capacitors in the circuit, it will take about 400-500 hours to realize its full sound potential. Out of the box, your “new” MV-50 will sound somewhat thin and you might even shake your head and wonder what happened to the magic that was in the amplifier you sent away. It’s there. It’s just going to take some time to return.

At about 250 hours, the amplifier will come out of its “fog” and the luscious midrange you remembered will

return, improving steadily for the next 250 hours. As neither *TONE* nor CJ suggest leaving a tube power amplifier playing unattended, this may take you a bit longer than it would to fully break in a solid-state component. As this is probably 10 percent of the tubes’ rated lifetime, I would highly suggest procuring a cheapo set of EL-34’s for the first few hundred hours of the burn-in ritual.

Once you get over the hump of putting some hours on those new capacitors, the MV-50 is a completely different beast. While Lew reminded me that it does not possess the ultra-wide bandwidth output transformers of the current amplifiers, the improvement is so huge in every way, it’s tough not to be really excited. It’s kind of like putting a new crate motor with fuel injection in your vintage Camaro.

Best of all, the work was done at the factory by the people who build these amplifiers every day, not some hack who works in the basement.  
(continued)

It’s kind of like putting a new crate motor with fuel injection in your vintage Camaro.



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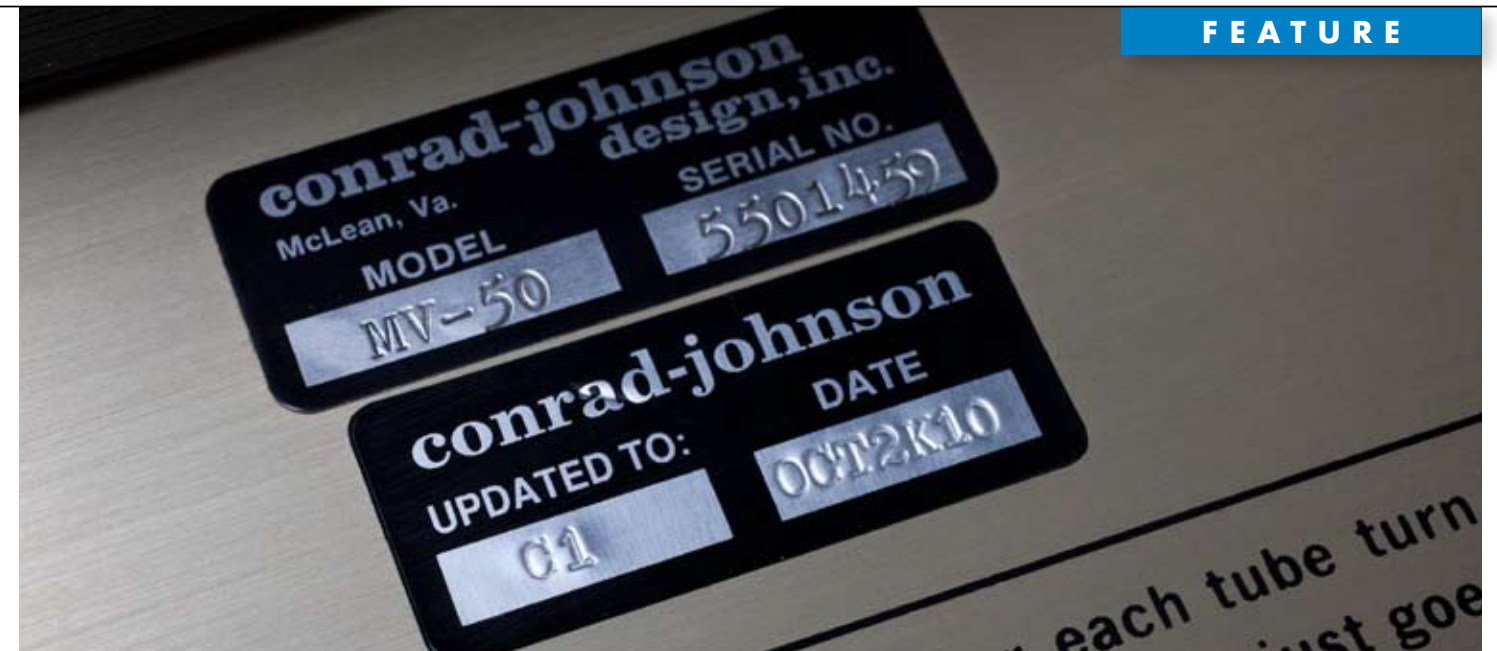
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## FEATURE



Johnson laughs, “You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff we’ve seen done to our amplifiers,” he said. “Some of it isn’t even safe. At that point, we have to call the customer and tell them what it will cost to undo what’s been done or we can’t even proceed.”

Johnson laughs as we discuss this. “You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff we’ve seen done to our amplifiers,” he said. “Some of it isn’t even safe. At that point, we have to call the customer and tell them what it will cost to undo what’s been done or we can’t even proceed.”

While using the new MV-50 was slightly overkill with CJ’s flagship GAT preamplifier that I heard in its sound room, this little amp wasn’t the least bit out of place driving a pair of Wilson Sophias. Even with the fresh Teflon caps, it possessed a greater degree of weight than any MV-50 I’d ever heard.

Fortunately, when the MV-50 arrived back on my doorstep, it was accompanied by the new CJ ET3 SE preamplifier, which is essentially a stripped-down version of the GAT with a built-in TEA-2SE phono preamplifier. We have a full review in the works, but for \$5,000, this is an amazing combination for the audiophile wanting the best CJ has to offer at a more affordable price. The combination with the upgraded MV-50 proved to be out of this world.

### The Value Proposition

If you start from scratch and seek out a used MV-50 to have updated,

you should be able to find a clean example in the \$700 to \$900 range. Add another \$1,500 to have the C1 capacitor upgrade and the power supply rebuilt and you will have a 45-watt-per-channel tube power amplifier that will be on par with (if not outperform) anything in that price category today.

Should another friend need a nice tube amp, they can find their own. This one is going to be buried with me.

### Epilogue: A final word from Lew Johnson.

Shortly after finishing my amplifier, I received an interesting email from Lew. Tracing the serial number more carefully, it turns out that this amplifier was the only MV-50 they sold to Esoteric Audio in July 1987. So after a long journey from Arizona to Chicago, and then to the East Coast, the MV-50 was found by me on the Audio Circle forum in Denver. After going on a trip to CJ and back, this amplifier should be on a frequent flier program! It’s certainly great to have it back. ●



# Audiophile Pressings

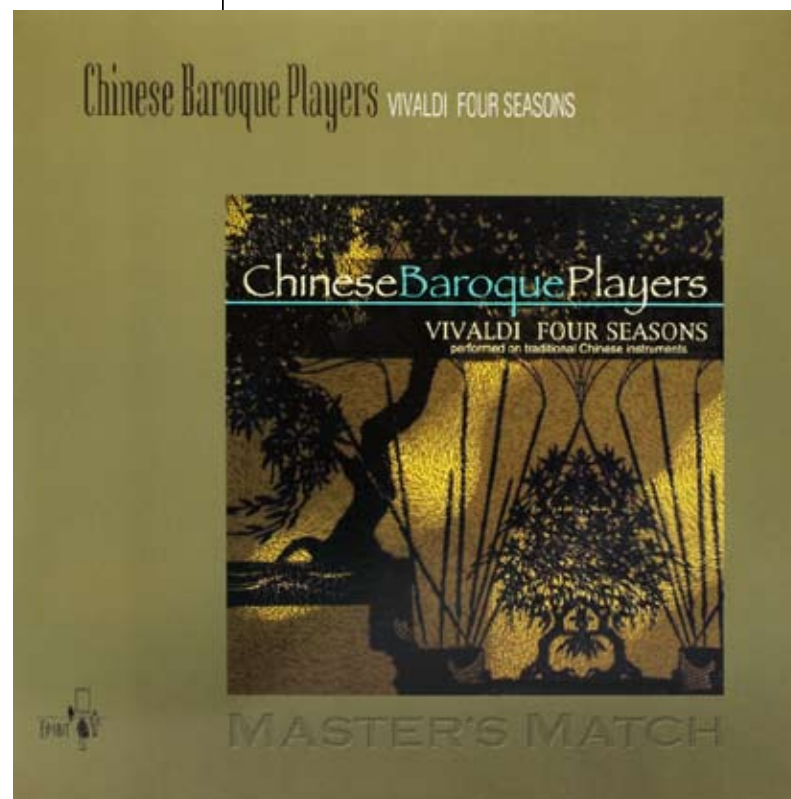
By Jeff Dorgay

Click on album art to purchase from Music Direct

## RECORDINGS OF SPECIAL MERIT

When it comes to CD mastering, many labels claim to have reinvented the wheel. But KK Wong has rewritten the rulebook. Utilizing his own process, referred to as “AudioXact Master’s Match” (which he does not describe in any kind of detail), he claims that the CD sounds better than vinyl, and that his approach is “the most truthful carrier of recorded music, ever.”

Indeed, Wong’s statement is a pretty healthy claim. But after repeated listening, I can state that these two CDs are the best-sounding examples of a 16/44.1 recording I’ve ever heard. The degree of timbral accuracy, astonishing delicacy, and complete lack of digital harshness needs to be experienced to be believed.



### Vivaldi

*Four Seasons*  
Chinese Baroque  
Players

Exhibit Records,  
180g LP and CD

Switching back and forth between the CD and LP of the Vivaldi album was, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable. The flute and violin are perfectly liquid, and I was indeed fooled into believing these musicians were playing in my room.

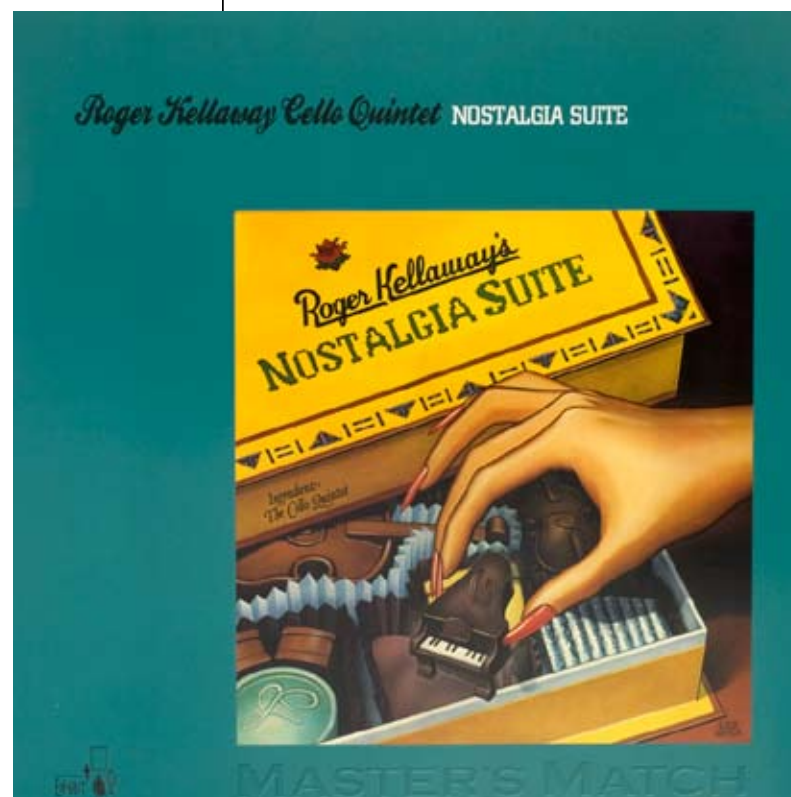
Since I’m not a classical music aficionado, I do not feel qualified to comment on the quality of the performance, save to say I tremendously enjoyed it. I feel that this classical standard, played with traditional Chinese instruments, puts an interesting twist on convention and yields tremendous fun. I’m guessing that classical music geeks will either love or hate it. But those that approach the piece without predetermined attitudes will almost undoubtedly enjoy it.

*Nostalgia Suite* is a straight-ahead jazz record that borrows from myriad styles. Van Morrison fans will instantly recognize Roger Kellaway as the piano player and bandleader behind Van the Man’s *Astral Weeks Live at the Hollywood Bowl* record.

### Roger Kellaway Cello Quintet

*Nostalgia Suite*

Exhibit Records,  
180g LP and CD



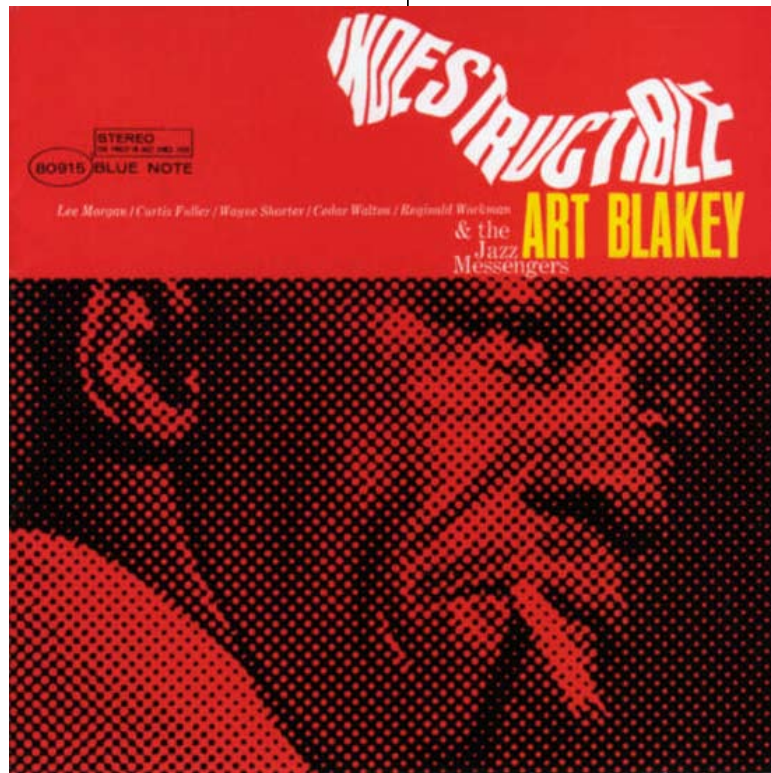
He also produced two records for A&M in 1971 and 1973. Kellaway teamed with Joe Pocar (father of the guys from Toto and drummer on the audiophile classic *James Newton Howard and Friends*) to form a quintet in 1978, the year *Nostalgia Suite* was captured.

Again, here, the difference between CD and LP is slight. Still, the slight nod in high-fidelity clarity goes to the LP—at least on my system. However, the CD sounds more lifelike than most 24/96 files I’ve heard, especially when it comes to the cymbals, which Pocar plays with an incredibly light touch.

Both titles sell for \$49.95, and include both the LP and CD. Every aspect of the packaging is gorgeous, and the imprint recently won awards for its graphic designs. Anyone seeking a pair of outstanding acoustic discs to really show off what their system can do should put these two Exhibit recordings at the top of their list. Let’s hope we see more from this label in the future.







**Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers**

*Indestructible*

Music Matters, 180g 45RPM 2LP

**B**ig, bold jazz demands big, bold grooves. Music Matters delivers that and more on *Indestructible*. The record starts with a giant drum thwack from Art Blakey and, immediately, the opening “The Egyptian” roars out of the speakers.

Throughout, the interplay between trumpeter Lee Morgan, trombonist Curtis Fuller, and tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter pins you back in your couch as well as any Metallica record. This LP has big—no, *huge*—dynamics. *Indestructible* takes your system and senses to the limit. And as much fun as the dynamic outbursts are, the most telling clue pertaining to sonic accuracy comes when Blakey slams his drumstick against the side of his snare. Percussion doesn’t sound any more realistic than that. It’s easy to see why Music Matters’ Ron Rambach cites this masterpiece as one of his all-time favorites. It’s fast becoming one of mine, as well. Begin or continue your exploration of bop here.

**L**ittle Feat is a lot like the Dave Matthews Band in several regards. At heart, the group was a jam-oriented band comprised of excellent players. And just as every 90s frat party seemingly required a few Matthews records, so, too, did every 70s college soiree demand at least two Little Feat albums. Usually, the latter involved *Waiting For Columbus*. Recorded live in London and Washington D.C. in August of 1977, and regarded by many as one of the best live records of the era, the effort captures Feat at the peak of its career. Less than two years later, bandleader Lowell George would be dead.

The two-record set highlights a fairly random mix of tunes from the band’s first five albums, including the party anthem “Don’t Bogart That Joint.” It’s a fantastic showcase for the group’s evolution from roots rockers to a New Orleans boogie style unit to an ensemble that finished its main career as jazz-fusionists.

If you are a Feat fan and do not have this record, now is the time to get it. Mobile Fidelity’s 24k CD, while not quite as smooth as the 180g vinyl, is much better than all but the earliest pressings of standard vinyl. The audiophile label also produced copies of this record in the early 80s on 140g JVC “super vinyl” (as they all were back then). Sealed copies sell for around \$125, with good-condition



**Little Feat**

*Waiting For Columbus*

MoFi, 180g 2LP set or 24kt CD

used copies regularly fetching \$45-\$65. Pocket the difference and buy the new version, as the student has eclipsed the master.

Yes, Stan Ricker did a great job on the original, but current MoFi engineer Shawn Britton aced this one. If you already have the original in your collection, you won’t be missing out if you don’t buy the newly minted pressing. However, for those that take the plunge, the current version has an even smoother high end and improved soundstage width and depth. The surfaces are dead quiet, again exhibiting MoFi’s fanatic level of pressing quality. Feat will not fail you on this release, no matter what format you choose.





## Burmester 100 Phono Preamp

Auravis Systems is pleased to announce the arrival of Burmester's state of the art 100 Phono Preamp in Salt Lake City. As avid fans of analog music reproduction, ground breaking engineering, and world class craftsman, we could not be more excited about Burmester's introduction of this work of art.

The 100 Phono Preamp may be the world's most advanced phono stage amplifier. At its core, the 100 is built with the finest, hand selected and proprietary components. The design is executed with Burmester's zero compromise "Reference Line" technology. The Result? .... Possibly the quietest, most accurate and spectacularly dynamic and natural, three dimensional presentation ever yielded by a phono stage amplifier.

The 100 features up to two independent MM/MC phono inputs with on the fly cartridge load/gain setting switching. An optional A to D conversion module allows for reference level digital output of your vinyl collection to a hard drive or CD burner. Additional features include an auto-adjust function for cartridge channel output balance, variable volume direct to amplifier capability, and phase switching.

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### Kate Bush

*The Sensual World*  
Audio Fidelity, 180g LP

Cleaning up most of the grunge, Audio Fidelity's edition takes it all a step further: Added dimensionality gives the music and production the feel of coming across like a good surround sound mix that, of course, you only need two channels to hear.

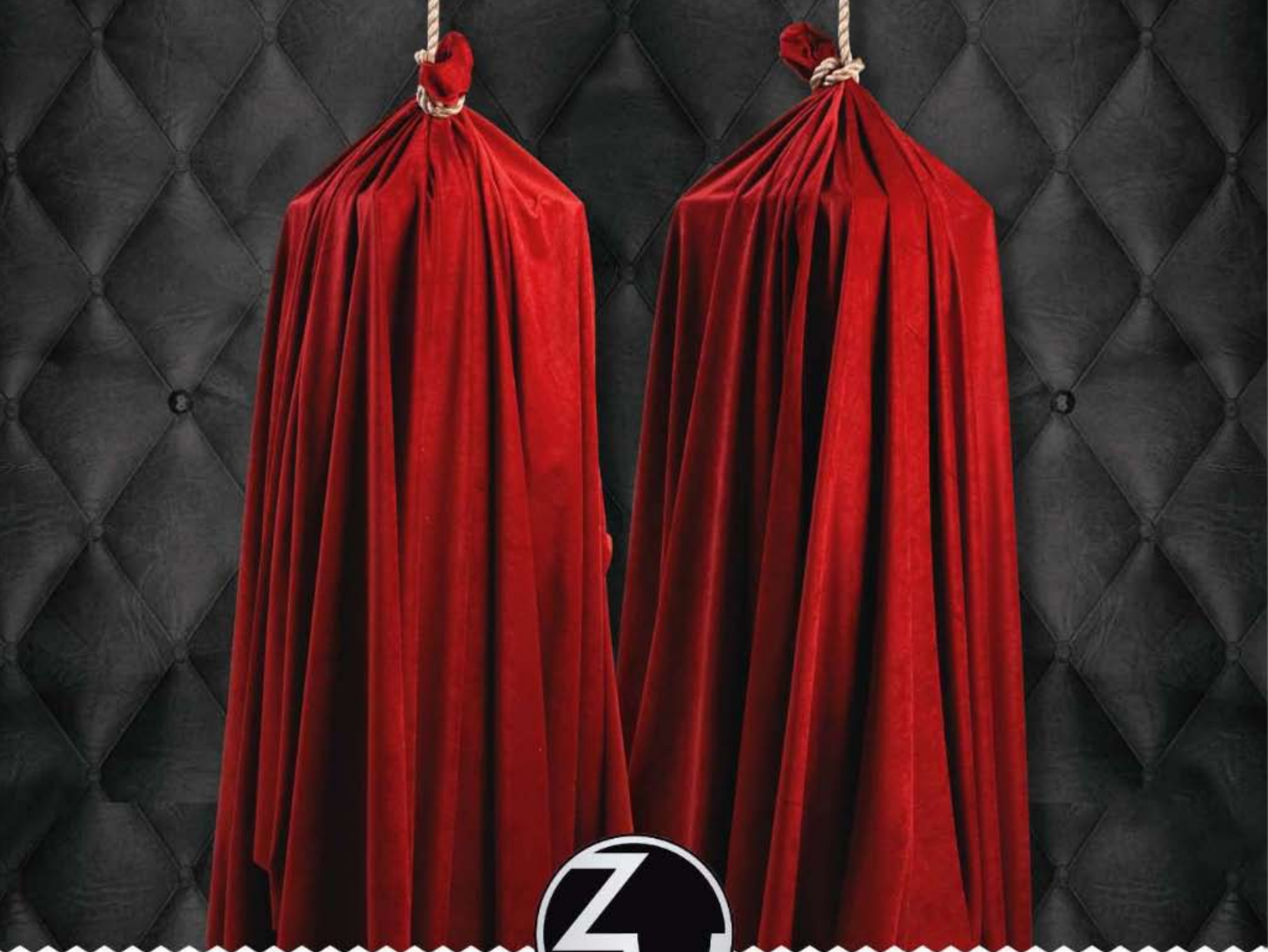
A slight bit of glare in the high frequencies suggests that this record may have been originally recorded on a digital tape recorder. This effect is much less noticeable here than on the original pressing, but *The Sensual World* is not as sultry-sounding as the *Hounds of Love* reissue. Still, the massive amount of low-frequency energy handily surpasses that on the original, lending real weight to the synth bass lines present on a majority of tracks. And, David Gilmour's guitar solo on "Rocket's Tail" claims more energy than the original.

*The Sensual World* is a worthwhile addition to any totally 80s collection, and while it doesn't contribute to the sound quality, the label did a phenomenal job of reprinting the cover art. With so many \$50 reissues cutting corners on jacket presentation, it's nice to see packaging given due respect and the price held in line at \$29.95.

Following up its excellent remaster of Kate Bush's *Hounds of Love*, Steve Hoffman and Kevin Gray turn in another winner with this new version of *The Sensual World*, the subsequent album in the singer's catalog. While it didn't enjoy as much commercial success, the effort stands as more of a severe creative undertaking, seeing Bush took four years to complete it.

By the time the album was finally released in 1989, CD was in full force and LPs had all but disappeared from record-store shelves. The original pressing possesses a big, punchy, highly processed sound that was all the rage in the late 80s, with plenty of strings and synthesizers in the mix.





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## MUSIC



**The Pretenders**  
*Pretenders II*  
MoFi, Hybrid SACD

Much like Van Halen, the Pretenders are a band whose fans argue over the group's first and second albums, continually debating which constitutes their masterpiece. If Chrissie Hynde and Co.'s debut is your favorite, the only choice for great sound is the original issue "target CD." Nautilus produced a half-speed LP pressing in the mid-80s that was terribly bright, and Steve Hoffman recently botched the current remaster. But if *Pretenders II* is on your list, the new MoFi hybrid SACD is stunning, especially if you have an SACD player and can take advantage of the high-res layer.

Where so much detail in the original LP remains lost, the SACD gives the players much more of their own space. Hynde's trademark warble comes through loud and clear, possessing more texture on slow songs and more

growl on uptempo tracks. Thanks to the improvements, "Bad Boys Get Spanked" sounds more serious, and as a bonus, you can now clearly hear Clint Eastwood say, "You don't listen much, do you asshole?" towards the end of the tune.

There's also far more weight in the bass department here than on the original LP, and guitarist James Honeyman-Scott is no longer so buried in the mix. These sonic revelations are again more apparent on slower numbers. On "Birds of Paradise," the guitar now floats through the song, whereas, in the past, it stayed flat. Much more of Honeyman-Scott's nuance comes through as well, the lead riff at the end of the chorus in "Jealous Dogs" brimming with a healthy dose of decay.

*Pretenders II* now begs to be played as loud as you have the nerve to do so.





### Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington

*Ella and Duke at the Cote D'Azur*  
Mosaic, 180g 3LP Box Set

Interestingly, the Mosaic website states that there is no engineer credit available for the mystery man that painstakingly captured these performances. But Kevin Gray at RTI took great care to get the tunes to vinyl, and the results are spectacular. By comparison, Verve's CD reissues are flat and strident.

Tackling jazz standards such as "Misty," "Mack the Knife," and the Gershwin's "How Long Has This Been Going On?," along with a sultry rendition of "Goin' Out of My Head," Fitzgerald is in top form. No matter the tempo, she delivers a more unrestrained performance than what's experienced on her studio sessions. It's a treat.

The Mosaic staff is to be commended for giving this jazz classic the treatment it deserves, not only restoring the sonics, but also including a booklet with rare photos and excellent liner notes. Like last year's *Complete Thelonious Monk at the It Club*, the set is limited to 5000 copies. Grab this piece of history before it's gone.

Somewhere between the original 2LP set and 1998 "Full Concert Release" on Verve, we have Mosaic's 3LP set of *Ella and Duke at the Cote D'Azur*. The audiophile imprint's new version encompasses the two original records plus the Duke Ellington album *Soul Call*, produced from the same French concerts recorded live to two-track tape in Juan-les-Pines between late June and July, 1966.



## POWER TRIO

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This winter brings a pleasing break from traditional audiophile conventions with not one but three classic Van Halen records: *Van Halen II*, *Women and Children First*, and *1984*. It's been a while since we've had a shot of audiophile-grade Van Halen. WB/Rhino released Van Halen in 2008, but it's been quiet since. Strange, particularly given the band's commercial appeal. Along with its self-titled debut, *1984* has the distinction of being RIAA diamond certified for sales of more than 10 million units. Van Halen is one of a select group of acts to claim ownership of two or more records to reach that mark.

The three new titles were initially sent to Bernie Grundman Mastering's Chris Bellman, the creative genius behind some of 2010's best rock remasters. (The Grateful Dead vinyl box, the Neil Young vinyl box, and Tom Petty's *Damn The Torpedoes*, just to name a few.) I caught up with him on the phone just before the holiday to discuss the project.



Photo courtesy of WB records

## Lightning Strikes Three Times

### Rhino's New Van Halen Remasters

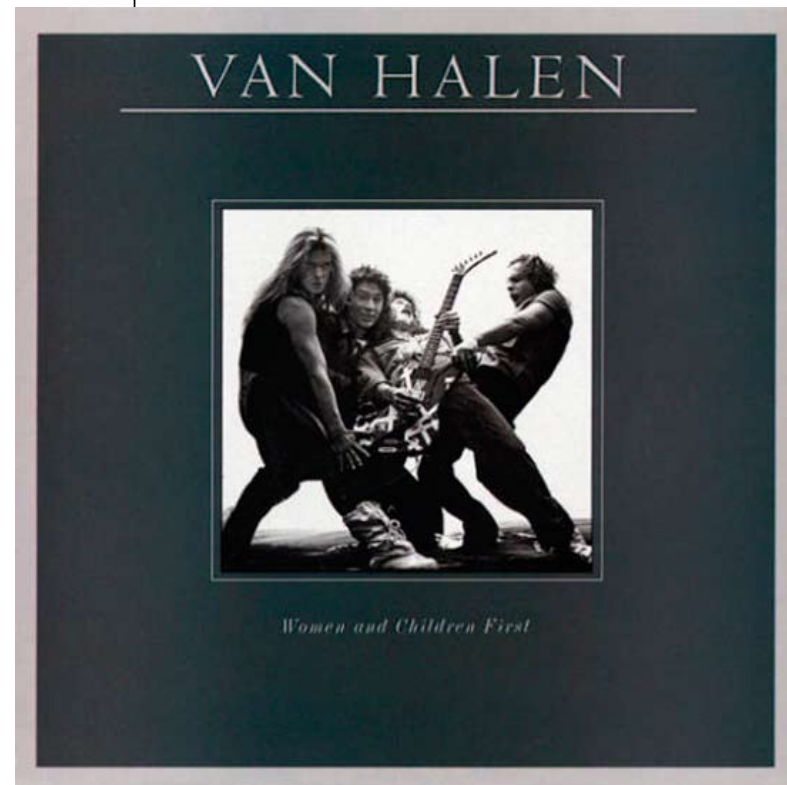
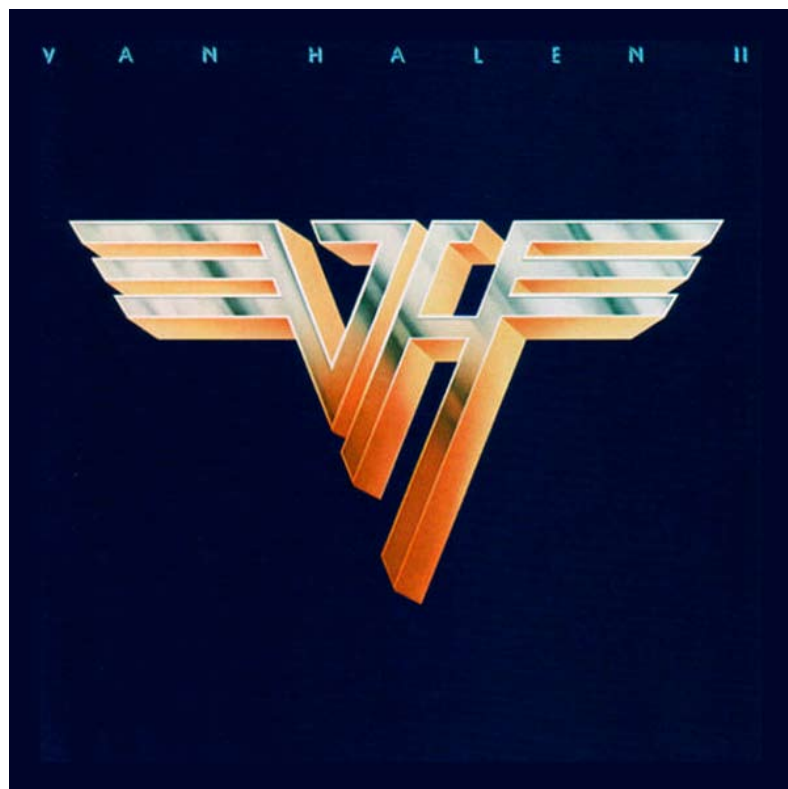
As it happens, Bellman has a long history with the band. Bellman was also the mastering engineer on the 1993 compilation *Best of Volume 1*. When Warner Brothers took on the task of remastering Van Halen's back catalog for CD in 2000, he got the call again—directly from Eddie Van Halen. Bellman says that when he and the guitarist spoke, Van Halen “was unhappy with the sound that Warner was going for.”

Unfortunately, by audiophile standards, the CDs from the 2000 remaster session are still fairly hot. But Bellman notes that he followed the band's direction: “That [digital] sound was more indicative of the day.” However, the new 180g LPs are definitely worthy of audiophile praise and produced from the original analog masters.

Because the tapes were fairly old, they required baking, often the case with tapes dating to the late 70s and early 80s. One of the biggest problematic consequences involved with the method concerns the dissolution of the splicing tape used in the edit process. “I had to go back and spend a day or two with each of the tapes, literally putting them back together,” explains Bellman. And to his knowledge, the band wasn't involved with the current remasters: “I sent the lacquers to Rhino for approval and that was it.” The results speak for themselves.

All three albums sound dramatically better than the original pressings. *Van Halen II* has gone from being flat and compressed, with very little bass energy, to a sonic masterpiece. From the initial bass riff and long decay in the cymbal flanging at the beginning of “You're No Good,” it's evident that this is not the record you may remember from your younger days. Instead of the album having a completely lifeless soundstage, the performance now unfolds in the room and boasts three-dimensional sound, with Michael Anthony's bass foundation playing out in full force. *(continued)*





**All three albums sound dramatically better than the original pressings. *Van Halen II* has gone from being flat and compressed, with very little bass energy, to a sonic masterpiece.**

Bellman mentions that one of the tricks involved maximizing the dynamic range while keeping the guitar sound intact. These new pressings have a lot more resolution throughout. The vocal harmonies in front of Eddie's blazing guitar work on "Somebody Get Me a Doctor" have their own unique spaces, and you can finally hear Van Halen and Anthony's distinct voices. Even the acoustic playing (a first for Van Halen back in 1979) on "Spanish Fly" jumps out from between the speakers, an effect that further solidifies Eddie's virtuoso status.

Sharing similar warmth, dynamics, and soundstage, *Women and Children First* mirror the sonic elements on *Van Halen II*. Again, we are treated to a much larger helping of Eddie Van Halen's guitar sound on record, and whether you prefer the full-on crunch of "And the Cradle Will Rock" or the delicacy gracing "Take Your Whiskey Home," it's all here.

Given that there's a two-album gap between *Women and Children First* and *1984*, it's no surprise that there's also difference in overall sound character on *1984*. Bellman laughs. "I know where you're going with this." At the time, the CD was taking over as the popular medium of choice, and Van Halen began recording its records in Eddie's 5150 Studio behind his house. Bellman points out that longtime VH recording engineer Donn Landee remained

at the helm, as did producer Ted Templeman, so the different sonic feel is somewhat of a mystery. And, it was recorded in analog. As we're talking, Bellman laughs, adding, "I'm holding the analog master to *1984* in my hands right now."

Compared to the other Bellman pressings, it is easy to feel the difference on *1984*. The levels are pushed higher than the prior records, and since the record features Eddie Van Halen playing more keyboards, the mix is much denser. *1984* also has a more polished studio quality than previous VH records, which seem to possess more of a garage band feel. Despite the forward presentation, the new version of *1984* reveals a wealth of information buried on the original.

It's possible that some nitpicky collectors will be annoyed that the album covers, while printed on heavy stock, picked up some contrast. But Warner is to be commended for including the Helmut Newton-photo-graphed David Lee Roth poster with *Women and Children First*.

So, this Christmas, pour some Jack Daniels in the eggnog and put Van Halen on your turntable. Hopefully Bellman will get the chance to work on a few more titles next year. We'll be waiting. ●



# AUDIOHIGH

MUSIC & HOME THEATER SYSTEMS

# Dealers That Mean Business

Audio High, Mountain View, California

By Jeff Dorgay





Two things immediately come to mind when walking through the door of Audio High in Mountain View, California: this is a *serious* hi-fi store, and mascot Fiona (an adorable soft-coated wheaten terrier) has a very comfy gig. With many of audio and video's best brands on display to experience, this store feels like the glory days of hi-fi retailing, with a 21st Century twist.

As you walk into the main showroom, the Sooloos music server is front and center, with an AVID Acutus turntable nearby. There are multiple amplification and speaker choices from KEF, Meridian, Chord, Burmester and Peak Consult, just to name a few brands. And this is a *big* room, so you can actually sit down and experience these components in a lifelike environment. Audio High is open Monday through Saturday from 11 a.m. – 7 p.m., but as owner Michael Silver says, "A lot of our business is by appointment and from repeat customers."

Though they have a steady clientele, not a week goes by that the staff at Audio High doesn't expose at least a few people to high-end audio who have never had the experience. "It's always the same: people come in here that have been used to listening to music on iPods and earbuds and they can't believe that music can sound this good," Silver said.

### A Strong Interest in Music and Technology

So much of this comes from Silver's own love for music. A classically trained pianist, he mentions that his parents "actually listened to a lot of folk music, but there was always music playing in the house. I even saw Woodie Guthrie when I was very young." But Silver was drawn to classical music at an early age. "It's a combination of the emotional and the intellectual aspects. When you look at the score to one of Beethoven's pieces, you can hear it a hundred times and still discover something new." It's no surprise that he considers Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 14 in C# Minor, Op. 131* "the best piece of music ever written."



Silver was always involved with technology. He always had a great audio and video system when young, going straight to Apple after college. During his college years, he helped people put systems together. After Apple, he was selling gear part time from his house, and increasing his network of clients. "I dabbled a bit over time and at one point felt I could do this as a real business. I started selling gear in 1997 to raise money for charity, and I was doing so much business out of my house that I needed a real store." In 1993, his first hi-fi shop was born.

### Staying Green

After a few years, he moved to the current location. Having rented space in the unit next door for six years, Silver ended up purchasing the entire building and was able to rebuild the current space to his specifications, which included powering the whole building with solar power. "We've always run the company as a green business because it's the right thing to do. Recently, the state had a program to become certified as a green business and when they came by to examine us, we were already doing everything on the list. When we added the solar power to the building, we installed enough capacity to run the whole building."

In addition to being environmentally friendly, having all that clean power on tap had a side benefit – and a slight detraction. Silver laughs, "It used to be a lot easier to demo power-conditioning

products in the old building because the power was terrible there." Currently, every outlet supplying audio and video gear has a separate 20-amp circuit, with audio and video demo rooms powered by their own electrical panel.

### The Importance of Two-Channel and a Proper Demo

When asked about the ongoing strength of the two-channel world, Silver remains optimistic. But because many of his clients have a wide range of needs, he is open ended in his analysis. "We fulfill our clients' needs, and there is a lot of overlap. Recently, we had a client add a pair of \$170,000 speakers to his theater system because that's where he listens to most of his music, so is that a two-channel or theater?"

But two-channel is very important to Silver, and having the extensive inventory on hand to demonstrate is critical. Often, a client will walk in the door with multichannel in mind, but after hearing the difference between what \$10,000 will buy in a multichannel system versus the same amount in two channel, that customer often leaves the shop with a two-channel system. "Personally, I'll always want to listen to music on a great two-channel system," Silver says. "You can see how much floor space we've dedicated to two channel."

They do not focus heavily on analog, though they do stock it. There was an AVID Acutus on display, but they do not sell a large quantity of turntables these days. *(continued)*



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FEATURE



Silver smiles. "We sell a lot more tube amplifiers than we do turntables, but we do love vinyl and have fun introducing (or re-introducing) people to it..."

I can't stress highly enough how critical it is to have a wide range of strategically picked gear to not only help a potential customer hear the difference between products in a manufacturer's line but to demonstrate the quality range of an entry-level system all the way up to a no-holds-barred system. I would place Audio High among the best retailers I've had the pleasure to visit in this respect. Silver mentions that his extensive inventory has helped them to close a very high percentage of sales.

## Keeping the Ball Rolling

Walking down the main hall from the main two-channel showroom to the large theater room (which features a Meridian 810 projector), one can't help but notice a smattering of photos of Silver's most notable clientele: Carlos Santana, Herbie Hancock, Francis Ford Coppola and Keith Richards are just a few of the people who are regulars at Audio High. Silver feels that this definitely helps the business, "When people come in the store and see the level of clientele that we work with, it definitely helps. Many of our music- and film-industry clients are referrals from others in the industry."  
*(continued)*



# Benchmark



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Coming full circle with Silver's love for music, he has managed to build more awareness for the store by sponsoring concerts each year, with the benefits going to charity. This year, they are sponsoring a Beethoven series featuring world-renowned pianist Robert Silverman. The series started in September and goes through April 14, 2011. Though they have a very healthy business, he would like to expand his reach in two-channel audio during the upcoming year. "We're considering cross-promoting with some of the car dealers along with a few other like-minded companies."

The key to running a great store is customer service and a willingness to introduce new music lovers to the world of high-end audio. During the better part of the day that I spent at Audio High, everyone who visited the store was treated with the same level of friendliness. Their main sales person, Eugene, even had a spirited conversation about music with the mailman.

As I leave the store, Eugene has just finished spending some time with a young customer looking at headphones in the \$200 range. He smiles and says, "Here we go again, this is where it begins." ●

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

## FEATURE



*(continued)*

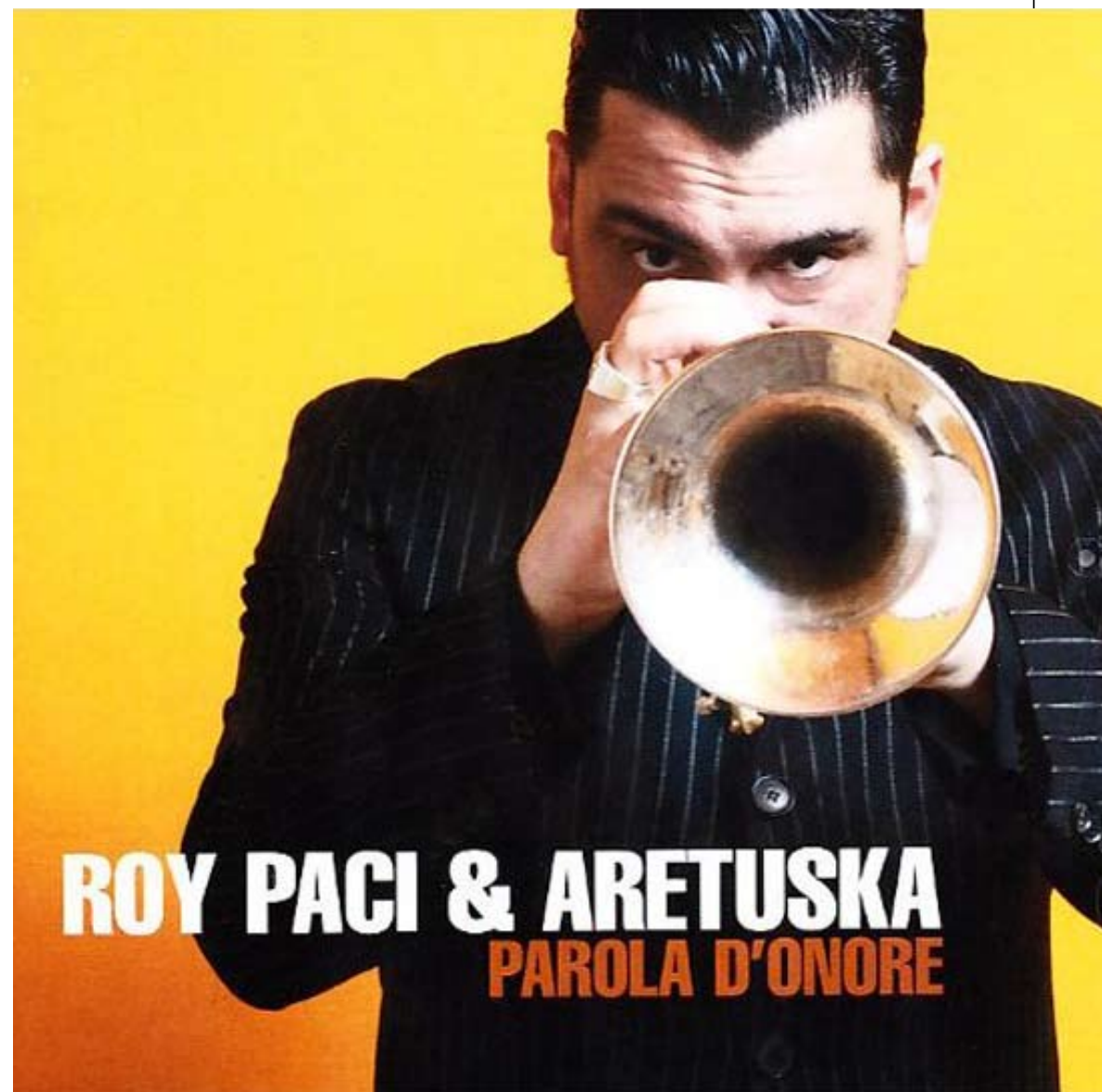


# Italian Alternatives

By Anne Farnsworth

If your idea of Italian music runs along the high/low borders of grand opera and singing gondoliers, with the Four Tenors and Domenico Modugno's "Volare" hovering somewhere in between, then you'll be pleased to know that there are some great artistic finds coming out of Italy's vibrant alternative, jazz, and contemporary scenes.

This should come as no surprise. Italy's culture has been the leading light in classical vocal music since the Renaissance, and a deep love of music expresses itself no matter what the style. So what, exactly, sets the following young artists apart from their peers in other countries? Their loyalty to the traditional folk music and instrumentation of their local regions—local, because culturally, I don't think Italians have quite yet bought into the whole unification concept—and their incorporation of the sounds of these musical microclimates into modern, personal interpretations. Get ready to dive in.



**Roy Paci & Aretuska**  
*Parola D'onore*  
Etnagigante

Imagine a young Louis Prima leading a high-energy Afro-Caribbean/ska horn band and you'll get a sense of the music of Sicilian trumpeter, singer, and composer Roy Paci. After stints in Africa and South America playing Argentine big band, Brazilian cumbia, and Afro-pop, and tours with Zap Mama, Manu Chao, and Italian urban/underground bands Negrita and Mau Mau, he's become a poster boy for world music. Need more evidence? Seek out his three-way collaboration with the klezmer artist and the Serbian gypsy orchestra, or his concept albums of mid-century Italian pop and southern Italian funeral marches.

Although a staple in European concert halls and on international festival circuits, Paci has yet to make his mark in the U.S. Last year, he played his first gig in North America in a sparsely attended Brooklyn high-school auditorium. He's since graduated to more respectable venues but retains a low enough profile that still allows American fans to get in on the ground floor.

Onstage, the ebullient Paci often tops the energy level present on his studio releases, a remarkable achievement given that his recordings have enough juice to jumpstart a small car. *Parola D'onore* mixes reggae, rap, big-band jazz, and Italian folksong themes that are powered by tight Cubano-style horn and percussion sections. Paci sings in English and Spanish as well as Italian. "Fela Kuti Aye!," an homage to the Nigerian superstar, opens with a James Brown-flavored funky guitar motif. "Malarazza," a Sicilian folk tune, includes a rapper rhyming in the local dialect. Thoroughly engaging.





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#### Après La Classe

*Mamma L'Italiani*  
Universal Music Italia

Six-member ska/punk band Après La Classe remains strongly tied to the music of its native Salento, located at the heel of Italy's boot. The group's fifth release, *Mamma L'Italiani*, was conceived and produced by lead vocalist Cesko Arcuti, bassist Combass Bruno, and rapper Caparezza. Eclectic to the extreme, the sextet also includes a disc jockey and an accordion player.

On the record's title song, Mother Italy is defended from a supposed international reputation as the birthplace of poor immigrants and mobsters. It's passionate, in-your-face punk tempered with the folksy sound of a mandolin. The band's playful interest in audio technology turns "La Borsa O La Vita" (translated as "Your Money Or Your Life") into a three-ring circus. If Fellini made records instead of films, they would probably sound like this. There's more.

Duke Ellington's standard "Caravan" gets a ska shout-out, and while "Io No" ("I Don't") credits a 'D. Gillespie' as co-composer, my multiple Jazz Studies degrees still left me helpless to find any evidence of Dizzy's fingerprints here. But that's the fun of *Après La Classe*: The band couples the thrill of the unknown with familiar, highly danceable beats.



#### Jazzinaria with Architorti

*Dipinto di Blu*  
Splasc(h) Records

In 2003, Piedmontese post-bop quartet Jazzinaria released its own take on Italian pop hits. Here, the latter are re-imagined as jazz standards with the string septet Architorti. The collective, featuring singer Laura Cavallero and pianist/arranger Luigi Martinale, swings hard, sometimes in odd meters. A pair of horn players blow so expertly that the duo could well hold its own with any of the New York or L.A. cats. And under Martinale's expert direction, the strings are incorporated organically; one never gets the sense that they were some producer's wild idea.

As for the concept? Breathing new life into beloved Italian evergreens is comparable to a hip American jazz band interpreting Frank Sinatra and Perry Como classics. One song that will be recognizable to American listeners is French composer Charles Trenet's classic "Que Reste-T'il De Nos Amours," here titled "Che Cosa Resta," which English speakers will know as "I Wish You Love." Familiar or not, it's always a pleasure to listen to contemporary jazz that doesn't revisit the standard bop repertoire. Mission accomplished.



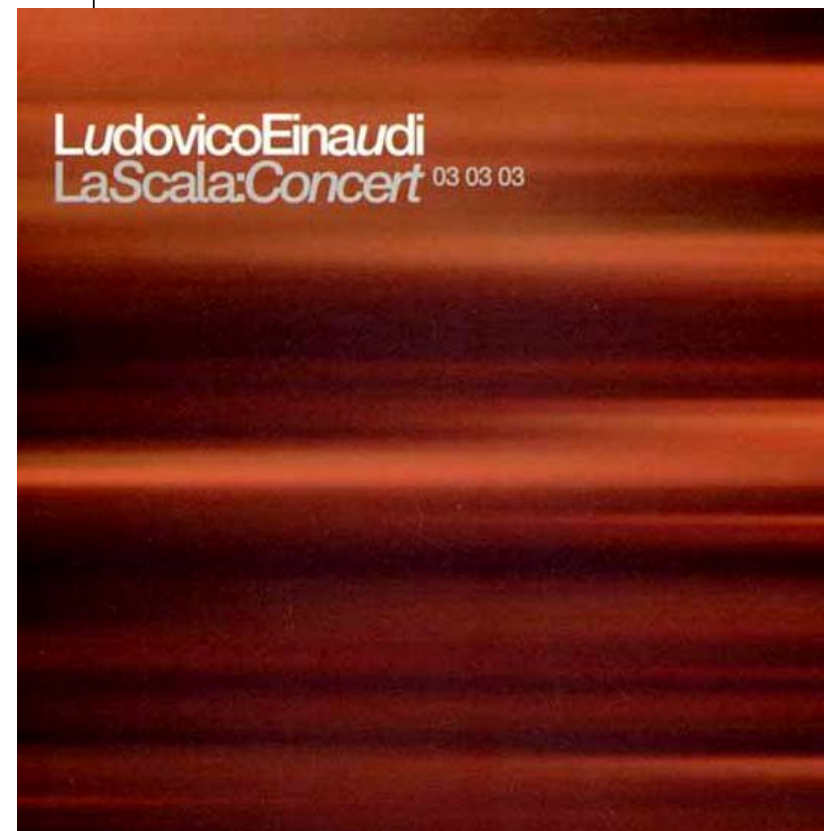
**Elisa***Heart*

Sugar Music/Warner Music Italia

**E**lisa Toffoli is a young singer/songwriter in the Alanis Morissette/Avril Lavigne mold. Born in the northern Italian port city of Monfalcone, she lived in the States for several years and primarily writes in English, singing with a barely discernable albeit charming accent.

Now 32, Toffoli is no newcomer. She signed her first record contract at 17 and has been voraciously recording and performing ever since, winning multiple awards, including one from MTV Europe. Aside from her own projects, she's appeared on several occasions with Andrea Bocelli and served as music director for an Italian production of *Hair*.

Having already gone triple platinum in Italy and landed her an Italian *Rolling Stone* cover, *Heart* is full of bouncy pop fueled by rock-leaning guitar, synthesizers, and Hammond organ. Her lyrics are largely inspired by Rudyard Kipling and Jim Morrison. On an LP that's stuffed with first-rate material, "Mad World" is the standout. Inspired by a version of the Tears For Fears hit featured in the film *Donnie Darko*, she slows the song's tempo and gives the lyrics a melancholy, sardonic edge that seemingly lingers for days.

**Ludovico Einaudi***La Scala: Concert 03 03 03*

BMG Ricordi

Whether you realize it or not, you've probably already heard his music. It's been used extensively in film and television soundtracks, including in several NBA spots. And Einaudi is a superstar in certain circles due to heavy rotation on classical FM stations and collaborations with world musicians as well as Coldplay and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. There are even piano nerd forums dedicated to the dissection of his themes and techniques.

The double-CD *La Scala: Concert 03 03 03* was recorded in Milan's storied La Scala, and while it should have been released on SACD, takes advantage of the hall's exceptional acoustics that lift each weighty note of the concert-grand piano and send it ringing over the hushed audience. Using circular arpeggios, Einaudi weaves accompanying figures around his themes, sometimes pulling together several well-known melodies into one piece. His impeccable technique shows in his mastery of subtle dynamics, as the music builds and then reduces in volume almost imperceptibly.

**C**lassically trained pianist Ludovico Einaudi writes and records minimalist, atmospheric music that occupies that nebulous neighborhood between contemporary classical and New Age; think about what would happen if Phillip Glass met George Winston. A Turin native, Einaudi trained at Milan's Verdi Conservatory and went to Tanglewood on scholarship. (Fun fact: His grandfather was President of Italy from 1948-1955, which leads one to wonder if he really needed that scholarship.)



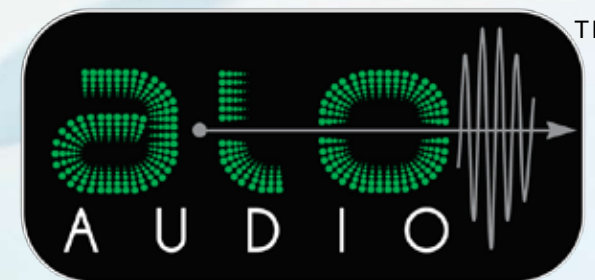

**Giovanni Allevi**

*Joy*  
Sony

**G**iovanni Allevi has had a similar career arc in that he's classically trained, and also conducts and composes orchestral works for solo piano. Younger than the dapper Einaudi, he's a T-shirt and Converse sneakers sort of guy. With degrees in philosophy and music, he cultivates a bad-boy persona, gleefully trading barbs with other Italian classical virtuosi. The cover of *Joy*, which depicts Allevi with a halo of Medusa-like curling irons sticking out of his Sideshow Bob hairdo, seems to be an attempt to position him as a wacky crossover artist. Yet the image comes perilously close to approaching Kenny G territory. His music is another matter.

Although comparable in approach to Einaudi, Allevi prefers to coax his melodies to the absolute forefront. His playing is reminiscent of Keith Jarrett's Köln recordings and Chick Corea's more contemplative solo work. And while not as harmonically interesting as those jazz masters, he brings a youthful energy to the keyboard and, like Einaudi, dazzles with commanding technique. Inspired.

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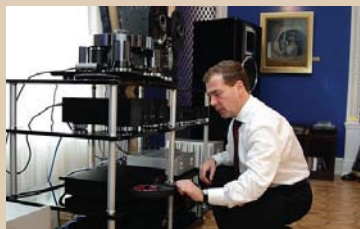
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Both these products have recently won the unreserved praises of the press and now, it seems, gets a Presidential seal of approval....



# Downloads

By Jeff Dorgay

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KEITH JARRETT  
THE KÖLN CONCERT



ECM

## Keith Jarrett

*The Köln Concert*

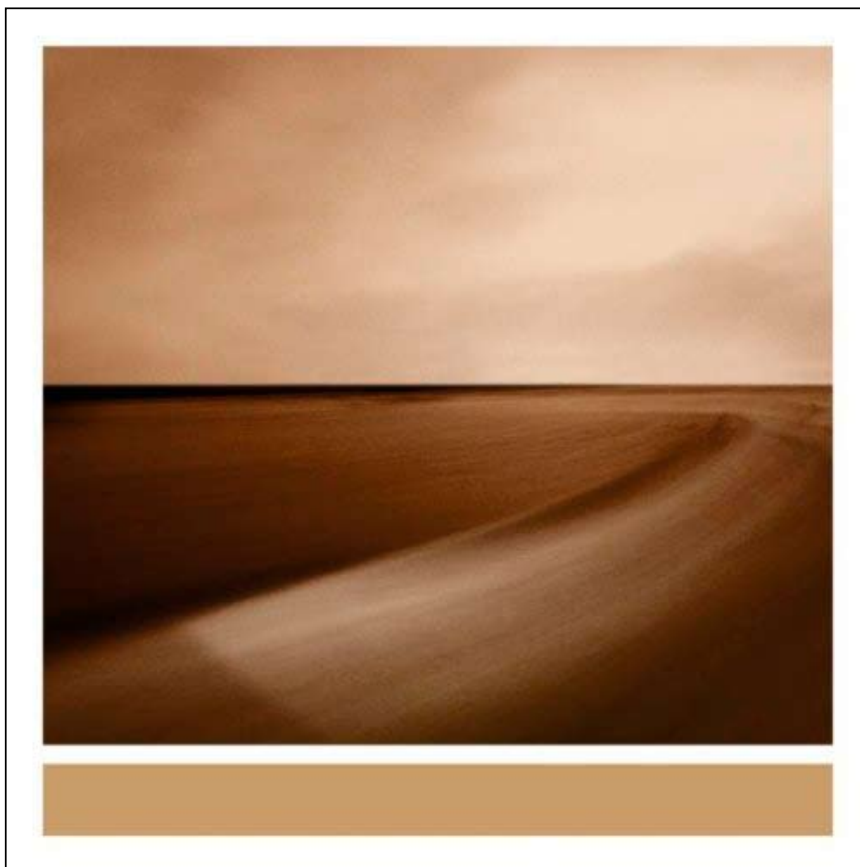
HDTracks, 24/96 FLAC download

**A**fter the temperamental Keith Jarrett was presented with a substandard piano, this concert almost didn't happen in January 1975. But things have a funny way of working out. Jarrett went on to perform what would become the best-selling piano album of all time. Fortunately, the house technicians captured the event, albeit initially for their own archives.

Owing to this record's longevity, it has been released a few times, both on domestic and import CD as well as with Universal's new SHM mastering process. A handful of these discs will set you back upwards of \$60, and they are *not* high-resolution files.

HDTracks' hi-res file comes to the finish line in a dead heat with the original ECM LP. The LP possesses slightly more warmth in Jarrett's piano, yet the download is more dynamic and captures more low-level detail. Unless you have an absolutely spotless copy on vinyl and a mega analog front end, the 24/96 file gets the nod. It's wonderful to hear this classic performance with nary a tick or pop.



**Brian Eno***Small Craft on a Milk Sea*

Bleep.com, 24/44.1 WAV download

**B**rian Eno's latest ambient excursion is a masterpiece (see full review, this issue). The only other way to get a high-resolution download is via the limited-edition box set, complete with a 2LP pressing, for about \$125. Which makes the \$11.95 charge at Bleep.com a stone-cold bargain.

While the sampling rate is only 44.1khz, the additional word length on these tracks really helps to maintain resolution through the album's quieter passages. You won't notice much difference on the louder parts of the record, but when the level drops, the 24-bit files definitely possess more air and texture. A no-brainer.



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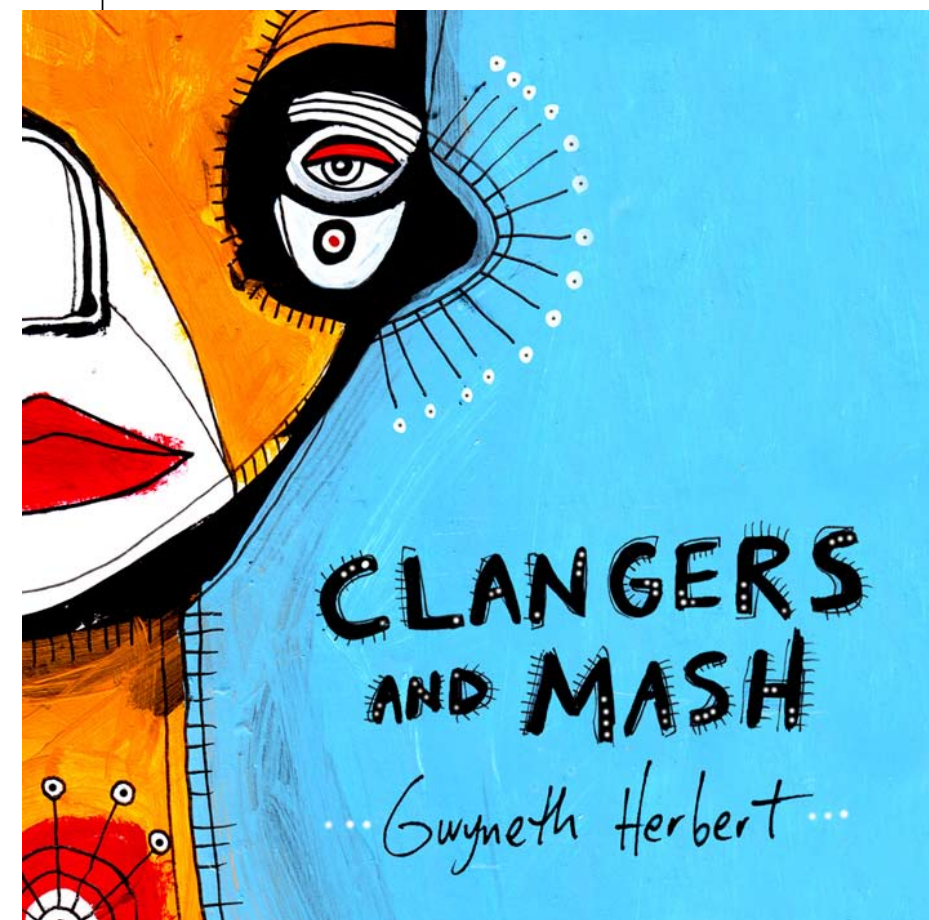
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### Gwyneth Herbert

*Clangers and Mash*

Naim Label, 16/44.1 FLAC, WAV or 320kb MP3 download

**N**o, they are not high-res files, but Gwyneth Herbert is so much fun that it doesn't matter. *Clangers and Mash* is a collection of songs from her first album, presented in various degrees of remix, along with a track ("Petite Cacahuete") from an early album, *Ten Lives*.

If you're a fan, you've likely heard these tracks in their original form. The remixes add new dimensions to the material. And even though this is a 16/44.1 file, it has been produced with great care, featuring a silky smooth high end and thunderous bass, especially on "My Mini and Me."

Herbert treats us to a cache of wryly written and tastefully arranged tunes, all offered up in a method that is sure to make even the driest audiophile smile. Much better than that Eva Cassidy CD to which you were listening.



## FEATURE



# Understated Excitement

## Cary Xciter DAC

By Rich Kent

At first glance, the Cary Xciter doesn't seem so exciting. It's a simple, silver or black, 3.5 x 11 x 13 inch box weighing 12 pounds. It has a single round dial in the middle of the front panel with a handful of LED indicators for power, input source and digital resolution. This polished dial is nicely weighted with a smooth, notchless feel and functions as the input selector. Analog outputs are single-ended RCA only. But a quick listen reveals that there is definitely some excitement under the hood.

The true excitement is how far digital has come in almost 30 years. It seems like only yesterday, I was waiting to get into the Consumer Electronics Show, intent on seeing Sony's latest development that was going to make my turntable obsolete – the Compact Disc. This was Sony's first generation CDP-101 player, which carried an MSRP of \$1,000 at its introduction. According to one of the "inflation calculators" found on the internet, this is equivalent to \$2,125 in 2010. The Xciter DAC has an MSRP of \$1,499.

While CD players were single-box components in the beginning, as digital technology ramped up in the '90s, the transport and DAC became separate components; much like the way the phono preamplifier and line stage had become individual parts of your system. Around 2000 or so, many high-end CD players started to become single-box components once again, but with the advent of so many people using their computers as a source, the standalone DAC has come full circle.





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## FEATURE



### Enter the Cary Xciter

Part of Cary's new compact Xciter series of components, consisting of an integrated amplifier (vacuum-tube powered, of course) and a music server, these components are geared towards the desktop user. Though small in size, the Xciter DAC is a full-featured DAC with RCA and BNC SPDIF inputs, a TOSLINK optical input and a USB input.

All inputs, regardless of resolution, are upsampled to 32bit/192khz and passed on to the new AKM 4399 32-bit DAC chips along with new output devices from National Semiconductor that were designed specifically for Cary. As a photographer, I view the oversampling process as akin to taking an old black-and-white photo, scanning it, processing it in Photoshop, and printing out a copy that is better than the original.

### System Integration and Comparison

The Xciter spent time in my main reference system, consisting of a McIntosh C2200 preamplifier, MC 275 power amplifier and a pair of MartinLogan CLS speakers. The entire system features various cables from MIT.

I wanted to investigate the Xciter both as a potential upgrade for someone with an existing CD player and the audiophile starting to enter the music server and/or computer playback world. Initially, I used my vintage Krell KPS 20i player and the more current OPPO BDP-83 player, utilizing the SPDIF outputs of both.

I started my listening comparisons with some of my original issue 1987 Beatles' CDs, and with a firm picture of both the OPPO and the Krell, brought the Xciter into play. Using the Cary DAC reminded me of the difference between movies that have been shot digitally versus filmed. The harshness and compression present on the CD players by themselves was palatable, but not as good as when played through the Xciter, and the new, remastered CDs were even better. The Cary presentation always sounded more lifelike, and while this DAC would not overcompensate for mediocre-sounding recordings, it did pull more detail and depth than I was getting from either of my other players.

Compared to my reference DAC, the PS Audio Perfect Wave, the Cary is somewhat on the warmer side of neutral, which seems to be a characteristic, albeit a pleasant one, of all its gear. *(continued)*



## FEATURE

Again, this helped when listening to less-than-perfect digital files. At times, my PS Audio DAC feels like an LCD TV that has the contrast and saturation cranked up; upon first glance it's tremendous, but after a while it sinks in that it is not accurate. But as most audiophiles know, "accuracy" is a relative term indeed.

Be aware though, that while the warmth in the Cary Xciter's presentation can be a plus on certain recordings, it can be detrimental with others, especially in a system like mine that is already a touch on the warm side. I found many of my favorite jazz vocalists sounded slightly huskier and at times too deep. This is an area that the Perfect Wave excels in my system.

I did appreciate the touch of warmth with most of the classical music in my collection, however. Symphonies with large string sections tend to sound strident and massed together in poor recordings or systems. The Cary Xciter was able to separate the individual violins and give them a rich tone that was more akin to what I've experienced in a live performance.

### Investigating HD Playback

As a recent convert to high-resolution audio files, I was pleased to see that the Xciter had so many inputs and would work with 24/96 files through its USB input. With more and more high-res music becoming available, 24/96 seems to be emerging as the standard, at least for now. I've been streaming some of my high-res files through the Squeezebox Touch, so I began my listening sessions with the SB's analog outputs for a baseline comparison.

*(continued)*



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FEATURE



A quick trip to the HD Tracks music store added a few favorites from John Coltrane and Diana Krall, and I was ready to roll. Again, the difference going from the analog outputs of the Squeezebox versus using its digital output to drive the Xciter was a big step up in fidelity. While listening to Krall's *Quiet Nights* disc, her breathing and tonal inflection were reproduced with much more realism. The standard 16/44 tracks now sounded flat by comparison. I had the same experience with Coltrane, his sax taking on a much more three-dimensional perspective in my listening space. Even at this level, the difference between standard and high-res playback was clear.

I easily noticed another jump up in resolution and fidelity upon returning to my reference PS Audio DAC (which costs twice as much as the Cary).

## Conclusion

As music moves further away from disc-based physical media and to downloadable, hard-drive-based media, the DAC will continue to become the heart of your audio system. The Cary Xciter stands as a great option to dramatically improve any of these sources while allowing you the convenience of accessing your entire music library on a digital network.

For \$1,500, the Cary Xciter offers solid value and performance. It will breathe life into an older CD player and point you in the right direction to start enjoying HD file playback. The Xciter is a component that allows CD digital media to finally realize and live up to the full potential touted in the '80s. And that's exciting. ●



# The Audeze LCD-2 Headphones

By Jeff Dorgay

I hate to admit this, but after about six years of serious headphone listening, they still leave me cold. I've heard some great phones, and the Head-Fi crowd is by far one of the most passionate group of audiophiles I've ever met, but ... I miss the big, transparent, walk-through sound that I get from a big pair of floorstanding speakers. Not that it's stopped me from collecting a plethora of headphones and amplifiers over the years. But headphones are never my first choice and after about an hour, I've usually had enough.

I don't hate to admit that I've had a paradigm shift. Earlier this year, Ken Ball, owner of ALO Audio, brought over the Audeze phones to show off some of his new cable designs, and I was very intrigued. Somehow, though, I forgot about them until the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. After another listen, I was hooked. Finally, a pair of phones that sounded like putting a pair of MartinLogans on your head! (And yes, I've owned Stax phones in the past. Close, but still not my thing.) Actually, the Audeze phones are more like putting a pair of Magnepans on your head, as they are a magnetic planar driver.



The Audeze LCD-2 phones arrive packaged in a substantial wooden box, along with a plug-in cable of decent quality. If you are a serious headphone enthusiast, it's almost a given that upgrading the cable is not a matter of *if* but *when*, and of course Ken Ball at ALO Audio has just the thing for you. Stock issue from the factory, the LCD-2s have an MSRP of \$945, but you can buy them from ALO with his latest cable creation for \$1,500 with the cable included. Everyone seems to already know about their awesome stature; there's a month-long waiting list.

The LCD-2s look somewhat large at first glance, but they are not terribly heavy at just over a pound (17 oz without cable). The big, black, squishy ear cushions fit perfectly and stay comfortable even after 3-4 hour listening sessions, of which I had many. Everyone that gave them a test drive commented on their unobtrusiveness.

They are completely unlike my Sennheiser 650s and AKG 701s, which feel truly massive in comparison.

#### Burn in and Cable Swap

The ALO cable's performance was consistent with those I've used to replace of every other stock phone cable. The most dramatic improvement is the lowering of overall grain in the presentation. No matter how good the headphones, swapping out that stock cable for an ALO always feels as if I had a severe head cold that has just gone away. In a word, clarity! Of course, there was a bit more low-level information available and thanks to the high resolution of the Audeze phones, the difference between stock and upgraded cable was even more apparent. The level of workmanship is always a bonus; the new cable *looks* better than stock, important when shelling out \$1,500 for a pair of headphones.



Not only was I highly impressed with the sound of the Audeze headphones, they were much better right out of the box than many broken-in headphones I've used. A few phones are notorious for long break-ins, but the LCD-2s are not on that list. Just 50-100 hours of playing is about all it takes. Leave your CD player on while you're at work and within a week, they will be at their best.

#### Natural is the Key Word

After weeks of listening, I'm still blown away by how *natural* these phones sound. Until my new Woo Audio 300B headphone amp arrives, I'm listening with the headphone amp built into my Burmester 011 preamplifier, and it's quite good. Solid state with plenty of current drive and a touch of warmth overall makes for a great headphone experience. Driven by the Spiral Groove SG-2/Triplanar/Grado Statement 1 through the Audio Research REF 2 phonostage made for some outstanding vinyl listening. Digital was handled by the dCS Paganini stack.

Instead of starting with female vocals, my first experience with these phones came from listening to the nine-disc set of Bob Dylan's *The Original Mono Recordings*. Dylan's harmonica on "Don't Think Twice" was amazing – there is so much texture available on this recording to begin with that if you close your eyes, it sounds like Dylan is standing in front of you. And the mono recordings have such an abundance of depth; they feel like stereo. It's crazy. Changing the program and moving on to the Greek Goth goddess, Diamanda Galas, the introduction to "You're Mine" from her album *The Sporting Life* album had buckets of reverb and depth.

(continued)





Her unique vocal style is spread all over the stereo image, so this becomes more of a treat on headphones. No matter who your favorite vocalists are, this is a test that the LCD-2s can ace.

### The Bottom and the Top

Most phones struggle when reproducing low frequencies. It can be any number of factors, dependent on the drivers as well as the cavity and seal of the ear cups. Again, the LCD-2s strike the perfect balance, offering bass that is solid and full of texture. While so many other phones I've heard have a one-note bass effect, there was a great deal of texture present with these. Nothing shows this off better than acoustic bass. As I was evaluating a few of the latest Blue Note test pressings from Music Matters, I was constantly impressed at how well these phones could capture the necessary texture and resonance of an acoustic bass at a level of detail that I've never experienced with headphones.

The lack of harshness and grain in the upper registers not only cuts down on fatigue but allowed me to listen at an even lower volume than I normally do. It's easy to get carried away with the volume control with headphones, which subsequently puts your ears at risk. You don't have to crank the LCD-2s to get

great sound, especially if you have a high-quality headphone amplifier. The brushwork on Ry Cooder's "Drume Negrita" from his *Mambo Sinuendo* album was absolutely dreamy; you can just feel that brush slide across the drumhead!

### A Champion of Low-level Detail

One of the greatest pleasures when listening to headphones is the way a great pair can capture low-level detail. At the beginning of "Fly on the Windshield" from Genesis' *Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, the tiny percussive effects just float all around your head – very trippy indeed. The elevator effect at the beginning of Pink Floyd's "Welcome to the Machine" from *Wishing you Were Here* is also fantastic. Another aural treat was working on the review of Brian Eno's latest release, *Small Craft on a Milk Sea*. This is a fantastic demo on speakers, but the sonic landscape presented is tremendous through these phones, throwing a soundfield that went way beyond the headphone boundaries.

Should you be a vinyl aficionado, these phones will really take you to another world. Again, their high-resolution yet non-fatiguing sound was fantastic for evaluating phono cartridges and the differences between them. Because the sound of the

LCD-2s comes so close to my reference system, it was easy to use with the Manley Massive Passive Studio Equalizer to "adjust" a handful of LPs when I was not happy with their final sound. Thanks to the phones, I could do the necessary EQ moves with my combined Manely/Nagra workstation and be confident enough monitoring with the headphones to get great results when going back to the speakers for final playback.

### You Need These Phones

Everyone who took the Audeze LCD-2 phones for a test drive arrived at the same conclusion – *need* was always the word used in the conversation. While headphone users are very opinionated and easily polarized, I'll stick my neck out and say that these are the most enjoyable headphones I've ever experienced. I have no complaints and I will be using them as my main reference standard against which I'll judge all other headphones. At least until something more amazing comes along ... ●

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# Tascam DR-2d Digital Recorder

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Of course, we on the TONE staff do not encourage illegal recording of live music events or anything else for that matter, but if you've been looking for a great portable digital recorder and are on a tight budget, look no further than the Tascam DR-2d.

Capable of recording in 24bit-96khz linear PCM, the sound quality is rather good even when using the internal mikes, as I found out when I attended a recent Black Crowes concert with our publisher. Lower sample rates are also accommodated, but the high res capability is tough to resist.

The internal pair of AA batteries offer about three hours of recording at the highest resolution, which should give you just enough time to cover anyone but Springsteen on a bender. Should you want to use this on location where you have access to AC power, there is a 5V connection. There are also one-eighth-inch jacks for mic in, line in and line out. The DR-2d records directly to an SD card, so you can either dump your captured sound files via the USB connection or just pop the SD card out and plug it into your computer. This worked very well when working on location, just moving the SD card right to my MacBook Pro and editing in Audacity. An 8GB card will give you just over four hours at 24/96 quality, and SD cards up to 64GB can be used. Check the owner's manual for a list of compatible cards before recording a critical project.

While the sound quality is not quite on par with the Nagra LB recently tested in TONEAudio, it is amazingly good for \$250 and much more versatile than my old Pro Walkman. And should your DAC work with high res files via USB, you can play your recordings back via the USB port. Another fun option with the DR-2d is to load up a large memory card with 24/96 music files. The resulting headphone playback blows away the iPod. Granted, you don't have the elegant user interface of the iPod, but if it's sound quality you're after, this is the way to roll. A very handy little device indeed! —**Jerold O'Brien**





# Ralph Lauren Sporting Collection

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

Ordinarily, *TONE* has no truck with watches not made by watch companies. Would you buy luggage from a bakery? Binoculars from a shoe maker? The trend for fashion brands to introduce their own timepieces has resulted in a fluke or two, however, and we should have known better than to doubt *tastemeister* Ralph Lauren. He collects watches with the same fastidiousness as he does vintage cars, and his watch line reflects it. Ralph Lauren wristwatches are made for the brand by the Richemont Group, which owns numerous respected watch companies including Piaget, Panerai, Vacheron Constantin, Cartier and IWC.

For pedigree, the newest entry in the Sporting Collection boasts the Calibre RL98295 manual-winding mechanical movement, made for Ralph Lauren by IWC. Consisting of 156 components, it provides a power reserve of 45 hours. The movement is finished with Geneva stripes visible through its sapphire case back. Case diameter has not been stated, but one suspects the low-to-mid 40mm range.

But why does this watch earn a place in *TONE*'s Gallery of Coolness? Just look at it.

Ralph turned to his car collection for inspiration. Gearheads know that Lauren owns the finest of the handful of the 1938 Type 57SC Atlantic Coupes built by the most elegant automotive marque of all time: Bugatti. A "lesser" one just changed hands for somewhere between US \$30 million to \$40 million, making it the highest price ever paid for a car. Ralph's is more original. The watch it has sired features a wooden surround for the inner dial, elm-burl trim circling a face revealing hours, minutes and seconds in a sub-dial at 6 o'clock. It looks like it was plucked from the Bugatti's dash.

Other "vintage-car" details include an outer bezel held in place by six steel screws, with the wooden surround secured by four blackened cross-head screws. The watch is fitted with a black calf strap reminiscent of the leather seating in Ralph Lauren's prized Bugatti. Price is "to be announced", but this writer expects little change from \$10,000 - \$15,000.

— Ken Kessler







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# Samsung's Galaxy Tablet

The Apple haters have something to be grateful this holiday season. There is finally a legitimate tablet for the rest of us who *refuse* to buy Apple. The ad hype makes it seem as if the Galaxy is light years ahead of the iPad, but the reality is somewhere in between. With the launch of our new *TONES* website in February, we will have an in-depth, head-to-head comparison, so consider this an introduction.

The Galaxy is smaller than the iPad, having a seven-inch screen, and it looks almost like a thicker Kindle with a color touch screen (no wait, that's the color Nook). But there's more to it than that. Looking around the perimeter, you will notice an extra slot for a micro SD card (something the iPad does not possess), making it much easier to view your photos in a hurry. The iPad requires a \$40 adaptor to view standard SD cards, and it struggles with cards larger than 4GB.

One of the main differences between the two pads aside from size is shape. Galaxy is formatted to 16:9, but the irony is that it's tough to actually *get* movies to play on it, at least for now. Once a few more vendors come on board and you can watch more than *YouTube* movies, this will be a great thing indeed. Claimed battery life is seven hours for video playback, but the lack of video content makes this tough to confirm; the Galaxy was running out of juice after about eight hours with the 3G wireless left on. Neither

tablet has a USB port, and I'm surprised that Samsung didn't learn from the initial grumpiness with iPad users over this omission that they didn't leapfrog the Apple competition.

The Galaxy definitely has a few tricks that will pull you into its orbit; it has front- and rear-facing cameras so you can now video conference with anyone having similar hardware and a fast-enough connection. Perhaps the best use of the camera was with Layar's "Augmented Reality" app. This utilizes the front camera, and when you walk down the street, it will make you aware of points of interest. Taking advantage of the Kindle reader for the Android OS makes the Galaxy the best Kindle, albeit the most expensive Kindle ever.

Readability on the smaller screen was never a problem, but if you are on the fence with needing reading glasses, you will definitely need them with the Galaxy. One of the definite advantages to the iPad is the ability to view the full page of a magazine or website with minimal magnification. Those less eagle-eyed will be reaching to see part of the screen more often than not, which does take away from the magazine-viewing experience.

Though the OS is slightly more cumbersome than the iPad, surfing the web is definitely a snappier experience on the Galaxy. When using both pads with a wifi network, the iPad slows dramatically when you have less-than-maximum signal strength. Even with one bar showing,

the Galaxy rockets from page to page. Though the Google mail client was not easily integrated into the system, the way the Galaxy notifies you of new email is a nice touch – a gentle charm goes off and in the upper margin of the screen, a message gives you the sender and the first six words of the message, making it a lot easier to decide if you want to stop doing something else and answer.

And while on the subject of 3G vs. wifi, you can't buy a Galaxy without specifying a wireless carrier. The workaround is to purchase a "pay as you go" plan; buy the first block of service and do most of your web surfing with your wifi network. The AT&T model we purchased for testing had data available in 2GB blocks for \$30. They are anticipating that this is the amount of data that the average user will go through on a monthly basis. Gone is the no-limit data package that early iPhone adopters enjoy.

After a brief stint with the Galaxy, it looks to be a winner and should serve to continue the Mac OS vs. Windows debate. Those with Android phones will feel right at home with the Galaxy pad, while iPad users will be searching a bit for their favorite functions. As an iPad/iPhone user, I found some of the most counterintuitive tasks to always take one more click than they do on the iPad, but within a short time, I got used to Galaxy's way of doing things.

—*Jerold O'Brien*

**The Galaxy definitely has a few tricks that will pull you into its orbit; it has front- and rear-facing cameras so you can now video conference with anyone having similar hardware and a fast-enough connection.**



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# 10 Green Apples

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Just when you thought we couldn't get any more Beatles-related contraband, we have another offering from the Apple Corps. (which is decidedly different from Apple Inc.) that for a change is only slightly related to the actual Fab Four.

In addition to a cool black t-shirt with the Apple (record not computer) logo, you get a sampler CD with a number of artists who used to be on the Apple label when the Beatles started the company. James Taylor, Badfinger, Billy Preston and the Modern Jazz Quartet, just to name a few. And the big bonus is that almost all of these tracks are previously unreleased. So there, you *do* need some more Beatle stuff for Christmas.

—Jerold O'Brien





# iPlunge

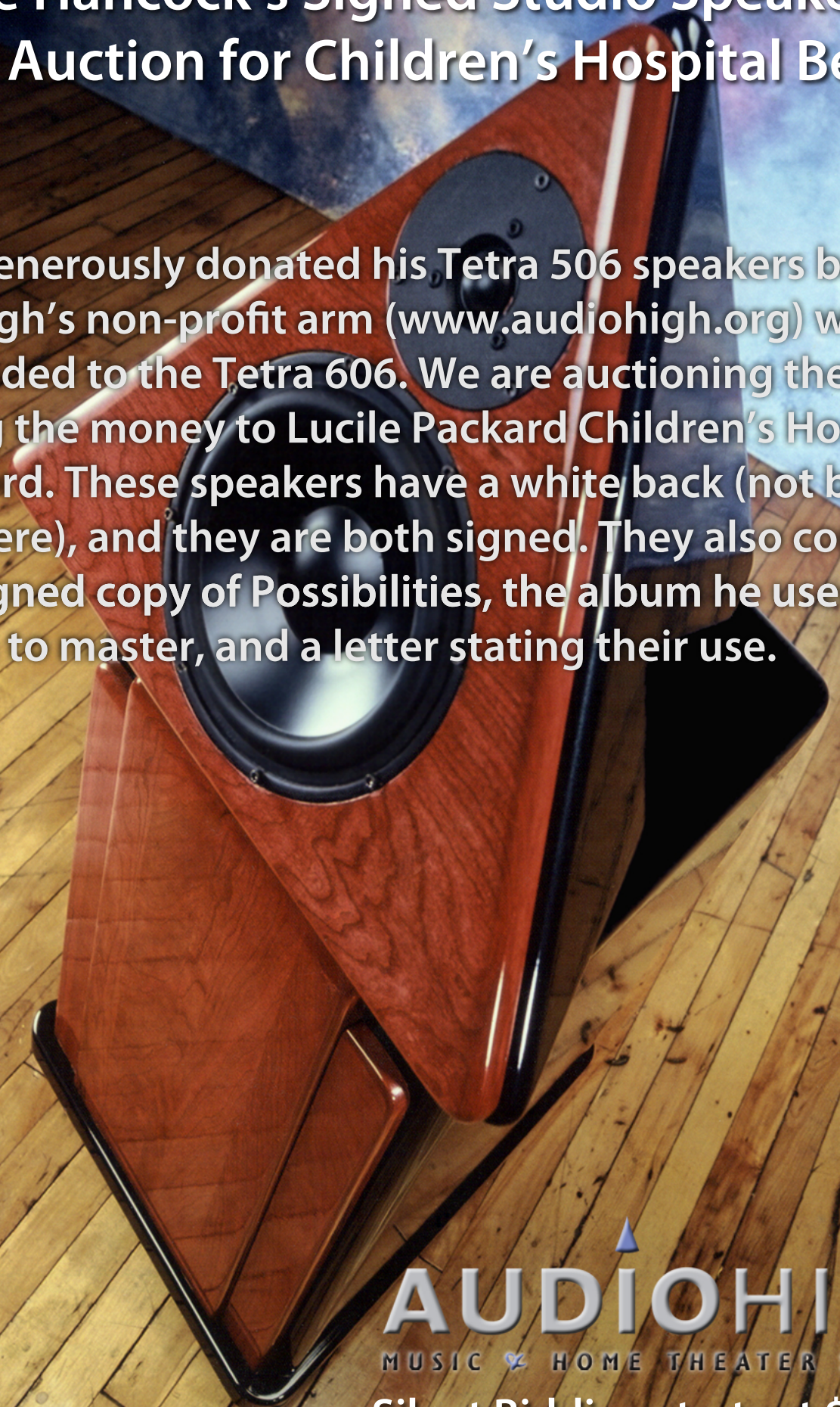
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## Herbie Hancock's Signed Studio Speakers Silent Auction for Children's Hospital Benefit

Herbie generously donated his Tetra 506 speakers back to Audio High's non-profit arm ([www.audiohigh.org](http://www.audiohigh.org)) when he upgraded to the Tetra 606. We are auctioning them and donating the money to Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford. These speakers have a white back (not black, as shown here), and they are both signed. They also come with a signed copy of Possibilities, the album he used these speakers to master, and a letter stating their use.



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TONE STYLE

# Beer Snob

By Bob Gendron

*Life is too short to drink mediocre beer.*

## Bell's Cherry Stout

**F**ruit-dominant beers don't often have the best of reputations. Usually, they are too sweet or intense, lacking the necessary balance, subtlety, and refreshing mouthfeel one expects from a drinkable brew. For these reasons and others, myriad Pumpkin beers that appear in the weeks before Halloween are generally awful—even if they stem from otherwise respectable breweries. Make no mistake: Bell's Cherry Stout isn't something you're going to want to drink in repetition. One 12 oz. pour will be enough to satiate most palettes. However, the wonderful Michigan brewery's cherry concoction is extremely pleasant if savored after a meal or paired with a spicy dinner dish. There's not much head, and the darkness is almost intimidating. Before sipping, the aroma prophesizes the dark roasted malt, deep chocolate, slightly bitter coffee, and cherry flavors that lurk within. This is a big and bold stout-leaning beverage that, because of its makeup, offsets any prickliness that accompanies the sour, tart fruit notes. Most impressively, there's none of the dryness or sickening sweetness that typically interferes with cherry beers. Is it a full-on stout? No, but it's not a full-on cherry beer, either, and that's where the uniqueness lies. Store a few bottles for future enjoyment.





# Stone Oaked Arrogant Bastard Ale

Few, if any, American microbreweries are making as much noise as Escondido, California's Stone Brewing Co. And for good reason. The West Coast establishment has yet to produce anything even close to disappointing, and several of its beers rank amongst the best you can hope to savor. Oaked Arrogant Bastard Ale is one of these chosen few. In addition to a great name, the beer also possesses a witty sense of humor. "It is quite doubtful you have the taste or sophistication to appreciate an ale of this quality and depth," reads the label description, before going on to take a swipe at major breweries that produce microbrew-sounding products (here's looking at you, Blue Moon Ale) and support them with multi-million-dollar advertising campaigns. Aged with American oak wood chips, Arrogant Bastard possesses a noticeable bite and distinguishes itself with a mellow scent that only hints at the hoppy qualities that, with the first sip, explode on the tongue. Brown sugar, caramel, pine, and orange notes collide rather than blend. The in-your-face effect seems to be intentional, particularly given the drink's aggressive-minded goals and personality. Smoky, smooth, and wonderfully clean. Don't plan on downing these bottles quickly. Drink slowly, and witness the impact that a slight temperature change brings to the flavors. Inspired.



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TONE STYLE



## Great Lakes Christmas Ale

**W**hat's great about the holidays? Plenty of things, not the least of which is the onslaught of Christmas-themed beers that hit shelves come late November. No matter where you live in the U.S., chances are, a decent liquor store carries at least half a dozen Christmas brews that provide a refreshing change from the norm. For more than a decade, Cleveland's Great Lakes Brewing Company proven itself as one of the most reliable, consistently excellent breweries in the world. Its Christmas Ale is a five-time award-winning offering, created with honey and spiced with fresh ginger and cinnamon. Clean, crisp, toasty, and just a touch citrusy, this so-called "yuletide merrymaker" is medium-bodied and ideal for sipping next to a fireplace or at the window while watching snow fall outside. One of the finer winter seasonals available. And yes, it actually smells like Christmas and will warm you up inside. Who needs egg nog? ●



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PREVIEW



## Conrad-Johnson ET3SE

\$5,500 [www.conradjohnson.com](http://www.conradjohnson.com)

Conrad-Johnson has made its share of world-class preamplifiers during the past few years: the ART, the ACT 2 and now the GAT. Along with this level of performance has come a substantial price tag; all of these preamplifiers cost \$15,000 or more.

Fortunately, a substantial helping of that engineering excellence has trickled down into the ET3SE. CJ Principal Lew Johnson likes to think of it as a “mini-GAT.” The \$5,500 price includes a phono stage that is essentially their TEA-2SE on the same chassis, so if you are an analog lover who wants world-class performance on a more realistic budget, this is the ticket. Those already married to a phono stage (or not in need of one) can get the ET3SE without phono stage for \$3,995, one of the best values in high-end audio today. Review coming in Issue 35.





# Nagra MSA

\$8,000 [www.nagraaudio.com](http://www.nagraaudio.com)

Thanks to its wealth of experience in building high-performance yet compact professional recording gear, a Nagra component personifies high quality in a small package. Featuring a footprint the size of the Nagra PL-L linestage and VPS phono stage, the MSA power amplifier should make the perfect match for these components.

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# Simaudio Moon i-700

\$11,999 [www.simaudio.com](http://www.simaudio.com)

The Simaudio i-7 was a big hit here and is still working full time in reviewer Mark Marcantonio's reference system. The new i-700 promises even more solid-state goodness, with improvements to the circuitry and power supply along with an increase in power from the i-7's 150 watts per channel to 175 per channel.

The substantial increase in performance is accompanied by a substantial increase in price as well, but all of the Simaudio gear we've reviewed so far has been top shelf. Review in progress.



[verityaudio.com](http://verityaudio.com)





# An Innovative Design from Chord

## The QB76

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By Jeff Dorgay





The Chord company has always been well-known for highly advanced aesthetic design in addition to advanced circuitry, and its QBD76 is no different. A small but densely packed box with a unique shape, one of the QBD76's claims to fame is the myriad of inputs it puts at your disposal.

While it features a pair of coax SPDIF inputs and a pair of Toslink optical inputs, there is also a USB input and a pair of balanced AES inputs (so that you can use the QBD76 in Dual Data mode). But perhaps the most intriguing feature of the QBD76 is its Bluetooth input – that antenna you see is not for a wifi connection. It allows your smart phone to transmit its digital music stream straight to your system.

This diminutive DAC feels even heavier than its 15.5 pound (7kg) weight spec would suggest. Made from a solid billet of aluminum, the QBD76 has the same high level of quality that all Chord products share. It is available in either a standard polish silver finish or black anodized finish; an optional “brilliant” finish costs extra. Described on the Chord website as “Audiophile jewelry for the home,” this finish looks as if the

DAC has been chrome plated. Very attractive, if that’s your thing, but also very susceptible to fingerprints. MSRP on a standard finish QBD76 is \$6,295.

Chord, of course, claims that this is “the world’s most technically advanced DAC,” pointing to its use of field-programmable gate arrays (as does dCS) to perform the digital processing via software and much higher processing power than a standard, off-the-shelf DAC chipset would provide. This is a great approach because as digital technology upgrades, the processor will only need a software upgrade, making it ultimately less prone to becoming outdated. Chord also claims that this is the only DAC to offer eighth-order noise shaping, resulting in better dynamics and 2,608 times oversampling and digital filtering.

### Setup

On a few levels, this piece of gear is almost too Zen for its own good, and as is typical with way too much expensive hi-fi gear these days, the instruction manual is equally cryptic. I thought my dCS stack was a bit tough to get around with the small type on the front panel, but at least it has a large LCD panel on each of its four boxes. This is not a piece of gear that you will be able to operate right out of the box without first reading the the manual.

Looking directly overhead at the top panel, there is a large, round window that lets you peer inside the QBD76, which has a very cool, blue glow. There is another, smaller round window that lets you see the various functions as you choose them with the unmarked buttons. Should you be the type of user who plugs in a source or two and forgets about it, you will get over these minor quirks easily. *(continued)*





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The Absolute Sound,  
Issue 193



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## REVIEW



The sheer number of digital inputs is a nice touch because as more audiophiles gravitate towards computer playback of some kind, the DAC is rapidly becoming the central hub of their system, much as the preamplifier used to be. Also impressive is the QBD76's ability to drive two systems, one through the XLR outputs and one through the RCAs, so you could use it as a source for two systems without issue.

All of the inputs automatically sense the bit depth and sample rate of the incoming signal and adjust accordingly. There is no option to bypass the oversampling and just play the digital signal in its native form, so this may be disconcerting to some digital purists.

I made it a point to run the QBD76 through its paces with everything from my dCS Paganini transport all the way down to my iPhone and aging Denon 3910 universal player to get a feel for its performance with a wide range of digital sources. At least half of my listening was done with the Sooloos

and Naim music servers, with a variety of files from 16/44 all the way up to 24/196. And since I was still in possession of a purpose-built server with dual-channel soundcard (on loan from dCS), I made it a point to play 24/192 files via this this set-up through the Chord. As with my reference Paganini, this provided the most lifelike digital reproduction.

Though I am not usually prone to much tweaky system tuning with cables, etc., the QBD reacted more to this treatment than any other piece of digital hardware I've used in recent memory. This one definitely responded to power conditioning and a good power cord, so consider at least upgrading the stock cord on this unit and you will be rewarded. Though I used Shunyata's Python CX power cord for most of my listening, even upgrading the stock power cord to its \$125 Venom 3 made a very worthwhile improvement in high-frequency smoothness and timing. *(continued)*

**Also impressive is the QBD76's ability to drive two systems, one through the XLR outputs and one through the RCAs, so you could use it as a source for two systems without issue.**



**Massive processing horsepower under the hood certainly made for an impressive amount of data retrieval.**

### A Highly Resolving Component

Massive processing horsepower under the hood certainly made for an impressive amount of data retrieval. Having quite a wide range of digital hardware at my disposal, I was instantly impressed at this aspect of the Chord's performance. If I were going to make an initial comparison to the analog world, the Naim CD 555 is more like a Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum, the dCS Paganini like a Dynavector XV-1s and the Chord like a Clearaudio DaVinci.

Especially when listening to high-resolution source files, I was intrigued with the tiny nuances available from the Chord. I would highly suggest investigating the buffer options; I felt the maximum buffer made for the smoothest sound, but your mileage may vary. "Still...You Turn Me On"

from Emerson, Lake and Palmer's *Brain Salad Surgery* had a degree of texture in the low bass that I've never heard to this extent in my system. I noticed that extra bit of bass texture in a few of my favorite Naim 24/96 downloads and the Mickey Hart *Planet Drum* and *At The Edge* CDs. Again, making a quick comparison with the analog world, the Chord DAC's bass characteristic reminded me of the Continuum Criterion we reviewed in 2008; there was a level of texture in the bass response that was simply stunning.

In terms of comparing the Chord to a few of the world's top digital players (all costing considerably more than the QBD76, but if you are going to claim you make the best box, it's fair game to compare with the big boys), it still falls short in terms

of the ultimate weight possessed by the top players from Naim, Wadia and dCS that I had on hand. Think of the QBD76 as a hyper performance 600cc sport bike, not a 1-liter bike. An experienced rider can get it around the track almost as fast as the big bikes, but you're working the bike 100 percent all the time. Listening to full-scale orchestral pieces from Mahler and Shostakovich, I was able to hear well into the hall and get a great read on its acoustics, but the big crescendos left me wanting a little more. But again, to quantify more accurately, my GamuT S9s are solid down to 17hz.

In all fairness to the Chord, if I were merely comparing the QBD76 with other examples I've heard in the equivalent price range, it would be tops in class. But when compared

with the five-figure players, I knew there was more "oomph" to be had.

### The Double-Edged Sword of High Resolution

The other aspect of the Chord's performance that will either be a perfect fit or the straw that breaks the camel's back is its ultimate tonality combined with all that resolution. I've been accused of liking a tonal balance that's slightly on the warm side of neutral, so any potential buyer should take this into consideration when reading my evaluations. Even in my second system, which currently consists of a vacuum-tube version of the McIntosh MC500 preamplifier and the MC1.2k power amplifiers, I still always felt like I was listening to a digital source.

Though I found the Chord visceral and exciting with excellent pace, in

my reference system, I could never relax and forget that I was listening to digital, as I have been able to with a few other top players. I didn't really see this as a negative for the QBD76, as I've never experienced this level of playback in any digital player below the \$12k range, so it was not a disappointment.

Where I did find the Chord to be a perfect match was when I swapped the solid-state MC1.2kw's for the vacuum-tube MC275 power amplifier in my third system, which consists of all vintage CJ gear. It definitely voiced on the warm side of the fence and was actually somewhat romantic and lush, if you will. Where a lot of other digital players sounded veiled and grainy, the Chord was a nice match, with the extra helping of resolution a solid plus. *(continued)*





Two of my other staff reviewers who are predisposed to liking a bit more detail in their presentation were absolutely smitten by the QBD76. One of them regularly referred to my Naim CD555 as “dark,” so the beauty is always in the eye of the beholder.

#### Other Features

I must admit that being able to mate my iPhone to my hi-fi system without any wires and let my friends do the same is very cool, so the Bluetooth access of the QBD76 was very useful. This feature is by far the perfect ice breaker at a party because friends always want to hear their own music when they drop by. I would love to see this functionality in everyone’s hi-fi system.

As I mentioned earlier, the multiple inputs on this DAC make it extremely easy to use the QBD76 as a digital hub and for comparing multiple sources.

At one point, I had one computer connected via USB, one via Toslink and two transports connected to the SPDIF inputs. Those who have a modestly priced CD player will be instantly impressed at how much more performance they can get from their system should they not want to abandon physical media right away. I was having a ton of fun using a Rega Planet CD player and a Mac Mini running Amarra through the QBD76.

#### Conclusion

As with any component at this price point, I would suggest a demo in your system to make sure the tonality is synergistic with your system. Warm and romantic it isn’t, but it isn’t harsh or grainy either. The Chord QBD76 will not embellish the more raggedy-sounding discs in your collection, but it will reveal some pleasant surprises in your best recordings. Highly recommended. ●

#### The Chord QBD76 DAC

MSRP: \$6,295

#### MANUFACTURER

##### Factory:

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

##### North American

##### Distributor:

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

#### PERIPHERALS

**Preamplifiers** Burmester 011, McIntosh C500, Conrad-Johnson ET3SE

**Power Amplifiers** Burmester 911 mk. 3, McIntosh MC275, McIntosh MC1.2kw monoblocks, Conrad-Johnson MV50-C1, Octave ME130 monoblocks

**Speakers** GamuT S9, MartinLogan CLX, Estelon EX, Harbeth Monitor 40.1, B&W 805D (w/Gotham Subwoofer)

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora I/C, Shunyata Stratos SP speaker cable, Cardas Clear I/C and speaker cable, Audioquest Wild Blue Yonder I/C and speaker cable

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim PLCs, RSA and Shunyata power cords

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T O N E   E X C L U S I V E

# The New Estelon XA Speakers

By Jeff Dorgay

For a number of reasons, it's always tough to get a full read on any speakers' performance at a show. But the Estelon XA was the most interesting *new* speaker I heard this fall at the Rocky Mountain Audio Fest. The seductive, curvy shape immediately caught my eye, and I paused on seeing the ceramic drivers. No sooner had my mind passed judgment that these were just another set of ceramic driver speakers that wouldn't rock, I heard some fairly dynamic music and drew a different conclusion.







Estelon designer and founder of the company Alfred & Partners, Alfred Vassilkov has been creating speakers and crossover networks for other companies for the past 25 years, and he is finally bringing a product to market under his own name that is 100 percent his vision. When the concept for these speakers was born in 2006, Vassilkov faced a dilemma: there was no enclosure material available that would suffice for his ultimate design. Now, with a new marble-based composite material that Vassilkov has patented, his concept has been born.

This exotic, computer-modeled shape is cast as one solid piece, much like the monocoque tub for a Formula 1 car, and then coated with multiple coats of an automotive finish. The Estelon speakers are available in gloss or matte black. Our review pair arrived in the matte finish, which looks similar to the matte finish on the newest models from Lamborghini and Range Rover. While robots were initially employed to apply the finish, they could not produce cabinets that were up to Vassilkov's high standards, so the robots were abandoned in favor of some highly skilled humans. The photos truly do not do these cabinets justice; the matte finish is seductive in person.

The Estelon XA is a three-way design, using all-ceramic Accutron drivers, a 1.2-inch tweeter, a 7-inch midrange and the latest 11-inch woofer. They have a single set of binding posts and weigh about 190 pounds each. MSRP is \$43,900 per pair, which includes delivery, setup and a pair of custom-made flight cases that are laser cut on the inside to fit the speakers snugly. *(continued)*





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## REVIEW

### Simple Setup

Though the XAs are a little tougher to move than a traditional wood speaker because of their curvy shape and slippery finish, they shouldn't take long to place in your room. My listening room is 16 feet deep and 24 feet wide, and while I began my listening where my GamuT S-9s normally reside, the final placement ended up just slightly further apart, with the Estelons just over 10 feet from each other (tweeter center to tweeter center) and the front of the tweeters about 40 inches from the rear wall. Vassilkov and his European representative, William McIntosh, were kind enough to visit my studio and double-check my setup. After about an hour or so of their attention to detail, we were all convinced that the speakers were performing to the best of their ability in my room.

Their large base made them easy to slide around on my carpeted floor, and once the optimum spot was found, fitting the spikes gave the anticipated last bit of bass performance. Minor movements of an inch here and there during the next few days after Alfred's visit only confirmed that we had the speakers in the right spot in the first place!

The XAs have a sensitivity of 89db/1watt, 4-ohm impedance and a suggested range of amplifier power from 20 to 200 watts. They are indeed very easy to drive and I had no problem getting great sound with my freshly restored C-J MV50 tube power amplifier that only produces 45 watts per channel. Again, thanks to the chameleon-like characteristic of these speakers, you will be able to enjoy whatever kind of amplification you have, so you won't have to go amplifier shopping to accommodate your new speakers.

While about eight different amplifiers were used in the evaluation, the majority of my listening was done with the solid-state Burmester 911 mk.3 (and later a *pair* of 911s) and the all-vacuum-tube Octave ME 130 monoblocks. I found these amplifiers to be extremely tube friendly and easy to fine tune with different cable. (*continued*)





I tried the latest from Kubala Sosna (which is also used for internal wiring), Cardas Clear, AudioQuest Sky and my reference Shunyata Aurora cable, all with excellent luck. Each cable set exhibited its own characteristics, and each seemed to suit a particular amplification choice slightly better than the other, making the XAs easy to fine tune to perfection.

### The Sound

I found their lack of coloration, while maintaining a high level of coherence, the XA's strongest suit. As a panel-speaker enthusiast, coherence is one of my biggest hot buttons, and the XAs delivered this in spades. Precious few cone speakers that I've heard at any price can truly pull this off, so I came away highly impressed with this aspect of these speakers' performance.

In the past, other speakers I've heard with the Accuton drivers have never floated my boat, for lack of a terribly technical description. They either have sounded too forward or somewhat restrained; great with classical music at moderate levels but not a speaker that could really rock out with conviction. The Estelons shattered this belief; they always maintained a balance between being resolving yet natural with the ability to play any music as loud as I wanted to.

Since I usually listen to music in 8-12 hour shifts, I quickly realize when I encounter a fatiguing speaker. The XAs passed this test with flying colors. This is a wonderfully open speaker that you can listen to for days

on end. I was reminded of the MartinLogan CLXs time and time again because of the XAs transparency and ease of delivery.

### The Bottom

One of the first test tracks queued up was Tom Jones' "What Good Am I," from his current album, *Praise and Blame*. Jones' voice is closely miked and this is one of those recordings in which you can hear him breathing in the room, full of emotion. It's a sparse arrangement, with Jones accompanied by acoustic guitar and a pounding kettle drum that will rattle your ribs if your system is up to the task. The XAs excelled, reproducing this drum with the necessary texture to avoid the "one-note bass" effect, capturing the attack and decay with ease.

Before investigating a few more of my favorite bass-laden tracks, one more Tom Jones cut was in order, "Style and Rhythm" from his last album, *24 Hours*. Though not as exquisitely recorded as his current record, this is a great track to crank up loud and dole out some speaker punishment. With a pair of Burmester 911 mk. 3s in monoblock mode and about 800 watts per channel on tap, it was no problem, even at ear-splitting levels.

After running through the usual bass test/torture tracks, including everything from the Telarc *1812 Overture* LP to my favorite electronica tracks, the Estelon XAs remained unrattled. There was nothing I could throw at these speakers that caused them to stumble. *(continued)*

**The XAs excelled, reproducing the drum with the necessary texture to avoid the "one-note bass" effect, and capturing the attack and decay with ease.**





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### The Top

Because the ceramic tweeter is very revealing, you may find that less-than-exceptional electronics are not up to the task. I assure you that after living with these speakers for some time and auditioning everything from a vintage Pioneer receiver all the way up to the Burmester 911 monoblocks, I could hear *exactly* what my gear is capable of producing, especially in the upper registers.

I would categorize the upper-frequency tonality as revealing and perhaps ever so slightly forward, yet without grain. A little too much zip in the cable or amplifier realm might be too much of a good thing with the XAs, but warm and gooey isn't the answer either; this only makes the speakers sound slow and muddled.

Again, the ESL-like speed of the XAs gave cymbals the correct amount of tone and decay without sounding harsh or overly brilliant. Art Blakey's drumming on Lee Morgan's *Tom Cat* was sublime through these speakers. I was grinning ear to ear after listening to a large selection of my favorite Blue Note remasters; these speakers definitely reveal the truth.

### The Middle

Every audiophile has their hot button. Some want pinpoint imaging, others want subterranean bass and 10 others want something entirely different. But for me, a speaker lives and dies with correct midrange. Of course, all of the other aspects of hi-fi reproduction are great fun; I just can't live with a speaker long term if it can't get the midrange as close to perfect as possible.

Without a boring you with the minutiae of a long punch list of favorites, suffice to say that these speakers nail the midband, another testament to a perfect integration of cabinet, crossover design and careful choice of drivers. *(continued)*



Upon listening to “Lay Your Hands on Me” from the 45 rpm, 200-gram Clarity Vinyl pressing of Peter Gabriel’s *Security*, McIntosh remarked, “I’ve never heard that track sound this good.” This is the level of tonal accuracy that justifies the five-figure price tag.

#### Low and High Level Dynamics

The Estelon XAs provide engaging performance at any volume level, another aspect that can be attributed to the world’s finest speakers. Even when listening to music that you could easily speak over, the stereo image does not collapse and there isn’t a volume level that the speakers suddenly “come alive.” While there is a definite level at extremely high levels that the speaker finally starts to compress, it is much higher than is reasonable and prudent for 99 percent of us. The one thing that could lead to trouble with these speakers is that they are so clean right up to the point where the stereo image starts to flatten that they might be damaged by an amplifier that does not have a lot of clean power in reserve. If you really like to rock, pay careful attention to your choice of amplifier and err on the side of too much rather than too little power. Come to think of it, when rocking out, can you really have too much power?

The outstanding MoFi pressing of Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Going On?* will tell you everything you need to know about the low-level dynamics of these speakers. At the beginning of the title track as Gaye is starting his intro rap, you can hear a number of other people in the background, all on different layers, and when he starts to sing, the myriad vocal

layers are easily distinguishable. Again, this is in full effect from low to high volume.

The lack of grain and overhang that the combination of drivers, crossover and cabinet contribute (or perhaps distract from) the presentation is instantly apparent while listening to violin and piano. One of my favorite test records of recent months is The Jung Trio’s *Dvorak Trio In F Minor Op.65*, available on SACD or 45 rpm LP from Groove Note Records. The speed and tonal purity required to reproduce the violin and piano are one of the greatest challenges to a speaker system, provided the electronics are up to the task. The XAs played this recording flawlessly and are on the very short list of speakers that almost fooled me into thinking these ladies were performing in my room.

Depending on whether your taste in music takes you to a heavy-rock band or a full-scale orchestra, you will not be disappointed in the XAs with either type of program material. I had just as much fun listening to Mahler as I did Van Halen, and I never felt that the speakers were running out of juice.

#### A Very Special Addition to the High-End Loudspeaker World

Though Alfred & Partners is a new company, it comes built on years of experience in the field. The fanatical attention to detail shows what can be accomplished when a great driver set is combined with cutting-edge materials and design. We give these speakers our highest recommendation and look forward to listening to some more of Estelon’s creations in the months to follow. This is a pair of speakers that

I could not fault in any way, no matter what music I listened to.

And if you’d like to get a substantial helping of what I heard during my evaluation, stop by Estelon’s room in Las Vegas at this year’s Consumer Electronics Show, where the speakers will be showed with the same Burmester 089 preamplifier and 911 mk. 3 power amplifiers that were used for this review. ●

**The Estelon XA Speakers**  
**MSRP: \$43,900 per pair (US)**  
**€ 29.900 per pair (Europe)**

#### MANUFACTURER

Alfred & Partners, Estonia  
[www.estelon.com](http://www.estelon.com)

#### PERIPHERALS

**Analog sources** Oracle Delphi V w/SME iV.VI and Koetsu Urishi Blue, Spiral Groove SG-2 w/Triplanar and Grado Statement 1

**Digital sources** dCS Paganini Stack, Sooloos Music Server, Naim HDX

**Preamplifier** Burmester 089, Burmester 011, McIntosh C500

**Phono Preamplifier** Audio Research REF 2 phono, AVID Pulsare

**Power Amplifier** Burmester 911mk. 3 (pair), Octave ME130 monoblocks, McIntosh MC 1.2kw monoblocks, McIntosh MC275, Conrad Johnson MV-50C1, First Watt M2

**Cable** Various from Shunyata Aurora, Kubala Sosna Emotion, AudioQuest Sky, Cardas Clear

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri, Maxim and Duke power conditioners, RSA and Shunyata Power Cords, Shunyata SR-Z1 Outlets



*First Watt  
by nelson pass* J2

# First Watt J2 Power Amplifier

## Pure and Easy

By Steve Guttenberg

The First Watt J2 is an absolute honey of an amp. Hooked up to my Zu Essence speakers, the sound isn't merely spectacular; it regularly keeps me up long after I should have gone to bed. The J2 is sublime, but I don't think this point can be made often enough: when a reviewer says an amp is "great," what he's really saying is that it's great with the speaker (or speakers) which he's auditioned it. The same logic could be applied to speaker reviews because you can't listen to speakers without listening through an amp. So it's really the combination of the two – speaker and amp – that we hear. Sure, the rest of the system, namely the preamp, sources and cables, all play their parts. But the interactions between amp and speakers can make or break the sound. And with the high efficiency Zus, it's a winner.





The First Watt J2 and Zu Essence are both made in the United States. Zu is a new wave, youthful audiophile company. First Watt is a Nelson Pass enterprise, and he's the founder and CEO of Pass Laboratories. In the 1970s, his first venture, Threshold, broke new ground in solid-state designs, and he's still advancing the state-of-the-art. First Watt exists because Pass wants to explore a variety of amplifier-design strategies in what he thinks of as "neglected areas:" amplifiers that might not fit into the mainstream and are probably not appropriate for Pass Labs.

The J2 is a stereo power amplifier rated at 25 watts per channel into 8 ohms, and 13 watts into 4 ohms. The clean, compact design measures 17 by 5.5 by 16 inches, and it weighs about 25 pounds. It has a two-stage circuit and operates in pure single-ended Class A mode, with signal JFET devices forming the input stage and power JFET devices for the output stage. What's that, a JFET output stage? That's special. Every solid-state amp you or I have ever heard used bipolar or MOSFET transistors in the output stage. The J2 sports JFETs, and that's way cool.

Yes, I recall that Sony and Yamaha made JFET amps ages ago, but then, power JFETs were MIA. Now they're back. Pass heard that SemiSouth Corporation of Missouri had started making new power JFET transistors with high voltage, current and power capabilities – as high as 1,200 volts, 30 amps, and 273 watts. These new JFETs were designed for very fast switching in solar-power and electric-car applications.

Pass bought a few of these JFETs and found they had a very low distortion characteristic. Compared with MOSFET-type power transistors, JFETs can achieve 10 to 20 dB improvements in distortion performance. So a JFET doesn't need as much feedback to keep distortion low. It's low from the get go.

Pass aims to design what he calls "simple circuits" because, as he once so eloquently put it, "Complexity tends to be the nemesis of musicality..." As he refines a design, he listens to how individual parts – capacitors, resistors, semiconductors, etc. – change not only what he can measure but how they put their "signatures" on the sound.

Low-power, singled-ended tube amps have been popular with some audiophiles, especially those with highly efficient speakers, so you might assume Pass was trying to build a solid-state amp that would appeal to that crowd. But that's not the J2's mission. It doesn't sound like tubes; it's not warm, mellow, romantic or lush.

The J2 is all about purity and exceptional transparency. It's a colorless device. Low-level resolution of recording-room sound or added reverberation are reproduced with startling fidelity. If you want romance, look elsewhere. Play a nasty-sounding recording, such as Arcade Fire's recent *The Suburbs* CD, and it will sound hard, grainy and ferociously compressed. Gorgeous recordings, such as Ella Fitzgerald & Joe Pass' *Sophisticated Lady* CD, will be a feast for the ears. Ella's voice, from a whisper to a full-on wail, takes center stage, and Pass' fleet-fingered fret-work is not too shabby! *(continued)*



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### REVIEW



The feel of the sound is tangibly live, and the anything-can-happen excitement of the 1983 Tokyo concert was perfectly resurrected by the amp and speaker. *Sophisticated* is my favorite Fitzgerald album, precisely because it gets me closer to the live event than anything else.

The J2/Essence combination is dynamically consistent from bass to treble, so the sound feels right. There is a definite tunefulness, a toe-tapping, engaging quality that brings music to life. Bass is quick and nimble, but it won't bowl you over with room-shaking, pants-flapping low-end. If you want that, get a subwoofer.

After an hour or so, the J2's heat sinks and the entire chassis get pretty warm, so you wouldn't want to rest your hand on it for more than a few seconds. The power switch is on the amp's rear panel, which might be a tad

inconvenient if you want to put the J2 in a rack or cabinet. Then again, considering how much heat this amp generates, proper ventilation is a must. I put the J2 out on the floor between the Essences, so it was easy to reach around to the power switch. The warranty runs three years, but Pass claims that in more than eleven years, he's never had a single First Watt product returned for a warranty claim.

Comparing the J2 with my Pass Labs XA100.5 100-watt monoblocks was a study in contrast. The big amps' power advantage was obvious, and that manifested itself in sheer gravitas and a richer, fleshier tonal balance. The XA100.5 soundstage was deeper and broader, but the J2 was just as transparent. Low-level resolution and transient speed were on par with the XA100.5. And the big amp is four times as expensive as the J2.

The little amp's 25 watts uncorked the full measure of Booker T & the MGs prodigious funk. Healthy doses of the band's *Time Is Tight* three CD box set proved the amp has what it takes. Duck Dunn's supple bass lines made all the right moves, and Steve Cropper's tasty guitar tricks were finger-lickin' good. Then again, Booker T's Hammond-organ grooves are the music's bedrock, and he was always adding just the right flavor to the mix.

The live tracks from Cream's *Goodbye* LP may not have had the same sort of unstoppable mojo as the Booker T sides, but played at a satisfyingly loud level, Jack Bruce's fat bass riffing off of Eric Clapton's stinging guitar leads were beautifully rendered. Ginger Baker's heavy-weight drumming had tremendous impact, so any concern that the little amp's 25 watts per would inhibit my style were soon forgotten. (continued)





The Cream record isn't by any stretch an audiophile recording, but I loved the way the J2 decoded the texture of Bruce's bass and Baker's drum kit. They were more dimensionally present than I ever recall hearing from the Mobile Fidelity *Goodbye* gold CD. Same could be said about *Still Life*, a live Rolling Stones LP from their 1981 tour. I've never really liked this LP, but it clicked over the J2, and it made me think about how much better the Stones were when bassist Bill Wyman was still in the band. "Start Me Up" was a highlight; the band still had a bit of their youthful power; then again, that was almost 30 years ago!

I also put the J2 through its paces with Anthony Gallo Acoustics' new and improved Reference 3.5 speakers. The latter is not a super-efficient design (only a moderate 88 dB/1 watt), but the impedance stays around 8 ohms before it drops like a stone around 20 kHz. I really love this new Gallo for its remarkably open quality and its transient speed. Soundstage depth and low-level resolution are superb, and the J2 handily exploited all of those strengths. But power was an issue, so if you like to listen

loud, the J2/Reference 3.5 combo won't float your boat.

The Hifiman HE-6 planar-magnetic headphones (similar operating principal as Magnepan speakers) can be hooked directly to any power amp, so I couldn't help but try the headphones with the J2. Wow, the sound was oh-so transparent, definitely on par with Stax electrostatic headphones. But the J2/HE-6 combination was vastly more dynamic and the bass kicked harder than any 'stat phones I've ever tried. The HE-6 is one of the most open-sounding headphones around, and the J2 only seemed to enhance that quality. Soundstage width and depth on Brian Eno's *Small Craft on a Milk Sea* CD were truly expansive. My only reservation was the bass. Other amps generated gutsier drive and more low-end oomph than the J2 did with the HE-6.

The J2 doesn't sound like a tube amp, but its musicality with my Essence speakers was spectacular. So if you have a Zu, horn or any high-efficiency speaker, the J2 could do the same for you.

## More Power!

By Jeff Dorgay

**S**hould the J2 not be quite enough juice for your speakers, consider the First Watt M2. Rated at an equivalent 25 watts per channel, the M2 is a push-pull design whereas the J2 is single-ended Class A. The M2 produces 40 watts per channel into a 4 ohm load, where the J2 produces only 13 watts per channel.

Bottom line, the M2 amplifier should be able to drive most speakers to adequate sound-pressure levels. I've been a fan of Nelson Pass' Class A designs all the way back to the Threshold 4000A, but everything that Steve has described in the J2 is available with slightly more power in the M2 model. The M2 is slightly less expensive, at \$3,600.

Removing the \$60,000 pair of Burmester 911 mk. 3 monoblocks in my reference system, the M2 held its own, with even slightly more inner detail than the German monster amps. This amplifier was able to take hold of the GamuT S9's with enough control that a few casual visitors didn't even know the Burmester amplifiers were no longer in the system!

Watch for a full review shortly when I have time to peel the smile off of my face. Nelson Pass has done it again. ●

### MANUFACTURER

First Watt J2 Power Amplifier  
MSRP: \$4,000  
[www.firstwatt.com](http://www.firstwatt.com)

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Source** VPI Classic turntable with van den Hul Frog cartridge

**Digital Sources** Ayre C-5xe MP Universal Player, Oppo BDP-83 Special Edition Blu-ray player

**Electronics** Parasound JC 1 preamp, JC 2 power amp, Pass Labs XA100.5 amp, First Watt J2 power amp, Whetst 2.0 phono preamp

**Speakers** Zu Essence, Zu Soul Superfly, Dynaudio C-1, Magnepan MG 3.6/R

**Headphones** Hifiman HE-6

**Cable** Zu interconnects, speaker cable, Audioquest Sky interconnect, Analysis Plus Silver Oval interconnects and speaker cables, and XLO Signature-3 power cords





# PMC DB1i

By Todd Sageser

H

aving listened to large electrostatic speakers for the past 20 years (Acoustat 2+2's and now MartinLogan Summits), it was a new challenge to evaluate a pair of mini monitors; I had to recalibrate my thinking. Unpacking the PMC DB1is, my heart sank a bit when I saw these pint-sized speakers. They are the smallest speakers in the PMC line and carry an MSRP of \$1,995.

Somewhat atypical for an audio engineer, I use my home reference system (with MartinLogan Summits) for final mixing and mastering of my recordings. The full-range capability of the Summits really comes in handy, yet they are still enjoyable speakers to use for personal listening. With my current list of projects out of the way, I installed these tiny speakers and prepared for some extended listening sessions, putting my biases to the side.



### Setup

The DB1s have substantial binding posts, so the jumpers on my current speaker cable had to be spread slightly with pliers to fit properly. Unfortunately, these larger binding posts are spaced closely together, so it took a bit of fiddling to tighten them down adequately. I did not use the PMC Tube 104 stands, which have a height of 41 inches, but the stands I had at my disposal were barely an inch taller, so the DB1s stayed close to the factory-suggested height.

PMC's well-written instruction manual got me up and running quickly, along with a bit of the company's history and a short list of some of the albums produced with its speakers. PMC suggests at least 15 hours of break-in time so that the speaker surrounds can "reach their optimum compliance," and I found this to be accurate. During the first few days of casual listening, I experienced the stereo image getting wider and deeper as the hours piled up.

### Background and Construction

Before we talk about the results of listening, let's look at the speakers themselves. PMC is a well-established brand offering a full line of speakers for both recording-studio monitoring and audiophile listening. Its list of users is like a who's who of performers, professionals and studios. Just a few examples are Stevie Wonder, Coldplay, Tony Bennett, the BBC, Sony, the NFL and EMI.

The line encompasses active and passive designs, sizes range from six-foot tall floor-standing models to smaller bookshelf models, center

and surround speakers, and sub-woofers. Models generally use soft domes for high and mid frequencies and cones, pistons or "Radial™" drivers for low frequencies. To enhance bass response, most of the full-range speakers include PMC's ATL (Advance Transmission Line) technology.

The woofer is at one end of a "tunnel" that wraps up and down within the cabinet. It is heavily damped to absorb high and mid frequencies, while leaving the lowest bass frequencies in phase able to exit the cabinet through a large vent, acting as a second low-frequency driver. In my early days as an audiophile, I used a pair of ESS AMT-1 monitor speakers that utilized a similar transmission-line concept.

The DB1i is no exception. This transmission-line box has a 140 mm (5.5 inch) doped cone with a cast-magnesium chassis low-frequency driver and a 27 mm (one-inch) Sonolex™ domed fabric soft-dome tweeter and is ferro-fluid cooled. The ATL is four sections (effective length of five feet) and exits on the upper rear of the cabinet. Frequency response is 50Hz to 25KHz (with no + or - limits specified). The crossover is at 2KHz. The speakers weigh a hair under 10 pounds each and are 11.4 inches high, 6.1 inches wide and 9.2 inches deep, plus grille. Impedance is 8 ohms and sensitivity is 87dB, one watt at one meter.

The cabinets have four wood-veneer finishes available: oak, walnut, black ash or cherry. Grilles are black fabric and removable. The speakers also offer four bolts on the back to which optional mounting brackets may be attached. *(continued)*



**PMC is a well-established brand offering a full line of speakers for both recording-studio monitoring and audiophile listening.**



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## REVIEW



Most importantly, these speakers sound good at low levels, they really sing at mid volume, yet they can play LOUD when called upon to do so. There was no listener fatigue when I pushed the DB1i's to the extreme. If you are a drummer, bass player or just love the sound of a good, tight backbone in your listening and don't have room for big speakers or a lot of cash, the DB1is could definitely satisfy you.

In general, I noticed that vocals were solid and centered, and the DB1is had a neutral character of a great studio monitor, never edgy or clinical. The stereo image was wide and deep; I loved hearing the ambience and reverb on a wide variety of program material and often heard instruments three-to-four feet outside the speaker boundaries. Trumpets and brass in general felt as if they were in the room with me.

### All the Strengths of a Great Monitor

One of my favorite John Mayer tracks, "Neon" from his *Room for Squares* album, adds guitar layers to each verse. This effect was easily heard, with the side-panned tracks staying in place, while Mayer's lead vocal was solidly center stage. Again, the tiny PMC's sounded much bigger than I expected.

Elvis Costello is always a "go to" when I want to hear how a male vocal sounds. This was a perfect opportunity to listen to the new MoFi release of *Armed Forces*. Track after track, the vocals were incredibly detailed, very focused but not edgy. Listening to the *Painted from Memory* CD by Costello and Burt Bacharach, the dryer vocal was haunting, very upfront but lacking any of the harshness that I have heard on some other speakers. The drums were recorded dry but again, they just jumped out on these little speakers. Brass was sweet and high strings were smooth, with low strings being very revealing in tone and texture. *(continued)*

### Listening Results

I immersed myself in the DB1is for about 10 days. They became my only source of playback and I came away highly impressed. It was easy to forget about their diminutive size when I closed my eyes and listened. With eyes opened, my mind kept trying to convince me that there were bigger woofers hidden somewhere in the room.

The first thing I noticed was that the rhythm section in any recording was just so clear and clean. The small woofers combined with the transmission line designed to make the electric bass pop, too. The bass had a very rich quality, and in most instances, I didn't miss the extra bottom octave that my Summits are capable of reproducing. The bass drums were crisp and quick, yet all retained their characteristic sounds. Snare drum and cymbals were extremely fast, but not harsh or edgy.



One of my new favorites, Jamie Cullum's *The Pursuit*, has an almost endless pallet of cool sounds, including Cullum playing every part of the piano in every possible way and a slew of different spaces and ambiances. On "We Run Things," the loops and synth programming offered a very wide, three-dimensional image. But I did miss the low synth bass on this one. I wouldn't have known it, though, if I hadn't heard it a bunch of times on the Summits.

The snapping sounds of the electronic percussion had incredible transient response that was almost startling. Tom fills were "in your face" as I believe they were intended. On "Not While I'm Around," the bass drum and associated ambience were clear and tight. I rarely missed the absent deep bass unless things went subsonic, but the quality of what was present was always top notch.

Continuing my musical journey with the DB1is, I spun some Alison Krauss and even revisited the Beach Boys classic *Pet Sounds*. PMC's emphasis on its monitors accurately reproducing vocals was always apparent; no matter what type of music to which I listened, the vocals were very natural – one of my hot buttons as an engineer.

Taking the opposite ends of the musical spectrum, going all the way from Van Halen's first album to some of my favorite classical pieces, I remained impressed with the dynamic abilities of these speakers. Whenever I stopped listening critically, I kept forgetting just how big the soundfield was from these small speakers.

#### Small but Powerful

After a wide range of test tracks, my conclusion is that the PMC DB1is are diminutive power houses that work well with any type of program material.

They are equally at home as part of a high-quality two-channel system as they are sitting on top of the monitoring console. Should you want to make these part of a compact multichannel surround system (PMCs are very popular in the movie soundtrack studios as well), PMC also makes a horizontally oriented DB1i center channel speaker with magnetic shielding. And of course, PMC makes a full range of subwoofers, from small to large.

If you enjoy a wide range of musical tastes, and don't want to give up dynamic ability in a modestly priced system, the PMC DB1i is a major contender. While this is the point in the review where the reviewer often comments on buying the speakers, I did exactly that, but for my recording studio! ●

**The PMC DB1i speakers**  
MSRP: \$1,995 per pair

#### MANUFACTURER

[www.pmc-speakers.com](http://www.pmc-speakers.com)

#### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Sources** Technics SP-10 w/Stax arm, Sumiko Blackbird cartridge, Technics SL-1200 w/SME 309 arm, Sound HiFi Mods and Clearaudio Maestro Wood cartridge

**Phono Preamplifiers** Modified Mark Levinson ML-1 (phono stage only), Nagra VPS/VFS

**Power Amplifiers** Acoustat TNT, McIntosh MC275, Marantz 8B, Moscode AU402, McIntosh MC402

**Speakers** MartinLogan Summit, Harbeth Monitor 40.1

**Cable** Shunyata, Cardas, Audioquest





# Ultimate Versatility

## The McIntosh C500 Control Center

By Jeff Dorgay

McIntosh has always built preamplifiers that define the term “input flexibility,” which is why I always refer to them as control centers. With nine inputs and six variable outputs (two XLR and four RCA) in addition to a processor loop, it’s safe to say this preamplifier should be able to accommodate every source in your system. It also features a MC and MM phono stage that can be configured from the front panel or your remote control, so no stone is left unturned. MSRP for the C500 is \$12,000 in either the solid-state or tube version. You can buy all three boxes for \$18,000, but the C500 controller can only access one preamplifier at a time.

A two-box design, the C500 has an interesting twist for those having the age-old debate about the validity of solid state versus vacuum tubes; you can configure your C500 either way. It’s actually two preamplifiers, the C500P (solid state) or C500T (tube). The flagship C1000 controller offers the same choices and allows you to drive both preamplifier modules simultaneously, but with the C500, you have to draw a line in the sand and pick one. For those on the fence, your McIntosh dealer should be able to audition both.







While McIntosh does an excellent job at voicing its gear similarly, there is still an elusive magic to the tube sound that is tough to ignore, and while a vacuum-tube preamplifier means that you will have to change tubes from time to time, it's nice to have the option. The end user is the winner thanks to this unprecedented ability to fine-tune your system, even to the all-McIntosh customer. And both two-box designs feature a set of big, blue output-level meters.

A fully balanced design from input to output, the C500 uses eight 12AX7 tubes: four in the high level circuit and four more in the phono preamplifier. The phono preamplifier circuit is all tube if you are using the moving magnet (MM) stage. If you have a lower-output moving-coil (MC) phono cartridge, the MC stage uses McIntosh's own solid-state phono step-up modules instead of an input transformer. Four of the 12AX7's are visible from the front panel, back lit in green, while the other four are beneath the top cover.

### Setup

The controller section of the C500 has no tubes inside and generates almost no heat, but the preamplifier section does get a little bit warm with eight tubes inside, so make sure to give it some ventilation room. Once both boxes are unpacked, you will notice a pair of umbilical cords that look like parallel-interface printer cables from the earlier days of PC-based computing. According to Ron Cornelius, McIntosh's Sales Manager, only control voltages run through these cables; there are no audio signals here. So tweakophiles can put their fears aside. The single IEC power socket is located on the

controller chassis, which also houses the dual power supplies for each channel, making the C500 a true dual-mono design. For those new to the McIntosh fold, these power transformers are wound in-house, as they always have been.

Once power is attached, the C500 stays in standby mode and on power up, displaying a "tube warmup" message on the LCD front panel with the outputs muted. It's worth noting is that the C500 does not produce a harsh transient should you forget and shut the preamplifier off before your power amp. A nice touch, especially if you're using an amplifier with significant power output.

If you are incorporating the C500 into an all-McIntosh system, there are seven individual data ports so you can link your other components to the C500 and control them all from the one remote – very cool if you have come to the point where you are considering hiring a feng shui consultant to keep your remotes in order! The C500 also features 12V trigger ports, so you can turn everything on with the single power switch. A great feature with other amplifiers but very impressive on a large McIntosh system when you see all of those blue and green faceplates light up at once.

Most of my listening for the review period was conducted with the MC275 vacuum-tube power amplifier and the MC1.2 KW solid-state monoblocks, and with a variety of speakers. The system was cabled entirely with Cardas Clear and utilized the balanced connections on all but one input (the dCS Paganini). After the initial listening was complete, I swapped the standard-issue power cord for a Python CX from Shunyata, as I use on my reference Burmester preamplifier. *(continued)*





### How About That Input Flexibility?

It doesn't stop with the *number* of inputs. The C500 allows you to trim the outputs of each program source  $\pm 6\text{db}$  and you can do it from the comfort of your listening chair, making it easy to fine tune the system so there are no surprises when going from CD to tuner, etc. Seeing that McIntosh has put so much effort into the display programming, it would be nice to see this taken a step further to let the user fully customize the input readout (ala BAT or Simaudio). It would be great for those with multiple turntables and digital players to be able to have the display say "Rega P9" instead of "Phono MM."

However, you can rename the inputs to the preset CD 2, Aux 2, etc. And you can shut off the display on the inputs that are not in use. So if you have only three inputs, you will only be switching between the active ones to avoid confusion. The display has seven steps of brightness from which to choose, and the meters can be switched off for those who like to listen in total darkness. But the question begs to be asked: Why would you ever want to switch off the meters on a McIntosh?

The MM phono stage has adjustments for capacitive loading from 50pf to 750pf in 50pf increments. As there are a number of high-quality MM cartridges on the market, this allows you to perfectly optimize your MM cartridge playback. The MC phono stage allows the input resistive loading to be set at 25, 50, 100, 200, 500 and 1,000 ohms. This should cover the bulk of MM cartridges that are available, but for the hard-core turntable enthusiast, it would be nice to see a "custom" setting that can be set by a competent technician.

Should you still own a high-performance tape deck or other recording device, the record and listen processor loops will come in handy. I found this to be indispensable using the Manley Massive Passive Studio EQ, when capturing digital files from my favorite LPs for music-server use. Thanks to the C500's playback loop, I could sneak the Manley into the system to use with troublesome CDs for playback as well. While this is a feature that few will use, those with multiple sources will appreciate it.

### Definitely Sounds Like a McIntosh

Almost all McIntosh gear has a full-bodied sound that leans slightly to the warm side of neutral, but I can't ever think of an instance where it isn't welcome. I've heard other preamplifiers with more resolution, but the C500 offers a great balance between the lush, overly tubey sound of the 60s and a modern high-resolution sound. While a few of your most pristine, perfectly recorded discs (analog or digital) may not have the last bit of slam and dynamics as they might on a more resolving preamplifier, I'll bet that at least half of the records in your record collection will benefit from that extra tonal richness that the C500 offers. This is one of the main reasons for the fierce loyalty of McIntosh owners.

But don't think the C500 doesn't hold its own against the competition. When listening to the GamuT S9, the YG Acoustics Anat Studio II, the MartinLogan CLX and recently the Estelon XA (all very high-resolution speakers in the \$30,000 - \$140,000 range), I never felt the preamplifier was holding the system back. *(continued)*





# RedEye, the **personal** remote.

The RedEye system allows the iPhone and iPod touch to control nearly any TV, stereo, cable box, DVD player, and many other devices that receive standard infrared signals.

## Personal.

- Each iPhone or iPod touch acts as a controller
- More than one controller can simultaneously interact with existing home entertainment gear

## Simple.

- One touch launches any activity—watch TV, listen to music, play a video
- Custom screen layouts for each activity means no hunting for the right button

## Smart.

- Multi-touch gestures for common functions
- Free software upgrades delivered via iTunes
- Control different rooms from anywhere in the house



### Wi-Fi to Infrared

Communication from iPhone or iPod touch to RedEye device via Wi-Fi, and RedEye device to entertainment gear via infrared



A hardware device and a free App available on iTunes turn the iPhone and iPod touch into a remote control

[redeyereMOTE.com](http://redeyereMOTE.com)



When comparing to my reference Burmester amp and preamp, the tubes had a definite warmth, but it was always inviting. Male and female vocals came alive in a way that they only seem to do with tubes – there was just more of a third dimension available. Listening to Neil Young's voice on the 24/96 version of *Harvest* was easily discernable from the standard 16/44 copies.

The soundstage of the C500 was always BIG. This seems to be so much easier to accomplish with vacuum tubes, and if you listen to a lot of rock and contemporary jazz that is created in a studio with a somewhat artificial soundstage to begin with, the C500 will win you over on this aspect alone. Listening to "Woman in Chains" from the Tears For Fears album *The Seeds of Love*, the triangle played during the opening of the song appears to float about 10 feet beyond the speaker boundary. Its not real, of course, but it is cool. If you love classic rock, you will be in heaven with the C500.

### Solid-State or Tubes?

By far, the most intriguing feature of the C500 is it's ability to work with a vacuum-tube

output stage or a solid-state one. As I suspected, the solid-state version had a bit more punch and the tube stage was slightly mellower. The solid-state preamp section also had slightly more weight in the lower registers. When listening to some bass-heavy tracks from Tosca, utilizing the JL Audio Gotham subwoofer, the tube section had a slightly looser feel, whereas the solid-state version offered a bass perspective that would more punch you in the chest. If you have a system capable of going down deep (the Gotham is only down -3db at 16hz) and perhaps listen to a lot of electronica, the solid-state version might be for you.

While I could happily live with either configuration, I did gravitate more towards the all-tube preamplifier with the MC 1.2KW solid-state monoblocks and the Octave MRE tube monoblocks (which are somewhat "un-tubey" sounding), while the solid-state output stage was more to my liking with the MC275 vacuum-tube power amplifier and my Conrad Johnson MV-50C1, which each have a fairly warm overall tonal balance. Though definitely a great subject for a month-long internet forum argument, deciding which one of these two is right for you is immaterial. (*continued*)



The good news is that you have the option. Should your needs change, you can go to your McIntosh dealer and purchase the alternative. Upon reconnecting all of your other components and the umbilical cord, a simple reset on the front panel and the C500 will make the necessary change.

### Spinning Records

C500 owners who have just one turntable and perhaps don't swap cartridges often won't be able to take advantage of one of this preamplifier's best features: the ability to set loading from your listening position. Cartridge swaps are a weekly occurrence here, and many audiophiles will have removable headshells or tonearm wands that use a specific cartridge for different purposes or as the mood strikes. The more involved vinyl junkie will be right at home with the C500.

I managed to try almost a dozen different phono cartridges from the Shure M97xe all the way to the Clearaudio DaVinci, all with excellent luck. The only cartridge for which I could not get the perfect match was the SoundSmith Sussaro, which is a moving-iron cartridge that sounds its best at about 2,500 ohms. There are a few moving-magnet cartridges that also perform a bit better slightly above or below the standard 47k loading, but these are the exception rather than the rule for 99.9 percent of analog users. Most MC cartridges should easily work between 100 and 1,000 ohms (though the 25 ohm setting is a fantastic match for the Rega Apheta MC).

Thanks to the solid-state modules in the MC section, the C500 is quieter than an all-tube phono stage and has a healthy dose of dynamic punch as well. A tiny bit of background noise creeps into the C500's phono stage, but you have to put your ear right up to the tweeter to hear it. The solid-state modules in the MC section aren't just switched into the MM signal path. According to the engineers at McIntosh, there are two separate phono stages under the hood of the C500.

While listening to the recent ORG pressing of Joni Mitchell's *Wild Things Run Fast*, I found there was a wonderful midrange bloom to the presentation that made Mitchell's voice take over the soundstage in a very enjoyable manner. I had similar results with any other strong vocalists in my record collection. Playing Marquise Knox's *Man Child* on LP was a chilling experience, revealing enough of his vocal character that you just might be fooled into thinking that you are back at Chad Kassem's Crossroads Blues Festival.

Comparing the phono stage in the C500 with some of the outboard phono stages we've had the opportunity to live with during the past few years, it offers a level of performance that would cost you \$2,000 - \$3,000 in an outboard phono stage. A separate MM and MC stage is pretty much non-existent at this price, plus you probably would want to buy an upgraded power cord along with a pair of decent interconnects going from phono stage to linestage. *(continued)*





# Frugalicious.

We admit it. We're a frugal company. There's no shame in that. The question is, how does it benefit you?

Our "no frills" attitude is directly reflected in what we make – the finest, affordable line of components in the stereophonic world. Clean design without showy frills.

Our frugal nature makes sure we never lose sight of 'affordability.' For many other companies, that seems to have gotten lost in the pursuit of the perfect component.

At Rega, we have a different pursuit – for the perfect sound. A distinctive, balanced sound. We call it (somewhat immodestly)...the Rega sound.

We're able to create our own sound because we make every component that affects this sound – cartridges, record players, CD players, amplifiers, pre-amplifiers, speakers and more. (Very few companies can say that.)

So if you're looking to upgrade your system in one area (or to replace it entirely), come listen to our affordable, priceless sound. We think you'll agree, it's frugalicious.

For more information, call 972.234.0182, or email [steve@soundorg.com](mailto:steve@soundorg.com)



# rega

THE SOUND ORGANISATION  
MAKES MUSIC

The Sound Organization is the exclusive Rega USA distributor. [www.soundorg.com](http://www.soundorg.com)

## Don't Forget the Phones

McIntosh doesn't ignore the headphone users on any of its preamplifiers, and the C500 is no exception. While not the last word in headphone performance, you would have to spend somewhere between \$500- \$1,000 to get an outboard headphone amp (and remember, more cables....) to put this one in the weeds. Running the gamut of the AKG 701s, Grado GS-1s, Sennheiser 650s and my new favorites, the Audeze LCD-2s, I came away impressed with the C500s performance.

The headphone stage sounded identical on both output sections, leading me to believe that the phono board is identical in each. Though it would only benefit a small number of customers, it would be cool to run the tube output stage direct through the phones. If you are like me and enjoy headphone use from time to time but don't feel the need to invest in a multi-thousand-dollar headphone setup, the C500 should serve your needs just fine.

## Looks Great, Sounds Great

McIntosh has stayed true to its look and feel, so the big, backlit glass front panel and blue meters will either speak to you or they won't. The C500 is rock solid. It's been playing here for about the past six months, 12 hours a day without so much as a burp, and I suspect that it will continue to do so just as so many other McIntosh preamplifiers do.

The best reason for buying this preamplifier is its combination of performance and flexibility. Whether you ultimately make one the cornerstone of your system depends on whether you can make use of what it offers. There are a few \$12,000 linestages out there that will extract more music from your recordings, but none of them have a built-in MM and MC phono stage, or a built-in headphone amp. So the C500 ends up being a little spendy if you don't need the phono stage and a killer bargain if you do. It's also nice to know that should your amplification needs change, you can fine tune the C500 with some tube rolling or even change the output stage to solid state. ●

## REVIEW



**The McIntosh C500 Control Preamplifier**  
MSRP: \$12,000 - \$18,000

### MANUFACTURER

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

### PERIPHERALS

**Analog Sources** Rega P9/RB 1000 and Shelter 501II cartridge, Oracle Delphi V/SME 309 and Grado Statement cartridge

**Digital Sources** dCS Paganini stack, Sooloos Music Server, Naim HDX

**Power Amplifiers** McIntosh MC275, McIntosh MC1.2kw monoblocks, Octave MRE 130 monoblocks, Burmester 911 mk.3 Pass Labs First watt F2, Conrad Johnson MV-50C1

**Cable** Cardas Clear speaker and interconnect

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim power conditioners, RSA and Shuynata power cords

**Speakers** GamuT S9, MartinLogan CLX, YG Acoustics Anat II Professional, Estelon XA, B&W 805D w/JL Audio Gotham subwoofer



# The Rega Dac

## A New \$1,000 Benchmark

By Jeff Dorgay

Analogue audio is similar to analogue photography in the sense that there haven't been many game-changing technological advances in the past 20 years. Most of the improvements have been the result of refining existing technology, upgrading materials and paying careful attention to the smallest details in assembly. The big, high-dollar turntables still spin a platter with a motor (often with a belt between the two) and that's about it. Granted, the world's best turntable manufacturers are masters at refining this process, and even in the year 2010, continue to produce better turntables. But in order to get \$20,000 turntable performance, you still have to *spend* \$20,000.

Digital audio is a completely different ballgame. Just like your favorite personal computer, much of processing a digital signal is about computing horsepower and is directly related to the chipset under the hood. There are a few manufacturers such as Wadia and dCS that take care of decoding and filtration in software, but for the most part, it's the DAC chips and whatever tweaks in the analogue circuitry combined with the power supply that determine the sound.

As with high-dollar turntables, the world's best digital sound is still expensive because of the amount of parts and labor required. However, the \$1,000 DAC category is improving by leaps and bounds – Rega's \$995 DAC is a perfect example of this.



# Power Cord Measurements!

REVOLUTIONARY  ANALYSIS

For years, the debate has raged on-line and off regarding the perceived value of after-market power cords within professional and consumer audio-video systems.

Though there are many sound and visual professionals who report experiencing dramatic differences when replacing stock power cords, there are still skeptics who point to a lack of measurements as proof that no real difference can exist.

Shunyata Research scientist, Caelin Gabriel, has put an end to the debate by revealing not only one — but three dramatic measured differences between stock power cords and an inexpensive audio-grade power cord.

The measurements represent three critical performance criteria:

- 1 The quantity of instantaneous current available through a specified power device or circuit. Measured in amperes.
- 2 The amount of voltage drop across the device during the conduction period.
- 3 The stored residual noise component rate of dissipation after the current conduction period (displayed on web-site).

## DTCD (DYNAMIC TRANSIENT CURRENT DELIVERY) ANALYZER

DTCD is a method of current analysis that measures instantaneous current delivery in the context of a pulsed current draw. In layman's terms, it is a way of measuring current performance into typical electronic component power supplies.

The DTCD Analyzer allows the measurement of pulsed transient current through a variety of AC power products, including power cords.



## A Quick Overview

Like every other Rega product, the Rega DAC is simple, functional and offers high performance in its price category. Rega principal Roy Gandy is not a man to jump on the latest trend. True to his engineering background, he studies a product and builds it the way he thinks it should be done. Rega's website proudly mentions that they are "the last hifi manufacturer to produce a CD player," and it could very well be the last high-end company to produce a DAC as well. But it is a damn good one.

Rega uses a straightforward approach with no upsampling. Terry Bateman, Rega's digital designer, said, "I wanted to keep the signal path to a minimum. We didn't use upsampling with the Saturn or the ISIS, and I wanted to follow the same spirit of these units." Those users with a high-quality sound card can upsample there if they prefer. The Wolfson WM8805 and WM8742 chips running at the incoming sample rates do a great

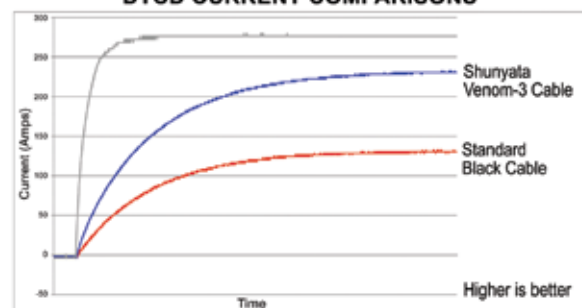
job on their own, along with a nice drop of "old school audio mojo." The Rega DAC also shares its buffer circuitry with the Rega CD players, which has been one of the aspects of their design that has been overbuilt from the beginning. Rega's CD players have a much larger buffering capacity than most, adding to the natural sound.

Around back, there is just a simple three-prong IEC socket due to a lack of space for a standard IEC. There is a high-quality power cord supplied, but an audiophile who wants an upgraded power cord can purchase an adaptor from Music Direct at:

[www.musicdirect.com/product/73370](http://www.musicdirect.com/product/73370)

This will allow you to use the aftermarket cord of your choice, and should you desire keeping your DAC all Rega, the power cord that is standard issue on its flagship Isis CD player is available from Rega dealers for an additional \$175. (continued)

### DTCD CURRENT COMPARISONS

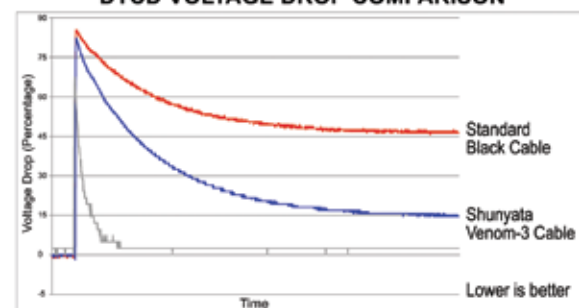


### DTCD CURRENT MEASUREMENT:

This measurement depicts the difference in available impulse current between Shunyata's Venom-3 power cord (\$99 retail) and a standard black component power cord. Note the enormous difference in the quantity of current available compared to the stock power cord. The stock power cord delivers only 47% of available current compared to 84% with a Venom-3 power cord. By any standard of measure, this is statistically significant.

See more measurements and complete info at [shunyata.com/Content/dtcd.html](http://shunyata.com/Content/dtcd.html)

### DTCD VOLTAGE DROP COMPARISON



### VOLTAGE DROP COMPARISON:

The voltage drop depicted for the stock power cord was so profound that several models were tested to validate the standardized measurement. A 53% drop in voltage during the conduction period compared to only a 17% drop with a Shunyata Venom-3 power cord represents a night to day objective difference. This magnitude of difference is certainly significant in a high performance entertainment system.

NOTE: Many standard cords were tested. This cord is representative of the average measurement.



## REVIEW

Following the trend of a few other manufacturers, Rega has chosen to ignore a high-resolution USB input, sticking with 16/48 as the maximum data rate their DAC will process. Bateman mentions that when they first started development on the DAC about two years ago, their vision for it was as more of an audiophile component, and they felt that the computer user was looking more for convenience. With computer audio gaining a lot of ground recently, this may be a deal breaker for some. But before you freak out, how many high-res files *do* you have on your computer?

Another unique feature of the Rega DAC is the choice between five filter characteristics for each of the sample frequencies. Bateman mentioned that he considers the “standard” settings to be position No.1 for 32/44.1/48k sample rates and position No. 3 for the higher sample rates. For those wanting a highly in-depth explanation of the filter characteristics, click here to go to the Wolfson site:

[http://www.wolfsonmicro.com/documents/uploads/misc/en/Ultra\\_High\\_Performance\\_DAC\\_whitepaper.pdf](http://www.wolfsonmicro.com/documents/uploads/misc/en/Ultra_High_Performance_DAC_whitepaper.pdf)

### Spectacular Sound

At turn on, the Rega DAC sounded a bit grainy and somewhat thin in the lower register, but after being powered for 48 hours, this deficit was gone. None of the Rega components I’ve used over the past 10 years have ever required an extended break-in time, and though this unit arrived with some hours on the clock, I don’t suspect the DAC is any different than any of Rega’s other



hardware. After it’s been on for two days, the Rega DAC really grabs you – in a good way.

I tried the Rega DAC with a number of digital sources. First, for the customer with an older CD player just looking for a better DAC, I took advantage of my stock Denon 3910. A Mac Mini running iTunes was thrown into the mix for the average computer listener’s perspective, and on the high end, I ran a digital cable from the SPDIF output of the dCS Paganini PTT transport. A fair amount of music was played through the SPDIF output of the Sooloos Control 10 as well.

The Rega DAC really excels at tone and timbre. Acoustic instruments sound natural and quite honestly, way better than even a digital snob such as myself ever expected a \$1,000 DAC to sound. The recent HD Tracks 24/96 download of Keith Jarrett’s *The Koln Concert* revealed a healthy dose of texture and hall ambience, with plenty of Mr. Jarrett’s

signature groaning in the back-ground. One of my favorite 24/96 warhorses is that 70s classic from Chicago, *Chicago V*. The cymbals at the beginning of “Hit by Varese” had a healthy decay. When switching back and forth between the 24/96 file ripped from DVD-A and the standard 16/44 file, it was instantly apparent that the high-res file had considerably more air between the notes.

Most of the 24/192 files on the Naim HDX music server have been digitized from LPs in my collection and a handful originated on the Rega P9/Shelter 501II combination through the Audio Research REF Phono 2. So it was interesting to compare playback at the DAC’s highest resolution. Again, I was amazed at how much of the essence of what was essentially a \$20k analog front end could be reproduced without serious compromise. The Rega DAC is an excellent choice for anyone thinking about archiving vinyl, provided you have an excellent-quality analog setup with which to capture it. (*continued*)



# “The best CD playback under \$5k... for \$1799!”

Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07

azur

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

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

Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07



**Cambridge Audio 840C - \$1799**  
CD Player with 24bit / 384kHz upsampling  
ATF (Adaptive Time Filtering)  
Dual-Differential DACs & Balanced Output

 **Cambridge Audio**

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Playing high-resolution files is not limited to the RCA inputs, but according to Bateman, “24/192 is pushing the limit of the Toslink interface. A high-quality cable will be required.” That in mind, I had no problem playing 24/96 files from my Power Book Pro, with a four-meter Monster optical cable. (About \$50 at Radio Shack.)

Though the Rega DAC did an excellent job with high-resolution files and provides a compelling reason for downloading them, I still couldn’t help thinking that this DAC was something special with standard 16/44 files, whether played from USB or SPDIF. If you are an audiophile who has merely ripped your CDs to a computer and doesn’t see high-res files in your immediate future, the USB performance is very good at 16/44.

#### A Few Comparisons

With the internet boards abuzz about whether the Rega DAC “sounds better or worse” than the bloggers’

existing CD players, I don’t think it is really a fair comparison because the DAC offers the ability to play high-resolution files. I suspect that the CD player will appeal to one type of customer and the DAC will appeal more to the computer/music server audiophile. So comparing the two directly is a moot point.

On many levels, I found the sound of the Rega DAC more akin to that of its flagship turntable, the P9 (which has been a long-term component in my reference system). It shares the P9’s quick and open presentation with a healthy dose of pace and timing. If this is the kind of sound that appeals to you, I think you will enjoy auditioning this DAC.

My theory on the rapid advancement of digital technology was confirmed when I compared the sound of the Rega DAC to my original Meridian 808, purchased about four years ago. When using the 808’s digital SPDIF input, the difference between what

was a \$15,000 player four years ago was minimal. Of course, Meridian is up to the 808.3 now, but it is amazing to see this ramp up in performance for the dollar. I guarantee that there are *no* \$1,000 turntables today that sound like a \$15,000 turntable from four years ago.

Forget about the “bits is bits” theory; there are still plenty of ways to handle filtering, digital processing, power supply design and the output stage. DAC’s are just like phono cartridges: each has its own unique sound. Where the Benchmark and Ayre DACs tend to be slightly on the analytical side of neutral and the Neko Audio DAC (\$1,195, and *no* USB input) is slightly on the romantic side of neutral, the Rega is very close to dead center. Interestingly enough, the Rega is one of my favorite budget DACs, much like the Simaudio DAC300 that also forgoes a high-resolution USB port to maximize the audio performance on the SPDIF side.

In the end, digital can drive you just as crazy as analog if you let it. However, the Rega DACs strengths far outweigh the lack of a high-res USB input for most users.

#### Musical to the Core

While there are definitely some other DACs at this price point that offer more functionality, the Rega’s strength is offering truly *great* sound from its SPDIF input, regardless of resolution. Personally, I’d still rather have outstanding 16/44 through the SPDIF input than multiple input options with mediocre performance. If this is your philosophy as well, I think the Rega DAC would find a very good home on your equipment rack.

And digital audio is much like the weather here in the Pacific Northwest; if you don’t like it, it will change shortly. Though the digital game is one that is constantly improving, the Rega DAC is certainly a great place to hang your hat for now and just enjoy your music collection. ●

**The Rega DAC**  
**MSRP: \$995**

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#### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Sources** Denon 3910, Mac Mini, Naim HDX, Sooloos Control 10, dCS Paganini PTT

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**Power Amplifier** McIntosh MC1.2KW’s

**Speakers** B&W 805D with JL Audio Gotham

**Cable** AudioQuest Wild Blue Yonder, I/C and Speaker

**Power** Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim, RSA Mongoose and Shunyata Python CX power cords



## DualCoherent™

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An established objective of loudspeaker design is to convey music with proper tonality. This is achieved through a flat frequency response – the flatter it is, the less a loudspeaker alters the timbre of musical instruments and voices.

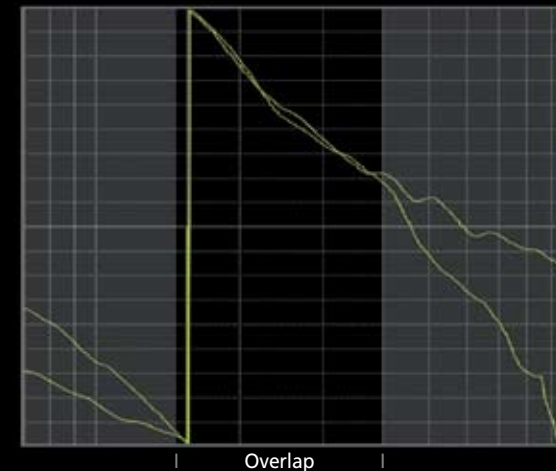
Another key objective is to preserve transients and spatial cues, which convey the impact of a musical event. This is achieved through good relative phase between drivers, i.e. they must all radiate in unison – the better the phase-match, the more a loudspeaker preserves musical excitement.

YG Acoustics™ DualCoherent™ crossovers, designed using software developed entirely in-house, are unique in delivering both a ruler-flat frequency response and near-zero relative phase. Virtually all other manufacturers use a single off-the-shelf software tool, which can only optimize either the frequency response or phase, but not both. They are forced to choose one and compromise the other.

### Phase

Below is the phase response of the mid-woofers and tweeter of a YG Acoustics™ speaker, as well as that of the leading competitor. The closer the phase-match throughout the range where the drivers overlap, the better the preservation of transients and spatial cues. Both YG Acoustics™ and the competitor exhibit excellent phase: YG Acoustics™ offers  $\pm 5^\circ$ ; the competitor offers  $\pm 20^\circ$ , and counters with a wider frequency-range within that tolerance. Both speakers were clearly well-optimized for phase.

YG Acoustics™ Phase  
700~10k Hz. 20° div.  
 $\pm 5^\circ$  throughout overlap.



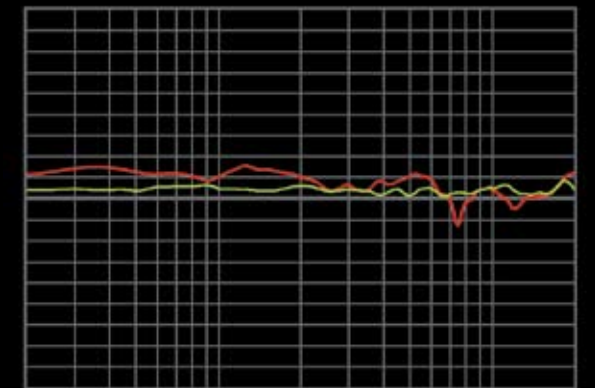
Competitor's Phase  
 $\pm 20^\circ$  throughout overlap



### Frequency Response

Below is the frequency response of both speakers. YG Acoustics™' response is extraordinarily flat – no compromise was necessary to achieve its perfect phase. The competitor's frequency response is good, but obviously compromised.

YG Acoustics™ on-axis. 200~20k Hz. 5 dB div.  
Competitor on-axis.



Designed by Yoav Geva (Gonczarowski)

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## Slummin'

By jeff Dorgay

With so many great budget turntables on the market, vintage receivers and integrated amplifiers are making a big comeback because most of them had decent phono stages built in – usually at least as good as what you could buy for \$100 - \$200 these days.

Here are two great examples of budget gear. Both are plentiful on the used market and were made in the '70s, the golden age for Japanese audio. Purchased on eBay for \$60 each, they will give great performance until their power-supply capacitors give out. Even then, if you are handy with a soldering iron, you can probably get under the hood and keep them going forever.

BARGAINS

**Luxman L-210 Integrated Amplifier**  
\$60 — eBay

Another Japanese HiFi company with a prestigious reputation, Luxman has been making great gear since 1925. This amplifier was built from 1982 to 1984, one of their last products to be built before their ill-fated merger with Alpine, the car-stereo company, that nearly destroyed their reputation.

With 45 watts per channel and a great phono stage, this amplifier can also be the anchor of a great starter system, though perhaps a little tougher than the Pioneer to get repaired. Its amplifier section proved more than adequate to power my vintage JBL L-100 speakers.

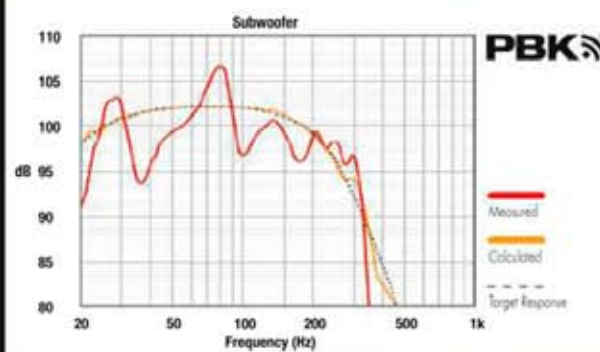




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## The Pioneer SX-424

\$50, eBay

Much like vintage cars, there is a lot of enthusiasm for the "Silver Series" of Pioneer components, produced approximately from the late 1960's to the early 1980's. Pioneer produced everything from such low-powered examples as the SX-424 pictured here all the way up to the "monster receivers," such as the SX-1980, which had a staggering power output of 270 watts per channel.

However, many consider the entry-level SX-424 to have the sweetest sound, possibly because the amplifier is a simpler circuit and not plagued with as much feedback (or as many capacitors) as the larger versions. Either way, a mint example of the SX-424 can usually be had for less than \$100 and along with a highly competent MM phono stage, is a great place to start your HiFi journey. It's also a great anchor to a vintage system.

For more info on the whole series of "Silver Series" Pioneer components, click here:

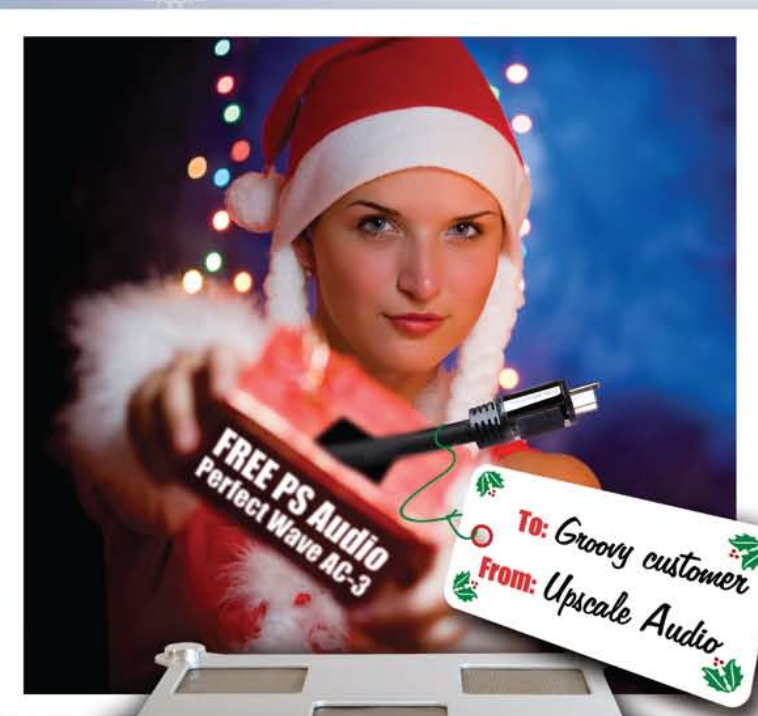
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