

# toneAudio.

The e-journal of analog  
and digital sound.

no.22

2009



## **THE SPEAKER ISSUE:**

Verity Audio, JL Audio,  
Focal, Zu and More!

## **EXCLUSIVE:**

**The McIntosh  
60th Anniversary  
Components**

## **STYLE:**

We Drive the  
Aston Martin DBS  
and Stay Out of Jail

## **Entry Level**

**Excellence**

From Simaudio

**Jann Uhleszki  
Reminiscences About  
Life On Stage With  
KISS**

Bob Gendron on  
New Releases from Wilco,  
Sonic Youth and more!

**Ben Fong-Torres  
and Jeff Dorgay  
Interview Legendary  
Photographer  
Jim Marshall**

**David Byrne**  
Jumps Around  
In Portland



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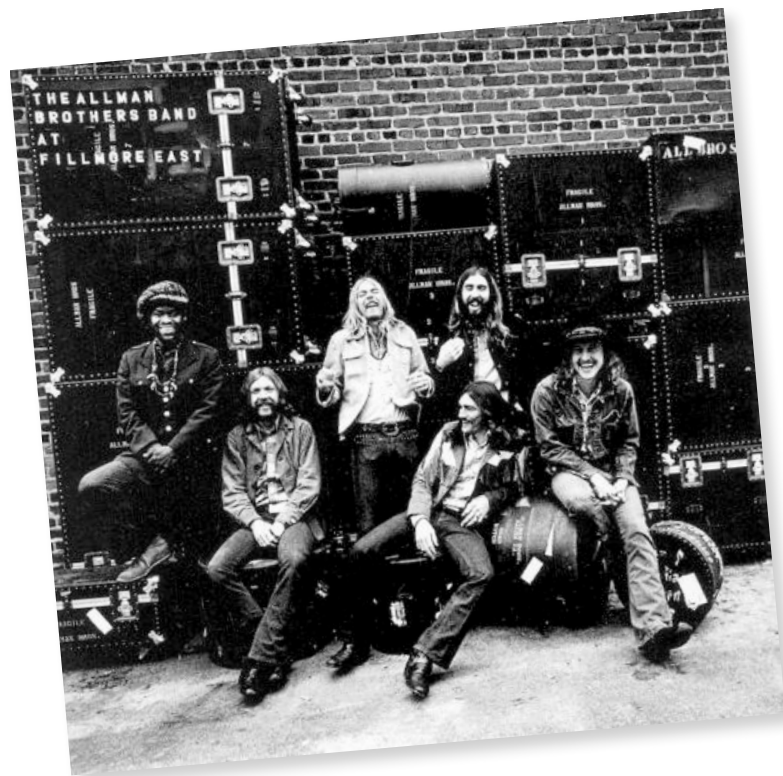
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(on the cover)

McIntosh  
60th Anniversary  
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PHONIC



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# CONTRIBUTORS

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## new in tone this issue

### **JESSE HAMLIN**

Jesse has written about a wide range of musicians and artists for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and other publications for 30 years. He's interviewed everyone from Sonny Rollins, Lionel Hampton and Dizzy Gillespie to various Marsalis brothers, composers John Adams and Philip Glass, Pat Metheny, David Grisman and many others.

### **JAAN UHELZKI**

Jaan was one of the founding editors at Detroit's legendary *Creem* magazine. Since that time, her work has appeared in leading publications including *USA Today*, *MOJO*, *Uncut*, *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *NME*, *Guitar World*, and the *Village Voice*. Currently the editor at large at *Relix*, she is the only journalist to have ever performed in full makeup with Kiss. These days she only feels compelled to put on Serge Lutens kohl black eyeliner and Dior mascara when she goes out to grill rock stars over an open pit.

### **HOOD MCTIERNAN**

Of course that's not his real name. But because of complications surrounding a fairly high-level security position, McT can not reveal his true identity. However, he fits in with the TONE crew perfectly, sharing our love for music and fast European cars. An analog expert, his setup skills come in handy when needed.

### **MARK MARCANTONIO**

Mark is a career parochial school teacher and fan of American history. He has been an audio fanatic since assisting his brother in a failed attempt to record an album on a portable cassette using a microphone, three pillows, and a cheap pair of his sister's RCA speakers in the mid 1970's. As the founder and former publisher of *Affordable Audio*, Mark brings some great experience to our entry level equipment coverage.

### **WINSTON ROWNTREE**

Winston is a comics guy from Canada who publishes online so that people from as many countries as possible can complain about how much text there is in his work. He is untrained as an artist, though his parents are writers so that's probably where he got that from. Also, music is important to him and so themes of aural entertainments can often be discerned hovering amongst the trees of the forest of his creative output. You may attempt to track him down at [www.viruscomix.com](http://www.viruscomix.com), but be forewarned that text will be involved.



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# PUBLISHER'S LETTER

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It's been a busy eight weeks since we've spent time here together!

This is the biggest issue in our four-year history, so I hope you enjoy it. We don't have an editorial calendar per se, but the reviews in this issue ended up being mostly about speakers. We have some great stuff, too, ranging from bookshelf speakers by Morel and PMC, all the way up to \$40,000 Verity Audio Sarastro IIs. Not to mention the incredibly cool lime-green Zu Essence.

But I'll warn you now: October will become the cartridge issue because by the time you read this, I'll be knee-deep in shipping 10 pairs of heavy speakers back to their respective manufacturers, and my back needs a rest.

Of course, we have something very special on the tragic death of Michael Jackson. A close friend of the TONE family, Sally Smith Clemens, covered the beginning of Michael Jackson's "Bad" tour for her first professional shoot, and she gives us her perspective. Jackson was a major musical genius and touched all of our lives. He will be sorely missed.

Speaking of music, we have some great new additions to the staff. Jaan Uhelszki was one of the founding editors of *Creem* magazine and the only journalist to ever perform on stage with KISS. So with the high percentage of head bangers on the staff, we thought it would be perfect to share Jaan's 1975 experience with you for her first article. Jesse Hamlin joins us from the *San Francisco Chronicle* with an excellent piece on Julian Lage.

We've got some great concert coverage from around the world, and now that summer is in full swing, so is the concert season. Turn off your HiFi system (and your BBQ grille) and head to your favorite venue to hear some live music, it's one of the best parts of summer.

There are some real goodies in the style section. The star of this issue is the new Aston Martin DBS. Yep, the car that James Bond drove in *Quantum of Solace*. While driving the Aston did not make me feel the least bit like James Bond, I have to admit that driving such a high-profile automobile has a more profound impact on people than anything you might be wearing. Clothes don't make the man; the car does.

The last time I went to a party at the Beverly Hills Hotel, I was dressed in Armani from head to toe (but driving a rental car) and no one said a word to me. Getting out of the DBS in a GAP hoodie, I got the royal treatment. Oh yeah, the B&O sound system was pretty good, too. Pictures on page 76.

As always, thanks for reading.







## Michael Jackson Remembered

### **Kemper Arena**

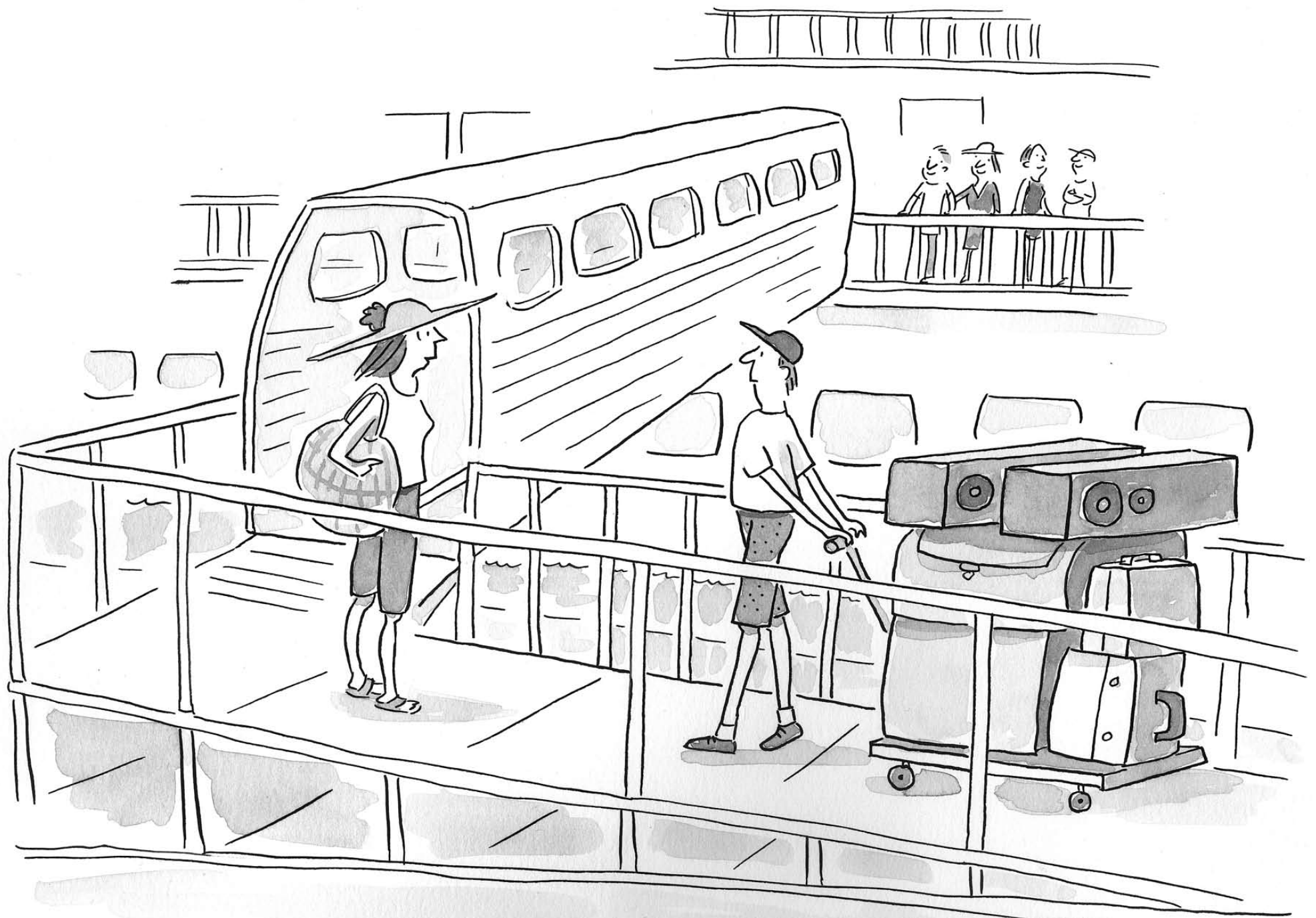
Kansas City, Missouri

**September, 1987**

Photo by Sally Smith Clemens

**N**ow a product manager for Olympus Cameras, Clemens shared this image with us from her first newspaper gig. Brought in to help cover for the staff photographer, she took the assignment for the tearsheet, knowing that there would be no compensation or byline, but it was *Michael Jackson*, on the opening night of the “Bad” tour.

Looking back on the show, Clemens remarked, “When I took this picture, Michael Jackson came right to the end of the stage and performed for the photographers. With the new tour just starting, it was to his advantage to give us a good photo op, but seeing how some of the big stars make it difficult for photographers to do their jobs, he was a gracious host that evening.” ●



DONNELLY

*“Harold, I told you, they won’t barter speakers for first class upgrades.”*



# Adcom GFP-555 Preamplifier

By Mark Marcantonio

**A** majority of the audio world had a facelift in the early 1980s. The silver-faced receivers from the Japanese majors were replaced with separates here and abroad with a more modern look that could have been at home on the space shuttle.

Adcom was one of the champions of reasonably priced high end gear that played beyond its price point. Nelson Pass was brought in as consultant for the now legendary GFA-500 series amplifiers that were designed with an austere black finish, with white and silver models available as special-order options.

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The press reacted favorably to these amplifiers and they sold extremely well. This led Adcom to develop the 300, 400 and 500 series preamplifiers that had a matching design aesthetic along with their operational simplicity. (Nelson Pass had nothing to do with the design of the Adcom preamplifiers, only the power amplifiers) The horizontal louvers running along the top of those early Adcom pieces became a visual signature for Adcom for 25 years, as distinctive as the blue McIntosh meters.

## Adcom expanded the line with the GFP preamplifiers to the GTP series with built-in tuners.

These were also great preamplifiers that included a high-quality FM tuner at a reasonable price. But my favorite piece from this period was the GFP-555, which did not include a tuner.

This preamplifier had a very straightforward design, making use of control knobs with a pointer shape that left no doubt as to where they were set, along with a simple tape-monitor layout that was easy to use, as many of us still had tape decks back then.

Recognizing that budding (and some seasoned) audio-philes still wanted basic tone controls, the GTP-555 had very useable bass and treble controls that only worked at the extremes of the frequency spectrum, as well as a loudness contour button. Low and high filter buttons were also included for those still listening to grumbly turntables or AM radio. *(continued)*

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There are even a few convenience outlets on the back panel to remind you of the days of audiophilia before power cords became a component.

### 555 or 555II?

A look under the hood of the GFP-555 shows it to be an extremely simple layout. Only two pairs of short ribbon wires, a blue one for each of the selector knobs, and a black pair for the phono section, and that's it. The simple gain-path philosophy is readily apparent. There really are not many components soldered onto the board, helping to explain the rather relaxed, non-technical sound.

The dilemma that the potential GFP-555 buyer faces is whether to purchase an original or a mk. II. The mk. II has a beefier power supply and some signal path upgrades, but the original 555 features a low-output moving-coil phono option (100 ohm impedance) as well as variable capacitance loading on the moving magnet phono input. Both units fetch about the same price on the used market, so choose according to your needs.

The mk. II has slightly less invasive tone controls (+/- 6db at 40hz and 15khz in the original vs. +/-6db at 20 hz and 20khz in the mk. II), though the option of bypassing the output capacitors in the mk. II has been eliminated because, Adcom claims, the high-

quality caps now used do not affect the output signal. In the earlier version, the user had the option of using the "Lab" outputs with no output coupling capacitors or the normal outputs, which had a cap in place. Purists can still bypass the output capacitors on the mk. II, but it is a permanent move that requires jumpers and soldering iron.

### Still a Solid Performer

The big question with vintage gear is how well it physically stands the test of time. Almost all components 25 years old or older will probably require some or all of the capacitors to be replaced, and that should be factored into the purchase price. The review piece did have one cap replaced about a year ago, but it was given a clean bill of health upon inspection. The technician involved even offered to buy the unit. The previous owner had taken good care of this pre-amplifier, so the buttons still worked fine and there were no scratches on the knobs or front panel. The technician mentioned that durability of mechanical parts was a strong point of Adcom units of that era. *(continued)*

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**The technician mentioned that durability of mechanical parts was a strong point of Adcom units of that era.**



In the mid 1980's when I purchased a GFP-555 for the first time, the compact disc was a new development and I had just started my career as a teacher. One of the first 10 discs I purchased for my collection was The Who's *Quadrophenia*, still one of my favorite rainy-day discs. This certainly brought back some great memories and was the first disc I cued up. The GFP-555's overall mellow presentation actually helped this disc somewhat, as well as my CD copy of Carole King's *Tapestry*, giving it a bit more sultry feel, like the LP that I once owned.

The phono section pared up well with my basic Technics/Grado combination. It won't make you abandon an out-board phono stage, but if you are shopping at this level, that's probably not an issue. Beginning or occasional LP listeners should find the on-board phono stage more than adequate.

While not up to the level of a CJ, Krell or ARC preamp of the same period, the GFP-555 still offers solid performance and value for about one-third of the price, just as it did when it was new. If you are looking for the cornerstone for a mid-80s vintage system, the Adcom offers great bang for the buck, with clean, used examples going for about \$175-250 on Audiogon or eBay.

Those seeking more information can still download the manual here: <http://www.adcom.com/manuals.aspx> ●

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**If you are looking for the cornerstone for a mid-80s vintage system, the Adcom offers great bang for the buck.**



# The Sound HiFi Technics SL1200 Modifications

By Jeff Dorgay

**W**ith this issue, we are starting a new column to address the needs of the audiophile who doesn't have unlimited check-cashing abilities, but who has stepped up a notch or two on the food chain from entry level. We're talking about the music lover who has invested somewhere between \$7,500 and \$20,000. This can vary greatly, depending on how many program sources you use in your system and whether you want them all to have the same level of quality. Those of you with a music server, digital disc player and turntable will be at the higher end of the range.

Though I am not a huge fan of modded gear, I've always appreciated the ingenuity exhibited by the DIY side of the audio world. Just like my other favorite hobby (automobiles), there is always plenty of room for the wrench turners to coexist with the check writers, and while they always like to banter about whose approach is more pure, the decision to mod is up to you.

# See in a new way.



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If you are new to the modding game, keep in mind that a modded piece rarely has great resale value, because once you start tinkering with anything, there are only so many people who will want to purchase your version of nirvana. So keep that in mind before you get out the Sawzall. In this case, if you perform the Sound HiFi mods with care, you could reverse the process and go back to a stock SL-1200, should you decide to sell it.

### From the Beginning

I must confess that while my journey in HiFi started with a Technics SL1200 about 35 years ago, I quickly got caught up in being a proper audiophile and traded that table in for a belt-drive Rega Planar 3. To be fair to the Rega, I still prefer the sound of a P3 to the sound of a stock Technics SL-1200, which I find rather dark and cloudy sounding overall. Careful attention to detail when setting up an SL-1200 will wring every bit of resolution for which it is capable, but this is still not a ton.

The good news is that Technics has been building the SL-1200 for a long time and the core turntable mechanism (motor, base and platter) is very robustly built. The direct-drive mechanism has a lot of torque and the table has a very weighty presentation with a fair amount of bass detail despite its other shortcomings. And while a basic “audiophile approved” turntable can easily run a couple thousand dollars without a tonearm, you can buy a brand new SL-1200 from Amazon for \$399 (in the U.S. anyway) with free shipping, so this is an excellent platform for modification. Think of the SL-1200 as the Volkswagen GTI of the turntable world. *(continued)*



I've investigated the KAB series of modifications for the SL-1200, but they have ultimately left me cold because I still feel that the stock SL-1200 arm is the weak link in the equation. While the full suite of KAB mods will improve the SL-1200, the minute I drop a record on a Rega P5, or a nice used Linn LP-12, I'm still not that interested in the Technics.

However, the rabid enthusiasm for the 1200 out in the world of internet forums has kept my interest piqued. The Sound HiFi mods described here were brought to my attention by a good friend on the MartinLogan forum (an SME owner) who had just heard the modded table at a friend's house with an SME 309 arm fitted. "Dude, you need to get this mod in for review. You won't believe how great the SL-1200 sounds with this arm and a good cartridge."

---

**"Dude, you need to get this mod in for review. You won't believe how great the SL-1200 sounds with this arm and a good cartridge."**

Dave Cawley of Sound HiFi ([www.soundhif.com](http://www.soundhif.com)) has been running a HiFi shop with on-site repair facilities for a long time and is a true analog enthusiast. During our phone conversation, he said, "Look, I sell AVID, SME and Clearaudio. I'm not going to tell you my mod will turn an SL-1200 into an SME 20, but I do think you will find it very interesting." Should you live anywhere near Sound HiFi in the U.K., they can modify your 1200 for you if you are not so inclined. Sound HiFi also still services and refurbishes the legendary Technics SP-10 broadcast turntable, which has enjoyed a tremendous resurgence in the audiophile world.

### Choices, Choices

There are a few different options to this series of modifications. The external power supply is about \$450 at current exchange rates (£299), the arm board for an SME arm is £89.95 and they also offer a great mat for £89.95. A series of upgraded feet and a clamp can also be purchased to take the SL-1200 to the limit of its performance envelope.

Our European readers may have an easier time of this, as the SME arms are not as expensive there as they are here. However, there always seems to be a great deal on a used 309 that someone is trading to move up the ladder. A 309 in excellent shape can usually be had for about \$900, and I've seen them as low as \$700. The M2-09 is a less expensive arm, but in much shorter supply and I've actually seen them selling for more than a 309.

I prefer the mechanical robustness of the 309, and the stock SME tonearm cable isn't bad either, though once you get done with all of this, you now will be able to easily hear the difference an upgraded tonearm cable will make. Should you decide to take this even further, I highly suggest the Furutech AG-12 tonearm cable. For about \$450, it offers

world-class performance, and I use it on my other two SME tonearms.

*(continued)*



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## FEATURE

### Some Assembly Required

The Sound HiFi kit is relatively easy to install, but it will require good basic soldering and mechanical skills. If you have never done anything like this, I would not make this your first electronic project without the help of a friend possessing some skills. The instructions that come with the Sound HiFi kit have a few holes in them, so we will be posting some additional tips and photos on our website to guide you a little better.

Granted, I've seen far worse, but being a visual person, I wouldn't mind just a few more pictures to ease the process.

As with all electrical and mechanical projects, the key is to budget an hour or so of quiet time and give yourself room to spread out everything. As you remove the bottom cover of the SL-1200, there are quite a few screws to keep track of.

**All the parts required were included and the organization of the kit was very tidy.**

I was taking my time and taking pictures along the way. Two hours later, I had a very nice looking SL-1200 with an SME 309 ready for setup and adjustment that looked as if it came that way from the factory. This speaks volumes about the quality of the Sound HiFi modifications.

I then mounted a headshell with a Sumiko Blackbird that I had been using on the SME 309 on my Raven Two. Now you have the versatility of setup that the SME arm offers while retaining the removable headshells that made the stock SL-1200 desirable. *(continued)*



**When the SME arm was added, the table went from capable to outstanding.**

### **The Sound – Glorious!**

Yes, you heard right; I'm gloating about the sound of an SL-1200. I performed the modifications in two steps – first the power supply and then the tonearm – so that I could evaluate each step's improvement to the overall sound. Thanks to removing that big transformer from under the platter and adding the more robust external power supply, the SL-1200 sounds more open and focused, even with the stock arm. But when the SME arm was added, the table went from capable to outstanding.

The more practical readers in the audience will probably be noting at this time that by adding the external power supply, arm board and a decent used SME 309 to the mix, I've quadrupled the original price of the SL1200, and wouldn't I be better off just spending \$2,000 on a proper turntable, in a box with a manufacturer's warranty?

Well, yes, if you worry about that sort of thing. But no, if you want to push the boundaries of what you can achieve for an investment of \$2,000 in a turntable. I've had the opportunity to listen to a lot of turntables in the \$2,000 - \$3,000 range from Rega, VPI, Pro-Ject, Music Hall, etc., and for my money, this one is the one to beat.

Would I give up my Rega P9/RB 1000 or Raven TWO with SME 309 for this table?

No, it's not that good, but it's so damn good for \$2,000, paired up with your favorite \$900 cartridge, that you may not ever need to spend more money on a turntable unless you have a mega system. This truly is a magic combination, being much more than the sum of its parts.

The big-bucks tables still offer more resolution at the frequency extremes, with more fine detail throughout, and that's what you pay the money for. But balance is the key to a great HiFi system, and for the Journeyman Audiophile, a five-figure analog setup is a waste of money.

What I noticed immediately was that the wonderful bass presentation of the stock SL-1200 was still there and, if anything, improved. The table now had plenty of weight and a high degree of bass definition. When listening to Charlie Haden's *Private Collection* on Naim records, I could really enjoy all of the texture present in his acoustic-bass playing. The one-note bass feel of the stock table was gone. My favorite early Genesis records were now sounding a lot more like what I'm used to on my reference tables, and even LL Cool J sounded a *lot* better, with more bass slam and control.

This I expected, but I was not ready for the amount of delicacy and resolution through the mid-range and high frequencies offered by the modded SL-1200. *(continued)*

---

**With the Sound HiFi mods in place combined with the SME arm, I was hearing some serious analog magic going on. This is an analog setup you can be proud to own.**



I'm sorry to offend the SL-1200's (again), but this table is really a clunker with acoustic music or densely recorded rock records; everything just becomes two dimensional and lacks any kind of proper depth. Honestly, I'd prefer a decent CD player to a stock SL-1200 any day.

With the Sound HiFi mods in place combined with the SME arm, I was hearing some serious analog magic going on. This is an analog setup you can be proud to own. My usual group of audiophile buddies teased me to no end when they saw a Technics table sitting on the rack next to my Raven TWO and Spiral Groove SG-2, but the minute I put a record on, everybody shut up.

When listening to the first track on Lindsey Buckingham's current release, *Gift of Screws*, the acoustic guitar barely made it to the outer edges of the speakers with the stock table. On the modded version, it extended about three feet past the speaker boundaries, with a healthy measure of height thrown in. Everything had a *lot* more body and my LP's were sounding great again, not flat and lifeless as they did on the stock SL-1200.

Vocals took on a realistic character, and I was able to hear clearly the subtle details that make

good analog such a treat, with a very expansive soundstage no matter what I was listening to. Combined with my ARC PH3SE phono stage, the SL-1200 and Sumiko Blackbird made an excellent showing. Stepping up to the Nagra VPS/VFS, I was still able to hear more detail present.

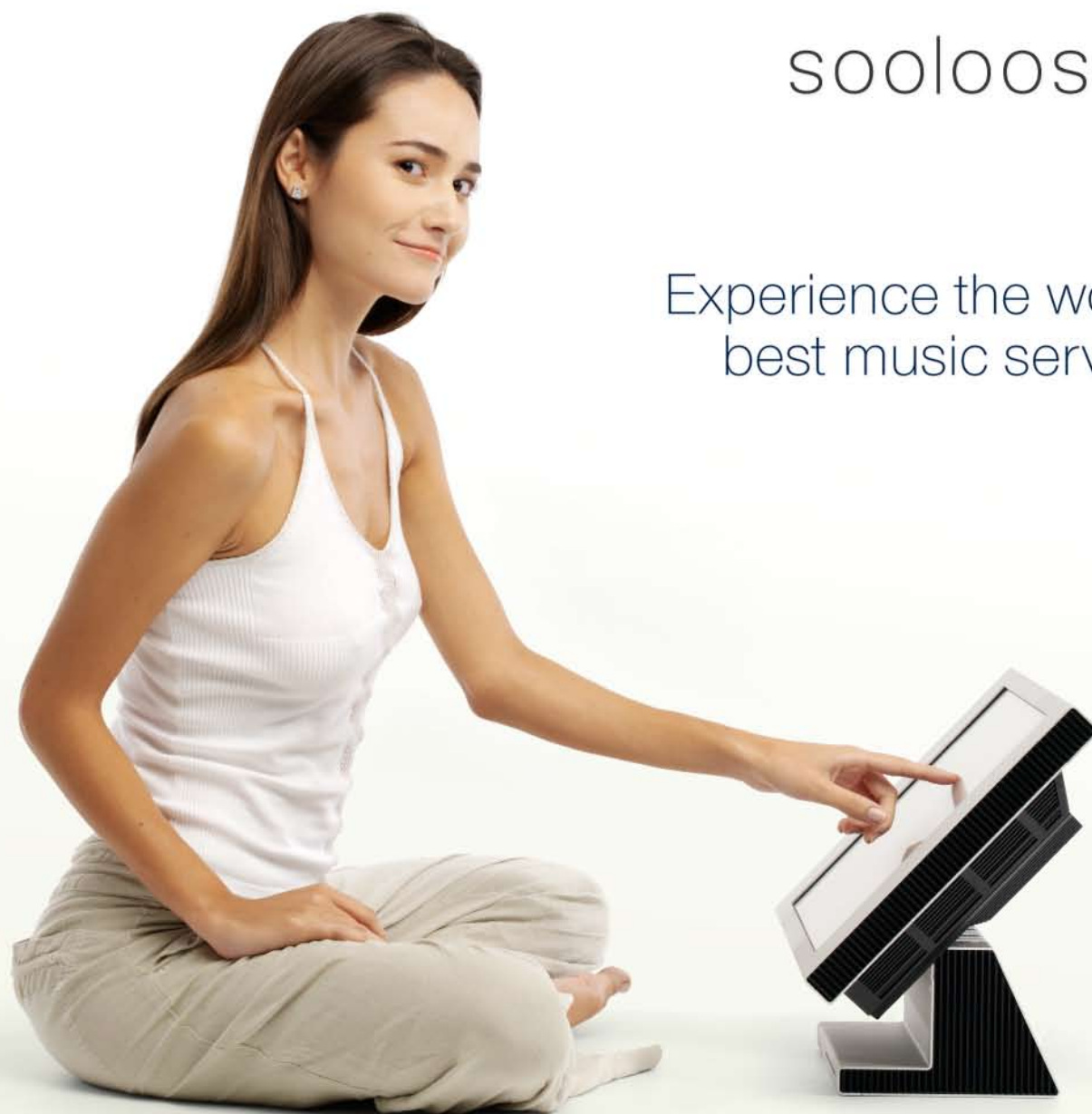
Sure, pairing this table up with a \$4,000 cartridge and an \$8,000 phono preamp was a little overkill, but the Sound HiFi SL-1200 still made a good showing. Playing more in its league, with something like a Shelter 501, Sumiko Blackbird, Lyra Dorian, etc., and perhaps a Lehman Black Cube SE, Dynavector P-75 mk.2 or the like, and I dare you to find more pleasing analog playback for this kind of money.

### **Get Out Your Credit Card and Call Dave**

Again, if the idea of a project like this is not for you, the cost of shipping an SL-1200 to the U.K. and paying to have these bits installed may outweigh the cost of the end result. Those of you who are handy and up to the challenge of creating something truly wonderful for a reasonable amount of money should look no further. I can't think of a more musically revealing turntable for this kind of money and I've heard most of them. *(continued)*

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**Phono Preamplifiers** Nagra VPS/VFS, Nagra BPS, ARC PH3SE

**Power Amplifier** Burmester 911 mk.3

**Speakers** MartinLogan CLX w/ JL Fathom F110 subwoofers (2)

**Interconnects** Shunyata Aurora

**Speaker Cables** Shunyata Orion



# Elton John

**Gloucestershire County Cricket Club**

Bristol, England

**June 13, 2009**

By Jeff Dorgay





Waiting for the gates to open at The Gloucestershire County Cricket Club, the people in line near me were concerned with one thing; Was Sir Elton going to treat us to the songs we grew up with, or would he go *Lion King* on us?

When the opening synthesizer line of “Funeral For a Friend” hit the giant bank of PA speakers, there was a big smile on every face in sight. Sir Elton John then sat down at the piano and tore into “Love Lies Bleeding,” along with his original band-mates Nigel Olsson on drums and Davey Johnstone on lead guitar. This evening’s show would mark Olsson’s 1500th live performance with the band; Johnstone played his 2000th show the evening before in Bath.

The band was razor sharp and John was in excellent shape vocally, though he has successfully adjusted his vocal range down in pitch somewhat. On the keyboard though, he’s still the ultimate piano man, with his trademark touch intact. There was a bit of trouble in the mix for the first few songs, with Johnstone’s guitar bouncing all over the soundscape. But it was quickly remedied, and for the rest of the evening, the mix was outstanding and the four giant plasma screens gave everyone in the stadium a great view of what was going on up on stage.

This evening’s show turned out to draw heavily from John’s most successful album, *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, with all but two of the songs performed from his first six albums. Except for the obscure “Skyline Pigeon,” from the *Empty Sky* album, every song John performed was one of his hits. John did an excellent job of rearranging the tunes we knew well just enough to keep them fresh, yet not going so far out of the box as to disappoint his long time fans.

And he only went *Lion King* on us for one tune. Not bad at all.

# St. Vincent

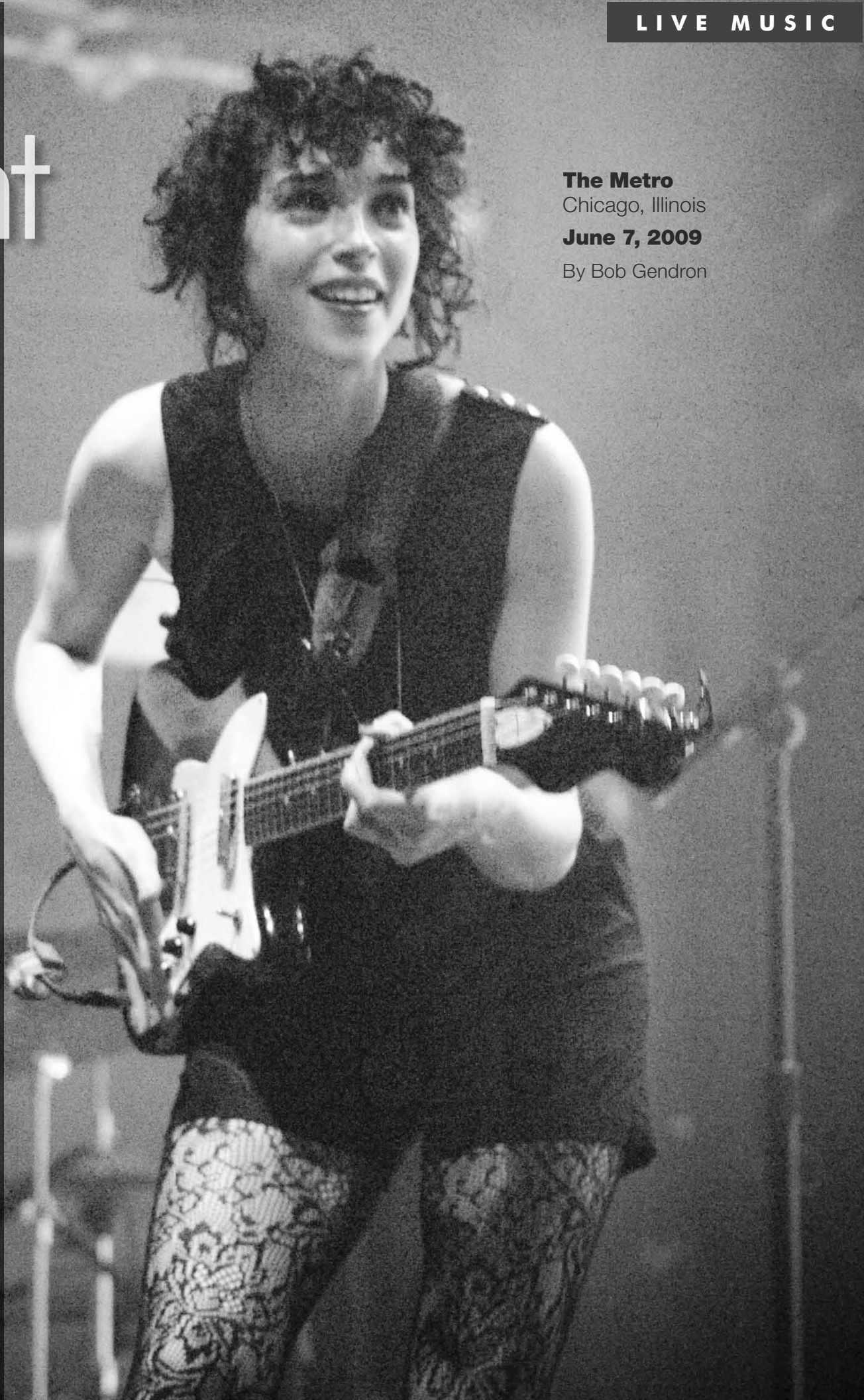
At her performance at the Metro in Chicago, St. Vincent (a.k.a. Annie Clark) made certain that the notes that she didn't play became just as important as those she amplified. The indie-rock singer/guitarist, whose superb sophomore *Actor* is one of the year's must-hear records, repeatedly utilized such dynamic juxtapositions to her advantage in establishing the sonic equivalent of mise-en-scene. Steeped in cinematic atmosphere, rich textures, and moody intrigue, the chamber-based pop music teased the near-capacity crowd with cheerful pleasures before ceding to darker constructs and vicious fantasies.

Backed by a multi-instrumental quartet, Clark's bold guitar work came across as a long-delayed response to that of trailblazer PJ Harvey. The petite vocalist relied on instinct and emotion; her stinging intensity based more on feeling and circumstance than on calculated precision. Exercising admirable restraint, she unleashed percussive riffs and feedback clusters only when they served the songs. After a non-threatening start, "Your Lips Are Red" drowned in screeching distortion that busted up the tune's disco-pop elements into unrecognizable fragments. Similarly unyielding, the hard-grooving "Actor" culminated with a venomous saxophone run.

Mellow settings highlighted the discordant outbursts. The delicate harmonics of "Now, Now" shadowed Clark's breathy vocals, but undercurrents of uneasiness torpedoed any flirtations with hesitant beauty. Better still, "Paris Is Burning" transformed into aural panic. Nervously strumming rough chords, the bright-eyed Clark took on the persona of an observer who wanted to flee danger but took too much thrill from being in the midst of a risky situation—evoking an intoxicating sensation that's not unlike witnessing the demure albeit self-assured performer onstage.

**The Metro**  
Chicago, Illinois  
**June 7, 2009**

By Bob Gendron







**The Rose Garden**  
Portland, Oregon  
**May 15, 2009**  
Text and Photos by  
Jeff Dorgay

# The Allman Brothers

The Allman Brothers have always been a band best experienced live, and they showed no sign of slowing down on this stop of their 40th anniversary tour. The show began with a blazing version of their instrumental “Hot ‘Lanta” that felt remarkably similar to the arrangement captured in 1971 on *Live at Fillmore East*. But this evening the guitar battle would be between Warren Haynes and Derek Trucks, with Gregg Allman matching riffs on his signature Hammond organ.

The band zoomed directly into an extended version of “Statesboro Blues,” while a tribute to the band’s history and members of the band lost over the years played on the video screen behind them. The audience jumped to its feet at the sight of Duane Allman. The Allman Brothers rounded out the set with their classic hits, “Midnight Rider” and “Melissa,” offering a good blend of new and older tunes. However, a quick peek at their past setlists reveals that they are mixing it up quite a bit at different venues. Fans will not see the same Allman Brothers show two nights in a row.

Though they only played 11 songs, the concert lasted just over two hours, with an encore performance of “One Way Out.” The Allman Brothers proved that there is no substitute for experience, playing at a level that many bands never achieve, yet making it look easy.



# Reeves Gabrels and HiS iMAGgiNARY Fri3NDS

**The Family Wash**  
Nashville, Tennessee  
**May 1, 2009**

By Rick Moore

It's not every night one gets to see a bona fide guitar hero playing for tips in a converted laundromat, but that's what about fans of Reeves Gabrels were treated to recently at Nashville's Family Wash.

The longtime David Bowie cohort has gone the power trio route with Reeves Gabrels and HiS iMAGgiNARY Fri3NDS, featuring bassist Kevin Hornback and drummer Jeff Brown. In Nashville, Gabrels put on a guitar clinic, showing a range that wasn't always evident with Tin Machine or in the '90s incarnations of Bowie's band, or even in his hired-gun work with such artists as Natalie Imbruglia and Robert Smith of the Cure.

Opening with the well-written "Wish You Were Her," Gabrels showed a confidence in his vocal ability that was lacking on *Rock-onica* and *Ulysses*, where much of the night's material was drawn from. The band used the gratis club date as a rehearsal session before hitting the road, and Gabrels demonstrated total mastery of his pedalboard, combining what sounded like the best of both analog and digital in "Underneath," "Bus Stop," and "Accident."

While Gabrels, now in his early fifties, admits to being influenced by older greats like Jeff Beck, but came across more like Eric Clapton this evening, showing a singer/songwriter sensibility. He combined his 21st century virtuosity in several tunes, going from simple open chord progressions to tearing off screaming rapid-fire upper register notes in the blink of an eye. He also effortlessly incorporated some two-handed tapping and even some jazzier licks that he may have picked up during his Berklee days.

Gabrels set aside his original material briefly for a nicely arranged version of "Messin' With the Kid" that featured tasty modulations, and paid homage to the traditional blues rockers of the '60s and '70s. This is the closest you'll ever see Reeves Gabrels playing classic rock or blues.

His current band lineup is more reminiscent of Mountain than Cream, though, with the rhythm section supporting the star guitarist. Gabrels' growing songwriting ability, combined with his unique talent on the guitar, make him a rare individual indeed.



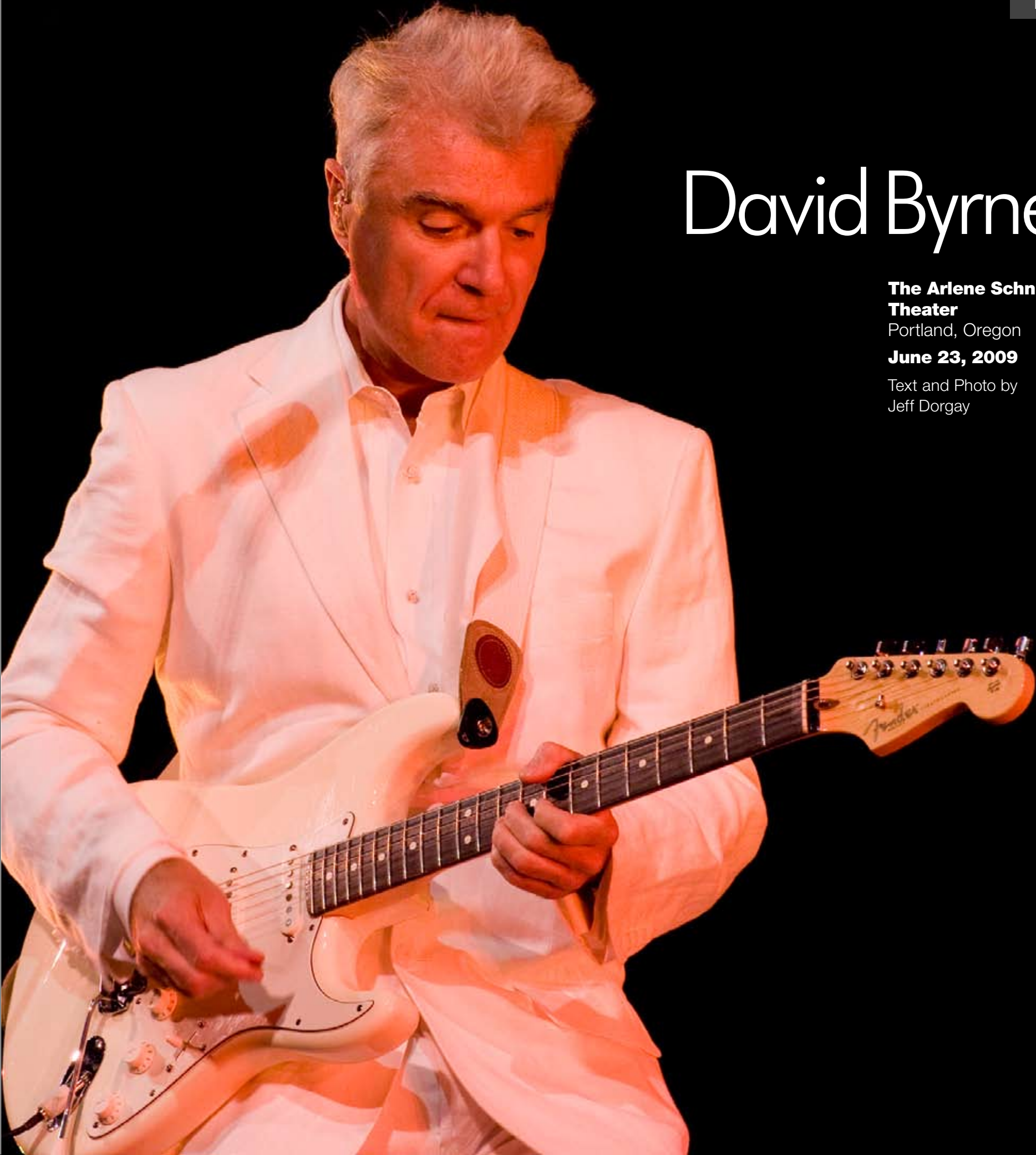
# David Byrne

**The Arlene Schnitzer  
Theater**

Portland, Oregon

**June 23, 2009**

Text and Photo by  
Jeff Dorgay



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## Music of the TV Generation

by **Ben Fong-Torres**  
(former senior editor at Rolling Stone)



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Instead of the crowd waiting for the rock star, this evening the rock star waited for the crowd. At 8:20, when the sold out crowd finally took their seats, David Byrne popped out, dressed in white from head to toe, with a matching white Stratocaster. For the next two hours, his fans were on their feet, through the final encore.

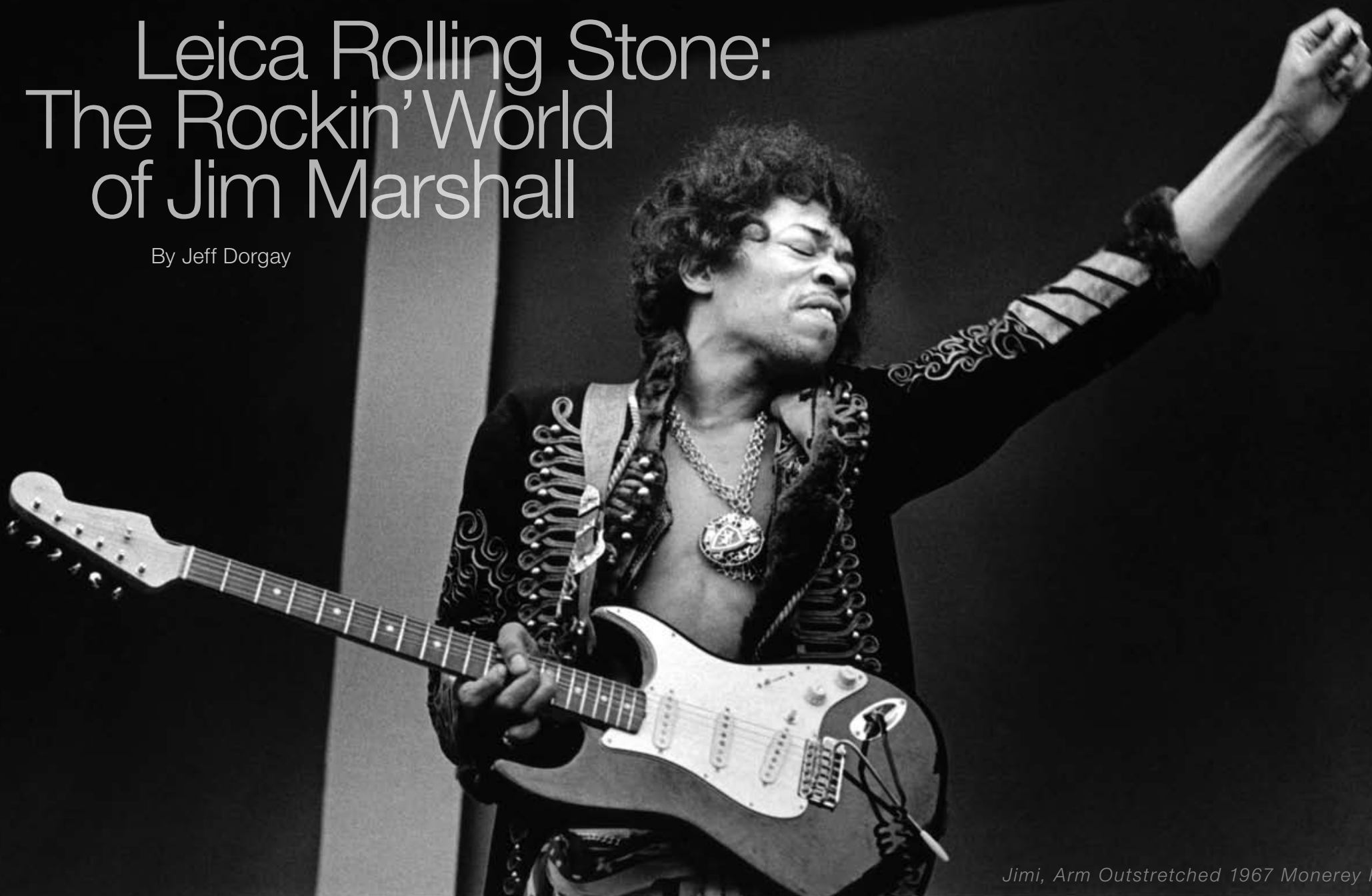
Byrne was in an excellent mood and joked with the Portland crowd throughout the set, apologizing for not making it to their town on the last leg of his tour in the fall of 2008. He said that it started out to support his current record with Brian Eno, *Everything That Happens Will Happen Today*, "but had evolved into something else now." That something else ended up being a set comprised mostly of Talking Heads tunes, which went over extremely well.

He punctuated the show with four songs from the latest album, opening with "Strange Overtones" and closing with "Everything That Happens," just as he has on the last dozen dates. The band was focused and energetic, but never got too far out of control, save for a pretty wacky guitar solo in the middle of "Life During Wartime."

For Talking Heads fans who missed their legendary *Stop Making Sense* tour, this is the closest they will get to that experience. The concert may disappoint those who prefer Byrne's solo work, but the show could morph again before the end of the tour. With the European leg of David Byrne's tour starting July 6, anything can happen. ●

# Leica Rolling Stone: The Rockin' World of Jim Marshall

By Jeff Dorgay



*Jimi, Arm Outstretched 1967 Monterey Pop*

*Note: This interview was originally published in TONEPhoto, in August of 2005, when Jim Marshall's book Proof, had just been released in hardcover. Besides the books mentioned in Ben Fong-Torres' article on Marshall's work with the Allman Brothers, a limited hardcover edition of Proof has been issued, including a signed print from Marshall.*

**A**t a recent Metallica concert, I was waiting with the other photographers in the pit when I overheard a few of them complaining about how their latest digital camera wasn't "fast enough" for them to get the right pictures; I instantly thought of Jim Marshall.

With an incredibly basic setup – a Leica rangefinder and Tri-x film, he's chronicled much of its history between the late 50's and today, from Miles and Coltrane to John Mayer and Shelby Lynne, with some Stones and Beatles in-between.

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I had been told by a number of people in the photographic community that “Marshall doesn’t do interviews.” I lucked out. When I spoke with his assistant Amelia, she informed me that he was lecturing in Seattle. Five minutes later, Jim Marshall was on the phone inviting me to dinner.

---

**“Can you get up here by 5?  
We can do the interview  
after dinner.”**

---

It was 2:15, and I would soon learn that Marshall and I had one thing in common; we liked to break the speed limit.

Walking through the restaurant door at 4:57, I met Marshall in the midst of signing his book *Proof*, which had just been released. The crowd had a few representatives from Leica, but they were mostly photography students who saw Marshall as much of a rock star as the subjects in his book.

As we sat for dinner, Marshall struck up a conversation with our waitress, who happened to be wearing a “Beatles at Candlestick Park” T-shirt. We asked why someone her age (she said she was 21) would be interested in the Fab Four. She said she had just watched the DVD of that last concert, in August of 1966, and that she “loved that picture of them walking off the stage.” Marshall calmly said, “I was there, I took that picture.” She and Marshall dove into a long conversation about the Beatles.

After dinner, we discussed his career over drinks. I found out that Marshall and I had something else in common: a love of good scotch. *(continued)*



*Beatles Walking to Candlestick Stage 1966*

**TA: Did you start out in the music business, or did you photograph other things first?**

JM: Actually, I started shooting cars. I shot a lot of dirt track and oval racing in Northern California and followed the early hot rod scene. I sold a number of my first pictures to *Hot Rod* magazine. A few years ago *AutoWeek* featured some of my early photos of Dan Gurney, Phil Hill and Sterling Moss. *Rodders Journal* also did a story on "Jim Marshall – The Hot Rod Years." It was a lot of fun to see those images again.

**How did you get into the music scene?**

It evolved from hanging out in clubs with my camera. The first major artist I shot was John Coltrane.

**What led you to Miles Davis?**

I shot Miles the first time in '59 and it scared the hell out of me! I had shot a couple of his albums and hadn't exchanged ten words with him, but I ran into him at Winterland in '66 where I gave him a color print of Coltrane. He saw one he loved and called me back. He said, "How come you don't take pictures of me like that?" I went for broke and said, "Because you won't let me." After that, I could do anything I wanted with Miles. He trusted me because he saw Coltrane trusted me.

**That seems to be the case with all of your work.**

I was a very lucky guy; I was able to gain their trust. *(continued)*





*Grace & Janis 1967*

**What about the pictures of Janis Joplin on her couch? Did the happy or the sad shot come first?**

Those were done in '68 about 15 minutes apart, but I forgot to number the rolls. They were shot with the same camera and lens, but to this day I don't remember which one was shot first.

**At the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s you switched to the world of rock & roll. Were you at Woodstock?**

Yeah, the big panorama shot of Woodstock, that's mine. Had a 17mm Pentax lens adapted to a Nikon body.

**When did you start using Leica cameras?**

In 1959, I bought an M2. Financed it by putting \$50 down and made 12 payments of \$24 a month to pay it off.

**Have you ever had an actual studio?**

Nope, always borrowed a studio from someone, as I have been mostly an available light kind of guy. No flash, it is very interrupting to the situation and adds a jarring moment to the shoot.

**Beatles or Stones?**

Neither; The Allman Brothers, with Duane Allman. I loved Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles and the Stones, but the Allman Brothers were my all-time favorite band.

**Your favorite concert?**

Otis Redding, '67 at the Monterey Pop Festival. It was an amazing performance.

**Least favorite concert?**

I can tell you that one, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. That was the worst show I've ever seen, just a couple of years ago. Pretentious and boring. It was at the Berkeley Community Theater.

*(continued)*



*Mick & Keith Recording 1972*

**Who was the most difficult artist to work with?**

(Laughing) A lot of them!

**Did you know Hunter S. Thompson?**

I sold him some coke, but I never took pictures of him. He was a great guy.

**Do you shoot all film, or have you started to play with digital a bit?**

No way, I shoot all film and use a modified Leica MP almost all of the time, with Tri-x. I never stick with the factory stuff, I always have it modified.

*(Editor's Update: Marshall has started experimenting with the digital version of his favorite Leica, the M8.)*

**So, you are one of those "human light meters," then?**

After all these years with Tri-x I can come pretty close, but I do carry a new Sekonic light meter with me most of the time. I'm not infallible.

If you are taking pictures, trust your light meter; if you are on the open road, trust your radar detector. But those damn things aren't worth crap in the city.

**Do you do your own darkroom work?**

No, I have been using the same guy, Kirk Anspach for the last 25 years. He does all of my film developing and printing. Contacts and work prints on RC paper, final prints on fiber base. I have no interest in learning Photoshop. More people are going digital, art directors want everything right now; it's scary.

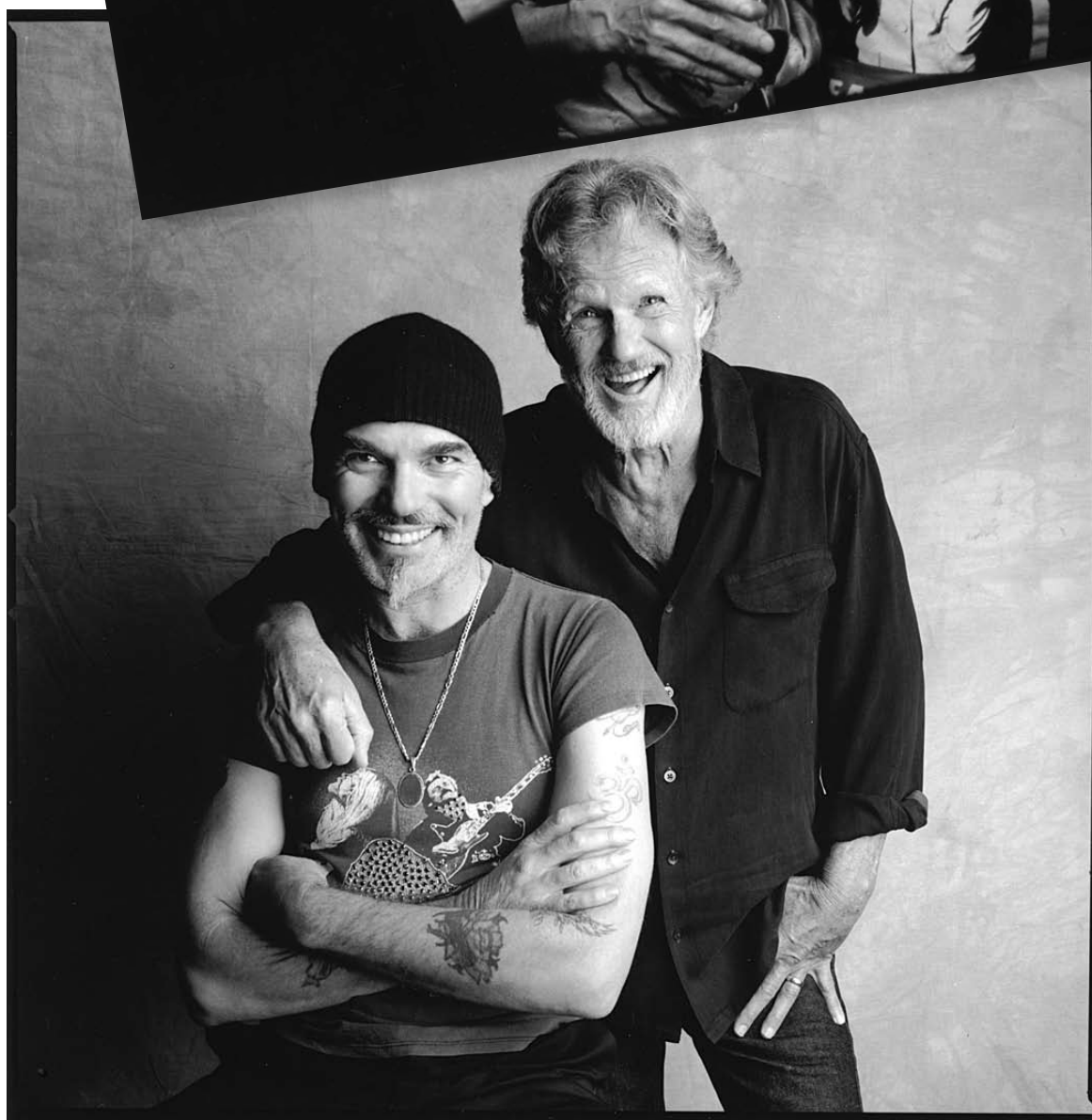
**Do you produce any editioned prints?**

I have a limited number of platinum and dye transfer prints available. All the information is on my website, [www.marshallphoto.com](http://www.marshallphoto.com)

**What is the highest fee you have ever received for one of your images?** *(continued)*



*Jimmy Page  
Jeff Beck &  
Slash 2005*



*Billy Bob Thornton & Kris Kristofferson 2003*

\$25K to Hewlett Packard, and Columbia paid me \$50K for a couple of Johnny Cash images recently. And I pay ALL my taxes.

**Who are you working with these days?**

Billy Bob Thornton, Limp Biskit and Shelby Lynne. CD and promotional stuff. She's wonderful. Gave me complete access to everything. Capitol records contacted me and I have worked with her directly.

**Who do you like in the jazz world these days?**

Oh, a few people, but after hanging out with Coltrane and Miles, the rest is pretty pale in comparison. They don't make them like that any more! Wynton Marsalis is great but he's not Miles....

**What about rock?**

John Mayer. He's a nice kid. Just bought a bunch of prints from me. Gotta love that. *(continued)*

**What's your favorite non-photographic thing to do?**

Watch TV. Cop shows. I love 'em. I can tell you the plot and story line to every cop show ever on TV.

**What car do you drive?**

A silver Mercedes C36 with black leather. Goes like hell. I can make the drive from San Francisco to Los Angeles (380 miles) in four hours. I leave at 5 a.m.; I'm in the city by nine. It's faster than flying by the time you screw around with luggage.

The morning after our interview, Marshall spoke to the second year photo students at Seattle Community College. He gave a sobering speech, saying that photography was a difficult business, requiring a lot of persistence. He said that while some people just burst on the scene, he had to work very hard at it until he found his spot.

Reflecting on his career, he said, "Access and trust, that's the key. The musicians are a lot more guarded now, so it's tougher to get the access."

His images all have that connection that is rarely present in today's music photography. Thanks to the access that he enjoyed, many of the musicians he photographed became good friends as well as terrific subjects. ●

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# Jim Marshall

Jamming With the Allman Brothers Band

By Ben Fong-Torres

A classic cover shot for a classic album. That's what Jim Marshall achieved when he met the Allman Brothers Band one day in 1971. Marshall, who was already a famed photographer for his work with a Who's Who of music, including Ray Charles, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, Johnny Cash, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, the Beatles, the Stones and The Who, was a fan of the Allmans, and it was Duane who told the band's label, Capricorn, that they wanted Marshall to shoot them.

The album was *At Fillmore East*, which still stands as a benchmark among live rock recordings. The Musicound rock album guide calls it "arguably rock's greatest record," and notes that "the double album holds only seven very long songs – including the epic 'Whipping Post' – and nary a wasted note."

Marshall, who works out of San Francisco, didn't catch the Fillmore East shows. "I'd seen them a bunch of times," he said. "They're one of the best live bands ever. It's one of the best live recordings of all time."

And, for Marshall, who's shot more than 500 album covers in a storied career that dates back to the early '60s, the *Fillmore East* cover is his favorite, hands down.

Marshall visited the band at their headquarters and rehearsal studios in Macon, Georgia. Their big brick building, he decided, would make a perfect backdrop for his idea: to pose them against a wall of their amp and speaker cases. Noting the typical stencils of the band's name and "FRAGILE" on the various cases, Marshall decided to add a large stencil, reading "The Allman Brothers Band At Fillmore East," onto the uppermost amp case.

*(continued)*

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And he did it himself. "I went out and bought the stencils and spray paint that morning," he said, in his Victorian flat in San Francisco. "It was my idea; one of my only ideas."

"It was an overcast day," Marshall recalled – perfect for an exterior photograph. He used a Hasselblad Super Wide he'd borrowed from fellow photographer Herb Greene, shot four rolls of black and white and one of color, "and that was it."

Not really. An inspection of a dozen shots included in Marshall's book, *Proof*, reveals that most of the six-man band maintained straight faces—except in the one shot that was ultimately used. Duane was smiling broadly; several of his bandmates were breaking up.

Marshall said he wanted the looseness. **"I told them, 'I have the only coke in Macon, and if you don't give me a laughing shot you don't get it.'"** Marshall's told this story before, but, now, he had a topper: "Butch Trucks said the reason Duane laughed was that they were waiting for *their* dealer, and while I was shooting, they saw their dealer pulling up."

Whatever the motivation, Marshall got his shot, and, like the Allmans' music, it endures. For an upcoming Jim Marshall collection, titled *Matched Prints*, Galadrielle Allman, Duane's daughter, wrote some words as true as her father's playing: "Jim's image transmits the same confidence and beauty that lives on in their music, and shows his uncanny ability to capture a fleeting second, to isolate and frame it: emblematic, refined and perfect." ●

# Current Releases

## Wilco

*Wilco (The Album)*

Nonesuch CD and LP

"I don't care any more," admits Jeff Tweedy on "You Never Know," commenting on the state of the world and his theory that every generation is led to think that it will be the last. While the Wilco vocalist ultimately qualifies the lighthearted sentiment with a classic Lennonism—slyly dropping in the phrase, "But you never know," after the airy chorus—the line is drawn. Where in the past Tweedy would find reason to meditate on such heady matters, he now sees fit to let go. And for additional reassurance, there's always "Wilco (The Song)," a feel-good novelty tune that functions as a group hug to anyone in need of emotional salve. For Wilco, healing is no longer achieved through screaming or distortion but by way of self-knowing humor and a bubblegum-pop bridge. My, how times have changed.



The more carefree vibe is indicative of an acoustic-based album that finds the Chicago sextet content to pool the collective strengths of its past into a satisfying albeit fairly safe whole. A vast improvement over 2007's sleepy *Sky Blue Sky*, *Wilco (The Album)* prizes subtlety over heft, and familiarity over the ambition and risk that defined the band's evolution from 1996 to 2004. That was a four-album stretch that remains on par with anything the Beatles ever recorded. The creative shift can directly be tied to Tweedy's personal situation—he's sober, his kids are relatively young—informing mellower tunes that come close to qualifying as "dad-rock."

There are no bad songs on Wilco's seventh studio set, but several ("Solitaire," "Sonny Feeling") unfold as if you've heard them before, with slightly altered arrangements. Fortunately, recycling is kept to a minimum, courtesy of the myriad colors, textures, noises, and fills provided by the excellent lineup. In particular, guitarist Nels Cline and drummer Glenn Kotche continue to impress by taking Wilco places it wouldn't otherwise venture. *(continued)*

Cline's nuanced accents make "One Wing" soar, his rubbernecking lines cracking through the climactic haze of a bittersweet goodbye. Similarly evocative, his elegant lap-steel playing underlines the convincing "I'll Fight," which shares gospel overtones with several other tunes on the album.

Harrowing, claustrophobic, and panicked, "Bull Black Nova" is not one of them. The murderous standout track is the most adventurous and gripping moment on *Wilco (The Album)*. A shivering reminder that all is not well, it's also a necessary riposte to the cheerful "Everyday People"-R&B groove of

"You Never Know." Framed by Kotche's stirring percussion, "Country Disappeared" is differently pained, the contemplative ballad a gorgeous confluence of rising and falling swells, atmospheric washes, and Tweedy's emotional falsetto. This gem is a song to grow old with, and to savor with a loved one. "You And I," a romantic duet with Canadian chanteuse Feist, the calm pop of "Deeper Down," and the stately "Everlasting Everything" also find Tweedy singing in an assuring voice—and setting up an us-versus-the-world scenario that, when Wilco embraces it as a mantra, finds the band at its best.

Sonically, this is yet another knockout from a group that truly values great sound and organic production. Vocal and instrumental timbres are true, and a wide-open soundstage exposes the generous separation, extraordinary spaciousness, and bountiful textures. As such, the glorious, warm, natural, and effortless sound acts as an invitation for listeners to keep returning to the album, a decision that proves wise as the riches of *Wilco (The Album)* reveal themselves over time—even if they aren't quite as bountiful as those on the band's finest efforts. **—Bob Gendron**

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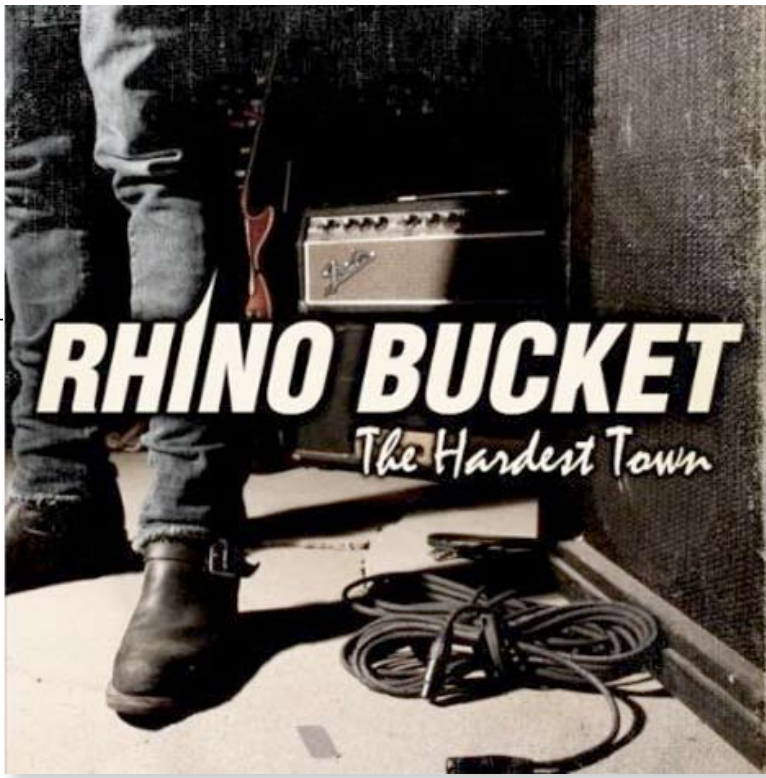
**S**on Volt is the latest project of singer/songwriter Jay Farrar, best known for co-leading the Midwestern alt rock group, Uncle Tupelo, with high school buddy Jeff Tweedy (of Wilco fame). Although *American Central Dust* is the roots rock band's 10th CD, it's their first release on Rounder.

The 12 songs range from intimate guitar/vocal solos to low-key rockers with steel pedal and lap guitar, giving the music an early Eagles sound. The band recorded old-school, with vintage gear on analog tape in Farrar's own studio. I get the sensibility, but the warmth of analog is sometimes a trade-off for digital's crisp presence. If you've got a gazillion-dollar home system, you won't be trotting out this CD for demonstration purposes.

Along with love songs, more lovelorn than celebratory, Farrar's subject matter is bleak but timely, a musical version of a Walker Evans photo. "When The Wheels Don't Move" looks at the greed of the fossil fuel industry. Titles like "Down To The Wire" and "Pushed Too Far" pretty much describe the overall mood. Lots of trains, dusty highways and sad faces in lonely joints.

"Sultana" describes a devastating 19th century Mississippi shipwreck, leading to obvious comparison with another newsy troubadour, Gordon Lightfoot. But Farrar sounds like Lightfoot's kid brother, his squishy emo vibe no match for the testosterone-fueled urgency of the Canadian singer's manly growl.

**-Anne Farnsworth**



### Rhino Bucket

*The Hardest Town*  
Acetate, CD

Although many thought that Jet might be the next AC/DC, they've faded from memory almost as quickly as they burst on the scene in 2003. A stronger contender is the Southern California band, Rhino Bucket. They've been playing together (albeit with a few lineup changes along the way) for 20 years now, and on their latest release, *The Hardest Town*, do an exceptional job of sounding like AC/DC.

Where Jet sounds more like the current iteration of AC/DC, Rhino Bucket echoes the Bon Scott version of AC/DC. Most of the songs on *The Hardest Town* start with a monster lead guitar riff and finish at the end of a long sustain, with the occasional scream thrown in just before the song fades to black; think of "Beating Around the Bush" from *Highway to Hell*. This is straight ahead four-chord rock and roll, centered around girls, rock, and life on the street. The most memorable tune, "Dog Don't Bite," is about a man questioning why his dog doesn't bite his girlfriend's potential suitors when he's away at work. Great stuff.

*The Hardest Town* is worth a spin, but, in the end, there can only be one AC/DC. **-Jeff Dorgay**



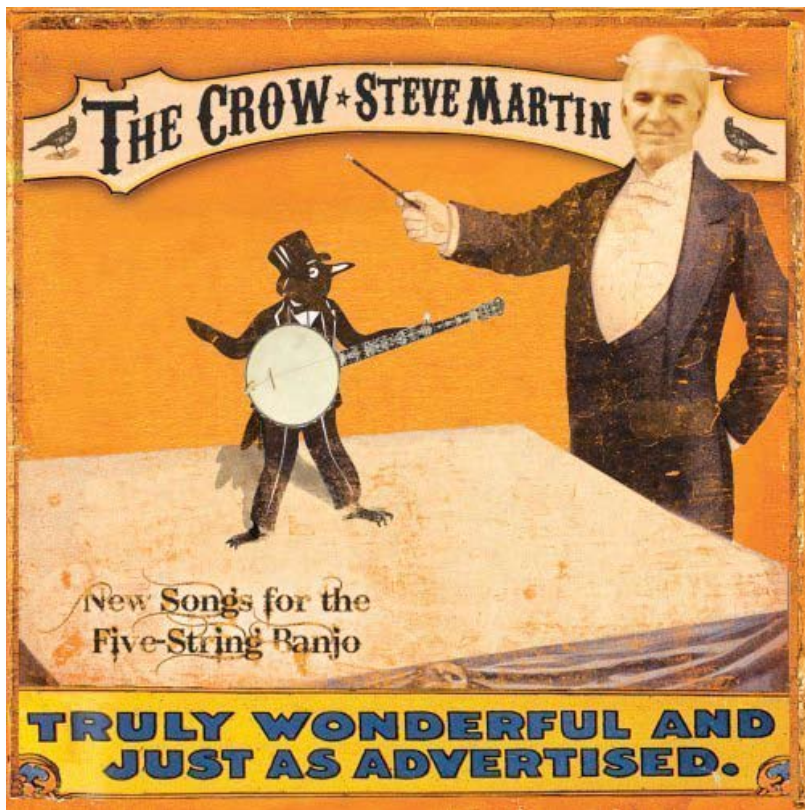
### Sunn 0)))

*Monoliths and Dimensions*  
Southern Lord. CD & 2-LP set

Picking up on last year's limited release *Domkirke*, a performance album recorded live in an ancient Norwegian chapel, Sunn 0))) continues to take listeners down fascinating rabbit holes on *Monoliths and Dimensions*. The robed duo's seventh record is its most radical departure from doom-metal yet. While the collective's trademark droning guitars remain a factor, they are no longer predominant. Impeccably arranged and largely acoustic, the set's four compositions unfold as grandiose, orchestral-based movements laden with atmosphere and density. As always with this band, the LPs sound magnificent, as if designed to challenge the limits of any stereo's low-end.

In what marks another significant departure, three of the four songs here contain vocals. The opening song comes across not as singing but as a hoarse poetry reading on "Aghartha," whose creepy creaks and sonic decay evoke the opening of a sealed coffin. Julian Priester, a veteran of Sun Ra and John Coltrane bands, blows a conch shell to add to the haunted oeuvre. It's accents like these—as well as orchestral strings, oscillators, French and English horns, and an upright bass trio—that set *Monoliths and Dimensions* apart from anything in the slow, heavy music canon. Take "Big Church." Anchored by a Vietnamese choir, the piece doubles as an eerie spiritual. For added dynamic contrast, brass instruments balance out the waves of grumbling sludge generated by distorted notes and echoing feedback.

Having already explored the outer limits of resonant noise, Sunn 0))) is now moving towards the opposite spectrum. Surprisingly calm, the all-instrumental "Alice" rolls back and forth like ocean waves before finishing with a sublime climax. The view from here is gorgeous. Who knew Sunn 0))) had its eye on film scores? **-Bob Gendron**



### Steve Martin

*The Crow: New Songs for the Five-String Banjo*  
Rounder Records, CD

Steve Martin has had a banjo in his hands since before he started his comedy career in the 70's. He said once in an interview that the instrument "was there to help take up some of the slack." Most people don't realize that he's been a student of the banjo for about 40 years, playing with his good friend John McEuen of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, and that he performed on Earl Scruggs' Grammy-winning album *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*.

McEuen returns on *The Crow* as player, producer and music director. Mary Black, Vince Gill, Earl Scruggs and Dolly Parton round out the lineup of top bluegrass and country artists enlisted to sit in on what Martin calls "the most expensive banjo record ever made."

Steve Martin is not another entertainer indulging himself with a trip to the recording studio. *The Crow* is a testament to Martin's mastery of both 3 and 5 finger styles of the banjo. McEuen commented in a recent interview that they tried "as often as possible to capture the music in one take or two takes," and that Martin "took direction well in the studio."

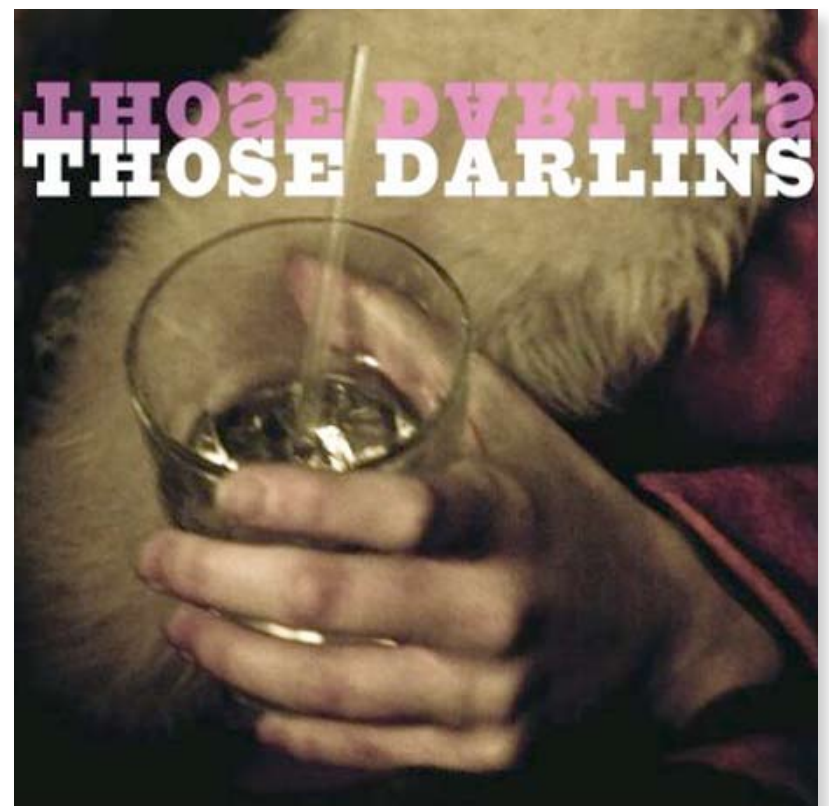
Other than the lighthearted "Late for School", *The Crow* is straight ahead bluegrass, recorded with care and craftsmanship. The only regret is that they didn't release it on vinyl as well as CD; the warmth of this recording would lend itself well to an analog version. **-Jeff Dorgay**

### Those Darlins

*Those Darlins*  
Oh Wow Dang, CD & LP

"Just because I'm sweet don't mean I'm always nice," warn Those Darlins on "'Wild One," the lead single from the trio's infectious self-titled debut. Combining old-time country twang and girl-group pop with punk-inspired clamor and fun-loving humor, these ladies don't take no mess. And while they each have adopted "Darlin" as a surname, Nikki, Jessi, and Kelley aren't a gimmick. Playing with boots-are-made-for-walkin' sass, confident sexuality, and drunken abandon, the Tennessee-based combo has crafted one of the year's smartest (and most entertaining) albums. As likely to pull a switchblade as they are to agree to let you buy them a drink, the threesome is proof that seriousness can be couched within seemingly flippant songs—and vice versa.

Upending convention, the Darlins tackle taboo themes such as libido, booze, and looseness with a candor normally associated with men. Assuming colorful personalities that aren't far removed from those of the sketched women depicted on covers of campy 50s pulp paperback novels, *(continued)*



the band extends an irresistible edge and comedic wit to tunes such as “Mama’s Heart” (on which they caution their mothers’ prospective suitor to be respectful... or else), “Hung Up on Me” (a Southern-fried kiss-off to boys who want a second chance), “DUI or Die” (an irreverent rockabilly ditty that suggests it’s better to find a guy to take you home rather than risk arrest), and “222” (an ode to whiskey highs and beer-goggle crushes).

Those Darlins support their romping narratives with aching Appalachian harmonies that convey requisite amounts of toughness, sarcasm, vulnerability, and charm. Bluesy accents, swinging beats, and rootsy guitar-bass-ukulele rhythms add to the rural feel. Filled with barroom piano and hootenanny horns, “Snaggle Tooth Mama” even plays up hillbilly stereotypes. No subject is off limits; there’s even an update of the Carter Family standard “Wabash Cannonball.”

Available on CD and LP, the production mirrors the music’s no-frills nature and off-the-cuff spirit. Anything fancier would be a disservice. And who’d want that? Fiercely independent and refreshingly original, these girls don’t lack courage or energy. As they make clear on the uproarious “The Whole Damn Thing,” they want it all—and aren’t about to settle for anything less.

—Bob Gendron

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### Moby

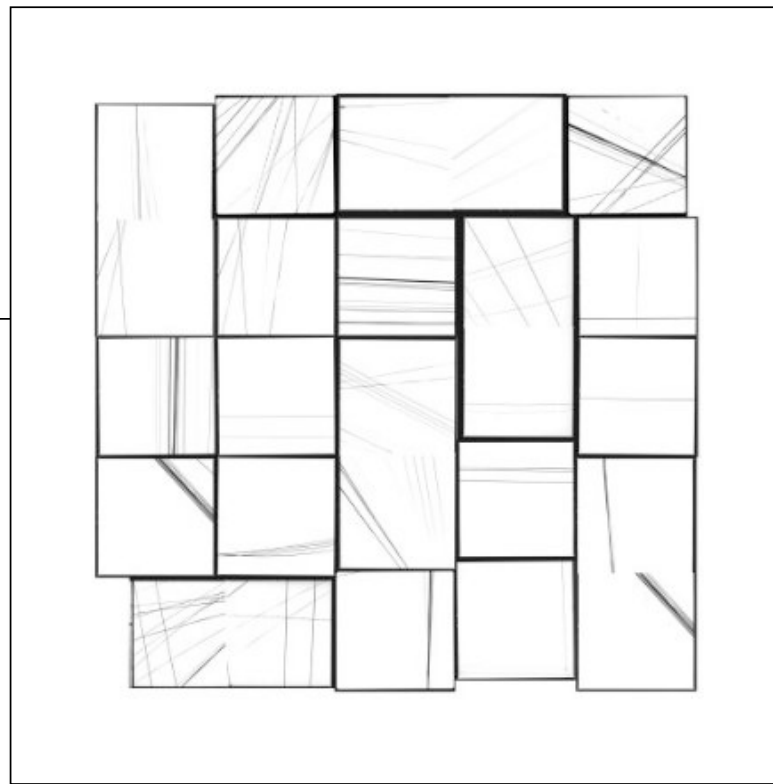
*Wait For Me*  
Mute, CD

**M**oby said in a recent interview that this record was his chance to get back to basics, having been inspired by a lecture on creativity by David Lynch, who ended up creating the video for the track “Shot In The Back of The Head.” Moby took this philosophy all the way, producing the album himself and recording it all at his home studio.

“Stock Radio” is only 53 seconds worth of electronic hum that sounds like something from a scene in *Eraserhead*, so perhaps hanging out with David Lynch did give Moby a couple of new ideas, but despite Moby’s commentary about creativity and control, *Wait For Me* sounds a lot like *Play*, with a heavy dose of looping vocal tracks layered over ethereal samples and synthesizer riffs.

In the end, this record doesn’t take me anywhere I haven’t been with Moby before. I’m also waiting for him to hire his crew of recording professionals back, because the sound quality of what would have otherwise been a pleasant Moby album is terrible. The CD doesn’t sound any better than what you can download from iTunes.

**-Jeff Dorgay**



### Tortoise

*Beacons of Ancestorship*  
Thrill Jockey, CD and 2-LP set

**A**kin to the slow pace of the animal to which its name refers, Tortoise takes its time between records. Nearly five years have passed since 2004’s *It’s All Around You* found the instrumental collective pursuing familiar jazz-oriented passages and Asian-tinted themes. And while 2006’s collaboration with Bonnie “Prince” Billy yielded the flawed but curious *The Brave and the Bold*, innovative bursts have been in short supply during the current decade.

*Beacons of Ancestorship* may not turn heads in the same manner that the Chicago quintet’s initial three studio offerings still do, but the boundary-blurring affair is immensely satisfying and often enthralling. Splattered with dub, electro, new wave, disco, and prog-rock elements, the atmospheric record unfolds as a stylistic cross-section of one of the most indefinable contemporary bands going. On the whole, Tortoise keeps the songs concise and the overall mood upbeat. Where the group’s two previous albums seemed content with relaxing and drifting, this set is about connecting with the dance floor. Yes, it’s easy to imagine the exotic “Northern Something” and strolling “Monument Six One Thousand” resonating in da club.

Its potential to spawn deejay remixes aside, *Beacons of Ancestorship* restores faith in Tortoise’s ability to constantly surprise and sculpt rich textures within the space of a single arrangement. Relying less on vibraphones, the music comes across as denser, more percussive, and more captivating than Tortoise’s last few efforts. An armada of synthesizers and foot pedals double as distorted accordions, old-school videogame effects, and rolling ocean waves.

*(continued)*



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The sense that anything is possible pervades the beat-heavy "Prepare Your Coffin," tugged along by guitarist Jeff Parker's frenzied solos and clusters of manic hand claps. Similarly adventurous, "Minors" evokes an underwater landscape one would expect to find in a sci-fi book, although here, the tune's robotic feel and sleazy romanticism come across as a mix between a 70s porn soundtrack and funky fusion. Grinding and burbling noises also inform "High Class Slim Cam Floatin' In." Dressed for an all-night rave, the sonic blend of rippling psychedelia, bagpipe-like melodies, volume fade-outs, and cut-up tempos make for a groove-laden laptop collage. A handful of experiments fail to register. The spiritual meditation "de Chelly" dead-ends as a throwaway interlude. "Penumbra" also seems little more than a brief, forgettable transition. But such filler is the exception. Any flaws are redeemed by contemplative pieces like the closing "Charter oak Foundation," a hypnotic jazz-rock synthesis that crackles with fractured leftovers of distant conversations. Evoking jumbled radio transmissions, Tortoise turns a communication breakdown into meaningful reconstruction.

Per Tortoise's normally high standards, sonics are excellent—no surprise given the band members' experience as studio engineers and producers. On LP, geometric shapes and vivid colors come to the fore and linger, while a deep soundstage encourages listeners to shut their eyes and lose themselves in a world where verbal language is no longer necessary.

—Bob Gendron

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TONE **46** NO.22 2009



### Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood

*Live From Madison Garden*

Reprise, CD and LP (with DVD in Collectors Edition)

In 2008, Eric Clapton and Steve Winwood reunited for a sold-out string of concerts at Madison Square Garden. The shows were filmed and the result is a double CD, with a special collector's edition available that also contains two DVDs and lots of cool fanboy extras.

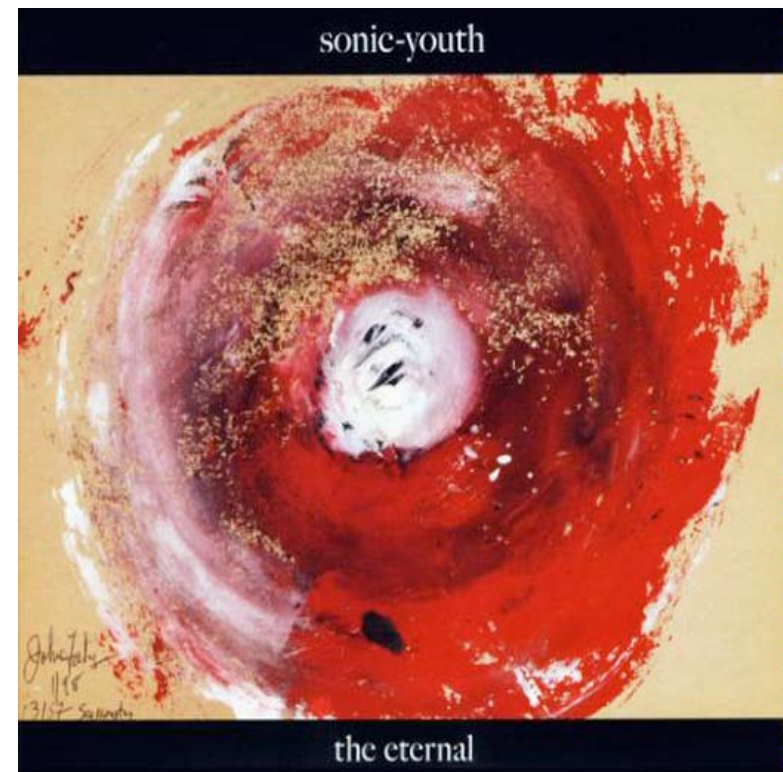
The Blind Faith bandmates seem to have weathered the decades with their friendship and enthusiasm intact — in 2007, they played *Crossroads 2* in Chicago and are touring together this summer.

In the late '60's, Winwood left The Spencer Davis Group to join Clapton and drummer Ginger Baker, forming Blind Faith. Considered one of the late '60's supergroups, it was hatched from the breakup of what is considered the first supergroup — the power trio Cream.

The 21 tracks here include Blind Faith hits as well as those of Traffic, Derek & the Dominoes and Jimi Hendrix, Winwood's close friend.

Both veterans are in top form, Clapton's guitar as fiery as ever and Winwood rocking the Hammond B3. It's thrilling to hear those familiar opening riffs, and the audience response is electric.

As for the singing, they could have used a little help in the recording booth. Clapton's voice, with its signature nasal twang, is strong and melodic but dry as a bone. He may be clean and sober but nothing says forever like a deviated septum. Although compared to Winwood, Clapton's got the resonance of an operatic tenor. Naughty boys. **-Anne Farnsworth**



### Sonic Youth

*The Eternal*

Matador, CD and 2-LP set

It's funny how some things never change even when, in theory, they're supposed to. On its first album for an indie label in nearly 20 years, Sonic Youth tried out two or three songs over one weekend and recorded them the next. Despite the shift away from traditional write-and-rehearse-at-once methods, *The Eternal* doesn't mark any steep departure from the iconic group's signature sound or feel. All of which is to say that on its 16th full-length record, New York City's leading art-rock contingent continues to advance the savvy pop-culture commentary and relatively concise songwriting forms that have defined its recent work. Only *The Eternal* resonates with more vitality.

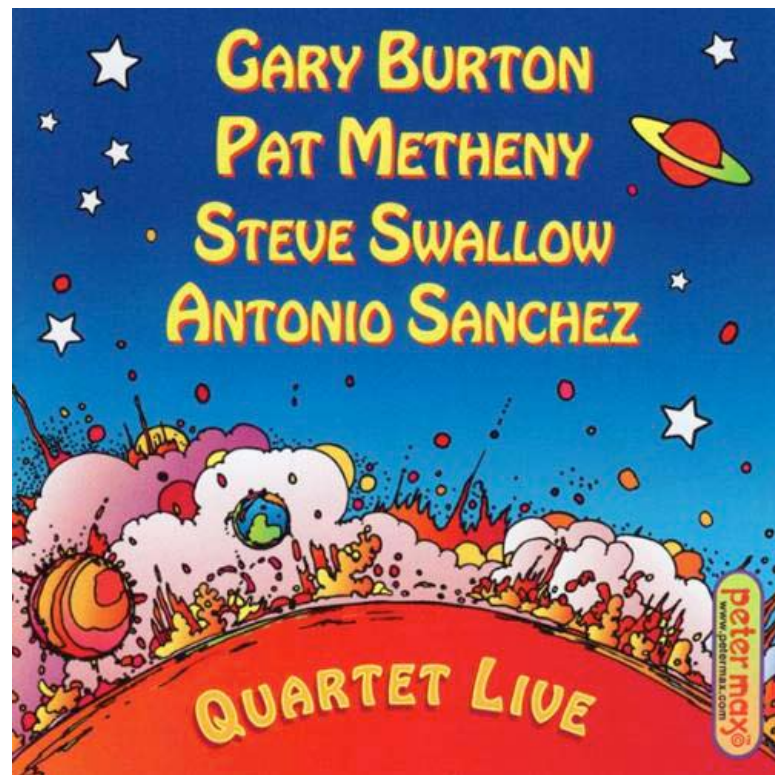
Ironically, as it draws closer to its 30th anniversary, Sonic Youth remains relatively comfortable with its creative mechanisms and processes. Yet the observation says as much about listeners' familiarity with the group's evolution as it does the band's progression. Recognizing its collective strengths, the quintet now devotes resources toward focused purposes rather than the exploratory improvisation that marked its earliest efforts (and continues to characterize its ongoing series of private-label SYR releases). And while *The Eternal* contains a few moments that evoke 80s no-wave, the album is steeped in the kind of irregular albeit fully realized structures that the quintet has developed during the better part of the past two decades. *(continued)*

In Sonic Youth's hands, such controlled chaos often yields the best of both worlds—a spontaneous underground racket helps balance the planned arrangements—even if the approach occasionally comes at the risk of sounding too cautious. Sure, other bands skew further towards the avant-garde. Yet no rock group better views guitars, amplifiers, and drums as a core heap of wires, strings, skins, and plugs that, once reassembled and reimagined, produces exhilarating music that violates rules and inverts perspectives within accessible melodic frameworks.

Sparked by a forward-driving momentum, *The Eternal* engages by way of alternate tunings, tonal shadings, sulfuric harmonics, and radical chords. The riff- and groove-based set also functions as a showcase for Kim Gordon. Relishing her most active role on an album since 1992's *Dirty*, the guitarist/bassist/vocalist plays lead agitator, torching celebrity culture and public voyeurism on "Malibu Gas Station" as guitarist/vocalist Thurston Moore's scraped notes feed into a distorted undertow. She's equally charged on "Sacred Trickster," a post-punk blitz that features her trademark femme-fatale "uh-huh" utterances. As sexual and deadly as any vocal expression in rock, Gordon's lusty moaning is feminism at its most liberating. She reprises the technique on "Anti-Orgasm," a tune as pointed as the title implies. With Berlin model/activist/sexual revolutionary Uschi Obermeier providing inspiration, Sonic Youth rails against moral hypocrisy with thumping rhythmic seizures and Gordon-Moore duet exchanges that act as aural metaphors for intercourse. The six-minute opus, as well as "Walkin Blue" and "Antenna," argue on behalf of the band's increasingly transparent connection between narrative and music.

Not that Sonic Youth has completely abandoned free-form noise. "Thunderclap for Bobby Pyn" devolves into a glorious scrum of frenzied dissonance while layers of treated guitar effects lend spookiness to the magnetic "Calming the Snake." And though the band occasionally sounds too content ("Leaky Lifeboat (for Gregory Corso)" is a bit plain), the slightly more mature approach has ushered Sonic Youth into a category unimaginable at the beginning of its career: serious songwriters. If only every artist aged half as well.

Pressed on two slabs of 180-gram vinyl at RTI, produced by John Agnello, and mastered by Greg Callbi, the sonics on the LP (as well as the CD) are magnificent, surpassing even the last handful of well-recorded Geffen albums. Textures and tones shimmer, while the midrange and low-end register with palpable air, immediacy, and impact. **-Bob Gendron**



### **Gary Burton/Pat Metheny/Steve Swallow/Antonio Sanchez**

*Quartet Live*

Concord, CD and LP

One of the great things about jazz is its mentor tradition, both in the classroom and in performance. Jazz is an aurally transmitted art form; what's on the stage ain't what's on the page, and gifted youngsters often get the chance to grow and become peers with their idols.

Pat Metheny takes pains to correct the canard that he was plucked by Burton from Berklee's student body to play in his quartet, but also says it was his favorite band as a teenager. He joined Burton's group in the '70s and they've been playing together on a frequent basis ever since.

This latest release, recorded live at Yoshi's, in Oakland, Calif., reunites the two (who also co-produce) with veteran bassist/composer Steve Swallow and drummer Antonio Sanchez, a relative newcomer.

There's nothing groundbreaking here, but fans will be pleased to revisit the Burton repertoire, breaking ground in the late '60s with its jazz/rock sensibilities, and played today with maturity, enthusiasm and great skill.

The '60's are also referenced in the trippy Peter Max cover. If you don't know Max's style, think Yellow Submarine cartoons. There's a trend this year in hippie culture CD art design; the Corea/McLaughlin and Eric Clapton/Steve Winwood releases are two more examples.

Yoshi's has quickly become the premier spot for live jazz recordings. It's interesting that Boston residents Burton and Metheny eschew Cambridge's Scullers, a venue on the level of Yoshi's, to record on the west coast. (Yoshi's has opened a second club, across the bay, in San Francisco.) **-Anne Farnsworth**



# Julian Lage:

## From Guitar Prodigy to a Smashing Debut

By Jesse Hamlin

**M**usic began flowing through Julian Lage the moment he picked up a guitar, at the age of five, and started improvising. Sixteen years later, melodies continue to pour out of him with fluidity, grace and passion.

A sweet-natured prodigy from Santa Rosa, in Northern California, Lage [rhymes with “corsage”] has always played with a depth of feeling and invention far beyond his years. He was working in professional blues bands at seven, jammed with Santana onstage at eight and made his first recording with mandolin master David Grisman before his 12th birthday. When Lage was 15, jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton, who’d been wowed by the kid’s playing on the Grammys telecast a few years earlier, tapped him to fill the chair previously occupied in his band by such stellar guitarists as Larry Coryell, Pat Metheny and John Scofield.



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## B&W Music Club

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Now, at the ripe old age of 21, Lage has come into his own as a bandleader, composer and recording artist whose soulful and original music draws on the wide range of traditions – jazz, bluegrass, classical and Indian music – that have shaped his expanding musical universe. He brings these seemingly disparate sounds together in a fresh, organic way that never sounds like a pastiche.

In March, EmArcy released Lage's *Sounding Point* CD, a smashing debut with a rich range of music that plays like a suite. It features a choice cast of musicians – among them banjo wizard Bela Fleck, Punch Brothers mandolin virtuoso Chris Thile, the dazzling Colombian-born percussionist Tupac Mantilla, and Venezuelan cellist Aristides Rivas – in a series of duo, trio, and quintet numbers that range in length from 46 seconds to seven minutes. The music artfully balances composition and improvisation, precision and spontaneous combustion. The tunes are linked thematically by solo guitar improvisations that Lage, a movie lover who often thinks of music in visual and spatial terms, calls the "Hitchcock Preludes" because of their "suspenseful and reflective nature."

The guitarist's working quintet is a dancing chamber-music group with the unusual instrumentation of cello, saxophone, guitar, bass and percussion. It's touring North America this summer, playing Frehofer's Jazz Festival in Saratoga Springs, New York on June 28, the Ottawa Jazz Festival the following day and the big Montreal Jazz Festival June 30. Grisman, whose *Dawg Music* – an ingenious blend of bluegrass and jazz – had a big influence on Lage, caught the band in late May at the Healdsburg Jazz Festival in the Northern California wine country. *(continued)*



“Julian is one of a kind,” said Grisman.  
“He’s going to make his mark.”

“Julian is one of a kind,” said Grisman, who a decade earlier had been blown away by the improvisational gifts and wisdom of the young virtuoso who impressed him as being focused on making a beautiful musical statement, not on showing off his chops. “He’s going to make his mark.”

A few nights later, Lage spun out a beautiful set at Yoshi’s in Oakland, one of the jazz world’s prime venues, playing for a crowd dotted with guitar freaks who hung on every unexpected phrase. Lage’s girlfriend, J.R. Farel, with whom he lives in Boston, was there with her mother and Julian’s father, Mario. When Julian was a kid, his parents, Mario and Susan, sought to

nurture Julian’s talent and inquisitive mind while protecting him from the public glare and exploitation that prodigies often experience. They repeatedly turned down documentary filmmaker Mark Becker before agreeing to let him make what became the Oscar-nominated film, *Jules at Eight*.

Before the Yoshi’s show, Julian sat backstage in a black leather chair and talked about his musical life, his band, and why he waited for the right moment to make his first record as a leader. He’d turned down offers to do so when he was younger.

“I could’ve gone in a strictly jazz route, pick a bunch of tunes that I like, find an

all-star cast, and blow on ‘em,” said Lage, a slim, handsome guy with dark hair and blue eyes. He speaks with the confidence, humility and open-heartedness that mark his playing. “But I always felt that maybe there was more potential than I realized in myself. I always saw myself as a jazz guitar player, but when I was playing with Gary’s band and Taylor’s band [pianist Taylor Eigsti, another Bay Area prodigy], part of me said, ‘When I have my own band, maybe I’ll do it this way, maybe I’ll have a chamber group quality, or more through-composed music.’ I had those things in mind, and when the time was right, I would do it.”

*(continued)*



## GamuT S5

In its intensity, breadth and interweaving of instrumental voices, Lage's group brings to mind the late, great Argentinean bandoneon player and composer Astor Piazzolla, whose bracing music brought jazz and Bartok to traditional tango. The guitarist readily acknowledges Piazzolla's influence.

"He had the ideal band," said Lage, who also counts jazz guitarists Jim Hall and Django Reinhardt, rock guitarist Steve Kimock, Grisman, and Dmitri Shostakovich among his inspirations. "They could do *anything*. They could play an intense improvised piece or they could play a fugue. It was incredibly flexible. They could raise you to these emotional levels. I want the thing that Piazzolla had, which was, 'I can't believe that's only five musicians making that sound.'"

The youngest of five children, Lage grew up listening to and playing a wide range of music. He had a voracious musical appetite, soaking up everything from Eric Clapton and Buddy Guy to Reinhardt and Ravel. Rather than copying licks he heard on records, he worked out the chord progressions, got into the feeling and learned to improvise. He keyed into the expressive aspect of music first, then found the technique he needed to bring it forth. The local school district provided a tutor, who met with young Julian once a week. On any given day, he might practice guitar for six hours, work on the Indian tabla drumming he studied at the Ali Akbar College of Music, analyze a Jim Hall solo and connect its harmonies to the Debussy scores he also studied, and practice his bluegrass picking.

*(continued)*


“My family’s sensibility was to check it all out,” says Lage, who later studied classical guitar at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and jazz at Boston’s Berklee College of Music (he was given a bachelor degree at Berklee after only two years but missed graduation because he was on the road). “My father played a little guitar, but he wasn’t a professional. My parents saw I was getting into music, which they didn’t know a lot about, so they got all kinds of books and videos and records for me. I think it was in my favor that I didn’t have a prescribed path, on a conscious level.

“I was always drawn to those qualities. One quality was fearlessness, a willingness to go for something. I sought that out wherever I could. I saw it in jazz, where the masters were fearlessly going for broke and reaching for higher stuff; I saw it in cinema, I saw it in the Russian composers, who wrote this tragic music, especially during World War II; I saw it in the Delta blues guitar players, where there was this heartbreak, but they were just going to persevere. There was this kind of longing, but a sense you’ll overcome. It was the feeling, the soulful thing. I would seek it out wherever I could.”

Not picking a particular style was key to shaping a personal voice. One day Lage would dig into stinging blues guitar. The next day he might want to explore music that was “precise and super-crisp,” he said. “Maybe I’d check out Eric Johnson on guitar, or Mozart, where every note is perfect, or Tony Rice, whose lines are just perfect. That quality would come to life for me. I don’t think I was conscious of any of this at the time, but I realize in retrospect that’s what I was after.”

Lage can play with lightning speed and sometimes does; he’s more of a “sound” player who lets the music breathe, delighting in the ring and hum of a sliding steel string, the resonant tones emanating from his wooden instrument (he plays a Linda Manzer arch-top electric and a Marin D-18GE acoustic guitar). His first appreciation of that sense of sound came from Kimock, who he heard a lot as a kid in the Bay Area.

*(continued)*



Lage can play with lightning speed and sometimes does; he’s more of a “sound” player who lets the music breathe...

**When it comes to composing, Lage employs an intriguing method. He takes a kernel of music that he thinks has potential and plays it outdoors to see if it holds his interest amid the ambient sounds.**

“He was the sound guy,” Lage said. “He could play one note and you would hear its life, you heard everything. You have guys who can shred and play a bunch of notes, and there are guys who are into sound. Those are the extremes. I think both uphold a certain value structure, sometimes unconsciously.” Some guitarists value speed or power, he said, adding that the players who are attracted more to sound tend to have “curious personalities. I’m curious. When I put my hand here in space, and it touches this place on the wood and I pluck the string, something happens that I can’t explain. Dig it. It’s so cool. I feel I have a knowledge of how it works as I get older, but I think what you’re receiving as an audience member is my curiosity, my willingness to accept what’s in front of me, right then and there. . . It’s an invitation.”

A student and teacher of the Alexander Technique, which releases tension by focusing on posture and body movement and the integration of mind and body, Lage aims for what he calls a holistic approach to music making and life. The ideal, he said, is to allow the music to come through you and breathe.

Performing onstage, he has to choose “if I’m going to react to the music in a stereotypical way, or if I’m going to let something come in that I haven’t done before. I’m making decisions all the time. Am I going to play that line that way I’ve always played it, or am I going to let this cue me into something that is happening tonight, that has never happened before and will never happen again.”

Lage looks for like-minded musicians to make those moments happen. He met the guys in his group while studying in Boston. Peruvian bassist Jorge Roeder is a one-time member of the Lima Philharmonic who plays in jazz pianist Kenny Werner’s trio. He went to the New England Conservatory, as did Mantilla – whom he met through pianist Danilo Perez – and alto and soprano saxophonist Ben Roeth, with whom Lage has developed a particularly felicitous rapport.

Mantilla is a monster improviser who plays almost entirely with his hands. Rather than a bass drum, he uses the African-Peruvian wooden box drum called the *cajon*, in conjunction with the African *gembe*, or “talking drum,” frame drums and a set of small cymbals.

“I hired Tupac on the condition that that there would be no hi-hat and no ride cymbals,” Lage says with a laugh. “Now we have a tiny hi-hat and sizzle cymbal. When I first saw Tupac he seemed extremely

resourceful. He’d do stuff with cans and things, and it wasn’t gimmicky. I saw his curiosity in the world around him. We both agreed that if we were going to go out there as a band, we needed to hit ‘em with a new form of drums that was uniquely him.”

On the CD, produced by the noted team of Stephen Epstein and Richard King – among others, they produced the “classical cross-over” disc by Yo-Yo Ma and Edgar Meyer – the quintet is featured on “All Purpose Beginning,” an evocative and mysterious soundscape inspired by the music of Lage’s favorite film composer, Bernard Hermann. The pulsing perpetual motion of “The Informant,” which Lage thinks of as the soundtrack for man escaping from prison, like in *The Great Escape*, is brought to life by the blazing trio of Lage, Thile and Fleck.

“Bela listens like no one else,” said Lage, who used to jam with the banjoist when he came through San Francisco. “He can hear all the things you’re doing and then turn them around. He plays things on the banjo I didn’t think were possible. He reveals so much to me when I play with him.”

When it comes to composing, Lage employs an intriguing method. He takes a kernel of music that he thinks has potential and plays it outdoors to see if it holds his interest amid the ambient sounds.

“I usually go outside somewhere where there’s something bigger that’s staring me down, like a tree or a park,” he said. “And I’ll play it and see if it sinks or swims. Does this catch my attention in the midst of distraction? I want to play amid real life. You go out and play the thing that sounded so hip in your bedroom, and if a car drives by or a siren goes off, do you still remember it when you come back to it? Or was it fleeting? I kind of test myself against natural sounds.” He’s thrown out a ton of tunes that didn’t pass the test. If a musical idea survives the siren, he said, “then it’s probably worthwhile.”

It’s taken the self-effacing young guitarist time to get used to being the bandleader at center stage. In his earlier groups, “I had a tendency to want to hide a little bit. I wanted the other musicians to go for things. I didn’t want to make that glowing space on the stage for me to step out, because I thought it was selfish. But I realized with these guys, they all do something I can’t even imagine doing, because they’re all unique. It makes me want to lead. And I’ve got this thing that I can offer. That’s a big transition for me.” ●

# Audiophile Pressings

By Jeff Dorgay

Presented by Music Direct

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**P**reviously available only on CD, the extended version of *Odelay* is now on vinyl; four glorious slabs. The first three sides feature the 13 songs from the original *Odelay* release, and the remaining five sides are remixes and bonus material. Also included is a full-color booklet.

Bernie Grundman mastered these himself, and the records were pressed at Pallas in Germany, with spectacular results. What may arguably be one of the trippiest records ever made now reveals its secrets. From the second you set the arm down on the record, you can hear layers of detail where there was none before.

Original, single LP versions (without all the bonus goodies) are selling for \$150 on eBay these days, and the ones I've heard sound awful. Only 3,000 copies of the Original Records Group version have been pressed, and at \$79 for the set, this is a killer bargain.

## Beck

*Odelay*

Original Records Group, 4-180g.





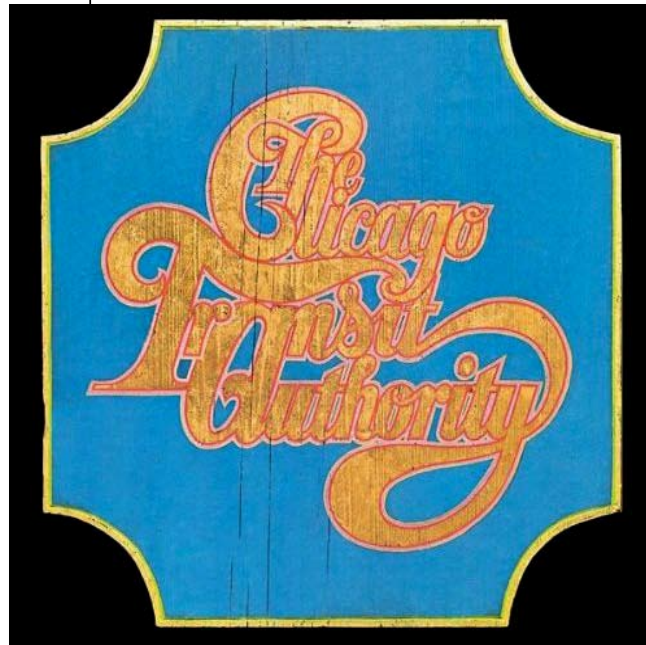
### Carly Simon

*No Secrets*

Friday Music, 180g. LP

**T**his had to be one of the most popular records with testosterone-crazed high school boys in 1972. Many bought it for the cover alone, but this album also contained three of Simon's biggest hits, "The Right Thing To Do," "You're So Vain," and the title track.

Friday Music got it right on this one. The record surfaces are very quiet and the mastering job is clean, unlike a number of the other titles we've auditioned on this label, which have had an overly bright high end. Simon's vocals are no longer buried in the mix, and the bass lines on all the tracks have a lot more definition than the original. Most but not all of the compression present on the original LP has been taken care of on the Friday Music release, making this classic a treat to listen to, especially on a good system.



### Chicago

*Chicago Transit Authority, Chicago*

Rhino, 2-180g. LP set (each)

**F**or the latter half of their career, Chicago became almost a parody of themselves, turning into a soft-rock outfit, producing tunes that got a lot of airplay, but were a long way from their roots.

They began in 1967 in a much artier vein. Their first two records, *Chicago Transit Authority* and *Chicago*, were heavily jazz oriented, spawning their early hits "Make Me Smile," "Color My World," "25 or 6 to 4," "Does Anybody Really Know What Time it Is?" and the tortuous "Free Form Guitar."

Initially released on Columbia, their original albums were recorded and mastered for AM radio play and had a big bump in the midrange, sounding great on the portable radios of the day, but fairly lacking on a good HiFi system.

Kevin Gray is responsible for the first two remasters in the series, and they are both excellent. These are now serious audiophile discs, with full range dynamics restored and the frequency response flattened out. With sound to match the musicianship on these records, the true genius of Chicago's early works shines through.







### The Doobie Brothers

*Toulouse Street*

Mobile Fidelity, SACD

*Toulouse Street* was the Doobie Brothers second album, but it was the first one that started a string of hits that would continue for six more records, ending with the triple-platinum *Minute By Minute*.

The Mobile Fidelity version is considerably smoother sounding overall than even the original vinyl, and the splashy-sounding cymbals on the original now sound correct. Even the CD layer of this disc sounds great, but if you have an SACD player to take advantage of the high resolution layer, you'll notice much more air around the vocalists and greater dynamics overall.

### Big Star

*#1 Album, Radio City*

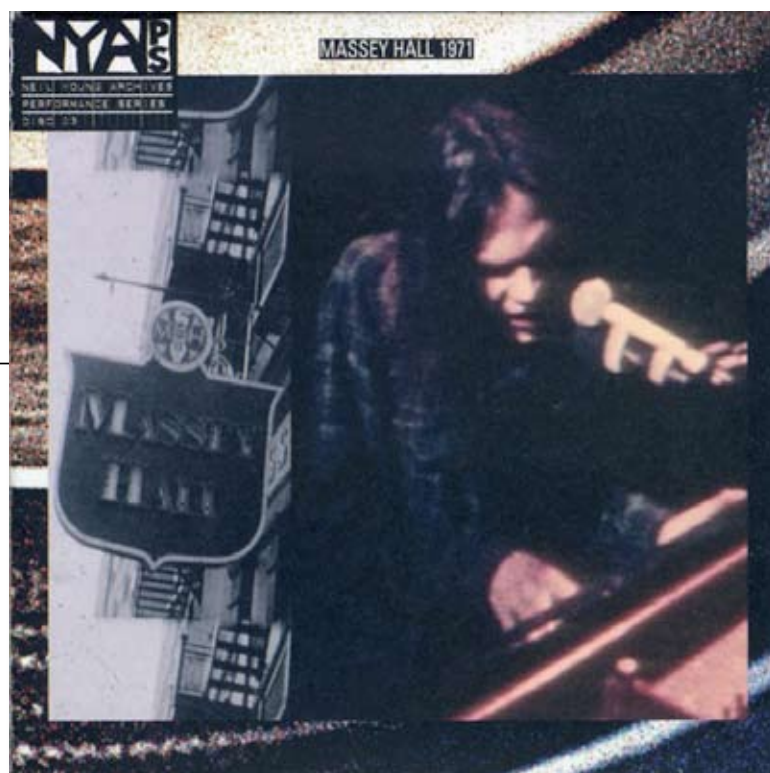
Classic Records, 200g. Clarity Vinyl

**B**ig Star was one of those underrated bands of the '70s that end up on rock magazines' Top 100 lists. These two records featured a series of popular singles including "In the Streets," which would achieve its ultimate fame as the opening theme for *That '70s Show*.

Mastered and cut by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Mastering on Classic's new Clarity Vinyl, the pressings are flawless, with Classic's new vinyl formulation a benchmark for LP quality. The jackets have been printed with care, and the reproduction of the Argent labels in the center of the LP is another nice touch.

These two records share an almost identical sonic signature and still sound weak on the bottom end of the tonal spectrum. Fortunately, the rest of the mix comes through more clearly than the current CD copies or a garden variety LP. Considering Bellman's track record of stellar work for Classic, I suspect this may have been all he had to work with.





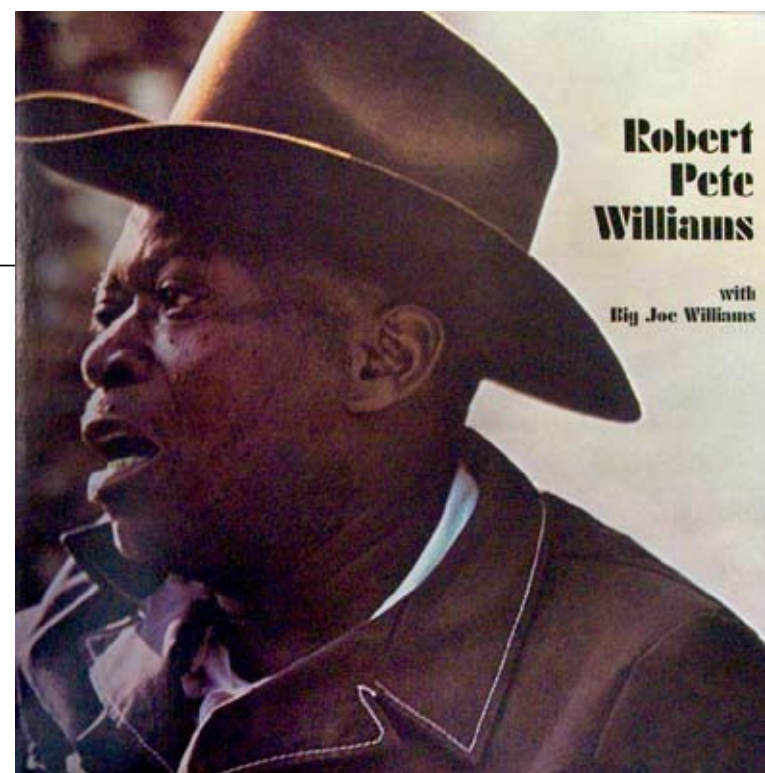
### Neil Young

*Live at Massey Hall*

Classic Records, 2 – 200g. LP set

Neil Young fan or not, you should add this record to your LP collection. At Massey Hall, in Toronto, the audience heard something quite special; only eight of the songs he played that night had been previously released. Five of those ten new songs would end up on *Harvest*, which wouldn't be in record stores for another year.

The material is great, but the recording is fantastic and this could be one of the best sounding live rock records ever produced. Mastered at Bernie Grundman Mastering with their all vacuum tube console, Classic has done an excellent job of preserving and enhancing the original recording without embellishment.



### Robert Pete Williams

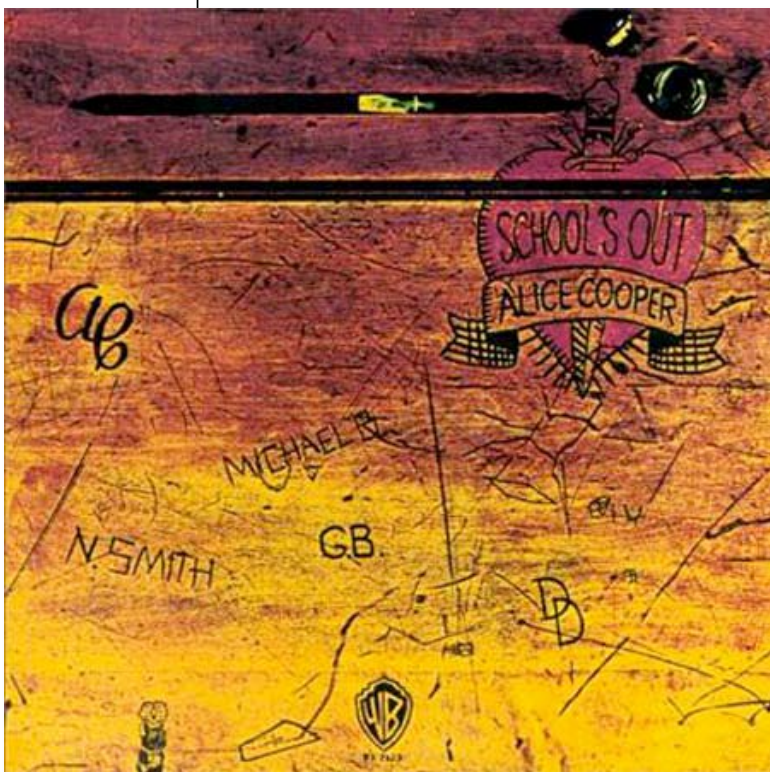
*Robert Pete Williams*

Pure Pleasure Records, 180g. LP

This is classic blues at its finest; a man, his guitar and his music, plus some great stories. Recorded live in Copenhagen in 1972, Williams is accompanied by Big Joe Williams on kazoo. In "Talking Blues," Williams tells us about his life in prison and the moral struggles he went through.

The Pure Pleasure Web site describes Williams as "the most avant-garde blues performer ever recorded." Just when you think you've pinned him down to one style, he quickly changes gears and goes down a different path, ultimately defying definition.

The recording captures the spirit of his tough times, and Sean Magee at Abbey Road Studios polishes this blues jewel to perfection; the record's surfaces are dead quiet, and every bit of the original recording's ambience has been faithfully captured.

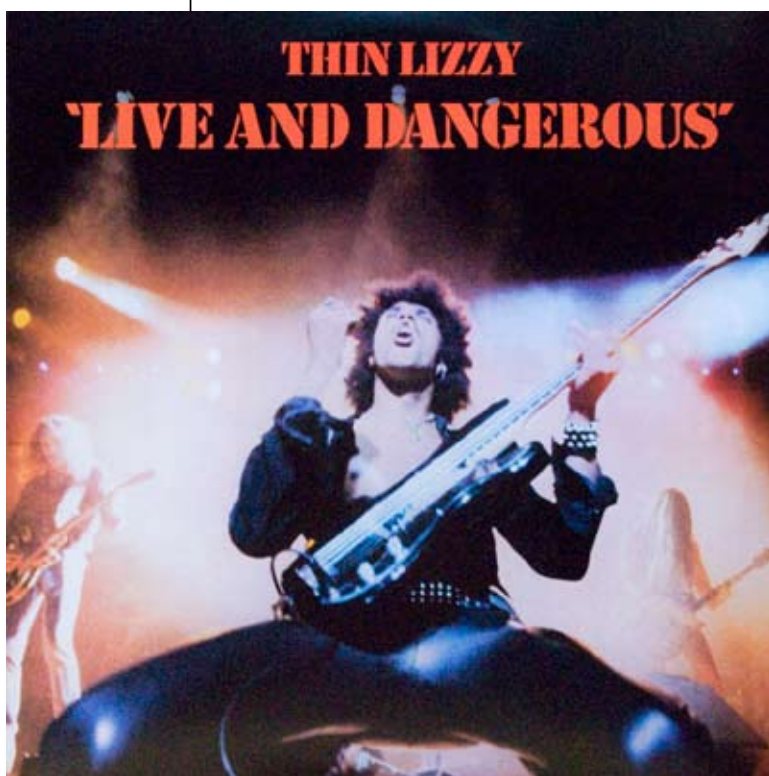


### Alice Cooper

*School's Out*  
Audio Fidelity, CD

**M**astering engineer Steve Hoffman has injected his signature “breath of life” into a classic from the ‘70s that sorely needed it. Most of the early LP pressings of *School's Out* are very compressed, and the CD's that Warner's released were even worse.

The title track is still slightly crunchy, but it's a huge improvement over the original, and the rest of the tracks are excellent. This record finally has some dynamic range along with some warmth in the bass tracks. Where Cooper's lead vocals got buried in the originals, they are now up front, where they belong. Let's hope Audio Fidelity can get their hands on *Killer* and *Billion Dollar Babies*.



### Thin Lizzy

*Live and Dangerous*  
Friday Music, 2-180g. LP set

*Live and Dangerous* is a two-record set, chronicling Thin Lizzy's 1976-1977 world tour, with the band at the peak of its popularity. Thin Lizzy has never been known for great sounding records, and this remaster does nothing to improve the dreadful sound of the original. It's a giant wall of midrange.

It's unfortunate that this is the legacy of one of rock's great live bands. I suggest passing on this except for those who just have to have vinyl. A used CD, at about \$3, won't sound any different.



When I saw KISS in 1975 on the *Alive!* tour, it changed my life forever as it did for Jaan Uhelski. But she got a *lot* closer to them than I did, being the only person in the world to perform on stage with KISS in full makeup. Now get on your knees and worship her!

Here's her story, reprinted from *Creem* magazine, that tells what it was like to go where no one has gone before, or since. — Jeff Dorgay



# I Dreamed I Was Onstage With **KISS** In My Maidenform Bra

By Jaan Uhelszki

Well, it was not exactly my idea of the perfect fantasy, but I was curious about life on the other side of the footlights. Armed with an abundance of determination and a tight pair of Danskins (Danskins aren't only for dancing), I approached Larry Harris, the vice president of Casablanca Records, with my plan: "How about if I join KISS for a night?"

# DeVORE FIDELITY



# The Nines

No answer, and then nervous laughter. Obviously, Larry thought I just wanted to know what it was like to mouth kiss a vampire. Sure, they were eager for a magazine feature on the band, but this scheme was just a little bizarre. I pushed the point and they told me disturbing tales of other fresh-faced females who were transformed into raging teenage nymphs after attending a KISS concert. **“But I don’t want to see the show, I want to be in it!”** I persisted. Reluctantly the Casablanca crowd conceded (only after making me promise not to call KISS a glitter band), assuring me I could join these contorted Kewpie Dolls on stage for one number or four minutes, whatever came first, on the following Saturday.

On Thursday, I decided to drop in on the Detroit rehearsal to see what kind of atrocities I’d be in for. Soon after I arrived, I found some of the band lounging on the side of the stage, so I walked up and asked what they thought of the idea of me being a KISS (Kissette?) for a night. They all looked at me vacantly, and I realized that **NO ONE HAD TOLD THEM!!** I felt like a Rockette who gets told ‘Thanks but no thanks’ at the open call before she’s had a chance to do her dance. I fumed at the executive-in-residence, and demanded he explain the plan.

I took a empty seat in the vacant hall and continued to watch the band rehearse, to “pick up some tips.” A stage hand divulged that bassist Gene Simmons had accidentally set his hair on fire while practicing the fire-breathing segment of the show, which I admit made me squirm and fear for my own charred remains. My visions of stardom were quickly evaporating like warm Jell-O. *(continued)*

During their break Simmons came over and pulled out the few strands of his singed curls, assuring me that “it was nothing,” but I couldn’t prevent myself from biting the Lilac Frost off my nails. I was beginning to have misgivings. I think Ace Frehley did too, because he just stared over my left shoulder, but Peter raised a comradely drum stick when Paul Stanley pointed to the empty stage and stated: “Saturday night, that’s you up there!”

“Didn’t anybody ever tell you to wear tall shoes around these guys?”

Seated in 8A my fear of flying is mixing badly with my apprehension. After a round of Hail Mary’s I look up to see Gene Simmons seated next to me, sans makeup, of course, although he still makes a scene with his 7-inch platforms, cheese-colored scarf and black polish that he is presently chipping off his stubby nails.

## What if that geekish bass player bites my neck, oozing red blood-goo on my shoulder? **Anxiety knots my stomach so much that I can’t even force a single Sugar Crisp down my throat...**

Soon enough, it’s Saturday morning. What am I going to pack to become a KISS? I ponder over breakfast, wincing at the memory of last night’s show. What if that geekish bass player bites my neck, oozing red blood-goo on my shoulder? Anxiety knots my stomach so much that I can’t even force a single Sugar Crisp down my throat, so I return upstairs to case my closet. One leotard—black, one pair tights—black, and one pair six-inch platforms—also black. I zipped up my Samsonite and hurried out the door, Junior’s warning still ringing in my ear.

Stage manager Junior Smalling is a frightening and humorless man, who wears an oversized pair of blue plastic glasses and possesses the self-given nickname of “Black Oak.” Last night he demanded my presence at the Eastern Airlines desk at 10:45 a.m. (for an 11:20 flight), and although it was now after eleven and my ticket was in order I still dared not move until Junior arrived. At 11:10, he strode in, lugging a battered briefcase and an ugly scowl. He didn’t acknowledge me, but instead barked at the airline clerk. Finished, he whirled on the band like an angry parent. “What the fuck is wrong with you guys? We get you watches, and you still can’t get here on time. We coulda missed the plane and the gig, so hustle them asses to the plane!” Finally, he looks down at me and spits: “What are you waiting for? Get to gate 34!” Then, almost kindly, he adds,

Of all the members of the band, his appearance is the most obscured by the paint: he might just as easily be Omar Sharif or Joe Namath, for that matter. Instead he was a former life guard, then a Boy Friday at Vogue, has a BA in education but secretly confesses a desire to be Bela Lugosi (and is lovingly dubbed “Mr. Monster” by the rest of his fellow inmates). Circulating around the plane is the current issue of one of CREEM’s competitors, which has done a full feature on KISS. Eventually the copy drifts to our seat, and Gene insists on reading the story aloud to me.

“How come after everything I say, they always add ‘Gene expounds?’” he asks.

“Probably because you went to college,” I say.

We exit the plane without incident, except that most of us are over six-foot-something. Me, I feel a lot like Lewis Carroll’s Alice after drinking the small potion, until I notice that Paul Stanley isn’t that much loftier than me. As I remember, yesterday I came about eye level to his Keith Richard button.

“What did you do, shrink overnight?” I ask.

“No, didn’t you know I gave up platforms? I wanted a new look,” he says coquettishly, tossing back his head of perfect curls. But he blows the cool by dropping his screaming yellow zonker sunglasses.

“Hollywood?” I venture. *(continued)*



"No, I wear 'em because I don't like to see people looking at me all the time," he confesses. Stanley is a confident young man, bordering on almost arrogant. With or without makeup he possesses an intense magnetism: Paul is the throb of the teenage heart, luring them away from their Barbie Dolls and into the backroom.

Believe it or not, the Gorgeous George of the group was once an ugly duckling, never getting any of the girls he wanted. **"You know, I was an ugly kid. I looked like I was put together with spare parts. 'Okay Mac, here's a set of legs, stick 'em on Stanley.'** I used to be fat and had the funkiest hair. In fact, I even used to iron it, or use this Puerto Rican product called Perma Straight that had directions in both English and Spanish. Back in 1966, the only thing I wanted to be was John Sebastian.

We enter Johnston, Pennsylvania, in a rented limo driven by a freckle-faced strawberry blonde. "You know, whenever we have a female limo driver I feel like saying, 'You get in the back seat, and let me drive,'" says Paul. "Or just get in the back seat..." he jokes. The driver titters, throws a toothpaste smile, and continuously sneaks glances at him in her rear view mirror.

"Is this your regular job?" he asks.

"Yes."

"What is your irregular job?" he jives. As we get out of the car she anxiously waits for Paul to beckon her, and when he doesn't, she reluctantly pulls away.

"Paul, you're just a tease," I admonish.

"Yeah, I know, that's all the fun. Getting it is nothing."

"Room 421, Miss." Key in hand, I rejoin the gang and anxiously ask, like an old hand, "When's the sound check?"

"What sound check?" Gene answers, blankly.

"You mean I don't get to rehearse?" I ask nervously.

"Nah, you'll catch on, just follow us," says Paul.

"Yeah, but I've got nothing to wear..." I say with a trace of panic.

"Don't worry, we'll take care of you, kid, your name in lights..." jokes Bill Aucoin, their manager.

It's 4 p.m., and all I have between me and showtime is Saturday afternoon TV. I'm watching *Soul Train* without having the slightest idea what I'm seeing, when the phone rings. It's Bill. *(continued)*



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"Uhelszki?" (By this time I was one of the boys, and either called Uhelszki or Kid.)

"Yeah?"

"What size shoe do you wear?"

"8 1/2... Why?"

"Too bad. I thought we could snazz you up in a pair of silver boots."

"Well, maybe I could stuff 'em with Kleenex?"

"No, won't work. Don't worry, I'll rummage around some more."

I felt like I was getting ready for that Big Date—you know, the prom or homecoming—when actually I was going to be on stage for a total of four minutes in an Ice Arena in Nowhere, Pennsylvania. But still fidgety, I kept trying on my leotard over and over, checking the image in the mirror, and feeling a lot like a motorcycle moll in *Naked Under Leather*. Drawing the drapes, I practiced a few classic KISS kicks in front of the bathroom mirror without much success. My practice was cut short by a knock at the door, and an ominous voice: **"Be in the lobby in one hour!"** The Voice commanded; mine, as a mere member of the shock troops, was but to obey.

The dressing room, in all of its filthy linoleum splendor, wasn't the worst of its lot. Once inside, I'm afflicted with a bad case of modesty, and become obsessed, like a cat searching for a spot to drop her kitten, with finding a secluded corner to change into my clothes. Clutching my costume, I spot an empty stall and dart in relieved, bolting the door.

*(continued)*



Like a quick-change artist, I tear off my tee shirt, tug at my Landlubbers and don my basic black, feeling more like a naked seal than part of KISS. Timidly, I sneak out of the stall and approach Ace: "Hey, do you have another pair of tights I can wear? I am freezing," I lie.

"Yeah, but they're size D," says Ace.

"That's okay."

"But Jaan, yours look better. They're much hotter, because you can see through them. Doncha wanna look good in pictures?"

"That's what I was afraid of."

Hey, hey, if you don't watch those legs they're gonna get grabbed," Simmons says with a leer.

Embarrassed, I turn on Junior and shout: "Hey, how long until we go on!"

"Lookit her, give her a black outfit, and make her a KISS and already she's hard core," he laughs.

The first band is on, and the crowd is a stiff. No encore. Bill Aucoin sticks his head into the dressing room, shoves five backstage passes towards us, and tells us we've got 45 minutes until showtime. My palms have started to sweat so much that they're beginning to obliterate the lettering on my pass, so I stick it on my right shoe, figuring the local goon squad would give me the shove, figuring me to be just another fanatical KISS groupie who had painted her face like her heroes, which seems to be the current fashion among fans. In keeping with the code of concealing the real identity of KISS, my photographer can't start shooting until the guys have sufficiently obscured their features. Tired of pacing, I take a spin around the backstage area, which is littered with underage glitter queens of varying age and brilliance. A fourteen-year-old Patty Play Pal accosts me.

"You know Gene Simmons?" she drools.

"Yeah," I reply matter-of-factly.

"Does he really do those things with his tongue?" she asks excitedly.

"I guess so," I reply.

"Gee, I wish he'd use that tongue on me," she says wistfully.

I return, and KISS are in the final stages of completion, and ready to give me tips on cosmetology. I'm hesitant to let them know that the last time I put on face make-up was in 10th grade, in the girls' john at Southfield High School, and my technique consisted entirely of smearing Touch and Glow over my adolescent visage.

"Yeah, Uhelszki, you gotta get rid of those bangs!" barks Simmons, yanking two clumps of my hair and wrapping elastic bands around them, so my carefully blow-dried hair is imprisoned in two sprouts on the top of my head.

"Ouch," I complain.

**"Shuddup, kid!" Simmons responds, with a smile. "You're the one who asked for this."**

Suddenly Paul looks at Gene, and the two of them grin, nod their heads, and attack my hair with a rat-tail comb and a can of hairspray. "Ah, perfect," says Paul, as he admires my new fright-wig concoction.

By general consensus, KISS have decided to make me up as a composite of all of them, just like the back cover of the *Hotter Than Hell* album. Now for the actual transformation: Side straddling the bench, I face Simmons in his black satin prize fighter robe with Otto Heindel emblazoned on the back, trying not to giggle as English comes out of this Halloween-monster thing. "It's time to make a little monster. Now watch, so you can do this," he instructs as if he were a counsellor for the Elizabeth Arden School of Beauty. "First rub Stein's clown white all over your face. Smooth it very lightly, only using a little around the eyes." *(continued)*

Gene etches Maybelline black on my dry to normal skin, sketching in his bat insignia. “Hey! Don’t make her up just like you,” yells Stanley.

“I’m not. I told you, we each get a crack at her.” Ace splotches a silver dot on my nose, and Peter adds his own feline touch in messy black crayon. Paul pauses over the conglomeration, and draws a smaller version of his star. Funny, somehow, I feel some kind of immunity behind the paint, a little more confidence. Maybe this rock ‘n’ roll business won’t be so bad after all. Gene holds up a mirror and stands back, telling me to look at my reflection. “Don’t you feel special?” he inquires.

## Gene whispers for me to “shake it” and I loosen up a little more, until I feel like a Vegas showgirl going to a go go. Suddenly it strikes me: I like this.

“No,” I say. “Silly.”

“Come on, you look very groupie.”

“I do not!”

“No, that’s great! Get off on it tonight, while you got it,” he says.

“So then you think I look okay?” I ask.

“Yeah, but I look better!” he laughs.

Now the presentation of my plugless wonder. Junior shoves a red guitar in my hands and I fumble with it. “You mean you don’t even know how to hold a guitar?” he asks incredulously.

“No, do you know how to change a typewriter ribbon?” I retort. Paul comes to my rescue and shows me how to handle the Fender. “Here, hold it like this, off to one side. Now wear it low and slinky, so it looks sexy.”

My last touch is the freak paraphernalia, and I go from person to person collecting their junk jewelry and brutish decorations. Finally I was outfitted in a studded collar, a menagerie of plastic eyeballs (and other unidentified organs), rings, a metal cuff, and a studded belt whose buckle encase a tarantula named Freddy. Unfortunately Freddy kept slipping off my 35-inch hips, and finally had to be taped to my tights with gaffer’s tape.

Readying for a gig with KISS fell short of my expectations and their reputations. I expected some gruesome ordeal, but instead we took turns mugging in the mirrors, exchanging gossip (“Did you see the set of tits on that

15-year-old broad?”) and advice. I felt more like I was at a Tupperware party than in a rock ‘n’ roll dressing room, but the worst was yet to come: Stage fright. “I got a run in my tights.” I whined.

“Don’t worry,” said Bill. “Who’s going to notice 50 rows back?” Like a rock ‘n’ roll Casey Stengel, Bill gave me an impromptu pep talk about standing up straight, not watching the audience, and looking “like you belong there.” As he finished we were out the door, and believe it or not I was raring to go, running down the hallway. Without realizing it, I was halfway up the stairs to the stage when Junior grabbed me. “Hey, sweetheart, where you going?”

What he didn’t realize was that I was getting a little trigger happy, and maybe even stage struck. But, just in case, I motioned him over. “I have every intent on going through with this, but when it’s time for me to go on-stage, don’t give me a hand sign, just shove.”

The set seemed to take forever; I felt like I was sitting through the rock version of *Gone with the Wind*. I had already shredded four Kleenexes, I had to go to the bathroom, and the makeup was beginning to itch unbearably. As I raised a fingernail to scratch, Bill was at my side, like a trained pro, grabbing my hand. “That’s a no-no,” he said, and fanned my face to relieve the irritation. “Did you know you’re on next?”

I didn’t. Visions of graduation day floated through my head, that fear of slipping before the entire school before you got your hands on the diploma. Only difference was that if I slipped on stage, KISS would use it as part of the act. So in this sense I couldn’t make a mistake. Just a damn fool of my self.

Countdown. Then the shove and I’m on stage, moving like I’m unremotely controlled. Forgetting completely that I’m in front of 5,000 people, participating as one fifth of this sadistic cheerleading squad, bobbing and gyrating instinctively, I no longer hear the music, just a noise and a beat that I will come to recognize as “Rock and Roll All Nite”. On cue, I strut over to Simmons’ mike and lean into it and sing. Singing loud without hearing myself, oblivious to everything but those four other beings onstage.

*(continued)*



Gene whispers for me to “shake it” and I loosen up a little more, until I feel like a Vegas showgirl going to a go go. Suddenly it strikes me: I like this. And I venture a look at the crowd, that clamoring, hungry throng of bodies below me. All I can think at that moment is how much all those kids resemble an unleashed pit of snakes, their outstretched arms bobbin and nodding, as if charmed by the music. I wonder if they will pick up on the hoax? But they keep screaming and cheering, so I might just as well be Peter Criss, unleashed from his drum kit, as anyone. **The only difference is, I am the only one in KISS with tits.**

I slide over to Stanley’s mike, sneaking up behind him, and mimic his calisthenics.

He whirls around and catches me, emitting a huge red crimson laugh from his painted lips. I push my unplugged guitar to one side and do an aborted version of the bump and the bossa nova, singing into Paul’s mike this time.

“I wanna rock and roll all night, and party every day! Oh, yeah! I wanna rock and roll all night, and party every day!”

And right on cue, to add that last dash of drama, Junior’s beefy arms ceremoniously lift me and the guitar three feet off the stage, and I look like a furious fan who’s almost managed to fulfill her fantasy, but was foiled at the end. But you know something? I felt foiled: I wanted to finish the song. My song! *(continued)*

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We trekked back to the dressing room and now, after the ordeal, my legs went marshmallow. Wanting to appear blasé after my big debut, I grabbed a wooden chair and draped myself over it.

"It was hysterical!" laughed Paul. "I knew you were gonna be on stage, but then I forgot about you, then all of a sudden I look and see you dancing, looking like Minnie Mouse."

"You're a perfect stage personality," said Gene. "All of a sudden you were hogging the mike. You took over, stealing scenes like a pro. You know, the kids thought you were part of the show."

The party was over, the fans dispersed, but the five of us were armed with five boxes of Kleenex and four bottles of cold cream. **"You know, if we don't get rich, I'm gonna need a padded cell," confesses Peter.**

The next morning, as we sleepily wandered to the coffee shop to await the limousines, each member of the group greeted me, not with a "Good morning," but with a mimic of my stage shimmy. "You deserve it, Jaan. You told us you were shy. I never thought you could be such a ham," said Bill.

As we said our good-byes, Gene Simmons said over his shoulder: "Whenever you feel like putting on that make-up again, give us a call." ●

*This article was originally published in CREEM magazine in 1975, when Jaan Uhelszki was a young writer and editor.*

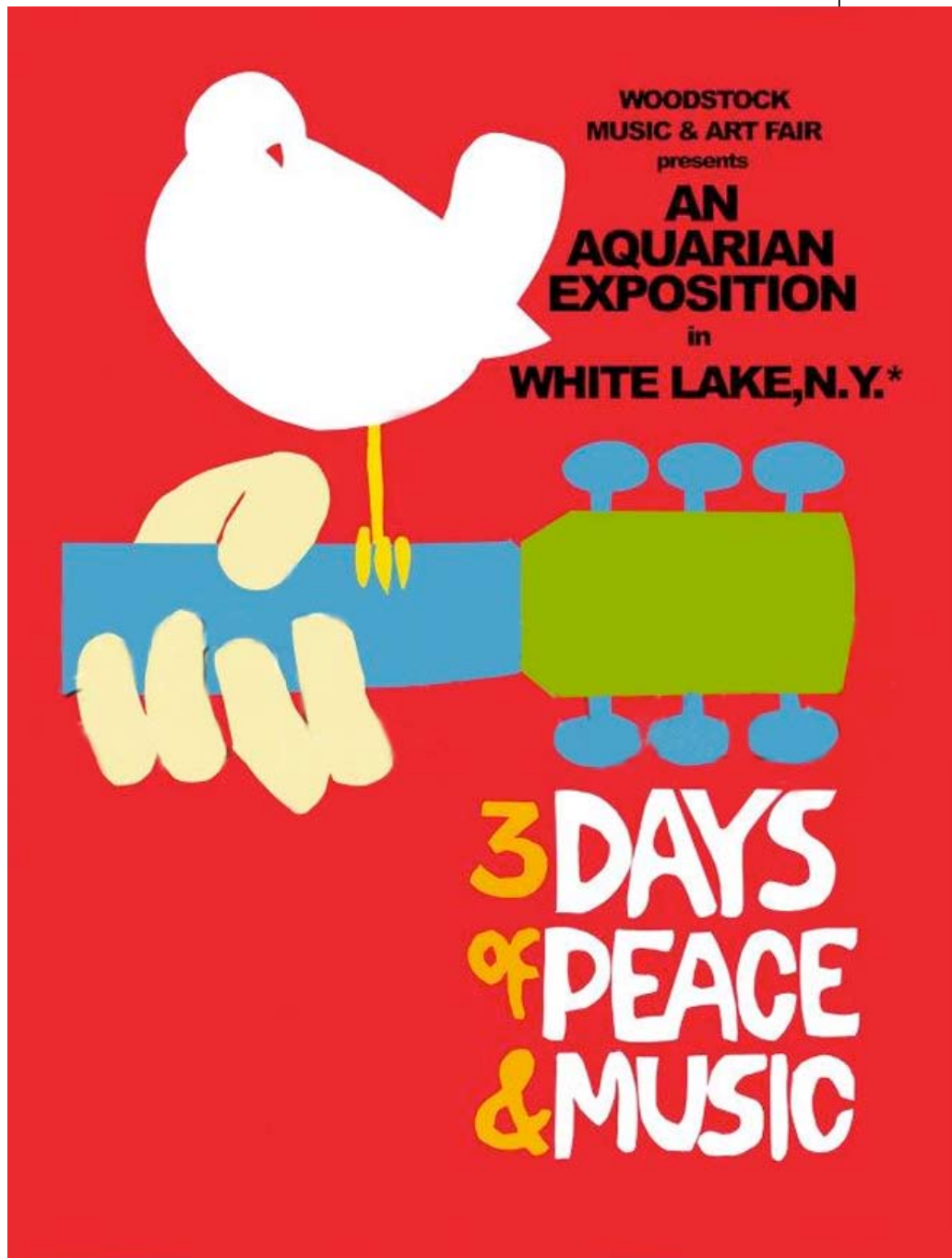
# Woodstock 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Releases: One More for the Road

By Bob Gendron

This August marks the 40th anniversary of Woodstock, the legendary festival that over the past decades has become the symbol of the peace and love generation. Despite the fact that this rose-colored-glasses view is more myth than truth—myriad history books and essays identify the Monterey Pop Festival as the prime intersection of music, culture, politics, ideas, and community—the upstate New York gathering's place in American lore is solidified. In terms of nostalgia, such anniversaries represent the ultimate opportunity to capitalize on emotions and traditions (real or imagined) via books, films, and music.

Not surprisingly, an avalanche of new releases and reissues are hitting the market, all striving for the same goal—to preserve memories, to further instill in the popular consciousness that the fest was and still signifies the ultimate be-in. Yet an important question remains: With so much archival material having already been exhumed, is anything worthwhile left in the vault?

Ironically, the newly remastered editions of the original *Woodstock* soundtrack—which spent four weeks at Number One in 1970—as well as its 1971 successor, *Woodstock Two*, are the most essential of the recent lot. (They pair well with a remastered Director's Cut multi-DVD set of the film.) Rhino went back to the original analog soundboard tapes to produce digital versions that claim a clarity, presence, immediacy, and warmth that have long been missing. Augmented with rare photos and notes, the material contained on these four discs—Jimi Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner," The Who's "We're Not Gonna Take It," CSNY's "Wooden Ships," the Paul Butterfield Blues Band's "Everything's Gonna Be Alright"—represents the best of the festival. *(continued)*



By contrast, Legacy's pairing of live Woodstock performances from Johnny Winter, Janis Joplin, Sly and the Family Stone, Santana, and Jefferson Airplane with essential studio albums from each respective artist under the banner *The Woodstock Experience* is a fine idea that's hampered by the simple fact that much of the material on the live discs already exists (and of course, all of the studio material is readily available).

For example, all but one song on the Santana and just three tracks on the Joplin are previously released. The Winter and Stone discs go a bit deeper, but not by much.

Yes, the environmentally friendly packaging is nice, but there are no insightful essays or revealing liner notes. And while these two-disc sets should appeal to diehard fans, none of the previously unheard performances are

essential. Audiophiles will also likely steer clear. The sound varies, and nothing here is recommendable from a pure sonic standpoint. Memorabilia collectors and those that don't yet own Sly and Co.'s *Stand* may be intrigued. But for everyone else, Woodstock's 40th anniversary seems to confirm that all of the histories have been written, all of the must-hear music released, and all of the visuals exposed. The well is officially dry. ●

## Nagra VPS valve phono preamplifier

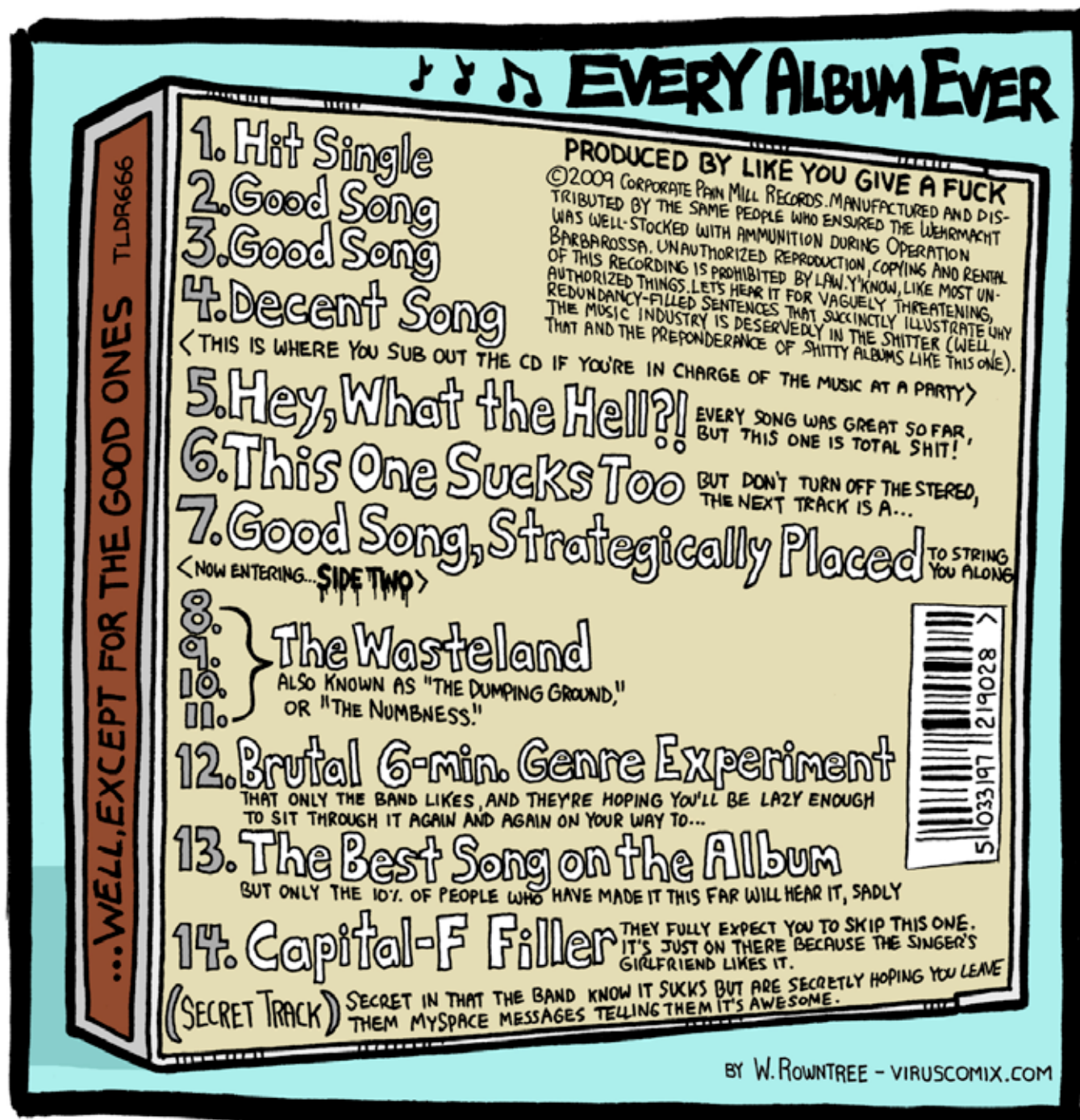
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# On Choosing Great Demo Material

By Jeff Dorgay



One of the most challenging aspects of reviewing HiFi components is the choice of demo material. I am always the most interested in identifying the difference between my handful of reference components and the new item being auditioned, so I have a handful of recordings that offer a mix of tonality, dynamics and information at the frequency extremes and imaging.

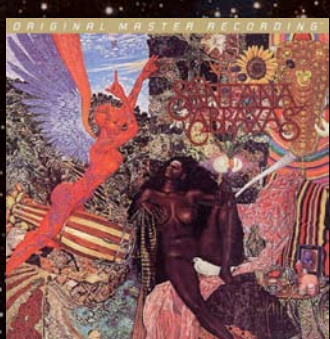
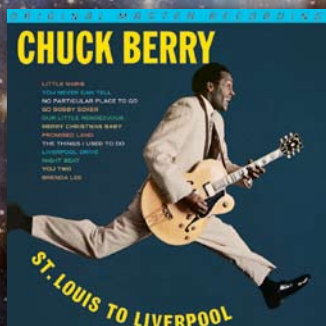
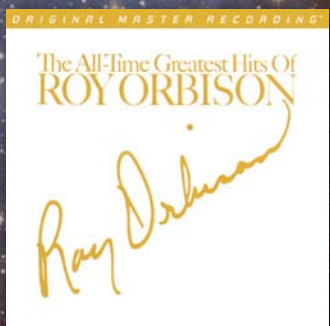
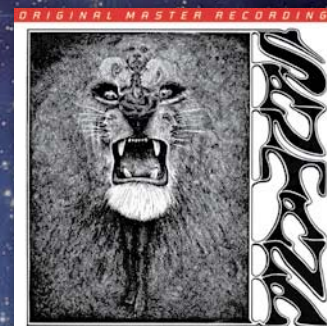
Often times, the material required is dependant on the component being evaluated: when listening to subwoofers, bass-heavy tracks are a must, while huge full-range systems beg for large-scale orchestral pieces and dynamic rock records. Vocal tracks and acoustic music are great references, especially if you spend a fair amount of time listening to live music. I typically attend about 50 live shows per year covering a variety of different music, just to keep that reference burned in my consciousness.

It's always tough deciding what music to talk about when writing the review. While the warhorses (of all musical genres) offer the reader a point of reference, I hate to have my readers think I live on a steady diet of Pink Floyd, Miles Davis and Johnny Cash. Far from it. Lew Johnson from Conrad-Johnson once gave me a great bit of advice: "Use demo material that consists of music you aren't terribly fond of, because after you listen to the same music day in and day out, you won't be any more."

While most of you don't use music as a tool to evaluate component performance on a daily basis, you still have the same objective as I do when contemplating a new purchase for your system. On many levels, it's even more important for you because you are thinking about writing a check.

*(continued)*





I always suggest using music with which you are intimately familiar, regardless of whether it has an audiophile pedigree or not. At initial listening, you are trying to determine if there is enough of a difference between the new component and what you currently own. It doesn't matter how well a system does with "audiophile approved" records, if you don't like the way it sounds with your favorites.

If you are new to this hobby/obsession, I suggest a good cross section of material to get a read on a component quickly. Often a record with a lot of information at the frequency extremes will help you determine some of the limitations of a speaker quickly. For some this will be *Morph the Cat*, while for others, it will be Mahler.

Many argue that even the best HiFi system doesn't come close to live music, but much of this is limited by the size and condition of your room. Of course, you can't put a symphony orchestra in a 14-by-17-foot living room, but a good system can give you a healthy dose of what one guy with a guitar can sound like.

**Here's another great tip – think about what you would play for a stranger to show off your system's capabilities.**

Once you've assembled 15 tracks in your head, you will probably have a good list that you can use to evaluate any component as well.

And in the end, you'll probably have a track from *Brothers in Arms* or *Scheherazade* on that list, because that's what you know. I promise I won't tell a soul. ●

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# Inside Neil Young's 'Archives'

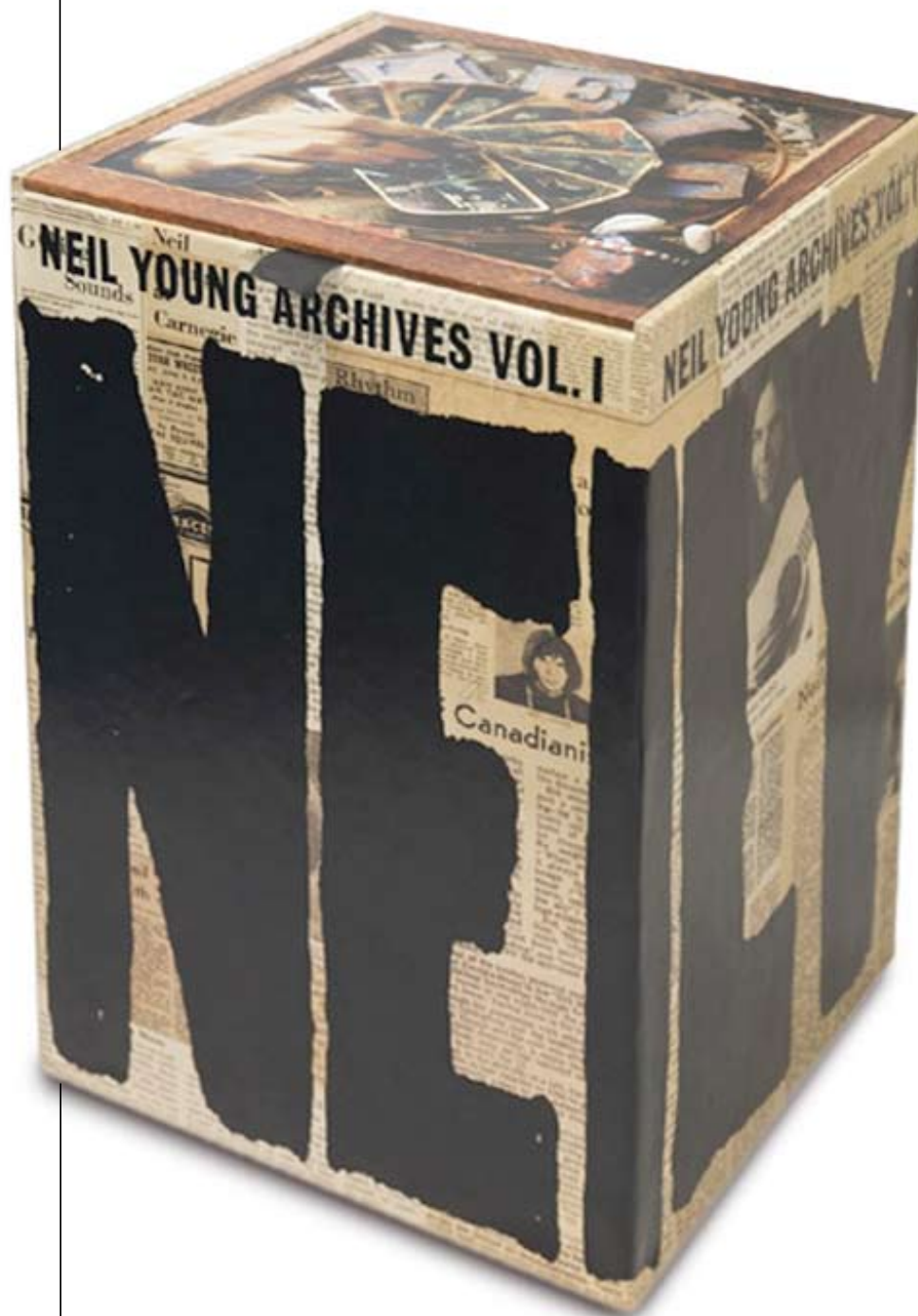
By Bob Gendron

**L.A. Johnson**, long time record and film producer, director, and sound recordist and editor, knows Neil Young better than most. They met when Young, along with Crosby, Stills and Nash, played at Woodstock, and Johnson was on the audio team for the film of the festival. Since then, Johnson has produced, directed and otherwise worked on Young's films, including *Journey Through the Past*, *Rust Never Sleeps*, and *Human Highway*, produced his records, and collaborated on shared ideas.

But his greatest achievement may be reading *Archives*, the long-awaited chronological series that intends to document nearly every aspect of Young's peerless career. The man behind the innovative format and stunning sonics on the groundbreaking *Archives Vol. I* recently communicated with TONE contributor Bob Gendron about how the set transpired, what was involved, and what might be in the future.

For a full review of the box set, please click here:

<http://www.tonepublications.com/spotlight/neil-young-archives-vol-i-1963-1972/>



**To give people an idea of how long *Archives* has been in the works, when did you begin putting everything in place?**

We started sorting and selecting the material in 1998 and began the design and implementation two and a half years ago.

**There were obviously many years of delays. Was this because Neil Young was waiting on sufficient technology? Or because you kept digging up more content?**

We were waiting on technology. We wanted to have a format in high-res audio and video where you can play the music and navigate the content simultaneously. A simple thing that only became available with Blu-Ray.

**The sound quality is superb. Can you elaborate on how you remastered the sound, and what gear/software was used?**

The sound path we used—we tried to keep it as simple as possible. Our master audio tapes were transferred through our Pacific Microsonics A to D converters to 192kHz/24-bit.

**You've worked with Neil for nearly four decades. At what point did he know that he wanted to do something like *Archives*?**

I would say that we started discussing a format and database and organizational systems in the 1980's. The advent of database management allowed us to track all of the materials to get an overview. *(continued)*

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

**Now that you've successfully completed the first volume, are there any new characteristics or changes that you will be implementing on the next volume?**

Yes. We're in the stages of implementing more timeline navigation and searchability. The Shakey Media platform will continue to grow and develop within the Java code as well as [with] interactivity in other formats. As other projects or artists use it, we certainly would be able to implement suggestions from end users.

**What BD Live downloads can fans expect to see in the first few months?**

We have as yet unreleased music and archival content, including photos, documents, and memorabilia. Plus other surprises to be named later.

**Finally, in the process of designing Archives, did you have a sense that this was greater than a project for one artist? Was it always intended to be a platform that other artists could use?**

We hadn't really considered it until a friend of ours pointed out the fact when we showed him the prototype about a year ago. It then became obvious that this would be useful to other artists. ●



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# The Aston Martin DBS Featuring Bang & Olufsen Audio

By Jeff Dorgay

**T**his issue, we start the Style section with something extra special: the Aston Martin DBS. It's the car you saw briefly in the latest James Bond movie, *Quantum of Solace*, before it was destroyed. Francesca Smith from Aston Martin North America said, "We all cried over that one. They destroyed two of our cars in that movie." Fortunately, neither Club Mix columnist Scott Tetzlaff nor I left as much as a fingerprint on this DBS, which Francesca handed over to us on a sunny California afternoon.



On the way out of the office complex, heading for the 405 freeway, I called one of my fellow car enthusiasts and held my iPhone out the front window as I gave the 510-horsepower V-12 a brief full-throttle blast. He responded with, "Dude, I hate you." As much as I love a great HiFi system, I knew I would never tire of hearing that V-12 approaching redline.

### The Thinking Man's Sports Car

Our test car came in the new Diamond Silver that was developed for the James Bond movie, having slightly larger metallic flakes in the paint so that it would reflect light better and shows off the shape of the car more easily. It also came with a window sticker with a \$279,000 bottom line, so this is a serious piece of hardware that is quite exclusive, even in car-conscious Southern California.

Balance is the charm of the Aston Martin DBS. Sure, a Ferrari accelerates slightly quicker and a Porsche GT3 might stop in a few less feet, but the DBS will hang with any of them out on the open road while delivering its occupants slightly stirred but never shaken. This is a sports car that you could drive coast to coast without becoming ruffled in the least.

### Did I forget to mention that V-12?

When you insert the stainless-steel and glass ECU (Emotion Control Unit) in the central dashboard and give it a gentle push, it glows bright red as the engine comes to life with a growl that sends nearby pets running for cover. It settles down to a reserved rumble until you become aggressive with the accelerator pedal. Now you have three modes to choose from for your next excursion: Luxury, Sport, or Track. The traction control can be completely disabled by holding the suspension control down for four seconds, but I did not investigate this mode. *(continued)*

These three modes transform the DBS from a remarkably comfortable sport sedan in Luxury to borderline racecar in Track mode. The roads on our test drive were very smooth, so Track mode worked best. The test car was fitted with the Touchtronic six-speed automatic gearbox that could also be controlled by paddles on the steering wheel. Each setting tightens up the adaptive dampers in the suspension and remaps the transmission shift points, as well as making shifting more crisply. While the DBS still accelerates briskly in Luxury mode, it leaps away from a stop in Track mode, shifting through the gears at the 7,200 rpm. redline.

Stop is as important as go in a car that will exceed 190 mph, and DBS is fitted with 15.7-inch Carbon Ceramic Matrix brakes that are enormously strong but also have remarkably good feel around town, even when ice cold.

### **Understated Beauty**

More than the Porsche or Ferrari, DBS is extremely comfortable to drive at reasonable speeds and is nimble in tight traffic. Thanks to extensive use of carbon fiber and aluminum, the DBS weighs 3,737 pounds, only about 100 pounds heavier than a Porsche 911 Turbo and 200 pounds less than BMW M6.

If your Porsche or Ferrari has a bright red or yellow coat of paint, it will get a lot more initial attention than the DBS. So if you need that kind of buzz from owning a supercar, the Aston may not be for you. During the test drive, a bright yellow Aston Martin Vantage pulled up next to us, and somehow just didn't look quite right. *(continued)*



While the DBS is listed as a 2+2 (undoubtedly for insurance reasons), the back seat will be very uncomfortable for anyone with legs. I strongly doubt the DBS will be purchased as a family car.

However, the driver and passenger up front are coddled in total luxury. The DBS has a pair of the most comfy yet supportive sport seats I've had the pleasure to sit in. The alcantara and semi-aniline leather seating surfaces give you just the right amount of grip. One of my good friends who owns a Vantage says that the Aston is a car that his wife, "enjoys riding in without complaint, which wasn't the case in the 11 years I owned my Acura NSX."

As you look around the cockpit, everything is leather, carbon fiber or alloy. It's all hand stitched and assembled by hand. When the car is finished, it does not receive its Aston Martin badge (the wings) for its bonnet until everything has been through final quality control and the car is fitted with a small plate under the hood letting you know who gave the car their final approval. I can see why the Aston Martin people were so distraught about seeing two of these beauties destroyed in the James Bond film. *(continued)*



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Each door panel has a midrange driver at ear level to fill out the stereo image along with an 8-inch woofer slightly behind the driver's seat, with another pair of 5.5-inch woofers on each side of the center console.

Everything is powered by B&O's ICEpower modules and total system power is claimed to be over 1,000 watts and controlled by a DSP system that is not only optimized for the car, but adjusts itself to road conditions, by changing EQ dynamically. The effect worked very nicely when we went from smooth to rough roads; bass level went up to compensate along with a slight boost in the midrange as well. The DSP had the same effect when the windows were lowered. We were always in constant chill mode when listening to the sound system.

Though car audio, even in its best implementation is a compromise, due to environmental variables, the system in the DBS was very enjoyable, no matter what music we played. The system had more than enough raw power to rock out as loud as we wanted, yet it had good tonal accuracy when listening to classical selections.

Because you can't sit in the middle of the listening area while you are driving, as you would when listening to music in your home environment, the whole concept of a soundstage is irrelevant when listening on the go. Thanks to the speaker placement in the DBS, listening to the B&O system always felt like being inside a giant pair of headphones (with 510 horsepower on tap), which I enjoyed immensely.

*(continued)*

### The Bang & Olufsen Sound System

Bang & Olufsen supplies the HiFi system for the DBS as standard equipment. Thanks to the quiet interior, you can actually make good use of it. The console in the dash is easy to read, and there is a standard iPhone/iPod connector, so that you can keep your iPod fully charged while driving and control it from the dash. Bluetooth is also easily accessible so that your phone can be used hands free.

The system uses a total of 13 drivers. On top of the dash, there are a pair of B&O's Acoustic Lens tweeters that are similar to their flagship Beolab 5 speaker systems. A midrange and tweeter is placed in the middle of the dash for center fill, and there are another two midrange/tweeter combinations inside the rear quarter panels.





While I was initially worried that an 8-inch woofer would not have enough grunt, I was impressed when auditioning some new CD's for the next Club Mix column that were bass heavy.

The music that seemed to most fit the mood of the test drive was Tosca's new two-disc set, titled *No Hassle*. Tosca has a signature, trippy sound that had effects bouncing all over the DBS cabin, with track two, "Elita" having some deep, driving bass lines that gave the subwoofer a great workout.

### **The Most Attractive HiFi System You Will Ever Own**

I can't think of a more interesting and attractive environment in which to listen to music than the Aston Martin DBS. The engineers at Bang & Olufsen have done an excellent job of integrating the audio with the auto, both from a performance and an ergonomic standpoint.

And the DBS itself is a work of art. All of the Aston Martin owners I've talked to over the years tell me the same thing: "It's a beauty I never grow tired of." Let's just hope that you don't have to get in a scuffle outrunning the bad guys in yours. ●





Beachside Jam

# Splash Some Color in Your Listening Room

**The Art of T. Scott Stromberg**

By Jeff Dorgay



Canto Nocturno 18" x 26"



Seaside Breeze 50" x 80"

Perusing through numerous “show me a picture of your listening room” threads on various HiFi message boards, I almost always see something missing – art. If you share your music system with the rest of your house, anything you can do to make it more visually interesting will always make the listening experience more pleasurable.

T.Scott Stromberg is based in Frisco, Texas and has been painting since college. He’s always been attracted to folk art and his work has a Picasso-like quality to it, with a very vivid color palette. But music has always been a major part of his life, with a wide range of taste from Punk to Jazz. This influence started early, thanks to his grandfather, who was a Vaudeville musician.

---

**“My Grandfather was a sax player. He toured with Bob Hope in WW2.”**

---

His Grandfather’s tales of life on the road, where he met his Grandmother who was a dancer, and playing in various juke joints is what has inspired his current series of paintings. “When I’d go over to his house, he always had a band, and I could always hear live, Dixieland jazz there.” When he wasn’t listening to jazz in the garage with his Grandfather, his Grandmother was taking him to see live music, plays and dance. *(continued)*

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“But I still have this fascination for juke joints, to me that’s when jazz was in its most pure form. Between that and my Grandfather’s stories, I have a very romantic vision of that period.”

Though Stromberg paints a variety of other subjects, he always comes back to music. “It’s just in my blood, I can’t get away from it.”

If you love music, I think you will enjoy Stromberg’s work. He paints in acrylic on large canvases, with most of his work being about 30 x 40 inches or bigger. His original pieces range from just under \$1,000 to just over \$6,000, and some are available as limited edition giclée prints. ●

You can view his work here:  
[www.tscottstromberg.com/alpha/Jazz.htm](http://www.tscottstromberg.com/alpha/Jazz.htm)



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**The HP 110XP Netbook**

\$349 [www.hp.com](http://www.hp.com)



**H**ere's a PC that even the most devoted Apple believer can get behind.

If you are tired of lugging that six pound PowerBook Pro on business trips when all you really need to do is check your email, salvation is at hand. The 110XP comes with the much more reliable Windows XP installed, 1GB of RAM and a 16GB solid state hard drive, so even if the goons at airport security bounce it, you shouldn't lose any data.

The screen is 10.2 inches wide, with a 1024 x 576 pixel count. Most standard laptops are 1024 x 768, so this isn't as limiting as it might seem. You'll really appreciate that extra few inches missing from the top of the screen when you are on a long flight and the bratty kid in front of you insists on reclining all the way. *(continued)*

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Wireless networking is built in and there is a multi card reader that reads SD and XD cards, which comes in handy if you happen to be doing a bit of blogging while on the go.



Should you purchase your Netbook from Best Buy, take advantage of the Geek Squad and have them remove all the unnecessary stuff (games, applications, utilities, etc.) from the hard drive before you take delivery. Space is at a premium when you only have a 16GB drive, and all those unnecessary programs will bog this little laptop down. It's the best \$39.95 I've ever spent.

Remember, you aren't trying to create the next Star Trek movie on this computer, you just want basic functionality; resist the urge to load the Netbook with anything but the basics. Word users will be pleased to see that a copy of Microsoft Works is already loaded on the 110 XP, and it will let you save files in standard word format, so you can move them to your daily computing platform when you return from your trip. There's also a handy little webcam built in and Skype pre-installed too. Very cool.

Wireless networking is built in and there is a

multi card reader that reads SD and XD cards, which comes in handy if you happen to be doing a bit of blogging while on the go. I installed a copy of Photoshop Elements 7 and still had 12 GB of disc space left for work. This proved to be a rather formidable combination, allowing me to edit web-sized jpeg's with ease.

The only downside of the 110XP is the battery life. HP claims 3.5 hours, and I was able to confirm this, but when you are stuck on a transatlantic flight, you're left wanting. Carrying another battery somewhat defeats the sveltness of the 110XP's 2.3-pound case. This would be the ultimate business tool if the weight could be maintained *and* it had an 8-hour battery life.

However, for \$349, HP's 110XP can't be beat. And it makes a nifty wireless remote for your music server when you aren't traveling. That big screen is much easier to read than an iPod touch. – Jeff Dorgay



# The Rebirth of Marantz

By Jeff Dorgay

If you or your parents were listening to music in the '70s, chances are someone in your circle had one of the ubiquitous "2200 series" of Marantz receivers. If you are even older, you may have had the pleasure of listening to the legendary Marantz tube amplifiers that now fetch more than 10 times their original cost to collectors.

Much like Luxman, and a few other prestigious brands from the '70s, Marantz went underground in the US market during the '90s to embrace the Home Theater market, allowing the two-channel components in their lineup to fade away. However, they were still going strong with their design team intact in Japan, and their products still sold briskly in Europe and Asia.



After living with a full system for a few months, I can attest that these components are top notch, equal to anything else you would purchase from the other major brands we enjoy today. Along with great sound, they bring a unique styling aesthetic in their warm gold finish with copper-plated chassis. Next to my reference gold Conrad-Johnson gear, they look slightly pink in comparison. Paying homage to the Model 9 amplifiers, the amplifier and the preamplifiers use small, circular-window-housing power meters in the Model MA-9S2 mono-block amplifiers, and showing input selection in the Model SC-7S2 preamplifier.

Marantz is 56 years old and has been solidly back in the U.S. two-channel market since 2003, with their second generation of engineering talent working on their current products. The preamplifier has an MSRP of \$7,999, the disc player is \$6,999, and the power amplifiers are \$7,999 each. Marantz is playing to an upscale crowd, but the performance is in line with the price tag. Those seeking an analog phono stage to match the rest of the system are out of luck for now, but Kevin Zarow, Marantz' U.S. Product Manager, told me that there are "some new things in the works" that he couldn't talk about right now. I am hoping that one of those things will be a matching phono preamplifier ...

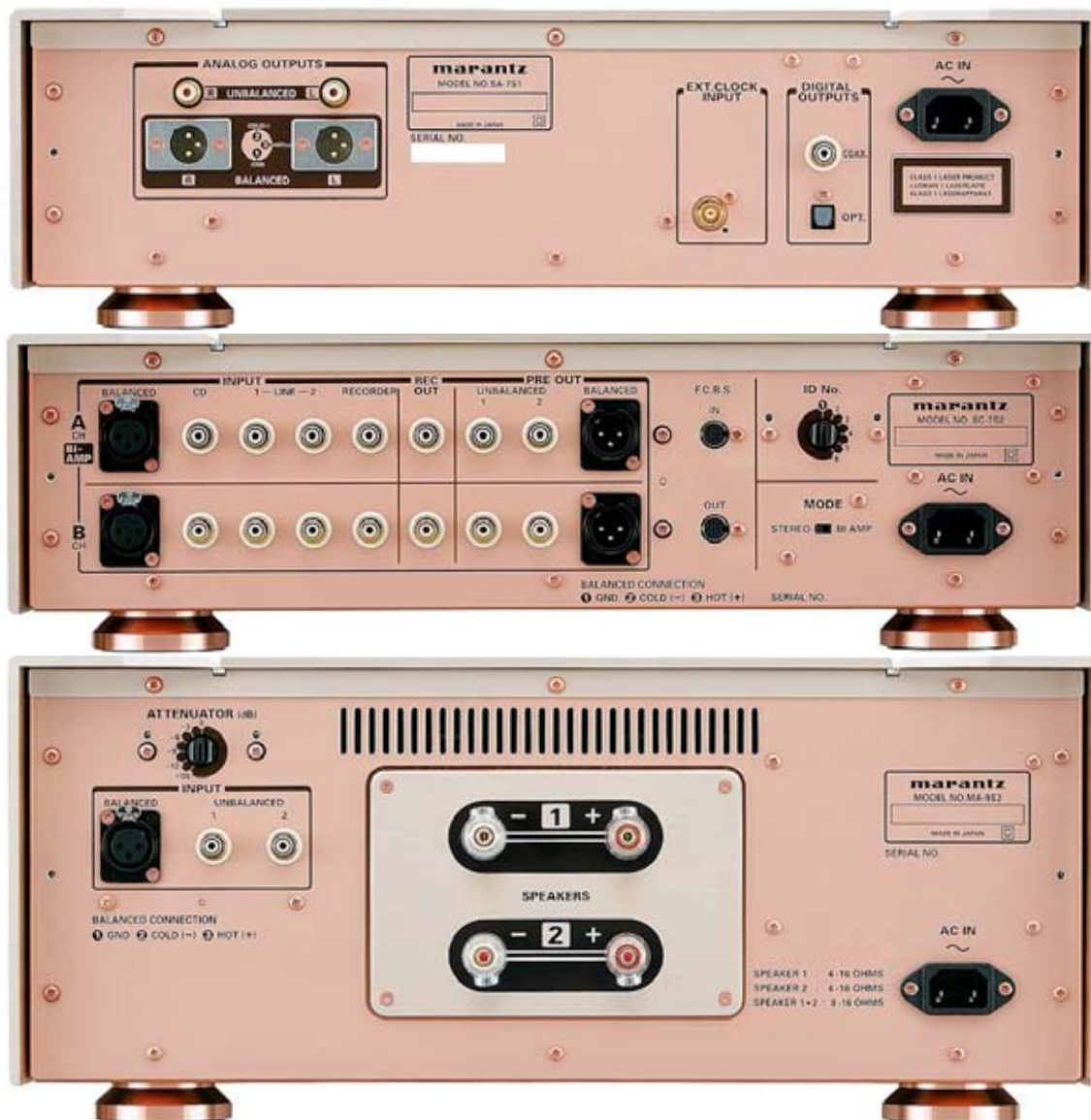
### Quick Setup

The Marantz system is fully balanced from input to output, and I had the best results running in balanced mode. I used Furutech Reference III cable throughout with excellent results. The neutral balance of the Furutech cable complimented the slightly warm tonal balance of the Marantz gear perfectly. The preamplifier has one balanced XLR input and five single-ended RCA inputs, all high level. Everything comes packed with its own manual, and the preamplifier and CD players have a common remote. Paying homage to Marantz past, every component comes with a basic

RCA patch cord, so you can at least hook it up when you get it home, a nice touch. All of the components can be connected together via a data cable so that the entire system can be switched on with a single remote.

The power amplifiers are monstrous, each weighing close to 100 pounds each, so enlist the help of a friend to muscle them to their final resting points. Initial listening and break in was with the stock power cords, but at the 100-hour mark, Shunyata Python power cords were substituted. This did not transform the system, but they did take a slight solid-state edge off the presentation. At about \$500 each, they are highly recommended for a system of this caliber. *(continued)*

**Marantz is 56 years old and has been solidly back in the U.S. two-channel market since 2003, with their second generation of engineering talent working on their current products.**



The matching Marantz SACD/CD player was used for the bulk of the evaluation because this was intended to be a full system review. Analog was supplied by the Rega P9 with Dynavector XV-1s cartridge and the compact Nagra BPS phono stage, since I didn't want to distract from the aesthetic of the full rack of Marantz.

### **These are Beautiful Components**

The full set of Marantz components are really a gorgeous sight to behold in your listening room, with those tasteful blue power meters, however they are really more for decoration as they are too difficult to be read from across the room. Perhaps making the pointer needles red instead of gold would really help this situation. With tiny meter needles and no LED to indicate a clipping situation, they aren't terribly useful.

The designers at Marantz have created a set of components that honor the design cues of their past equipment, with a style that is firmly rooted in the 21st Century. They are some of the most beautiful components I've had in my listening room. Car enthusiasts often talk about cars like the Mercedes Gull Wing or the Ferrari 275 GTO, saying "it looks like it's going 100 mph standing still." The Marantz Reference gear is in that league. It just looks great even without music playing! I really enjoyed the continuity to Marantz gear of old, by using the same font on the front panel that Marantz used on my 2220B receiver.

The preamplifier features the same size blue backlit circle, though a meter is replaced by a red LED readout for volume level, which is easily read from a distance. There are two matching knobs for volume and input selection. The blue backlight on the window can be shut off, but the blue LED on the selector switch cannot. The meters on the power amplifiers can be shut completely off, but why would you?

As you can see from the photos, form follows function in the Marantz Reference Series. The gold anodized-aluminum outer chassis bolts to a copper-plated inner chassis, with copper shields around all of the power transformers to keep noise to a minimum. Everything is sturdily constructed, with high-quality parts used throughout. *(continued)*



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The Marantz gear had a slightly warm overall character, yet was still very dynamic. A few older audiophile friends wanted me to pop the covers so they could “see the tubes inside.” As soon as I played some Shostakovich (and some Motorhead), they realized that these were not the same Model 9s they grew up with!

Thanks to the separate power supplies, monoblock amplifiers usually have a more open soundstage than stereo amplifiers, and the MA-9S2's were very good in this respect. Though they did not have quite as much ultimate drive as my reference Conrad-Johnson Premier 350 stereo amplifier, they were still able to drive the Martin-Logan CLX and the Magnepan 1.6 (both of which are very current-hungry speakers) with ease. The extra power on tap really makes the big panels come alive.

Listening to the Naim recording of Charlie Haden's *The Private Collection*, I was constantly impressed by the bass drive of these amplifiers, and I could hear Haden breathing while working his way up and down the neck of his acoustic bass, yet holding on to the delicacy of the crowd way in the background.

Overall, the tonal character of the Marantz stack is slightly relaxed, not unlike the Burmester gear we currently have in for review. The sweet spot for these amplifiers is to keep them below about 85 percent of their maximum. When pushed to the extreme, they pass a point where the presentation gets grainy and somewhat harsh. *(continued)*



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If you like to listen at extremely loud levels, I would suggest having a dedicated 20-amp line for these amplifiers due to their current requirements. Moving the MA-9S2's to a dedicated line gave them quite a bit more headroom at high playback levels.

### **Commitment to SACD**

Given the current level of excitement for the SACD lately, between the audiophile labels and the classical labels, I was pleased to see that Marantz has not abandoned this format. SACD performance of the SA-7S1 was excellent, yet I felt there were no sacrifices in the CD playback either. For those of you considering this player as a standalone in a non-Marantz system, the overall tonality is somewhat laid back and forgiving.

The SA-7S1 gives up a bit to its immediate (and slightly more expensive) competitors in terms of ultimate dynamics and resolution, but rewards with a smooth presentation that is forgiving of the digital format. Unfortunately, right at the end of the evaluation period, we received the new MCD500 from McIntosh, utilizing the latest DAC chips from Sabre, which takes performance at this price point to another level for a thousand dollars less. So it appears we have a bit of "sibling rivalry," as McIntosh and Marantz are both part of D&M Holdings.

The Marantz is just to the laid-back side of neutral and the McIntosh is dead center. I would like to see a player at this price point feature a digital input like the MCD500, so that this system could be integrated into a computer based music system.

### **The Preamp is the Jewel**

While I found the overall level of performance very high in the Marantz system, the component that stood out for me in the stack was the SC-7S2 Reference Control Amplifier. The \$8,000 - \$10,000 range is highly competitive, and as much as I love tubes, I'm always on the lookout for a world-class preamplifier that doesn't require glass bottles. I'd put the Marantz on my list of top preamplifiers, offering a big, expansive sound, with a delicacy that rarely exists in the world of solid state. *(continued)*

**MARANTZ**  
super audio cd player sa-7s1



I was impressed with its ability to dig low-level information out of my favorite recordings, combined with a huge soundstage in all three dimensions. When playing in my main system with the MartinLogan CLX's, I was able to achieve an image that extended way beyond the speaker boundaries, which only has happened with the best preamplifiers I've had the opportunity to audition.

This was also the most neutral sounding of the stack, too. I found the amplifiers and disc player to be slightly polite sounding. The SC-7S2 was right in the middle of the range and worked well with every other power amplifier I tried it with, tube or solid state.

#### **Power, Flexibility and Beauty**

Either of these components has enough performance by itself to stand on its own merits, but the system synergy of putting them all together is unmistakable. Where the audiophile customer often mixes and matches components to achieve the perfect system, the qualityphile customer tends to be as interested in design excellence as well as audio performance, often wanting a set of components from the same manufacturer to complement the installation.

If this describes your criteria, look no further than the Marantz Reference Series. This is gear that has top-shelf sonics, museum-quality aesthetics and is easy to use as well. I can't imagine anyone putting up a roadblock to displaying this gear in their home, and the level of sound quality should be able to keep even the fussiest audiophile happy.

I'm glad to see this old favorite back in the U.S. and doing well. ●

## **marantz** **stereo control amplifier sc-7s2**



**power on/off**



# McIntosh at 60!

This year McIntosh celebrates their 60th anniversary. Some car companies don't make it that long, but McIntosh continues to make quality HiFi gear in the United States very much like they used to when they started; by hand with a highly skilled labor force. On a recent visit to their factory in Binghamton, New York, I got to see "Made in America" at its finest.

By Jeff Dorgay





Many people make the comparison between McIntosh and Harley Davidson as being similar icons of American consumer goods, but a stroll down any of the aisles at Harley Davidson reveals cartons of parts from Japan, China and elsewhere. Not so at McIntosh – they bend the chassis from raw steel and cut front panels from bulk sheets of glass. Even the circuit boards are stuffed at McIntosh, some using their own surface mounting machines and others by hand. Precious little gets jobbed out.

Chuck Hinton, McIntosh's head of technical support, was kind enough to take the better part of a day to show me everything in the McIntosh plant and allowed me to peek in all the nooks and crannies. And yes, those nice ladies that you saw in the early McIntosh ads are still there, winding transformers, building amplifiers and performing final tests.

Value is one of the biggest questions raised when investing in a good music system and McIntosh components retain the highest resale value of any other brand on the used market. Many of their vintage components are highly coveted, just like vintage sports cars. You only need to spend a few minutes inside the McIntosh factory to see why.

At the end of my visit, company CEO Charlie Randall took some time to answer my questions about McIntosh's past, present and future. Here's what he had to share with us. *(continued)*



**TA: The photos in the Ken Kessler book really don't do justice to just how extensive the facility is!**

CR: Yes, there's a *lot* of square footage out there, close to 60 thousand square feet.

**I was impressed by how nearly every molecule of McIntosh is built right here.**

We try to do it all, and make an effort to have any machining of small parts that we can't handle done nearby as well. We even get the cardboard shipping cartons from a company right down the street.

**It must be pretty handy to have engineering right next door?**

That's a fairly recent development, sometime in 2001. It's a big benefit for them to see what's going on with the product.

**Just like that cartoon about "what the customer wanted..."**

(laughs) Exactly

**And that's a big part of the value in McIntosh...**

Certainly. If we had to farm out casework, etc. etc, our products would cost considerably more. Doing it all in house allows us to keep a tight rein on costs, and it keeps more people employed. Our employees have fairly stable jobs in this economy.

**How do you feel McIntosh is holding up in this wacky economy?**

We're feeling the pinch, but this isn't our first recession. Some markets are doing better than others, but we keep our workforce small. We pay a fair amount of overtime when we are really busy, but when we aren't, there's still enough work to keep everyone busy. That way I don't have to deal with a hire and layoff cycle. *(continued)*



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– Jeff Dorgay, *TONEAudio Magazine, Issue 18*



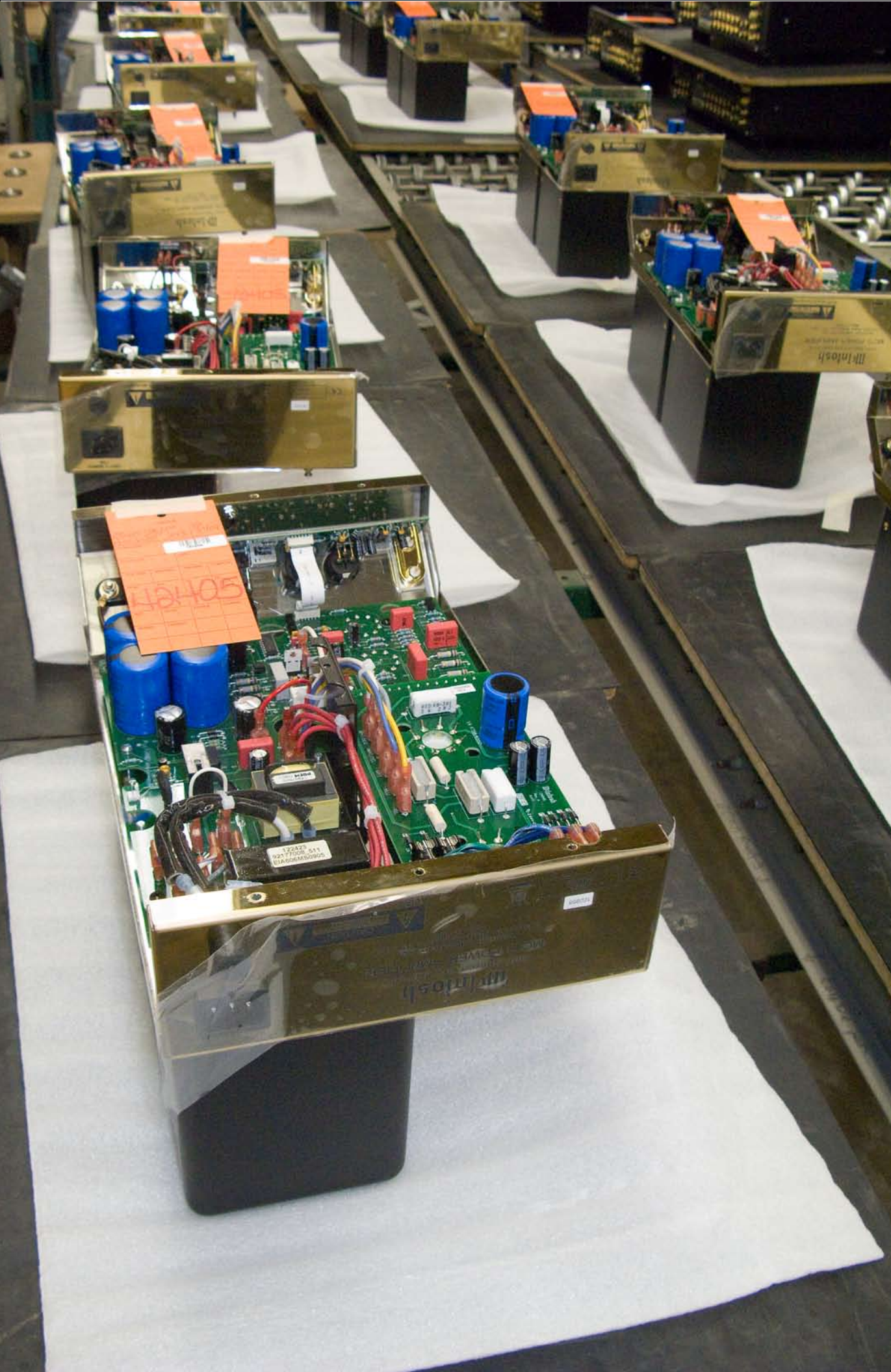
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Good or bad economy, it's always a challenge to keep sales going. Historically, we tend to lag about three months behind the economic trends, yet because we enjoy a fairly affluent customer base, our business bounces back quicker than most.

**What about Snell? How much of Snell is coming to the McIntosh campus?**

Eventually their whole HQ will move here. Bob Graffe is behind it, and will work from his home in New Hampshire, but will commute here as necessary. Their product R & D will move here eventually, but we plan on keeping the product lines separate. Snell will not become "McIntosh's speaker." It's purely an economy of scale move.

**And you are now in charge of Snell too?**

That's correct.

**Are you starting to see things turn around somewhat from last fall?**

We're just starting to. There isn't a consistent change yet, but we are on target with our export business, which is actually over plan.

**Is the 60th Anniversary product helping that?**

Yes, all of the 60th Anniversary product should be spoken for by the end of the month. (April) We're building 180 systems total and it only took two weeks to get orders for most of them. We're very excited. *(continued)*



**How long have you been with McIntosh?**

I started in 1985. I graduated from RIT as an electrical engineer. I started here as part of their work co-op program. You had to complete 50 weeks worth of work in your field in order to graduate. So I started here as a runny nosed 19-year old kid! McIntosh still sponsors that program today.

Our employee's average tenure here is about 26, and the engineering staff is even higher than that, most of them have been with us for 35 years or more. Our head mechanical engineer Pete Urban started the same time I did; he was my roommate at RIT.

**Is it pretty amazing to reflect that you started here at 19 and now you're the CEO?**

It doesn't feel like I've been here for 25 years, because it's been a long progression from there to here. It really helps when you are working at a job you love.

**For a while in the mid 90's McIntosh was somewhat dismissed in the high end audio press, but for some time now, you are getting the respect you deserve. What happened?**

During that time, we were moving heavily into mobile audio, so the engineering department was split between refreshing old product and developing new mobile product. Right around the release of the MC352, we started to hit our stride. *(continued)*





**And you've kept building bigger, more powerful amplifiers ever since?**

Yes, the MC501s, the 1.2KW and of course the MC2000KW. That was fun, but we are approaching the limit of how much juice we can pull out of the wall! We wanted to create those a while ago, but we didn't have the wherewithal to do it. It's helped put us into dealers that wouldn't have considered carrying McIntosh ten years ago.

**How many dealers do you have in the US now?**

We have a total of 330, probably about 100 of them being integrators, working with architects and install people. It's amazing when you see how many different ways McIntosh gear has been made part of people's environment.

**What's the most off the beaten path place you've seen Mac gear installed?**

Mykonos, Greece. I was walking down the street on vacation and saw a stack of our gear in a jewelry store. It was the owners system and he was thrilled that I spent some time chatting with him. What are the odds of that happening?

**What's coming up on the horizon for McIntosh?**

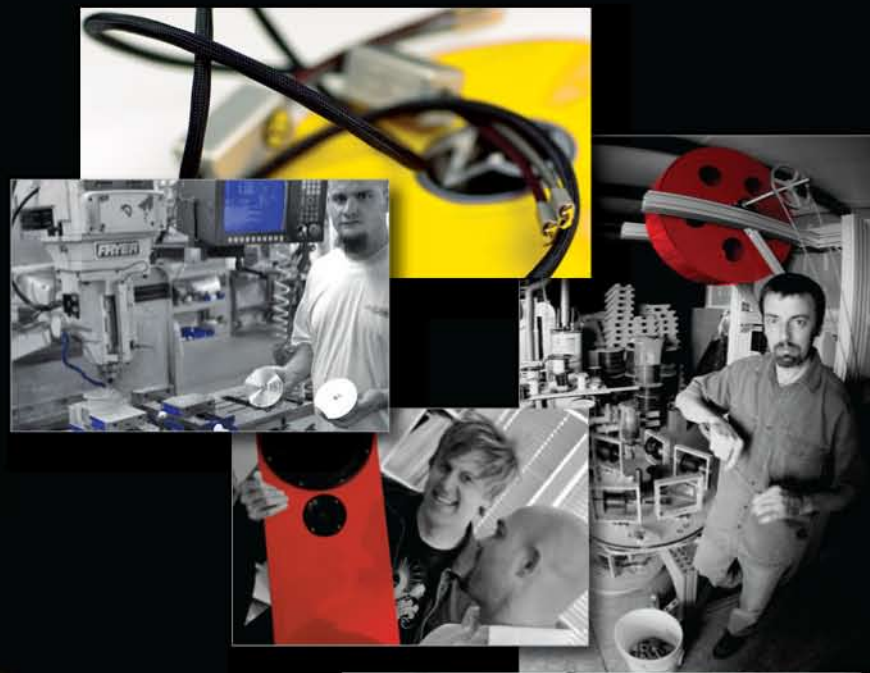
We'd like to see more brand awareness and are looking outside the audio industry. Our new radio system should be able to be placed in non-traditional retail outlets, say Neiman-Marcus, or make it a prize for AmEx Black cardholders. We'd like to get in front of people that appreciate good merchandise that aren't necessarily audiophiles. ●



# Moon i.5 Integrated Amplifier and CD Player

By Mark Marcantonio

**A**s I drive to my teaching job every morning, I pass a number of bus stops where many of the waiting people are listening to iPods or something similar. Most audiophiles would speak disdainfully about the downfall of the hobby being directly tied to those lightweight music cases. But recently, I've noticed more and more people using high-quality earphones, which I think is a sign that quality listening is coming back to the music experience.



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

Last week, some of my eighth-grade students were discussing music on their iPods, and they started asking me about headphones and how to improve the sound. Never wanting to miss a teaching moment, I turned it into a science lesson about file size, dynamic compression and getting the best sound for the buck.

I told them how when I was their age, my friends and I would buy an album and listen together, all the while looking at the album jacket and reading the liner notes. The connection was much deeper between the music and the listener. It became apparent that they would like to hear music without headphones, but they don't know how. Unlike the car-audio industry, home-gear manufacturers aren't in sync with the next generation of audio buyers.

A few companies have figured out ways to create a true bridge between the iPod and the home-listening market. Small powered speakers such as the AudioEngine have helped the audiophile cause, and Wadia's 170i has done more than anything else to build that bridge. But we still need some reasonably priced high-performance components and speakers so that these new audiophiles can actually afford a system.

### Enter The i.5 Series

Simaudio of Canada already had a reasonably-priced integrated amp, the MOON i-1. Originally priced at \$1,500, (currently \$1,700) but for these young listeners, they felt that they needed to drop the price down another \$300.

Taking it a step further, they announced the .5 series at the Consumer Electronics show in January and added a matching CD player to go along with it, each priced at \$1,200. *(continued)*



The aesthetic follows previous Simaudio pieces and from across the room, you could easily mistake the .5 series for the much more expensive 3.3 series. The main visual difference is the display window on the i3.3, where the i.5 has none. The i.5 amplifier delivers 40 watts per channel at 8 ohms (80 per channel into 4 ohms), which should be more than enough for whatever speakers you would match up in this price category.

But there is plenty of quality to go around at this price point, and most importantly, this is made in the Simaudio factory in Canada on the same production line as Simaudio's flagship components. It's not outsourced to China with a badge slapped on the front panel. This is the level of quality necessary to capture the next generation of audiophile. The front panel controls are self explanatory and there is an additional line-level input for an iPod next to the headphone jack.

### No Shortcuts

A peek inside the amplifier reveals a beefy power supply with a large Simaudio-designed power transformer. The circuit board uses copper and gold tracings, with the components not stuffed on top of each other, as one would see in a mass-market component. As a result, the i.5 components run cool and can be left on continuously, if you desire.

The CD.5 disc player has an identical design and uses a large, red LED display like the rest of the MOON series line, which is easily read from across the room. The CD tray feels somewhat lightweight, but its operation is smooth and quiet. Remember, this is an entry-level component. The remote control is also indicative of the price, though maybe I'm just spoiled by the substantial remote that comes with the MOON i-7 integrated that I've been using. Both remotes will control either device, there are two buttons marked "amp" and "cd" located in the top right corner of the remote. I suggest storing one for later, should anything happen to the first one. *(continued)*



The CD.5 uses the industry-standard Burr Brown 1793 chipset with 24-bit processing and 8x oversampling and a highly accurate clock to keep digital jitter to a minimum, along with “internal upsampling” which uses 24 bit/352.8kHz processing. The rear panel features a pair of analog outputs as well as a digital output, should you decide to use this as a transport and add a better DAC later. I’d love to see a digital input as part of this great entry-level CD player because it would then make adding a Wadia 170i the perfect addition to this system. Remember, we’re trying to hook the newcomers.

### Natural Sound

I’ve been listening to Simaudio’s flagship MOON i.7 integrated amplifier for a while, and I have been impressed with the neutral tonality and sheer power of which it’s capable. But the i.7 sells for \$7,500. I was curious to see how much of that sound \$1,200 would buy. I’m happy to say, quite a bit. I gave both pieces about 100 hours of background play before listening seriously, but from the first track, I was hooked. These two will take about 300 hours to reach what they are fully capable of.

One of my favorite references is the xylophone, as its richness and tonal complexity separates the quality gear from the impostors. The trick is to achieve a balance between tone and resonance. Budget solid-state gear usually sounds too thin, and budget tube gear usually sounds too rich. In the title track on Steely Dan’s classic, *Aja*, there is a wonderful xylophone solo early in the song, and the i.5 walked the middle ground quite nimbly. I didn’t notice what I was missing until I switched back to the MOON i.7, and that’s a good thing.

Switching to my favorite acoustic guitar CD, *Aloft*, by Sean Harkness: On “Cuchullian’s Dream,” the reverberation of the guitar cabinet is easily picked out, with sonic decay that goes on forever. In addition to the richness, the clarity on the Harkness’ finger work in “Coconuts” is quick and light with enough detail that you can tell what kind of strings he’s using.

The i.5 combination offered impressive richness and clarity that I’ve not previously experienced at this price point. Simaudio’s entry-level gear clearly expresses a quality-first mentality, and if these components exhibit the same trouble-free performance that their other gear does, chances are high they will never see the repair shop. *(continued)*

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M-600A

## Power to Spare

While the i.5 is rated at a modest 40 watts per channel, I suspect this is a conservative rating. I was surprised with the low-frequency grunt and control when I was listening to Donald Fagen's *Morph the Cat*. I don't think I've heard a budget component with this much juice since the legendary Adcom GFA 535. I was pushing my reference speakers, Eficion F200 monitors, fairly hard, and the bass had plenty of weight and detail. Substituting a 120wpc budget amp from the '90s was a big disappointment; the i.5 played just as loud, but with more refinement and inner detail.

I moved next to the Era Design 5 mini monitors, which are more difficult to drive and have always needed at least 50 watts per channel to really open up. Again, the i.5 pushed these speakers hard while I was blasting Holst's *The Planets*. This piece is always a great amplifier workout with its tremendous dynamic contrasts. The top of the i.5 remained cool to the touch. Very impressive for a \$1,200 amplifier.

## It's a Canadian Thing, and I Understand It

I always feel it's important to pair similarly priced components in the course of a review, which gives our readers some system suggestions. The Canadian connection with my Totem Acoustic Rainmakers seemed like the perfect choice. *(continued)*





At \$1,100 a pair, they make good financial sense in an all-Simaudio system and, with their small size combined with a 4 ohm impedance, a practical one as well. They were delicious mated with the larger MOON i.7, but still very good with the MOON i.5 pair. That's something I would suggest if you are looking for a small yet high-performance system.

The finesse of the Simaudio components played to the strength of the Rainmakers' imaging capabilities and smooth high-end response. This is not an easy task, as most budget amplifiers end up sounding brittle with these refined speakers. My first choice was the jazz group Images. I was impressed with how well the i.5 could keep the electric piano in "Copenhagen's Dream" crisp and distinct from the rest of the track. These were the kind of pleasant surprises that made my experience with the i.5 combination so alluring. This is truly budget gear that doesn't sound like budget gear.

### Final Thoughts

There's nothing better than equipment that exceeds expectations. With Simaudio's extensive manufacturing and engineering capabilities, they are able to give the entry-level audiophile a big helping of technology from their higher-priced components at a reasonable price. For \$2,400, these are two components that you should be able to live with for a very long time. ●

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# Fosgate Signature MC/MM Phono Stage

By Randy Wells

**J**im Fosgate of Rockford Fosgate car-audio lore? An all-tube phono pre-amp? What on earth do these two have in common with each other? Well as it turns out, quite a lot.

When I hear the name Fosgate used in association with audio, I immediately think of those big-kilowatt Rockford Fosgate solid-state car amps. So when our Editor suggested I review the latest creation from Jim Fosgate – a diminutive all-tube phono stage – I was somewhat taken aback.

And when the sample (a prototype, I later learned) came to me in a plain box with non-custom padding and no instruction manual, I was even more perplexed. That was until I plugged it in.

Even though he is best known for his work on surround sound, Dolby Pro-Logic II and car audio, Jim Fosgate listens to tubes and vinyl in his personal system. Wanting to build the most versatile phono pre-amp he could, he decided on an all-tube amplification and rectification design with no solid-state devices in the signal path, switchable moving magnet/moving coil gain setting, and variable loading from 50 to 47K ohms. He also wanted it to be affordable relative to its performance, thus its projected retail price of \$2,500. *(continued)*

The Fosgate Signature is a very clean and somewhat retro/industrial design that uses blue LED illumination for its three pairs of 12AX7, 12AT7, and 6922 tubes. A single 12X4 rectifier tube, transformer and dual capacitors cloaked in silver complete the black top plate. The loading and gain switches are easily accessible and self-explanatory. With no cage, real wood end caps and compact chassis design, the Signature is immediately appealing to the eye. OK, I know what you're thinking. It's pretty, but how does this thing sound?

Well, I've been lucky enough to audition some superb phono stages in my system, among them the Naim Superline with the Super-Cap power supply, The Whest PS30R, the Rega los, and my trusty Cary PH-302. In particular, the Naim combo impressed me mightily with its weight, dynamics, and realistic presentation across a wide soundstage – all of which left me wishing I could afford the more than \$8K price of admission.

The Fosgate Signature prototype I sampled appears to approach this subjective ideal without breaking the bank. It has loads of detail, a taut bass, a spacious soundstage, and a midrange that is steeped in liquidity and sweetness, though just lacking in ultimate richness and weight. No, it's not the equal of the Naim in harmonic rightness and explosive dynamics, but it communicates the essential elements of music in a similarly inviting and involving way at a third the cost and half the size.

Convinced that this prototype had potential for improvement, I started rolling in some old NOS Mullard 12AX7 and 12AT7 tubes. These tamed the small but perceptible brightness in the treble and provided an increase in extension and resolution. Yet even with the supplied Russian tubes, the noise floor was surprisingly low for an all-tube design; not in Rega los solid-state territory, but I could happily live with it. Listening to David Crosby's expansive "Cowboy Movie" from *If I Could Only Remember My Name*, Sandy Denny's soaring vocals on the recently issued LP *Fotheringay 2*, and Paul McCartney's cavalcad-ing bass riffs in "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" from *Abbey Road*, I was transported to that emotionally satisfying place that only the best analog gear can provide.

Captivating and affordable, I wait in eager anticipation for the factory review sample of this remarkable little phono stage to arrive so I can spend even more time with it. Stay tuned.



## Clearaudio daVinci Moving Coil Cartridge

By Jeff Dorgay

**T**his one has only been spinning records for a couple of weeks, and it is sounding great! With a healthy dose of the technology inside Clearaudio's flagship Goldfinger and Titanium cartridges, the daVinci is somewhat more affordable. It is also quite a bit lighter than the 17 gram Goldfinger. At only seven grams, you can mount this cartridge on any tonearm with no issues or additional counterweights.

Thanks to recent advances in coil design and a much lighter stylus assembly, Clearaudio claims their latest cartridges have 100 db of dynamic range. The daVinci is fast, powerful and musical, yet it has a level of resolution that will have you playing records until the wee hours. This one is a winner, and we will have a full review shortly.

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



# The BAT VK-55SE

By Jeff Dorgay

**T**he VK-55SE has been here for a while, and I've been having too much fun listening to it to finish the review! However, look to our website shortly for a full review of the VK-55SE and its companion preamplifier, the VK-32SE.

The VK-55SE is a more cost-effective version of BAT's flagship tube power amplifier, the VK-75SE. It utilizes their patented self-bias circuitry so you don't ever have to worry about biasing tubes. The SE version shown here is \$2,000 more than the standard VK-55, but it has a much beefier power supply, with BAT's premium oil-filled capacitors. *(continued)*

Marketing hype aside, the formula works. You might scoff at only 55 watts per channel, but this amplifier features 55 watts per channel of triode power. That's right, those big 6C33 power tubes are triode workhorses and give this amplifier a much more powerful sound than its specs might suggest. Bass is tight, powerful and controlled, with the highs delicate and refined, and midrange magic reserved for triode amplifiers.

It's fully balanced in, but it can be used with single-ended preamplifiers if you have the necessary XLR to RCA inputs. I ran it balanced with the BAT preamplifier, my Nagra PL-L and the Burmester 011, all with excellent results. It drove every set of speakers I was able to throw at it, and it was a particularly good match with the Verity Audio Sarastro II's reviewed in this issue. Thanks to a set of low-impedance output taps, the VK-55SE even drove my MartinLogan CLX's without problem, and that's something that very few tube amplifiers can accomplish.

I liked it so much that we purchased the review sample to become part of our permanent stable of reference amplifiers. For those of you needing more power, you can easily upgrade the VK-55SE to a 110 watt monoblock and buy a second one. This is the tube magic, folks!

**\$5,995** [www.balanced.com](http://www.balanced.com)



## Grant Fidelity RITA-340 Tube Integrated Amplifier

By Jeff Dorgay

If you love the classic EL-34 tube sound, the RITA-340 from Grant Fidelity is a beauty. With its transparent power meters and beefy metal case, this 90-pound amplifier delivers the goods. It has one set of balanced inputs and four single-ended inputs, so it offers tremendous flexibility.

We've been listening to this one for a while, and it would be a perfect match for your favorite high-efficiency speakers. A quick look under the chassis reveals high-quality point-to-point wiring throughout and massive output transformers.

The RITA-340 is like the rest of the products that Grant Fidelity offers: high quality and high performance. Just get a friend to help you unbox this one. Full review on the TONE website next month. For those needing a bit more power, there is also a higher powered version featuring KT88 tubes and 45 watts per channel for \$4,300.

**\$3,500** [www.grantfidelity.com](http://www.grantfidelity.com)

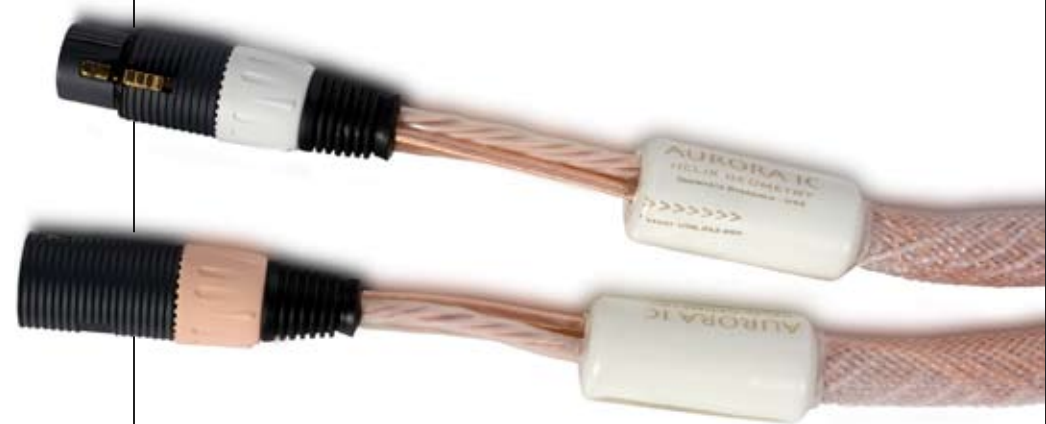
# DarTZeel CTH-8550

By Jeff Dorgay

**T**his Swiss beauty is a rare object of desire. Hand-built and assembled in Geneva, this 220-watt-per-channel integrated comes with a built in MC phono stage. Definitely at the high end of what one might pay for an integrated. If the gold-and-red motif is not your thing, it is also available in black. This is a work of art visually and sonically. Under the hood is a very sophisticated dual mono circuit, with massive power supplies for the preamp and power-amplifier sections. And to make sure it stays yours, the CTH-8550 requires a USB key to start it up. Otherwise it works for 15 minutes in “demo” mode and then politely powers down.

The sound? Scrumptious. We'll tell you a lot more in Issue 23, so stay tuned. This one was as much fun to photograph as it was to listen to.

**\$20,300** [www.dartzeel.com](http://www.dartzeel.com)



## Shunyata Aurora Interconnects

By Jeff Dorgay

**S**hunyata has appropriately named these interconnects after the Roman Goddess of the dawn. Yes, in the midst of this wacky economy, a pair of \$7,500 interconnects isn't for everyone, but for those who have a state-of-the-art system and still have some net worth on their balance sheets, these cables certainly could be just the thing that takes your system as far as it can go.

Now that my reference system is fully cabled with Aurora interconnects, Stratos SP speaker cables and Shunyata's newest power cords, I've been doing some serious comparisons between their current technology and the last generation of Shunyata products, which seemed hard to improve. Needless to say, I am very impressed with their latest recipe.

If you read our interview with Shunyata founder Caelin Gabriel last issue, you know that he's a man who's never satisfied, always trying to push the envelope further. We'll have a report on the full Shunyata system next issue. ●

**\$7,500, 1M pair, XLR**  
[www.shunyata.com](http://www.shunyata.com)

# Anniversary Classics from McIntosh

By Jeff Dorgay

It is amazing how things come full circle. The first true high-end system to which I was exposed as a 14 year old was right down the street at my pal Garth Rivera's house. His dad was an ex-military officer and while many servicemen were bringing home Japanese gear to start their systems, Garth's dad was pro-American. He had a tricked-out McIntosh system built right into the wall in their living room featuring a C22 preamp front and center along with a McIntosh tuner and Thorens turntable with SME arm and Shure M91ED cartridge. A pair of Dynaco Mark III amplifiers were placed under the floor boards feeding the Jantzen floorstanding speakers with electrostatic tweeters and 15-inch woofers.

It was one of the tidiest HiFi installations I would see for years to come. But that summer was the year that I discovered Miles Davis, Robin Trower and Pink Floyd, usually at fairly high volume, as his dad really liked to rock out. Whenever I heard that system blasting, I would hop on my bike and zoom down the street. There was always something great playing on the turntable. Now with McIntosh's 60th anniversary C22 and matching MC75 monoblock power amplifiers, you can go home again.

McIntosh  
60th Anniversary  
1949-2009

H O N O R

STEREO RE

R TO L



### A Remake That is an Honor to the Original

In celebration of McIntosh's 60th anniversary, they have decided to release an updated version of that legendary preamplifier. Unlike the Commemorative Version that was sold in 1995, with a different tube complement from the original design, the new version is back to the original's configuration of six 12AX7 tubes. There is also a matching pair of MC75 tube power amplifiers that feature triple-plated gold-colored titanium stainless steel. The 60th Anniversary McIntosh amplifiers and preamplifier are only sold as a set for \$15,000, which is not a bad price for a great vacuum-tube preamp with MM and MC capability and a pair of 75-watt tube monoblocks, especially with this level of exclusivity.

There are only going to be 120 sets built for North America (60 for the US and 60 for Canada), along with 60 sets each for worldwide territories. When I visited the McIntosh factory in March, I was able to see the final units being built and shipped all over the world. The various McIntosh dealers had already purchased all 60 sets for the US market, but as CEO Charlie Randall told me, "All of the dealer units haven't been sold to customers yet, so we should get the word out on how great this set is." *(continued)*

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"All of the dealer units haven't been sold to customers yet, so we should get the word out on how great this set is."



## What does *ne plus ultra* mean?

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

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

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

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

audio physic

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EAR / Yoshino

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*finite elemente*

Grand Prix Audio

Halcro

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Lyra

Meridian

Nagra

Rives Audio

Shunyata Research

T + A

Transparent Audio

Wilson Audio

Wilson-Benesch

### And great they are, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

If you are a car enthusiast, you know that a few classics have been brought back with mixed success. The new Dodge Challenger is by far my favorite current classic because it combines all of the styling cues we remember, it gives a slightly modern aesthetic, and it offers more performance than the original. The owner of the original can look at the current version and not want to take a hammer to it, while owners of the new model can look back on the original and still feel pride of ownership.

**I think McIntosh has achieved aesthetic perfection with the current issue C22 as well: it's just the right balance of classic Mac with subtle updates.**

The MC 75's are awesome too, but the gold finish will either be for you or not. It's a little too much for me. I'm a big fan of the standard chrome finish of the MC275 and McIntosh tube power amplifiers past. Who knows, maybe the folks at McIntosh will release a "standard" version of the MC 75's in chrome next year?

Other upgrades to the basic C22 design is a set of balanced inputs and outputs and a moving coil phono stage in addition to the moving magnet version available on the first C22. MM capacitance and MC loading are adjustable on the front panel. Gain is fixed for the MM stage at 40db and the MC stage at 60db, just like the C2300 preamplifier. *(continued)*



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“These are not museum pieces to put on a mantle. They are to be used and enjoyed as a state of the art tube McIntosh audio system.”

While it does not have as many balanced inputs and outputs as the C2300, a quick call to Roger Stockholm at McIntosh revealed that the 60th anniversary C22 and the C2300 share a lot of DNA, and their core circuitry is virtually identical. “We wanted to put the cartridge loading right on the front panel, just like the original though, and the C22 does not have the microprocessor control of the C2300, but it is lit with LEDs so it should last for a very long time.”

### Modern Sound

Though these components look vintage, the sound is of this century. Ron Cornelius of McIntosh put it best when he said, “These are not museum pieces to put on a mantle. They are to be used and enjoyed as a state of the art tube McIntosh audio system.”

While styling is always very personal, having lived with the C2300 and the C22, I like the simple elegance of the C22. But maybe it's the nostalgia gland in my brain. Cornelius also told me that the MC75 monoblocks are “more like baby MC2301's than just an MC275 split onto two separate chassis.” Roger Stockholm confirmed that the output transformers on the MC75 are completely different than the ones used in the MC275, though each monoblock uses an MC275 power transformer. This keeps the MC275's running extremely cool and a substantial power reserve is always on tap, thanks to what is essentially, twice the power supply of an MC275. *(continued)*



I'll go on record as saying this is the best remote control I've had the pleasure to use.



These are special amplifiers, and thanks to the 2-ohm output taps, I was able to drive the MartinLogan CLX's much easier than could my MC275, which only has a 4-ohm tap. However, I found nirvana with the 60th anniversary gear connected to the Verity Audio Sarastro II's. These full-range floor-standing speakers that are very efficient, so the MC75's always had power to spare. This was a system that I could live with happily ever after!

When comparing the MC75's to a good friend's early vintage MC275 with NOS tubes, you can really see how McIntosh has refined their design over the years. The MC75's still have a healthy dose of the midrange magic that's made them famous, but they have much more grip and authority in the lower registers and more resolution in the upper mids and treble. Even compared to the current MC275, the MC75s push the soundstage wider and are more transparent overall. I suspect that a certain amount of this is due to splitting up the amplifiers on separate chassis with their own power supplies, but the difference is not subtle, especially when listening to texturally complex music at high volume.

### Modern Features

If you are a current McIntosh owner, you are familiar with the standard issue remote control, with about 100 small backlit buttons. It has a nice feel, but if you are older than 35, it will have you reaching for the reading glasses. The new HR22 remote that comes with the C22 is a model of elegance and functionality. I'll go on record as saying this is the best remote control I've had the pleasure to use. The power button is located at the top left, with volume up/down located beneath. Should you be using your C22 with one of McIntosh's CD players (I used the MCD500); a data cord between the pre-amp and CD player will allow that remote to control your CD player as well.

*(continued)*



The big bonus with the MC75 monoblocks is that they feature remote turn on. This has always been my sole complaint with the MC275 stereo amplifier. I know a lot of McIntosh owners have “all Mac” systems, so the ability to turn the whole system on from this one remote is very cool indeed. McIntosh makes a shielded cable specifically for this purpose in a six-foot length that you can purchase at your dealer. Or the nearest Radio Shack will do, especially if you need to run longer lengths.

### Control Flexibility

As someone who has always had multiple sources, I’ve always appreciated the way McIntosh always gives you a ton of inputs. They used to call their preamplifiers “control centers,” and that is a perfect description. The back panel features two sets of (switchable) RCA outputs and a set of balanced XLR outputs along with a set of fixed output RCA jacks for any recording device you might have. It worked perfectly with my KORG MR-1000 portable digital recorder and Nakamich ZX-7 tape deck.

There are six sets of RCA high-level inputs, two sets of balanced XLR inputs along with separate MM and MC phono inputs. MC loading is adjusted on the front panel and has a range of 10, 25, 50, 100, 200, 50 and 1,000 ohms, while MM capacitance is adjustable from 30-350pf in 50 pf increments with the standard 47k loading.

### Quiet!

The first thing you will notice about the 60th anniversary pair is how quiet these pieces are together. Even with the phono inputs, you can turn the volume control up to maximum with no hiss coming from the speakers. It’s very impressive how much attention to detail the McIntosh engineers have paid to the subtleties in this preamplifier.

Again, the phono stage is the same one from the C2300. You could probably swap the tubes for some older vintage models and get a different sound, but I was impressed enough with the stock tubes when I had the 2300 that I did not bother to roll any tubes in the C22. I did really appreciate having the ability to connect two turntables to the C22, and used my modded Technics SL-1200 with Clearaudio Maestro Wood through the MM input and the Rega P-9 with Lyra Dorian through the MC input.

I had equally good luck with other cartridges I tried with varying outputs. Even with the relatively low-output Dynavector 17D3 (.23mv), I still had enough gain so that noise did not creep into the presentation. Sonically, I’d put the internal phono stage on par with what you might find in the \$1,500 range in an external phono preamplifier, but it is one of the quietest tube phono preamplifiers I’ve heard at any price. Personally, I like it all on one chassis – fewer interconnects and power cords to complicate the system. *(continued)*

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As someone who has always had multiple sources, I’ve always appreciated the way McIntosh always gives you a ton of inputs.

### Fantastic Balance

The hallmark of the 60th anniversary McIntosh system is its overall balance. I commend McIntosh on pricing these fairly; considering the dedication of McIntosh lovers worldwide, they probably could have doubled the price and sold every set they could build.

For \$15,000, you get a fantastic tube preamplifier with considerable flexibility, great sound and two phono inputs along with a very powerful pair of monoblock amplifiers that should be able to drive all but the most inefficient speakers. I predict that the people who manage to get their hands on these will have something very special indeed. This is a system I could retire with.

### Do you want originals or the updated classic?

If you still love the Porsche 356, go find a mint early vintage C22 and send it to Audio Classics for a full checkup. According to their president, Steve Rowell, a mint C22 can fetch as high as \$4,000 and a mint pair of original MC75's often sell in the \$4,000 - \$6,000 per pair range. Considering that the C22 sold for \$279 and the MC75's sold for \$229 when new, that's pretty substantial appreciation for HiFi gear that is almost 50 years old!

If you would rather have the new Porsche 997, the 60th anniversary C22 and MC75's are your ticket to ride. All of the old volume controls and switches that illuminate the front panel are gone in favor of LED's that might outlast you.

And just for old times sake, spin a copy of *Bridge of Sighs*. I know you'll dig it. ●

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I predict that the people who manage to get their hands on these will have something very special indeed. This is a system I could retire with.





The McIntosh  
Anniversary Collection  
C22 preamplifier and  
(2) MC75 monoblock power  
amplifiers

MSRP: \$15,000

#### MANUFACTURER

**McIntosh Laboratories**  
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Binghamton, NY 13903  
607-723-3512  
www.mcintoshlabs.com

#### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Sources** McIntosh  
MCD500 SACD player, MS300  
music server

**Analog Sources** Rega P9 w/  
Lyra Dorian, Sound HiFi Technics  
SL1200 w/SME 309 and Sumiko  
Blackbird

**Speakers** Harbeth Monitor 40.1,  
MartinLogan CLX, Verity Audio  
Sarastro II

**Cable** Shunyata Aurora  
Interconnects, Stratos SP  
Speaker cable, Anaconda power  
cords

**Power Conditioning**  
Running Springs Jaco

### *McIntosh: For the Love of Music*

written by Ken Kessler is included with the purchase of the McIntosh Anniversary Collection along with a letter of authenticity signed by CEO Charlie Randall.

# Sound And Style

## The Verity Sarastro II

By Jeff Dorgay

**W**hen you graduate to the level of audio enthusiasm that affords you the luxury of a 40 thousand dollar pair of speakers in your living room, you are nearing the very top of the mountain. Sure, there are still 100 thousand dollar speakers out there, but I always think of the 40 thousand dollar speaker as the Porsche 911 twin turbo of HiFi; sure you can buy a Ferrari or an Aston and yes they offer more exclusivity and better accoutrements, but for three times the price they won't get around the track or make a run for the border any quicker than the Porsche will.

However, at this lofty price level, you should get it all; build quality beyond reproach, museum aesthetics and most of all, sound that you shouldn't have to make any excuses for. I'm happy to say that the new Verity Sarastro II meets these criteria and then some.

**The cabinets are flawlessly built, and the Italian Lacquer used to finish them is perfectly smooth and feels like liquid glass.**



Should you purchase a pair of Sarastro II's, they will arrive at your location in a pair of reinforced, aluminum flight cases that are well padded. Your Verity dealer will personally unpack and set your speakers up. The cases assure your speakers arrive in the same flawless condition they left Verity, and should you ever need to move, your speakers will survive the moving trolls. This is also handy, because you can store your cases in a back corner of the garage and not have to worry about the elements taking their toll on the regular cardboard box you have to re-order in three years (for a small fortune) when it's moving time. A nice touch.

Our review pair arrived in African Cherry, also known as Makore, with four other standard finishes being available. Custom finishes are also available for additional cost and lead time, which can include lower-gloss lacquer similar to the finish on the Rienzi we reviewed last year. The cabinets are flawlessly built, and the Italian Lacquer used to finish them is perfectly smooth and feels like liquid glass. There is definitely a high pride of ownership with these speakers.

Unlike a lot of mega speakers, the Sarastro II's will not impose on your room. The cabinets are relatively small, having a semi trapezoidal shape that tapers from 8 to 11 inches wide at the front, 10 to 14 inches wide at the rear (top to bottom), 12 to 20 inches deep from front to back. They stand just four feet tall with the top surface having a rearward slant. While all of these uneven surfaces work wonder for resonance control and add to the level of wood-working expertise required, the end product is stunning, yet understated.

### **The Verity Approach**

All but Verity's smallest model, the Finn, feature dual cabinet construction. On the Sarastro II, Verity isolates the 6-inch midrange and ribbon tweeter housed in the upper cabinet, and the 11-inch, rear-firing woofer in the bass cabinet, with a 1¼" inch thick damped aluminum plate and specifically chosen Sorbothane pucks. *(continued)*



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Once they are in place, they are tough to get back apart, so position with care.


The Sarastro II shares the same ribbon tweeter as Verity's flagship speaker, the Lohengrin II. Whereas the Lohengrin II requires a fairly big room to perform to its best, the Sarastro II will give similar performance in more reasonably sized rooms, but with slightly less ultimate dynamic range and bass extension. There are no off-the-shelf components used in the Sarastro II's. All of its drivers are manufactured to Verity's exact specification, and the proprietary ribbon tweeters are actually built in-house.

While some of Verity's speakers offer the option for front or rear woofer firing, Verity prefers the rear-firing configuration, feeling it offers better bass performance overall. That has been my experience with both Verity loudspeakers I've listened to in my room, and the Sarastro II only offers the rear-firing option.

## **Verity is also a firm believer in high efficiency designs.**

The Sarastros have a rated sensitivity of 93db, so this is not a speaker that requires a behemoth amplifier to achieve high sound pressure levels. The brochure for the Sarastro claims that these speakers can be driven with as little as 18 watts. I had no problem powering them with a 300B amplifier, but if you really want to rock, I suggest an amplifier in at least the 30 – 50 watt range, and always, power is your friend. Using the Sarastros with a high power amplifier provides effortless dynamics, no matter what level you choose to listen at. *(continued)*

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With a 6-ohm nominal impedance, you will have no problem using these speakers with your favorite tube amplifier; I had excellent success with every tube amplifier I tried during the review period.

This brings us to another, often overlooked aspect of reference speakers. I feel that a speaker at this level should not be overly fussy, requiring special amplification or cabling to sound its best. In this respect, Verity stands above many of the pedigreed speakers I've used.

### Simple Setup

Thanks to the dual cabinet design, these speakers are easy to move into your listening room. The woofer cabinet weighs around 100 pounds, so you may need some help with these, but once out of the flight case, the supplied pucks make the speaker very easy to move around. Due to the 150-pound weight of the assembled speaker, I highly suggest working with the pucks until you have optimized the bass response before installing the spikes.

During the initial break in, I placed the speakers at my usual starting point, about 9 feet apart, tweeters 4.5 feet from the back wall (with slight toe in), and the listening position just over 9 feet from the tweeter centers. Even just "throwing" the speakers in the room, I was very impressed with the sound, but with about an hour of careful setup, and the help of Verity's John Quick, the Sarastro II's went from very good to brilliant.

We ended up with the speakers further apart than I would normally listen to in this room, but it worked well. Final positioning in my 16 x 24 foot room, with the speakers positioned on the long wall, had the tweeters 3.5 feet from the rear wall and about 10.5 feet apart, and my seating position moved back to about 11 feet from the speakers.

I found the Sarastro II's rather easy to set up overall and nowhere near as fussy as my other reference speakers, the MartinLogan CLX's, which needed to be optimized within a 1/16 of an inch (and 1/32" was even better) in all three planes to give their all.

Initial listening was done with the Conrad-Johnson ACT 2/Series 2 and Premier 350. Over the course of the review, I made it a point to try about ten different combinations of amplification, as well as a few cable swaps, to find any potential synergies, or lack thereof. *(continued)*

series 1

# 170iTransport



The 170iTransport is the first component specifically designed to transform your iPod into a high-resolution audio/video media server.

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REVIEW

Again, thanks to the high efficiency and stable impedance, the Sarastro II's were incredibly easy to use.

If you are assembling a system around these speakers, you should be able to start anywhere on the amplifier food chain and achieve acceptable results. I was even very pleased with the sound of the Sarastro II's with my \$1,200 Prima Luna Prologue 1 integrated amplifier that has 35 watts per channel of EL-34 power.

### Close to the Edge

My favorite aspect of the Sarastro II's is the high level of resolution that they offer, without going over the cliff, becoming harsh and unforgiving. They take you right up to the edge, offering a very enticing look at your recordings, without the fatigue that some hyper-detailed speakers possess. The Sarastro II's are one of those rare speakers that will help you to rediscover your music collection.

Much like a very high-end source component, if your recordings are top quality, you will be amazed at how much more detail is lurking inside. The Sarastro II's unravel complex recordings in a way that few speakers at any price can. The Sarastro II's are not a one-person speaker system, and while the sweet spot is still the prime center location, three people on your couch will all have a great experience.

Even sitting thirty feet away at my desk editing photos, I can still hear the main system well, and the Sarastros coaxed me back to the main listening position quite often because I kept hearing interesting things.

*(continued)*

TONE **123** No.22 2009

Spinning the Classic Records version of Neil Young's *Live at Massey Hall* felt like Young was playing the piano in my listening room – this realistic portrayal of a man and his piano was staggering. And even though Young's *Time Fades Away* is a fairly lifeless live recording, it never sounded better than it did on the Sarastro II's.

I was caught off guard again when listening to records with densely layered vocal harmonies; there seemed to always be more information available. In the title track of Transatlantic's *Bridge Across Forever*, the four vocalists now had a very distinct sound, where on lesser speakers they tend to blend together much more. Same thing with the self-titled Utopia album. Todd Rundgren, Kasim Sulton, Willie Wilcox and Roger Powell all have such similar voices that it can be hard to pick them apart, but now it was easy. Even the tweeting bird at the beginning of The Rascals' "Groovin" floated around the soundscape in a very trippy way, where it was just somewhat diffused. Moving into the 21st Century, I enjoyed the Fleet Foxes album more than ever before for the same reasons; these speakers are champions of pinpoint imaging.

---

**The smile on your face gets really big when you put the pedal down with the Sarastro II's.**

This brings up a very important point aspect of the Sarastro's performance. If you have mated them with suitable electronics, they will reveal more music in *all* of your record collection, this is not a finicky set of speakers that sounds incredible with a short list of "audiophile approved" pressings. Even listening to some of the worst recordings in my collection, I was always impressed that even though it was much easier to hear the difference between the top shelf recordings and the average ones, the average ones were still more enjoyable than before.

It is worth noting that while the ribbon tweeter blends seamlessly with the rest of the drivers, these speakers will need to be played for a while to achieve this. I was told that break-in was in the neighborhood of about 300 hours for a fresh pair to get there.

### **Sit Down and Hang On**

Just like that Porsche turbo I was talking about at the beginning of the review, the smile on your face gets really big when you put the pedal down with the Sarastro II's. They work fine at low to moderate listening levels, but when you give the volume control a healthy twist, they seem to sound much bigger. *(continued)*





# Unprecedented.

In 2008, The Absolute Sound honored three of our subwoofers with an Editors' Choice Award.

(The other two haven't been reviewed yet.)



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Fathom® f110

Fathom® f112

Fathom® f113

Gotham® g213



GOTHAM® g213  
FATHOM® f113  
FATHOM® f112

Another strong suit of the Sarastro II's is that they are able to play very loudly without distortion or compression, and as we enter the realm of high resolution digital downloads being more readily available, this is a concern. Even if you aren't cranking your system, the ability to handle dynamic peaks without compression is important.

**The Sarastro II's bass response is powerful, tuneful and controlled, without being overdamped.**

These speakers can move serious air, and Verity claims response down to 20Hz. A quick sweep of test tones confirms solid output at 25Hz with a moderate drop off at 20Hz, so the Sarastro II is a true full range loudspeaker that does not require a subwoofer. There is a lot of texture and detail, with acoustic basses sounding correct. And the Sarastro II's are never wimpy either. Moving right along to a little Snoop Dogg, I was blasting "Gin and Juice" from *Doggystyle* with some serious gut wrenching bass. My ears gave out before the Burmester 911 mk. 3 or the Sarastro II's did, which was promptly followed by a knock on the door from my next door neighbors wanting to know if they could join the party.

### Assemble With Care

The only downside of a speaker with this much resolution is that it will cast your current system in a different light. *(continued)*

Though not finicky, it will reveal whatever shortcomings are present in your current components, which is why I consider a speaker at this level a destination product.

That said I found the Sarastro II's to be an excellent tool by which to evaluate other components, simply because they reveal so much critical information yet are still so musical that I didn't hate actually listening to music on them.

**The Verity Audio Sarastro II is a loudspeaker without compromise.**

It offers full range response, lifelike tonality and bottomless dynamic range without sacrificing the ability to unravel all it's capable of at moderate levels. They work well with a very wide range of amplification, and their stratospheric performance is matched by their flawless construction and dashing good looks.

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**PERIPHERALS**

**Digital Sources** Naim CD555, Wadia 781i, Sooloos Music Server

**Analog Sources** Spiral Groove SG-2 w/ Triplanar Arm and Lyra Skala cartridge, TK Acoustics Raven 2 w/SME iV.Vi arm and Dynavector XV-1s, Rega P9 w/RB 1000 arm and Shelter 9000 cartridge

**Preamplifiers** Burmester 011, Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2

**Power Amplifiers** Burmester 911 mk. 3, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350, Nagra PSA, McIntosh MC75 monoblocks, BAT VK-55SE, Prima Luna Prologue 1

**Interconnects** Cardas Golden Reference, Shunyata Orion

**Speaker Cable** Shunata Stratos SP

**Power Conditioning** Running Springs Jaco and Dmitri, Shunyata Hydra 2, Shunyata Anaconda power cords and RSA Mongoose power cords

**Vibration Control** Burmester V2 and V4 racks, Pagode Cerapucs, Ceraballs

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

**Accessories** Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators, Furutech DeMag, Clearaudio Simple Matrix record cleaner, VPI 16.5 record cleaner, MoFi record cleaning fluids



Sanders

## SANDERS MAGTECH AMPLIFIER

# Innovation or Evolution

By Rich Kent

**W**hen most audiophiles discuss electrostatic speakers, they usually mention Quad, Acoustat and MartinLogan, but there is one more guy who's been making electrostatic speakers since the '70s – Roger Sanders. Best known in the industry for the Innersound Company, which featured his electronics as well as their speakers from 1996 to 2004, Roger has written quite a few “white papers” on topics from speaker design to waste-oil heaters. He is truly a man with diverse talents.



About a year ago, Sanders began to market a pair of solid-state monoblock amplifiers that were designed specifically for the voltage requirements of electrostatic speakers, as those were his specialty. While they still provided good results with conventional dynamic speakers, Sanders felt he could build a more “universal” amplifier, and the Magtech was born.

### The Specs

The Magtech is a two-year culmination of work and design innovation. The amplifier is built on the same chassis as his ESL amplifier and utilizes a linear voltage regulator with no protective circuitry and is designed to drive conventional magnetic speakers with ease. The amp will hold power-supply voltages rock steady whether it is at idle or full power, and it can supply these steady voltages even with some variation in line voltage.

The Sanders Magtech amplifier claims to deliver 500 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load and nearly doubles to 800 watts per channel into 4 ohms. This will amaze anyone considering this is done in a format of 17 x 16 x 5.5 inches and weight of 54 pounds. It will fit

on any component shelf easily. Try that with any other 500-watt-per-channel amplifier. The Magtech looks identical to the Sanders ESL specific amplifiers with Neutrik five-way speaker-wire binding posts spaced apart at 45-degree angles, allowing plenty of space to connect thick and unyielding wires of any type. It features Cardas RCA jacks for the unbalanced connections as well as Neutrik XLR balanced connections; WBT binding posts are used for the speaker connection.

The physical design is simple and straightforward, with a plain 3/8-inch aluminum front plate, an oval power light and inch-deep heat sinks along both sides of the chassis, that Sanders says are of a very high efficiency design to keep the amplifier cool without a weight penalty. A small power switch with a voltage selector and two fuses complete the back panel, and Sanders claims that the Magtech can be left on at all times, as the idle current is only 10 watts. During the review period, it stayed cool to the touch regardless of how hard it was pushed.

*(continued)*

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**The amp will hold power-supply voltages rock steady whether it is at idle or full power.**



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"There's no denying that the Helsinki is an unconventional design that defies expectations"  
– Marc Phillips, TONEAudio

## Initial Overview

My system consists of a McIntosh C2200 tube preamp, Krell KPs20i CD player, MIT speaker wire and balanced interconnects throughout. With the Magtech now taking the place of my McIntosh MC275 and powered on, the amp was totally silent through the system except for a slight hum emitting from the amp itself. Possibly the regulated power supply? Sanders explained this as a "resonant vibration from the transformer," usually a sign of a dirty AC supply.

**Upon initial listening I was impressed with the seamless power and clarity of the Magtech.**

Taken a little aback, I disconnected the amp and reconnected my McIntosh MC275 tube amp and then switched to a McIntosh MC252 that I still have from a previous review to refresh my listening reference.

The width of my soundstage was similar to the MC275, but there was as an increase in detail and resolution. I found myself listening to my system at levels that I normally would find uncomfortable. At these increased levels, there was no hint of congestion, and the sound become more realistic. The normal congestion I experienced at these levels with my MC275 was absent, so I was enjoying the increased dynamic range at my disposal.

## Give and Take

As with all things in life, the Magtech is not all nirvana. With this increase in clarity and definition came a slight hardness to the presentation. It is similar to a digital image. *(continued)*

**The Magtech is an amazingly dynamic and powerful amplifier, yet something was missing in the sound.**

When I saw my first picture made from a digital camera I was impressed by the color saturation, sharpness and contrast. I was positive it was so much better than film. Yet as I looked at more and more digital images, I realized that the smoothness and lack of grain was what I enjoyed most with an analog image.

The same impression struck me with the Magtech. The Magtech is an amazingly dynamic and powerful amplifier, yet something was missing in the sound. It had all the pieces of the music, but something was lacking.

I enjoy small stage vocals, and my favorite cuts from Erin Bode's *If It's Magic* came across neutral and clean with the Magtech. Her voice was separated from the instruments in the mix, but her tone modulations and a sense of "you are there" realism was

missing when compared with my normal reference gear. The warmth that my McIntosh MC275 displays with this music was not there, although the Magtech had a much greater sense of separation between the instruments and more resolution overall.

I had the same experience with Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*, a complex and difficult piece of music, which can sound harsh and compressed on some of the best sound systems. Again, the Magtech was more dynamic with a sacrifice in tonality. This seemed to be the tradeoff no matter what I listened to: ultimate dynamics versus ultimate tonality, neither amplifier provided both.

The Mark Knopfler and Emmylou Harris collaboration *All The Roadrunning* is a pairing of two very distinctive and recognizable

voices. The Magtech handled the track, "This Is Us," with ease, displaying the amazing synergy of these two talented singers as well as their individual traits. Yet the deeply resonant lower tone of Knopfler's voice was missing when compared with the MC275.

I am being very picky with the Magtech sound and have probably raised a few eyebrows among those who own this amp. It is an amp that may sound tremendous with the correct speakers. Even with the CLS's, it still has the ability to reproduce the intricate details of classical quartets or solo vocals with some finesse and will never be challenged when you need realistic levels for rock or large orchestral recordings, as long as you have good recordings. An inferior recording is going to sound horrible. *(continued)*



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Marc Phillips  
TONEAudio Magazine

Either of the McIntosh amps I tried had a little bit of leeway that makes a poor recording tolerable. It is hard to explain the sensation unless you have heard McIntosh amps, but there is a slight smoothing of the sound in bad recordings that few amplifiers can imitate.

## **A Call to Roger.....**

After a few weeks with the Magtech, a personal call to the designer was in order. Roger answered the phone on the third ring and gave me about an hour of his time, thoroughly answering every question I threw at him and then some. It was a very informative visit to say the least!

He made it clear that his hand (literally) is in every piece of equipment that comes out of Sanders Sound Systems, and every product comes with a lifetime transferable warranty. Of course, the lifetime warranty is only as good as the lifetime of Sanders, so this will probably not be an amplifier that would outlive you, as would a McIntosh.

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**Sanders offers a 30-day in-home trial on every product, which I feel is a must for something not supported by a dealer network.**

He is so confident that you will keep his gear after the trial period that he covers the shipping both ways if you find that it is not for you. I bet very few take him up on this offer. This seems to be the way the 21st century HiFi world is going, and I must admit it is a very comfortable way to audition an amplifier.

*(continued)*

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## Second Opinion: Jeff Dorgay

The Sanders Magtech is a well-built solid-state amplifier, and for the \$5,000 asking price, is a real contender. You can't have it all for 5,000 bucks, but you can have a big slice of the pie. When comparing the Magtech to the megabucks amplifiers from CJ, DaTZeel and Burmester, there is a level of refinement that this amplifier does not possess. However, comparing it to its peers, it fares well and may be just right for you.

Having listened to the Sanders ESL Monoblocks earlier in the year, the basic sonic signature was intact with the Magtech. Even with dynamic speakers, I was able to play the ESL monoblocks quite loud, and I came to the same conclusion that Rich did: the Sanders amplifiers possess a lot of drive and dynamics. No matter what speakers you have in your system, I doubt that you will have trouble driving them to insanely loud levels. If you listen to a lot of heavy rock and large-scale symphonic music, you will enjoy the effortlessness that 500 watts per channel can deliver.

They passed the Magnepan torture test with ease, and this would be an amp I would highly suggest to a Magnepan owner; it has enough power and control to make them rock. I also enjoyed them with my Harbeth Monitor 40.1s, which are fairly inefficient. The extra power and control of the Magtech made for a tight and defined presentation from the Harbeths, which is a completely different sound than what I'm used to with 75 watts of tube power.

I concur with Rich on the overall tonality. I found the Magtech to be a bit on the clinical side, but I tend to be happiest on the slightly rich side of the fence. If you find most Class-A solid-state amplifiers too much of a good thing, you will be right at home with the Magtech. ●

### Time for a Road Trip

When returning the Magtech to the TONEAudio office for final photography, I spent a few hours comparing the Magtech amplifier to our publisher's reference, the Burmester 911mk. 3 along with the MartinLogan CLX speakers. Unfortunately, this was no contest, as the Burmester amplifier was much more holographic, with three-dimensional depth, where the Magtech was relatively two dimensional in comparison and lacking in tonal richness.

Though unfair (as the Burmester amplifier costs almost seven times the price of the Magtech), this was a comparison in which the Sanders couldn't really compete. The shortcomings that I heard with my CLS's were only magnified with the increased resolution of the CLX's.

Is this amplifier worth auditioning for a possible purchase? Definitely. Though the Magtech has a few shortcomings, I could own a complete Sanders system (including a pair of his electrostatic speakers) with some change left over for the price of the Burmester amplifier alone and that's value. You have nothing to lose but your time if you take Roger up on his 30-day trial, and I believe you will find it time well spent.



# Simply Magnificent

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## **The Morel Octave 5.2**

By Jeff Dorgay

**T**he new Morel Octave 5.2 speakers looked like a ton of fun, as we were lifting their bright red cabinets out of the box. My past reference speakers from Tetra used Morel drivers, so I was ready to be impressed sonically as well. The review pair had plenty of hours on the clock, so serious listening began in earnest the minute they were placed upon their stands; I was not prepared for the sheer amount of sound that came out of these little red cabinets. For those of you that find the red a bit too much, they are also available in black and white.



If you are shopping for a pair of high performance, yet high style compact speakers in the \$2,500 range, put the Octave 5.2 at the top of your list. They are \$2,499 without stands (factory stands are \$499 extra) and take up precious little floor space. They have a tiny footprint, just 7 inches wide, 12 1/2 inches tall and only 12 3/4 inches deep. This two way, rear ported system uses a 5 1/4 inch woofer that has a 3 inch voice coil and a 1 1/8 inch soft dome tweeter. Though many may argue the strengths and weaknesses of the soft dome approach, Morel has done a fantastic job with this design in the rest of their range. Overall frequency response is rated at 40 – 18,000 hz (+/- 1 1/2 db) with a claimed sensitivity of 83db.

To keep the cabinet weight down and rigidity up, Morel uses Corian that is sprayed with an anti-resonance material inside. The Octave 5.2's weigh 25 pounds each and have an extremely smooth finish.

### **Setup and System Compatibilities**

Initially skeptical of that 40hz figure, a quick test tone sweep confirmed that these little speakers indeed have solid output at this point. In a smaller room, you can work this to your advantage further with careful room placement. Even in my 16 x 24 foot room, I was very impressed at how much low-end grunt these tiny speakers possessed.

The Morel stands are 24" tall, putting the tweeters slightly below ear level. Jenny Smith from ASL group cautioned that these speakers might take a while to get set up properly, "if the bass is tubby, you've got it *wrong*." I had spent quite a bit of time finding the perfect spot for the Focal Diablos, so I started there and hit a home run – they sounded perfect.  
*(continued)*

(Yes, I did experiment with multiple placements to be sure) Placing the tweeters six feet apart, with a few degrees of toe-in and five feet from the back wall gave me the taut bass response I was told I could expect from the Octave 5.2 and the ideal listening position for maximum depth was about 6 feet back.

Back in my normal listening position of 10 feet from the speakers, the Octave 5.2's would still fill the room, but the depth of the presentation suffers slightly. If you can inch your chair back from about 5 feet and you will find the magic spot (probably around six to seven feet) that you get it all, a perfect balance of powerful bass without losing the width.

Initial listening was done with my Burmester 911mk. 3, which has about 350 watts per channel on tap, so I wanted to make sure that these speakers would work well with an amplifier that was more in keeping with what the average owner would probably mate these speakers with. Rega's new Brio3 (65watts per channel) and Apollo CD player along with DH Labs BL-1 interconnects and T-14 speaker cable made for a great system around the \$5,000 mark.

While these speakers are not efficient to make you happy with a low powered SET amplifier, they are still easy to drive and quite tube friendly. An amplifier in the 35-60 watt per channel range will work nicely and I wouldn't even shy away from 100 watts per channel if you have it. The Octave 5.2's are very capable, so you can pair them up with substantially more expensive source components. Moving up the ladder to the Nagra PL-L preamplifier and BAT VK-55SE power amplifier, I felt the Octave 5.2's were more than up to the task of revealing what this much higher priced gear could deliver, especially in a smaller room. These speakers will surprise you! *(continued)*

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**The Octave 5.2's are very capable, so you can pair them up with substantially more expensive source components.**





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Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07



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## Lightening Fast

While these speakers did not possess the ability to throw as big a soundfield in all three dimensions like the much more expensive Focal Diablos that I just finished evaluating, but I was consistently impressed at how wide the stereo image was. At moderate volumes with high quality source material, you could be tricked into thinking that you were listening to something much more expensive.

**These speakers offer quality and quantity in the bass department.**

When listening to some of my favorite jazz records featuring acoustic bass, there was plenty of texture present; this was not a one note bass speaker by any means. Switching to the LP version of Bowies' *Aladdin Sane*, I was impressed with how well these speakers kept track of the bass line on the title track during the atonal piano solo. I've listened to far more expensive speakers that can't hold the pace like these speakers can.

Attack and decay sounded correct, giving the Octave 5.2 the proper amount of punch without having an "audiophile sound." Listening to some of the recent Dead Can Dance SACD's, showed just how well these speakers could start and stop on a dime, doing a great job with the natural echo that exists in these recordings. Even after some very long listening sessions, I never found the Octave 5.2's fatiguing.

The Octave 5.2's were over-achievers (for their small size) in their ability to play quite loud, with a substantial helping of dynamic contrast on tap. *(continued)*



---

**The Morel Octave 5.2's excel in every aspect of small speaker design, offering performance way beyond their price point in a package that should easily integrate into any decor.**

When playing some of my favorite older direct to disc jazz recordings I was always impressed with how well these speakers could stop and start quickly, even at fairly high levels.

The only thing the Octave 5.2's could not do as well as a big speaker was play AC/DC or Prokofiev at realistic levels, but they *will* play a lot louder without breakup than you might expect. In a system comprised of components with equal value and performance, I guarantee that these speakers will not be the weak link.

This led me to the only other shortcoming I found with the Octave 5.2's. The stands that come from Morel are very attractive, but lightweight. These speakers responded so favorably to more massive stands, I would suggest that the discerning audiophile in the audience skip the stock stands and get something much beefier. Though not as attractive as the factory stands, my 24" Sound Anchors put these speakers into an entirely different performance category. Now I was getting some serious depth out of these tiny cabinets and the bass performance had even more punch. When playing "Elitsa" from Tosca's latest disc, *No Hassle*, I was amazed at how much better the Octave 5.2's coupled to the room.

#### **A True Champion**

The Morel Octave 5.2's excel in every aspect of small speaker design, offering performance way beyond their price point in a package that should easily integrate into any decor. *(continued)*



**This is a real world product that you can listen to a wide range of music on successfully in a reasonably sized room.**



While I have heard plenty of great speakers in the five-figure range, I've heard precious few at the \$2,500 level that can offer a serious helping of truly high end, musical sound with no consequence. I love my Magnepan 1.6's (about \$1,700 a pair), but they need a ten thousand dollar amplifier to sound great. Same with the Stirling Broadcast LS3/5a's (about \$1,800 a pair) – amazing midrange and depth, but you need to be sitting four feet away from them in a tiny room.

This is a real world product that you can listen to a wide range of music on successfully in a reasonably sized room. The Octave 5.2's will sound great with budget electronics; yet have more than enough performance to grow with you, should you decide to upgrade your system at a later date.

I am happy to award them one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2009 and unless something else comes along to raise the bar even further, they are on the fast track for Product of the Year in the affordable speaker category. Yes, they are that good. ●

**The Morel Octave 5.2**  
MSRP: \$2,450 pr.,  
Matching stands, \$495 pr.

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**Power** Running Springs Dmitri power conditioner, Shunyata Anaconda power cords

**Cable** Furutech Reference III interconnects and speaker cable

**Accessories** Burmester V3 rack, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators

# Compact Powerhouse

## The JL Audio Fathom F110

By Jeff Dorgay

**A**dding a subwoofer to a home theater system is usually an easy choice to make. If you want to hear all of the rattles and explosions that occur in your favorite action movie at realistic levels, you need to move a lot of air. The only way to do that is with one or more subwoofers. And while integration with whatever satellite speakers you have is desirable, in the end it's usually about shaking the foundation of your house.



A high performance, high-fidelity music system is another game altogether. Audiophiles with canine hearing can get fussy in a hurry when it comes to blending a subwoofer with the main speakers, and many will happily forgo that last bit of bass extension for clarity and coherence. As someone who has always been fonder of mini monitors and panel speakers, the quest for the ultimate subwoofer has been even more difficult. The subwoofer that integrates splendidly with a pair of floor-standing dynamic speakers usually falls short when it has to keep up with the speed of an electrostatic panel or the five-inch woofer of a mini monitor.

JL Audio originally earned their reputation in the autosound world, winning more “best sound” awards than anyone else. The chances are high that if you’ve heard an incredible custom HiFi system in a car, there are one or more JL Audio subwoofers lurking in the trunk. A quick check of Crutchfield’s catalog shows raw 10-inch subwoofers from various manufacturers available for \$69.95. The JL Audio 10W7 raw driver is \$639. These guys are serious about bass.

You can see just how much research went into the JL Products by watching the video from this link:

[http://home.jlaudio.com/multimedia\\_pages.php?page\\_id=15#](http://home.jlaudio.com/multimedia_pages.php?page_id=15#)

JL’s Gotham subwoofer (which features a pair of 13-inch woofers and an amplifier capable of 3,800 watts of short-term RMS power) has received high praise and awards from many other HiFi magazines, so I began my journey with their smallest subwoofer, the F110. I felt the single, 10-inch driver might be easier to mate with my reference MartinLogan CLX speakers and I was curious to see how much of the performance of their statement product would carry over to the F110, which is very reasonably priced at \$2,100 in satin black finish and \$2,200 in gloss black.



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"... Furutech's cables offer great transparency and purity, plus an uncanny ability to block out noise and grunge"

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Carefully chosen and tested "active" materials mechanically and electrically damp Piezo connectors as they "interconvert" thermal, mechanical, and electrical energy for the finest Furutech Pure Transmission signal imaginable.

Because my CLX's only extend to about 45hz, a pair of subwoofers was a must. Using one subwoofer with the CLX does not work well when you are listening to music with extremely low bass. You always can hear exactly where the sub is when they kick in. The review here will involve a pair of F110's.

The compact size of the F110 is also a big plus. Taking up a small footprint of about 15.5 inches tall x 13 inches wide, and slightly more than 17 inches deep, this is a subwoofer that you can easily move around your room to achieve optimum placement. Weighing only 67 pounds, the F110's should be a one-person job. (The Gothams weigh almost 400 pounds – each) The rear panel has stereo and mono inputs with RCA and XLR connections as well as an output marked "Slave," which is intended for multiple woofer installations.

## Don't let all the adjustments intimidate you.

In the past, all the other subwoofers I've used required considerable experimentation with placement and subsequent crossover/level adjustments. While many like to use some kind of a crossover in between the main amplifiers to free the main speakers from operating full range, I've always had the best results using a full-range speaker (along with a powerful main amplifier) and letting the subwoofer bring up the very bottom.

I must congratulate JL Audio on writing a very comprehensive instruction manual, one of the best I've seen in the industry. They not only explain in great detail what all the controls for the F110 do, they offer plenty of good advice on subwoofer placement with single and multiple subwoofers.

No matter whose sub you own, I'd suggest downloading one of the PDF manuals from the JL website. I guarantee you will learn something.

Achieving final subwoofer setup usually takes the better part of the day, but after reading that manual, I decided to give JL's Auto Room Optimization (ARO) a try. Each F110 has a calibrated microphone included that plugs into the front panel jack of the F110, marked "calibration microphone." Next, push the "Calibrate" button and hold the microphone at ear level from your listening position. For the next three minutes, the Fathom kicks out a series of test tones and frequency sweeps that measure and analyze your room, doing its best to chop off any peaks that exist in your room response.

JL's Brett Hanes explained, "The ARO is basically a 1/6 octave, cut-only, automatic equalizer. We examine the room curve at your listening seat and then equalize it (as close as possible) to an ideally flat curve. Using cut-only EQs makes sure that you don't try to add energy in a room-mode null (dip). When you get a frequency response dip due to room modes, no amount of energy you add via an EQ will bring the dip back up, and you might wind up overdriving the sub in that attempt. All you can do is bring the peaks down to a more desirable level."

**No matter whose sub you own, I'd suggest downloading one of the PDF manuals from the JL website. I guarantee you will learn something.**



## Master or Slave?

Your choice of main speakers will greatly determine how your JL Subwoofers will be used, bringing us to the issue of using additional subwoofers in “slave” or “master” mode. Because my main speakers do not go down terribly low and I have plenty of power on tap, I chose to let the CLX’s run full range (allowing them to fall off naturally at about 45hz) and run the F110’s as stereo subwoofers using my preamplifiers second set of high level outputs, via a pair of Audioquest SUB3 RCA cables.

It should be easy to run at least a pair of subwoofers from your preamplifiers line outputs, but if you follow the direction in the manual, and add a third or fourth subwoofer, that’s where the slave settings will help: You can take the room calibration and apply it to the additional subwoofers and cable from the first two. This may need some further investigation.

## But do they ROCK?

The answer to that question is YES! While I’m still fidgeting with fine-tuning the F110’s to perfection, merely working with the auto setting provides amazing results. These subwoofers seem to be made for panel speakers, with the speed and weight necessary to complement my CLX’s perfectly. While the F110’s do not go down quite as far as the MartinLogan Descent i’s (which feature three 10-inch woofers each and cost \$1,500 more with the CLX module installed), the quality of the bass is superb, with lots of texture, attack and definition.

Acoustic and electric bass are equally well-represented using a perfect amount of dynamic contrast to fully realize whatever instrument is being played. Often times, powerful subwoofers are overdamped, so they can go low and provide a lot of grunt. But the resulting bass has a one-note feel. Not so with the F110’s. I just kept reaching for more of my favorite records that I know have a lot of low bass energy to probe the limits of what they could do. Thanks to a 2.75-inch maximum cone excursion, I couldn’t run the F110’s out of juice no matter how loud I played my system, even when I was watching movies in 2.1 mode listening to things explode. This is truly a subwoofer that does it all.



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A good friend of mine who is a longtime industry veteran and claims that he “can always hear a subwoofer in a system” paid the F110’s the supreme compliment. He said, “These CLX’s don’t need a subwoofer, they have *plenty* of bass.” When I told him the F110’s were on, and then proceeded to shut them off, he was as amazed as I was at the level of integration. A 25hz lower limit is still more than adequate bass response in my book.

I also had excellent luck mating a single F110 to the Focal Utopia Diablo’s as well as my Magnepan 1.6s and the Harbeth Monitor 40.1s. I was surprised that the F110’s can go up to about 100hz cleanly, so I can’t imagine anyone not being able to integrate one or two of these into any system with ease. At this price, you can easily start with one F110 and work a second one into your system as budget allows.

#### **A Success on All Levels**

Carl Kennedy, JL’s VP of sales told me that before starting the project to create home subwoofers, “They spent a year to buy or borrow every one of their competitors’ products to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.” Two more years and a few million dollars of prototyping and development yielded the Gotham and then the Fathom products available today.

I’d say they have succeeded brilliantly. The FL110’s exceeded my expectations by a considerable margin and are not only the most musical subwoofers I’ve had the privilege of using, but by far the easiest to set up. Bring on the Gotham!





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### PERIPHERALS

**Digital Sources** Naim CD555,  
Wadia 781i, Sooloos Music Server

**Analog Sources** Spiral Groove  
SG-2 w/Triplanar Arm and Lyra Skala  
cartridge, TK Acoustics Raven 2 w/  
SME iV.Vi arm and Dynavector XV-1s

**Preamplifiers** Burmester 011,  
Conrad-Johnson ACT2/Series 2

**Power Amplifiers** Burmester 911  
mk. 3, Conrad-Johnson Premier 350

**Speakers** Martin Logan CLX, Focal  
Utopia Diablos, Harbeth Monitor 40.1,  
Magnepan 1.6

**Interconnects** Shunyata Aurora

**Speaker Cable** Shunata Stratos SP

**Power Conditioning** Running  
Springs Jaco and Dmitri, Shunyata  
Hydra 2, Shunyata Anaconda power  
cords and RSA Mongoose power  
cords

**Vibration Control** Burmester V2 and  
V4 racks, Finite Elemente Cerapucs,  
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**Room Treatment** GIK 242, GIK Tri  
traps, Sonex Classic

**Accessories** Shunyata Dark Field  
Cable Elevators, Furutech DeMag,  
Clearaudio Simple Matrix record  
cleaner, VPI 16.5 record cleaner,  
MoFi record cleaning fluids

# What Lies Beneath the PMC TB-2i

By Hood McTiernan



The Professional Monitor Company might not be the first manufacturer you'd think of when shopping for a compact stand-mount loud-speaker for your stereo system, but you should. They are well-known in the pro-audio world for providing exceptional products to recording studios and mastering facilities the world over. Moreover, founder Peter Thomas is a former BBC engineer with many years of experience. While popular in the UK, their consumer offerings find scant coverage here in the US. We hope to change that.

I was first exposed to PMC during a Bryston demonstration at the CEDIA show quite a few years ago. A stunning set of their AML-1 active monitors were wowing the crowd with an excellent combination of pro-audio prowess and audiophile sensibility. A few years later, I heard another very impressive demonstration of their flagship BB5 XBD speakers in the DTS booth at the Las Vegas CE show.

### **The Secret Is the Transmission Line**

All PMC speakers, consumer or professional, feature transmission-line bass loading. PMC calls it ATL or Advanced Transmission Line technology. Transmission-line bass loading isn't a new idea – IMF used it extensively in their 1970s models that were quite well-received by audiophiles. Of course, their claim to fame was the ability to reach very deeply into the low bass regions while offering a really large soundstage. Put simply, transmission-line bass loading will yield a full octave more bass extension for any given box size when compared with either a bass reflex enclosure or a sealed system.

The transmission line is a complex labyrinth behind the bass driver that uses the back wave to extend bass. What issues from the port is in phase with what is being propagated by the driver into the listening area. Sounds complicated, and it is. There is no computer program that you can plug in and yield a formula for what can be done with transmission line designs. A successful transmission-line-based product is part science and part black art, and judging by what the TB-2i did in my room, I'm all in favor of black art. *(continued)*



**Put simply, transmission-line bass loading will yield a full octave more bass extension for any given box size...**



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The TB-2i is the larger of the stand-mount speakers in PMC's consumer line. It's an innocuous box that looks like hundreds of other speakers we've seen over the years, featuring a 1-inch silk dome tweeter and a 6.5-inch bass driver in a nicely veneered cherry box.

**Sound familiar? Expecting a nice polite British speaker? Sorry, not the case here.**

While the box itself is simple looking, it has that transmission line inside, the veneers are book-matched and the drivers are unique to PMC. The tweeter was co-developed with SEAS and the bass driver is a doped affair with a cast basket. The TB-2i is bi-wireable and sold in matched pairs for \$2,450.

The speakers were used on a pair of 19-inch Sound Anchor stands about three feet into my listening room and about eight feet apart with no toe-in. After a thorough warm-up cycle, I proceeded to give these somewhat plain Jane boxes a workout. They did not disappoint.

Being an electric-bass hack myself, I thought I'd test the low-frequency capabilities of this little transmission line. Claimed response is down to 40Hz so why not start there? After playing recordings by Brian Bromberg, Stanley Clarke, Victor Wooten, Christian McBride and others, the TB-2i exhibited a wonderfully controlled bass extension capability that almost defied belief. Along with that extension came detail as well. On acoustic bass, the gut of the strings was in plain sight while the creaks and groans of the instrument on close-miked recordings gave a wonderful sense of realism. *(continued)*

All of this goodness in the bass is really hard to pull off in a smallish box. I wouldn't recommend the TB-2i for organ-pedal recordings as they don't go down *that* far, but for most low-frequency reproduction, they over-achieve for their size. On only a few occasions during my time with these little powerhouses did I long for more bass.

The TB-2i isn't a one-trick pony though. The other driver in the system performs its duty flawlessly as well. Having very sensitive high-frequency hearing and anything amiss in the upper registers literally drives me batty. Proper high-frequency response is the difference between being enticed and walking away. Countless times I've been at shows and immediately left demo rooms because of poor tweeter behavior. The SEAS/PMC unit in the TB-2i is an excellent driver. There is no tizziness, buzzing, ringing or raggedness in evidence anywhere throughout its extensive range. All the detail you'd ever desire is there in evidence but the presentation is always sweet.

The crossover frequency between woofer and tweeter is a commendably low 2KHz that ensures good off axis performance and doesn't require the bass driver to go too high before starting to beam, along with a seamless blend between woofer and tweeter. This results in a deep, wide soundstage, allowing you to see into the recorded performance very well;

small details don't get lost and busy recordings are unraveled with precision.

Imaging on the TB-2i is rock steady. Vocals are rendered with naturalness and dimension ultimately giving the impression of a much larger box at work. But the hidden strength of the TB-2i is its lack of distortion. On recording after recording I could hear exactly what was going on and more important, where it was going on. This should come as no surprise though as the TB-2i is a *monitor* in the truest sense of the word. The pro version of this speaker is very popular as a desk-top monitor in some of the world's best recording studios. In the end, the user gets a true monitoring tool that exhibits audiophile attributes. It treads that fine line between detail and musicality with aplomb. And it rarely breaks a sweat in doing so.

*(continued)*

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**All the detail you'd ever desire is there in evidence but the presentation is always sweet.**



## Conclusions

Caveats? Not many. The binding posts are too close together for one. Bass can become rather boomy if you place it too close to the back wall. Will it fill a huge room? No, but for small and medium-size rooms its performance is more than adequate.

Prospective buyers shouldn't overlook this rather innocent-looking small speaker. To appreciate the goodness of the TB-2i, one must discover what lies beneath its exterior. There you'll find a cleverly engineered and unique small speaker with superb bass performance which can be used in most average rooms without any performance compromise. Whether you're listening to Patricia Barber or Porcupine Tree, you'll be highly satisfied. Recommended without reservation.



## Second Opinion – Jeff Dorgay

I agree with Mr. McT wholeheartedly on these speakers. This is the ultimate “anti-bling” speaker, but it delivers the goods. As I have the staff amplifier farm here, I tried them with a wide range of amplifiers to see if there were any rocks in the road.

With a rated sensitivity of 90db/1watt and a nominal impedance of 8 ohms, the TB-2i's are easy to drive with tube and solid-state amplifiers. I hooked them up with everything from the latest Brio3 from Rega to the new DarTZeel integrated with excellent luck, so whatever is in your rack will probably work nicely. As I mentioned in the Morel review, I am a big fan of soft-dome tweeters and the implementation in these speakers is excellent, striking a balance between resolution and smooth tonality.

This is definitely the little speaker that rocks. In my small (11 x 17 foot) living room and the 75-watt per channel Pathos Classic One integrated amplifier, I was able to play the TB-2i's way louder than I expected, so no matter what your listening habits, you should be able to party up a storm with the TB-2i's. ●

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**Analog Source** Pro-Ject  
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**Digital Source** Denon DVD  
3910(Transport only), Wadia  
170i, Bryston BDA-1 DAC

**Preamplifier** Aesthetix  
Calypso preamp

**Power Amplifier** Jeff  
Rowland 201 monoblock  
amplifiers

**Speakers** FOCAL Utopia  
Diablo

**Power Conditioning**  
Shunyata V-Ray

**Power Cords** Shunyata,  
AudioQuest and Audience

**Digital Cables** Transparent  
Audio and Stereovox

**Interconnects** AudioQuest  
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FOCAL

# High Style and Performance

## **The Focal Diablo**

By Jeff Dorgay

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Lately, there have been a number of posts on various internet forums that question the value of products in the high end. Just what do you get when you spend a five-figure sum for a pair of speakers? In the case of Focal, you get the best from one of the largest speaker manufacturers in the world in terms of speaker systems, as well as one of the largest manufacturers of raw drivers. This makes a huge difference when it comes to research and development. Manufacturers that do not have this level of technical diversity at their disposal can only investigate so many paths.



A quick download of the PDF at Focal website shows the amount of effort that went into the Grande Utopia series:

<http://www.focal-fr.com/catalogue-docs/EN/32/files/1913.pdf>

Taking into consideration that Focal builds the raw drivers, both for OEM use by other manufacturers as well as a complete line of drivers for the autosound world, they have a large database of experience from which to draw on. Not only are they continuously trying to design better speaker systems, they are working to build better drivers as well.

The result of this diversity is what gives us the current Utopia III series. If you've been to a HiFi show in the past year just about anywhere in the world, chances are you've at least seen or perhaps heard the pinnacle of Focal's efforts: the Grande Utopia. An extremely large speaker, (with a fairly large pricetag to match, at \$180,000 per pair) the Grande Utopia is not for everyone's room or budget. As cool as they looked at last year's CEDIA show, my attention immediately turned to the model reviewed here, the Diablo, which is priced at \$11,995 per pair for the speakers, plus \$1,995 for the matching stands.

If you were sitting in one of the demos wondering how great it would be to put a pair of Grande Utopias in the shrink machine, the Diablo is for you. It uses a 6.5-inch woofer that looks identical to the mid-range driver in the Grande Utopia, but has different characteristics for woofer duty in the Diablo. The 1-inch tweeter is the same in all three Utopia III models.

The Diablos are a work of art visually, so you won't have to barter or resort to trickery with whomever you share your living space with to install a pair in your listening room. A quick peek at the cabinet reveals the same attention to detail as the Grande Utopia. The test pair came in a gorgeous black metallic finish, with a brushed aluminum band where the tweeter resides. *(continued)*

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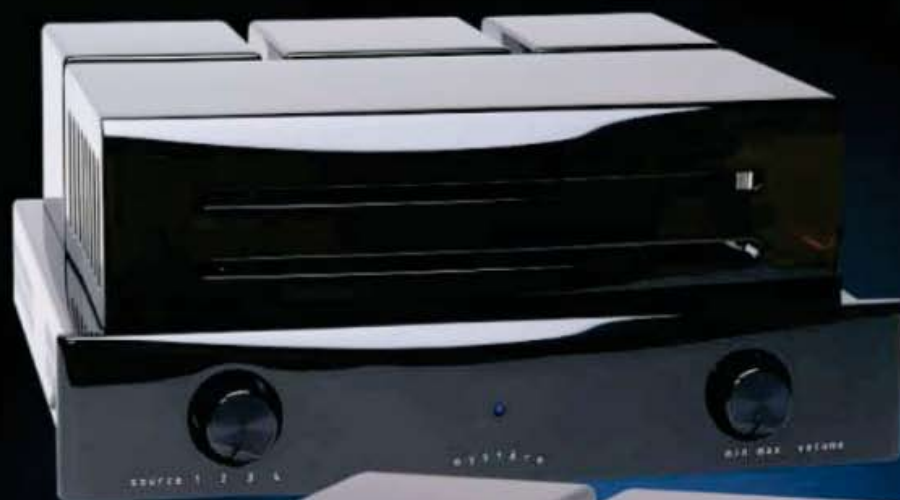
**If you were sitting in one of the demos wondering how great it would be to put a pair of Grande Utopias in the shrink machine, the Diablo is for you.**



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While these speakers were in my living-room system breaking in, the vote was unanimous from everyone who visited; there was nothing but praise for the aesthetics of these speakers. Wife acceptance was off the chart.

### Setup and Initial Listening

Like most speakers, the Diablos are somewhat stiff right out of the box. At first, the beryllium tweeter sounds forward and harsh. Between 100 and 200 hours later, as the woofer breaks in rather nicely, the tonal balance shifts, making the tweeter sound even more forward. The folks at Focal warned me that these speakers take a LONG time to sound their best, and other Utopia owners concur, so don't give up here. The best is yet to come.

Around 400 hours, the magic starts to happen in earnest, and by 500 hours, when the tweeter fully breaks in, you are treated to a completely different musical experience. To save yourself the aggravation and the urge to get rid of these speakers prematurely, I highly suggest that you just play them in a spare room or your garage for two weeks with blankets over them at moderate volume. Unless you are terribly curious to observe the break-in process, find a good house project (which will probably make your housemate happy) and forget about the HiFi soufflé that is cooking in the other room. Then just enjoy the speakers when ready!

The Diablos spent the first 400 hours in my living-room system with the Bel Canto e500 monoblocks and a Bel Canto DAC3. Because the Diablos offer such a high degree of resolution, a class-D amplifier would not be my first choice. The presentation was just too flat and one-dimensional. Be prepared to find any weaknesses in the rest of your system exposed by the Diablos. The better your source components and cables, the more music the Diablos will offer up. *(continued)*

Out in the main listening space, with more amplification and cable choices available, I did not find these speakers terribly cable sensitive and had good luck with a wide range of amplification as well. I found the Diablos equally at home with solid state or tube amplifiers. If you like a more up-front, extremely accurate presentation, you might veer towards your favorite solid-state gear. Those wishing a richer presentation will love the Diablos with tubes.

One of the most pleasurable combinations I assembled featured the 60th anniversary McIntosh gear reviewed in this issue. The Mac equipment provided a nice balance of warmth and detail, while my reference Burmester gear offered up more authority and dynamic contrast. I could live happily with either flavor.

All of the serious listening was done in our 16-by-24 foot main room. On both the long and short walls of my room, I found the optimum placement and balance between bass response and three-dimensional imaging was with the speakers about five feet apart (center of tweeters, front of cabinet) and the front face somewhere between four and five feet from the back wall.

Moving them closer to the back wall will offer more bass reinforcement, but at a slight loss of front to back depth.

My listening position was exactly eight feet from the tweeters. In my living room, which is very reflective, I preferred the speakers with no spikes on the stands, just some 1-inch thick squares of high-density rubber as feet. In the studio with a thick concrete floor, the spikes offered the best bass performance. Either way, be sure to bolt the speakers to the stands with the hardware included or bass definition will suffer and the upper bass response will get cloudy. For those of you that like to tinker with everything, forget about someone else's stands – bolting the Diablos to their dedicated stands is the only way to go. I tried my favorite Sound Anchors stands that are full of lead shot (even heavier than the Focal stands) with every combination of sticky stuff, cones and spikes to no avail. Besides, the factory stands look so cool ... *(continued)*

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**For those of you that like to tinker with everything, forget about someone else's stands – bolting the Diablos to their dedicated stands is the only way to go.**

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While you are at it, double check the tightness of the woofer. All of the vibration from shipping will usually require tightening the bolts about a quarter turn. I suggest tightening the bolts in a star pattern, just as you would the cylinder head on an engine to keep the torque evenly distributed. The truly obsessive ones in the audience who have a torque wrench calibrated in inch-pounds could tighten them all to exactly the same spec.

The Diablos did a great job on both the long and short walls, but as with every other speaker I've tried so far, getting them away from the side walls, even in a treated room, made for a more spacious soundfield. However, this was one of the few speakers that offered up more depth when on the short wall of my studio, with precious little sacrifice in image width. I am guessing that this speaker would be right at home in a room of about 10-by-12 feet to about 14-by-18 feet, without making you feel as if a subwoofer was necessary.

### Close to Defying the Laws of Physics

If you really want to surprise your friends with the Diablos, escort them into your listening room and play one of your favorite records that has ample low-frequency information. I guarantee they will be quite surprised when they open their eyes and find that there is no subwoofer to be found in the room, and they will probably be surprised to find all that sound coming from such a small speaker.

Reviewers often get accused of falling prey to their own set of built-in prejudices when listening to new components. Guilty as charged. *(continued)*

I have three great sets of speakers to listen to as references, but I still love the big, walk-through presentation of a panel speaker. Is that soundstage a bit exaggerated? You bet, but that's what I like.

With that in mind, I was blown away by how big the Diablos sounded in all three dimensions. This is the first small speaker I've heard with tonal characteristics that I enjoy, but which sounds like a big speaker. Most impressive was the amount of height in the presentation, along with width and depth. When connected to great electronics, the Diablos not only disappeared in the room, the soundstage extended way beyond the border of the speakers, just like my MartinLogan CLX's or the full-range Verity Sarastro II's. Listening to "Arms of a Thief" on the new Iron and Wine album, I could hear percussion effects and backup vocals spinning all around my listening chair.

There is one aspect in which the Diablos absolutely destroy my favorite panels: dispersion. While there is an obvious sweet spot, this is a speaker that everyone on the couch can enjoy. Whether you are sitting front and center or on the floor off to the side, you still get a big slice of the stereo image. These are no slouch in the speed department either. I guarantee that the Diablos are speakers that will help you to rediscover your music collection. You will be amazed at how many small details in your favorite recordings that were faint or undecipherable now reveal themselves.

### **Barely Any Limitations**

The Diablos have only two minor limitations, neither of which troubles me. They will not play as loud as a big pair of floorstanders because a 6.5-inch woofer can move only so much air. When using the Burmester 911mk.3, I could bang the woofer cones against their stops before the amplifier ran out of clean power, but I was listening to Motorhead at a fairly ridiculous level. Most listeners will not push the Diablos this far, and I was amazed at how hard these little speakers would rock when I turned the volume down slightly. This isn't a small speaker that will only play chamber music and female vocals. *(continued)*

---

**I guarantee that the Diablos are speakers that will help you to rediscover your music collection.**

Extremely low pipe organ or synth bass will be diminished somewhat for the same reason, but I was amazed at how much output there still was in the 40hz range. But it does fall off dramatically after that. Factoring in some room gain in a small space (where these will most likely be used anyway) should shore this up slightly, so proceed with caution before you mate these with a subwoofer.

I can't think of a small, high-performance speaker that I've enjoyed anywhere near as much as the Utopia Diablo. Other than that last bit of deep bass, they do it all. If the rest of your system is up to the task, this is the perfect speaker for someone who wants six-figure speaker sound in a smaller form factor. This is as close to perfection as you are going to get in a box this small.

## Second Opinion – A Micro Utopia Be Owner Responds

**A**s an owner of the previous generation bookshelf speaker in the Utopia line, the Micro Utopia Be, I was anxious to get my hands on the new version, the Diablo Utopia. On the surface, the speakers seem similar: the Diablo is marginally heavier by 5.5 pounds, marginally taller and deeper, and spec wise, goes 5Hz deeper at the -3db point (45 Hz vs. 50 Hz). Efficiency remains the same at 89dB. Although the woofers are the same diameter, the Diablo features a newer version of the Power Flower (TM) and a larger Beryllium (1-inch vs. ¾-inch) tweeter. The larger tweeter coupled with the Helmholtz resonator back enclosure makes for a lower crossover point and smoother bass driver to tweeter transition.

Physically, the new model seems better finished, although all the finishes are now all painted instead of having wood options. The matching stands come assembled and are fillable with your choice of dampening material. Packing is superb on both the stands and the speakers themselves.

So much for numbers. Even though the Diablo costs considerably more than the Micro Utopia Be (\$7,500 vs. \$12,000), it is in a different league entirely. After proper running in, the newer model gives the impression of a much wider, deeper and higher sound stage. There is also a sense of greater loudness for a given level, but I suspect that this new model is easier to drive than the old and that accounts for this impression. I also suspect that the lower crossover point pays dividends here because of superior off-axis performance. *(continued)*



**After proper running in, the newer model gives the impression of a much wider, deeper and higher sound stage.**



While the Micro Utopia Be is a superbly balanced speaker, the Diablo handily outdoes it in the transparency department, giving you the ability to hear far deeper into the musical event without being put off by an overly detailed presentation. I especially enjoy live jazz recordings, and the Diablos pick up all of the fine textures from both the performers and the audience, presenting them as a whole event.

The new 1-inch Beryllium tweeter is a superstar with no discernable ringing or distortion, and it extends way out without ever calling attention to itself. To me, this is one of the hardest things to get right on a speaker, the fine line between musicality and detail. The Diablos' HF region is simply sweet and musical. On the Micro Utopia Be, the lower treble will occasionally sound strained when pushed.

Vocal quality is uncanny on the Diablos. On well-recorded LP's and discs, the dimension and nuance of the voice is presented without drama, bloat or harshness. It's just a person standing there singing for you. The better blend between woofer and tweeter on the new speaker gives the vocals more life than on the older model.

Proper low-frequency balance in my room took a bit of tinkering with placement, but once properly situated, the Diablos' greater bass reach made itself perfectly clear. I would describe the bass qualities of the Micro Utopia Be as punchy, but I'd attribute that quality to a slight bump in the response. Not so with the Diablo. The Diablo has more authority and more linearity. They will also punch when pushed.

It's always great to hear an audio product that gets it just right. There was never an off-putting moment the whole time I had the Diablos in the system. I thoroughly enjoyed the Micro Utopia Be, but I suspect that shortly there will be a pair of Diablos in their place. They say that the devil is in the details. In this case the details are devilishly good. – **Hood McTiernan**



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**Power Amplifier** BAT VK-60SE,  
Burmester 911mk. 3, Conrad-  
Johnson Premier 350, McIntosh  
60th anniversary MC75 monoblocks,  
Nagra PSA, Prima Luna Dialog 8  
monoblocks

**Phono Preamplifier** Nagra VPS/  
VFS, Naim Superline w/Supercap

**Analog Sources** Rega P9/RB1000  
with Lyra Skala, Spiral Groove  
SG-2/TriPlanar with Lyra Skala, TW  
Acoustic Raven TWO/SME iV.Vi with  
Dynavector XV-1s

**Digital Sources** Naim CD555/  
PS555, Sooloos Music Server w/  
Neko Audio D100, Wadia 781i SE

**Interconnect** Shunyata Stratos,  
Furutech Ref III

**Speaker Cable** Shunyata Antares

**Power** Running Springs Jaco  
and Dmitri line conditioners, RSA  
Mongoose power cords, Shunyata  
Hydra 2 line conditioner and  
Shunyata Anaconda VX power cords

**Accessories** Burmester racks,  
Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators,  
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# Crank up the Volume and the Color!

**The Zu Essence**

By Jeff Dorgay



A couple of years back, we had the Zu Druids in for review. At the time, I was going through an infatuation with SET amplifiers, and the Zu's were a perfect match for a two-watt amplifier with their 101 db sensitivity rating. But the Druids weren't the typical single-driver speaker that couldn't rock (I had a couple of those, too). With their bullet super tweeter and substantial enclosure, they went down solidly to about 40hz and had plenty of extension at the top of the frequency range, so that you could enjoy them with much more than smoky female vocals.

At \$2,700 per pair, the Druids were a steal, and as a result, there are quite a few happy Druid owners throughout the world. But the guys at Zu haven't rested on their laurels. They've been refining their designs, and the first new product to roll off the assembly line is the new Essence, at \$4,995. There are quite a few changes to the Druid, starting with a larger enclosure. While the Druid was only about 6 inches deep, the Essence is a 48-inch-tall column that is 12-by-12 inches in diameter, no bigger than a pair of mini monitors on stands.

Zu's 10-inch full-range driver is now in its fourth generation of production, and you can read a more in-depth overview of all the changes here: [www.zuaudio.com](http://www.zuaudio.com)

**Suffice to say, their approach works.**

Using the ribbon tweeter primarily as a super tweeter, the integration with the main driver is seamless and has some other benefits. It also allows for a very simple crossover network, eliminating potential phase issues that might crop up with a complex crossover. It also makes the speakers extremely easy to drive. With 12-ohm impedance, the Presence is a perfect match for any tube amplifier.

*(continued)*



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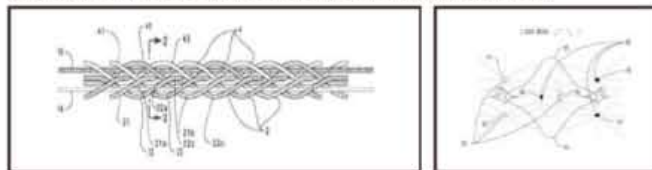
The new *Sky Series Signal Cables* utilize *Shunyata Research's* extremely complex, hand wound *Helix Geometry* braid; granted a patent for its ability to minimize the effects of electromagnetic interference, reactance and self-induced distortion. The dual helix, longitudinally offset, counter-rotating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

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

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

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### Setup in a Snap

The *Essence* speakers come shipped in a cloth bag with a coat of wax applied. I suggest a high-quality microfiber cloth to remove the wax (just like you would with your *Aston Martin*), but a nice, soft t-shirt will do. At 66 pounds, the speakers are not that heavy to move around, but because they are so smooth, you might want to enlist some help from a friend. Keep that cloth handy when they are in place though, so you can remove the fingerprints!

My living room offers only corner placement, so that's where the *Essence* speakers spent their time breaking in, with a *Pathos Classic One* integrated amplifier. This revealed a major strength of the *Zu's* — they are not terribly critical of room placement. But moving them out to the studio where they could be placed further away from side walls did offer dividends.

In the studio, I was able to put these speakers 10 feet apart (between tweeter centers) and just over three feet from the front panel to the back wall, making my listening position about 12 feet from the speakers with about eight degrees of toe-in. This allowed the stereo image to fill the room and go way beyond the speakers, just as my reference *MartinLogan CLX's* do.

I auditioned these speakers with quite a few different amplifiers, large and small, but I kept coming back to the *Prima Luna Dialog* monoblocks that I've been using for a while. Switching the *Dialog* amplifiers into triode mode still left me more power than necessary (35 watts per channel) to drive the *Zu* speakers to brain-damage levels, but offered up an even sweeter, enveloping musical experience. (continued)

I even had a great time building a system around them with my Dynaco SCA-35 amplifier that has only about 10 watts per channel of EL84 power.

Also worth mentioning is your choice of speaker cables. When the Druids were here, we noticed a slight recess to the midrange with every pair of speaker cables auditioned, which went away with the substitution of a pair of Zu's Libtec cables. While this effect was not as pronounced as it was with the Druids, the Essence will benefit enough from a pair of Zu Libtec cables that I would highly suggest buying a pair to go along with your speakers. Interestingly enough, putting the Libtecs into my reference system did not tilt the midrange response of my CLX's at all, so I have no idea what kind of magic is going on here. But it works.

### **A Clean and Transparent Presentation**

The Zu's have a slightly forward presentation that is not harsh or grainy. It's very immersive, if anything, somewhat saturated in the same way that a picture looks in Photoshop when you bump up the saturation control the slightest bit, giving everything that little extra shot of reality. It's not overly lush or colored, but I suspect that what I'm identifying as a saturation effect is due to the high efficiency of the Zu driver. Thanks to a very short cone excursion, distortion is held to a minimum. Even with the lowest power SET amplifier, you will rarely push your amplifier beyond its comfort zone, which also contributes to the low distortion feel of these speakers.

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**Even with the lowest power SET amplifier, you will rarely push your amplifier beyond its comfort zone...**

That's not to say that solid-state amplifier owners won't be able to enjoy the Essence. When hooked up to my reference Burmester gear, the sound was very enjoyable and lifelike, but the tubes made it hyper real. I had excellent luck with the Class-A Luxman L-590A II amplifier (30 wpc) and the Pathos, which is a hybrid design (70 wpc, solid state output).

After the necessary hour of warm-up time for the Prima Lunas, the first record I put on the turntable was *Zoolook*, by Jean Michael Jarre. Whoaaaa! One of my favorite records, it can easily extend the boundaries of your listening room beyond the walls if you have the right mix of components. *(continued)*





**The major strength of the Zu Essence, though, is its ability to project a larger-than-life stereo image with considerable width, depth and height.**

Track two, side one, "Diva" starts with running water and some deep synth bass layered over some reverse tracked Laurie Anderson vocals – very trippy indeed. Next, I moved on to the Jazzeem remix of Nina Simone's "Funkier Than A Mosquito's Tweeter" from the Sony Legacy LP, *Remixed and Reimagined*. This track opens with some great acoustic-bass riffs that the Essence handled with ease, putting the question of a subwoofer to rest.

The bass performance had me curious as to how far the Essence would go. So, putting a disc of test tones on the CD player confirmed solid output down to 35hz, with a slightly plump area in my room around 60hz that gives everything some extra (and usually much needed) weight.

A quick medley of warhorse tracks (Pink Floyd, Miles Davis, Stevie Ray Vaughn and Dire Straits) convinced me that everything was in the proper place in terms of tonality and image quality. A brief stop with the Fleet

Foxes, and then I listened to all eight sides of the ORG deluxe remaster of Beck's *Odelay*. If you like Beck, you need this record; ORG did a stellar job on the remaster. The Zu's just kept revealing tasty little nuances sprinkled throughout the record and soon had me busting the shrinkwrap on that big pile of LP's that have been sitting next to my equipment rack for a few weeks now.

The major strength of the Zu Essence, though, is its ability to project a larger-than-life stereo image with considerable width, depth and height. Much like a good pair of electrostats this makes for a very seductive presentation. These are speakers that make you want to stay up late and listen to records.

Another aspect of the Zu's that you will find intriguing is the overall coherence of the speaker. Because the ribbon tweeter takes over gently at about 10 khz, you are listening to the full range driver most of the time.

*(continued)*

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While this does introduce a slight bit of upper midrange warmth/coloration, I think the benefits of not having to deal with crossover slopes and different drivers though the critical midband will more than make up for it. Transients were lightning fast and I never felt like I was listening to a two-way speaker, something you take for granted when listening to full-range electrostats every day.

If I haven't stressed it enough, let me remind you again: these speakers really rock! The ability for speakers to play fairly loudly without distortion adds to the realism of the presentation as much if not more than any other factor, especially with non-acoustic music. These speakers take charge of your music and, when you are in the mood to crank it up, they won't disappoint you.

### True Works of Art

While the review speakers were being built, Zu owner Adam Decaria called to ask if I wanted "anything special" in the color department. If you aren't familiar with Zu's paint-booth prowess, these guys are the best in the industry. You won't find a smoother finish on a pair of \$160,000 Wilson Alexandrias or a \$290,000 Aston Martin. And I've spent plenty of time with both. The Essence is available in a handful of standard colors, but for a slight up-charge, they will paint them to order and I highly suggest taking advantage of this service.

I'm always impressed when a manufacturer grasps the importance of producing speakers that look great as well as sound great. Nothing will make the person you share your house with more stoked about getting a new pair of speakers than letting them pick the color. (continued)



As a vintage BMW enthusiast, I couldn't resist having the test pair painted in BMW's classic Golf Yellow, which was a standard color on the 2002 and 2002tii from 1971-1975. I also knew it would make staffer Jerald O'Brien insanely jealous, as his 2002tii is painted this very color. As we were unboxing the speakers in our driveway, the fellow that was working on our fence came over and said, "I don't even care what those sound like, I want a pair just like that for my living room. *Those are works of art.*"

A few weeks later, after the speakers were thoroughly run in, he came back for a long listening session, and I think Zu will soon be building a second set of the Essence in Golf Yellow. Perhaps a third pair will be in the works, because Mr. O'Brien grumbles about needing a pair every time he visits the office. I suggested he should show a little originality and get his pair in Inka Orange.

### Rock Around the Clock

Are they the last word in tonal accuracy? Not really, but they *are* a ton of fun and were never fatiguing, even after extended listening sessions. You aren't going to get it all for \$5,000 a pair from anyone else, and I'd rather have a little bit of warmth sprinkled in at this price point. Much like my favorite McIntosh tube amplifiers, the Zu's inject that little bit of romance that makes most of your record collection sound way better than you ever thought it could. If you love music, you will love the Essence.

The Zu Essence is the only \$5,000 speaker that's been able to give me goosebumps on a regular basis when listening to my favorite rock, jazz and electronic music albums. Combined with the tube amplifier of your choice, the Zu Essence speakers will transport you to an extremely enjoyable place that few speakers can. I'd say the name is very appropriate. ●

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**The Zu Essence speakers will transport you to an extremely enjoyable place that few speakers can. I'd say the name is very appropriate.**

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**Analog Sources** Spiral Groove SG-2 w/Triplanar and Lyra Skala, TW Acoustic Raven TWO w/SME iV.Vi and Dynavector XV-1s, SME 309 and Clearaudio Virtuoso Wood

**Preamplifiers** Burmester 011, Conrad-Johnson ACT 2/Series II, 60th anniversary McIntosh C22

**Power Amplifiers** Burmester 911mk.3, BAT VK-55SE, 60th anniversary McIntosh MC 75 monoblocks, Prima Luna Dialog Monoblocks

**Phono Preamplifiers** Nagra VPS w/VFS, Naim Superline with HiCap2

**Interconnects** Shunyata Aurora

**Speaker Cable** Zu Libtec

**Power Management** Running Springs Dmitri and Jaco Power Conditioners, Shunyata Hydra 2, Shunyata Python CX and Anaconda power cords

**Accessories** Burmester audio racks, Furutech DeMag, Shunyata Dark Field Cable elevators

**Room Treatments** GIK 242 panels and Tri-Traps, Sonex Classic

# Let's Get Small!

By Jerald O'Brien

If you love headphones and have been contemplating a move to the world of computer based music storage, the StyleAudio Topaz could be your ticket to paradise. At just \$449, it includes a very good headphone amplifier *and* a great DAC all in one tiny box. It will process up to 24/192 signals through its optical port and up to 16/48 through the USB port. You can even use it as a preamp if you cheat a bit.

The owners manual suggests 150 hours of break in, so I left the Topaz hooked up to one of my old laptops with Journey's *Greatest Hits* on repeat for the better part of the week. I'm not sure if it was the extended play time, or the torture of playing "Wheel in the Sky" about 500 times, but the slight edge of the Topaz was gone by Friday night.

My phones of choice were the AKG 701's that have been rewired by Ken Ball of ALO Audio. I always borrow these from our publisher, because they present a slightly more difficult load to drive than my Grado GS-1's and thanks to the ALO rewire, they reveal a lot of detail. For those of you with other phones, the Topaz had no problem driving the Grados, Sennheiser 650's or even my really old Koss Pro4AA's. The front panel features a standard ¼ - inch jack, so if you are using some high performance earbuds you will need an adapter.





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## USB or Optical?

While I had great luck using the USB input for most of my iTunes collection, this eliminated the possibility of playing high-resolution files. Switching to the optical connection, allowed my recent downloads from the Naim Label store to be played in all of their 24-bit glory and you can really hear a big difference, with more dynamics and less noise in the presentation. I've been grooving on the acoustic sound of Fred Simon's *Since Forever*, which features Pat Metheny bassist Steve Rodby. The high res wav file really expanded the space inside my head.

When I started with the 320kb/sec jpeg, the sound appeared to be a point source in the middle of my head. Moving up to the 16/44 file, the ball of sound felt as big as my head, and the 24/96 file felt like I had a head the size of one of those guys on a Fruit Gusher ad.

For those of you not familiar with this, click the link here;

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cr0nU1e6wjl&feature=PlayList&p=0DE39F4D06BEADCA&index=0&playnext=1>

Yep, that's how big the soundstage was. Cool.

Using the USB port with both Mac and PC computers was no problem at all. My Dell laptop running Vista (home edition) switched over automatically and my power book required going into the control panel and switching the output manually to the USB port. *(continued)*



### A Step Into Madness

There's been a lot of buzz on the internet lately about premium USB cables and I've resisted this forever, because half of my brain says a USB cable just transmits data and can't make a difference on the sound. However, Lee Wieland at CryoParts has never tried to sell me snake oil in the past or sent me anything to listen to that I didn't like.

Now that I have my HAZMAT suit secure, I must say that their \$249 Polestar USB cable does sound more musical than the standard \$20 item I bought from Radio Shack. Again, I was very biased *against* the outcome of this test, but even with a few of my favorite blind test guinea pigs, the most untrained listeners could hear a difference between the two cables and they all described the same effect. The overall presentation gets cleaner, with slightly more air on top and everything overall sounds less congested and "digital-like."

Would I buy the \$249 USB cable to go with the Topaz? Nope, it really defeats the budget ethos of this kind of product. But in a mega system, using a laptop as the source, I would highly suggest this cable, or perhaps even one of the top USB cables from Locus. Taking the Polestar over to our publisher's house to listen on his MartinLogan CLX's powered with a complement of Burmester and Naim goodies, it was much easier to hear the difference in overall sonic cleanliness, specifically in the highs. Again, this was much more apparent with 24/96 files, so if you are getting into high resolution downloads, this cable should be on your list of future upgrades.

Should you still think I'm crazy, Lee is finally getting caught up enough on production of these cables to actually have some stock on the shelf. If you don't think the Axis makes a difference, you can send it back and get a refund, less 20% restock fee. I'm going to bet you that \$50 restock fee, that you'll keep it.

### Further Notes

The Topaz is definitely fast becoming my favorite small headphone amplifier. The sound quality is good enough that as an occasional headphone listener, I don't think I'd ever need to go further. Because I can't stand to keep my fingers out of things, I tried hooking the Topaz up to a much beefier power supply. Adding a 1500ma 9V supply from Radio Shack, took the Topaz to another level entirely and had it knocking on the door of headphone amps I've heard costing twice as much. *(continued)*

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The best sound came from my custom wire harness, putting ten 9V batteries together, taped with industrial tape. In theory, this would allow you to take the Topaz on a trip with you, but you'll probably have some explaining to do at the security checkpoint. Backgrounds got *super* black and the high frequencies even smoother and less grainy, so there's a lot more locked up inside this tiny black box.

My only minor complaint is that the RCA outputs are fixed. I'd love to see them variable, so that you could make this part of a very compact, yet high performance computer based music system. I ran a 1-meter cable from the headphone jack to a Dynaco Stereo 70 and a pair of Quad 57's I just picked up and the sound was very good.

Just a suggestion perhaps, for the next generation.

### Conclusion – The Topaz Rules!

If you are looking for a moderately priced headphone amp with a DAC built in, look no further than the Topaz. This little box is worth the price asked for either component, so the fact that you get both is a true value. I'm happy to award the Topaz one of TONEAudio's Exceptional Value Awards for 2009. This one is worth every penny. ●

### Info for the Polestar Cable:

<http://www.locus-design.com/interconnect.html>

### And the Topaz Amplifier:

[http://www.cryo-parts.com/style\\_audio.html](http://www.cryo-parts.com/style_audio.html)

# Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

With cassettes and SACD making a comeback, I thought these two pieces made perfect finds for the bargain basement. Both can be had for a very low price and will give you excellent sound for the money.

## Nakamichi 550

eBay — \$75

In the 70's many of us found a way to sneak our Sony Walkman Pro's into concerts to get remarkably good bootleg tapes. The quality was so good, that many of us ended up using the Walkman Pro as our home cassette deck as well.

Here's another forgotten hero from that time period, the Nakamichi 550. I used to see these on soundboards at shows all the time and a number of engineers I knew used them for personal projects. This deck had a legendary following, and for a while had almost as much cachet as a Nagra. So I couldn't resist.



**Pioneer DV-563A**

Garage Sale — \$15

This player was one of the best bargains in HiFi when it was new, at \$129. Now that they are showing up used, you can usually find a clean one on eBay or Audiogon for under \$50, but this one was a steal. The 563 plays everything but Blu Ray, and it does a remarkably good job with 2-channel. This one even came with a Journey CD still in the tray, bonus!

If you are putting a budget system together, you can't go wrong with one of these. ●



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Music Direct: [www.musicdirect.com](http://www.musicdirect.com)

Music Millennium: [www.musicmillennium.com](http://www.musicmillennium.com)

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

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

NePlusUltra: [www.neplusultrainc.com](http://www.neplusultrainc.com)

Nik Software: [www.niksoftware.com](http://www.niksoftware.com)

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

Red Wine Audio: [www.redwineaudio.com](http://www.redwineaudio.com)

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

Running Springs Audio: [www.runningspringsaudio.com](http://www.runningspringsaudio.com)

Save the Music: [www.vh1.com](http://www.vh1.com)

Shunyata: [www.shunyata.com](http://www.shunyata.com)

Sooloos: [www.sooloos.com](http://www.sooloos.com)

Upscale Audio: [www.upscaleaudio.com](http://www.upscaleaudio.com)

Verity Audio: [www.verityaudio.com](http://www.verityaudio.com)

Wadia: [www.wadia.com](http://www.wadia.com)

Zu Audio: [www.zuaudio.com](http://www.zuaudio.com)