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As We See It

John Atkinson

"The monthly miracle," it's called in publishing: that magical moment when the new issue of your magazine arrives in the mailbox hot from the printer. And with this issue of *Stereophile*—No.274, or Vol.25 No.11—we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the start of our "miracle." With the 20 pages of Issue No.1, Vol.1 No.1, cover-dated September-October 1962, "Ye Editor & Publisher" J. Gordon Holt introduced both a new audio magazine and the philosophy that an audio product is best reviewed by doing exactly what its purchasers will do: listen to it. On that small rock of an idea was founded not only *Stereophile* but the entire high-end audio industry. Here, reprinted from a 1974 anthology of the first 12 issues, is J. Gordon Holt's description of the events that led up to the founding of *Stereophile*:

"Many years ago—in 1945, to be exact—I was required to take a music-appreciation course at a private school I was attending in Melbourne, Australia. The approach was, of course, a historical one, so like most of my classmates I sat with total indifference through the playing of excerpts from Gregorian chant through Baroque to early Romantic, via a truly magnificent phonograph and record collection donated to the school by the Carnegie Foundation. Not until the *Prelude* to Act III of Wagner's *Lohengrin* was I stirred from my apathy, and I was so stirred I bought my own recording of it, to play on a little wind-up acoustic Victrola. Somehow, it didn't sound quite the same, and I was determined to find out why. And that is how, in one fell swoop, I became hooked on both classical music and high fidelity.

"Since audio was technical, I chose to go to an engineering university—Lehigh U.—but soon learned that engineering was math, for which I had no talent. So I went for a journalism degree, for which one course required that I write magazine articles. I wrote about audio, and sold two pieces to *High Fidelity*, ultimately accepting a job there as 'Audio Editor.' My function: testing and reporting on components. That was my introduction to the 'commercial' side of Big Publishing.

"I watched, first with incredulity and then with growing disgust, how the purchase of a year's advertising contract could virtually insure a manufacturer against publication of an unfavorable report. Critical reports were either watered-down to minimize the critical comment, or were simply suppressed when it proved impossible to express in an 'acceptable' manner the fact that we were unable to test something because all three samples submitted to us had blown up when we switched them on.

"I managed to live with this crap for five years, after which I quit *HF* and went to work for one of the hi-fi industry's genuine geniuses, Paul Weathers, who is still best known as the inventor of the first commercially made FM phono pickup. The stereo version of that never came to pass, but Weathers did produce a *ceramic* stereo pickup that managed somehow to wipe out all of the competition. It was when we started submitting that pickup to the hi-fi magazines that I got to see the other side of the commercial-publishing coin.

> "If no one else will publish a magazine that calls the shots as it sees them, I'll do it myself."
> — J. Gordon Holt, 1962

"The Weathers Professional Stereo pickup outperformed everything else on the market for a period of about four years after its introduction, but it was never given any recognition for this superiority by any hi-fi magazine. In other words, not only were the Big Advertisers' products immune from serious criticism, they were also shielded from the threat of comparison with competing products that were better but not so heavily advertised.

"My reaction was, 'Okay, if no one else will publish a magazine that calls the shots as it sees them, I'll do it myself.' I must have been out of my mind! —JGH"

Four decades later, in a different century, we are still calling the shots as we see 'em, and we are still basing our value judgments on how products sound. I outline what happened next, the story of *Stereophile*'s subsequent 40 years, in an article starting on p.56. But as that article is concerned with our public face, I thought I'd take a moment to mention the behind-the-scenes aspect of "the book."

Every installment of our "monthly miracle" involves *many* disparate elements. Looking at the issue you are holding in your hands and contrasting it (in parentheses) with issue No.1, it contains:

- 1 color cover photograph (1 black-and-white in 1962)
- 3 articles (5)
- 5 regular columns (2)
- 10 individual news items in "Industry Update" (none)
- 17 audio components written about (1)
- 22 recordings reviewed (5)
- 25 events listed in the "Calendar" (none)
- 26 letters from readers and manufacturers (9)
- 39 classified advertisements (1)
- 58 measurement graphs (4)
- 100 photographs and graphic images (13)
- 120 display advertisements (none)
- 204 pages (20)

Each month, every one of these items must come together at the right place at the right time in the right order. J. Gordon Holt wrote back in the 1970s that putting together that first issue of *Stereophile* took him and a temporary assistant six months. The current issue was put together in *one* month by just three full-time people—Pip Tannenbaum (Production Manager), Elizabeth Donovan (Managing Editor), Stephen Mejias (Editorial Assistant)—with the help of two contractors: Richard Lehnert (Copy Editor) and Natalie Brown-Baca (Art Director). These five are the magazine's too-often-unsung heroes. My thanks to them for turning the ideas expressed by music editor Robert Baird and myself, and by our 60-strong team of writers, into something tangible.

And my thanks to those same writers for making this editor's job as rewarding as it has turned out to be. To my continuing regret, J. Gordon Holt left *Stereophile* in 1999 for what he perceived to be greener pastures. But it is my pleasure to announce that Art Dudley, until recently editor of the now-defunct *Listener* magazine, will be joining our extended family as a reviewer and columnist with the January 2003 issue. Welcome aboard, Art.

stereophile
November 2002
Vol.25 No.11

40 YEARS OF Stereophile

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175 Record Reviews
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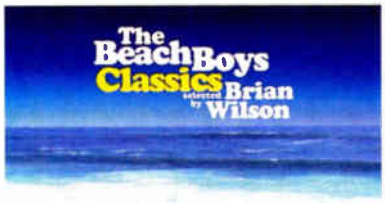
Independent label Thrill Jockey celebrates its 10th anniversary. Robert Baird talks with TJ founder Bettina Richards.



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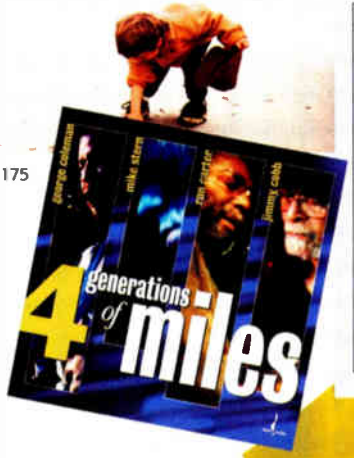

Staff

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Publisher ..... *John B. Gourlay*

Editor ..... *John Atkinson*
Music Editor ..... *Robert Baird*
Managing Editor ..... *Elizabeth Donovan*
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Senior Contributing Editors ..... *Martin Colloms, Michael Fremer*
Copy Editor ..... *Richard Lehnert*

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Test & Measurement Consultant ..... *Paul Miller*

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Assistant to the VP/Executive Publisher ... *Lynn Goldstein-Garguilo*
Assistants to the Publisher ..... *Maria Howard, Emily Helming*
Web Producer ..... *Jon Iverson*
Graphic Design ..... *Natalie Brown-Baca, Pip Tannenbaum*
Cover Photo ..... *Eric Swanson*

Advertising Sales
Eastern Advertising Manager: *Keith Pray*
110 Fifth Avenue, 5th Floor • New York, NY 10011
(212) 229-4846 • fax (212) 886-2810
e-mail: keith_pray@PRIMEDIAmags.com

East of the Mississippi: *Brian Georgi*
110 Fifth Avenue, 5th Floor • New York, NY 10011
(212) 229-4868 • fax (212) 886-2810
e-mail: brian_georgi@PRIMEDIAmags.com

West of the Mississippi & National Dealers
Laura J. LoVecchio • LoVecchio Associates, Brooklyn, NY
(718) 745-5025 • fax (718) 745-5076
e-mail: LoVecchio_Associates@compuserve.com

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Editorial ..... (212) 229-4896
Editorial fax ..... (212) 886-2809
John Atkinson ..... john_atkinson@PRIMEDIAmags.com
Robert Baird ..... robert_baird@PRIMEDIAmags.com
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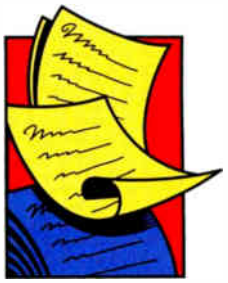

Worn out?

Editor:

I just got my *Stereophile*. Oh man, has this publication fallen. It used to be excellent. It was a real specialist journal of great stature among such things. It had a close-knit group of really good writers, whom you couldn't wait to read each month. Different styles, different opinions, different personalities, humor, wit, all on the same page, coupled with delightful stuff from great minds on the lunatic fringes. Where is Corey Greenberg now that we really need him?

I hope somebody buys *Stereophile* who cares, who makes it happen again, and who puts personalities ahead of profits. Go back to digest size, go back to matte paper, and start all over. But I fear it is too late.

Louis Peeler
rdme@rmci.net

Newly minted

Editor:

I am a brand-new *Stereophile* subscriber and I enjoy the magazine greatly. I recently read Jon Iverson's "As We See It" in the June issue (p.3), about where audiophiles got their start. I turned 16 in February. For my birthday my parents got me a 60W NAD integrated I'd been drooling over for some time. This summer I am not getting a car because I want to save up for the rest of my audio system.

I got my start in sound when I was six years old and a guy at my church let me help him set up microphones. I lived in Charlotte, North Carolina at the time, and when I was eight, my family moved up to South Bend, Indiana. I started working for another sound team that set up and took down equipment for People of Praise meetings. Now I occasionally run the FoH (Front of House, mixing sound for the audience) and the monitor mixes. I just got a job this summer as an assistant recording engineer at a small-project studio and I hope to also work part-time at HiFi Buys, one of our city's better hi-fi dealers. (The owner of that store is the one who told me about *Stereophile*.)

I would like to go to McGill University to get a Master's in Sound Recording and make a profession out of something I love. Keep up the good writing in *Stereophile*—I'm sure I will be reading about the latest sound innovations in your magazine when I'm on my deathbed in 2050.

Michael Banks
Neve1686@aol.com

Hats off!

Editor:

I have been a *Stereophile* subscriber and reader for over 25 years (with one short gap). Unfortunately, due to forces beyond my control, I have been out of the audiophile circuit for a while now. Now that I'm back, I'm enjoying *Stereophile* again, but I am wondering what I missed: where's J. Gordon Holt?

Hats off to JA and all the *Stereophile* gang for the absolutely best audiophile magazine around!

John Guozdz
Johnmail@aol.com

Thanks, Mr. Guozdz. As you can read elsewhere in this issue, in the first of the three articles celebrating our 40th anniversary, the venerable JGH, in whose ears we trust, packed up his two-channel tent in favor of surround-sound and home theater and left us in 1999. —JA

Just thawed out . . .

Editor:

I have a somewhat unusual story to tell.

I was an avid audiophile. I had foam on the walls, garden hoses on the carpet, and a loving wife who could not help but roll her eyes every time I pulled up with another box in the trunk. It got so serious, I even planned our family vacations near major cities so I could check out the audio shops. In late 1990, I gave it up. I have neither read about nor touched a component in over 10 years.

The other day, I came upon my old McIntosh amplifier and Celestion SL-600 speakers in the closet. It all came back to me—the orange glow, the endless audition of speakers, the search for the Holy Grail. I got in the car and headed for the bookstore.

The September 2002 *Stereophile* was my first in over 10 years. I did what I always used to do: I read it from cover to cover. My emotions ran the gamut.

I was heartened to see that you (and your competitor) are still around. In late 1990, we were slipping into a recession, and many component manufacturers were closing their doors. I was therefore relieved to see that many of the quality manufacturers are extant. I was also pleased to read that companies such as Thiel and Vandersteen are still producing high-end components for the common man. I was amused to read that the vinyl/digital debate is still unresolved, although it appears to have settled down somewhat in the past 10 years. I was discouraged to read the prices of much of the equipment, as I have to believe that this has a chilling effect on new converts to the hobby. I was saddened to learn of the passing of Lars, and obviously shocked to read of the "defection" of J. Gordon Holt.

It is too soon to tell whether I am back for good. However, early indications are positive. My wife caught me measuring the downstairs bedroom, which my daughter recently vacated when she went off to college.

Howard Lessinger
Atlanta, Georgia
LegaLess@aol.com

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Being there #1

Editor:

I had an amazing experience last night. I saw John Hiatt in concert at the Mountain Winery in Saratoga, California. The setting was fantastic, his backing band, The Goners, was outstanding, and John was at his best—and very entertaining! What *was* amazing, though, was a thought that struck me as I drove home: I had as much fun listening to music as I've ever had, yet not once did I think about imaging, soundstage, lush mids, etc.

I need to get out of the house more often!

Kevin Thornton
Danville, CA
kevint1@ix.netcom.com

Being there #2

Editor:

I was rereading "A Tale of Two Systems," John Atkinson's "As We See It" in the November 1988 *Stereophile* [*available online at www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?533*], and found some of his comments very

interesting. He was trying to come to grips with statements made by [*Stereophile* founder] J. Gordon Holt about "musical accuracy," and why so many are left unmoved by digital recordings but are totally enthralled by the analog equivalents. It seems that today the discussion remains much the same, even with the digital hardware significantly better in both the recording chain and playback DACs.

JA hit the nail on the head when he talked about the "scale" of the performance. How can you accurately reproduce a concert orchestra that spans 100' from two speakers whose largest drivers are, at most, 15" in diameter? The problem, to me, seems to be the size of the orchestra's projected "face" of 100', the reflected sound that arrives from the theater walls, floor, and ceiling, the patron sitting next to you, and then the inability of the recording engineer to capture "all" of the direct and reflected sound.

It must be made clear from the outset that this is no slight to those, like JA, who perform Herculean efforts to accurately record music. But to design and implement a microphone and recording system that could capture it "all" is impossible. I still can't find a "sampled" piano sound I really like. An artist who plays a 9' concert grand will know what I am talking about. Synthesized has not yet met piano reality.

What we do find is that microphones that have a figure-8 pattern seem to do a better overall job of capturing "more" of the acoustic energy than large-diaphragm, cardioid, condenser microphones. They also accept acoustic energy more similarly to how we hear it. Again, we can be assured that someone with JA's experience in recording agonizes over the placement of the mikes to replicate what he hears in the hall during the recording. But I think I can say for sure that the 10-CD collection of Robert Silverman performing Beethoven [www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?298] is still *not* what JA or RS heard "in person." Very close, maybe? That is a question only JA and RS can answer.

It seems to me that it is the senses of space, depth, air, and breadth of soundstage that are missing from most reproduced music, which causes the dissatisfaction with audio components, even with analog *vs* digital itself. But each and every time we replace even one component in the playback chain, we make major changes in all I mention at the beginning of this paragraph. How many times has Michael Fremer mentioned these same changes from different cartridges mounted on the same turntable, or in the replacement of one phono stage with another? I have even noticed a great improvement in the sound of my system just by moving back 6–8' from my normal listening position. The senses of depth and horizontal soundstage improve greatly, with a greater sense of naturalness, as I move back. Unfortunately, my furniture will not work in this position.

The most realistic reproduction/presentation of prerecorded music I have ever heard was put on by a music dealer in Bel Air, Maryland. He rented a local theater with a stage approximately 150' wide and a gradually raked seating area of about 800. Across the width of the stage he had eight 4–5'-tall Bozak speakers, each, I believe, with multiple 12" or 15" bass drivers. Four speakers on each side of the stage, separated by about 15', reproduced the stereo image. Each speaker cabinet was driven by a separate 200Wpc power amplifier, this monitored to ensure that it was not driven into clipping.

The sound was spectacular, to say the least. The balance of acoustic energy was very good, with no bass bloom or doubling and no smearing of the highs. It seemed easy to pick out individual instruments from orchestral works. But to me, what was at work here was the re-creation of a similar soundstage to what existed when the recording was made. It also made it clear that asking any single pair of speakers to re-create the width of a symphony orchestra may be physically impossible without special time-delay recording techniques to trick us into hearing "large" or "wide."

It seems, from a physics perspective, improper to negatively tag hardware as "faulty" when it is asked to do more than the real-world instruments create in actual performance. At 5' 8", I cannot do what Michael Jordan does on the basketball court. I think that what we ultimately require might be multiple systems to re-create different types of music. In listening to a vocalist in a small acoustic trio, this would require a less expansive soundstage to sound "realistic." Perhaps multichannel DSD will ultimately bring this to reality — not with rear surround, which many find disconcerting, but with a horizontal frontal "stage" array of multiple speakers. Tom Jung's multiple-microphone, multichannel DSD recordings may be what we have been waiting for.

When I listen to MapleShade recordings, I hear how their minimalist miking techniques come into play. When I listen to Christy Baron on Chesky, I hear what they feel is an accurate reproduction of her wonderful performance. When I listen to Eva Cassidy's *Live at Blues Alley*, I hear what I believe to be an excellent live recording. It is the emotional attachment to music we all seek — the sense of being in the same room with the performers. I think the "scale" of the performance is what we are all after. We just have to be realistic in how we record it, and how we can achieve it in our homes.

Jim Tavegia
Villa Rica, GA
tavegia@bellsouth.net

My *Mosaic*

Editor:

I just received *Stereophile*'s *Mosaic* CD and wanted to thank John Atkinson for all the trouble he went to to make this recording. It is the best CD I have ever heard (I have more than 500 in my library) — better, in fact, than any SACD. It is the first classical recording where I was able to hear the wood of the instruments.

Bob Prichard
bprichard@somaxsports.com

Muddled *Mosaic?*

Editor:

I have been an audiophile and a reader of *Stereophile* for a while now and I recently purchased your *Mosaic* CD. I would like to thank you and congratulate you for doing an excellent job on the recording and engineering of the album. However, I noticed that on some tracks, the clarinet appears to be on the right-hand side of the soundstage, which is where it is supposed be according to the photo in the album booklet, while on others it is at center stage, in front of the cello. Where is it supposed to be?

Sanjaya Warnasuriya
sanji@ucla.edu

Glad you enjoyed our efforts, Mr. Prichard (described at www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?575). For me to have been involved in such inspired music making was its own reward.

The clarinet is on the right, Mr. Warnasuriya, but pointing across the stage rather than out into the hall. The anomaly you hear is a combination of the miking used and the fact that the clarinet player tended to raise his instrument at musical climaxes. The bell of the instrument then pointed directly at the left omni mic; the resultant increased amplitude in that mic began to outweigh the fact that the instrument was farther away than it was from the right mic. There was also a strong reflection from the wall behind the players that affected the apparent position of the clarinet when it was playing loud.

I tried dealing with these problems at the sessions by moving the players farther out into the hall, but then they couldn't hear each other well enough to stay in time with one another. One of those quirks that makes recording an art rather than an exact science. **—JA**

An exhibitor heard from

Editor:

My thanks and congratulations to *Stereophile* for putting on such a successful show. It was wonderful to see so many excited, curious faces in and out of our room all weekend long at Home Entertainment 2002, and I am very proud that our room was so well received. We had set up to accommodate 24 people for each of our 15-minute presentations, but during the busiest hours we had to squeeze in 70 people at a time!

I would also like to thank EgglestonWorks, Convergent Audio Technology, VPI Industries, Electro-

How to improve upon perfection.

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companiet, Dream Vision, and Harmonic Technology for their collaborative efforts in making our room the success that it was. Each worked tirelessly, right up to the day of the show, to have a new product to debut to the world here in New York. They are to be commended for their dedication and the results that they yielded.

Thank you once again. I can hardly wait for the excitement that next year's show is sure to bring. *Mario A. Campa*
Toys from the Attic

Beg them

Editor:
Beg them. No more single-layer SACD discs. I can't play them in the car. I can't play them at the beach. I can't even play them at my friend's. And the only SACD player I have doesn't connect to anything digitally (in SACD mode). Make them release everything on two-layer hybrid discs. Make them. I'll even give up my second morning coffee.

I will not buy *Lady in Satin* in 5.1. I will not buy *Lady in Satin* in 5.1....
Giles
zerocold3@atthi.com

Flood the market

Editor:
I just read Jon Iverson's September "As We See It," on the format war between DVD-Audio and SACD. Let me say a couple of things.

First, I was an early adopter of the Sony Betamax. Now you have an idea of how much respect I have for Sony's marketing capability. (There were technical problems with Beta that VHS never suffered from, so I don't have much respect for Sony's technical "superiority" either.) I have just as little respect for Sony's handling of the marketing of SACD. It's not too late, if Sony does what I think should be done; that is, flood the market with hybrid discs. Encourage record companies to do the same. Get bricks'n'mortar and online stores to sell them.

Bricks'n'mortar outlets would be happy to have just one disc that does everything, so they don't have to be stuck with double inventory (SACD and DVD-A). Remember VHS and Beta rentals? Most stores went VHS-only and helped sink Beta. SACD could sink DVD-A the same way. When you want to win a war and conventional weapons don't cut it, you drop the big one.

One other thing to think about is that a lot of people listen to CDs in their cars. I don't think that DVD-A will ever go mobile. That's another spot where the war can be won by SACD. [*Panasonic has already demonstrated a superb-sounding in-dash DVD-A player; see Jon Iverson's report on DVD-A in this issue's "Industry Update."—Ed.*]

Most people aren't going to rush out and replace a working CD player with an SACD equivalent, but when their machines break, they will, after having already collected a bunch of SACD titles playable on their CD players. When that happens, these people will hear good sound for probably the first time in their lives. That should make our hobby grow with the masses. *Ray Moran*
Austin TX
Raytx@aol.com

We'll always have vinyl

Editor:
I have been following with much interest the debate over which hi-rez digital format will replace CD. I, too, would love to have a true digital high-resolution format that captures all the virtues of vinyl to go along with the convenience of digital. Unfortunately, it just isn't going to happen. SACD, DVD-Audio, or whatever else can be thought up will end up being niche products at best. The deck is stacked against all of them succeeding, and has been from the start. And this ongoing format war isn't helping. VHS triumphed over Beta only because it filled a need on the part of the public at large. SACD and DVD-A don't do that.

None of the big record companies seem all that interested in supporting any (and especially not all) of the different formats by putting out many (all? Heaven forbid) of their new releases on any of them. [*Actually, new major-label releases are starting to appear on SACD and DVD-A as well as CD this fall.—Ed.*] And those that are putting out titles seem to be releasing repackages of a few older, analog recordings that have paid for themselves many times over. These they'll reissue again and again, trying to get consumers to purchase the music for the second (or third, or fourth) time. Toss in watermarking and you get a reception even less warm. Consumers are conspicuously voting "No" with their wallets.

The only *new* releases I've seen come down the pipe have all seemed to come from small, specialty audiophile labels, such as DMP, Chesky, and Telarc. While that's all well and good, not many of these produce music that the public at large is interested in—otherwise they wouldn't be small, specialty labels, but major ones.

Therein lies the real reason none of the new hi-rez formats will succeed: John Q. Public just doesn't see (or hear) the need for them. Those few music-lovers who still have any interest in prerecorded albums are perfectly happy with CD, and since those CDs can be played via that hot new DVD-Video player they just bought at Best Buy or Circuit City or Good Guys, well, the consumer gets the best of all worlds. One machine to handle two jobs: movies and music. What could be simpler?

The media that, in the past, trumpeted such new advances as necessities, are gone. Think *Stereo Review*, *Audio*, *High Fidelity*—mass-market–catering publications audiophiles loved to dump on, but which the general public read with confidence. Who today is telling Middle America that they need either of these two formats? The audiophile press? Please. Most of the world doesn't even know it exists.

I firmly believe the audiophile press needs to consider the real viability of these new formats before trumpeting them to the stars. As I said above, I'm all for one of these new formats succeeding. I just don't see it happening.

Oh, well. At least we'll always have vinyl. *John Crossett*
Johnmcrossett@aol.com

Analog is alive and well in Costa Rica

Editor:
As I have been a happy, in-his-late-20s *Stereophile* subscriber for several months now, you should be flattered to know you have faithful readers beyond the usual US/Canada realm. Although getting into high-end audio here in Costa Rica isn't as easy as in the US (thanks partly to our country's outrageous custom fees), I am proud of being able to rely on my trusty Rega Planar 3 turntable fitted with an AcousTech phono stage. (We can always dream of having a custom Simon Yorke 'table, right?)

I started deep into analog and vinyl when everyone was getting rid of them: in the early 1990s. Being able to scour thrift stores for priceless, mint records for pennies on the dollar was a great start for what later became an essential part of my life. Overseas travels have become vinyl-hunting trips as well, and those are really memorable moments for me. And when there's not travel, there's eBay!

Still, I have to put up with all my friends' weird looks when I talk about or show them my phono setup: "Have you lost your mind?" "Why do you collect ancient junk?" I can't blame them—being able to discern the difference and superiority of analog *vs* digital is part acquired taste, part self-*ear*ducation, and part realizing that investing thousands of bucks in select components is not an eccentricity when you know what you are doing and can enjoy the rewards.

Simply put, the digital approach of chopping a piece of music into bits and bytes can never be the same as the continuous flow of a modulated groove—"continuous" is the key word here, I think. The "air" between instruments, the overall sweetening—those are characteristics I have yet to hear from a CD, and I doubt if I ever will.

And now with Senator Hollings & Co. jumping down US consumers' throats while barking up the wrong tree, and the record companies shooting themselves in the foot with useless "copy-protection schemes" and treating like criminals the

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Here are last month's Nagra Spotters:

The Wire (HBO Series) Mark Roman
Diva (Delacorte Novel) Alex Rydzewski
Stereophile (July 2002) Robert Strum
The China Syndrome (Movie)- Douglas Pitt
The Star Chamber (Movie) Douglas Pitt
The Conversation (Movie) - Douglas Pitt
The Year of Living Dangerously (Movie) Douglas Pitt
Robb Report (June 2002) Jason Sufilka
Stereophile (Jan 1998 & Jan 1996) Bond Haynes
The Night Crew (Sanford Novel) - Lori French
Music Lovers (Audio Store) - Mike Perszyk
John Cleese's First Farewell (BBC America) - Dave Kaleta
The Wire (Episode 2) Mike Williams
Law & Order (TV Series) - Scott Winter
Stereophile (April 2002) Robert Lin
Animal Telepathy (Discovery Channel) - Doug Richardson
Wired (Magazine, July 2002) Bill Howard
Blind Man's Bluff (History Channel) Dave Wilhite
My Wife is an Actress (Movie) Phil Ressler
USA Today (July 13) Steve Lant
National Education Association Media Campaign - Bill Reilly
Thelma and Louise (Movie) Joe Romano
Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (Movie) Joe Romano
No Way Out (Movie) - Mark Wollman
Blow Up (Movie) Mark Wollman
The Thin Blue Line (Movie) Mark Wollman
The Dead Milkman (Music Video, VH1 Aug 28) Alin Villaverde
The Right Temptation (Movie) Casey Mckee

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very customers they depend on, I wonder who are the ones who have actually lost their minds. This along with the current grim scenes in the music industry, not only on the financial-piracy issue, but also the narrow-minded attitude that sees revenue only in selling Britney Spears to pimply, hormone-challenged teenagers who in turn couldn't care less about buying a CD when they can just rip it off the Web.

But kudos to your SuperAnalogMan, Michael Fremer, whose column is the one I read first, in a frenzy, every month when my copy of *Stereophile* arrives. Guys like Fremer make me feel I'm not alone going against the musical and technological grains.

Alberto Gonzalez M.
beto@betobeto.net

Nixon *won?*

Editor:
Michael Fremer implying that analog is alive and well based on a show of hands at a *Stereophile* "Ask the Editors" session at Home Entertainment 2002 (September, p.37) is like Pauline Kael expressing amazement that McGovern lost to Nixon despite everyone she knew voting for him.

Bhagirath Kathanna
Hannibal, MO
bkathanna@pol.net

The analog obsession

Editor:
Two to three years ago I returned to vinyl in a significant way, spurred on by *Stereophile* and Mikey. I purchased high-quality gear, a VPI 16.5 record washer, and all sorts of paraphernalia. Many of my old records were already near mint quality, and with light cleaning, these played very well. Others were dirtier—especially some of my favorites from the 1960s and '70s. Recently, I finally got the courage to "really scrub" the dirtier records while rotating them on the record cleaner using the VPI brush. I figured a couple such washes on each side would either destroy the record or make it playable. The result is that my entire collection of 1000 discs became musically accessible—in fact, in most cases, pristine-sounding.

I now often find myself in cleaning-listening marathons when I should be sleeping at night or cutting the grass on weekends. I do not think I am the only one who is afraid to really clean records. I doubt that I am using the best technique, and I would appreciate *Stereophile* revisiting the record-cleaning options in a more thorough way. I think we can all use a little review on how to really clean dirty vinyl for use with very sensitive playback systems. Newcomers to vinyl certainly will not know what to do, and many others probably would not dare scrub a record.

Greg Lanza
greg@cm.wustl.edu

Welcome back to vinyl Mr. Lanza! Your timing is good. There's so much new and used vinyl out there right now it's impossible to keep up. I did a long piece on cleaning a while back in "Analog Corner." I recommend the Disc Doctor's cleaning fluid and his brushes. My cleaning regimen consists of: apply Disc Doctor fluid with brush to the LP; remove as much fluid as possible with an Allsop Orbitrac; apply distilled water with a stiff nylon bristle brush, like the VPI machine (the distilled water rinse is essential following the DD fluid); followed by vacuum cleaning.

—Michael Fremer

Hearing the differences

Editor:
I have read with interest the debate in *Stereophile* about online *vs* bricks'n'mortar stereo buying. I think you need to use both. This year I have fulfilled a longtime ambition to have nice sound again in my life. In doing this, we turned not only to *Stereophile* but also to the wealth of reports, reviews, and comments by owners that are available online. These directed us toward the products we began to narrow our interest to, within the reality of a budget.

We then went to the two blocks in our major city where four major stereo shops are located. We invested full days of looking and listening at the various shops, based on what we had learned.

We also learned about each retailer. One was just too busy selling to stop and talk to us. That was an easy decision for us. Another redirected us from one set of speakers to another that was incredibly better—so much so that we thought we were done. Then hubris took over and they played their "custom" CD. Yes, the female vocalist was right in the room with us, like the Voice of the Gods. Then came the next rock sound, and, "Oh my God, where did the bass go?"

The next shop had a great-sounding speaker, even with our tired old integrated amp, but we were listening in Room Three—the one with the bevel-cut leaded-glass door, full of things made of unobtainium. It sounded good, really good, but then we looked through your reviews and thought, well, the CD player listed in *Stereophile* for $20,000 *should* sound good.

Finally, we found a shop that just let us listen, but with a purpose. First, get the best you can afford that will play the thing itself—CD, tape, LP, etc. We went from CD player to CD player to CD player, changing nothing in amp, speaker, wires, and it did get better and better. We found our player, then we did the same with an integrated amplifier. Took it home—wonderful.

Then we looked in their used-speaker room. Wow—some great and wonderful-sounding speakers. We traded in our old speakers, took the new used ones home, and sat for hours just listening, hearing things we had never heard before. Finally, they let us know that a power supply to upgrade the CD player was going

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* Add an Arcam T61 tuner to any of these systems for only $449. The T61 is not only Arcam's best analog tuner ever; it's also their least expensive! And, it offers a slew of special hidden IR codes that make using it with multi-room systems or programmable remotes a real joy.

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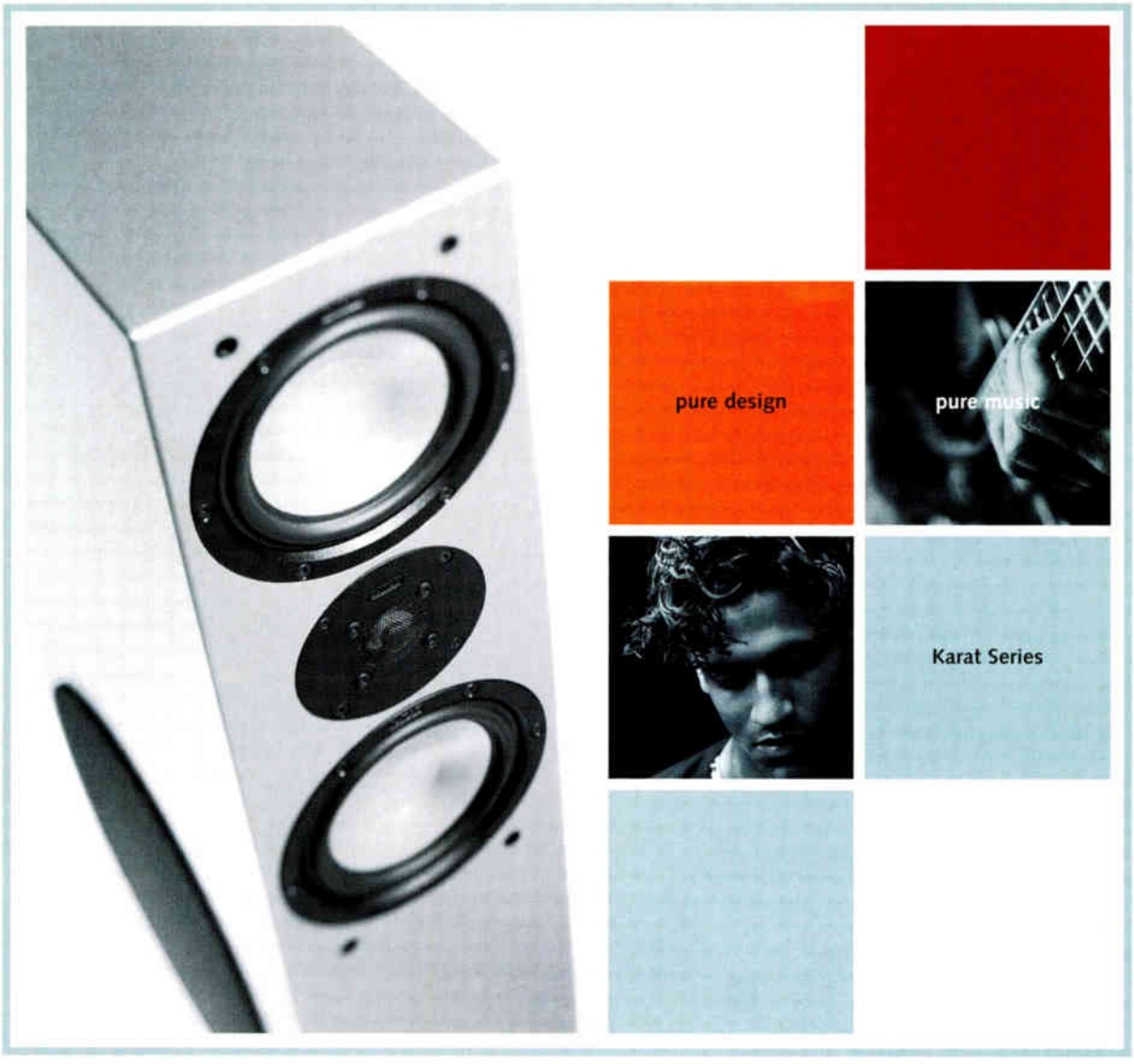

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on sale—used for CES demos, mint. We got it, and again the whole sound changed. Now we look for good CDs. After the kids are in bed, we sit and just listen, then sleep really well.

I thank the Internet for direction in this journey, but I buy from *people*, and yes, you have to look for the right people. I was helped on this journey by people who made sense and whom I trust. Their philosophy: "If you hear it, buy it. If you don't, don't buy it. Don't spend on what you don't need. When it sounds right, stop." I heard the differences. *Bert Paul*
Bertonpaul@aol.com

Giant steps

Editor:
As an Italian-American audiophile and music-lover, I am ashamed of the ignorance of Bucky Pizzarelli, as featured in your September issue. Only a "putz" can call John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* a "piece of shit" (p.74). I can dig where Mr. Pizzarelli is coming from musically in a traditional sense, but it takes a lot of nerve to say "I played with Charlie Parker. I played with Miles Davis, but it didn't faze me at all." It's too bad Bucky's head has been for decades where the moon doesn't shine.
Charles Bellomo
Bayside, New York

Atomic steps

Editor:
If anything, Bob Reina's rave in the September issue understated the virtues of the Paradigm Atom v.3 loudspeaker. After reading his review, I purchased a pair for my third system, in the kitchen, replacing speakers that cost four times as much. The Atoms made me realize once again what really counts. These things simply don't get in the way of the music. Unfortunately, many expensive speakers—including the others I own—do.
Jeffrey Elliott
Chapel Hill, NC

The wrong amps

Editor:
"Yes! Excellent gear is getting more affordable," I said out loud as I flipped to p.88 of the September *Stereophile*. I love reading about components that are big on performance and small on price. "Oh good, JA's doing this one," I said to no one in the room. I really enjoy the more technical side of reviewing. "But wait, where's the amp? No, not the near-flawless, $20,000 laboratory-grade audio jewelry sporting the Mark Levinson insignia that JA used. *You* know—the amp...?"

I remember listening to music one afternoon at my favorite audio store. We had a pair of $700/pair minimonitors hooked up to the $9000/pair Wolcott Audio tube monoblocks. After getting over the initial shock of how great the speakers sounded, we just sat there and listened to music. The owner of the store said to me, with a puzzled look on his face, "No one would ever buy this combination of equipment."

I seriously gave it some thought on the drive home. Was this $10,000 worth of great-sounding gear? Yes, without question. Could I bring myself to spend only 700 bucks for speakers and $9000 for the amps? No, I couldn't. It shouldn't make any difference, but my friend and dealer was right: No one would ever buy that combination of equipment.

So what's my point? I think the Thiel CS1.6 is still waiting to be reviewed by *Stereophile*. No consumer will ever hear them at home the way John has. It's not Thiel redefining the two-grand two-way speaker. It's *Stereophile*. *Dave Daniels*
davedaniels@jps.net

Losing it

Editor:
I've seen *enough*. You guys have *lost* it. You didn't notice the Thiel CS1.6 on the cover of *The Absolute Sound* months ago? *They* did a better *review*.

Then I encounter Bruce Willis' ugly mug in a full-page ad (September, p.58). If I wanna read about renting *videos*, I'll buy a friggin' *video* magazine. I *know* you need to survive. But ads from Netflix? From BMW? Gimme a *break*! I want to read about the new *Maggies*, or why Infinity stopped using EMITs and if they will ever use 'em again, and why JBLs suck now but Mirages don't. *That's* the kind of stuff I want from what used to be my favorite hi-fi magazine, not this limp...uhh...pabulum!

How the mighty have fallen. I will *not* be renewing my +10-year-old subscription. *Paul Southard*
paul.southard@planetinternet.be

Goodbye...

Editor:
Stereophile has shrunk to nothingness—but the cost is still the same. You've seen your last dollar from me. *Name withheld*
Kilowat3@aol.com

...and hello

Editor
Stereophile is excellent and therefore rare in a world of cheap sensationalistic cover splashes and magazine articles intended for adults but written to a middle-school vocabulary and mentality. Of all of the automotive, computer/Internet, and audiophile magazines to which I subscribe, *Stereophile* is the most valuable and miles beyond the others in terms of information, education, and enjoyability. I've never gained so much satisfaction from learning or staying up-to-date!

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US: SAN FRANCISCO
Jon Iverson

California will open its Golden Gates to welcome the Home Entertainment 2003 Show on June 5–8, 2003. The event will take place at the Westin–St. Francis Hotel in the heart of downtown San Francisco. HE2003 marks the fourth time this event has been held in San Francisco and the second time at the St. Francis. Previous events were held in 1989, 1993, and 1997.

The four-day Show will dedicate its first day, June 5, exclusively to members of the trade and press, to allow exhibitors to meet one-on-one with retailers, distributors, and the media. The Show officially opens to the public on Friday, June 6, and will run through Sunday, June 8.

"We're delighted to bring the Home Entertainment Show back to San Francisco," said Jackie Augustine, group publisher of the Primedia High Technology Group and executive director of the Home Entertainment Show. "Based on our exhibitor and consumer research, San Francisco rated highest as a venue for a show outside of New York City. After two highly successful years in New York, we decided to branch out to San Francisco in the hopes of attracting new music talent, new seminars, new exhibitors, and new attendees from international markets. The Home Entertainment 2003 Show will be even more spectacular than in prior years, and the Westin–St. Francis, with its almost 100-year history, is the perfect partner for this event."

Co-sponsored by *Stereophile*, *Home Theater*, *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater*, and *Audio Video Interiors* magazines, the annual HE Show is the country's preeminent home-entertainment event of the year. It is the only show of its kind that gives consumers an intimate understanding of the latest in technology and the ability to touch, look, listen, and feel before they buy. As a bonus, there will be daily free, live music performances from popular, jazz, contemporary blues, and classical recording artists.

A weekend pass to the Show costs $35, a one-day pass $25. Advance tickets can be ordered online at www.HomeEntertainment-EXPO.com. The Westin–St. Francis Hotel will offer a special discount price to exhibitors and attendees of $195 per night, based on availability.

UNITED KINGDOM
Paul Messenger

According to an item in the August 19 edition of UK daily *The Independent*, the British Home Office has reprimanded a group of scientists at Cambridge University for having subjected mice to loud music in "tasteless" experiments. Seven mice died after being given strong doses of methamphetamine and forced to listen to the dance group The Prodigy, while others suffered brain damage. Although the researchers had received "formal admonitions" from the government, animal-rights campaigners described the research as "horrific," and complained that the scientists had not been prosecuted for animal cruelty.

The study was part of research into Huntington's chorea, a disease of the nervous system of which Woody Guthrie and others have died. A total of 238 mice were used, half receiving injections of methamphetamine, the other half salt water. The mice were then subjected either to silence, to white noise, or to music played at 95dB, from either the dance group The Prodigy or Bach's Violin Concerto in A Minor (apparently, the two recordings used had similar tempos). The saline-injected mice merely fell asleep when the music was played, but the music caused the drugged mice to suffer more speed-induced brain damage than normal. Besides the seven Prodigy fatalities, four of the mice subjected to Bach also succumbed.

CANADA: VANCOUVER
Barry Willis

Super Audio CD is gaining serious momentum. With more than 650 titles available from many record labels—including some majors—and with several inexpensive players now on the market, Sony Corp. has launched its next volley in what may very well prove to be an all-out format war. At a press conference held August 7 at the Fairmount Hotel in Vancouver, British

Calendar

Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should fax (do not call) *the when, where, and who to (212) 886-2809 at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the January 2003 issue is November 1. Mark the fax "Attention Stephen Mejias, Dealer Bulletin Board." We will fax back a confirmation. If you do not receive confirmation within 24 hours, please fax us again.*

Please note that it is not appropriate for retailers to promote new product lines in "Calendar" unless this is associated with a seminar or similar event.

ARIZONA

● The ***Arizona Audiophile Society*** sponsors monthly audio and home-theater meetings and events. For information, call (623) 516-4960 or e-mail AzAudioS@aol.com.

● Tuesday, November 26, 7–10pm, Los Olivos Senior Center, 2802 E. Devonshire (28th St. north of Indian School Rd.): ***AudioNut.com*** will host "Seven Ways to Improve Sound and Picture," an ***Arizona Audiophile Society*** meeting featuring the Arizona debuts of the new **Thiel** CS1.6 and **Athena** AS-F2 speakers, **Rega** Planet 2000 CD player, **Rogue** Tempest Magnum integrated amplifier, and the new **Harmonic Technology** Harmony-Link cables. The public is invited. For more info, call AudioNut at (623) 487-1116 or e-mail info@audionut.com.

CALIFORNIA

● The ***Bay Area Audiophile Society (BAAS)*** schedules manufacturer and dealer demonstrations, fosters com-

neers to consumer-electronics manufacturers, staged a press event on August 9 at Dolby Labs in Los Angeles in hopes of rekindling interest in their format, which they've been quietly trying to launch for the last year or so. Warner Bros. Records has gone so far as to call this current effort a "re-launch," but after spending over four hours with the DVD-A folks, this reporter thinks that, once most of the current issues (detailed below) are sorted out, there's a good chance we'll see yet a *third* official launch.

Curiously, there was no mention at any time during the presentations of the competing SACD format and how the DVD-A camp would handle this threat. One of DVD-A's spokespersons suggested privately that they didn't want to disparage Sony and SACD's future. Fair enough. But it was stated at the beginning of the presentation that there really is no conflict. The implication was that, by default, DVD and its stepchild, DVD-A, are all that consumers will need to consider for the future of home entertainment. This was the first sign of denial on the part of the DVD-A adherents.

Before the formal presentations got under way, we were treated to a DVD-A cut from Linkin Park's latest album, *Reanimation*, slated for DVD-A release in October. After an apology from Dolby that their room was optimized for film sound, not music (I'm still wondering why there should be a difference, since accuracy is supposedly the goal), the tune began. In spite of the odd room tone, it was quickly apparent that this was a great surround mix for a contemporary track — inspiring, without obvious gimmicks like putting key instruments in the rear, etc. A great demo, if you like techno pop, and it clearly set the mood for the meeting: DVD-A will be aimed not just at audiophiles, but even more at the mass youth market.

Ted Cohen of EMI kicked off the presentations with an enthusiastic delivery that emphasized "getting the [DVD-A] message to music fans," and praised the surround options possible with the format. Cohen also stated that DVD-A offered the industry a way to "keep the physicality of music retailing alive," adding that, over the next year, we'd be seeing an "amazing selection" of DVD-A titles from EMI.

Toshiba's Craig Eggers followed, articulating a theme we would hear many times over: DVD-Audio will ride on the coattails of DVD-Video's success. Eggers said that next year, almost every new DVD player costing more than $200 would include DVD-A. (However, a chart used near the end of the final presentation seemed to imply that only a third of all DVD machines sold would include DVD-A in the coming years. Maybe Eggers was referring only to Toshiba players?) Eggers went on to emphasize the format's "two-channel [audiophile]" quality, and its potential for success in car audio.

Next up was a presentation from John Trickett of the 5.1 Entertainment Group, which includes Emergent and Silverline Records, among others. Trickett announced the first major title, Dishwalla's *Opaline*, to be released simultaneously ("day and date," as they like to say) on CD and DVD-A, as well as a price drop to $17.98 per DVD-A disc for all of its labels. DVD-A's promise for car audio was again mentioned, as well as the boast that DVD-A discs can't be copied. Trickett added that, "as CD sales fall, DVD-A sales will rise. This is a format that literally can save the music industry."

Technical presentations were next, with Robin Hurley from Rhino Records running us through the process of getting the artist and label contracts in order and securing all necessary art and audio tracks. Hurley says that if things go smoothly, a minimum production time needed to bring a DVD-A title to market is around 16 weeks, and that, in the scheme of things, it "doesn't cost much to produce a DVD-A disc." Hurley noted that with DVD-A, as with other audio formats, it was the artist's appeal to consumers that sold discs, not the sound quality of the recording. As an example, he used Metallica's robust sales on DVD-A compared with modest interest in "audiophile-appropriate" works from Steely Dan. In closing, Hurley stressed the importance of getting the original artists involved in the project.

DVD-Audio consultant Craig Anderson of Craigman Digital broached the touchy subject of watermarking DVD-A discs. Anderson explained that most mastering facilities "do not want to touch watermarking," and that this chore is typically passed to the authoring house, implying that in most cases there will still be uncorrupted high-resolution masters available for future use. Anderson was satisfied by ABX studies that showed that, even though the watermarking process is an audible distortion ("it has to be, so that music played through speakers cannot be recorded"), it will not deter music lovers from buying discs. Anderson also said that only once — for just a second — was he able to reliably hear a watermarked passage out of the dozens of discs he's worked on.

What was not addressed was whether or not consumers will stand for having not only their sonic sensibilities compromised in this way, but their fair-use

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CONNECTICUT

● For information about the ***Connecticut Audio Society***, visit www.theatom.com/cas or call Carl Richard at (860) 745-5937.

GEORGIA

● Sunday, November 10, 2–5:30pm, the Community Clubhouse (4522 Kingsgate Dr., Dunwoody): The ***Atlanta Audio Society*** is hosting a loudspeaker design seminar featuring Dr. Joseph D'Appolito, who will provide an in-depth description of the new **Usher** Compass loudspeaker and its design attributes, including development and testing procedures. A Q&A session will follow. Guests are welcome. For more info, visit www.mindspring.com/~chucksaudio/index.htm or call Chuck Bruce at (770) 493-7105.

LOUISIANA

● New Orleans' first and only high-end audio club holds monthly meetings to discuss topics of interest and listen to music. Join the fun by e-mailing zephirin@cox.net.

MASSACHUSETTS

● For details of upcoming monthly meetings of the ***Boston Audio Society***, samples

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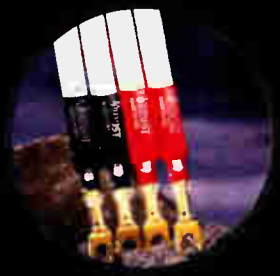

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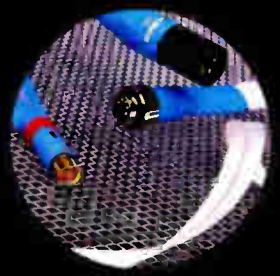

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rights as well. Although it was stated many times that watermarking is optional, the odds are overwhelming that, audible distortion or not, every major label and/or artist will choose to include the watermark. The labels clearly don't care that consumers are already resisting this approach in CDs and MP3 downloads. Another sign of denial?

Jeff Dean of 5.1 Entertainment told us that 230 DVD-A titles are currently available, with another 70 planned for release by the end of the year. He mentioned that DVD-A samplers will soon be appearing in DVD-player boxes, and that discs are currently being sold through 160 retailers with 2000 retail locations. Circuit City will soon be installing DVD-A displays in all of its stores, said Dean, who reminded us that, unlike DVD-V, the DVD-A format does not have unpopular zone restrictions built in.

Jeff Samuels of Panasonic stated that factory-installed DVD-A players will start showing up in cars in 2004, adding that his company sees promise for DVD-A with home-theater-in-a-box (HTIB) products. Jeff Skinner of DTS recited the hardware numbers: 40 DVD-A player models from 12 manufacturers are currently on the market, with the total expected to be sold by year's end reaching 1.4 million units. By 2004, the manufacturers expect 9.9 million DVD players to be sold with the DVD-A feature.

Questions asked at the end of the session included: When would a digital connection scheme be finalized? (soon, very soon, said Dolby's John Kellogg); and How many DVD-A discs have actually been sold and are projected to be sold in the next few years? This last question, which more accurately judges the format's actual success, had the DVD-A representatives fumbling, until a Warners attendee said that in 2001 and 2002 his label had so far sold 170,000 discs to consumers. He added that Warners expects the Linkin Park DVD-A alone to reach 100,000 units when it is released. No one, however, would commit to future projections, insisting that there are too many variables and that it is far too early to tell.

Although DVD-A will be a boon to audiophiles if it can succeed — especially if the smaller labels refuse to add watermarks to their releases — possible confusion in the marketplace about the various surround and resolution options could be a problem. Other challenges facing the DVD-A supporters include how to market the format simultaneously to audiophiles (who want two-channel recordings at the highest resolution) and to the mass market (who possibly want surround sound and the extra features) without alienating either or both. The youth market has demanded that music be portable as well: Young consumers must be able to take a song from a disc and feed it to their iPod, computer, or car stereo without any hassle. DVD-A will not allow this, and in fact makes it tougher to accomplish than do today's CDs.

And how much money are DVD-Audio proponents prepared to spend to inject their message into the mainstream consciousness? Have they planned to spend even a fraction of what it took to get DVD-Video launched? Will they be able to match Sony's marketing budget for and determination in promoting SACD? These issues were not addressed at the meeting. Record companies also need to come to grips with the real reasons for their decline, which will likely not be solved by locking down their products any tighter than they already are.

THE INTERNET

Jon Iverson

What music lovers have suspected for months, and record labels vehemently deny, has apparently been confirmed by Forrester Research (www.forrester.com): Piracy by consumers is not responsible for the 15% drop in music sales in the past two years. According to an August report from Forrester, "Labels can restore industry growth by making it easier for people to find, copy, and pay for music on their own terms."

Forrester's Josh Bernoff explains, "There is no denying that times are tough for the music business, but not because of downloading. Based on surveys of 1000 online consumers, we see no evidence of decreased CD buying among frequent digital music consumers. Plenty of other causes are viable, including the economic recession and competition from surging video game and DVD sales. But labels will soon discover that there are several simple ways of satisfying today's sophisticated digital music consumers.

"First, consumers will demand their right to find music from any label, not just two or three. Second, they want the right to control their music by burning it onto CDs or copying it onto an MP3 player. Finally, consumers will demand the right to pay by the song or album, not just via the subscription services now offered by pressplay, MusicNet, FullAudio, and EMusic. We call this set of features — which any paid music service must meet to satisfy customers — the Music Bill of Rights."

The researchers say that, in the next two years, labels "will struggle to deliver on the promise of digital music," but their services will fall short because they

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from their publication, *The Speaker*, or membership information, visit http://bostonaudiosociety.org, e-mail dbsystems@attglobal.net, or call (603) 899-5121.

MISSISSIPPI

● If you are an audiophile living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast and would like to participate in a high-end audio club, please e-mail stokjoc@hotmail.com.

NEW JERSEY

● The ***New Jersey Audio Society*** welcomes anyone interested in high-performance LP and CD playback systems to become members and participate in their monthly meetings. Annual dues are $30, and include a subscription to the society's newsletter, *The Source*. For more information, please e-mail your mailing address and telephone number to annalogg@aol.com or to Russell Prince at prince@sewkis.com, or call (973) 743-5450.

NEW YORK

● For information on the monthly meetings of the ***Long Island Music and Video Society***, call Lee Grosberg at (516) 239-9004.

● For information on the monthly meetings of the ***Musicalaudiophile Society***, the ***Audiophile Society***, and the ***Gotham Audio Society***, call David Nemzer at (718) 237-1094.

● ***The Audio Syndrome*** meets 10 months out of the year, on the last Friday of the month. We offer field trips, equipment demos, and, most of all, getting together to listen to the

fail to match the Music Bill of Rights. Forrester predicts that, by 2005, labels "will endorse a standard download contract that supports burning and a greater range of devices. Downloading will start to soar in 2005 as finding content becomes effortless and impulse buys [get easier]. Labels will make content available on equal terms to all distributors, while online retailers become hubs for downloading."

By 2007, Forrester is predicting, the new business model will generate $2.1 billion, or 17% of the labels' revenues. "Big hits will spark traffic, as people download music directly to their cell phones, portable players, or PCs. . . . As a result of the growth potential, artists will embrace the Internet and sign downloading rights over to their labels, or see sales suffer."

In addition to Forrester's study, the Yankee Group (www.yankeegroup.com) also released its findings in August, predicting that unlicensed music downloads will peak in 2005. "Consumers will continue to flock to unlicensed file-sharing services such as KaZaa, Morpheus, and LimeWire because of their unlimited content and zero cost," says Yankee. "Consumers aged 14 and older downloaded 5.16 billion audio files in the US via unlicensed file-sharing services in 2001. This figure will grow to 7.44 billion audio files downloaded in 2005 before declining to 3.9 billion in 2007 due to the impact of legitimate music services."

Yankee's Michael Goodman says, "Efforts by the record labels to use the courts to quash music piracy have failed, and legitimate online music services have had little impact. The future of music, however, resides on the Internet, with its dramatically lower distribution costs."

The Yankee report, "Digital Audio: Legitimate Services Inch Forward," suggests that, to be successful, legitimate music services must meet the following criteria:

• Availability: Music services must offer content from all five major labels as well as the majority of independent labels.

• Ownership: Consumers do not want to rent music. If they pay for it, they want to be able to mix it, burn it, copy it, and retain ownership even if they choose to discontinue subscribing to a service.

• Portability: Downloaded files must be playable on different devices in the home, at work, and when mobile.

• Exclusivity: Legitimate music services must differentiate themselves from unlicensed services with unique content and services.

• Digital Rights Management (DRM): Consumers want to share music, and they will find a way to do so, thereby defeating all realistic DRM capabilities.

Goodman adds, "In the end, the record labels will have to share control of the content with the consumer. This philosophical shift will not come quickly or easily to the record labels. Nor will consumers quickly adopt fee-based file-sharing services."

In another report released at the end of August, research from Arbitron (www.arbitron.com) and Edison Media Research (www.edisonresearch.com) indicates that "streamies"—defined as people who have watched or listened to streaming media online—bought more than one and a half times the number of CDs in the past year than the average US consumer. The study, "Internet 9: The Media and Entertainment World of Online Consumers," found that weekly streamies bought, on average, 21 CDs in the past year, compared to the average American, who bought 13 CDs. The researchers say they also found that residential broadband adoption has doubled in just under 18 months, accelerating online audio streaming. Those with a cable modem or DSL Internet connection at home jumped from 12% in January 2001 to 28% in July 2002.

In an effort to put their results in proper perspective, Arbitron and Edison say they have conducted nine studies of the Internet and streaming media, one every six months since 1998, and will continue to do so. Arbitron's Bill Rose says, "While some in the record industry have viewed streaming as a threat, this research indicates that streamies are a very lucrative group of record buyers."

In yet another report, however, researchers from In-Stat/MDR (www.instat.com) conclude that the exponential growth in the number of people accessing the Web has further contributed to an increase in the illegal access and distribution of proprietary content. In-Stat says that the widespread availability of digital audio and video files, coupled with the popularity of file-sharing software from companies like KaZaa, has resulted in an "inter-industry schism in the search for a viable Digital Rights Management (DRM) solution."

The report elaborates: "The continuing quest for a workable DRM solution has pitted the content development industry, primarily consisting of companies in the recording industry and the movie industry, against the information technology (IT) industry."

While the music industry's stated goal is to stop all "unauthorized" online access and distribution of their content, it also maintains that it is committed to online distribution, but only in conjunction with a secure DRM system in place. Meanwhile, In-Stat is reporting

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music. We now provide a quarterly newsletter—articles wanted. For more info, contact Charles at (718) 352-2178.

● November 13–14: ***Sound by Singer*** (New York) will be hosting the world premiere of the Grande Utopia Beryllium. Dominic Baker of **JMlab Focal** and Ian McArthur of **Audio Plus Services** will present this new evolution of JMlab's reference loudspeaker. Space will be limited. RSVP: (212) 924-8600.

● November 13–14, 4pm: ***Avantgarde Music & Cinema*** is pleased to announce their Grand Opening, featuring Jim Smith of **Avantgarde USA**, and representatives from **Viva**, **Audiopax**, **Elrod Power Systems**, **Cardas**, **Grand Prix Audio**, and **RPG**. RSVP: (212) 229-1842.

TEXAS

● Thursday, October 24, 6pm: ***Krystal Clear Audio-Video*** is proud to host an evening with **Wilson Audio**, **Halcro**, and **Transparent Audio** in their new location in the Dallas Decorative Center. Representatives of each company will be available to answer questions. Be ready for an energizing evening filled with tantalizing information and goodies. Reservations required. For info and to RSVP, call (214) 520-7156 or e-mail info@kcaudio.com.

● Thursday, November 7, 7pm: ***Audio Concepts, Inc.*** (2200 Southwest Freeway #105, Houston) welcomes you to an evening seminar with Richard **Vandersteen** on the importance of

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that the IT industry, while also concerned about DRM, is very interested in the potential of new, online distribution technologies. "Many technology executives have noted that if there ever was a killer app for broadband services, it was Napster," says the report.

In-Stat says that while the IT camp acknowledges piracy, it "also support[s] current 'fair use' laws that permit consumers to copy and share a limited amount of content with others. The content development industry always seems to attack new technologies and distribution channels. From playing recorded music on the radio to playing movies on a VCR, the content development industry regularly tries to stop new technologies that ultimately end up being an important and profitable part of their business model."

Nevertheless, the RIAA announced that music sales were down again in the first half of this year. The organization says that US CD sales decreased 7% during the first six months of 2002, representing a decline of $284 million in sales. The RIAA reported a drop of 5.3% for the same period last year.

In apparent contradiction to other research results, the RIAA also released statistics from a survey it had commissioned indicating that consumers between the ages of 12 and 54 bought fewer discs as they increased their downloading. Researcher Geoff Garin states, "I would not argue that downloading and copying are the only factors at work, but we have clear evidence that downloading and copying do not have a favorable effect on record sales."

Analysts say that other possible factors, not openly acknowledged by the RIAA, contribute to flagging CD sales: the weak economy, high disc prices, lack of compelling new music, DVD-Video, and music fans' disenchantment with the record industry. The RIAA's aggressive stance regarding online file services and the music business' reputation for withholding artist royalties and pensions—to cite only two obvious public-relations train wrecks—have fanned increasing resentment on the part of consumers, some of whom have called for an outright boycott of the major labels, which fund the RIAA.

And there is, of course, more than one way to interpret the RIAA's sales numbers and the data behind them, according to columnist Dan Bricklin, writing for his website (www.bricklin.com). In fact, Bricklin finds that if the RIAA is right about peer-to-peer networks and CD burners damaging CD sales, then, when combined with other negative factors such as a slow economy, the numbers should look a lot worse.

Instead, in his essay "The Recording Industry is Trying to Kill the Goose that Lays the Golden Egg," Bricklin argues that file trading is one of the few factors that may have prevented the RIAA from having to report far worse sales damage in recent years.

Bricklin, who made his fame as co-creator of VisiCalc, knows his way around statistics, and in his essay he generates a few of his own. After crunching RIAA sales figures and revenues generated for various music formats over the last several years, he concludes that, while unit sales numbers have indeed dropped, "revenue has not dropped as much because of an unprecedented 7% rise in prices."

Using the RIAA's own reasoning—that access to free music is killing sales—Bricklin trots out another set of numbers suggesting that radio should be a much greater negative factor than online file trading. However, he points out that, in the end, finding and buying music is a complicated emotional process, and that the RIAA's statistics, reasoning, and actions may be making matters worse.

"They are trying to use legislation to hobble computing in general to get what they incorrectly think they need," says Bricklin. "This is wrong and short-sighted, and will result in many undesirable side effects. It is bad for them and it is bad for society."

UNITED KINGDOM

Paul Messenger

At the time of writing, the *What Hi-Fi* Awards are a few days away. Just a fortnight later, the UK's most important hi-fi show—which this year returns to its spiritual (?) home just alongside the main runway at London's Heathrow airport—will open for business, sponsored as always by *Hi-Fi News* magazine. Next month's "Industry Update" will inevitably be bulging with reports from The Hi-Fi Show, so, a month early, here's my pre-emptive strike on some of the major British brands' key fall launches.

Naim Audio organized a press junket to publicize its new Classic series, a collection of no fewer than 10 components that represent the company's most important launch ever, and which were available beginning in September. The Classics replace all of Naim's core models with brand-new equivalents incorporating the latest "triptych" styling (first seen in Naim's "entry-level" 5 series a few years back), plus numerous technical refinements that arose out of the background work done to create the high-end NAC552 and NAP500 pre- and power amplifiers.

The Classic collection comprises three preamps (NAC202, NAC252, and NAC282), three power amps (NAP200,

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waveform preservation. RSVP: (713) 527-0774.

WASHINGTON

- The ***Pacific Northwest Audio Society*** meets the second Thursday of each month. Usual start time is 7:30pm at 4545 Island Crest Way, on Mercer Island. For more information, call Jerry at (206) 416-3669 or Earl at (206) 795-1970.
- ***Premier Audio and Home Theater*** (6017 Roosevelt Way, Seattle) is pleased to announce the Grand Opening of their new location, featuring new audio and video products and promotional guest speakers throughout November. Info: (206) 985-0209.

WISCONSIN

- Wednesday, October 23, 6–9pm: ***Hi-Fi Heaven*** (1549 Sixth St., Green Bay) hosts an evening with engineer Bill Dudleston, founder of **Legacy Audio.** He will demonstrate the Whisper and Focus 20/20 speakers and will discuss his goals, methodology, and the technology used in each model. The evening will also offer special trade-up opportunities for interested customers. For more info, call (920) 494-8999 or (800) 808-HIFI, visit www.hifiheaven.net, or e-mail hifiheaven2002@yahoo.com.

NAP250, and NAP300), three power supplies (HiCap, XPS, and SuperCap), and the new, single-box CDX CD player (XPS-upgradeable). We were also shown a mockup of a new high-end top-loading CD player, the CDS III, which will follow later in the year.

The Classics look just like the 5 series, but are slightly taller to accommodate larger transformers. Black remains the only finish option for the substantial alloy casework. With the NAC282 replacing the NAC82 and the NAC252 the NAC52, all NAC preamps now incorporate configurable inputs, with unity-gain A/V sockets and some phono-pair options alongside Naim's traditional DIN sockets. RC-5 and RS-232 ports are both available, and different power-supply arrangements allow upgradeability for the NAC202 and NAC282 (the NAC252 requires a SuperCap).

The NAP power amps all revive names from Naim's history, the NAP200 replacing the NAP180, the new NAP250 succeeding the model of the same name that first went into production way back in 1975, while the NAP300 (like the NAP500) is a two-box stereo amp that replaces the NAP135 monoblocks. The NAP180, NAP250, and NAP300 are rated at 70Wpc, 80Wpc, and 90Wpc into 8 ohms, respectively, with 300VA, 400VA, and 500VA transient capabilities. Both the NAP250 and NAP300 use the 007 transistors specifically developed for the NAP500, though in single-ended rather than bridged configurations.

Linn's high-end CD12 CD player and Klimax power amps have been around for a few years, so a two-channel preamp to fill the gap between them was overdue. The Klimax Kontrol does just that, matching the power amps with its machined-from-solid clamshell casework, which shields the internals from electrical fields and mechanical vibrations. It uses a switch-mode power supply and has four stereo inputs—three single-ended, one balanced—plus outputs of both kinds and RS-232 control.

At a lower price, Linn also has a new high-power, two-channel power amp for balanced or single-ended drive. Code-named the 2250 and rated at 250W into 4 ohms or 125W into 8 ohms, the 2250, too, uses a switch-mode supply to keep everything compact. The complete amplifier weighs less than 12 lbs, suggesting particular suitability for multi-amp applications.

Meridian's fall launch strategy focuses on DSP active loudspeakers intended for direct digital input signals and therefore to be used with one of the company's own complete systems. At the UK CEDIA show in June, Meridian had already sneak-previewed its DSP33i—a clever in-wall adaptation of the little alloy-cased DSP33, one of the most effective small speakers around.

The other newie is the DSP7000, a luxury floorstander that slots into the gap between the rectilinear DSP6000 and the curvaceous DSP8000 that JA reviewed in November '01. Providing the latter's great looks and much of its performance at a significantly lower price, the DSP7000 has the same piano-black finish over the same unique plywood-metal cabinet, but in this case the speaker is built into a single enclosure rather than the separate sub/sat arrangement used for the DSP8000. Other differences include two bass drivers on the front (rather than three on the side), and four (rather than five) power amplifiers.

Naim's Classics look just like the 5 series, but are slightly taller to accommodate larger transformers.

Down the years, Glenn **Croft** has always followed his own path, persevering with tubes through the dark years and subsequently pursuing his CTC output-transformerless approach. However, he has never taken a doctrinaire stance on a particular technology; sound quality has always been his only driving force.

Deliberately eschewing the term "hybrid," Croft describes his new Twin Star as a Transvalve power amplifier. It combines ECC83 tube drivers with a carefully selected solid-state (MOSFET) output stage that has a tube-like character, in an application that's quintessentially Croft: zero feedback, no output transformer, paper-in-oil capacitors, extensive hardwiring, etc. The Twin Star's power output is 45W or 55W into 8 or 4 ohms, its sound quality is claimed to be significantly better than that of an all-tube device of similar price, and some upgradeability is available.

I guess it was the mid-1980s when the brand-new company **Acoustic Energy** turned up at a hi-fi show with a tiny but very expensive and solidly built loudspeaker with metal-diaphragm drivers. The AE1 became an overnight success and an instant classic, and has sold steadily ever since. There was a Signature variation in the mid-'90s, and a Mk.II version a year or two after that, but improving on the original formula has not been easy.

Now, after two years of painstaking development, AE has unveiled the AE1 Mk.III. Apart from keeping the original's basic dimensions and appearance, the Mk.III is a new design in almost every detail. Quarter-inch steel plates line the thinner (12mm) MDF enclosure, bonded by a damping medium normally used to quiet ships' hulls. The main driver's aluminum cone is now pressed rather than spun to reduce weight, while the motor uses a glass-fiber voice-coil former, neodymium magnets, and a mag-alloy basket. The front baffle is now machined aluminum, while the tweeter is Vifa's odd-looking (but effective) annulus/dome device.

Possibly the most interesting of all this fall's high-end launches is the new Grande Utopia Be, from **JMlab**. As its "Be" suffix suggests, the speaker's main claim to fame is beryllium: specifically, a tweeter diaphragm made of a pure grade of the super-stiff, super-light element. The purity is apparently essential to achieving the full benefit of this rare metal, which is not as dense as titanium but has three times the rigidity. Beryllium is notoriously difficult to work, complicated by its toxicity, and this ultra-thin (0.25μm) tweeter diaphragm is claimed to be a world's first, giving rise to patent applications for both the forming processes and the machinery used.

One consequence of using beryllium is that the Be's tweeter has an operating bandwidth of nearly five octaves, from 2kHz to 40kHz, rendering an additional supertweeter unnecessary and therefore avoiding the very real difficulties of integrating two high-frequency sources. The tweeter's motor uses a combination of samarium cobalt (for its high Curie point) and a focus ring of neodymium alloy (for its superior flux).

The midrange driver, too, is radical. Its W-sandwich cone is now both thinner and stiffer than before, and its 40mm voice-coil is driven from a multi-magnet Power Flower pole-piece arrangement. What is presumably the first of a new generation of Utopia models sees a number of other changes too, including cleaned-up cosmetics and a significant increase in total weight, to a daunting 560 lbs!

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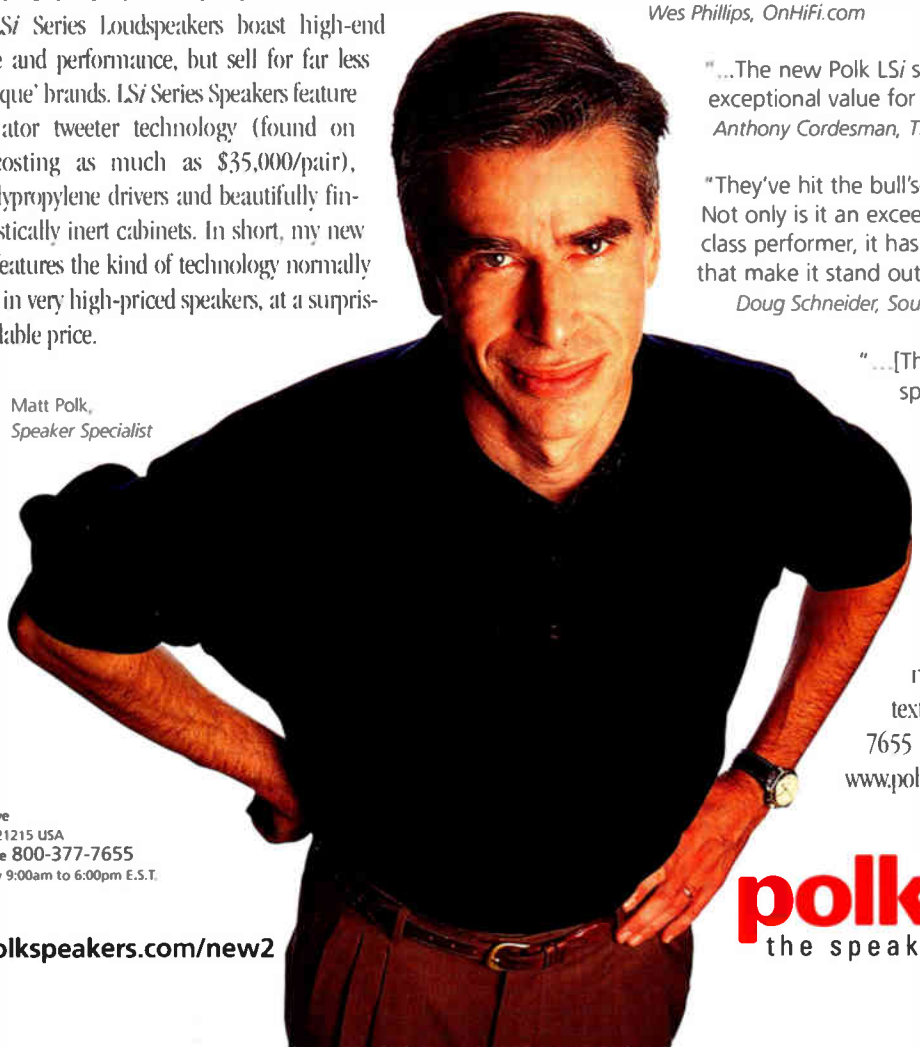

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US: NEW YORK CITY

Barry Willis

Swing-era giant Lionel Hampton died August 31 at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Manhattan of complications from age and a recent heart attack, according to his manager, Phil Leshin. Hampton was 94.

A percussionist adept at drums and piano, Hampton was the first major jazz musician to master the vibraphone, an electronic instrument based on the marimba and the xylophone, and which he'd played as a student. His "flamboyant mastery" of the vibes, in the words of the *New York Times'* Peter Watrous, won him a vast following among jazz fans of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, and inspired the generation of vibraphonists that followed in his footsteps, including Milt Jackson of the Modern Jazz Quartet, Bobby Hutcherson, and Terry Gibbs. "He inspired me to play the instrument," Jackson said in an interview three years ago. "First, he was the first one of note to play it, but more important, I liked how dynamic he was. And the way he blended with groups and the way he played in front of a band was inspirational."

Hampton got his start as a child, playing impromptu bass drum in his grandmother's church. "When I was six or seven and temporarily living with my grandmother in Birmingham, Alabama, she'd take me to the Holiness Church services, not just on Sundays but all the time," he said in a 1987 interview. "They'd have a whole band in the church, guitars, trombones, saxophones, drums, and they'd be rocking. I'd be sitting by the sister who was playing the big bass drum, and when she'd get happy and start dancing in the aisle, I'd grab that bass drum and start in on that beat. After that, I always had that beat in me."

Some music critics trace the roots of rock'n'roll to Hampton's onstage dynamics and rhythmic inventiveness; he claimed to have learned them "in the sanctified church." His 1942 recording "Flying Home" featured "a honking and shouting solo by the tenor saxophonist Illinois Jacquet that set the emotional atmosphere for rock," Watrous writes. Louis Jordan exploited the sound—and the approach—even further in the late 1940s, followed by numerous white imitators in the early 1950s.

Hampton was both self-taught and traditionally trained. He played drums in a school band as a student at Holy Rosary Academy in Kenosha, Wisconsin, and later attended a music school for boys sponsored by the *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper for that city's black community. "I worked hard learning harmony and theory when I was growing up in Chicago in the 1920s," Hampton recalled. "All those altered scales and harmonic extensions people were calling modern in the '40s and later, I knew all about those before 1930. I was playing the timpani, xylophone, and orchestra bells in the school's concert orchestra, taking the flute parts on things like *Poet and Peasant Overture*, and also playing the snare drum in the marching band. Then I would go home, play records by Louis Armstrong and Coleman Hawkins, and learn the trumpet and saxophone solos note for note on the xylophone and orchestra bells."

Some music critics trace the roots of rock'n'roll to Hampton's onstage dynamics and rhythmic inventiveness.

His first professional gig was as a 14-year-old drummer with Detroit Shannon's band. In his teens and early 20s, Hampton recorded with Armstrong, Benny Carter, and Benny Goodman. It was Armstrong, in fact, who encouraged him to get serious about the vibraphone.

Hampton and pianist Teddy Wilson were featured soloists in Goodman's racially integrated big band in the late 1930s. The group shattered a widespread taboo at a time when segregation was almost ubiquitous in the US, sometimes refusing to play in hotels that refused to accommodate its black members. Like Armstrong, Hampton went on to become an American cultural ambassador, until fairly recently leading his band in sold-out tours of Japan and Europe. Jazz legends who logged stints with Hampton's band include Betty Carter, Arnett Cobb, Johnny Griffin, Clifford Brown, Cat Anderson, Charles Mingus, Wes Montgomery, Dexter Gordon, Quincy Jones, Milt Buckner, Thomas Chapin, and Terence Blanchard.

Hampton also led a productive life outside of music, and was involved in the development of housing projects, including the Gladys Hampton Houses in Harlem, named after his wife, the former Gladys Riddle, who died in 1971.

US: NASHVILLE

Barry Willis

All of us at *Stereophile* were saddened to learn of the death of mastering engineer Denny Purcell, whose body was found Thursday, August 22, in the offices of his Georgetown Masters studio, in Nashville. He was 51.

The cause of Purcell's death was not immediately determined, but was most likely a stroke or heart failure, according to people close to the situation. Purcell had suffered some health problems in recent years, but had appeared to be improving. "He had gained some weight back, and was upbeat about his new projects," said his friend and colleague Chuck Ainley in a telephone conversation. "Everyone here is in complete shock over this."

Threshold Audio president Chris English expressed similar sentiments over Purcell's passing. The two were friends and partners in a campaign to bring audiophile standards to the pro sound community. "It's no exaggeration to say that he was the most important person to come into my professional life. He's simply irreplaceable."

Purcell was one of a handful of mastering engineers who elevated their craft to a high art. In a career spanning more than 30 years, he mastered more than 8000 albums, including approximately 500 that went "gold" (more than 500,000 copies sold) or "platinum" (more than a million). The walls at Georgetown Masters are lined with awards from most of the major music labels and mementos from dozens of appreciative artists, in addition to Purcell's collection of rare guitars, basses, banjos, and other instruments. The studio he founded in 1985 won *Billboard* magazine's "Mastering Facility of the Year" award in 1998.

Despite his success and incredible work ethic, Purcell combined an easy-going attitude with disarming self-deprecation. During one of my visits to Georgetown Masters for the Secure Digital Music Initiative's watermarking tests, he described the mastering process as akin to magic. "The raw material comes in there," he said, pointing toward the front door, "and I sort of wave my hands over it." Gazing at a wall covered in gold records, he deadpanned, "Sometimes it works." Purcell was "nominated almost every year for *Mix* magazine's Tech Award," said Ainley.

Purcell's death comes at a crucial time for the music industry and the music

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lovers on whom it depends. In addition to working to upgrade the level of playback in studios, Purcell was involved in developing mastering techniques for high-resolution recordings, and was engaged in what Ainley called "a crusade against mediocrity in the music business." His strong opinions alienated some people in the industry, but they all respected him. "He was a bright, shining star in this community," Ainley said. "We're expecting an overflow crowd at the funeral."

A memorial service took place on Monday, August 26, at Nashville's Harpeth Hills Memory Gardens and Funeral Home. A partial list of recordings mastered by Denny Purcell can be found at http://music.barnesandnoble.com/search/results.asp?ctr=160964.

POLAND

Paul Messenger

I like Poland. The agriculture is still preindustrial, so the food, though plain, is full of flavor. Pronunciation remains problematic—the local brew is called Zywiec—but Krakow itself is a beautiful medieval city, and the locals are friendly and not yet fatigued by tourism.

Krakow was the venue for 2002's Marantz line show, and well-timed to get the latest news on the takeover of both Denon and Marantz by Ripplewood Holdings, which culminated in D&M Holdings being listed on the Tokyo stock exchange on May 14 (see "Industry Update," May '02, p.27).

Headed by Kentuckian Tim Collins, this $4 billion, US-based private equity fund focuses on "restructuring" Japanese companies, and apparently has plans to build a conglomerate that will include specialist companies in acoustics, networking, and flat-panel displays.

Denon, which came along with its parent, the Nippon Columbia record label, is half again as big as Marantz, with strong involvements in A/V and premium-priced mini or "desktop" systems. Because Denon had fewer debts, it accounts for 70% of D&M Holdings' equity. The new company's president and CEO is Tetsuo Kabomoto, previously CEO of Marantz.

Marantz achieved its independence from the Philips empire a little over a year ago, but Terrie O'Connell, managing director of Marantz Europe, seems very comfortable with the new ownership, and feels strongly that Marantz needed the economies of scale that come with a big strategic partner: "It was cold outside Philips."

The new operation will still be small compared to a Matsushita or a Sony, but neither was the smallest of the specialist consumer electronic genre, the combination slotting in above Onkyo and Yamaha but below Pioneer and JVC. The plan is for the two brands to remain entirely autonomous in sales, marketing, and product development, but to reduce costs by sharing resources in research, production, and administration.

Larger audio companies such as the two D&M brands face difficult and complex times as they come to grips with a world undergoing increasingly rapid change and digital convergence.

> "There will come a time when buying a home without an integrated audio system will be as unimaginable as buying a home without central heating would be today."
> —Tim Childs, Barratt Homes

Traditional two-channel hi-fi will probably remain a core part of everyone's business, but the larger the company, the greater the pressure to create products to satisfy the broader mass market. New types of customer are emerging, seeking lifestyle, A/V, multichannel, multiroom, and download solutions, to name but five.

While Marantz continues to offer a full range of traditional hi-fi components, thanks to its Philips connections, the company has already enjoyed considerable success with sophisticated LCD learning remote controls, and is now adding DLP and LCD video projectors. A hard-disk server based on iMerge's XiVA operating system is also close to production, and the company is keeping a close watch on other developments.

A year ago, Marantz was distributing Tannoy loudspeakers in the UK. That arrangement ended last summer by mutual agreement, long before Tannoy was taken over by Danish company TC Electronic, at the end of 2001. Marantz has subsequently forged a distribution relationship with another famous name in British loudspeakers, Mordaunt-Short—or, rather, with M-S's current parent, Audio Partnership.

It's nice to see Mordaunt-Short making solid progress after its change of ownership at the end of 1998, and it makes plenty of sense for an electronics brand to distribute a speaker brand. But I suspect another major reason for Marantz's keenness to link up with AP: the latter's Opus brand.

The brainchild of electronics engineer Matthew Bramble and a startup operation just two years old, Opus seems to offer a particularly neat, well-thought-out, and affordable solution to the challenges involved in multiroom installations. Although primarily intended for "new build" installations, it seems as versatile and flexible as any custom-install system, and well-suited to retrofitting.

Based around an MCU 500 master control-unit hub, Opus can handle up to five A/V inputs, serve up to four zones and sub-zones, and handily incorporates an analog tuner. The special connecting cable uses four twisted pairs for signals, communications, and the ±24V supply to power distributed slave amplifiers, which therefore don't need to be plugged into wall sockets.

Opus quotes Tim Childs of construction company Barratt Homes: "There will come a time when buying a home without an integrated audio system will be as unimaginable as buying a home without central heating would be today." Well, maybe, but home entertainment technologies are far more complex than central heating, and constantly changing and evolving. However, while custom installations are relatively rare here in the UK, current growth seems to be at around 50% per annum, which should be good news for Opus and Marantz.

US: YOUR LOCAL MALL

Barry Willis

The US economy took a severe downturn last year following the terrorist attacks of September 11, and this year was hit by the stock market's decline in the wake of the collapses of Enron and WorldCom, Inc., both fueled by accounting scandals. Electronics retailers have ridden out the slump fairly well, buoyed by consumers' tendency to "cocoon," or put their disposable income into their homes. For most retailers, the popularity of DVD and home theater has offset diminishing sales of standalone audio.

But even with the continuing growth of DVD and digital video—on September 5, the Consumer Electronics Association reported a 66%

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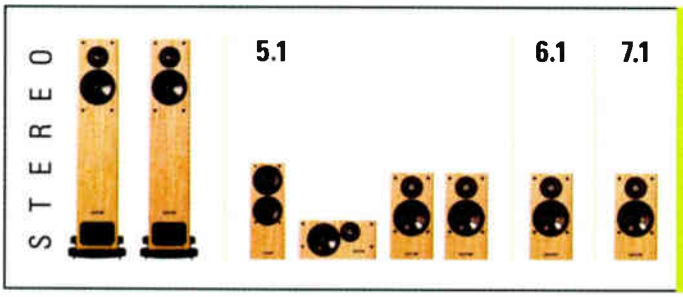

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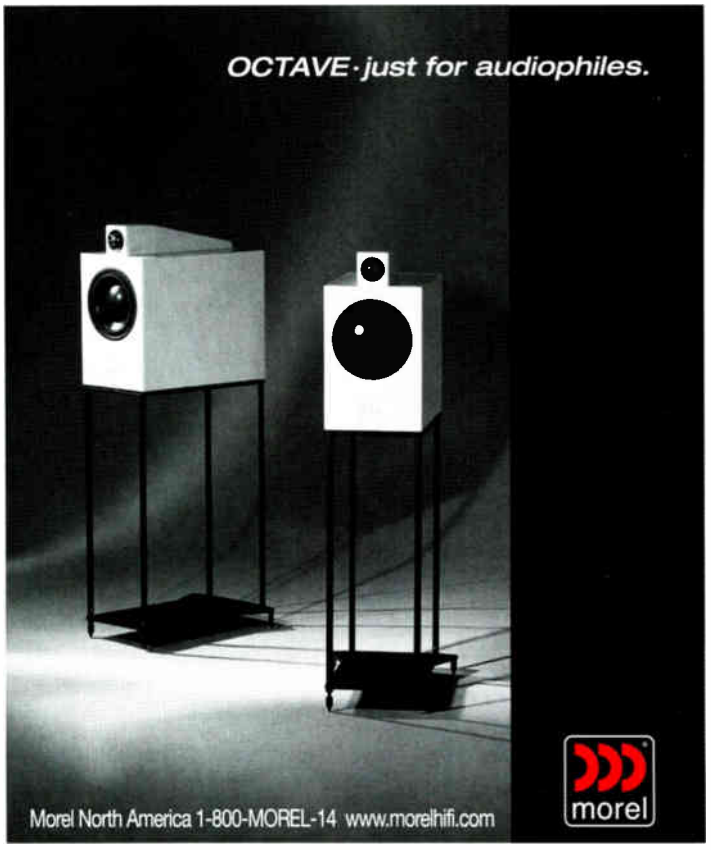
increase in July of shipments of DTV equipment—this summer was a season to be endured rather than celebrated. Sales of consumer electronics declined 1% in July from their levels in June, according to an analysis published September 5 in the *Wall Street Journal*. The primary competition was zero-interest financing on new car purchases, a tactic that helped the auto industry post a 4.2% increase in sales for July. The sharp rise in auto sales lifted overall US retailing by 1.2% compared to the level in June.

Some retailers were hit especially hard this summer. Washington, DC–area electronics chain Myer-Emco reported a 20% sales slump in July 2002 compared to the same month the previous year, the company's vice president, Gary Yacoubian, told the *Journal*'s Elliot Spagat. The nine-store chain has instituted its own zero-interest financing program for big-ticket purchases, as have several other large retail chains.

Circuit City saw a similar decline, with a 21% drop in same-store sales for the second quarter of 2002 compared to the same period last year. Even so, the nationwide chain, based in Richmond, Virginia, reported a 10% increase in total sales for the second quarter ended August 31, with stores open at least a year posting sales increases of between 5% and 6%. "We are extremely pleased with our comparable-store sales growth for the quarter," said company president and CEO Alan McCollough. Like others in the industry, Circuit City was boosted by increased interest in DTV, thanks to upgraded video departments in many of its stores.

Best Buy, Inc., based in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, reported a 20% increase in gross sales for the second quarter ended August 31, a potentially deceiving number skewed by the addition of 76 new stores and revenues from its Canadian Future Shops chain, acquired late last year. Best Buy's sales total for the quarter was $5 billion. A more accurate indicator of the company's performance was the 2% increase in same-store sales for the period. Its Magnolia Hi-Fi chain reported a 3% drop for the quarter, to $380 million, attributed to "slow summer traffic" and "an economic slowdown in the Pacific Northwest," while the company's Musicland stores suffered from the continuing slump in sales of recorded music. Future Shops' total sales rose 13% overall, for a $340 million total, due to the addition of 12 new stores, with comparable-store sales up 6.9%. Product categories with the strongest demand were in the DVD and DTV niches.

Things are looking up for Denver-based Ultimate Electronics, Inc., which on August 7 launched six new stores in the Dallas–Ft. Worth area, executives said Monday. The performance of the new stores to date has "exceeded expectations," in the words of CEO Ed McEntire. The Dallas area is the seventh-largest market in the US. Ultimate is hoping that the Dallas business model will provide a base for expansion into other areas of the country, according to COO Dave Workman. Best bets are areas where no "strong third player" competes successfully against Best Buy and Circuit City, the nation's No.1 and No.2 electronics retailers, respectively. In a recent press release, Ultimate Electronics said it expects to open five more stores this year, for a total of 12 openings in 2002. With the additional five, the company would have 58 stores overall. For Ultimate's third quarter, conservative analysts are predicting an increase in same-store sales of only 1–2%.



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Sam's Space

Sam Tellig

Larry Fish called the other day. You've met Larry here before—he's vice president of product planning for McIntosh Laboratory.

I like to give Larry a hard time—especially about tubes. Larry used to head up McIntosh's engineering department, and he's very much a measurement man.

"I have a product you might want to review," said Larry. "It's our first CD changer in five years."

"Gee, Larry, is it tubed?"

"No, it's not. But you might like it anyway. It matches your McIntosh C2200 preamp and MC2102 power amp." Both of those products *are* tubed. Larry went on to say that the new McIntosh MCD205 CD changer doesn't sacrifice performance for convenience.

A few days later, on his way to visit family members nearby, Larry brought it by. We put it into my main system, with the aforementioned Mac tubed separates and my reference Quad ESL-988 speakers.

Larry clutched two pairs of thin wires terminated by miniplugs. "These are for the Power Control. I think I remembered the lengths you need." He ran one wire between the C2200 preamp and the MC2102 power amp, and another wire between the C2200 pre and the MCD205 changer.

"Watch this," he declared, and turned on the preamp.

A trigger in the preamp turned on the other two pieces.

"That's great," I said. "Now I don't have to walk across the room to turn on the power amp." Just what I need. Less exercise. [*See Sam's photo in September, p.35.—Ed.*]

My friend Marc explained the attractions of a CD changer: "I can load several discs and have music for an entire evening. I don't have to get up during a meal. I can play a long symphony or an opera straight through."

Marc's five-year-old changer worked okay but didn't sound so hot. So he bought an outboard digital processor, running a TosLink optical digital cable from his changer to a Monarchy Audio 24-bit/96kHz DIP, and then an AES/EBU digital cable to an MSB Link DAC III processor with upsampling. That goes straight into his Boulder amplifier, which has level controls. No preamp. Like me, Marc is a big fan of electrostatics. He owns a pair of Martin-Logan Ascents. Starting with an ordinary changer, he has achieved great sound.

The McIntosh MCD205 CD changer, coming and going.

I told Marc I'd just received the McIntosh changer.

"You won't want to give it up," Marc predicted.

The MCD205 has immediate appeal to McIntosh fans. It sports the familiar glass faceplate, while the blue alphanumeric fluorescent display matches the displays on other Mac gear. The MCD205 offers balanced and unbalanced analog outputs, optical (TosLink) and coaxial digital outs. Solidly built, the unit weighs 21 lbs. I tried to guess the price.

"$3995?"

"No," said Larry. "$2495."

Of course, you can buy a CD changer for far less. I've seen some for as low as $99.95. But flimsy build quality is not what McIntosh customers want. They build custom cabinets or inwall shelves for their gear. They don't sell the stuff; they keep it.

The chief design engineer for the MCD205 was Ted Saito, and there's a story here. Ted was born in Japan. As a youth, he lusted after McIntosh gear. ("*Tube* Mac gear, I'll bet," I needled Larry.) He went to work, in Oneonta, New York, for a subsidiary of a Japanese company that made depth-sounders. He subsequently married an American woman and decided to stay in the US. On discovering that McIntosh Laboratory was located nearby, he "knocked on the door," as it were, in Binghamton, New York, and was hired.

Ted has worked at McIntosh for 18 years, which makes him a relative newcomer. He worked for more than a year on the MCD205, more or less orchestrating the whole product—software, circuit design, PCB board layout.

The heart of the MCD205 is a Music Bank transport made by Nakamichi, something you won't find in any $99.95 Circuit City CD changer special.

"Our friends at IBM put us on to it," Larry told me. "They use it for data storage. The mechanism is robust and reliable."

You insert up to five discs, one at a time, into a slot, and the MCD205 deposits them in the Music Bank. There's no flimsy tray, no drawer, no carousel, no loud grinding of gears. Loading is fast, and so is ejection.

According to Ted, the MCD205 uses a CS4396 stereo DAC from Cirrus Logic. It's a multibit, as opposed to a single-bit, IC. "The [multibit] architecture improves most of the audio specs," Ted told me.

I asked Ted about upsampling—the so-called (by me) Magic Bullet.

"...Awesome"

— *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 135, April 2002

The New THIEL CS1.6

"THIEL has established a new benchmark for speaker performance," says *The Absolute Sound's* Tom Miiller. "...this new THIEL possesses tonal, dynamic, spatial, and transient resolution comparable in most ways to the world's best speakers."

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— *Tom Miiller,* The Absolute Sound, *April 2002*

CS1.6 in Painted Black with optional outrigger stand

"...the CS1.6 is one of the very best speakers I've heard."

— *Tim Shea,* SoundStage!, *July 200*

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"There's a lot of confusion between oversampling and upsampling," Ted said. "I think they're the same, and a few companies are using the word 'upsampling' instead." (John Atkinson has said much the same thing. Perhaps he'd like to insert a footnote now.[1]) I can't argue, not being an engineer.

I *have* heard great sound from upsampling DACs and CD players. And there's one difference: the upsampling process adds eight bits of random dither to bring the CD's word length up to 24 bits. Whether dither is desirable is open to question, however. Dither, by definition, is noise.

I wasn't going to get all a-dither. What matters is not upsampling or oversampling, or multibit *vs* single-bit. What's important is how well a chosen technology is implemented and how the resulting product sounds. I found the MCD205 to be a stellar performer in every respect. I was surprised. It took me a while to get over my prejudice about changers. Most are mere appliances. Well, the MCD205 is a true high-end hi-fi product, not an appliance.

I appreciated the speed and steadiness with which the changer ingested and ejected discs. The MCD205 was quick and easy to use, even if I wanted to play just one disc. Operation was user-friendly, for the most part—meaning I didn't have to refer to the instruction manual.

But programming is for the intrepid—as it is, perhaps, with any CD changer. The MCD205's well-written manual devotes nearly three pages to programming the player. According to the manual, you can program and store up to 50 different "Program Steps." A Program Step can be a single track or an entire disc. First, though, you have to make sure that each disc's table of contents (ToC) is stored in memory...

Thanks, but no thanks. I simply loaded my classical discs and played them in sequence.

For popular music of the 1920s and '30s, I took a different tack, and this one *was* easy. I loaded discs by Bing Crosby, Ukulele Ike, Kate Smith, Al Bowlly, and the Boswell Systers and hit Random Play. The Mac mixed them up, hopscotching among the five discs at random, and surprisingly quickly. There was little mechanical noise. It was like having an automatic disc jockey. Marc marveled.

Since the Cirrus Logic DAC in the MCD205 outputs a fully balanced signal, Larry suggested balanced interconnects between the changer and preamp. He supplied a 1m pair of Tributaries Silver Series SCA2200. This interconnect looks like a million bucks but retails for a reasonable $200.

"You mean McIntosh hears differences among interconnects?" I inquired.

Larry smiled.

"Do *you* have a favorite interconnect?"

What's important is how well a chosen technology is implemented and how the resulting product sounds.

I love to tease Larry—he's so loath to admit anything subjective. And he made it clear that McIntosh does not endorse any particular brand of interconnect or speaker cable.

"Thanks for the wire," I said. "Now I'll have to come up with some adjectives to describe this interconnect."

He groaned.

"Let's see. 'Open'? 'Transparent'? How about 'coherent'?"

The conversation went nowhere, but the Tributaries cable turned out to be all of those things, providing performance without the hype. Substituting a generic balanced interconnect furnished by another manufacturer, I noted a slight loss in overall sound quality.

I used a 6m balanced run of Kimber Silver Streak—another favorite—between my C2200 preamp and MC2102 power. While neither is a fully balanced design, running a balanced interconnect can quiet things—especially with such a long length. It's not only obvious noise, like humming or buzzing. "Quiet" can mean a lack of grunge or electronic haze. Sometimes the difference is subtle, sometimes not.

I let the MCD205 cook for at least 100 hours before I sat down to some serious listening.

The sound was most impressive. The MCD205 conveyed a sense of authority. It was unflappable—like Larry Fish! The sound never compressed or collapsed, even on loud orchestral passages. I thought that small-scale dynamics (so-called "microdynamics") were well-rendered, too, thanks to excellent low-level resolution. The sound was full-bodied, never thin, irritating, or edgy (unless the recording was really rotten). For sure, the MCD205 never exacerbated poor recorded sound quality. Quite the opposite. A number of discs I had admired as performances but not as recordings became more listenable with the MCD205—smoother, more extended, less objectionable.

I heard excellent bass extension, definition, and speed. And yes, the midrange and treble were nicely handled, too—the top was smoothly and sweetly extended.

Perhaps upsampling is *not* the cat's whiskers, after all. Maybe oversampling serves just as well, or better. Maybe Ted Saito is right. I trust Ted and the other engineers at McIntosh. They don't rush things, and they don't adopt everything new that comes down the pike just for the sake (perhaps) of marketing hype. Still, I was curious.

I decided to try upsampling. The MCD205 has optical and coaxial digital outputs, so I tried the Musical Fidelity A3^{24} DAC with upsampling. I used a coaxial cable and set the Musical Fidelity at 96kHz. I ran both into my McIntosh C2200 preamp: the MCD205 with its onboard DAC *vs* the MCD205 as transport for the A3^{24} DAC. I was able to switch from one to the other by using the McIntosh master remote. (I could have used the C2200's trimpot feature, but the two sources were at equal levels. The C2200's power-level meters *can* be useful.)

I expected to hear the same dynamics and authority with the Musical Fidelity DAC as with the MCD205 on its own, and I did. I also expected to hear "benefits" from upsampling—a little more low-level resolution, perhaps, combined with a touch more ambience and air. A little more extension and delicacy in the treble, maybe.

What I actually heard surprised me.

I heard no differences at all between the Musical Fidelity DAC and the MCD205 left to its own devices, as it were. This is not to say that the A3^{24} isn't an excellent DAC—it surely is—or that I take back the good things I've said about

Contacts

McIntosh Laboratory Inc., 2 Chambers Street, Binghamton, NY 13903. Tel: (607) 723-3515. Fax: (607) 723-1917. Web: www.mcintoshlabs.com.

1 Okay. See my December 2000 "As We See It," available on-line at www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?344. —JA

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upsampling players. But on its own, the MCD205 performed equally as well as the MCD205/A3[24] combination. I found it impossible to tell which was which.

I did note a difference when I substituted the Musical Fidelity NuVista 3D CD player for the Mac MCD205 changer. With a good piano recording, the instrument sounded more immediate, more there. I heard more of the attack and natural decay of each note. Who knows? If McIntosh had "tubed" the analog output stage of the MCD205, perhaps they might have achieved a similar sound. At any rate, the NuVista 3D is no longer available, retailed for $4995 when it was, and doesn't offer the convenience of a changer.

And so the McIntosh MCD205 screams "Keep me!" At $2500, the sound is hard to beat, the convenience is fabulous, and the build quality looks outstanding. At last—a changer that looks...well, made to last.

My Favorite Products of the Last 40 Years

John Atkinson asked his writers to help him choose the best hi-fi products of the last 40 years, but I suspect that some of my own favorites might not make the final list. So here are my personal dozen faves from the last four decades, in no particular order.

Quad ESL-63/ESL-988 loudspeaker: Introduced in 1981, the Quad ESL-63 sold in the US for a whopping $3300/pair—a very expensive speaker for its time. (The price bounced around a bit.) Today its worthy successor, the Quad ESL-988, retails for what looks like a bargain: $6000/pair.

Every loudspeaker has its limitations, and the Quad's are well-known. It doesn't play crazy loud or go very low. But the Quad ESL-63/ESL-988 is extraordinarily neutral. It's fast and transparent. There are no cabinet colorations because there's no cabinet. There are no crossover glitches because there's no crossover. If you love classical music and jazz, speakers do not get better than this, at any price. The fact that Peter Walker's masterpiece is still in production, little changed after 21 years, speaks volumes.

Spendor BC1/SP1/2 loudspeaker: The Spendor BC1 was introduced in 1969. It was designed by Spencer Hughes, formerly of the BBC. Called a "bookshelf" speaker by some, the three-way BC1 was too big for a bookshelf and was usually set on stands. Such was the sorry state of hi-fi in the early 1970s that suitable stands were difficult to come by. The current model SP1/2 is the BC1's worthy successor and remains a favorite, especially with classical and jazz lovers. Toe-tappers are advised to look elsewhere. (Actually, I wish they'd stub their toes.)

The McIntosh MCD205 screams "Keep me!"

BBC LS3/5A loudspeaker: Produced at various times by Rogers, Spendor, Harbeth, Chartwell, Goodmans, and KEF, all under license from the BBC, the LS3/5A was the first great mini-monitor. When I first heard it, I knew I had to own a pair. The LS3/5A did not play especially loud and was relatively insensitive, but its tonal accuracy was superb, and the imaging was astonishing.

Triangle Titus loudspeaker: Miracles do happen. A current model, the Triangle Titus sells for $495/pair (stands extra). Like the LS/3A, this one hit me *comme un coup de foudre* (like a clap of thunder). The midrange and treble might not be the most refined, but the sound is exceptionally clear, quick, and clean, and the imaging is remarkable. Designed by Renaud de Vergnette, one of the world's great speaker designers, the Titus loves tubes and could get it up in my listening room on as little as 3.5W.

AR and AR ES-1 turntables: Ivor Tiefenbrun, who set up shop in the Linn district of Glasgow to make the Sondek LP-12, knew a good thing when he saw it.

The Acoustic Research turntable was the first spring-suspended turntable. Designed by Edgar Villchur, it was introduced at the end of the 1960s with a miserable excuse for a tonearm. Some tweakers would rip the arm out and install their own. In the mid-1980s, AR revived the table as the ES-1 and sold it with or without a passable arm, and tweakers caught on to the fact that Rega's RB300 arm was an ideal match. It's still my reference turntable after nearly 20 years. AR engineers were working on a deluxe version with an outboard power supply and better bearings, but idiot management killed the project, wondering who in the age of CD would want it. Duh.

Rega RB300 tonearm: High-quality tonearms are tweaky, twitchy things. And expensive. At least they were before Roy Gandy came along at the end of the 1980s with the RB300. In terms of getting information out of the grooves and making the best of any cartridge, the RB300 is hard to beat. Lacks height adjustment, however, and some audiophiles prefer to upgrade the wiring.

Supraphon Revelation Basic preamplifier: I think this preamp sold for $399 when it was introduced in the early '80s. For your four C-notes you got a stunning moving-magnet phono stage (in those days, a preamp was a preamp) and a great, dynamic line stage. Designed by Stan Warren, the onetime *S* of PS Audio, this plain-looking box was made as simply and cheaply as possible. Good thing Stan couldn't afford to put in too many parts, which was partly why the Revelation *was* a revelation (it was basic, too). Transparent, dynamic, a soundstage champ with phono—name a preamp virtue and this el cheapo number possessed it. My son loves his so much he says he'll never part with it. (Come to think of it, it was mine.)

Advent 300 receiver: The late Henry Kloss did not design this product; young Mr. X did, before he went to Hollywood. That's Tomlinson Holman X. Actually, Tom designed this receiver before he co-founded Apt, one of the great little companies of hi-fi that is very fondly remembered...and missed. However, Henry the K did head up engineering at Advent at the time, and did influence the Advent 300. It featured a killer phono section (moving-magnet only), a great line stage, and a superb-sounding FM tuner (not the greatest with adjacent channels or very weak signals, though). Oh, yes, and it was rated at 15Wpc—shy on power with just about every speaker then available except a Klipschorn. Obviously, you couldn't crank it up. But boy, did it sound good. My own 300 is still in the attic. Needs work. If you know of anyone who can restore it, please let me know at samtellig@aol.com.

Conrad-Johnson ART preamplifier: A manufacturer recently told me that it's much harder to make a great preamp than a fine power amp, and I believe him. The $15,995 Conrad-Johnson ART is a great preamp. Designed by Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson, it's simply jaw-dropping: full-bodied, dynamic, transparent, and harmonically pure. If you don't think a preamp matters all that much, listen to this one. The Premier 16

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I got into one of my snits this morning while reading the "Circuits" section of the *New York Times*. Michel Marriot was heralding the introduction of yet another portable music format, DataPlay. Each encased DataPlay disc, about the size of a quarter, can hold 500MB *vs* CD's 650MB. Prerecorded discs will sell for between $18 and $22, blanks for $5, and the first player-burner for $350!

I yucked so hard that coffee got up my nose when I read that DataPlay will be aimed initially at kids, with albums by Britney Spears, 'N Synch, Pink, and Usher being among the first releases. Label support is coming from BMG, UNI, and EMI, though a daring BMG executive went out on a limb to say, "I don't think the CD is going away anytime soon." DataPlay is liked by the labels, the story said, because it's a secure medium.

What have these guys been smoking? Where can I get some? The vice president for marketing and business development for DataPlay summed it up best when he said, "Money is what ends up driving everything." What I want to know is, who's driving these clowns to the unemployment office?

But it wasn't the launch that ticked me off, but rather the *Times*'s description of DataPlay's sound quality as "comparable" to that of CD. Marriot has a habit of writing that MP3 sound is "CD quality," and despite numerous e-mails from me to the "Circuits" editor, he's still making the claim. This time I sent an e-mail suggesting that perhaps the *New York Post* (good mostly for cat litter) is "comparable" to the *New York Times*, since both are printed on the same stock.

I went on to read that CD, which has rendered the LP "practically obsolete...now threatens the same fate for cassette tape." Never mind that LPs outsold cassettes last year in the UK [*and that CD sales surpassed those of prerecorded cassette several years ago—Ed.*]. Then, at the top of the page, I spotted a timeline that began with Edison and ended with DataPlay. The 33⅓rpm disc was introduced in 1928, it claimed. Actually, RCA *did* introduce a 33⅓ record in 1932, but pulled it a year later because it was a technological disaster. As we all know, the real introduction of the LP was in 1948, by a development team headed by Peter Goldmark at CBS. I sent an e-mail to the corrections editor of the *Times*, but a correction never appeared. I guess some facts aren't fit to print.

Does VPI have the "Midas" touch?

The *Times* has a habit of writing that MP3 sound is "CD quality."

The "Circuits" article ended up with a sour cherry on top, in the form of quotes from Forrester Research analyst Josh Bernoff, who recently predicted that digital-music downloading would be a $2 billion business by 2006. In an e-mail to Bernoff, I bet the left half of one of my most treasured anatomical resources that it wouldn't happen. In this article, the soothsayer predicted that the "era of discs of any kind...may be coming to a close." Right, and the Internet will spell the death of bricks-and-mortar stores, and e-books will end publishing as we know it. "So much wanking," I scolded the writer in another e-mail, "but I guess that's what you get paid for."

The Aries Extended/JMW-12.5 Combo Revisited

After reading in the March "Analog Corner" about the problem I had with motor-noise transmission in his Aries Extended turntable, VPI's Harry Weisfeld sent me different rubber feet for the motor and four new aluminum plinth cones to replace the original ones that had included a rubber damping insert that can't offer much in the way of genuine isolation, given what must be the relatively hard rubber's high resonant frequency—especially when compressed by the weight of the plinth. The insert also permitted horizontal plinth movement, which, even on the micro level, might vary the distance from pulley to platter—and that can't be good.

When I removed the old feet, I was surprised by what the rubber dampers appeared to be: automobile tail-pipe hangers, or something originally designed for a similar use. Nothing wrong with that kind of ingenuity if it works as promised, but I found that, without the inserts and with the new motor feet, the motor noise diminished and the 'table's overall sound seemed to tighten and exhibit better focus. My advice for tighter sound from your Aries is to chuck the rubber insert and replace it with a threaded rod, which you should be able to find at a good hardware store.

A Listen to Rega's New P9 turntable

Have you ever, while on a trip, rented the basic model of the car you own and been shocked at the differences in handling and fit'n'finish between it and what's in your garage? They're two different cars under the same skin. I got behind the wheel of a 250hp Saab Aero wagon, and the differences in performance between it and my light turbo model were profound.

Keep this analogy in mind as you consider Rega's new P9 turntable. It might *look* like a P25 ($1200), but the new P9 ($3500) is an entirely different animal. Consider: The plinth is an enclosed skeletal structure of ultra-lightweight, ultra-rigid, laminated phenolic resin—a step up from what was used in the previous P9, and worlds apart from what's used in the P25 and other Rega 'tables. Rega

claims the plinth alone costs more than the entire P25. The platter is made of compressed and fired ceramic oxide powder—one of the hardest substances known—diamond-ground precisely to size.

The drive bearing and hub assembly, with twin O-rings, is a big step up compared to what's used in other Regas, though Rega's claim that the twin-belt design means one belt's small inaccuracies cancel out the other's doesn't compute with me. Note in the photo the three precision-machined raised areas on the top plate, on which the platter rests.

Rega P9

The 24V twin-phase synchronous motor is shielded with Mu-metal, fitted with a CNC-machined pulley, and driven by a handsome new quartz-crystal-locked power supply. This outboard supply contains 3 and 4MHz reference oscillators (33⅓ and 45rpm) that drive high-current, low-distortion (<0.03%) FETs. Because the motor is dual-phase, each power supply can be trimmed by Rega to vary the phase, thus eliminating motor vibration. I saw at the factory how this is accomplished, and it works, eliminating the need to mount the motor outboard, or to fit the 'table with a suspension (at least for motor-noise suppression). Even the surround, offered in a choice of exotic woods (which can easily be changed), has been visually upgraded and made larger, but thanks to CNC woodworking machinery, it is actually lower in mass than the old one.

While the new RB1000 arm superficially resembles the P600 and RB300, it's said to take 30 times longer to build and, Rega claims, represents the single greatest change in Rega tonearm design in more than 20 years. Only two technicians at Rega are skilled enough to build the arm, which features new bearing assemblies, wiring (finally, I believe, without breaks from cartridge pins to RCA plugs), and other materials. While the new arm shares the P900's three-point mounting system, the entire assembly is now made of stainless steel. The arm's mass is reduced by forgoing any kind of coating on the cast aluminum. Cast construction is one of the big differences between Rega tonearms and most other arms now made. Back when analog was king, Rega bet the farm on this casting technique, a tooling-up whose cost today would be prohibitive, given the smaller number of arms sold. The advantages in terms of rigidity of the one-piece casting can't be overestimated. Rega has sold well over 250,000 arms so far. I think they've made back their money.

P9 spindle bearing hub

All of this makes the P9 compact, super-rigid, meticulously built, and definitely not for tweakers. While you can get spacers that will allow some VTA adjustability while retaining rigidity, if you like to play with VTA, this will not be the combo for you.

P25 spindle bearing hub

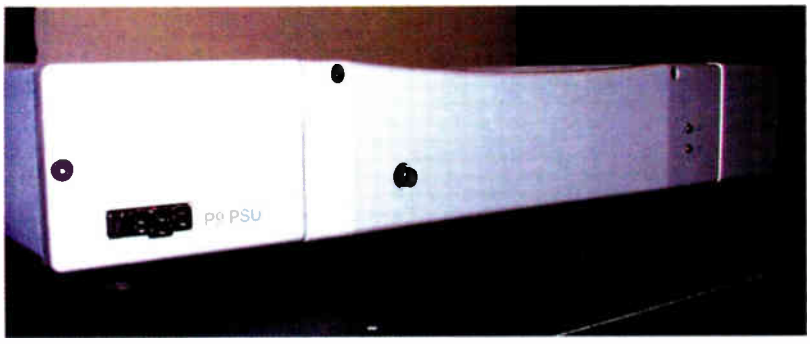
I'm no tweaker, believe it or not. I go crazy when VTA is way off, but once I find that sweet spot on a 180gm record, I find it's good enough for 150gm vinyl, 200gm, or however thick or thin my records are. If you insist on making micro-VTA changes, rule out the Rega, but you'll be missing one of the tightest, fastest, quietest analog rides out there at *any* price. The P9 is not just an overpriced P25, but an outstanding value in terms of parts, labor, and, especially, sound.

I listened first with the supplied $595 Rega Exact cartridge. This high-output (*ca* 7mV) moving-magnet design has a non-removable cantilever and a Vital stylus; *ie*, a "fine-line" shape (I couldn't ascertain the precise dimensions) micro-ground from a rectangular diamond. The coils are hand-wound on Rega's proprietary machines, and each cartridge is hand-built and tested twice, the tests run 24 hours apart.

Except for its so-so bass control, the Exact is a musical, reasonably detailed cartridge. It produced a pleasing and coherent musical picture, but overall it couldn't compete with the better moving-coils at the same price—the Ortofon Kontrapunkt A, for instance—when it came to the resolution of low-level detail, transient speed, and rhythmic snap. Still, the Exact was easy to like, and, with its high output and three-point mounting system, easy to use. Depending on your musical tastes and system sound, it might just fit the bill until you can step smartly upscale.

This was the first opportunity I had to use the Alesis Masterlink hi-rez digital recorder as a reviewing tool, and it was instructive to compare, in real time, the P9 with the Exact and the P9 with the Transfiguration Spirit Mk.3. The Spirit Mk.3 ($1600) was clearly faster, airier, and more detailed, and its bass tighter, more articulate, and revealing. Not surprising, given the difference in price, but the comparison indicated that the Exact was the limiting factor.

After making recordings using the Spirit, then the Temper Supreme and the Helikon, I believe the P9 is good enough to be used with the best cartridges out there—as long as the proper VTA can be accommodated. (Hardly surprising, given the quality of the bearings, the claimed care of assembly, and the super-rigidity of the mount and the cast arm itself.) The choice of spacers should do the job for most cartridges. If



P9 motor drive

you insist on variable VTA on the fly, you're not buying the P9 anyway. Only a top cartridge will let you know how great this turntable is.

Can you get *really* deep bass from a small, light turntable like the P9? Of course! I used my usual bass suspects, which I won't repeat here to save valuable space, and the P9 was up to the task. It packed a wallop in terms of low-frequency extension and dynamic slam, but, just as important, it had superb low-end focus and control. That gave it the relaxing sense of musical "grip" needed for long-term listening comfort.

Airy, easy, open, and light on its feet, the P9 is a Class A turntable all the way. And, unlike some of the lower-priced Regas, it didn't run slightly fast—my sample was right on the money at both speeds, which I verified with Clearaudio's neat *Stroboscopic Test Record* (*ca* $40). This disc has modulated grooves for cartridge break-in and to account for stylus drag. One side is calibrated for 50 and 60Hz illumination, the other for a special ultra-accurate 300Hz quartz light source Clearaudio sells for around $100.

Direct comparisons between the Rega P9 and the VPI Aries extended with JMW-12.5 Memorial tonearm were instructive (I used the Helikon SL cartridge). The P9 was faster, tighter, better focused. The Aries was more extended, sounding more lush and rich, and with larger, somewhat more diffuse images and a bigger overall picture, but at the expense of focus and snap. I A/B'd the title track of Willie Nelson's *Stardust* (Columbia/Classic JC 35305), and the differences were clear: more "pluck" and definition to the nylon-stringed guitar, more snap to the snare, and better spatial definition and organization to Booker T.'s organ fills. A familiar story. I can't say that one sound is better than the other—it's a matter of taste and associated gear. But I think Harry Weisfeld is starting to pay more attention to the rigidity issue and the difference it can make.

The compact P9 is like a Porsche, the big Aries Extended with JMW-12.5 more like a Lincoln Continental. If you opt for the P9, chuck the dumb felt platter pad and, if your VTA needs allow, replace it with the better-sounding Ringmat. The felt mat isn't just a dust sponge, it can be dangerous—it can cling to a record as you lift it off the platter, then slide sideways into the cantilever. Also, don't believe Rega's silly claim that LPs don't need cleaning, and that the stylus will just push the dust aside. I once tried that at Rega founder Roy Gandy's home, with a moderately dusty used LP I'd bought at the UK's Beano's record store and halfway through, so much dust had accumulated on the stylus that it lifted out of the groove and slid across the record's surface.

In Heavy Rotation

1) Peter Gabriel, *Peter Gabriel*, Classic 200gm Quiex SV LP
2) Count Basie, *88 Basie Street*, Analogue Productions 180gm LP
3) Alison Krauss, *Forget About It*, Diverse 180gm LP (test pressing)
4) Van Morrison, *Down the Road*, Exile (UK) 180gm LPs (2)
5) Dusty Springfield, *Dusty in Memphis*, 4 Men With Beards 180gm LP
6) Lovin' Spoonful, *Do You Believe in Magic?*, Sundazed 180gm LP
7) João Gilberto, *Chega de Saudade*, Odeon Brasil 180gm LP (UK) LP reissue
8) The White Stripes, *White Blood Cells*, XL (UK) 120gm red vinyl LP
9) Gomez, *In Our Gun*, Hut (UK) 180gm LPs (2)
10) Creedence Clearwater Revival, *Pendulum*, Acoustic Sounds 180gm LP

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The Fifth Element

John Marks

Aristotle, what a guy.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) spent 20 years studying under Plato, and was himself the private tutor to the young Alexander, later "the Great." Aristotle's works include writings on biology, philosophy, and ethics. The relevance of Aristotle to audio hinges on one of his fundamental achievements: the development of the concept of purposefulness as an important part of intellectual inquiry.

Aristotle reasoned that what something "is for" is an important part of what it "is," and, conversely, that what something "is" provides important clues to what it "is for." For Aristotle, the purposefulness of a thing is elemental to its existence as existence, and not something we conventionally impose upon it. Take that, deconstructionists! And stop using that screwdriver as a hammer!

What set me wandering in this direction were the irony-laden incongruities between a truly wonderful amplifier—one you really should hear—and the way quite a few audiophiles go about buying audio systems. First, the amp.

Unison Research's (www.unisonresearch.com) unusually handsome S2K ($2000; add $100 for remote control)—a single-ended, class-A, KT88-based integrated amplifier—is the sort of component of which, after giving its spec sheet a cursory glance and seeing its somewhat puny rated power of about 15Wpc, many potential customers might say, "Unh-hunh, not for me."

I'm the first to admit that, if you want to drive difficult loads such as Magneplanars or Shahinians to room-filling volumes with Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem*, you should look elsewhere. But that specific purpose is not the only possible or valid answer to the question "What is this for?"

This is where Aristotle comes in. By making "What is this for?" a central question in Western thought, he has provided valuable guidance to a lot of people who don't seem to be paying much attention.

I get e-mails all the time asking for equipment-buying advice. I try to reply as helpfully (and rationally) as I can. But golly, the way some people go about buying audio equipment makes about as much sense as feeding celery and mayonnaise to tuna in hopes of getting tuna salad. All the components (or ingredients) are there, but somehow they don't work together as a system to produce the desired result. In large part this is because people often put what the components "are" first, and only as an afterthought concern themselves with what the components "are for"—usually after misspending a whole bunch of money.

The way some people go about buying audio equipment makes about as much sense as feeding celery and mayonnaise to tuna in hopes of getting tuna salad.

What *is* it—meaning the music—you want to listen to, how, and where?

Should anyone be surprised that, within a given reasonable budget, a system optimized for listening at moderate levels to Beethoven string quartets—or to Sarah McLachlan, for that matter—might be configured differently from a system designed to play Widor organ works—or movie soundtracks—very loudly?

There are times and places when you can really let a system rip, and play at levels above realistic concert-hall volumes, but I think that 95%—or certainly at least 80%—of our listening time is spent at moderate volume levels. If you have only a certain amount of money to spend, doesn't it make sense to at least consider a low-power amplifier that more than makes up in fatigue-free tonal lusciousness what it lacks in ultimate slam?

If you're ready to give even grudging assent to that proposition, Unison Research's S2K should be on your audition list. Two thousand bucks might seem like a lot of money for 15Wpc, but, having hefted and sized up this amp, I have little question that it is a fairly priced labor of love. First off, with single-ended transformer-coupled designs, both power and audio transformers are very important, and it's obvious that Unison has not scrimped in that department. This amp is heavy (about 36 lbs), and most of its weight is at the rear. Its industrial design is top-drawer, and its build quality and fit and finish are excellent for the price.

The S2K's chassis is deeper than it is wide. The rear two-thirds are taken up by an enclosure of black sheet-metal. In front of that, not centered but offset slightly to the right, are two 12AU7A input tubes; behind them are two Sovtek KT88 output tubes. A contoured stainless-steel apron surrounds the tubes, and bears script legends identifying which tubes go where. Considering the size difference between the input and output tubes, at first blush this gesture might seem silly. But if the amp gets separated from its tubes and manual, the legends will eliminate guesswork in buying replacement tubes.

A thick piece of hardwood trim (it looks like lacquered cherry) laps down from the top front edge, with a cutaway on that edge to accommodate the tubes and apron. Cutaways on the front accommodate the beefy Volume and source-selector knobs, both of polished stainless steel, and the Source/Monitor toggle switch. A beveled section on the left of the trim piece holds a red LED to indicate power on, and Unison Research's "UR" logo, which, typically, is rendered in contrasting solid milled metals with a Florentine finish. (Obviously believing that nothing exceeds like excess, Unison binds the S2K's owner's manual with a spine of solid wood.)

The rear panel holds four pairs of RCA jacks for inputs and two for the tape-monitor loop, two pairs of substantial CE-compliant speaker-cable binding posts (single-wiring only), the power switch, power fuse, and an inlet for a detachable IEC power cord. I used Custom Power Cord Company's Top Gun HCFi AC ($1150) and Nordost's Blue Heaven interconnects and speaker cables. Replacing the stock cord with

the HCFi brought about an increase in timbral palpability that surprised even me, and I'm a bit of a power-cord zealot.

The KT88 tubes stand about ⅜" taller than the top of the sheet-metal transformer enclosure. I infer that this is a design feature intended to discourage placing anything on top of the S2K, especially another component. The specified power consumption is 150W. There is no provision for user adjustment of tube bias voltages. The S2K ran really quite warm, but not so hot as to provoke concern, as long as ventilation was adequate. The S2K was very quiet in operation, with no transformer hum. Switch-on and switch-off were entirely drama-free.

The sound? Gloriosky, this thing just sounded *right*. As I said, fatigue-free tonal lusciousness. Well-recorded pop particularly benefited from the S2K's combination of smoothness and articulation in presenting inner voices and harmonies, both instrumental and vocal. Examples that come to mind included Jesse Colin Young's *Light Shine* (Edsel 452) and the Cowboy Junkies' *The Trinity Session* (Classic Compact Discs RTHCD8568). Debussy's and Ravel's string quartets by Quartetto Nuovo (Denon 33C37-7830, nla) were by turns resinous and atmospheric. Vaughan Williams' *An Oxford Elegy* (EMI 5 67221 2) was just sublime.

Be assured that this was not a case of first-time tube beguilement. For years, I have recommended JoLida's inexpensive all-tube amps to music-lovers on a budget. I have reviewed some tube integrated amps favorably in the past (Golden Tube, Conrad-Johnson), and heard others and been extremely impressed (Art Audio, VAC, Tenor). I also have heard a few that seemed like triumphs of ideology over common sense. I was more impressed by the Unison Research S2K's musical performance and value for money than I have been by any other amp — of any kind — in its price range.

The S2K sounded rich without being sludgy, opulent without being slow or rolled-off, relaxed without being lazy. I switched the thing on and got a whomping big dose of music. A surprisingly substantial dose, when you consider that its power output is a fraction of a typical refrigerator light bulb's.

Drawbacks? Yes, Virginia, Pliny the Elder does indeed come down the chimney once a year to write "Nunquam prandium liberum"[1] in the volcanic dust on the mantelpiece.[2] So, mutatis mutandis, when I turned the S2K all the way up on the Brahms *Requiem*, it lost its composure and I didn't get any more bass.

For most listening through averagely efficient speakers, as long as the program material was not too bass-heavy, I never got the sense that there was any shortage of power. Does this mean that I take back all the enraptured things I've said about Halcro's amps in columns past? Not by any stretch. It doesn't even mean I take back the respectfully enthusiastic things I've said about Plinius and Jeff Rowland Design Group. Even within its limitations, the S2K might have erred (slightly) here or there on the side of euphony or soft focus. Wisely spend five or ten times as much, and you get not only more bass and dynamic range, but more musical details as well; you're that much closer to the reality.

The Philips SACD1000 is undeniably a screaming bargain.

At moderate levels, Unison's S2K was completely up to the task of critical listening to music that is not unusually demanding, if you can assimilate that distinction. If I never wanted to crank up Mahler's or Elgar's big works, I could live indefinitely with the S2K, especially for good string-quartet or vocal recordings. Bravi, bravi, bravi.

While auditioning the Unison S2K, I had two digital sources and three two-way loudspeakers to swap around, so I'll now give you capsule lowdowns on those.

1 "Ain't no such thing as a free lunch." —Ed.

2 Actually, were he to write, he would probably write "NUNQUAMPRANDIUMLIBERUM." In Pliny's time, lowercase letters had not yet been invented, and, furthermore, the Romans saw no need to put spaces between words. —JM

Philips SACD1000

Marantz SA-8260

This multichannel SACD/CD player ($1049) is elegantly designed and solidly built. By my rough measure it provided about two-thirds of the sonic refinement of Marantz' SA-14 player at about a third of that unit's $2800 price. Disc-access times were not excessive, and its tracking was quiet. Its sound quality was detailed but not edgy. Indeed, between the SA-8260's CS4397 digital chipset and its claimed attention to analog output circuitry ("HDAM modules"), its CD playback was so good that only pure-DSD SACDs could make a slam-dunk case for the new medium. Which of course they did, especially the not-for-sale Iván Fischer/Budapest Festival Orchestra demo SACD.

Default-recommending the SA-8260 at its price tier would be a no-brainer, except that Philips was kind enough to send me a review sample of their SACD1000 multichannel SACD/DVD player, which Chip Stern and Kalman Rubinson reviewed last year.[3] Then, that player cost $2000. At Home Entertainment 2002 in May, Philips representatives informed me that they had lowered its list price to $1000.

The Philips SACD1000 had a slight advantage in articulation and dynamic detail, while the Marantz enjoyed a somewhat greater advantage in musical continuity and richness. Audition both if you can. The Marantz is slightly cleaner-looking and more intuitive to use, and includes a headphone jack, but the Philips has impressive video capabilities. For audio-only use, I call it the Marantz by a nose — despite the fact that you can reset the Philips player's SACD play-mode default from multichannel to stereo, but apparently can't do so on the Marantz. Grrrrr. But the Philips is undeniably a screaming bargain.

Loudspeakers

Meadowlark's Swift is a tall, quite narrow, floorstanding two-way speaker, an ambitious design that employs transmission-line loading and a first-order crossover (www.meadowlarkaudio.com). At $995/pair, it's Meadowlark's price-value leader. The Swifts presented a remarkably tall and wide

3 Review by Chip Stern, April 2001 (Vol.24 No.4), www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?353:0. "Follow-Up" by Kalman Rubinson, June 2001 (Vol.24 No.6), www.stereophile.com/showarchives.cgi?353:6.

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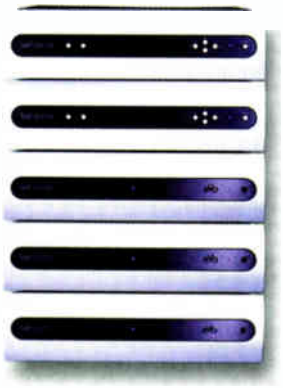

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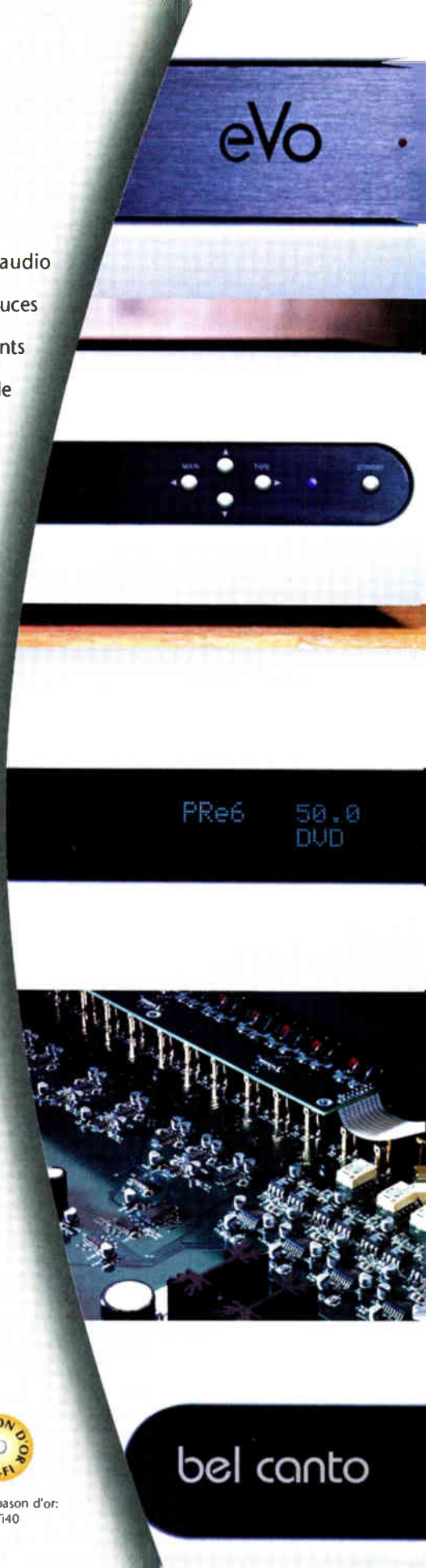

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Meadowlark Swift loudspeakers

soundstage, with great articulateness and sense of detail, but no exaggerated sibilance—at least not with Unison's S2K.

In view of the Swift's considerable value for money, I feel a bit churlish mentioning that the necessarily small size of the woofer/mid driver perhaps resulted in a certain lack of forcefulness or heft in the upper bass and lower midrange, but that is an extremely tentative conclusion; more break-in and different associated equipment are needed before I resolve the issue. Of course, at this price, there will always be tradeoffs. By all means, try to hear the Swift for yourself; it's a most impressive product that could be just the ticket for your needs and budget.

On the other end of the see-saw, Opera Loudspeakers' Callas Gold stand-mounted two-way ($2295/pair; www.operaloudspeakers.com) suffers, if anything, from an excess of energy in the upper bass and lower midrange. Careful stand-mounting at a height that does not add floor-boundary reinforcement just where the Callases are ripely plummy (You! Over there! Curb that thought!) is as necessary as is careful placement away from rear walls, which can reflect the output from the rear-facing port. The Sound Organisation's (www.soundorg.com) Z570 24" stands, a bargain at $245/pair, served admirably. Highly recommended. Once those positioning concerns had been dealt with, the Callases delivered warm, inviting sound with powerful bass and fatigue-free treble.

That Unison and Opera sound good together is no great surprise: the companies are not only neighbors, but share development work and partial cross-ownership, as explained by Sam Tellig in September. The Callas Golds share the design aesthetic of the Unison Research amps, with thick, solid-hardwood sides and top cut on bevels to create a faceted profile. Even the rear panel is solid hardwood—impressive at the Callas' price.

An aside equal parts nostalgia and chagrin: I briefly borrowed a friend's pair of the two-way Baby speakers from the now-defunct French firm A.S.A. (an ST fave rave from about five years back). Ah me. The Babys' midrange was clearly superior to both the Meadowlark's and the Opera's, and the bass was more continuous with the rest of the tonal spectrum.

Perhaps the converse of there not being a free lunch is that sometimes, when you pay for lunch, you get your money's worth. Pride of place (understandably so, in view of the outlay) goes to Wilson Benesch's entry-level two-way speaker, the Arc ($3825/pair with wood trim and integral stands; www.wilson-benesch.com). The Arc is based on the tweeter and midrange from the Wilson Benesch $8200 Discovery (which I wrote up in this column in January 2002), without the more expensive speaker's downward-firing isobaric woofer pair, and in a smaller and simpler cabinet, although still made from carbon fiber. The Arcs have the midrange/treble continuity that is the hallmark of the rest of the Wilson Benesch line. Furthermore, in direct comparison with the late, lamented ASA Baby, the Arc sounded even more authoritatively confident and relaxation-inducing.

As a system, Wilson Benesch's Arc loudspeakers, Unison's S2K integrated amplifier, Marantz' SA-8260 SACD player, and the wire goods total about $8750. Although that is a not-inconsiderable sum, it is a fraction of what most systems on display at HE2002 cost. Within its dynamic and bass-extension limitations, this system enveloped me in immensely satisfying music. And that's what it's for.

Flash! Just days before deadline, I received a pair of interconnects from Stereovox (www.stereovox.com, a very cool site). Tremendous focus, but with not a trace of the frigidity that often comes along with it. A potential new high-water mark. More next month!

Feedback: jmrcds@jmrcds.com

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40 YEARS

JOHN ATKINSON OUTLINES Stere

STEREOPHILE: THE TIMELINE

1930 Justin Gordon Holt is born in North Carolina. His family moves to Melbourne, Australia in 1935, and returns to the US in 1947.

1948 CBS's Dr. Peter Goldmark demonstrates the (mono) microgroove LP; *Audio Engineering* magazine is launched, later to split into *Audio* magazine and the *Journal of the Audio Engineering Society*; John Atkinson is born in England; J. Gordon Holt records his high-school band with one of the first tape recorders, a Brush Soundmirror BK401. (One of his 1948 recordings is later featured on *Stereophile*'s first *Test CD*.)

1950 Sales of war-surplus electronic components trigger the first, small hi-fi boom, with "Radio Row," on the site of the future World Trade Center in Manhattan, offering dream fuel to the kids who will grow up to invent high-end audio.

1955 J. Gordon Holt joins *High Fidelity* and *Audiocraft* magazines, both based in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, as audio editor. Around this time, he also contributes a column called "Sound and the Query" to *Hi Fi/Stereo Review* (now *Sound & Vision*).

1956 *Hi-Fi News* magazine starts publication in England, with its June issue. The first stereo LPs are introduced.

1960 J. Gordon Holt leaves *High Fidelity* to join Weathers Industries, manufacturer of high-end phono cartridges, as Technical Information Person. He finds this frustrating, for there seems little point in Weathers making better products than anyone else if none of the magazines that test them can tell the difference.

1962 Vol.1 No.1, Issue No.1, of *The Stereophile*, published and edited by J. Gordon Holt out of Wallingford, Pennsylvania, hits the newsstands in October. Gordon's declared editorial policy is to judge audio components by listening to them—a heretical idea in those days of meters and measurements. "Dammit," said Gordon, "if nobody else will report what an audio component sounds like, I'll do it myself!"

OF

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN

ophile

Full-size at 8½" by 11" and stapled, the magazine's 20 pages are free from advertising and feature a review of the Weathers cartridge and an article by "Lucius Wordburger" (JGH, of course) on how to write an ad. The declared publishing schedule is bimonthly. There is no cover price, but a subscription costs $6 for 12 issues *ie*, ostensibly two years' worth.

For the next 16 years, the only *Stereophile* staffers are Gordon and his wife, Polly (*née* Norton), who also contributed record reviews under the nom-de-plume Margaret Graham.

1963 Vol.1 No.5, cover-dated "May–June 1963," features the first "Recommended Components." Fifty-two products are listed, using the same rating system of Classes A through D still used today. Philips introduces the Compact Cassette as a convenient dictation medium.

1964 In August, Vol.1 No.8 is notable both in being the first issue to feature what will much later come to be called a "home theater" component on its cover, and to include the first of a number of attacks JGH will make on RCA's Dynagroove technology, whereby LP sound quality is deliberately degraded to make it more compatible with cheap players.

1966 Vol.2 No.3, cover-dated "Winter (4)," is devoted to a constructional article on a tube amplifier written by Edward T. Dell, who will later found *The Audio Amateur* magazine (now *AudioXpress*). Ed is later featured on the cover of Vol.2 No.9 wearing quadraphonic headphones (though he only has two ears).

1967 The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* is one of the first significant non-classical LPs to be released in stereo, helping trigger the second boom in hi-fi component sales, in which the major Japanese brands dominate the mass market.

1968 Vol.2 No.8, Issue No.20, cover-dated "Spring (1)," is still staple-bound, but is the first of the digest-sized issues that will persist for the next 25 years.

1971 Vol.2 No.12, cover-dated "1-71 Spring (1)" and 36 pages long, closes out Vol.2, with 24 issues published in nine years—rather fewer than was anticipated. A subscription is $1 cheaper than it was in 1962, though now the reader gets only four issues for his $5.

1972 Vol.3 No.3 of *The Stereophile* is the first issue to feature advertising, but only from dealers. The first advertisers are Jonas Miller of Beverly Hills, California; Music & Sound of Willow Grove, Pennsylvania; Paoli High Fidelity Consultants of Paoli, Pennsylvania; and Paul Heath Audio of Rochester, New York.

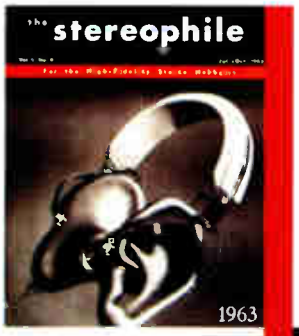
Surround sound is launched, in the form of Quadraphonic LPs. Despite a massive push from both hardware and software companies, competing and incompatible formats lead to a massive lack of interest from consumers.

1973 In October, tired of waiting for the next issue of *The Stereophile* to arrive in his mailbox, Harry Pearson launches the first issue of *The Absolute Sound*, to be based on an editorial philosophy of judging audio components by listening to them.

1975 Apparently out of design inspiration, J. Gordon Holt prints a typewritten contents list on the cover of Vol.3 No.9 (Issue No.33), dated "Summer (2) 1975."

1976 John Atkinson abandons his career, such as it is, as a professional bass guitarist, and joins the English magazine *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* as news editor. Deputy editor Paul Messenger (in 2002 *Stereophile*'s UK correspondent) starts a

column in *HFN/RR* called "Subjective Sounds," in which audio components are judged by listening to them. PM lends JA a copy of an "underground" magazine he had been sent by an American reader, *The Stereophile*.



1977 *Stereophile*'s Vol.3 concludes with the 76-page Issue No.36 ("Spring 1977"), which features the first four-color cover: an illustration of Lorin Maazel conducting the Cleveland Orchestra for Telarc's first direct-to-disc recording. The leadoff equipment report is the BBC LS3/5A loudspeaker, and "Recommended Components" consists of a list followed by literally hundreds of footnotes. A four-issue subscription now costs $12.

1977 Vol.4 No.1, Issue No.37, drops *The* from the magazine's name, and for the first time a price—$3.00—appears on the cover. This issue, celebrating 15 years of publication, is the first to include ads from manufacturers: featured are AGI, Audionics of Oregon, db Systems, Dynaco, H&H International (importer of JR Loudspeakers), Infinity, and M&K.

1978 J. Gordon and Polly Holt relocate from Pennsylvania to Santa Fe in the New Mexico mountains.

1979 Vol.4 No.4 (Issue No.40), the first issue to be published in Santa Fe, features 72 pages and returns to printing the table of contents on the cover. With the exception of Issue No.46, which features the Quad ESL-63 cradled by Ross Walker on the cover, this practice persists for the next nine issues and three years. The cover price is $3, rises to $6 with Issue No.42, then falls to $2 with Issue No.43. The staff list features a Larry Archibald as "Assistant Tester & Technician."

1982 Vol.5 No.1's editorial leader, titled "Changes of Everything," announces that Larry Archibald has purchased *Stereophile* from J. Gordon Holt, but that JGH will stay on as Editor and Chief Tester. Issue No.47 is 32 pages long, and there are just 3200 subscribers, but the announced frequency of publication is now 10 times/year. An annual subscription costs $20. Vol.5 No.2 (Issue No.48) sees a rise in newsstand price to $2.50 and is the first to feature the writings of the magazine's longtime tube maven, Dick Olsher.

In October '82, John Atkinson becomes editor-in-chief of *Hi-Fi News & Record Review* in England, the Compact Disc is launched in Japan, and *HFN/RR* starts its own hi-fi show.

1983 The CD is launched in the US and Europe in March, triggering the third and longest-lasting hi-fi boom. Vol.5 No.10 (Issue No.56) is cover-dated "January/February," meaning that Larry Archibald has missed his goal of publishing 10 *Stereophiles* in his first year by just one issue. This issue features J. Gordon Holt's review of the Sony CDP-101 CD player, in which he nails his audiophile colors firmly to the digital mast: "There is no doubt in my mind that this development will ultimately be seen as the best news serious music listeners have had since the advent of the LP."

1975-76

As significant in our world as the introduction of the CD is in the wider one is the first appearance, in Vol.5 No.10, of Sam Tellig's "Audio Cheapskate" column. Sam begins his *Stereophile* career with a survey of moving-magnet phono cartridges, quickly becomes our most popular writer, and remains so to this day. But the magazine also benefits over the next 15 years from the circulation-promotion expertise of Sam's real-life alter ego, Tom Gillett.

1982

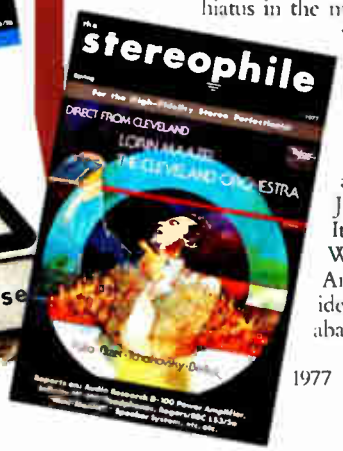
A minor event in June '83, but a portent for the future, is John Atkinson's meeting Larry Archibald for the first time at the Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago, and subsequently having dinner at a Greek restaurant with J. Peter Moncrieff (of *International Audio Review Hotline*) and J. Gordon Holt.

The August issue (Vol.6 No.3) sees the cover price rise again to $3, reflecting the typical issue size of 72 pages, while the circulation is officially declared to be 12,000. By the final issue of 1983, Vol.6 No.6, the circulation has risen to 15,000 but the subscription rate is reduced to $18 and the publication frequency is officially changed to a more realistic eight issues per year. For the first time in its life, *Stereophile* will publish the number of issues each year that it has said it will. And from now on, all covers are in color.

1984 In Issue No.63 (Vol.7 No.1), Larry Greenhill (still with the magazine) and Anthony H. Cordesman make their debuts as *Stereophile* reviewers. Bob O'Neill is the magazine's first full-time advertising salesperson, joined two issues later and then replaced by audio magazine veteran Ken Nelson. Vol.7 No.3 also sees Stephen W. Watkinson make his reviewing debut, while Don Scott starts reviewing FM tuners. The cover price increases to $3.95 with Vol.7 No.5, at 100 pages the largest issue yet published.

1985 At 112 pages, Issue No.71 (Vol.8 No.1) breaks the previous record, only to be topped in turn by the 136-page Issue No.72, published in May, which both features the first installment of Tony Cordesman's "Long Year's Journey into Wire" and sees another cover-price increase, to $4.95 (where it stays through December 1993).

"Down With Flat!" proclaims JGH in the August issue (Vol.8 No.4), whose cover features an Infinity speaker being adored by Larry's almost human dog, Ralph (later to be featured on *Stereophile*'s first *Test CD*), and is, I believe, the first issue to be copy-edited by Richard Lehnert. Apart from a short hiatus in the mid '90s, Richard has edited every word you have read in *Stereophile*, right up to the present day.



1977

The fall witnesses the infamous challenge in which Bob Carver claims he can match the sound of his inexpensive solid-state amplifier to an expensive Conrad-Johnson monoblock (Vol.8 No.6). It is also in fall 1985 that Steve Watkinson suggests to Larry Archibald that it might be a good idea to persuade John Atkinson to abandon all he's achieving at

"... a serious high-end contender, and a formidable one ..."

- Robert Deutsch, Stereophile on the Studio/100

www.paradigm.com

HFN/RR in the UK and take the editorial helm of *Stereophile*.

On the other side of the Atlantic, July 1985 sees the introduction of the *HFN/RR* Test CD, co-produced by JA and manufactured by Denon in Japan.

1985

1986

1986 The year begins with John Atkinson sharing a ride back from the Las Vegas CES to New Mexico with Larry Archibald and his then girlfriend (now wife), Laura Chancellor. During the 13 hours it takes to reach Santa Fe, they reach agreement on the role JA is to play, when JA is to start (May 1), and have mapped out a strategic plan for *Stereophile*. Other than a delay of a year going to a larger format, for the next eight years *Stereophile* follows that plan almost to the letter.

Vol.9 No.2 (Issue No.80) sees the first appearance of Thomas J. Norton on the masthead. Formerly editor and publisher of *StereOpus*, Tom's first piece for *Stereophile* is a report from the Winter CES.

May sees the planned arrival of John Atkinson in Santa Fe as the magazine's third full-time employee (not counting Larry A.), and the publication of the largest-ever issue, the 164-page Vol.9 No.4, which, not coincidentally, is the first *Stereophile* to be perfect-bound (*ie*, with a spine).

JA's first issue is Vol.9 No.5 (August), while his first review for *Stereophile* is of the California Audio Labs Tempest CD player. The October issue sees him preparing "Recommended Components" for the very first time, which he continues to do today. The year ends with a circulation of around 25,000, an annual subscription rate of $24, and a 180-page issue!

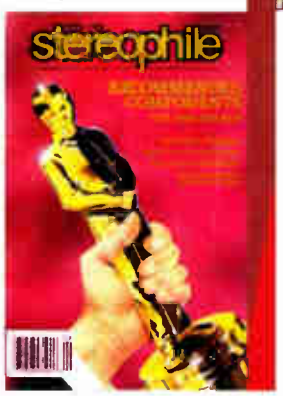
1987

1987 The first issue of *Stereophile*'s 25th-anniversary year begins with a tribute to J. Gordon Holt and, remembering JA's involvement in the launch of the *HFN/RR* Show five years earlier, a question to JA from Larry Archibald and Ken Nelson: "Should *Stereophile* start an audio show?" His answer is "Yes!" and the debut of the HI-FI Show takes place at Santa Monica's Bay View Plaza Hotel in March, with a second installment at Manhattan's Omni Park Central Hotel in October (the weekend before the stock-market crash on "Black Monday"). Helping *Stereophile*'s staff run the Shows is JA's erstwhile ad manager from his *HFN/RR* days and the manager of the London Show, Mark Fisher.

The August issue sees Richard Lehnert join the full-time staff as Assistant Editor, charged with creating an authoritative music section, which he does starting with the October issue. The August issue also announces that, from now on, *Stereophile* will be published monthly, which it has been to this day. Inevitably, the subscription rate has to be raised, to $35.

On the writer side of things, Tony Cordesman leaves but Peter W. Mitchell and Martin Colloms join, and Lewis Lipnick becomes the magazine's "Musician in Residence."

1988 The big news with the January issue (Vol.11 No.1) is the launch of the "Industry Update" column, shamelessly modeled on the news coverage of the UK's *Car* magazine. The Show returns to Santa Monica, Laura LoVecchio joins the magazine's sales team from *Audio* magazine, and the watchword is growth and consolidation. By the end of 1988, the circulation is 47,000 and our largest-ever issue is the June issue, at 248 pages. J. Gordon Holt writes more reviews in 1988 than he has ever done before or will ever do again.



1989

1989 Vol.12 No.1 includes the sad news that J. Gordon Holt is taking a sabbatical and leaving Santa Fe, both in order to take care of his estranged wife, who is dying from cancer in Boulder, Colorado. Gordon remains on salary, but something has to be done, and an ad is published for a full-time technical editor. Erstwhile recording engineer Robert Harley accordingly joins the staff in May, and as technical editor is charged with developing a measurement program to support the subjective reviews. The other two finalists in our search, Guy Lemcoe and Barry Willis, both become regular contributors, and, more than 13 years later, Barry still writes the lion's share of our "Industry Update" items. That summer, *Stereophile* acquires an Audio Precision System One for measuring amplifiers, and, in the fall, a DRA Labs MLSSA system for measuring speakers.

The Hi-Fi Show takes place in March, in San Mateo, just south of San Francisco, and JA subjects large numbers of audiophiles to enjoyable blind amplifier tests. One of the subjects scoring statistically significant identification of the amplifiers under test is a San Luis Obispo audio dealer named Jon Iverson, destined to play an important role in the *Stereophile* story eight years later.

1989

June sees JA, RL, LA, and Water Lily Acoustics' Kavi Alexander recording music for flute and piano on the USC campus in Los Angeles. The resulting LP, mastered by Tim de Paravicini, is released on the Stereophile label in September. It goes on to sell 3250 copies on vinyl and 6750 on CD—not bad for a recital of obscure chamber works by Prokofiev, Schumann, Reinecke, and Griffes. June also sees the folding of the venerable *High Fidelity* magazine.

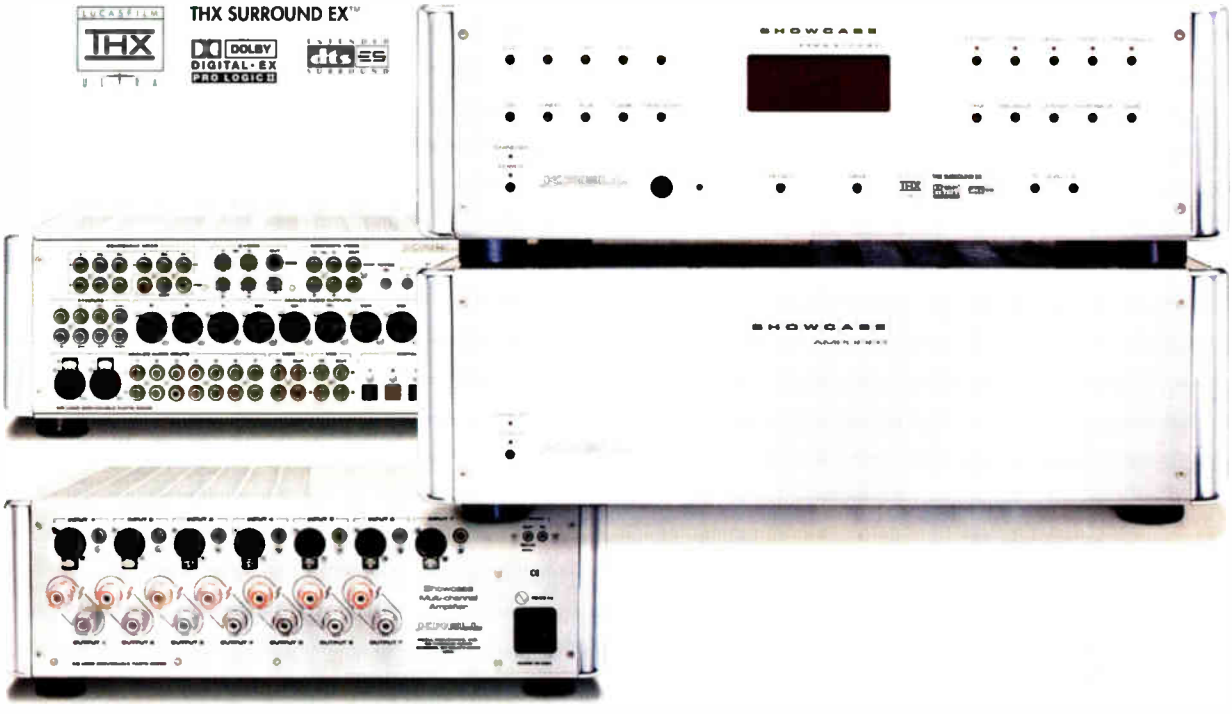
The *Stereophile* year ends with a full-time staff of 15, a circulation knocking on the door of 50,000, an issue once again featuring an Infinity speaker on the cover as well as Ralph—now an elder statesman of the canine world but sporting a Santa Claus cap—and four issues (January, June, October, December) each breaking the scales at 276 pages!

1990 February sees the release of our first *Test CD*, in April the Hi-Fi Show returns to New York, and in June Robert Harley's title changes to consulting technical editor, the role of full-time technical editor passing to Thomas J. Norton.

The year ends with circulation having reached 58,000. The October issue is the record-breaker, at 324 pages.

1991 There is no Hi-Fi Show in '91, but the first edition of our annual "Records To Die For" feature appears in the January issue. The same issue's "Letters" pages feature a con-

The Price of Admission...



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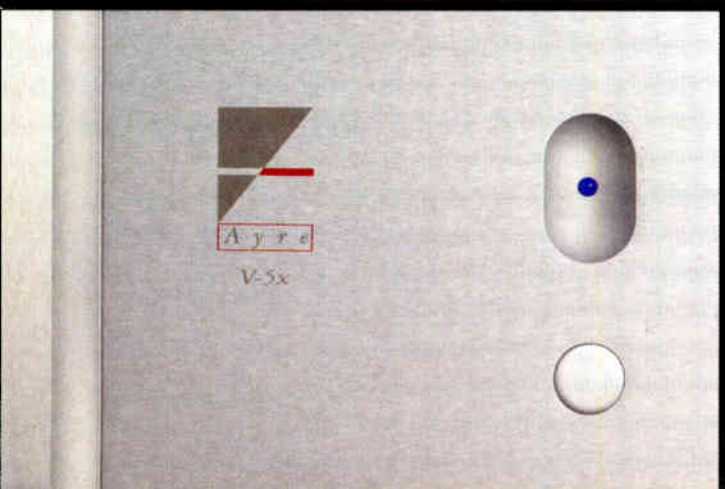
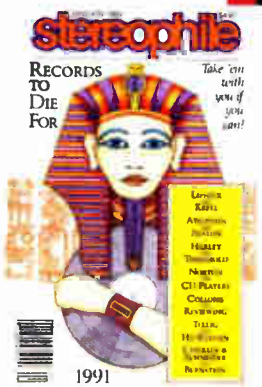


Coming soon...
K-5 Preamplifier

tribution on passive preamps from a writer who will set the magazine's pages on fire when he joins our equipment-review team in April: Corey Greenberg. Eleven years later, Corey may be spending his days demonstrating electronic toys on NBC's *Today* morning TV show, but in 1991 *Stereophile* is fortunate indeed to benefit from the first public flowering of his writing talent. Our second LP, featuring Canadian pianist Robert Silverman—with whom we will go on to enjoy a long relationship—performing solo Brahms works and again recorded by Kavi Alexander, is released in February. The magazine's spiritual mascot, Ralph the Christmas Dog, passes away in September.

Circulation surpasses 68,000 in 1991; the January, April, June, and October issues each equal the previous year's record size of 324 pages.

1992 Our 30th-anniversary year begins with an essay by Robert Harley examining at length the philosophy underlying why the quality of audio components should be judged by listening to them, and ends with our first "Product of the Year" vote, the winner being the Mark Levinson Reference No.30 D/A processor.



In between, the *Stereophile* Show—renamed HI-FI '92—returns to Los Angeles, and Stereophile, Inc. expands its base of operations by purchasing the venerable Schwann guides to recordings and publishing a Chinese-language edition in Taiwan. Mark Fisher joins the company's full-time staff as publisher and to oversee the Schwann and overseas operations. *Test CD 2* is released in May, Jack English joins the review team, and we celebrate 30 unbroken years of publication with a banquet for the audio industry at Chicago's Intercontinental Hotel.

The largest issues are January, April, and October at 340 pages each, we have 25 full-time employees, and circulation peaks at 87,000.

1993 In this year of consolidation the decision is made to abandon, starting with the January 1994 issue, the digest size with which the magazine has been identified for the past quarter century. In the meantime, HI-FI '93 is a roaring success at the Marriott Hotel in San Francisco's Mission District, Jack English contributes an excellent three-part series, "The Sonic Bridge," on how to listen to audio components, Robert Harley continues his fascinating investigation into digital word-clock jitter, we publish J. Gordon Holt's extensive glossary on how to describe sound quality, and Jonathan Scull and Stephen Stone join the reviewing team.

Circulation drops slightly, to 78,000—just as well, given the burden of paper costs: the largest issues are January, April, and October, at 356 pages each. But in our last year as a digest we publish a record 2013 pages of editorial out of a total of 3456 pages.

The December issue features the CAT preamplifier, 1993's "Product of the Year," in a cover photo taken by Eric Swanson, who goes on to photograph almost every product on *Stereophile*'s cover through 2002.

1994 Not only does the January issue see the debut of our "Recording of the Month" feature, it also introduces our new size—at 10" by 7", the same size as the Chinese *Stereophile*, which proves to be efficient to print in terms of wasted paper—and a new cover price of $6.95. Reader reaction ranges from positive to *very* negative, but partly as a result of the better exposure we now receive on newsstands, and perhaps because we offer subscriptions for $19.95, we significantly overshoot our circulation target to end up with a total of 92,000 readers by year's end.

Preparing for the change in size, we get headaches trying to predict how much it will cost to print the new book, and how many pages we can therefore devote to editorial. Each new page is 60% larger than one of the old digest-size ones, and while the opportunity for improved design and an easier-to-read typeface will use up some of the extra real estate, we can publish the same amount of editorial material in a third fewer pages. We decide to go for the 50:50 ratio of advertising to editorial that persists to this day. The upside is that when the advertising market is healthy, the issues can contain enormous numbers of reviews and articles; the flipside is that when the audio industry slides into one of its cyclical recessions, *Stereophile*'s page count can shrink dramatically.

In other news, Wes Phillips and Russ Novak join the reviewing team, and we release Robert Silverman's two-CD *Concert* set, recorded, as its name suggests, live in concert. HI-FI '94 takes place in the idyllic surroundings of Miami's Doral Resort, and we publish 1430 editorial pages out of a total of 2896. Most significant, December witnesses the launch of *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater*, at first an annual, then a quarterly, and finally published 10 times a year from January 1998 on.

1995–1997 As we settle into our new size and fine-tune the magazine's design, the high-end audio business booms, fueled by Asian sales, resulting in enormous issue sizes. We average 276 pages per issue in 1995 and 288 pages in 1996, and although we drop back to 252 pages in 1997, due to the collapse of the Far Eastern market for high-end audio gear, the demand for articles and reviews subjects the staff to major stress. Richard Lehnert decides to resign as music editor in 1996, reducing his responsibilities to those of copy editor. Robert Baird, formerly editor of *CD Review*, takes RL's place in September of that year, and remains music editor to this day, contributing his "Aural Robert" column to each issue. With Tom Norton taking on much of the responsibility for the content of the *Guide*, Wes Phillips moves from Brooklyn to Santa Fe to join the full-time staff and take over the administration of the equipment reports, as well as write as many reviews as he can manage.

The magazine purchases a Nagra-D digital recorder for its recording projects, and in July 1995, at the urging of *Stereophile*'s new assistant publisher, Gretchen Grogan, JA begins a four-year relationship with the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, recording a selection of their summer concerts for the Stereophile label. In 1996 we release Robert

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Silverman turning in a heroic performance of Franz Liszt's grand B-minor piano sonata, first on CD, then on an LP mastered directly from the 20-bit digital master. In '97, with Hyperion Knight, we commission a new orchestration of *Rhapsody in Blue* to celebrate Gershwin's forthcoming centenary. Magnificently performed and conducted on a Stereophile CD by Hyperion, this is both JA's first high-sample-rate digital recording of an orchestra and his first surround-sound recording.

1997

We return to Los Angeles for HI-FI '95, but the 1996 show recognizes both the prosperity and the new maturity of the High End by being held at our most prestigious venue yet: Manhattan's Waldorf=Astoria Hotel. For the '97 Show we choose a similarly grand San Francisco hotel, the St. Francis, to which we will return in 2003.

Corey Greenberg, Mark Fisher, Russ Novak, Robert Harley, Dick Olsher, Guy Lemcoe, Lewis Lipnick, and Jack English all leave the magazine, and Peter W. Mitchell passes away, but Muse Kastanovich, Kalman Rubinson, Lonnie Brownell, Shannon Dickson, and Bob Reina join. Rick Rosen starts "Rick Visits...," his fascinating peek into musicians' secret lives as audiophiles, and George Reisch offers "Undercurrents," a bimonthly examination of audio's philosophical underpinnings. Most important, Michael Fremer joins us after a lengthy apprenticeship at *The Absolute Sound* to contribute "Analog Corner" and component reviews, and Lisa Astor begins to examine the pathological behavior of "her audiophile" in her own column, "Astor Place." In addition, Paul Miller becomes our "Test & Measurement Consultant" in 1997, to help JA develop new strategies for assessing product performance.

1999

The Schwann guides are sold to Valley Media. *Stereophile*'s circulation stabilizes at just above 80,000 by the end of 1995, where it has remained ever since. This is its natural level, as predicted by JA when he joined the magazine a decade earlier.

1998 December 1, 1997 is a portentous date in *Stereophile*'s history, because on that day the magazine's website emerges from the darkness. The result of months of work by webmaster Jon Iverson, www.stereophile.com begins with a weekly news poll and "Soapbox" updates, and in 1998 adds a links database and begins making *Stereophile*'s archive of reviews and articles available online.

But 1998 is a year to remember because, on June 1, ownership of *Stereophile*, *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater*, and the HI-FI Show passes from Stereophile, Inc., the corporation jointly owned by Larry Archibald and John Atkinson, to Petersen Publishing. (The deal was suggested and negotiated by Steve Watkinson, who tragically, was to pass away later in the year.)

Larry, John, Tom Norton, and Laura LoVecchio stay on, but, as is always the case with acquisitions, many staff members and writers leave in the following months, including Ken Nelson, Gretchen Grogan, Wes Phillips, Stephen Stone, Don Scott, and Muse Kastanovich. On the bright side, Chip Stern and Brian Damkroger begin contributing equipment reviews, and Jonathan Scull initiates his popular "Fine Times" column, on cheap ways to get the best sound from your system.

1999–2002 Organizational and ownership changes continue, as in January 1999 the Petersen Company is acquired by the English media conglomerate EMAP, which in turn divests itself of its US properties to *Stereophile*'s current owner, Primedia, in August 2001. (Primedia had expressed interest in acquiring *Stereophile* as early as 1997's San Francisco Show.) And at the end of June 2000 we depart New Mexico after 22 years, *Stereophile*'s editorial office relocating to Manhattan and the *Guide*'s to Los Angeles.

1998

But these years are difficult for hi-fi publications: *Audio* magazine closes in January 2000, *Stereo Review* abandons its half-century-old mission by morphing into *Sound & Vision*, and, as well as *High Fidelity* and *Audio*, the overall list of print-publishing casualties in the US includes *Sounds Like...*, *Hi-Fi Heretic*, *Fi*, *Audio Adventure*, *Ultimate Audio*, *Listener*, *The Tracking Angle*, *High Performance Review*, *Glass Audio*, *Speaker Builder*, *Sound Practices*, and *Positive Feedback*. R.I.P.

In 2002, *Stereophile* remains true to its 40-year-old mission, which is perhaps why it survives and, despite its necessarily smaller issues in these recessionary days, even thrives. However, after a long period during which he wants to write primarily about home-theater and surround-sound components, in summer 1999 J. Gordon Holt finally leaves the magazine he founded 37 years before. Larry Archibald also departs for ventures new in 1999, his final article appearing in the November 1999 issue (Vol.22 No.11). And in 2000 Tom Norton fully severs his relationship with *Stereophile* (though not its publisher) by becoming editor of *Stereophile Guide to Home Theater*.

There are other changes: Jonathan Scull serves three years on the full-time staff, leaving in March 2002 and ending up at one of the companies that started the audio High End, Monster Cable. Both George Reisch and Lisa Astor decide for personal reasons that they cannot continue with their popular columns. But first John Marks, then Paul Bolin, David Lander, and now Art Dudley join *Stereophile*'s writing team, bringing new voices, new sensibilities, and new viewpoints. And John Gourlay, the magazine's publisher since October '98, and Jackie Augustine, its executive publisher since the Petersen buyout, demonstrate each month their commitment to *Stereophile*'s editorial ethos.

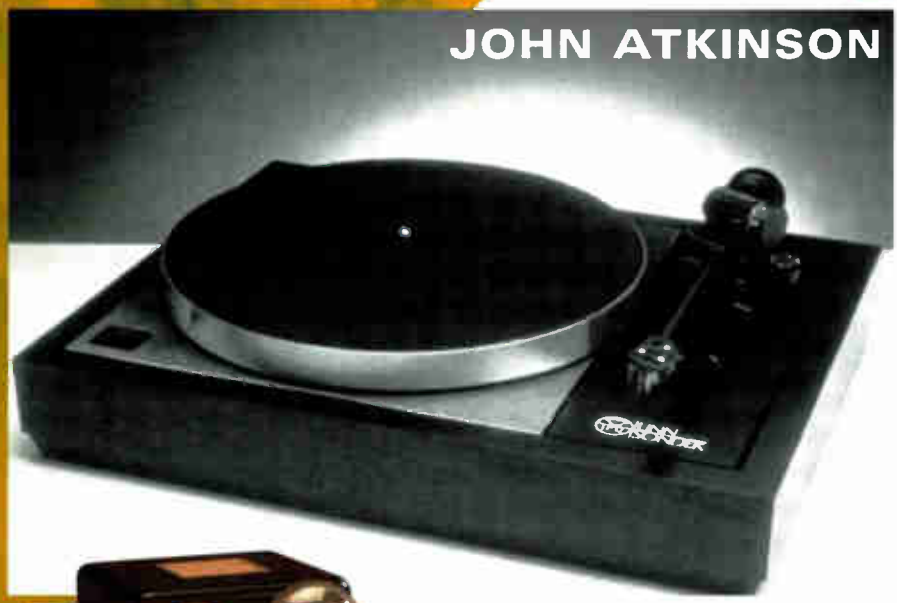
HI-FI '99 visits Chicago in May 1999. While there is no Y2K event, the Show continues to demonstrate the joys of listening to music on a high-end audio system—the 2001 and 2002 Home Entertainment Shows, held at the Manhattan Hilton, are two of the most successful ever. The magazine continues to release CDs, and is investigating the hi-rez SACD and DVD-Audio media, launched in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Our website, celebrating its own anniversary at the end of this month and still managed by the supremely talented Jon Iverson, goes from strength to strength.

Our thanks to everyone who has contributed to our past 40 years of success, especially to Natalie Brown Baca who has had responsibility for the magazine's appearance for most of the issues we have published since the fall of 1995. We all look forward to celebrating *Stereophile*'s Golden Anniversary in 2012! We'll see you there.

stereophile 40 YEARS 1962-2002

THE HOT

JOHN ATKINSON RANKS THE



Top: #1: Linn Sondek LP12 turntable
Above: #37: Cary CAD805 monoamp

"MOST IMPORTANT." That was the phrase I used when I e-mailed the members of *Stereophile*'s extended family of reviewers and writers to ask for suggestions when I began to compile this list. I didn't want to be more specific because I wanted to cast the net as wide as possible. But there are many factors that make an audio component "important": design innovation, sound quality, sales figures, influence on other designers, influence on the evolving market, influence on system synergy.

When I received everyone's suggestions—thanks, guys, I'm in your debt big-time—I reduced the number of contenders to just 100 and ranked the products from 100 to 1, trying to take all the above factors into account, as well as the impact each component had had on my own development as an audiophile. That a component was undoubtedly the best-sounding had to be weighed against how many people would have actually heard it, for example. The ranking is therefore intensely subjective—I fully acknowledge that no one else would come up with the same list in the same order. There are also products that are *not* on the list, despite being important in their ways: the Decca cartridges, for example, or the original Infinity switch-mode amplifier or the Spectral amplifier. Entire *technologies* have been omitted—the optical disc, HDCD, DSD encoding, 24-bit/192kHz PCM, NXT, room acoustics products, sigma-delta A/D and D/A conversion—and each of these has or will have a profound effect on how we experience recorded music. Japan, Germany, and Italy are under-represented, and France is not represented at all! And, to my shame, there is nothing on the list designed by Tim de Paravicini, David Berning, or Keith Johnson, possibly the three most original, most creative electronics designers who have been working during the 40 years *Stereophile* has been in existence. *Mea culpa.*

Any factual errors are mine alone. If you disagree with my rankings or feel important products have been omitted, write me with your suggestions. Where

100

100 AUDIO PRODUCTS HE FEELS TO HAVE BEEN THE MOST IMPORTANT SINCE 1962.

Stereophile reviewed the product, I have listed the issues where the reviews appeared, along with the date of the first one published. Where the review is available in the www.stereophile.com archives, I have indicated the fact with "WWW."

THE LIST

(in ascending order)

[100]: Polk Cobra Cable loudspeaker cable
Stereophile review: 1978 (Vol.4 No.3). Highly capacitive, this distinctive-looking Japanese-sourced cable blew up many amplifiers that weren't unconditionally stable. Nevertheless, it blazed a trail followed first by Bob Fulton, then by Monster, then by countless others.

[98] (tie): Advent 201 & Nakamichi Dragon cassette decks
Stereophile reviews: Advent, Spring 1973 (Vol.3 No.4); Nakamichi, November 1984 (Vol.7 No.6). Henry Kloss's first attempt to wring high-fidelity performance from a format introduced (as a dictation medium!) a year after *Stereophile*'s debut was the Advent 200, which combined Dolby-B noise reduction with a Nakamichi transport. But it wasn't until Kloss replaced the Nakamichi with an industrial mechanism from 3M's Wollensak division, to make the Model 201, that he was satisfied. The rest is history, culminating in Nakamichi's own Dragon. As so often is the case, this ultimate statement in the medium was introduced just a few years before the medium's own death knell was sounded. In the case of the cassette, it was sounded by the digital DAT.

[97]: AR 3A loudspeaker
(No *Stereophile* review:) It may have been ugly, colored, and with rolled-off highs, but the sealed-box 3A defined the "Boston Sound" and helped establish the American speaker industry. I never liked it, but I can't ignore it. Pretty much the same drive-units were used in AR's multidirectional LST, which years later was to inspire Mark Levinson's Cello speakers. I *really* didn't like the LST.

[96]: Crown DC300A power amplifier
Stereophile review: Autumn 1968 (Vol.2 No.10). In hindsight, the Crown sounded like early solid-state. But it was powerful, bombproof, and drove the early days of the progressive rock revolution and what was to become high-end audio.

[95]: Magnum Dynalab FT-101A FM tuner
First *Stereophile* review: August 1985 (Vol.8 No.4; also Vol.10 No.3, Vol.13 No.10, Vol.17 No.10). Magnum Dynalab's more recent MD-108 was the best-sounding FM tuner to come from this Canadian company, but the FT-101A was the tuner that redefined the genre by sticking with analog tuning in a digital world.

#37: Halcro dm58 amplifier

[93] (tie): Nagra IV-S & ReVox A77 open-reel analog tape recorders
First *Stereophile* reviews: Nagra, December 1964 (Vol.1 No.9); ReVox, Autumn 1968 (Vol.2 No.10; also Vol.2 No.12, Vol.3 No.5). The superbly Swiss and superb-sounding Nagra IV-S is in some ways the ultimate analog recorder and is still in widespread use in Hollywood a half-

[78]: Quicksilver MX-190 monoblock power amplifier
First *Stereophile* review: June 1984 (Vol.7 No.3; also Vol.8 Nos.2 & 4). "This amplifier, in an underground way, helped lead the resurgence of tube gear in the dark days of the early 1980s," says Sam Tellig. Many, if not most, of the units sold are said to be still in use (although owners may have had to convert from the original 8417 output tube to the EL34).

#69: Shure V-15 series phono cartridge

[77]: Dynavector Karat DV-17D MC phono cartridge
First *Stereophile* review: October 1982 (Vol.5 No.8; also Vol.6 No.1, Vol.7 No.8, Vol.8 No.1, Vol.10 No.5). With its short, rigid diamond cantilever, the late Dr. Tominari's masterpiece produced an astonishingly transparent view into the recorded soundstage while making almost impossible demands of the rest of the playback system. But when the planets aligned...

[76]: Hafler DH-200 power amplifier
Stereophile review: November 1983 (Vol.6 No.5). With this high-powered kit, David Hafler attempted to do for solid-state amplifiers what he'd already done for tubed designs with the Dynaco Stereo 70. He almost succeeded—the DH-200 proved an excellent platform for almost unlimited tweaking (called "Poogeing" by cognoscenti). Still in production 20 years later from Smart Devices, who have added a small-signal tube!

[75]: Spica TC50 loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: February 1984 (Vol.7 No.2; also Vol.9 No.5, Vol.11 No.1, Vol.12 No.10, Vol.14 No.10 WWW). John Bau's ugly duckling of a time-aligned two-way miniature showed that great sound could be produced from a speaker without the designer having to throw unlimited sums of money at the problems.

[74]: Advent 300 receiver
Stereophile review: December 1977 (Vol.4 No.1). Designed by a team led by Tomlinson Holman, of subsequent THX fame, the Advent combined a superb phono stage with an excellent 15Wpc power amp. It was also a pretty good FM tuner. And, like all of Henry Kloss's conceptions, it cost next to nothing.

#68: Grado (original) "moving-iron" phono cartridge

[72] (tie): Sony CDP-101 & Philips CD-100 CD players
Stereophile review: Sony, January 1983 (Vol.5 No.10 WWW); Philips, no review. They may not have sounded that good by today's standards, but they were the first, and you can't take that away from them. With its non-oversampled DAC shared between the channels and its complex analog filters, the Sony was a technological cul-de-sac. The Philips, however, and its identical Marantz-badged clone, introduced noise-shaping and oversampling to consumer audio, a development whose significance was not widely recognized for almost a decade.

[71]: Shahinian Obelisk loudspeaker
(No *Stereophile* review.) I first heard the quasi-omnidirectional Obelisk 25 years ago, and it sounded as different then from what else was around as it does now. Richard Shahinian has always gone his own way, guided by his overwhelming passion for classical orchestral music; his speakers fall into the category of "If you love their sound, they're the best speakers in the world for you." However, for Dick to survive and even to prosper through the years lends his efforts a credibility that cannot be acquired in any other way.

[70]: Sennheiser HD-414 headphones
(No *Stereophile* review.) Sennheiser has made better-sounding headphones since the '414s were introduced in the 1960s—their electrostatic Orpheus from the early 1990s was to die for, and their HD-600, driven in balanced mode by a HeadRoom BlockHead amp, is my current reference for headphone performance. But with its open-air, on-the-ear loading and with every part replaceable, the '414 showed how to achieve genuine high-end headphone sound, not only to Sennheiser but to every other headphone manufacturer.

[69]: Shure V-15 series MM phono cartridges
First *Stereophile* review: December 1964 (Vol.1 No.9; also Vol.2 Nos.4 & 5, Vol.3 No.6, Vol.4 No.5, Vol.5 Nos.5 & 9, Vol.7 Nos.5 & 8, Vol.10 No.5, Vol.12 No.11, Vol.20 No.7). The idea of balancing an in-band, top-octave resonant peak against an electrical top-octave rolloff didn't seem particularly intuitive compared with the elegant simplicity of the wide-bandwidth moving-coil cartridges pioneered by, among others, Denmark's Ortofon (later to be owned by David Hafler). But given that the massive MCs of the time tended to plow rather than trace their way through the grooves, the excellent tracking offered by the Shures, even at low downforces, was a welcome development—"First, do no harm to the groove walls."—and the fact that the styli were interchangeable was a bonus. The conceptually similar ADCs, Empires, Stantons, and Sonuses had their fans, but Chicago's Shure Bros. owned the audiophile market for a long, long time. Except in Japan, where the MC flame was guarded for posterity.

[68]: Grado (original) "moving-iron" phono cartridge
Stereophile review: Spring 1966 (Vol.1 No.12). There were moving-coils and there were moving-magnets, and then there were Joe Grado's cartridges, which were neither and perhaps sounded superior because of that fact.

[66] (tie): McIntosh MR 78 & Sequerra Model 1 FM tuners
Stereophile reviews: McIntosh, December 1984 (Vol.7 No.7); Sequerra, Winter 1973 (Vol.3 No.7). "Some consider this FM tuner to be the finest tuner made," writes *Stereophile*'s Larry Greenhill about the McIntosh, "equal to the Marantz 10B in sound quality but having sensitivity greater than any other." A decade earlier, Richard Sequerra packed into his design the maximum amount of 1970s-vintage technology possible, including an oscilloscope-cum-RF spectrum analyzer for FM tuning, to transform radio into a true high-fidelity medium. Remanufactured by David Day for a while in the '90s, the Sequerra was easily the finest tuner LG had ever used. A shame that, in the 21st century, the compression-obsessed FM broadcasting industry strives but fails to achieve the audio quality of MP3 files.

[64] (tie): Avantgarde Uno & Sonus Faber Guarneri Homage loudspeakers
First *Stereophile* reviews: Avantgarde, September 2000 (Vol.23 No.9; also Vol.25 No.8 WWW); Sonus Faber, July 1994 (Vol.17 No.7 WWW). With American and British loudspeaker design philosophy running along rigidly defined rails by the 1990s, the appearance of these musically communicative German and

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Italian speakers, which danced to very different design drummers, blew a welcome breath of fresh air into the High End.

[63]: Pass Labs Aleph power amplifiers
First *Stereophile* review: March 1995 (Vol.18 No.3; also Vol.20 Nos.4 & 11). Some critics nominated Nelson Pass's Threshold amplifier designs from the late 1970s, produced with the industrial design help of the talented René Besné, as being the most important. But I think Nelson's Aleph designs, with their use of high-voltage FETs and uncompromised single-ended operation, represent the true flowering of one of America's most distinguished electronics engineers.

[62]: DNM solid-core loudspeaker cable
Stereophile review: October 1985 (Vol.8 No.6). "Imagine a company that promotes hardwired electronics, nonmetallic enclosures, split-foil capacitors, low-power amplifiers, and, of course, simple, solid-core interconnects and speaker wires. No big deal in the SET-happy 21st century? True, I suppose—but I'm thinking back to the DNM company of 1985." That's how Art Dudley, *Stereophile*'s new editor-at-large, began his nomination of Denis N. Morecroft's DNM cable. And it's true that, while DNM-branded cables have almost zero market profile in the US, the *idea* of solid-core cable has become ubiquitous.

[59] (tie): Musical Fidelity Digilog, Arcam Delta Black Box, PS Audio Link D/A processors
First *Stereophile* reviews: Musical Fidelity, October 1989 (Vol.12 No.10); Arcam, February 1989 (Vol.12 Nos.2 & 10); PS Audio, no review. The first of many. Did standalone digital processors introduce more problems than they solved? Possibly. At least some of the time. But what they also did was make use of the CD's open-source data structure to trigger simultaneous explosions of design energy and hardware market expansion. Those intent on restricting outsiders' access to raw SACD and DVD-Audio data take note.

[58]: Audio Alchemy Digital Decoding Engine v1.0 D/A processor
First *Stereophile* review: August 1991 (Vol.14 No.8; also Vol.14 No.10, Vol.15 No.10). Audio Alchemy was a once-in-a-lifetime commingling of design talent with entrepreneurial flair. The DDE sounded good enough and cost little enough that, for a brief glorious period, it and its successors managed to inject gobs of energy and excitement into this all-too-often stuffy hobby—until AA discovered they were losing money on every sale and couldn't make it up in volume, as the old saw has it. So long, Mark and Peter, and thanks for all the fun.

[54] (tie): Oracle Delphi, SOTA Star Sapphire, VPI HW-19, Well Tempered turntables
First *Stereophile* reviews: Oracle, June 1986 (Vol.9 No.4; also Vol.14 No.8, Vol.20 No.12); SOTA, February 1984 (Vol.7 No.2; also Vol.9 No.4, Vol.10 No.5, Vol.11 No.1); VPI, February 1984 (Vol.7 No.2; also Vol.8 No.4, Vol.9 Nos.4 & 5, Vol.12 No.11, Vol.15 No.8); Well Tempered, March 1988 (Vol.11 No.3; also Vol.16 No.4, Vol.17 No.10, Vol.22 No.8). The Linn Sondek showed the way in the 1970s; the 1980s saw a flurry of US design activity intended to show that the Linn could be surpassed. The SOTA was the 'table "Newton would have designed," the Oracle was stunningly beautiful, the WTT was the result of inspired lateral thinking, and the VPI demonstrated what could be achieved by obsessive attention to detail. All four were "better than the Linn" in at least one area of performance, but it took a long while for any to reach the original goal.

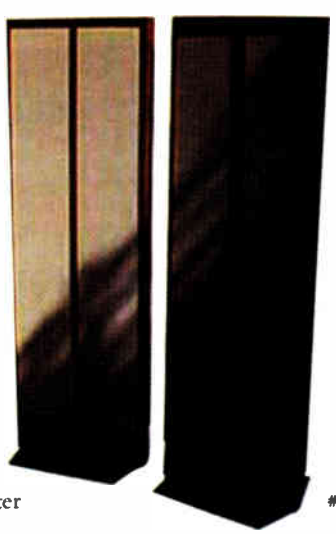
[53]: Roksan Xerxes turntable
First *Stereophile* review: April 1986 (Vol.9 No.3; also Vol.13 No.3). The English Xerxes was introduced more or less at the same time as CD and was almost profoundly influential, according to Art Dudley. The Roksan's influence involved the way hi-fi was sold more than designed, in that it was the product that broke the Linn-Naim stranglehold in the UK (and the handful of like-minded stores in the US). "Before Roksan," says AD, "people who valued a component's rhythmic and melodic capabilities had only one real turntable choice, the (still splendid) Linn LP12. But the first Roksan Xerxes was so good, and so superior to the pre-Lingo LP12, that honest listeners among the so-called/self-called 'Flat-Earthers' had no choice but to say so." The floodgates opened, and soon it was okay for all but the most brainwashed to acknowledge good performance from products by companies other than Linn, Naim, and Rega.

[51] (tie): Audio Power Industries Power Wedge 1 & PS Audio P300 Power Plant
Stereophile reviews: API, November 1991 (Vol.14 No.11); PS Audio, December 1999 (Vol.22 No.12, Vol.23 Nos.5 & 12 WWW). There had been other components intended to clean up the AC supply, most notably the Tice, but the improvement in system sound quality wrought by the cost-effective Power Wedge, with its high-quality isolating transformers, was the first to convince me that I indeed had a problem that needed fixing. The PS Audio piece takes the philosophy to the limit by synthesizing a whole new AC signal. Skeptical? Just give a listen to your preamp plugged into the wall, then plugged into the Power Plant. Who'd a-thunk it?

[50]: KEF R107 loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: June 1986 (Vol.9 No.4; Also Vol.9 No.7, Vol.10 No.2, Vol.14 Nos.5 & 10, Vol.18 No.10 WWW). Yes, the elegant R107 was the first high-end speaker to successfully implement a "bandpass" or "coupled-cavity" woofer, but its real importance lay in the fact that it finally rammed home the lesson that speaker design primarily involved engineering rather than art. Yes, art is still an essential part of designing a musically satisfying speaker, but only when that art rides on a platform of solid engineering.

[49]: Apogee Scintilla loudspeaker
Stereophile review: July 1985 (Vol.8 No.3). It wasn't the first all-ribbon loudspeaker from Apogee, it wasn't the biggest, and it probably wasn't even the best-sounding (that was probably the Duetta). It was also a pig to drive, with perhaps just the big Krells up to the task of sinking power into what was, at some frequencies, little more than a short circuit. But the Scintilla was the Apogee speaker that convinced me that the magnetically driven ribbon, with its effortless coupling to the room and its lack of sonic character or coloration, was more than just a historic backwater of speaker design.

[48]: KLH 9 electrostatic loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: Spring 1966 (Vol.1 No.12; also Vol.2 No.10). An American classic at least two decades ahead of its time. I heard the 9 only once, but I still shiver at the memory.



#48: KLH 9 loudspeaker

[47]: Convergent Audio Technology SL-1 preamplifier
First *Stereophile* review: November 1986 (Vol.9 No.7; also Vol.15 No.12, Vol.17 Nos.1, 9 & 11, Vol.18 No.12, Vol.19 No.12, Vol.21 No.3, Vol.22 No.8). The ultimate tube preamplifier for more than a decade, until the Conrad-Johnson ART appeared. But CAT lovers are a loyal bunch.

[46]: Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 3D CD player
Stereophile review: October 2001 (Vol.24 No.10 WWW). In an era when consumer digital media are available that inherently exceed what is possible from the antique CD format, Musical Fidelity introduced what is possibly the finest-sounding CD player that was ever made. As only 500 *were* made and all 500 were sold, that point will be academic for almost all audiophiles.

[45]: Nagra-D open-reel digital recorder
Stereophile review: January 1996 (Vol.19 No.1 WWW). Using a VHS scanner to record four channels of 24-bit data (two channels at 88.2kHz or 96kHz), this Swiss jewel of a recorder showed what could be achieved from high-resolution digital audio.

#45: Nagra-D open-reel digital recorder

[44]: The Graham tonearm
First *Stereophile* review: March 1991 (Vol.14 No.3; also Vol.14 No.8, Vol.18 No.6, Vol.21 No.2, Vol.24 Nos.1 & 10, Vol.25 No.7 WWW). "Simply the most practical, easy-to-use, and superb-sounding arm to be had today," enthuses Paul Bolin, adding that Bob Graham's masterpiece, now in its 2.2 incarnation, is "maybe the best all-'round tonearm ever." All I can add is to point out the Graham arm's impossibly elegant engineering and idiot-proof installation procedure.

[43]: SME 3009 tonearm (original)
First *Stereophile* review: September 1965 (Vol.1 No.11; also Vol.2 Nos.10 & 12). "Scale Model Engineering" was the original name of Alastair Robertson-Aikman's machine shop, and when ARA turned his attention to audio components, the result was a fastidious work of engineering art to turn the heads of even the Swiss. The version listed is the one with the nondetachable headshell, which worked superbly in its day with feather-light trackers like the Shure V15 Mk.III. The current SME IV and V are much better overall and much better suited to medium-high-mass MCs. But you never forget your first SME.

[42]: Meridian D600 digital active loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: November 1989 (Vol.12 No.11; also Vol.14 No.10). More recent Meridian loudspeakers exceed the D600's performance in every way, but this modest floorstander was the first to show what could be achieved by integrating power amplification and digital technology in a speaker design.

[41]: Celestion SL-600 loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: May 1989 (Vol.12 No.5; also Vol.15 No.8). The first popular compact supermonitor, introduced in 1983. The English company's Graham Bank and Gordon Hadaway decided that, as the main source of coloration in a box speaker is the box, they would effectively do away with it by making it from the Aerolam material used in airplane construction. The copper-dome tweeter used in the SL-600 and its wooden-box SL-6 sibling also pioneered the resurgence of interest in moving-coil drivers with pistonic metal diaphragms. "Had anyone even 1) tried to make a compact monitor sound this uncolored, or 2) charge as much?" asks Wes Phillips. Nope. But what a sound!

[39] (tie): Cello Palette analog & TacT RCS 2.0 digital equalizer-preamplifiers
First *Stereophile* reviews: Cello, June 1992 (Vol.15 No.6; also Vol.18 No.7); TacT, September 2001 (Vol.24 No.9 WWW). The Palette, designed by Richard Burwen and Tom Colangelo and the first product to come from Mark Levinson's Cello after he'd been forced out of his eponymous company, broke the primary rule for analog equalizers by featuring enormous overlaps between the operating bands. But because of this, it was perhaps the finest-ever equalizer for dealing with music program's tonal problems, as opposed to room and acoustic problems. The latter are far more effectively dealt with by TacT's DSP (digital signal processing) engine, a revolutionary device that implements in a simple consumer product the technology pioneered by the professional Sigtech device, which in turn evolved from work done by Bob Berkowitz and Ron Genereux at Acoustic Research in the early 1980s, when "research" was still actually part of that company's mission.

[37] (tie): Cary Audio Design CAD805 & Halcro dm58 monoblock power amplifiers
First *Stereophile* reviews: Cary, January 1994 (Vol.17 No.1; also Vol.17 Nos.2 & 5, Vol.21 No.3); Halcro, October 2002 (Vol.25 No.10). While not the first modern tube amplifier with a single-ended output stage, Dennis Had's gorgeous-looking and -sounding '805 is the culmination of all that this retro technology has to offer. By contrast, the Australian Halcro might well be the finest solid-state amplifier made. "An engineering tour de force and quite possibly the planet's best component," writes Paul Bolin. "Not bad," I'm forced to agree with my usual English understatement.

#44: Graham 2.0 tonearm

[36]: Meridian MCD Pro CD player
First *Stereophile* review: October 1985 (Vol.8 Nos.6 & 7). It's hard for audiophiles younger than 40 to comprehend how truly unmusical most early CD players were. This was compounded by the resolution of the data on the discs themselves, which was limited by the professional converters and the fact that some of the early digital editors lacked dither and thus reintroduced quantizing artifacts. But Bob Stuart's radical reworking of a first-generation Philips chassis revealed that the discs weren't as bad as we thought, and that the medium did have true audiophile

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[24] (tie): BBC LS3/5A & Wilson Audio WATT loudspeakers
First *Stereophile* reviews: BBC, Spring 1977 (Vol.3 No.12; also Vol.4 No.1, Vol.7 No.2, Vol.12 Nos.2 & 3, Vol.16 No.12 WWW); Wilson, February 1988 (Vol.11 No.2; also Vol.14 Nos.6 & 10, Vol.18 No.11, Vol.19 No.10 WWW). These two tiny speakers—which, apart from being intended to serve as location recording monitors, are as far apart in their design starting points as is possible to imagine—redefined the art of the miniature loudspeaker: the LS3/5A in the mid-1970s, the WATT a decade later. The LS3/5A perhaps represented the finest flowering of a team of audio engineers assembled by the state-run broadcasting company, and which included Dudley Harwood and the late Spencer Hughes.

#24: Wilson WATT/Puppy

#21: Mark Levinson LNP-2 preamplifier

[23]: MartinLogan CLS electrostatic loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: September 1986 (Vol.9 No.6; also Vol.9 No.7, Vol.10 No.1, Vol.14 No.12, Vol.15 Nos.2 & 3, Vol.17 No.6 WWW). The elegant and transparent (both visually and sonically) CLS brought electrostats into the mainstream consciousness—you can find MartinLogans on both the small and silver screens.

[22]: Audio Research D-150 power amplifier
Stereophile review: Winter 1975 (Vol.3 No.11). This massive Minnesotan amplifier used modern circuit design to set a new direction for high-end tube components and to highlight contemporary solid-state gear as sounding edgy and unmusical in comparison.

[21]: Mark Levinson LNP-2 preamplifier
(No *Stereophile* review.) This no-frills preamp gave birth to the High End, in terms of both sound quality and its being synonymous with expensive audio jewelry. It also created the Levinson livery of heavy anodized faceplate with contrasting machined knobs, a look that other companies emulated lest they be thought *not* high-end.

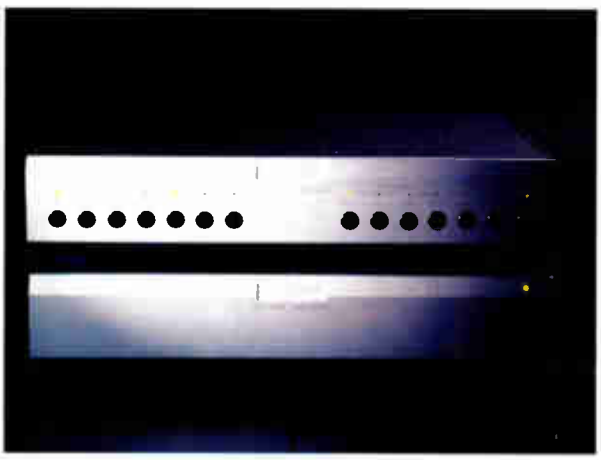
[20]: Monster Cable (original) loudspeaker cable
(No *Stereophile* review.) Yes, it was not too different from heavy-gauge zipcord, and yes, its copper conductors showed a premature propensity to turn green. And Monster didn't create the high-performance cable category. But it was Monster that established the importance of using good cables. Monster that established cables as a separate component category, and Monster that made cables mainstream. (Monster Cable has also trained more audio industry professionals than any other organization except, perhaps, Harman.) More controversially and in my personal opinion, it was Monster, that opened wide the "anything goes" floodgates, and it was Monster that taught dealers to rely on the profit margin offered by cables. This was to high-end audio's benefit, in that margins on electronics and speakers were lower than they might otherwise have been; and to its detriment, in that high margins discourage sales initiative and marketing expertise.

[19]: NAD 3020 integrated amplifier
(No *Stereophile* review.) Designed by Erik Edvardsen, who had worked with Tom Holman on the Advent receiver, the ridiculously inexpensive 3020 showed that an amplifier didn't need machined faceplates, intimidating heatsinks, or technically glamorous components—its output stage was based on cheap and slow 3055/2955 complementary transistors—to be able to drive real-world speakers. It put NAD on the map, but they never matched the 3020's overall achievement, in my opinion.

[18]: Audio Research SP10 preamplifier
First *Stereophile* review: June 1984 (Vol.7 No.3; also Vol.7 No.7, Vol.9 No.7). Throughout the 1970s and early '80s, many "SP"-series all-tube preamps emerged from William Zane Johnson's drawing board, and all have their advocates as being the most important Audio Research component. But the two-chassis SP10 was the finest of them all.

[16] (tie): Krell KSA-100 (original) & Mark Levinson ML-2 power amplifiers
(Neither reviewed in *Stereophile*.) Two Connecticut amplifiers with class-A output stages that defined the high-end solid-state

#11: Conrad-Johnson ART line preamplifier



#11: Boulder 2008 phono preamplifier

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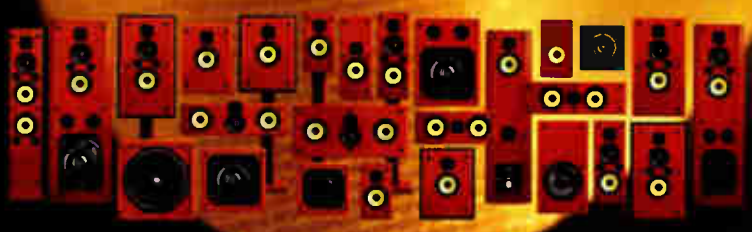

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amplifier as being a true voltage source — it will swing the same volts into a load no matter how many amps are being sucked from it — but also as being massive, expensive, and Bauhaus brutal in its looks. Yes, Krell's Dan D'Agostino and the Madrigal design team have produced successively better-sounding amplifiers in the more than 20 years since the ML-2 and KSA-100 hit the scene, but these plowed that first furrow.

[15]: Dynaco Stereo 70 power amplifier
First *Stereophile* review: January 1963 (Vol.1 No.3; also Vol.11 No.5, Vol.15 No.9). It was cheap and cheaply made, but David Hafler's simple little two-channel tube amp introduced the importance of good-sounding electronics to more audiophiles than any other product. It also spun off a pro-audio dynasty when the founders of Sunn used first the kit version, then OEM chassis supplied by Dynaco, for musical-instrument amplification. And it triggered an explosion in tube-amp design in the 1980s as a new generation of designers realized, "Hey, I can do better than that." A few were even right.

#11: Rockport Technology System III Sirius 'table

[11] (tie): Boulder 2008 phono preamplifier, Conrad-Johnson ART line preamplifier, Mark Levinson No.33 Reference monoblock power amplifier, Rockport Technology System III Sirius turntable
First *Stereophile* reviews: Boulder, July 2002 (Vol.25 No.7 WWW); Conrad-Johnson, May 1998 (Vol.21 No.5; also Vol.25 No.6 WWW); Mark Levinson, no review; Rockport, August 2000 (Vol.23 No.8 WWW). When a product is the "best-sounding," as each of these four undoubtedly is in its category, there is not a lot more that needs to be said.

[8] (tie): B&W Nautilus, Infinity IRS, Wilson Audio WAMM loudspeakers
Stereophile reviews: B&W, no review; Infinity, March 1986 (Vol.9 No.2); Wilson, August 1983 (Vol.6 No.3). One uses cone/dome drivers in a conventional cabinet (if something resembling a snail could be called "conventional"), the other two use dynamic, planar-magnetic, or electrostatic upper-range drivers in a panel array and conventional woofers in a separate tower. All three were made in minuscule numbers, and all three are the finest-sounding true full-range loudspeakers I have heard.

[7]: B&W 801 Matrix Series 2 loudspeaker
Stereophile review: December 1987 (Vol.10 No.9 WWW). Widely used in classical recording studios and high-end systems alike, the revised version of the big B&W took the concept of a high-quality minimonitor integrated with a bass bin to a far wider audience than its $5000/pair price would suggest was possible. "Possibly the best-selling high-end loudspeaker ever sold in the US," notes Wes Phillips, and "certainly the most influential dynamic loudspeaker design of its generation." The current Nautilus incarnation of the 801 builds on a solid base of quality.

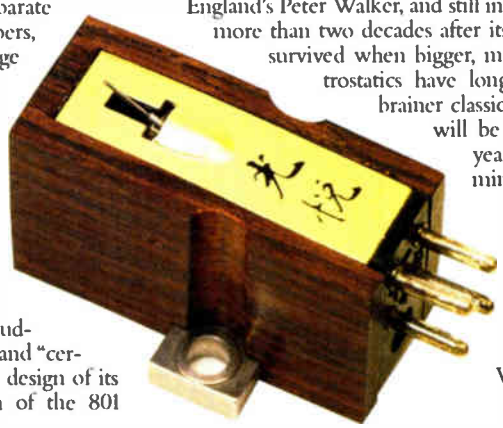
[6]: Magnepan Magneplanar Timpani loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: Spring 1973 (Vol.3 No.4; also Vol.8 No.6). Back in the late 1980s, more *Stereophile* readers owned Magneplanar panels than any other loudspeaker. Jim Winey's twin ideas of using an array of ceramic refrigerator magnets and bonding a flat wire coil to a Mylar diaphragm allowed him to create a magnetic equivalent to an electrostatic speaker but without some of the latter's problems, and with additional benefits such as ease of drive and much higher power handling. The current Magnepan designs may use a ribbon tweeter and be refined in all areas of performance, but are no different in concept from what Paul Bolin calls "a landmark in the dictionary sense of the word."

[5]: AR XA turntable
Stereophile review: Summer 1967 (Vol.2 No.5). While it was let down by a poor tonearm and cheap construction, Edgar Villchur's deceptively simple-looking turntable created the formula for almost every high-end turntable introduced in the past 40 years: belt drive and a suspended subchassis both provided high-pass filter action to isolate the stylus/groove interface from, respectively, motor- and loudspeaker-generated vibration.

[4]: Koetsu Rosewood MC phono cartridge
Stereophile review: December 1985 (Vol.8 No.7). The ultimate design to come from the late Sugano-sama, the Koetsu set new standards for sound quality and price. Outclassing the turntables and tonearms in which it was mounted, it triggered an end-of-era flowering of analog design and engineering.

[3]: Vandersteen 2 loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: August 1986 (Vol.9 No.6; also Vol.12 No.5, Vol.13 Nos.1 & 5, Vol.16 Nos.4 & 9, Vol.23 No.10 WWW). In production for a quarter century and incrementally improved throughout that period, the modest-looking 2 offers astonishingly clean, extended, and detailed sound without ever losing sight of the music. That it does all this for just $1500/pair is a tribute to Richard Vandersteen's talent but also foresight.

[2]: Quad ESL-63 loudspeaker
First *Stereophile* review: September 1983 (Vol.6 No.4; also Vol.6 No.5, Vol.7 No.7, Vol.8 No.3, Vol.10 No.1, Vol.12 Nos.2 & 6 WWW). An inspired planar design from a true audio genius, England's Peter Walker, and still in production (as the ESL-988) more than two decades after its introduction, the Quad has survived when bigger, more complex full-range electrostatics have long since disappeared. "A no-brainer classic," writes Paul Bolin. "People will be listening to the ESL-63 40 years from now and loving every minute." Amen.



#4: Koetsu Rosewood phono cartridge

[1]: Linn Sondek LP12 turntable
First *Stereophile* review: February 1984 (Vol.7 No.2; also Vol.13 No.3, Vol.14 No.1, Vol.16 Nos.11 & 12, Vol.17 No.5, Vol.19 No.2 WWW). Still in production after nearly 30 years, this Scottish turntable was featured on almost every *Stereophile* writer's list. The LP12 demonstrated the importance of the turntable to system performance. As a result, it has brought the sonic benefits of belt drive and a suspended subchassis to more audiophiles than all other high-end 'tables combined.

THE 40 Essential

And I used to think our annual "Records To Die For" issue was difficult. Whew! When it came down to choosing the 40 most influential rock/pop, jazz, and classical records of the past 40 years, during which this magazine has been the most honest and enjoyable source of high-end audio journalism, my initial list contained more than 200 choices. A painful paring-down process ensued, with input from every member of the *Stereophile* staff.

The idea was not to name the records I most love, or to list undiscovered or underappreciated masterpieces I could rattle on about (not that I wasn't tempted), but the albums that I feel were the most influential, the most accomplished, and/or the fullest flowering of a band or artist's style or career. This is only my list and everyone's list will undoubtedly be different. Several factors also narrowed the choices. By 1962, when the first issue of *Stereophile* rolled off the presses, many classical, blues, and jazz artists were either dead or past their best work. This was the era when rock'n'roll in all its many forms took over, hence its heavier representation here. Also, many musicians, such as Aretha Franklin and Elvis Presley, to name just two, were primarily singles artists whose albums tended to be a couple of already released hits surrounded by assorted filler. And "Best of" discs and other types of compilations were disqualified as not being coherent albums.

Special thanks go to former *Stereophile* music editor and current copy editor Richard Lehnert and classical writer Robert Levine, without whom this project would not have succeeded. And thanks to editor John Atkinson, whose wide range of musical knowledge, tastes, and enthusiasms are a constant source of genuine aid and riotous amusement to me. Happy 40th, *Stereophile*!

—Robert Baird

Albums

CLASSICAL

WAGNER: *Der Ring des Nibelungen*
Sir Georg Solti, Vienna Philharmonic, *et al*
Decca/London (1958, 1962, 1964, 1965)

The fact that Wagner's *Ring* is undeniably the finest music-drama ever written did not encourage record labels to record it with the invention of the LP—it was simply too vast and expensive an undertaking. But with stereo and advances in technology, Decca and producer John Culshaw eventually did so, and revolutionized the way opera was recorded—with stage details, movement, perspective, tricks of amplification and tape speed (to alter pitch and tone quality), and more. With the *Ring*, recording opera became an art form. Furthermore, with the brain-splitting clang of Donner's hammer and the subsequent thunderbolt near the end of *Das Rheingold*, every audiophile in the world had a new demonstration disc. Other *Rings* do this or that a bit better, but for sheer grandeur, this is still it: In the stereo era, much of the cast has still to be bettered (ditto the playing of the Vienna Philharmonic), and sonically, it's still a masterpiece.

—Robert Levine

J.S. BACH: *Goldberg Variations*
Glenn Gould, piano
Sony (1981)

With Gould's first recording of the *Goldbergs* in 1955, the world was introduced to a unique artist and began listening to Bach differently. By the time of this remake, Gould's eccentricities—humming along, odd tempo choices and accents, a refusal to perform anywhere but in the recording studio—were well-known, as were his spectacular gifts. Fleet-fingered, incredibly accurate, with soul and intelligence in equal parts, Gould was it. So is this, his later performance of the *Goldbergs*, now available in a boxed set along with the 1955 recording, in excellent sound and for the first time using the original analog tapes, made as backups because the engineers didn't altogether trust the new digital technology.

—Robert Levine

BEETHOVEN: Symphonies 1–9
Herbert von Karajan, Berlin Philharmonic
Deutsche Grammophon (1963)

Von Karajan recorded the complete Beethoven cycle four times, but this was the first ever recorded and intended to be sold as an integral set. Initially, those who wanted the set had to subscribe; the LPs were sent, symphony by symphony. It remains the key example of the most important partnership of label, orchestra, and conductor in the history of recordings. It's not a perfect set (what is?), but the orchestra's fabulous enthusiasm, and the senses of unity, event, and achievement, are palpable. The set remains a milestone for these foundations of the symphonic repertoire.

—Robert Levine

HILDEGARD VON BINGEN: *A Feather on the Breath of God*
Emma Kirkby, soprano; Gothic Voices
Hyperion (1983)

With this gorgeous CD, Hildegard von Bingen, 12th-century abbess, composer, artist, poet, visionary, and friend and advisor to popes, kings, and emperors, became a household name. Who would have believed that this collection of wandering, twisting plainchant lines and more complicated pieces would usher in an era in which baby-boomers raised on Dylan and Hendrix, the Stones and the Beatles, would listen to chanting monks? The whole production was both mystical and approachable—the boyish purity of Emma Kirkby's soprano mingled with a recorded ambience that

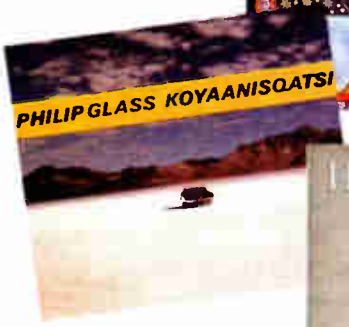
made us believe we were in or near an ancient monastery. The performances are impeccable, and the whole endeavor at least gave us the impression that we were in touch with a time long, long ago. — **Robert Levine**

GLASS: *Koyaanisqatsi*

Michael Riesman, Western Wind Vocal Ensemble, Members of the Philip Glass Ensemble
Nonesuch (1982)

Here is an example of a movie and its score being virtually inseparable, probably for the first time since the era of silent films. Godfrey Reggio's ravishing film is as important for Glass's music as for its images, which depict nature's, society's and technology's multiple relationships. The score, underlining the imagery, contains some of Glass's most stunning music—the runaway arpeggios are here, and so is a gloriously low bass-voice drone at the film's start and finish, as well as some choral music the composer has yet to better. As a result of this important collaboration, Minimalism became Mainstream.

— **Robert Levine**



GÓRECKI: Symphony 3

Dawn Upshaw, David Zinman, London Sinfonietta
Nonesuch (1993)

Composed in 1976, Górecki's Symphony 3 had its admirers from the start; within two months of its release 17 years later, this recording was on the Classical Top Ten charts, and quickly "crossed over," without a bit of marketing, to the pop charts as well. Its three tonal, dirge-like movements are laments for the victims of World War II. Perhaps it tapped into a type of new-age goodness/sadness consciousness and spirituality. Whatever: who would have guessed that this would become the best-selling disc ever by a contemporary composer?

— **Robert Levine**

HANDEL: *Messiah*

Christopher Hogwood, Academy of Ancient Music, vocal soloists
L'Oiseau-Lyre (1984)

Here was as close a re-creation as possible of the performance of *Messiah* given at the Foundling Hospital in 1754. The pitch is at 415Hz, the voices are small, vibratoless, and remarkably agile, there's plenty of ornamentation in both vocal and instrumental lines, the trebles sing the higher chorus parts, the small complement of period instruments plays crisply, and unsentimental tempos prevail. It all adds up to a vital, meticulous, polished, ear-opening performance that altered the way we listened to 18th-century music. Some still argue with the sound of the "scratchy" violins, and historically informed performances in general remain a matter of taste, but this set is riveting. The clear, precise sound continues to be a joy.

— **Robert Levine**

Symphonies

SCHUBERT: Complete Songs

Many vocalists; Graham Johnson, piano
Hyperion (completed 2000)

In 37 volumes, each conceived by and with the superb playing (and fascinating, informative accompanying notes) of pianist Graham Johnson, this set proved that a small label like Hyperion could steal the type of artistic thunder heretofore thought available only from one of the huge conglomerates. Each disc has a unique theme, and the singers are the finest in the business: Janet Baker, Thomas Allen, Arleen Augér, Elly Ameling, Philip Langridge, Brigitte Fassbaender, Thomas Hampson, Lucia Popp, Peter Schreier, and more. Schubert, the master of the Lied, finally gets *all* of his songs recorded.

— **Robert Levine**

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ROCK / POP

THE BEATLES: *The Beatles ("The White Album")*

Apple (1968)

The argument over which Beatles album is most influential is long, loud, and, ultimately, unsolvable. While *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* is where the band's revolution in thought and approach took wing and soared, *Revolver* is where the transition from pop band to something much more artistically serious began. Yet *Rubber Soul* is a better collection of tunes than *Revolver*. And let's not forget that *Abbey Road* is as gleaming and

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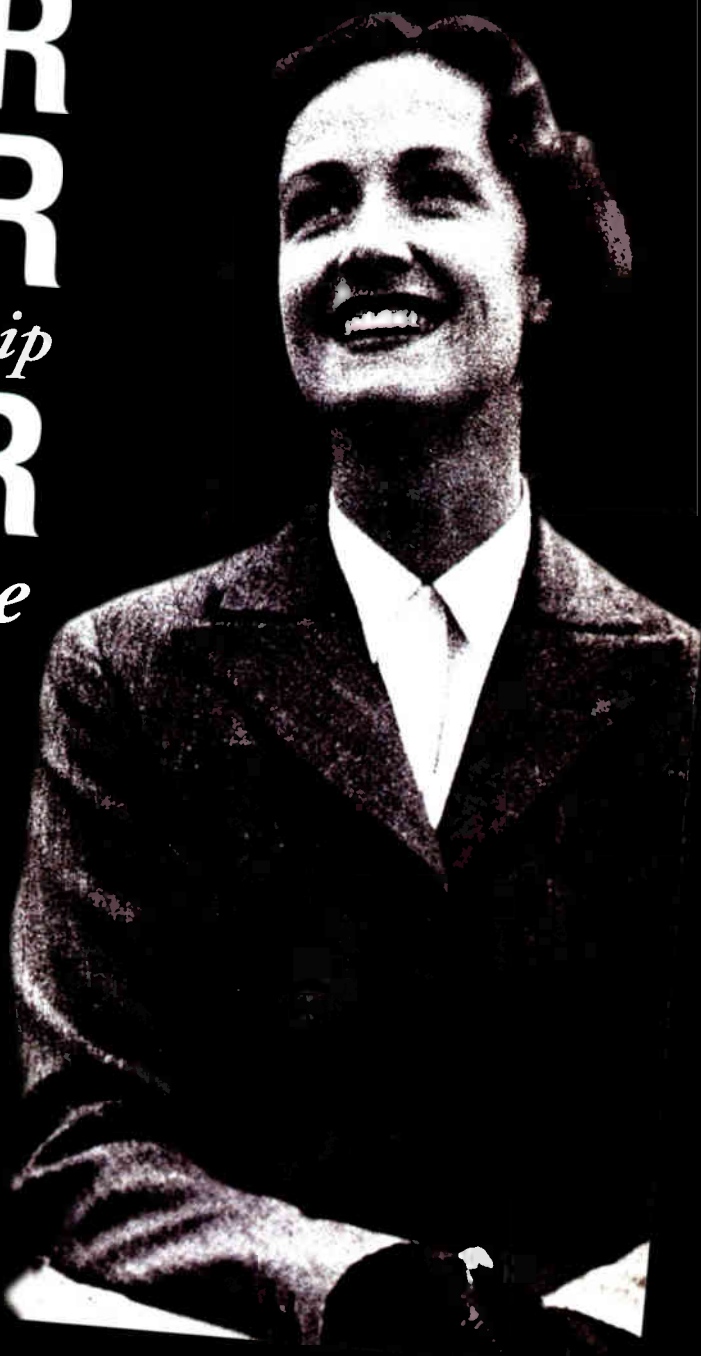

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All that said, "the White Album" is the *richest* entry in the band's still astonishing canon. If you're mining for inspiration, there's more ore here than anywhere else. Yes, cracks were appearing between the personalities at this time, but "Dear Prudence," "Blackbird," "Piggies," and so many others constitute the deepest, most resonant collection of songs the Beatles ever recorded.

DAVID BOWIE: *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*
RCA/Virgin (1972)

Beside Mick Ronson's guitar heft, the song cycle *Ziggy Stardust* is notable as the finest expression of glam rock. And then there's the passion obviously felt for the project by Bowie, for whom the line between the fictional Ziggy and his own life vanished. Androgynous, preening, self-obsessed, and made up like a space hooker, Bowie *was* Ziggy for a time. He also still had the nasal whine that powered "Suffragette City" and "Hang Onto Yourself." In music, the official end of the peace-and-love sixties.

ELVIS COSTELLO: *My Aim is True*
Columbia/Rhino (1977)

Hey, maybe all rock critics do look like Declan Patrick Aloysius MacManus (so said brainiac David Lee Roth), but Costello's blend of dense Dylanesque lyrics and punky, snarly rock music—called New Wave—was a revelation in the late '70s, when heavy metal ruled (hence Roth's envious comment). This debut album contains "Watching the Detectives," "Welcome to the Working Week," and "Alison," whose chorus of "Whooooa-oooooa Alison / I know this world is killing you / Whoooooa Alison / My aim is true" inspired countless dorm-room singalongs. While his 1986 masterwork, *King of America*, is a close second in terms of songwriting, this album's brashness and out-of-nowhere quality make it unforgettable.

BOB DYLAN: *Blood on the Tracks*
Columbia (1975)

As with the Beatles, the choice of most influential Bob Dylan album has been known to set off, shall we say, passionate arguments. This one is more of a two-sided war, the choice being between 1966's *Blonde On Blonde* and 1975's *Blood on the Tracks*. The decision here rested on which album contained the best single song, and "Simple Twist of Fate" fits that bill for me, with "Tangled Up in Blue," "Idiot Wind," and "Shelter from the Storm" not far behind. Although Dylan junked an early version of this record and re-cut it with a band of Minnesota musicians, it still rates as one of his finest collections of originals.

STEVE EARLE: *Guitar Town*
MCA (1986)

While Gram Parsons' two original solo albums, *GP* and *Grievous Angel*, started the whole country-rock genre, this shocker, from Nashville no less, turned country music on its head. Soon after its release, Lyle Lovett, Dwight Yoakam, kd lang, and other left-of-center acts had record deals and careers. Suddenly, being edgy and a rocker was cool on Music Row, which had been floundering for years. The funny thing is that it's the slow songs here, the sad, non-rockin' stuff, that are the sweetest: "Fearless Heart," "My Old Friend the Blues," and "Someday" are each as good a song as has ever been waxed in Nashville or anywhere else.

FUNKADELIC: *One Nation Under a Groove*
Warner Bros./Priority (1978)

Sure, George Clinton is a little fried now, but back in the '70s, when he simultaneously ran two soul-funk projects—the more accessible Parliament and the spacier Funkadelic—he was the high priest of the genre. Prince, Rick James, even James Brown in later years "borrowed" ideas from this album and its equally potent sibling, *Uncle Jam Wants You*. Bassist William "Bootsy" Collins and keyboardist Bernie Worrell add much to "Who Says a Funk Band Can't Play Rock" or "Promentalshitbackwashpsychosis Enema Squad (The DooDoo Chasers)." Out of print for years, both were reissued in 1993 by Priority.

MARVIN GAYE: *What's Going On*
Motown (1971)

An early and still one of the best concept albums, this soul classic is also a deeply political record, with songs addressing Vietnam, the environment, and civil rights. While Gaye's irresistible 1973 single, "Let's Get It On" (from the album of the same name), may be sexier, "Mercy, Mercy Me (The Ecology)" is more heartfelt. Gaye was arguably the smoothest soul singer of all time. This album is part of the proof.

THE GRATEFUL DEAD: *American Beauty*
Warner Bros. (1970)

Improvisation in rock music began with the Dead, but for those who think they sometimes went too far in that direction, there's this 1970 session. Inexpensively made and full of songs that would become permanent entries in their concert set lists,

"IT'S OUT-OF-NOWHERE QUALITY MAKES IT UNFORGETTABLE."

American Beauty gets the nod over the rest of their overworshipped catalog because guitarist Jerry Garcia doesn't fly off into an endless solo on any of the cuts. Instead, he plays gorgeous pedal-steel and tasty guitar fills throughout, and psychedelia is soft-pedaled in favor of a rootsier sound in tracks like "Sugar Magnolia," "Friend of the Devil," and "Truckin'." This was Ron "Pigpen" McKernan's last studio album with the band.

JIMI HENDRIX EXPERIENCE: *Are You Experienced?*
Reprise (1967)
The Hendrix catalog is rich in albums that could be named his "most influential." *Are You Experienced?* gets the nod because it was the first time audiences heard his inimitable gifts, and was the platform from which he sprang into superstardom. "Foxy Lady" displayed Hendrix's raw sexuality, but "Purple Haze" is one of the most influential hard-rock songs of all time.

MICHAEL JACKSON: *Thriller*
Epic (1982)
Seven Top 10 singles, 37 weeks at No.1, 12 Grammy nominations and eight wins, the Moonwalk, Vincent Price's voiceover for the then-exorbitant $160,000 video of "Thriller," MJ as the first black artist to be played to death on MTV... and 45 million copies sold. *Thriller*, the second of Michael Jackson's projects with producer Quincy Jones, is the biggest-selling album in the history of the record business—a monster in terms of sales and cultural impact whose equal the music biz will never see again. Fortunately, on each side there still are songs, albeit soul-lite pop tunes, that the radio didn't ruin—like "P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)" and "Wanna Be Startin' Something."

ELTON JOHN: *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*
MCA (1973)
From the opening sweep of wind and tolling church bells that precede "Funeral for a Friend," this album is a grand, rich concoction of pop riches. Like the Beatles' "White Album," this 17-song collection is the richest of the many albums recorded during the still-enduring collaboration of Reggie Dwight and Bernie Taupin. Adapting an American icon for its title, the album's variety is what makes it a milestone. From the groaning Mellotron of "Dirty Little Girl" and the spiny ARP synthesizer in "All the Young Girls Love Alice" to the banjo of "Social Disease" and Davey Johnstone's growling guitar in "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting," it's unabashedly great pop music.

CAROL KING: *Tapestry*
Ode (1971)
After a long and successful career as a songwriter with her husband Gerry Goffin ("Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow"), Brooklynite King's second album singing and playing her own songs is an ambitious collection whose emotions and worldview swing from sad resignation to expansive profundity: "You've Got a Friend," "So Far Away," "It's Too Late," and the crowning glory, "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman." No.1 for 15 weeks and a winner of four Grammys, *Tapestry* went on to sell 15 million copies, and encouraged female singer-songwriters everywhere to step into the light.

LED ZEPPELIN: *Untitled ("Zoso")*
Atlantic (1971)
It wasn't the decibel levels—though they were high, God knows—that made the Zep such a watershed rock act. It was their élan, their panache, their clever way of taking blues-rock and making it both a hit tune and something slightly more thunderous than an atomic bomb. While the first album, *Led Zeppelin*, was where their style began and so was more of a surprise, and *Led Zeppelin III* has legions of passionate supporters, "Zoso" wins out, if only for "Black Dog," "Rock and Roll," and, yes, the tune that turned air guitar into a virus, "Stairway to Heaven." Annoying as it is, "Stairway" is, with the Doors' "The End," one of rock's greatest epic poems.

BOB MARLEY: *Exodus*
Island (1977)
The first Bob Marley album to be recorded outside Jamaica and the first to be recorded on 24 tracks instead of 16, *Exodus* was the album that crossed Marley and reggae music as a whole over into the rock mainstream. The bouncy "Jamming" became the first reggae track to receive heavy radio airplay in the US. The funny thing is, although *Exodus* was made just after a nearly successful assassination attempt on Marley, its most charming tracks are love songs: "Waiting in Vain," "Three Little Birds," and "Turn Your Lights Down Low."

"IT WAS THEIR ÉLAN, THEIR PANACHE."

THE MOTHERS OF INVENTION: *Uncle Meat*
Bizarre/Rykodisc (1968)
Many of the more than 60 albums by Frank Zappa, with or without his Mothers, could have been named here: for instance, his acerbic response to the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper, We're*

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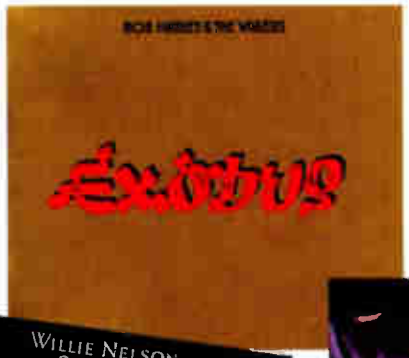
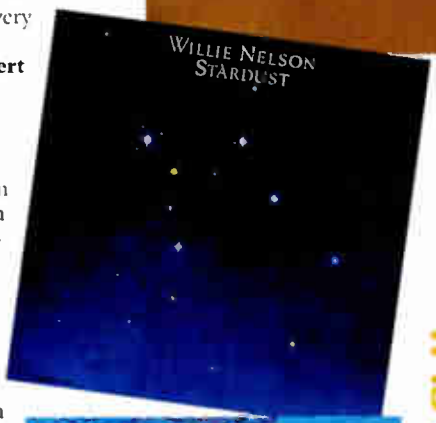
Only In It for the Money, or the instrumental *Hot Rats*. But *Uncle Meat* gets the nod for being the most dense, complex, and full realization of the decidedly fractured vision of Zappa and his first band. FZ makes his points almost purely musically in this mostly instrumental set, originally released on two LPs. *Uncle Meat* has a dark, foreboding prescience and undeniable authenticity: the reptile brain of America's pop culture croaking and wheezing through an amalgam of avant-garde jazz, 12-tone serial composition, big band, junk rock, doo-wop, and found recordings. Who else, in 1968, would title an instrumental "Nine Types of Industrial Pollution"? A year before Charles Manson's murderous misinterpretations of the Beatles' "White Album," and already Southern California seemed a very scary place.

—Richard Lehnert





WILLIE NELSON: *Stardust*
Columbia (1978)

Proof that Shotgun Willie, the man who wrote "Crazy" and who once laid down in the middle of Nashville's lower Broadway hoping to be run over, was much more than just a country singer/songwriter. Pipes once thought too nasal to sing country music make cuts like the title track sound ethereal and haunting. The one country album music lovers of any stripe should (and do) own, the transcendent *Stardust* is also a cherry-picking survey of the great American songbook: "Georgia On My Mind," "Unchained Melody," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "All of Me." The list goes on. Tin Pan Alley has never sounded so surprising.

NIRVANA: *Nevermind*
Geffen (1991)

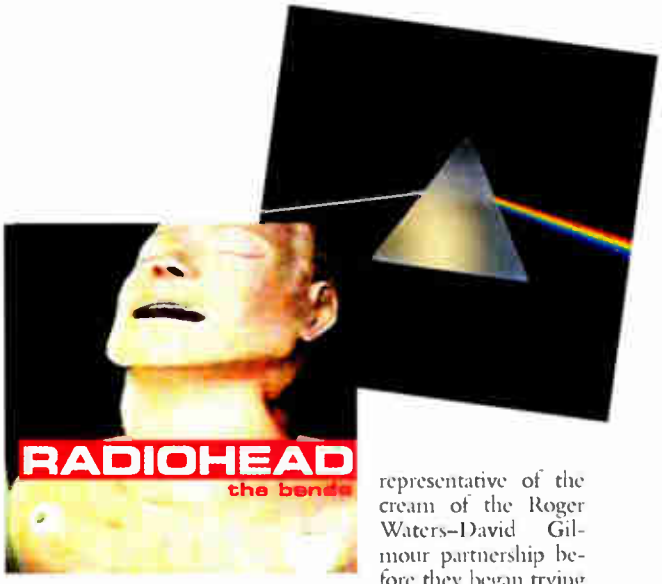
Nearly 20 years after it began, punk music finally won mass acceptance with this record. While its follow-up, *In Utero*, has a more desperate edge ("Rape Me") reflecting leader Kurt Cobain's struggles with success, *Nevermind* is the sound of a band making history. From the opening roar of rock's last great anthem, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," to the psychoid guitar solo in "Come As You Are" (whose darkest line, "I don't have a gun," is repeated again and again), to the massive sound and "I don't care, I don't care, I don't care" verse of "Breed," this is the last great rock album. Period.

N.W.A.: *Straight Outta Compton*
Ruthless/Priority (1988)

When it comes to records that changed the world, few can match the impact of this nuclear explosion of gangsta rap. Brimming with anger, threats of violence, and superhero-like fantasies, this white-hot session made stars of Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, the late Eazy-E, Yella, and MC Ren, attracted the attention of the FBI (who feared the album's infamous rallying cry, "(Fuck) the Police"), and put West Coast rap on the map.

PINK FLOYD: *Dark Side of the Moon*
Capitol (1973)

There's an old joke about how marijuana use and audiophilism go together. Never has that been more true than with this album. A generation or two grew up leaning back, eyes closed, consciousness altered, headphones strapped on as *Dark Side* eased its psychedelia-lite way into the spacey strains of "...Breathe." But pot's not the only reason this sprawling, paranoid chronicle of alienation lingered in *Billboard*'s Top 200 chart for 741 weeks. For one thing, the sarcastic "Money" became an unlikely single. And tunes like the instrumental "Any Color You Like" are representative of the cream of the Roger Waters–David Gilmour partnership before they began trying to outdo each other. Hey, don't fight it, just close your eyes and...(gotta light?)



RADIOHEAD: *The Bends*
EMI (1995)

The current crop of overly manicured, ballad-heavy English rock bands (Coldplay, Starsailor) began here. The ever-gloomy Thom Yorke's approach and impassioned singing have launched a (literal) thousand imitators, and *The Bends* is their bible. The emotions and musical ideas come from all directions—Yorke is world-weary and cynical yet leavens his misery with a discernibly soft side. Ed O'Brien and

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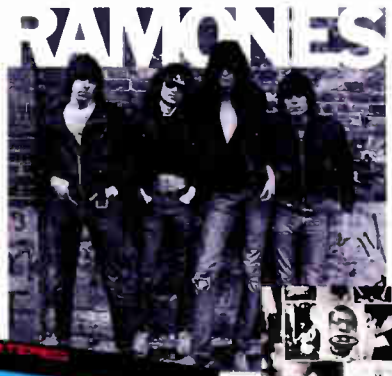
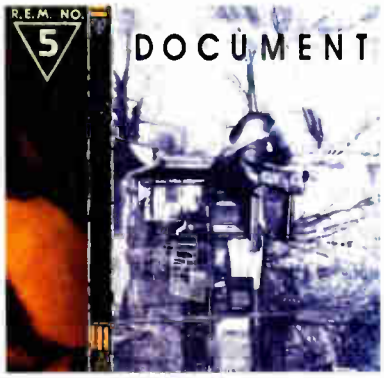
Johnny Greenwood create a shimmery curtain of guitar textures, some dark and off-key, others filled with obvious cleverness. Guitar pop has never been this sweet and sour.

THE RAMONES: *RAMONES*
Sire (1976)
Simple? Definitely. Too Loud? Yep. Dumb? As a box of rocks. Yet this is where punk rock began. Recorded for around $6000 and lacking any song longer than two and half minutes, this sonic assault is fun before anything else. Originals like "Blitzkrieg Bop," "Judy is a Punk," and "I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend" established the formula the band would never deviate from: come on fast and loud, with no pretension, and in the process change the rock world forever.



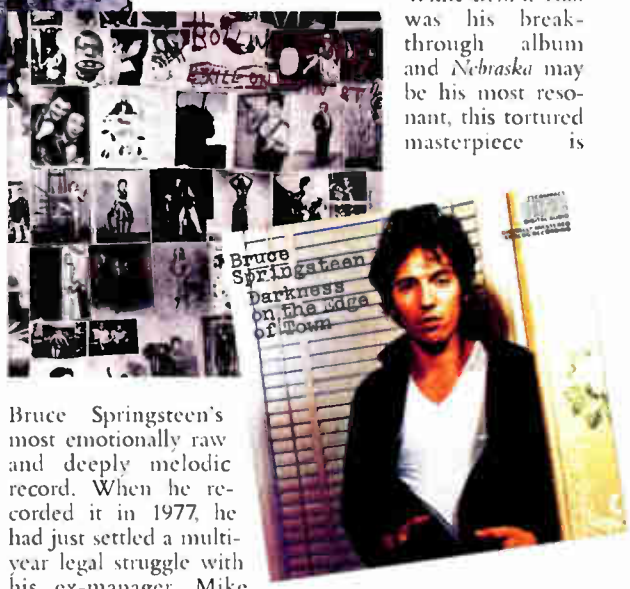
OTIS REDDING: *Complete and Unbelievable: The Otis Redding Dictionary of Soul*
Volt (1966)
With James Brown, Sam Cooke, and the aforementioned Gaye, Otis Redding remains one of the greatest male soul singers. His presence looms ever larger today, when most "modern R&B" singers don't know his work, much less possess the talent to equal it. Redding never made a bad or even mediocre album in his tragically short career, and *Dictionary of Soul* is one of the best studio albums, showing his gritty voice and forceful delivery in top form. His career-defining cover of "Try a Little Tenderness" is here, as are "Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa-Fa (Sad Song)," the ballad "You're Still My Baby," and the blues "Hawg for You."

R.E.M.: *Document*
IRS (1987)
Choosing the most influential or most fully realized alternative record is like choosing the top punk record: impossible. While Big Star birthed the genre, R.E.M.'s fifth full-length disc is as good a choice as any for top alt record, and showed that an unassuming "alternative" band on an indie label could break through to larger success. And for the first time on record, lead singer Michael Stipe forsakes gibberish for English and has learned to pronounce words rather than babble. The result was "The One I Love," the band's first hit single. But it's in the tracks inside this record—"Exhuming McCarthy," "Disturbance at the Heron House," the intelligible jabberwocky of "The End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)"—that the band's energy, ideas, and killer playing from Mike Mills, Bill Berry, and especially Peter Buck, combine R.E.M.'s art-rockisms and Byrdsian tendencies into a whole. The word "jangle" was never the same.



ROLLING STONES: *Exile on Main Street*
Rolling Stones/Atlantic (1972)
Unlike their good-boy counterparts, the Beatles, the bad-boy Rolling Stones actually have made a number of, if not actually bad, then certainly dispensable albums. This evil two-LP set was the band at its mid-'70s peak. As the famous inside photo of Keith and Mick singing into a single mike while holding a pint of rotgut also makes clear, this was the Stones when they were still young enough to enjoy the self-abuse. Unlike the traveling wax museum and cash cow they've since become, here, in songs like "Rocks Off," "Sweet Black Angel," and the sublime "Sweet Virginia," the rock'n'roll fire burns hot.

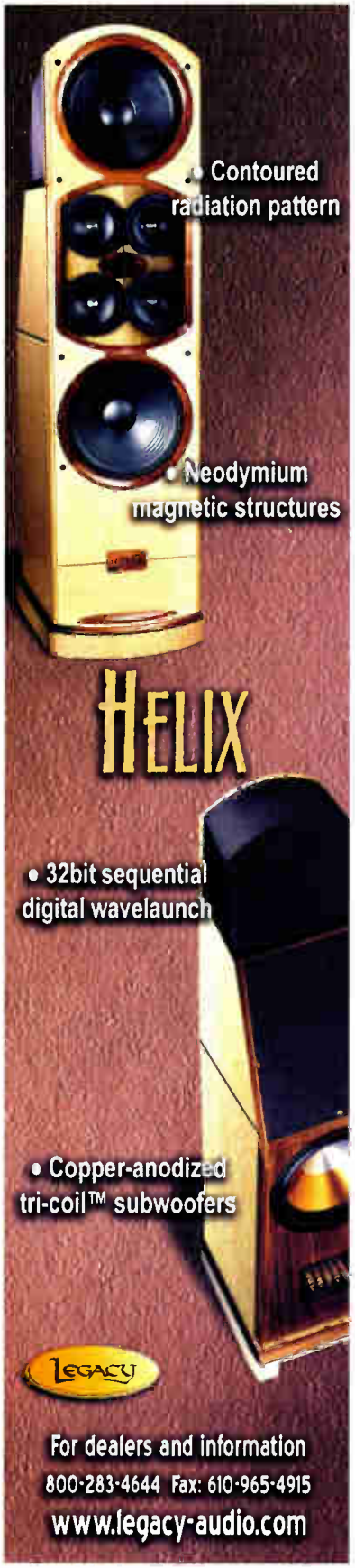
BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN: *Darkness on the Edge of Town*
Columbia (1978)
While *Born to Run* was his breakthrough album and *Nebraska* may be his most resonant, this tortured masterpiece is Bruce Springsteen's most emotionally raw and deeply melodic record. When he recorded it in 1977, he had just settled a multi-year legal struggle with his ex-manager, Mike Appel, and the time away from the studio, and the bitter taste in his mouth, had left Springsteen humbled and angry. While "Streets of Fire" and "Adam Raised a Cain" personify that anger, the title track tells you what else he was feeling, in such lines as "Some folk are born into a good life / other folks get it any way they know how / Now I lost my money and I lost my wife / those things don't seem to matter much to me now." Add the anthems "Promised Land" and "Badlands," and you've got a classic.

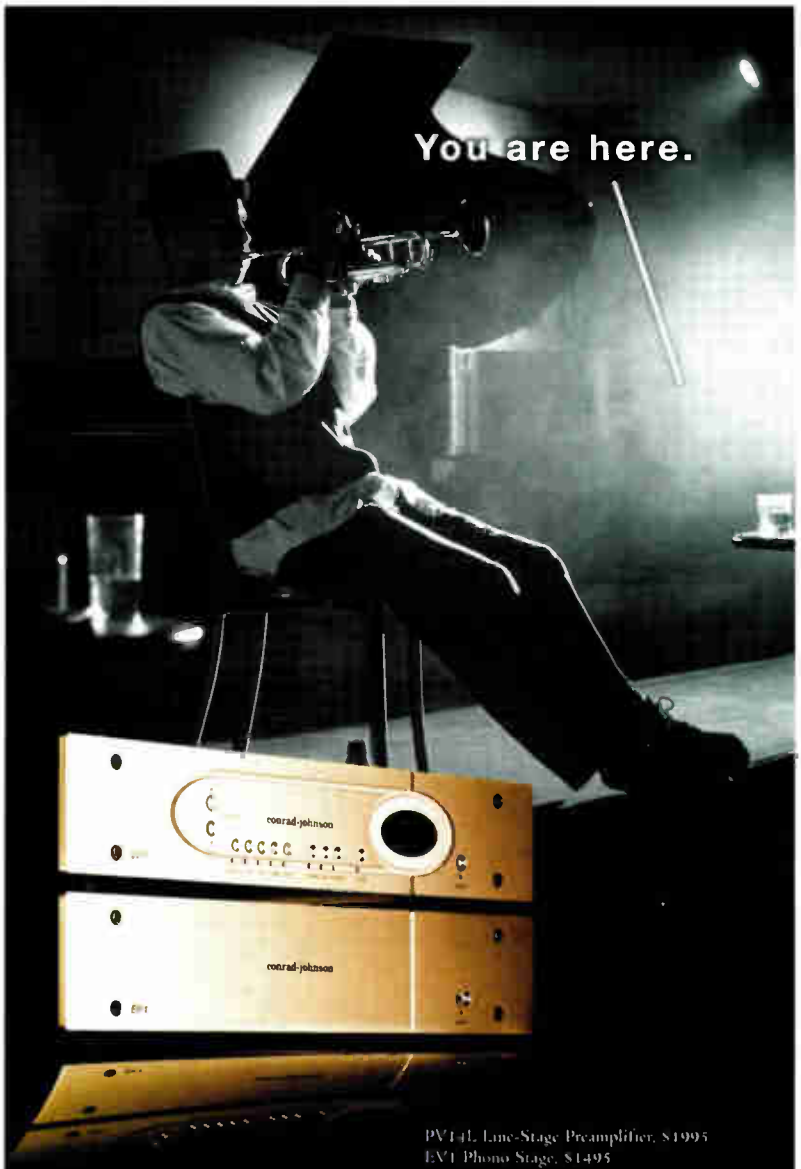


"THE ROCK'N'ROLL FIRE BURNS HOT."

JAZZ

MILES DAVIS: *In a Silent Way*
Columbia (1969)
One of the strangest aspects of Miles Davis' transition from acoustic to electric sound is the notion that he "sold out"—that somehow, while making the music more accessible, he also made it less intellectually dense. If anything, his electric period, which





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EV1 Phono Stage, $1495

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began in earnest with these sessions, was more forbidding, and his style more concentrated, than it had been before. Heretical as it may be, *In a Silent Way* gets the nod here over the more famous *Bitches Brew* from the same year, because here is where Miles began his electric phase. Even more important, where *Bitches Brew* is all noisy edges and there's often a terse quality in Davis' tone and approach, *In a Silent Way* still highlights the beautiful side of his playing. Here introspection, not his dark side, still holds the power.

ORNETTE COLEMAN: *New York is Now!*
Blue Note (1968)

Eight years past his landmark period of *The Shape of Jazz to Come* and *Free Jazz* (both 1960), saxophonist Coleman cut this album with a trio that, besides sax man Dewey Redman, included bassist Jimmy Garrison and drummer Elvin Jones: the last rhythm section of John Coltrane, who had died the year before. While *New York is Now!* lacks the surprise, inventiveness, and impact of those earlier splashes of sound, it's the sound of Coleman consolidating his earlier stylistic leaps to inexorably become one of the leaders of the music. His 1977 session, *Dancing in Your Head*, with his electric band Prime Time, is a close runner-up for Coleman's Best Album of the Last Four Decades, but such tracks here as "Garden of Souls" are the sound of a master growing more masterful.

JOHN COLTRANE: *Ascension*
Impulse! (1965)

While the more approachable *A Love Supreme* is often cited as one of the top two or three most influential records in the history of jazz, *Ascension* is *unlike* any other record in jazz, in that the sounds of what was being played took precedence over the actual notes. Although still based on a head-and-solo pattern, this enormously complex, almost incomprehensibly influential album attempts to fuse the ways of jazz's past with its future of free improvisation. Vast oceans of improvisation are interspersed with just enough song to tether the explorations to earth. While Coltrane's rhythm section of Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones distinguish themselves, saxophonist Archie Shepp and Pharoah Sanders provide the fire. Its "free" nature has made *Ascension* an object of derision among fans of more traditional jazz and a touchstone for true Trane believers.

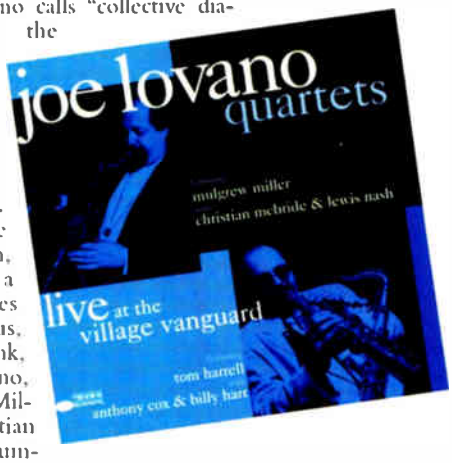
KEITH JARRETT: *The Köln Concert*
ECM (1975)

The great popularity of this solo album, which put pianist Keith Jarrett and label ECM on the map, did not prevent *The Köln Concert* from being one of the least understood albums of its and our times. Rockers and New Agers thought it was jazz, which it isn't, except sometimes; jazzers thought it was New Age or sentimental pop, which it never is; while classical listeners, if exposed to it at all, were blown away by Jarrett's breadth of association and awesome technique. With this single concert, wholly improvised by a consummate pianist equally at home in the classical, folk, jazz, pop, and standards idioms, Jarrett brought a whole new genre to full flower. Yes, you can use it for background music. Don't. **—Richard Lehnert**

"THESE ARE THE SOUNDS OF A MASTER GROWING MORE MASTERFUL."

JOE LOVANO QUARTETS: *Live at the Village Vanguard*
Blue Note (1996)

A live album from New York's Village Vanguard has become a rite of passage for jazz players. Here Joe Lovano, the dominant tenor saxophonist of his generation, claims his bit of history with a two-disc set recorded in 1994 and 1995. He cements the spectrum of his abilities by recording with both bop-mainstream and avant-jazz quartets. The first quartet, playing what Lovano calls "collective dialogues," includes the great trumpeter Tom Harrell, who contributed "Sail Away" to the program of seven tunes, four of them Lovano originals. The second, more traditional session, recorded almost a year later, includes tunes by Mingus, Coltrane, and Monk, played by Lovano, pianist Mulgrew Miller, bassist Christian McBride, and drummer Lewis Nash. Lovano's huge tone and buoyant ideas mark him as one of the few of the current generation of jazz players who is adding something new to the music.



LEE MORGAN: *The Sidewinder*
Blue Note (1963)

Jazz purists may run it down as being too predictable and accessible, but the 24-bar theme of trumpeter Lee Morgan's title tune—certainly not the most complex jazz theme ever written—has grown no less hummable over the last 39 years. And "Hocus Pocus" and "Totem Pole," more Morgan originals, prove that his compositional skills extended beyond the title cut. With solid sup-

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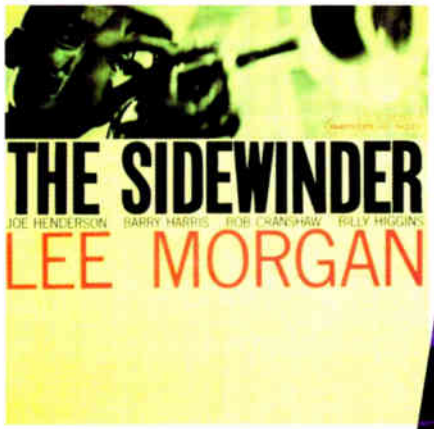
port from saxophonist Joe Henderson and pianist Barry Harris, the album was a hit and a best-seller — something that occurs far too rarely in jazz. Although known for the upbeat side he showed to great effect on "The Sidewinder," by the end of his life Morgan had also developed a moody, introspective side that made him a more complete player. And while he was a leader on 25 dates, his playing as a sideman on over 100 sessions make him one of the trumpet's most influential exponents.



WAYNE SHORTER: *Speak No Evil*
Blue Note (1964)
Almost with the flip of a coin, any number of albums tenor saxophonist Wayne Shorter cut in the 1960s and early '70s (*Native Dancer*) could be chosen as his most influential or accomplished. Recorded while he was part of Miles Davis' second great quintet, *Speak No Evil* is the choice for two reasons: the stellar quintet of Shorter, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, pianist Herbie Hancock, bassist Ron Carter, and drummer Elvin Jones; and the lyrical flow of Shorter's playing. No longer the cipher of Rollins and Coltrane that many dismissed him as, here Shorter steps out stylistically and, especially, as a composer — all six tunes are his.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

The Allman Bros. Band: *At Fillmore East*
Bad Brains: *Rock for Light*
Bad Company: *Bad Company*
The Band: *Music from Big Pink*
The Beach Boys: *Pet Sounds*
Benson: *Breezin'*
Big Star: *#1 Record*
Art Blakey: *Free for All*
The Blasters: *American Music*
Blood, Sweat & Tears: *Blood, Sweat & Tears*
Boston: *Boston*
James Brown: *Live at the Apollo*
Jackson Browne: *The Pretender*
Tim Buckley: *Happy Sad*
Jimmy Buffet: *Volcano*
Captain Beefheart: *Trout Mask Replica*
The Byrds: *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*
The Carpenters: *The Carpenters*
James Carter: *The Real Quietstorm*
Johnny Cash: *Live at Folsom Prison*
Ray Charles: *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*
Clifton Chenier: *Bogalusa Boogie*
The Clash: *London Calling*
Albert Collins: *Showdown!*
Deep Purple: *Machine Head*
Eric Dolphy: *Out to Lunch*
The Doors: *The Doors*
Kenny Dorham: *Trompeta Toccata*
Nick Drake: *Five Leaves Left*
Bill Evans: *Blue in Green*
Aretha Franklin: *Amazing Grace*
Al Green: *Gets Next to You*
Green Day: *Dookie*
Guns 'n' Roses: *Appetite for Destruction*
Herbie Hancock: *Sextant*
Tom Harrell: *Stories*
Emmylou Harris: *Pieces of the Sky*
Howlin' Wolf: *Evil*
George Jones: *I Am What I Am*
Janis Joplin: *Pearl*
Joy Division: *Unknown Pleasures*
B.B. King: *Live at the Regal*
KISS: *Alive*
King Crimson: *Discipline*
Kraftwerk: *Autobahn*
Lightnin' Hopkins: *Texas Blues*
Little Feat: *Feats Don't Fail Me Now*
Los Lobos: *Kiko*
Lynyrd Skynyrd: *Second Helping*
Madonna: *Madonna*
Magic Sam: *Black Magic*
Wynton Marsalis: *Black Codes from the Underground*
Charles Mingus: *The Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*
The Neville Brothers: *Fiyo on the Bayou*
Joni Mitchell: *Court and Spark*
Van Morrison: *Moondance*
My Bloody Valentine: *Loveless*
Randy Newman: *Good Old Boys*
Gram Parsons: *GP*
The Pixies: *Doolittle*
Iggy Pop: *Raw Power*
Elvis Presley: *From Elvis in Memphis*
Prince: *Purple Rain*
Professor Longhair: *Crawfish Fiesta*
The Ramones: *The Ramones*
Jimmy Reed: *Jimmy Reed at Carnegie Hall*
Replacements: *Pleased to Meet Me*
Sonny Rollins: *The Bridge*
Santana: *Santana*
The Sex Pistols: *Never Mind the Bollocks*
Simon & Garfunkel: *Bridge Over Troubled Water*
Frank Sinatra: *Ol' Blue Eyes is Back*
Sly: *Stand!*
The Smiths: "No Smiths!"—JA
Sonic Youth: *Daydream Nation*
Steely Dan: *Can't Buy a Thrill*
Cat Stevens: *Tea for the Tillerman*
The Stone Roses: *The Stone Roses*
Sun Ra: *Outer Spaceways Incorporated*
Talking Heads: *Fear of Music*
Television: *Marquee Moon*
Three Dog Night: *Seven Separate Fools*
Traffic: *John Barleycorn Must Die*
A Tribe Called Quest: *The Low End Theory*
McCoy Tyner: *Enlightenment*
U2: *Unforgettable Fire*
Townes Van Zandt: *The Late Great Townes Van Zandt*
Stevie Ray Vaughan: *Texas Flood*
The Velvet Underground: *The Velvet Underground and Nico*
Muddy Waters: *Hard Again*
Ben Webster: *See You at the Fair*
The Who: *Live At Leeds*
Lucinda Williams: *Lucinda Williams*
Neil Young: *After the Gold Rush*

Unpacking and installing a new component is always cause for excitement, even if one does it with almost mechanical regularity, and the anticipation is greater when the component is from a manufacturer of almost mythic reputation. So when John Atkinson asked if I'd like to audition Nagra's new PL-L preamplifier, I feigned calm as I accepted the assignment, even while remembering those years in college radio when I had to schlepp big Ampexes and Maggies. The sexy, portable Nagras were the stuff of dreams. Finally, I thought, I'd get my hands and ears on one.

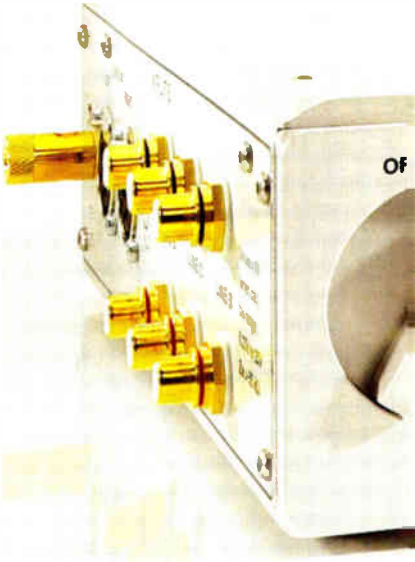
But this line-level preamp without phono stage made me think about what, in this age of digital sources and standalone phono stages, is a preamp's fundamental role. Well, as one can see from the popularity of so-called "passive" preamps, that true function is the attenuation and adjustment of the signal level and, usually, the selection of signal source. Yet today's preamp market encompasses everything from the bone-simple EVS attenuators to the open-ended complexity of the modular preamps from Meridian, Boulder, and Viola Audio Laboratories.

The compact Nagra PL-L is sort of in the middle, and far from the elaborate end of the spectrum. While it's nominally a consumer product, the PL-L reeks of Nagra's professional heritage: It's a very tidy box with inputs on one side of its front panel, outputs on the other, and three basic controls: volume, balance, and input selector. Even including its separate power-supply brick, it's smaller than any preamp I'd ever used, and downright minuscule in comparison to my reference Sonic Frontiers Line-3.

However, you'd be wrong to assume that the PL-L is functionally compromised in comparison to most larger preamps. First, it has four inputs, three outputs, an extremely informative level meter, and a full-function remote control that will, I'm told, be able to operate many other Nagra components in the near future. Second, the PL-L is built in the Nagra tradition, which successfully bridges hand- and eye-pleasing design with no-nonsense professional solidity. For example, the aging of the three tubes is monitored by a usage timer on the circuit board. Third, it sounds…well, I'm getting to that.

The input jacks are on the left side of the chassis rather than the rear. While inputs B, C, and D are single-ended RCAs, A is a pair of single-ended XLRs in which pin 2 is hot and pins 1 and 3 are grounded. Connection of a balanced source (or an unbalanced one with pin 2 hot) will work fine, but, depending on whether the balanced source uses the American/IEC or the Japanese convention for XLR wiring, you'll get one polarity or the other. The PL-L doesn't include a polarity switch, and, since absolute polarity of program sources is unpredictable, you can count on getting absolute polarity right only about 50% of the time. On the other hand, that's no better or worse than with *any* device of fixed polarity. There's also a sturdy ground post on this side panel.

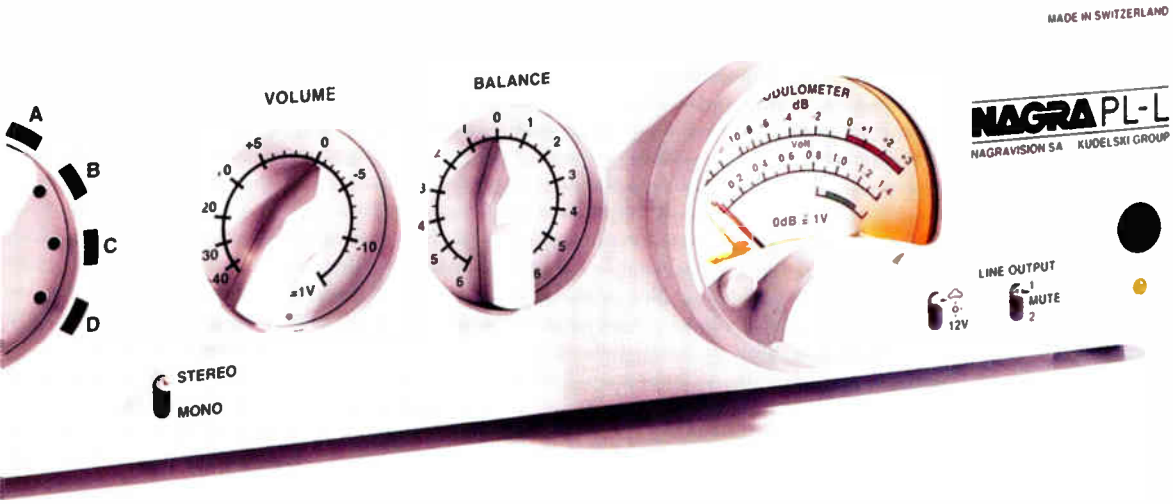
The selectable output jacks are on the right side panel of the chassis. Output 1 consists of two stereo pairs of



Description: Tube line-level preamplifier. Tube complement: two 12AX7/ECC83, one 12AT7/ECC81. Inputs: 3 line-level (RCA), 1 single-ended (XLR). Outputs: 2 single-ended RCA, 1 single-ended XLR (transformer-coupled balanced XLR optional). Input voltage for 1V output: 250mV–25V, adjustable. Input impedance: >110k ohms. Output impedance: 60 ohms. S/N Ratio ref. 1V: >88dB A-weighted. Dynamic range: 100dB. Bandwidth: 20Hz–100kHz, +0/–1dB. Distortion: <0.02% (1V out, no load 1kHz), <0.10% (2V out, 600 ohm load). Power consumption: 12V, 900mA.
Dimensions: 12.2" W by 3" H by 10" D. Net weight: 7 lbs.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: 5540331, 5440346.
Price: $6000. Remote control, add $800; balanced outputs, add $400. Approximate number of dealers: 18.
Manufacturer: Nagravision SA/Kudelski Group, Route de Genieve 22, CH-1033 Cheseaux, Switzerland. Tel: (41) (0)21-732-0101. Fax: (41) (0)21-732-0100. Web: www.nagra.com/nagraaudio. US distributor: Audiophile Systems, Ltd., 8709 Castle Park Drive, Indianapolis, IN 46256. Tel: (888) 272-2658, (317) 841-4100. Fax: (317) 841-4107. Web: www.audiophilesystems.com.

Kalman Rubinson

Nagra PL-L tube preamplifier



ERIC SWANSON

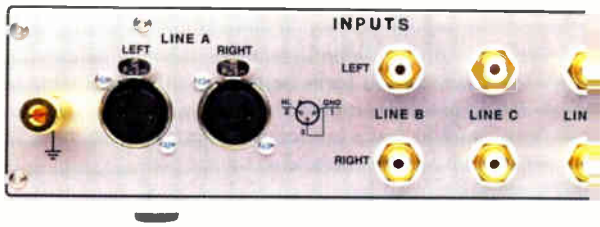
RCA jacks, available simultaneously. Output 2 is a pair of XLRs that can be unbalanced, like the XLR input, or fully balanced and floating with the optional output transformers. Also on the right side is the LEMO socket for the power-supply umbilical, which supplies 12V to the PL-L. The hefty power supply runs pretty warm; be careful where you hide it.

The front panel, from left to right, has the input, volume, and balance knobs. The input selector has a power Off position and, if one turns it to the setting just beyond Input D, a position that enables the remote control to select input and power On/Off. In the other input positions, the remote controls only volume and balance. To the right of center is the Nagra Modulometer, a level meter whose independent left- and right-channel indicators have a ballistic response that permits the user to see the correct magnitude of signals, regardless of their duration. This is particularly useful for assessing brief, spike-like events. To the meter's right is a small toggle that turns the meter lamp on or off or, in its spring-return third position, sets the meter to indicate the power-supply voltage. Next to that is another toggle to select between outputs, with Mute in the intermediate position. The remote control's receiver and indicator are at the extreme right end of the panel.

Inputs on the left, outputs on the right, controls on the front—doesn't that sound like the ever-fastidious Swiss? And on the back? Nada. But wouldn't you know it—my sources are all to the right of the preamp on my double rack, and my power amps are all on the other end of the room, to the left. I thought, briefly, about turning the PL-L upside down, but concerns about cutting off ventilation to the tubes stopped that. I also mused about Nagra offering both recto and verso versions of the PL-L, but quickly recognized the folly of that as well. So, in

know for sure, but familiar and subtle differences among sources and power amps were as distinct as I'd ever heard. To me, this means that the PL-L must be low in distortion and flat in frequency response, or else these differences would have been smeared and obscured.

I used the PL-L with both the RCA and the balanced XLR outputs and could find little to distinguish them in terms of noise. However, I did think that the direct-driven single-ended outputs were just a tad more dynamic and lively. I noted this particularly in the *Menuetto* of Haydn's Symphony 88, with Thomas Fey conducting the Heidelberg Symphony (Hänssler Classic CD 98.391). Those of us raised on Furtwängler's classic Berlin recording will have had our eyebrows well raised before this third movement, but in Fey's account, brass accents are notably crisp and acute. Switching from the XLR (via AudioQuest) to the RCA (via Cardas) outputs, those accents glinted even more while remaining acoustically natural. Furtwängler might disagree—his accents were less pointed, his pace more slow and playful. Still, Fey's performance is not fey at all, but a brisk, dynamic account that the PL-L, through either output, presented more crisply than the Sonic Frontiers Line-3 or the Simaudio P-5. Those preamps seemed a bit more distant, requiring greater concentration to hear the details with equal



view of the left side

Measurements

domestic systems, but fig.3 does suggest that the PL-L not be used to drive "professional" 600 ohm loads.

Fig.4 plots the THD+N percentage against frequency at an output level of 2V, where fig.3 had suggested that the PL-L's distortion was starting to emerge from the noise floor. The unbalanced behavior (bottom traces) is superb, with only small rises apparent above and below the audioband. The balanced traces (top) are very slightly worse than the unbalanced over most of the band, but a greater rise in the measured percentage can be seen below 25Hz, presumably due to the onset of core saturation in the balancing transformer. At just 0.1% at 10Hz, however, this behavior will not be audible.

Fig.5, taken at 1V into 8k ohms, shows the spectrum of the PL-L's unbalanced output signal. The second harmonic is the highest in level, if the word "high" is even appropriate for something at −97dB (0.0014%), with any higher harmon-

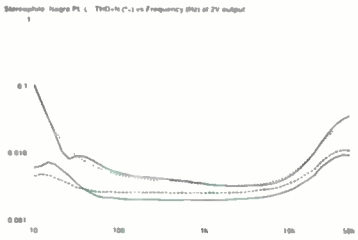


Fig.4 Nagra PL-L, THD+noise (%) *vs* frequency at 2V into 100k ohms: balanced (top), unbalanced (bottom) (right channel dashed).

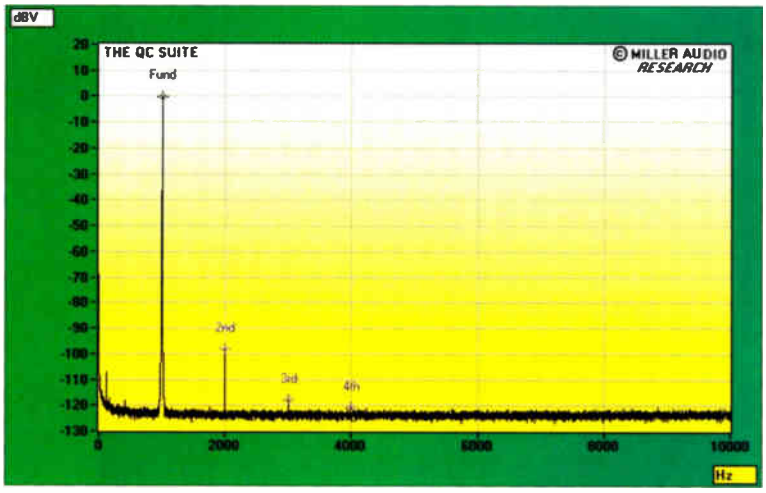


Fig.5 Nagra PL-L, spectrum of unbalanced 1kHz sinewave, DC–10kHz, at 1V into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale, 10dB/vertical div.).

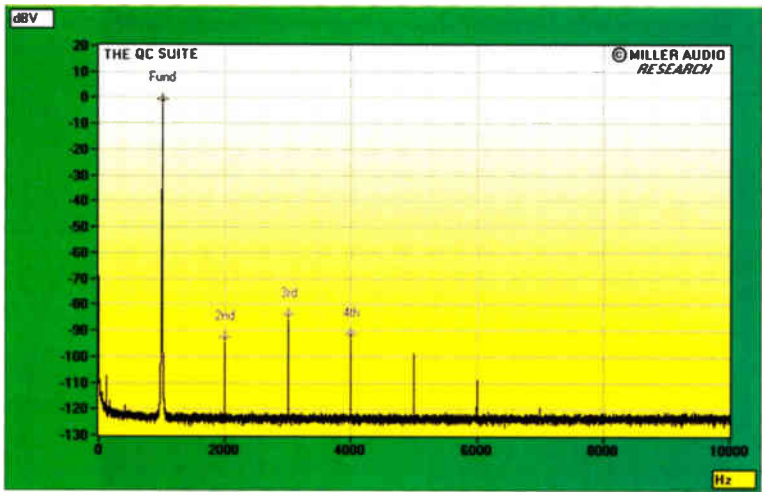
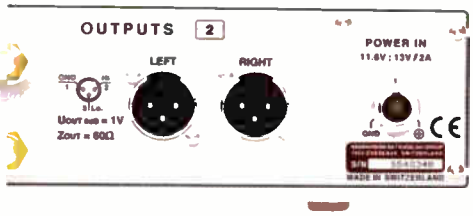


Fig.6 Nagra PL-L, spectrum of unbalanced 1kHz sinewave, DC–10kHz, at 1V into 1k ohms (linear frequency scale, 10dB/vertical div.).

distinction. The difference between the Nagra and the others persisted when I defaulted to the balanced outputs, which made my comparisons easier.



view of the right side

The PL-L was not unsubtle; in terms of ambience and depth, it was the equal of the best units auditioned. On the above-mentioned Haydn and on *Shaker* (Chesky JD236), the follow-up to David Johansen and the Harry Smiths' successful first Chesky CD, the perception of performers placed in an acoustic space was superb. I attended recording sessions for both Smiths CDs and the illusion matched my acoustic memory of the recording venue, Manhattan's St. Peter's Church. On the day I was there for the *Shaker* sessions, I heard a half-dozen takes of "Deep Blue Sea," and I remember the one that made it onto the disc because of Johansen's *sotto voce* "I want to make this one right" at the beginning. Through the PL-L, it was easy to hear how he got closer and closer to the mike as his voice got softer and softer, verse by verse. Nor was this intimacy achieved at the expense of the sense of ensemble or, indeed, of impact. Johansen and the Chesky team got it right and the PL-L revealed it all, showing how good a monitoring tool it really is.

But the biggest boot I got with the PL-L was with the arrival of the ABKCO SACD sampler, *The Rolling Stones, Remastered*. Now, I ain't much of a Stones fan, and I've got only one of their classic CDs, bought at my wife's insistence. However, even she, as uninterested in sound and equipment as she claims to be, found that CD raucous, muddy, and nearly unlistenable. The new stereo remastering, whether via the CD track or the full-blown SACD track, is something else. Perhaps I'm revealing the limitations of my own experience of the Stones' recordings (I *have* heard them live!), but I had never before heard 1) Mick Jagger's voice so present and palpable, 2) clear distinctions between the other voices and instruments, 3) decent dynamics, or 4) any sense of "air" in the acoustic. Of course, these old master tapes will always lack the richness of a modern recording. Nonetheless, via the PL-L, I probably got as close to the original session sound as is possible.

The PL-L's quickness and microdynamics were noticeable when compared to the Sonic Frontiers and Simaudio preamps. It wasn't that those models lack these capabilities, and it wasn't that the PL-L exaggerated them; it was just that the PL-L had a bit more snap. On the other hand, the SF and Sim seemed richer than the PL-L from the midrange down, but without getting a bit overripe, as the Blue Circle BC-21 does. The PL-L had excellently deep and weighty bass; my preference for the SF in this regard is very dependent on my specific speakers and room acoustics. Driving an active studio monitor with balance/EQ incorporated—or, indeed, any slightly warmer amp and speaker—would likely turn the tables regarding my preference.

These observations should not be taken to mean that the PL-L sounded "bright," independently of or in contrast to the SF and Simaudio preamps. In fact, the PL-L's combination of midbass lightness and treble smoothness only encouraged me to turn up the wick a bit

ics at −116dB or below. Reducing the load to 1k ohms makes the preamp work much harder, as expected from fig.3. The sum of the harmonics rises from 0.0014% to 0.009%, and, as fig.6 shows, not only have the second through fourth harmonics all risen significantly in level (particularly the third), but they are now joined by some higher-order spuriae. Again, the Nagra's superb linearity will be achieved only into higher impedances.

Finally, fig.7 reveals that, even into 1k ohms, the PL-L has very low levels of intermodulation distortion, the 1kHz difference product from the full-scale mix of 19kHz and 20kHz tones lying at −90dB. Increasing the load to 8k ohms (not shown) drops the 1kHz product to −94dB (0.002%), while the higher-order components at 18kHz and 21kHz fall to −100dB.

Overall, this is superb measured performance. While the PL-L should not be used into impedances much below 8k ohms, thus ruling out professional 600 ohm loads, the gain structure and overload behavior are sensibly arranged with the expected audiophile usage in mind. Another Swiss jewel of a product from Nagra.

—John Atkinson

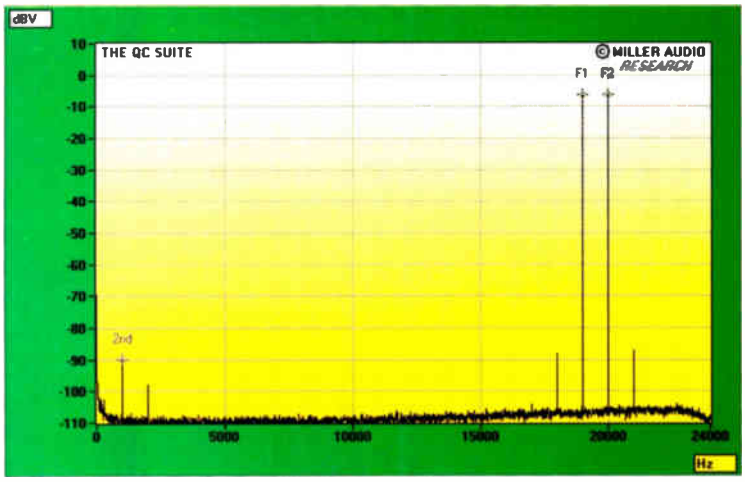


Fig.7 Nagra PL-L, unbalanced HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–24kHz, 19+20kHz at 1V into 1k ohms (linear frequency scale).

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more. The bigger the music—Mahler, Widor, or electric blues—the more I appreciated the PL-L for its generously clear and powerful performance.

Conclusions

A therapist might say that I had "personal issues" with the Nagra PL-L. It forced me to adjust my power-sequence behavior, its connection layout is the opposite of what I need, and it doesn't have nearly enough inputs for me.

On the other hand, it's practically impossible to criticize the PL-L's sound. It was so fast, balanced, and clean that any sonic personality could be inferred only in comparisons with other preamps, from which it differed only ever so slightly. Even then, I had to wonder which preamp deserved to be the reference. And the tactile pleasure of using the Nagra's controls, and its superb overall fit'n'finish, are givens.

As for the options: These days, I regard remote control as mandatory. I recommend fully balanced outputs only if you must use very long interconnects or will be using the PL-L in studios in which balanced operation is the standard.

The Nagra PL-L's small size, capable remote control, and sonic transparency commend it not only for professional monitoring, but also for home systems of the very highest quality.

Associated Equipment

Analog source: Heybrook TT2 turntable, SME III tonearm, Ortofon SME30H cartridge.
Digital sources: California Audio Labs CL-20 DVD/CD player, Meridian 508-24 CD player, Sony XA-777ES SACD player, Mark Levinson No.360 DAC.
Preamplification: Sonic Frontiers Line-3, Simaudio Moon P-5 preamplifiers; Audiolab 8000PPA phono stage, TacT Audio RCS 2.0 digital EQ/room correction.
Power amplifiers: Bel Canto eVo2, PS Audio HCA-2, Sonic Frontiers Power-3, Classé CAM-350 monoblocks, McCormack DNA-1 Rev.A.
Loudspeakers: Revel Ultima Studio, B&W Nautilus 800 Signature.
Cables: Interconnect: AudioQuest Anaconda and Python, both balanced; Cardas Cross. Speaker: AudioQuest Gibraltar. AC: PS Audio Lab Cable.—**Kalman Rubinson**

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Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24 CD player/preamplifier

How much fun can you have with an audio component? Fun for me is having a Nakamichi BX-300 analog cassette deck running into Musical Fidelity's evolutionary, revolutionary CD-Pre24 preamplifier, with the unit's *digital* output feeding the Alesis MasterLink hard-drive–based digital recorder, and being able to monitor the *digital* loop through the preamp once again in the analog domain.

I'm preserving a wacky cassette compilation made by Byron Werner, an old L.A. acquaintance I met back in 1982, when we worked together on the movie *Tron*. Back then, Byron was a rabid collector of vinyl oddities. He'd also painted a life-size rendering of Jack Ruby's encounter with Lee Harvey Oswald, with a hole where Oswald's head would be. Visitors were asked to stick their heads through the hole, at which point Byron would snap a picture for a rather peculiar archive. Today, he's described as a "vinyl archivist" and as one of the originators of the "lounge music" movement.

The cassette includes Senator Sam Ervin's (of Watergate fame) cover of "Bridge Over Troubled Water," Telly Savalas "singing" "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling," Beaver and the Trappers' "Happiness Is" (yes, it's Jerry Mathers as the Beaver), and the original "I Took a Trip in a Gemini Spaceship" by the Legendary Stardust Cowboy, which David Bowie covered on his new album, *Heathen*. This is stuff I don't want to lose.

Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24 CD player/preamplifier

Thanks to the CD-Pre24's *digital* tape loop and the MasterLink, it's become really easy, even fun, to archive decades' worth of cassette, open-reel, and micro-cassette recordings of personal musings, radio shows, and commercials I'd produced—and, of course, treasured soundtracks-to-my-life music compilations—before they and/or I turn to dust. I bet you have a similar stash of analog history you'd like to preserve.

The single-box CD-Pre24 contains a full-function remote-controlled analog preamp, a digital switcher, a CD transport, a 24-bit/96kHz upsampling DAC, and a 16-bit/44.1kHz A/D converter—all for $3000. With it, one can have both analog and digital components connected, and record and play back from both domains without constant plugging and unplugging.

If that doesn't give you a convenient handle to grasp, think of the CD-Pre24 as a CD player with a bonus analog preamplifier, bonus digital switching facility, and analog *and* digital tape loops. Or as an outboard DAC with a built-in CD

Description: Combination CD player/digital and analog preamplifier. **CD Section:** DAC: 24-bit delta-sigma, 8x oversampling (CD or DVD-Audio conversion only). Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz, <0.02dB. Channel balance: <0.02dB. Stereo separation, 20Hz–20kHz: >98dB. THD 1kHz: 0dB digital level 0.002%, –10dB digital level 0.004%, –70dB digital level 0.050%. S/N Ratio: 110dB unweighted (20Hz–20kHz), 114dB A-weighted. Audio output at digital 0dB level, 1kHz: 2.14V RMS nominal, sourced from 47 ohms impedance. Jitter: 189ps. **Preamplifier Section:** Direct Analog connection: Maximum output for 2.2V RMS in: 8.4V RMS (11.6dB voltage gain). Distortion: <0.002%, 20Hz–20kHz. Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz +0/–0.02dB. Crosstalk (typical): 85dB. Channel Balance: 20Hz–20kHz <0.01dB. S/N Ratio: 106dB unweighted (20Hz–20kHz), 109dB A-weighted. **Preamplifier Section:** ADC/DAC (measurements made by linking coax digital output to digital monitor and using digital monitor function). Maximum output for 2.2V RMS in: 8.2V RMS. Distortion: <0.004%, 20Hz–20kHz. Frequency response: 20Hz–20kHz +0/–0.37dB. Crosstalk (typical): 90dB. Channel Balance: 20Hz–20kHz <0.02dB. S/N Ratio: 101dB unweighted (20Hz–20kHz), 104dB A-weighted. **Dimensions:** 17.2" (440mm) W by 5.5" (140mm) H by 14.8" (380mm) D. Weight: 30 lbs (13.5kg).
Serial number of unit reviewed: GYP10000 "January 2002," auditioning and measuring; GY10048, "April 2002," measuring (see text).
Price: $3000. Approximate number of dealers: not disclosed.
Manufacturer: Musical Fidelity Ltd., 15–17 Fulton Road, Wembley, Middlesex HA9 0TF, England, UK. Tel: (44) (0)181-900-2866. Web: www.musical-fidelity.co.uk. US distributor: Kevro International, Inc., 902 McKay Rd., Suite 4, Pickering, Ontario L1W 3X8, Canada. Tel: (905) 428-2800. Fax: (905) 428-0004. Web: www.kevro.com.

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transport and a bonus analog preamp section plus A/D converter. Or, better yet, as an ingenious compilation of familiar electronic components that function in new and sometimes surprising ways.

Analog signals plugged into the three analog inputs remain in the analog domain. When one of these is chosen, it appears at the preamp's analog line-out RCA jacks as well as at the output of the analog tape loop, where you can monitor it with an analog recorder—but, thanks to the built-in 16/44.1 A/D converter, a digitized version of the chosen analog input will also appear at the CD-Pre24's digital outputs.

There are also two digital inputs, each offering a choice of TosLink optical and coaxial connections, as well as digital recording monitor. Select a digital input and its signal will be converted to analog and appear at the main and analog tape outputs—*and*, redigitized, at the CD-Pre24's digital outs (one coaxial, one TosLink optical).

If you have a digital recording source connected to the digital tape monitor, you can monitor the signal through it. Conversely, a digital input can be monitored via the analog tape loop. If you've never used a tape monitor, you're now thoroughly confused in both the analog and digital domains! The important thing to remember is to always connect a recorder's output (analog or digital) to the monitor input and not to a regular input. Otherwise, when you try to monitor the signal you'll create a feedback loop that can do serious damage to your loudspeakers and your ears.

Inside and Out

Despite the CD-Pre24's incredible versatility and reasonable price, Musical Fidelity has managed to retain the high parts quality of its more expensive products. The 24/96 upsampling DAC, 8x-oversampling filter, control electronics, CD transport, and choke-regulated power supply are identical to those in

Measurements

Looking first at the Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24 as a conventional analog preamplifier, the input impedance at 1kHz was a usefully high 126k ohms, this not changing with the volume-control setting, and the maximum voltage gain was 11.9dB. (The unity-gain setting of the volume control was approximately 1:00.) The CD-Pre24 preserved absolute signal polarity, and the output impedance was a low 49 ohms other than at very low frequencies, where it rose slightly to 85 ohms.

The A-weighted signal/noise ratio with the volume control wide open and the input shorted was 89dB ref. 1V output, not quite up to the standard set by the Nagra PL-L (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). Unlike the Nagra, however, the Musical Fidelity's figure worsened only slightly, to 83dB, with an unweighted wideband measurement. Channel separation (not shown) was excellent at better than 90dB below 1kHz, though this decreased with increasing frequency due to capacitive coupling, reaching 60dB at 30kHz, which is still good. The frequency response with the volume control set to its maximum position was down by 0.25dB at 20kHz (fig.1, top pair of traces), this rolloff increasing to –0.4dB with the control set to unity gain (middle traces). Into the low 600 ohm load (bottom traces), the bass response rolled off slightly early, reaching –1dB at 12Hz. Note that a 0.2dB channel imbalance creeps in at the control's lower setting.

Fig.2 shows that the CD-Pre24 could swing almost 10V into 600 ohms, however. The downward slope of the traces in this graph shows that, below 8V or so, the measured level of distortion in the preamp's output is dominated by noise. Musical Fidelity components have always featured extremely low distortion levels; fig.3 shows how the THD+noise level varies with frequency at 5V output, above the level required to drive a typical power amplifier to clipping but high enough for noise not to dominate the reading. There is a slight but inconsequential rise in THD apparent at the top of the audioband into both 100k ohms and 600 ohms, but a greater rise below 80Hz into 600 ohms. This suggests that the CD-Pre24 has to work hard at combinations of high levels, low frequencies, and low loads, with the third harmonic dominating (fig.4)—if "dominating" is the appropriate word to

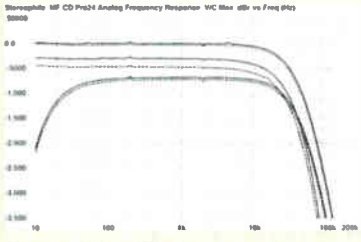

Fig.1 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, analog frequency response at 1V RMS into 100k ohms with volume control at maximum (top), at unity gain (middle), and into 600 ohms (bottom). (Right channel dashed, 0.5dB/vertical div.)

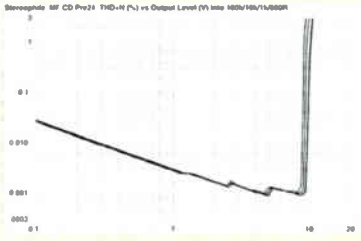

Fig.2 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, THD+N (%) *vs* output voltage into (from left to right): 600 ohms, 1k ohm, 10k ohms, 100k ohms.

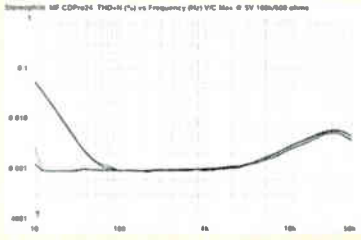

Fig.3 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, analog stage, THD+N (%) *vs* frequency (Hz) at 5V into 100k ohms (bottom at 10Hz) and 600 ohms (top).

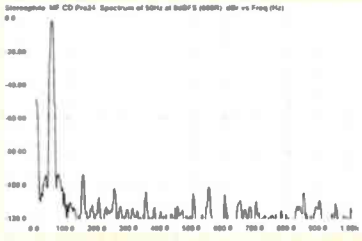

Fig.4 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 2V into 600 ohms (linear frequency scale).

the more expensive Nu-Vista 3D CD player. (Not included, of course, are the tiny metal-can nuvistor triode tubes that help give the 3D its magical sound.)

The CD-Pre24's preamp facilities are said to be very closely related to those in MF's highly regarded A3CR, though improved using techniques learned during the design of the Nu-Vista amps and CD players. Entirely discrete power supplies are used throughout, with grounding schemes carefully chosen to avoid analog, digital, and CD-stage interaction. Combining all of this functionality into a single box can remove unpredictable variables such as cable, AC interference, and differing grounding potentials. It also saves valuable rack space.

Construction quality and appearance also match those of Musical Fidelity's finest offerings: panel-mounted jacks, copper-clad chassis, ribbed side panels for added rigidity, a heavy top plate held in place by 14 hex-head screws, and a thick, substantial faceplate finished in brushed aluminum but without the gold accents that some found excessive on earlier MF designs. The large box weighs about 30 lbs and has the physical authority usually associated with far more expensive components. A black plastic remote sporting rows of evenly spaced, identically sized buttons somewhat lowers the bar, but given the CD-Pre24's price of $3000, better the money goes toward what's *in* the box.

From the remote you can select CD playback, or any of the five inputs (three line-level analog plus two digital), as well as the digital and analog recording monitors. The layout is clean, with the various functions separated and well-delineated (as long as you've got a light on; the remote is not backlit). The only exceptions are the volume up and down buttons, which are too close to the bottom of the remote and thus require both hands to

Measurements

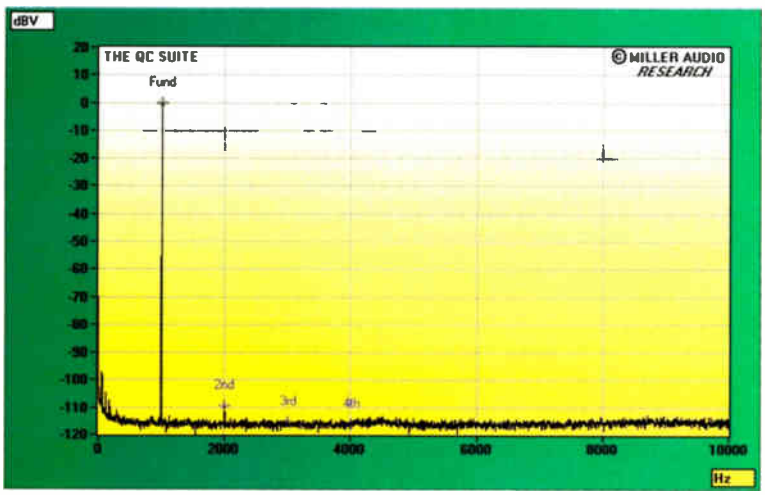

Fig.5 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, analog stage, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–10kHz, at 1V into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

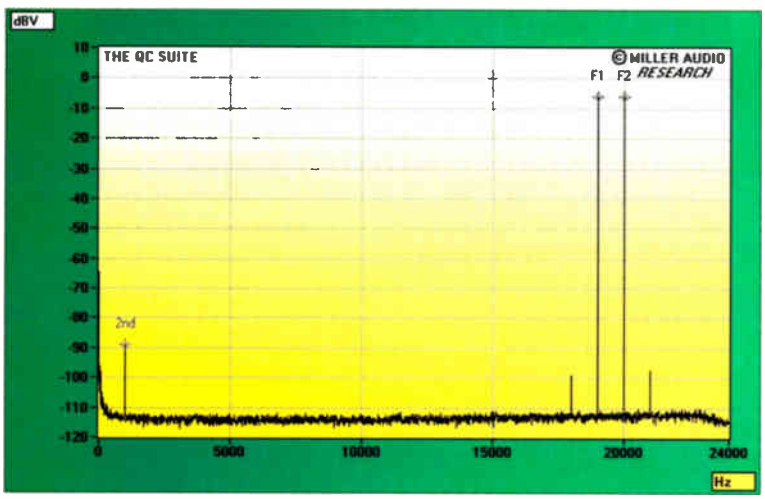

Fig.6 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, analog stage, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–24kHz, 19+20kHz at 1V into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

describe something happening at –94dB (0.002%).

With 1kHz driven at a more reasonable level into a more reasonable load (fig.5), only the subjectively innocuous second harmonic is apparent above the noise floor, but this lies at a totally trivial –109dB! A similar spectrum (fig.6) reveals low levels of intermodulation products resulting from an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones.

Turning to the CD-Pre24's digital circuitry, the channel separation (not shown) was about 20dB worse than for analog sources, though still good at better than 90dB below 1kHz. The frequency response for CD replay (not shown) was flat from 10Hz to 10kHz, but drooped slightly at the top of the audioband, reaching –0.25dB at 20kHz. Like other recent digital components from Musical Fidelity, the CD-Pre24 didn't apply the appropriate equalization for pre-emphasized discs, which will be boosted by 9dB above 10kHz as a result.

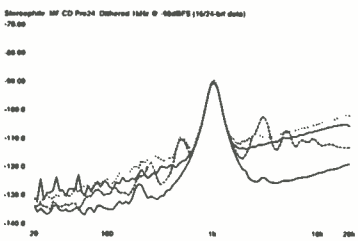

Fig.7 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, sample 1, ⅓-octave spectrum of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS, with noise and spuriae (from top to bottom): 16- and 24-bit external PCM data (right channel dashed).

operate: one to hold the remote, one to push the buttons.

With its blue LEDs and gleaming, oversized volume control surrounded by an eight-bolt trim ring, the CD-Pre24's front panel resembles something from Krell for a tenth the price. In fact, the press release—obviously written by Musical Fidelity's not-shy founder, Antony Michaelson—takes direct aim at Krell with this headline: "Performance that surpasses the Krell KPS-25S, priced for ordinary mortals." The blurb goes on to suggest that "we reckoned that the CD-Pre24 would outperform the Krells in every significant technical and sonic parameter," and later cites the CD-Pre24's 0.05% distortion at –70dB compared to the Krell's 0.71%, and a signal/noise ratio claimed to be 23dB lower than the Krell's.

My review sample had a balky motorized volume control that hung up as it got closer to zero output, but I'm sure that was the luck of the reviewer's draw, given MF's usual high build quality and reliability.

Easy Setup, Easy on the Ears

I hooked up two phono sections and the cassette deck to the CD-Pre24's analog inputs (I wasn't recording in analog, so no chance of creating a feedback loop), while the coaxial digital output of a DVD player (for 24/96 DAD discs) fed one of the MF's digital inputs. The Alesis MasterLink digital recorder's input and output looped through the digital monitor facility, while the second digital out was routed to a MiniDisc recorder. Thus, at the push of a button, I could select an input, analog or digital (including the built-in CD transport), and record digitally to either or both of the recorders.

But none of this innovative functionality would be worth a whit in a high-end audio system if the MF's preamp

The CD-Pre24 successfully locked on to external 96kHz- and 88.2kHz-sampled datastreams. However, its frequency response for these sources was curtailed to the CD's 22kHz bandwidth, suggesting that the unit's sample-rate converter chip downsamples to 44.1kHz for these sources and that they are not fed directly to the 96k-capable DACs. Confirming this, only a 44.1kHz datastream is available from the digital outputs even when the CD-Pre24 is driven by a 96kHz source, as Mikey found.

Fig.7 shows spectral analyses of the Musical Fidelity's analog output while it decodes external 16- and 24-bit data representing a dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS. The left channel (solid traces) behaves as expected, with the increase in word length lowering the noise floor by up to 15dB; this suggests an ultimate resolution of 18.5 bits, which is excellent. However, if you look at the right-channel performance in fig.7 (dashed traces), not only does the noise floor *not* drop with increased bit depth, but odd-order distortion harmonics make an appearance. This suggests that the right-channel data are being truncated to 16 bits!

Fortunately, data from the internal CD drive were handled correctly, but I was worried enough by this to obtain a second sample of the CD-Pre.[1] As shown by fig.8, this unit (serial number 10048) did handle 24-bit data correctly in both channels. However, like Mikey's sample (serial number 10000) it still downsampled external high-sample-rate data.

Playback of damaged discs was excellent. The Pierre Verany Test CD revealed that the Musical Fidelity produced no glitches in its output until the gap in the data spiral was more than 1.5mm long.

I looked at the CD-Pre24's DAC linearity error using a dithered 16-bit, 500Hz tone that faded from –60dBFS into the noise floor. The left-channel performance from CD was good (fig.9), and was identical for external data and to both channels of the second sample. The good linearity for CD playback and the low noise floor mean that reproduction of an undithered 1kHz sinewave at –90.31dBFS is essentially perfect (fig.10), with the three discrete voltage levels and excellent waveform symmetry readily apparent. When the Musical Fidelity was fed undithered 24-bit data, the waveform was a pretty good sinewave (fig.11).

1 My thanks to neighbor Wes Phillips for the loan of one of the samples he had received for his on-line review at www.onhifi.com. —JA

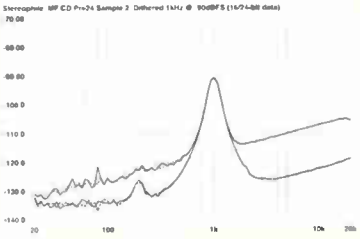

Fig.8 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, sample 2, ⅓-octave spectrum of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS, with noise and spuriae (from top to bottom): 16- and 24-bit external PCM data (right channel dashed).

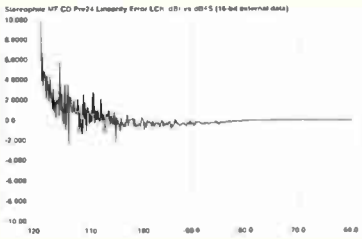

Fig.9 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, left-channel departure from linearity, 16-bit CD data (2dB/vertical div.).

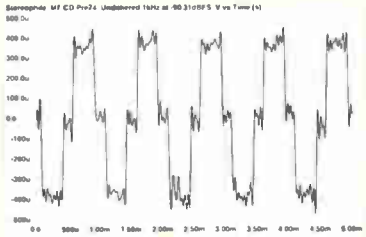

Fig.10 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at –90.31dBFS, 16-bit CD data.

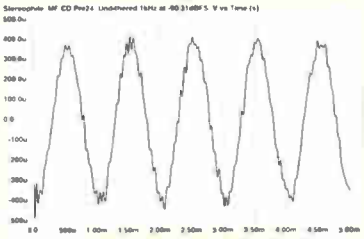

Fig.11 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at –90.31dBFS, 24-bit external data.

and CD player didn't *sound* good. So after a few days' warmup I sat down to listen to some familiar LPs and CDs I'd recently auditioned with my reference Hovland HP-100 preamp and Nu-Vista 3D CD player.

Did the CD-Pre24 trump Krell? I haven't a clue. In 16 years as an audio critic I've never reviewed or even heard a piece of Krell gear in my system. However, compared to my references (combined cost: more than $10,000), the $3000 CD-Pre24 held its own as both preamp and CD player.

Missing in action were the Nu-Vista 3D's bloom and midband richness (I did run its analog outs into a CD-Pre24 input and compared it to the built-in transport and DAC), and the Hovland's crystalline clarity, transient articulation, and subtle scaling of microdynamics. But aside from those minor sins of omission, the CD-Pre24's performance was so accomplished during the month I had it in my system that I never felt cheated of a first-class listening experience. This is hardly surprising, given the high marks I and other *Stereophile* reviewers have awarded such standalone Musical Fidelity components as the Nu-Vista 3D CD player and A3CR preamp, which form the core of the CD-Pre24's circuitry.

In most ways, the CD-Pre24's analog preamplifier compared quite favorably with the Hovland, especially in terms of its dynamic authority—its ability to scale the large dynamic peaks was effortless, confident, and fully fleshed-out. On Classic Records' 45rpm edition of the Reiner/CSO version of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the orchestral crescendos were nothing short of explosive. Instrumental timbres were somewhat drier and less complex but still convincingly rendered, and delivered

Measurements

I was somewhat puzzled when I looked at the CD-Pre24's intermodulation behavior for CD playback. Fig.12 was taken under the same conditions as was the spectrum for analog sources (fig.5), but the spectral lines at 19 and 20kHz show some spreading by comparison. The only possible explanation for this phenomenon is word-clock jitter—yet earlier digital products from Musical Fidelity have been uniformly excellent in this regard.

Fig.13 is a narrowband spectral analysis of the CD-Pre24's analog noise floor while it decoded undithered data representing a high-level tone at one quarter the sampling frequency, over which has been laid a low-frequency squarewave with a maximum amplitude of 1LSB. As both audio signals are exact integer submultiples of the sample rate, any spuriae apparent in the analog output signal of the device under test will be due to jitter and DAC errors, not to quantization error. What should be a narrow central spike in fig.13 is significantly broadened at its base, just as was seen in fig.12. The actual measured jitter level was a good 365 picoseconds peak–peak, mainly due to data-related sidebands at ±229Hz. But this figure doesn't take random-noise jitter into account, and it is this kind of jitter that is affecting the Musical Fidelity's performance.

Paul Miller, the developer of the Jitter Analyzer I use, has conjectured that this kind of jitter behavior will blur stereo imaging. I wonder also if it correlated with MF finding the CD-Pre24 to lack the Nu-Vista 3D's "bloom and midband richness." When I checked the second sample of the CD-Pre, the jitter dropped to a superbly low 168.7ps, with a pair of sidebands at ±20Hz dominating the measured figure. However, the spreading of the central peak was still apparent, if not quite to the degree shown by the first sample.

Shown grayed-out in fig.13 is a spectral analysis taken under identical conditions with the CD-Pre24 fed external 44.1kHz-sampled data representing the same analytical signal. The level of random jitter has dropped, but there are now high-level pairs of sidebands apparent at ±126Hz and its harmonics, as well as data-related sidebands, all of which sum to give a total word-clock jitter figure of 2.7 *nano*seconds, which is poor performance. The second sample was no better in this regard, the measured jitter figure being almost as bad at 2.4ns, with again a single pair of low-frequency sidebands contributing most of the jitter.

Finally, I looked at the performance of the CD-Pre24's A/D converter, which appears to operate at 44.1kHz[2] and with 24-bit data words available at the unit's digital output. An input level of 2.1V RMS gave a digital level of −1dBFS. However, raising the input level to anything above 2.237V (−0.3dBFS) resulted in the ADC hard-clipping.

2 Peculiarly, even though RME's DIGICheck program measured the sample rate as a true 44.1kHz, the "32kHz" flag was set in the datastream's subcode. —JA

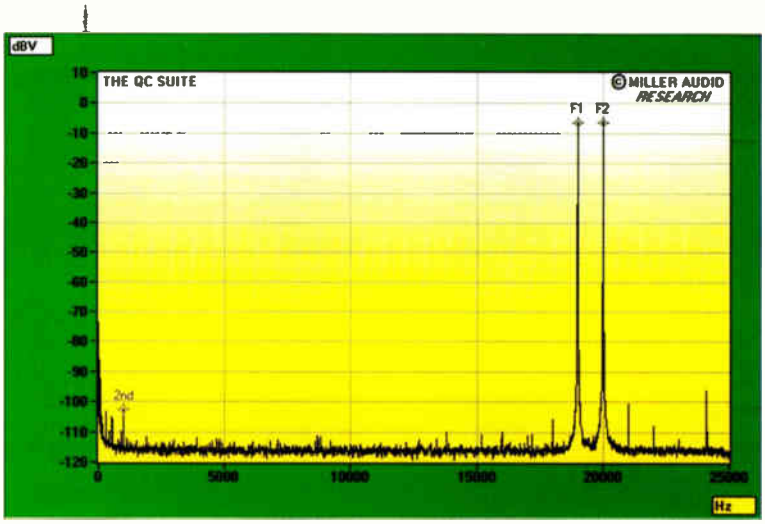

Fig.12 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–25kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS/1V into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

absolutely free of grain and grit. My reference was somewhat more pure and finely textured on top, but short of a direct comparison, the CD-Pre24's harmonic delivery was sufficiently rich and free of mechanical artifacts to give my ears long-term satisfaction. Key to the unit's performance was the natural quality of post-crescendo, low-level decays and fadeouts—these were absolutely convincing and well-resolved, thanks to the ultra-low noise floor. And the backgrounds were black.

Vocal sibilants were also conveyed honestly: finely articulated and detailed, yet free of edge or harshness. With the purity and rich resolve of the Hovland? No. But female voices had delicacy and believability, with no hint of mechanicalness or cardboard-cutout edge definition. There was plenty of air around instruments on familiar live recordings, though the overall presentation was somewhat drier than the Hovland's.

Listening to such favorites as Tony Bennett's *Live at Carnegie Hall* (LP, Columbia C2S 823), Joni Mitchell's *Miles of Aisles* (LP, Asylum AB 202), *Mel Tormé and Friends at Marty's* (LP, Finesse W2X 37484), and Miles Davis' *In Person: Friday and Saturday Nights at the Blackhawk, San Francisco* (LP, C2S 820) demonstrated that the CD-Pre24 could adequately convey venue size, room ambience, and image dimensionality, though not quite as convincingly or as gracefully as the Hovland—or, not surprisingly, the $16,000 Connoisseurs 4.0 that I wrote about in October. More important, the CD-Pre24 never got in the way of the music by injecting obvious additives into the picture. I entirely enjoyed listening to music with the CD-Pre24 substituting for the Hovland. It was a listening experience different but no less enticing.

Fig.14 shows the ADC's linearity error plotted against absolute level. The increase in positive error below –80dBFS suggests resolution between 15 and 17 bits despite the 24-bit word lengths, with the right channel being about two bits better than the left. The digital-domain spectral analysis shown in fig.15 reveals that the Musical Fidelity's A/D converter produces high-order harmonics. Though these are very low in absolute terms—the 16 MSBs are not affected—their existence implies that the ADC is not properly dithered.

Summing up the Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24's measured performance is difficult. The product combines an excellent, virtually bombproof line preamplifier with a good CD player with high dynamic range that is let down somewhat by the random-noise jitter present in its output and the fact that it doesn't apply the correct de-emphasis for the admittedly small number of pre-emphasized CDs. And while the downsampling of high-sample-rate sources will not affect the majority of audiophiles who play CDs, it is still an issue for me. (The problem with handling right-channel data for external digital signals is presumably a sample-specific fault.) The CD-Pre24's A/D converter is okay, but it's not up to the standard I've been led to expect by such relatively inexpensive products as the Alesis MasterLink, which Mikey reviewed in June, or the RME Digi96/8 PAD soundcard, which Wes Phillips reviewed last February.

Given the technical excellence of the last two digital products from Musical Fidelity that have been reviewed in these pages—the A324 D/A converter and the Nu-Vista 3D CD player, both of which offered state-of-the-art performance—I must admit to being disappointed with some of the CD-Pre24's measurements.

–John Atkinson

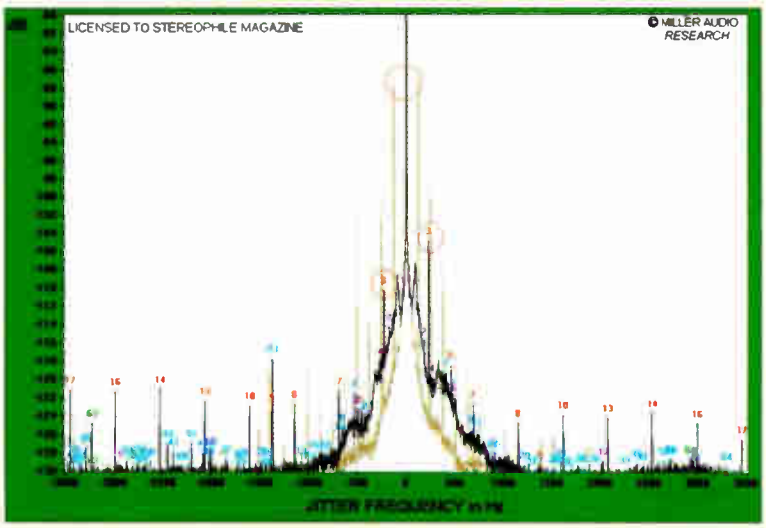

Fig.13 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24, sample 1, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, internal CD playback (11.025kHz at –6dBFS sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz). Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz. (Grayed-out trace is similar analysis from PC fitted with RME Digi96/8 Pro soundcard via 1m TosLink.)

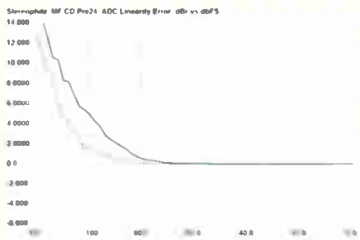

Fig.14 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24 ADC, departure from linearity (right channel dashed, 2dB/vertical div.).

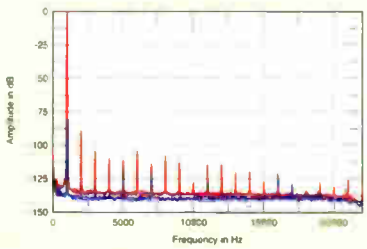

Fig.15 Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24 ADC, digital-domain spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–25kHz, at –1dBFS (red) and –80dBFS (blue) (linear frequency scale).

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The MF's overall tonal spectrum leaned toward a slight upper-midrange presence, but with the frequency extremes so well-rendered and the midband admirably transparent and free of congestion, the balance remained remarkably neutral and cut from whole cloth. Measured against any standard, the combination of the slightly dark but wonderfully rich- and complex-sounding Lamm LP2 phono section ($7000; review in next month's "Analog Corner") and the rhythmically adept CD-Pre24 yielded first-rate sound.

Not surprisingly, given the same DAC and transport, the CD-Pre24's CD performance was very similar to the Nu-Vista 3D's, minus the 3D's lush midband and high-frequency delicacy. On a few of the rich (some might say overly warm) JVC XRCDs, such as Bill Evans' *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* (JVCXR-0051-2), the slightly drier, faster sound worked to the disc's benefit. The DAC-preamp's impressive dynamic range and low-bass prowess were spotlit via Shawn Murphy's superb recording of James Newton Howard's edgy score to the summer blockbuster *Signs* (Hollywood 62368-2).

As for the *true* upsampling 24/96 DAC, I tested its efficacy by running the 24/96 digital stream from the Alesis MasterLink, and I *think* it decoded it. I say "I think" because of a few curious findings: If I ran the 24/48 digital output of the Camelot Technologies Round Table DVD player into the MasterLink's digital input (the Camelot is supposed to pass the 24/96 bitstream, but for some reason mine downconverted it to 48kHz, according to the MasterLink), which automatically syncs to the incoming word-clock rate, it registered the 48kHz sampling rate. But if I ran the digital output of the DVD player into one of the CD-Pre24's digital inputs and connected the MasterLink via a CD-Pre24 digital output, the MasterLink synced to and indicated a 44.1kHz clock rate. Ditto through the digital loop. So something inside was downconverting 96kHz to 44.1kHz, which means it's not really a "loop." That leaves me wondering if the 24/96 MasterLink and 24/48 DVD-player outputs are really being decoded at full resolution in the CD-Pre24, or if they're being downconverted before being fed to the DACs. At any rate, the result still sounded like pristine, ultra-high-resolution audio.

While 24/96 DADs like Classic's *Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington* (DAD 1031) and Hi-Res Audio's *Seven, Come Eleven*, a live album featuring Herb Ellis and Joe Pass, sounded more dimensional, harmonically fleshed out, and just plain *involving* than most CDs in my collection, they also sounded *more* rich, lush, delicate, and analog-like when decoded by the Round Table's ultra-sophisticated, 24/192-upsampling internal DACs (by Anagram Technologies of Switzerland) and connected via the Camelot player's analog outputs.

With a record on the turntable and a 24/96 hard-drive recording of the same LP on the MasterLink, it was possible to A/B the AAA vinyl and the 24/96 recording decoded by the CD-Pre24 by pressing the MF's digital monitor button—but only with recordings made previously through the Hovland, or new ones through the CD-Pre24's analog tape outs, because the digital out downconverts to 44.1kHz. And since it now appears that the MasterLink's 24/96 bitstream is downconverted by the CD-Pre, then upsampled, the A/B was less than rigorous.

So I compared the MasterLink's digital and analog outs into the CD-Pre24 and found that both resulted in a slight shift away from transparency and a diminution of image size, three-dimensionality, and lushness compared to the "live" AAA source. I guess it's a tribute to the CD-Pre24's downconverting/upsampling DAC that there was little difference between the true 24/96 signal decoded in the MasterLink and run analog into the CD-Pre24, and the digital 24/96 bitstream downconverted and upsampled in the CD-Pre24. And though I felt the former sounded somewhat bigger and more liquid, I wouldn't want to bet the farm in a double-blind test!

Conclusion

Quirky, unique, and oh so handy for the home-recording enthusiast, the Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24 packs versatility, flexibility, and first-class sound into an attractive, reasonably compact, extremely well-built package. And considering that its CD performance comes surprisingly close to the Nu-Vista 3D's and it costs $2500 less, think of the CD-Pre24's preamp, DAC, digital switching, and tape loop as premium freebies.

Nonetheless, those already owning ultra-high-quality DACs and/or CD players, and those who don't need the unit's flexible analog and digital tape-loop facilities, should probably consider all-analog alternatives like Musical Fidelity's A3CR preamp. And owners of high-resolution 24-bit/96kHz recorders like the MasterLink will probably want to opt out because, despite its upsampling 24/96 DACs, the CD-Pre24 is strictly a 44.1kHz A/D and pass-through device.

Can an SACD-based edition equipped with 2.83MHz sampling and an Ethernet connection be far off? Now *that* sounds like *real* fun! Just give Antony Michaelson and prosumer manufacturers like Alesis some time…

Associated Equipment

Analog sources: Simon Yorke, Rega P9 turntables; Graham 2.2, Immedia RPM2 tonearms; Lyra Helikon SL, Helikon mono, Transfiguration Temper Supreme, prototype Lyra Titan cartridges.
Digital source: Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 3D CD player; Alesis MasterLink hard-disk digital recorder.
Preamplification: Hovland HP-100 preamplifier; Manley Steelhead, The Groove, Lamm LP2, Hageman Trumpet phono preamplifiers
Power amplifiers: Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300, Music Reference RM-200.
Loudspeakers: Audio Physic Avanti III, Kharma Midi-Grand.
Cables: Phono: Hovland Music Groove, Cardas Golden Reference (RCA-RCA). Interconnect: Harmonic Technology Pro-Silway II, Audio Zen, Analysis Plus Solo Crystal Oval 8, Kharma. Speaker: Harmonic Technology Magic Woofer, Analysis Plus Solo Crystal Oval 8, Kharma. AC: Electra Glide Fatboy, PS Audio Lab, Wireworld Electra Series III, Synergistic Research Designers' Reference, Shunyata Research Anaconda, JPS Labs Kaptovator and Aluminata.
Accessories: PS Audio Power Plant P300 and Shunyata Research Hydra power-line conditioners, Sounds of Silence Vibraplane active isolation platform, Symposium Rollerblocks (Tungsten, Grade 3 Superball), Finite Elemente Pagode amplifier stands, Symposium Acoustics Ultra shelves, Audiodharma Cable Cooker 2.0, Walker motor drive, A.R.T. Q dampers, Walker Valid Points, ASC Tube Traps, Shakti Stones and On-Lines, RPG BAD and Abffusor panels.

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some other high-end designers. As a result, the 5.5 doesn't invert absolute phase, but does include a high-quality Noble balance control (when aligned at its center detent, it is not in the circuit), as well as phase flip and Mute switches, both of which can be activated manually or by remote control. Housing a separate power supply for each channel in a single chassis is a prudent approach at this price point, VTL putting the money saved toward audiophile-grade Multicaps in the signal path.

System & Cables

It took 50–100 hours for the VTL TL-5.5 to open up and breathe enough to resemble what I ultimately determined to be its true sound signature. During this burn-in phase I was reviewing a pair of Meadowlark HotRod Shearwater loudspeakers—see September 2002, p.103—and I became more conscious of the 5.5's noise floor than I was with the Joseph RM33si Signatures I also used for my listening. The left channel was more noisy than the right, although neither could be heard from more than a few feet away. I opened the chassis to ensure that all tubes were firmly seated in their sockets and after the VTL had been powered up again, I wasn't disturbed by background noise any longer.

The 5.5 had a profoundly crystalline sound—remarkably clear, sweet, and extended.

The TL-5.5 line stage offers two sets of single-ended outputs as well as a fully balanced out, which proved useful in running long lengths of Acoustic Zen Silver Reference interconnects to the power amps on my double-decker PolyCrystal amp stand: a 15' single-ended run to the Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300 and Rogue Audio Magnum M-120 monoblocks (review to come), and a 20' balanced run to the VTL MB-450 monoblocks on a sturdy timber table to the rear. Most of my critical listening was done on the Nu-Vista 300.

After returning to the familiar sound of the tube/solid-state Nu-Vista preamp and leaving it on more or less continuously, I alternated between the tubed VTL TL-5.5 and the Blue Circle Galatea until I'd gotten a sense of their distinguishing characteristics. Switching from a more or less solid-state line stage to a fully triode front-end, I was expecting the hybrid Nu-Vista preamp to be, if not significantly brighter, then much more open and extended in the top end. But instead of a slightly diffused, velvety top end, the 5.5 had a profoundly crystalline sound—remarkably clear, sweet, and extended.

Measurements

The VTL preamp offered a maximum voltage gain of 20.5dB into 100k ohms and was noninverting from both its balanced and unbalanced outputs with the Phase LED green. The input impedance at 1kHz was 12k ohms, while the unbalanced output impedance was 184 ohms across most of the audioband, rising to a still low 409 ohms at 20Hz.

As a result of the increase in source impedance at low frequencies, the low-frequency response rolled off to reach –3dB at 16Hz into the punishing 600 ohm load (fig.1, bottom pair of traces below 200Hz). However, into 100k ohms the TL-5.5's infrasonic response was well-extended (fig.1, top pair of traces below 200Hz). The ultrasonic response is also a little less extended into the low load impedance. However, the bandwidth changes with the setting of the volume control: at its maximum position, the HF response is –3dB at 200kHz; at unity gain (1:30), the –3dB frequency decreased to 105kHz. However, as there was no significant change in the audioband rolloff, this behavior is probably insignificant.

Channel separation was excellent in the low treble, at 100dB L–R and 90dB R–L (fig.2), but this worsened at higher frequencies due to capacitive coupling, and at lower frequencies due (presumably) to increasing power-supply impedance. The A-weighted signal/noise ratio ref. 1V output with the volume control at its maximum and the input jack short-circuited was a high 89.3dB, this worsening to 73.5dB with an unweighted wideband measurement.

The VTL preamp was both very linear and capable of swinging very high voltages into real-world loads. Fig.3 plots the percentage of THD+noise in the TL-5.5's output against output voltage into 100k, 10k, and 1k ohms. The preamp clips (1% THD) at around 16V into the higher impedances, and will still drive 7V into 1k. The downward slopes of the traces at the left of this graph indicate that, below 600mV or so, the reading is

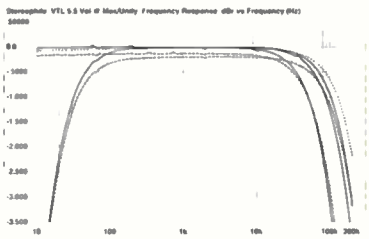


Fig.1 VTL TL-5.5, unbalanced frequency response (from top to bottom at 150kHz) into 100k ohms with volume control at maximum and unity gain, and into 600 ohms with volume control at maximum (0.5dB/vertical div.).

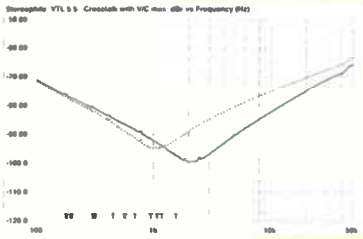


Fig.2 VTL TL-5.5, unbalanced channel separation (R–L dashed, 10dB/vertical div.).

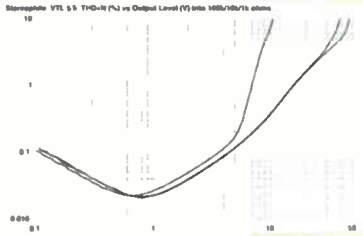


Fig.3 VTL TL-5.5, distortion (%) *vs* unbalanced output voltage into (from right to left at 10% THD): 100k, 10k, and 1k ohms.

I was thus inspired to play my best solo piano recordings to hear the true impact of each line stage on the transition from the upper midrange to the lower treble, where reside, in my experience, much of the air, inner detail, and depth of character of music. I used Acoustic Zen's Silver Reference interconnects and Hologram speaker cable, for their ability to depict that mid-treble transition in such a natural, unforced manner — they're never merely bright but sparkling, open, and expansively detailed. They also have an ease and depth of midrange presentation, and a tuneful, well-damped bass that is dynamic, revealing, and unobtrusively pure.

To bring out the best in my preamps, I used the same massive yet flexible JPS Labs Aluminata AC cords I obsessively use with my power amps and Equi=Tech Balanced Power Transformers (review in the works). The fact that, dollar for dollar, one of these anaconda-sized AC cords retails for as much as the VTL TL-5.5 itself is laughable, but they offer me galactic-black silences, electron-microscope resolution, and enhance the speed and dynamic range of high-current devices by letting them operate at optimum efficiency, making it sound as if I've doubled my power and added an octave of bass.

Sweet & Lovely

I first played Arcadi Volodos' remarkable live-to-DSD CD of Schubert's Sonata in G (Sony Classical SS 89647), which I'd used in my evaluation of Simaudio's i-5 integrated amplifier — though since that review I've purchased the SACD edition. For a contrasting perspective, I turned to pianist Ito Ema's dazzlingly ambient recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (M•A MO24A).

The 5.5 offered me a very moving

Measurements

dominated by noise. The true distortion level is a hair over 0.02% (–74dB). Fig.4 plots the THD+N against frequency at 1V into both 100k and 600 ohms. A slight but inconsequential rise in distortion is evident at the frequency extremes into the lower impedance, but the right channel can be seen to be even more linear than the left.

The spectrum of the TL-5.5's distortion into 8k ohms, which is about the lowest impedance the VTL will be called on to drive, is shown in fig.5. The second harmonic is the highest in level, but will be subjectively innocuous at –78dB (0.013%). Similarly, the level of intermodulation distortion products (fig.6), even into the demanding 1k ohm load, is low. The difference product at 1kHz is the highest in level, but at –76dB (0.015%) will be insignificant.

All in all, the VTL TL-5.5 seems to be a well-engineered preamp, with nothing to indicate that its use of tubes has compromised its performance.

–John Atkinson

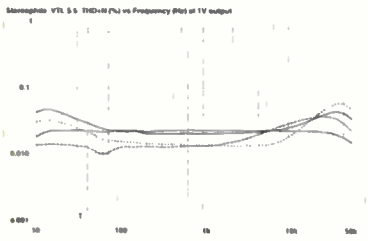


Fig.4 VTL TL-5.5, unbalanced THD+noise *vs* frequency at 1V into 100k ohms (bottom) and 600 ohms (top) (right channel dashed).

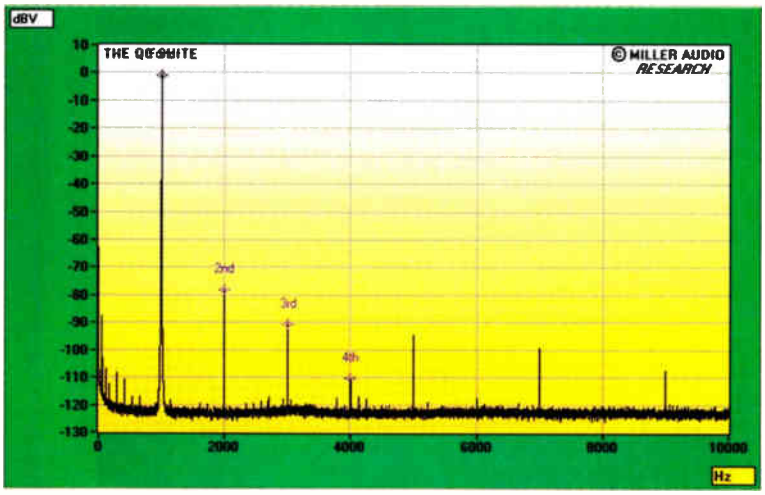


Fig.5 VTL TL-5.5, unbalanced spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–10kHz, at 1V into 8k ohms (linear frequency scale).

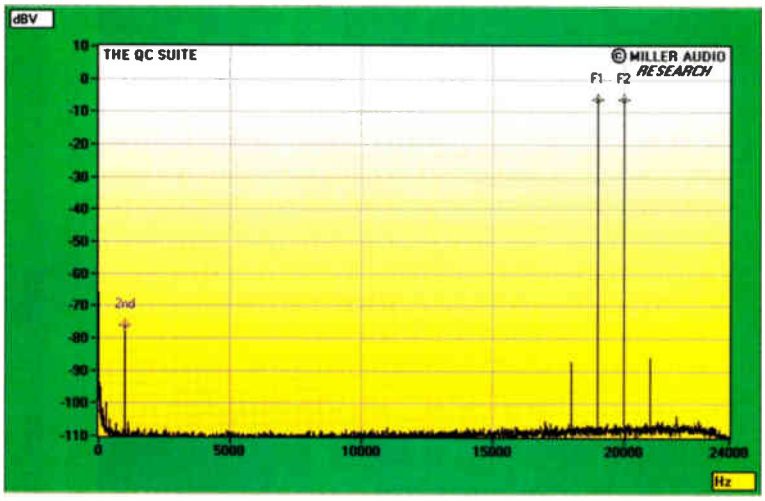
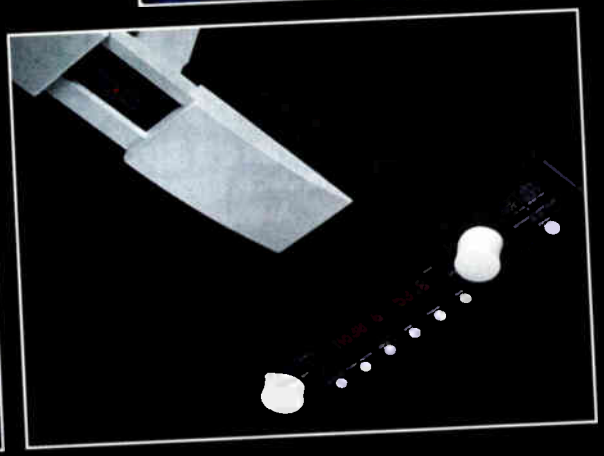


Fig.6 VTL TL-5.5, unbalanced HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–24kHz, 19+20kHz at 1V into 1k ohms (linear frequency scale).

AUDIO OUTLET



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Michael Fremer, *Stereophile* November 2000

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emotional connection with the Volodos performance; I was taken aback by the top end-extension and up-close detailing, which was neither etched and analytical nor unnaturally bright and peaky. Smooth, sweet, and richly detailed, without glare or sibilance, the 5.5 gracefully tracked all of Volodos' extreme dynamic contrasts with exceptional speed and clarity, while translating the subtleties of the pianist's touch, the instrument's spectral decay, and the wealth of room cues with rhythmic ease and spatial aplomb. The VTL delivered all the enhanced depth, transparency, and dimensional realism that this definitive SACD mastering promises.

Likewise on the Bach: The 5.5 offered richly rewarding insight into the lateral imaging and more distant, symmetrical perspective that producer-engineer Todd Garfinkle achieved by removing the vintage Steinway's lid and floating his stereo array of mikes well above the performer. This God's-eye view serves to emphasize the linear aspects of Bach's conception.

Head to head, the VTL TL-5.5 split the difference aesthetically between the creamy, laid-back intimacy of the Galatea and the smooth, cool immediacy of the Nu-Vista. The Blue Circle offered a touch more holographic depth, but the Nu-Vista was more transparent and extended. The VTL handled the high frequencies in a more vibrant, involving manner—not softly inflected like the Blue Circle, but smoothly and infinitely extended, like the Nu-Vista, which contributed to the transient speed and exquisitely layered, textured dimensionality of its soundstaging. When I listened through the VTL TL-5.5, both pianos sparkled and glowed with high-frequency effervescence and midrange illumination. More significant, when the VTL was mated with the Nu-Vista 300 power amp, visitors to my den of iniquity never rushed to conclude that they were in the thrall of a tubed line stage.

I always found its midrange to be the Galatea's glory, but the TL-5.5 trumped it. I satisfied myself that the VTL was comparably juicy and detailed, but blissfully free of euphony with Alison Kraus's devotional vocal performances from T Bone Burnett's Grammy Award–winning production of the soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Lost Highway 088 170-069-2). We're talking about the difference between midrange *tone* and midrange *character*—between *my-ode* and *triode*. The mids of the Blue Circle and VTL were both very detailed and inviting, but the Galatea tended to smooth things over, while the 5.5 invited me deeper and deeper into the vivid acoustic of Kraus, Gillian Welch, and Emmylou Harris on "Didn't Leave Nobody But the Baby." While fleshing out all manner of distant, teasing sonic artifacts (such as the faintest echo of a musical saw), the VTL localized the beckoning images and sultry tonal signatures of these three Appalachian sirens in a devoutly intimate manner.

But the VTL's luminous midrange really shone in its portrayal of the cumulous waves of vocals accompanying Kraus's angelic performance of the hymn "Down to the River to Pray." Voices seemed to manifest out of silence and recede into nothingness, suggesting the eerie presence, ambient potency, and harmonic weight of tubes, as well as the tranquil iridescence, soothing stillness, and lifelike distinction of solid-state.

But in the end, it was my experience of the 5.5 with a cornucopia of jazz and blues recordings that really gave this sonic pilgrim some of that old-time religion. On a spectral performance of "Minor Mystery," from Roy DeNunn's classic 1959 recording of that most masterful of jazz guitar trios, *Pollwinners Three* (Contemporary OJCCD-692-2), the VTL got the signature rhythm, pacing, dynamics, and tonal balances of a jazz combo just right. It was all there: the fundamental tonality and shimmering overtones of Shelly Manne's cymbal; the earthy bottom and woody, transient snap of Ray Brown's bass; the pungent attack and indigo intricacy of guitarist Barney Kessel's horn-like lines and chordal fanfares. The 5.5 delivered a soulful emotional connection to the collective and individual aspects of this improvised performance, just as I hear them in the mind's ear of a musician who himself plays drums, bass, and guitar.

Associated Equipment

Analog sources: Rega Planar 25 turntable, Rega RB600 tonearm, Grado Statement Master cartridge; Marantz PMD430 portable cassette recorder.
Digital sources: Sony SCD-777ES SACD/CD player, California Audio Labs CL-20 DVD-V/CD player and Delta 24-bit/96kHz DAC.
Preamplifiers: Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista, Blue Circle Galatea, Rogue Audio Magnum Ninety-Nine.
Power amplifiers: Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 300, Mesa Baron, VTL MB-450, Rogue Audio M-120.
Loudspeakers: Joseph Audio RM33si Signature, Meadowlark HotRod Shearwater.
Cables: Interconnect: Acoustic Zen Silver Reference (balanced, single-ended, coaxial). Speaker: Acoustic Zen Hologram. AC: JPS Labs Aluminata, Kaptovator, Kaptovator Power AC Outlet Centers, Synergistic Research Designers' Reference² Master Couplers (with Active Shielding), Acoustic Zen Gargantua.
Accessories: Equi=Tech 2Q Balanced Power Transformer, Monster Cable AVS 2000 Automatic Voltage Stabilizer, PolyCrystal equipment racks and amp stand, Ringmat 330 and Signal Guard II Isolation Stand (turntable), Shakti Stones, PolyCrystal cones, Argent Room Lens, Echo Busters Bass Busters and Absorptive and Diffusive Panels.

—Chip Stern

Conclusions

When I find in a component as much to *kvell* about as I did in the VTL TL-5.5, I can't help wondering if I've gushed too fulsomely. But in head-to-head listening sessions against quality preamps that have afforded me enormous pleasure over the past few years, the TL-5.5's quickness, clarity, depth of resolution, layered soundstaging, and arresting midrange depth always proved warmly involving and musically compelling.

Richly detailed, tonally accurate, and nonfatiguing, the VTL TL-5.5 is a fine example of the midrange liquidity and human character that a finely tuned, non-invasive tube design can add to any signal chain by fleshing out a realistic palette of earth tones—even as its bass control, midrange smoothness, sparkling highs, and quiet authority suggest the performance of solid-state.

With a minimum of fuss and primping, the VTL TL-5.5 delivers useful features, no-compromise build quality, and audiophile authority at a most competitive price point. You'd have to spend a lot more to make this preamp take a back seat to any line stage, tubed or otherwise.

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Paul Bolin

EgglestonWorks Andra II loudspeaker

It's always tough to follow an award-winning act. Wes Phillips raved about the original EgglestonWorks Andra back in October 1997, and it was subsequently dubbed *Stereophile*'s Speaker of the Year for 1997. The Andra won many other plaudits, and found its way into a number of top-shelf recording studios as the monitor of choice. Such a reputation for excellence is the stuff most speaker designers dream of. It also imposes the burden of expectation—the "new and improved" version of such a knockout product had better be good, or else.

Since the Andra's debut in *Stereophile* there have been big changes at EgglestonWorks. While too complex to detail here, the end result is that the company is now under the resolute leadership of president Michael Sabre and director of sales and marketing Jim Thompson, but remains in its tradition-rich home of Memphis, Tennessee.

When Sabre and Thompson determined that the time was ripe for updating the Andra, they didn't have far to look for inspiration. After Sabre assumed control of the company, EW developed their titanic Ivy Reference in collaboration with mastering legend Bob Ludwig, for use as Ludwig's reference at Gateway Mastering. The Ivy was then translated into the only slightly less imposing Savoy.

The lofty ambitions of the Andra II project were to make significant and meaningful improvements to the Andra, ladling in a large share of the performance of the $100,000/pair Ivy and $40,000/pair Savoy. The primary goals were more accurate amplitude response, higher efficiency, deeper bass response, and a major increase in overall transparency—a tall order.

EgglestonWorks Andra II loudspeaker

Evolution at Work

Some of what has changed in the journey from Andra to Andra II is apparent at first glance. The Andra II is more than 7" taller than the original. The cabinet has very thick (1.53–1.79") walls of layers of MDF laminated together with vibration-damping adhesives, then cut to shape on a computer-controlled milling machine. The slim top section, containing the midrange drivers and tweeter, remains clad in black granite, and the overall fit and finish are everything one would expect in a speaker costing nearly $20,000/pair. With their slender top sections and deep-cabinet design, the Andras do not overpower a room, and their handsome presence attracted plenty of appreciative comments. The knuckle-rap test produced only bruised knuckles and a heavily muted *tk* from the speakers. These are exceedingly dead boxes.

A glance around the back of the speaker shows another major change. The cabinet is now a sealed box, and the woofer chamber is 50% larger than that of the original Andra. Just about all that hasn't changed are the drivers.[1] The twin

1 Owners of the original Andra can have their speakers upgraded to II status for $2750/pair plus round-trip shipping to Memphis. This includes major changes to the cabinet, a complete crossover change, new wiring, modification of drivers, repolishing of the entire speaker, and full inspection of all internal and external parts.

Description: Dynamic, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1" fabric-dome tweeter, two 6" plastic-cone midrange drivers with 3" voice-coils, two 12" plastic-cone woofers with 4" voice-coils in push/push compound, sealed-box loading. Crossover frequencies: 135Hz, 1.8kHz. Crossover filters: 6dB/octave symmetrical filters at 135Hz with Zobel impedance compensation; 24dB/octave symmetrical filters at 1.8kHz. Frequency range: 17Hz–25kHz. Impedance: 6 ohms average, 4 ohms minimum at 35Hz. Sensitivity: 88.5dB/W/m (91dB in-room). Recommended power: 30W (small room) to 600W.
Dimensions: 46" H by 15" W by 18" D. Weight: 215 lbs.
Finishes: Piano-black gloss with polished black granite side panels.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: 2027, 2028 (measurement); 2025, 2026 (listening).
Price: $18,900/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 20.
Manufacturer: EgglestonWorks, 435 S. Front St., Memphis, TN 38103. Tel: (901) 525-1100. Fax: (901) 525-1050. Web: www.egglestonworks.com.

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Dynaudio 12" woofers have 4" voice-coils to handle high power, and are considerably farther off the floor than in the original Andra. They now operate in a pressure-loaded push/push (isobaric) configuration, and the cabinet in which they work is filled with a non-settling, crimped Dacron called AcoustaStuff. The result is a more even impedance curve and improved efficiency over the first Andra.

The Andra's heart remains two beefy 6" Morel 166 midrange drivers connected directly to the speaker's inputs. The Morels are modified by EW to meet their own specifications, have 3" voice-coils, and, like the woofers, can accommodate large amounts of power. The original Andra ran these drivers full-range, but the EW design team became convinced that driver-to-driver differences in the Morels' top-end rolloff compromised the speaker's ultimate performance. One of the most challenging exercises for the EW team was therefore developing a crossover network that let the Morels work only in their most effective bandwidth without affecting the speaker's much-lauded midrange. According to Sabre, achieving this took months of work, primarily listening. The midrange drivers now operate with sealed transmission-line loading, with more AcoustaStuff packed into the labyrinth. Up top, the Dynaudio Esotar tweeter still holds pride of place. If there's a better dome tweeter, I haven't heard it.

The crossovers are kept as simple as possible, with 6dB/octave symmetrical filters applied at the woofer/mid transition [*Albert von Schweikert says "12dB/octave (acoustic) slopes in his cover letter—Ed.*] with Zobel impedance compensation, and 24dB/octave (acoustic) symmetrical filters used at the 1.8kHz mid/tweeter transition. According to EW's literature, the tweeter high-pass crossover filter consists of nothing more than a Hovland MusiCap and a pair of Vishay resistors as an L-pad, this working with the drive-unit's acoustic rollout to give a 24dB/octave slope.

After more than a year of develop-

Measurements

For logistical reasons, the samples I measured were different samples from the ones auditioned by Paul Bolin. My estimate of the Andra II's sensitivity was slightly but inconsequentially lower than specified, at 88dB(B)/2.83V/m. This is still a dB or so above the average sensitivity of the speakers I have measured over the past decade, but more important, the EgglestonWorks is a very easy speaker to drive. Fig.1, which shows its electrical impedance magnitude and phase, reveals that it drops below 4 ohms only briefly in the octave between 50 and 100Hz, and that the phase angle is generally low. The small peak at 39Hz indicates the tuning of the sealed-box enclosure—although the twin woofers are mounted in an isobaric arrangement, this doesn't affect the nature of the loading—suggesting only moderate bass extension for such a large speaker.

However, the moderate 12dB/octave rolloff of a sealed-box speaker, in conjunction with the low-frequency gain offered by a typically sized room, will mean that the Andra II's perceived extension will be greater than this measurement implies, as PB heard in his auditioning. In addition, the nearfield responses of the drive-units, shown in fig.2, indicate that the Andra's output peaks significantly between 40 and 90Hz. About 3dB of this rise will be due to the nearfield measurement condition, but the rest is real, according to the pink-noise responses I took (not shown). Compounding the nature of the speaker's low-frequency behavior is the fact that there is significant overlap between the woofers and the midrange units. The latter appear to extend an octave lower than both the specified 130Hz crossover frequency and the nearfield measurements supplied me by Albert von Schweikert, the leader of EgglestonWorks' design team.

If I reduce the woofer level in this graph (red trace) by 10dB and imagine the midrange output (blue trace) without the 3dB boost below 200Hz or thereabouts due to the nearfield technique, I get something that looks very similar to AvS's graph. However, if I follow the recommendations of DRA Labs' Doug Rife and scale the individual drive-units' outputs in the proportion of the square roots of their radiating areas, I get the relative levels shown in fig.2.

The black trace in fig.2 shows the complex sum of the lower-frequency nearfield responses spliced at 300Hz to the Andra II's farfield output. I have no explanation for the sway-backed shape of this trace between 150Hz and 600Hz, unless it really is plotted 4–5dB too high in level. The same response trace is shown to the left of fig.3, which shows the speaker's farfield response averaged across a 30° horizontal window on the tweeter axis. Unlike its predecessor, which

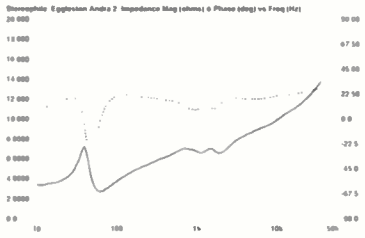

Fig.1 EgglestonWorks Andra II, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)

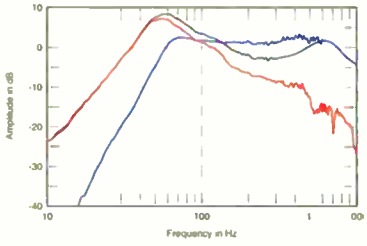

Fig.2 EgglestonWorks Andra II, nearfield response of midrange units (blue), woofers (red), and the complex sum (black), the last spliced at 300Hz to the farfield response.

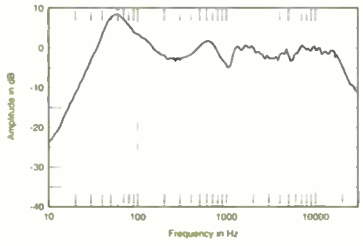

Fig.3 EgglestonWorks Andra II, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the complex sum of the woofer and midrange responses plotted below 300Hz.

mental work, the EW team was satisfied with the fruits of their labors, but Sabre feared that tunnel vision may have set in. As a check on their work, speaker-design guru Albert von Schweikert was called in as an objective ear to offer his thoughts on the new Andra. Von Schweikert wound up working with EW in finalizing the II's crossover designs and tonal voicing.

I have to mention the grille, which is the slickest I've seen: one thickness of the material used in ballet tutus stretched over a steel frame. The grilles are entirely acoustically transparent and attach magnetically, obviating the need for visible fasteners. They look great, too. *Very* nice, and elegant as all get-out.

Setup

After hearing the spanking-new Andra at CES in January 2002, I suggested to John Atkinson that a review was in order. On a fine Saturday afternoon in early June, Michael Sabre and Jim Thompson showed up with a pair of uncrated IIs in the back of Mike's wife's SUV.[2] The manpower was necessary—each Andra weighs 215 lbs. Sabre and Thompson schlepped the hefty critters downstairs into my listening room and 40 minutes later pronounced themselves satisfied with the setup. After a few hours, I toed them in about ⅜" more than Sabre and Thompson had, to firm up the imaging at the listening position, and that was that.[3] If only every speaker installation went so easily!

Andra Sound?

After Sabre and Thompson left, I promptly gave in to my sadistic streak and put the Andra II to the test. The Halcro dm58 monoblocks were warmed up and ready to play, so why

2 That Mike Sabre lives only a few miles from me in suburban Minneapolis proved most fortuitous. EW was able to ship the speakers to Mike's home, where they were uncrated and loaded into the SUV for the short trip to the Paul Bolm Institute of Advanced Audio Mania in the adjoining 'burb.

3 The tweeter axes still crossed well behind my head, and a large slice of the speaker's side panel was visible from my chair.

Measurements

featured a large suckout at the upper crossover frequency, the Andra II is impressively flat from the low treble upward, with just a small trough visible in the presence region.

Allowing for different microphones and measurement techniques—I use DRA Labs' MLSSA, AvS uses LMS from LinearX—my curve agrees pretty closely above 1.3kHz with that supplied me by AvS. (The small dip between 5 and 6kHz appears in both our curves and is due, AvS says, to diffraction.) But between 300Hz and 1.2kHz our responses are different. Both show a fairly narrow suckout in the upper midrange, but mine is centered on 1kHz instead of the manufacturer's 800Hz. AvS mentions in his cover letter that this dip is due to a suspension resonance in the Morel midrange units; perhaps it varies from sample to sample of this otherwise well-regarded drive-unit.

Because of the Andra II's bulk, I was unable to lift it onto my Outline speaker turntable for the acoustic measurements, and had to examine its lateral dispersion by rotating it by hand on a small dolly. Therefore, rather than take measurements at 5° intervals all the way out to 90° off-axis, as I usually do, I performed response measurements at 15° intervals from 15° onward. The result is shown in fig.4. Though the off-axis traces are smooth, a slight off-axis flare can be seen in the presence region. In typical rooms this will balance the slight depression in the same region. The Esotar soft-dome tweeter becomes quite directional above 10kHz, which will lead to a slight lack of top-octave air in very large rooms.

In the vertical plane (fig.5), the speaker's response doesn't change

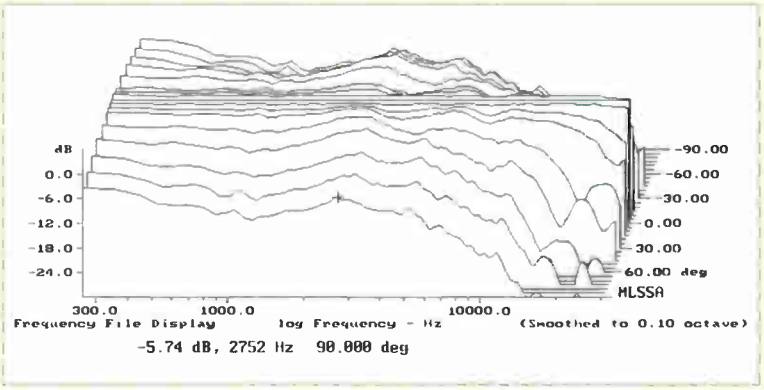

Fig.4 EgglestonWorks Andra II, lateral response family at 50", from back to front: differences in response 90°–5° off-axis, reference response on tweeter axis, differences in response 5°–90° off-axis.

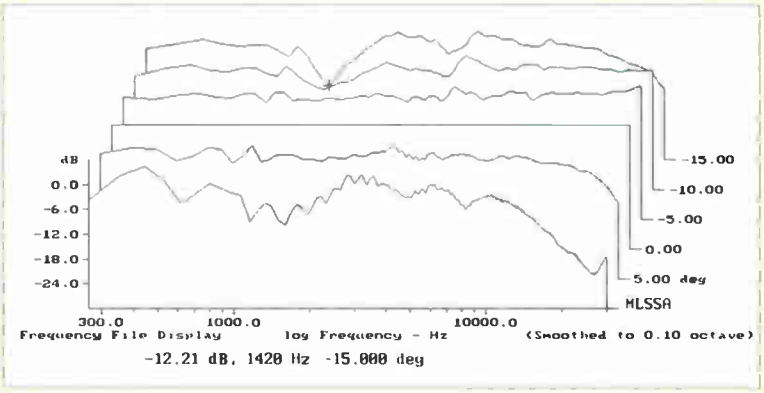

Fig.5 EgglestonWorks Andra II, vertical response family at 50", from back to front: differences in response 15°–5° above tweeter axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–10° below tweeter axis.

"Why I Cried When the Music Ended"

I couldn't help it. The song was so *sad*. I looked over at my wife. Sure enough, there were tears streaming down Pam's face as well. In my 30 years as an audiophile, I couldn't remember this ever happening to *me*.

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The Avantgarde Hornspeakers, perhaps alone among speakers, *communicate* better than anything else I've ever heard. You'll hear your music with all the *emotional impact* the composers and performers meant for you to have.

Why? It's the effortless dynamics. The music has a freedom, a quality of just "floating" over to you.

A composer or performer *intends* to speak to you through the music. The way that happens most often is through dynamic shifts, sometimes extremely slight in nature.

Listen, most speakers need at least 30-50 watts just to "come alive." By comparison to the Avantgardes (that need just *milliwatts* to speak to you), some high-end speakers are *almost deaf* to the gentlest subtleties in phrasing, tone, and emotion. They're simply unable to convey the *intended message* of the music.

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Best regards,

Jim Smith

Jim Smith

not? Out came the *Gladiator* soundtrack (CD, Decca 289 467 094-2) and up ramped the volume control of the Jeff Rowland Design Group Synergy Hi line stage. Had I a handlebar moustache, I would have been twirling it à la Snidely Whiplash as I cued up "The Battle" and "The Might of Rome."

But not for long. Any questions about the Andra's ability to handle massive forces at insane volume levels were obliterated in the space of those 16 minutes. Even at peaks that popped well over 100dB, the II remained undaunted, as cool and composed in confronting this full-scale assault as it would later prove with the Bill Evans Trio. About the time you think "The Battle" can't possibly get louder or more intense, it does—but the Andras seemed thoroughly unimpressed with my apparently meager efforts to make them misbehave. There was no strain, no compression of the size of the soundstage—and, miracle of miracles, there was every bit as much grace and finesse in the low-level passages, such as the acoustic guitar and Lisa Gerrard's haunting voice, as in the sheer horsepower and unflappability of the earth-shattering segments.

Later attempts to overtax the Andra with system-busting 12" 45rpm discs like the German pressing of David Bowie's "Putting Out Fires" (Backstreet/MCA 259 5740) and the gargantuan Townhouse-mastered "annihilation mix" of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's "Two Tribes" (UK, ZTT 12 ZTAS 3) proved equally ineffective. Dynamically, the Andra II was a behemoth power lifter that could dance like Baryshnikov.

Many dynamic speakers are claimed to have transparency and immediacy approaching that of electrostatics, but few deliver those goods. The Andra actually managed to do it. Its cabinet is so nonresonant and its drivers so well isolated that the speaker could respond to the most minuscule of musical signals free of the distortions caused by excessive energy stored in the cabinet structure. The upshot was that retrieval of low-level detail was superb. Reverb trails on orchestral recordings could be amazingly lifelike. The Wild/Fiedler/Boston Pops *Rhapsody in Blue* ("shaded dog" LP, RCA Victor LSC-2367) had incredible transient snap and suddenness in the orchestra's forceful entrances, and the immediacy of hammers on piano strings commanded my attention in a way not at all unlike the real thing. Through the Andra II, things happened *now* from top to bottom.

As much fun as mega-music was through the Andra, the speaker was just as wonderful with more intimate fare. Never had my wonderful old green-label first pressing of Van Morrison's *Moondance* (LP, Warner Bros. WS 1835) sounded so involving as through the Halcro dm58/Andra II combo. The lithe, mellow flute and sax, the warm, brown-toned throb of the bass guitar, and Morrison's *ur*-soulful voice ascended to the sublime. Paired with the Lamm M2.1 amps, Oscar Peterson's *A Tribute to*

Measurements

much for a listening axis between the upper-midrange unit and the top of the enclosure (34"–46"). If you stand, however, a suckout appears at the upper crossover frequency.

The Andra II's step response (fig.6) indicates that the tweeter and midrange units are all connected with inverted acoustic polarity, the woofers with positive. The large ripple at the 5.5ms marker is the first reflection of the woofers from the floor—I couldn't lift the speaker off the ground for this measurement—and the small one just before the 8ms marker is that of the midrange units. As a result of these early reflections, I had to aggressively window the EW's impulse response when I calculated its cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.7). The on-axis dip at 1kHz is associated with some delayed energy, implying that it is indeed due to a resonance, as suggested by AvS. There is also some low-level delayed energy around 5kHz. But other than these phenomena, the plot is generally clean.

Finally, the impedance plots were free from the small wrinkles and discontinuities that would imply the presence of cabinet resonances. Using an accelerometer, I wasn't able to detect any such resonant modes at a significant level

Other than its bass performance, which reminds me of that of the larger Alón speakers that have also performed well in *Stereophile* reviews, there is nothing in the Andra II's measured performance that contradicts Paul Bolin's very positive listening impressions. My thanks to Albert von Schweikert for supplying me with an almost complete set of graphs. It is always a great help for me to see the designer's own measurements.

–John Atkinson

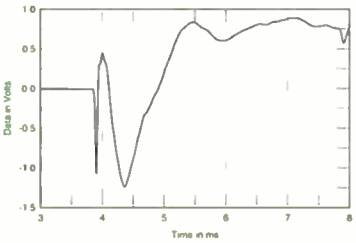

Fig.6 EgglestonWorks Andra II, step response on tweeter axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

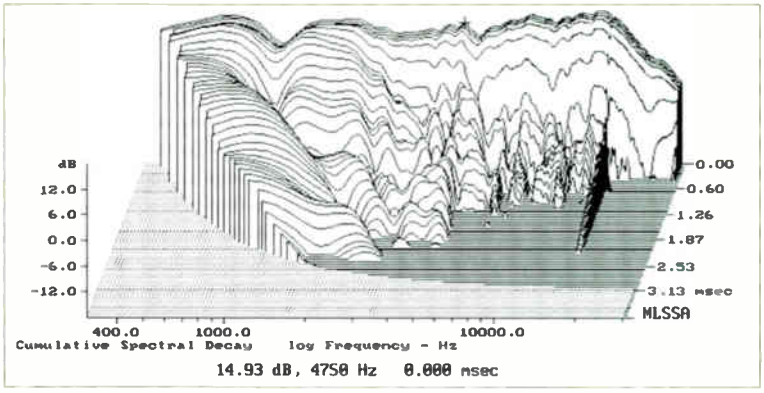

Fig.7 EgglestonWorks Andra II, cumulative spectral-decay plot at 50" (0.15ms risetime).

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My Friends (LP, Pablo 2310-902) simply sang. The Andra not only articulated Peterson's dizzying fingerwork and brilliant piano sound flawlessly, it simultaneously delivered the commanding, woody tone of Niels-Henning Ørsted-Pederson's bass and the laid-back sound of Joe Pass's electric guitar in exactly the right contrasting shades.

The longer I listened to the Andra, the more I appreciated its supremely easy and unforced sound with all types of music. Like a great improvising band, it was "tightly loose." Its ability to respond instantaneously to attacks and to hold decays until the last smidgen of sound had dissipated did not step over that line where supreme control becomes a tight, buttoned-down, almost constipated sound. For whenever there was timbral and spatial bloom on a recording, the Andra set it free as do too few speakers. The Andra always let music breathe and flow, which was perhaps its greatest strength. It excelled at communicating the essences of music as much as at reproducing the sound.

Given their ability to let the music through, it wasn't surprising that the Andras carved out a soundstage the dimensions of which were limited only by what was on the recording. I've long had a thing for Henry Mancini's soundtrack score for *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (LP, RCA LSP-2362), and not just because of the lovely shot of Audrey Hepburn on the cover, though that never hurt. *Tiffany's* is a record with impossibly plush and gorgeous sound, a cavernous soundstage, and music that is the essence of early-1960s Hefneresque cool.[4] The singers on "Moon River" are closely grouped in the center of the stage—have I mentioned that the Andras had the most spectacularly solid center-fill I'd ever heard?—and each voice was so precisely focused and timbrally distinct that it transcended the merely hi-fi. The seemingly massive recording venue was not merely suggested by the Andras—they forcibly imposed it on my listening room. Just a few years ago, only the most huge, complex, and costly speakers could manage such a feat. The Andras did it with almost offhanded ease.

The Andra IIs' soundstaging excellence followed in no small part from their tremendous bass performance.

The EWs transported me from venue to venue. It didn't matter whether it was the Bal Masque nightclub site of Ellington's *Dance with Duke* (LP, Columbia Special Products CSR 8098), the richly textured acoustic of Boston's Symphony Hall, or the electronically created alternate realities of Yellow Magic Orchestra and Air—the worlds of these recordings came to sparkling and touchable life in my room.

The Andra IIs' soundstaging excellence followed in no small part from their tremendous bass performance. The lowest frequencies a speaker can reproduce serve to set the limits of its ability to describe the size of the space in which a recording was made. EW specs the Andra's bass as extending to 17Hz, and nothing my pair did suggested that this is anything but an accurate figure. Plumbing the depths of bass was once a task for monstrous boxes or servo-controlled subwoofers. The Andra proved that neither is any longer necessary. The belly-rumbling lows of Trey Gunn's contrabass touch guitar in King Crimson's *The ConstruKction of Light* (CD, Virgin 493612), the organ and bass voice from Philip Glass's complete *Koyaanisqatsi* music (CD, Nonesuch 79506-2), and the immense synthesizer bass on "Two Tribes" had smack-you-upside-the-head authority.

And the definition! The Andra never sounded sloppy, woolly, or indistinct. Each bass note was dead-bang on a precisely defined pitch. The Andra's bass simply appeared, like a genie out of a bottle, but only when called for. There was nothing heavy or ponderous about its presentation whatsoever, as is sometimes the case when dealing with speakers of prodigious LF capabilities. On his eponymous debut album (CD, Castle/Transatlantic ESM CD407), Bert Jansch's solo acoustic guitar was sumptuous, speedy, and detailed—dare I say electrostatic-like?—in its transparency and verisimilitude. But throw on Kruder and Dorfmeister's dub remix of Bomb the Bass's "Bug Powder Dust" (EU CD, *The K&D Sessions*, CD K7 K7073), or track 9 of Vangelis' *El Greco* (CD, Atlantic 83161-2), and *kaboom!!* Through the Andra, big bass was not just loud and low but profound, compelling, and, above all, musically correct.

As is the case with most of today's best speakers, the midrange that came out of the Andra II was nothing more or less than what was put into it. My weakness for sexy-sounding female singers is of long standing, and the Andra proved a perfect conduit for my fix. Chrissie Hynde's achingly lovely vocal on Moodswings' "State of Independence," from *Moodfood* (CD, Arista 18619-2), was as luscious and succulent as a ripe peach. Patricia Barber's ultra-

4 Al Schmitt, best known today as Diana Krall's engineer, was responsible for getting Mancini's luscious sounds down on tape.

Associated Equipment

Analog sources: SOTA Cosmos turntable, Graham 2.2 tonearm, Dynavector DRT XV-1 cartridge; Clearaudio Champion 2 turntable, Unity tonearm, Benz L2 cartridge.
Digital sources: Classé Omega SACD/CD player, Ayre K-1x CD/DVD player.
Preamplification: Manley Labs Steelhead, Jeff Rowland Design Group Cadence phono stages; Jeff Rowland Design Group Synergy IIi line stage; Ayre K-1x, Atma-Sphere MP-3 preamplifiers.
Power amplifiers: Halcro dm58, Lamm ML2.1, Manley Labs 250 Neo-Classic, all monoblocks.
Cables: Phono: Cardas Golden Reference, Hovland Music Groove 2, Clearaudio. Interconnect: Nordost Valhalla, Acoustic Zen Silver Reference 2 and Matrix Reference 2, Wireworld Gold Eclipse III+, Cardas Golden Reference. Speaker: Nordost Valhalla and SPM, Acoustic Zen Satori Shotgun biwire and Hologram biwire, Wireworld Gold Eclipse III+ biwire. AC: Nordost El Dorado, Acoustic Zen Gargantua and Gargantua 2, Wireworld Silver Electra III, Custom Power Cord Company Top Gun and Top Gun HCFi, Top Gun Super Power Block conditioner (front-end electronics, digital components).
Accessories: Grand Prix Audio Monaco Modular and Ultra Resolution Technologies Bedrock equipment racks, Ganymede isolation footers, Nordost Ti Pulsar points, PolyCrystal footers, Wally-Tools analog setup equipment, Argent Room Lenses, Caig Pro Gold contact cleaner. **–Paul Bolin**

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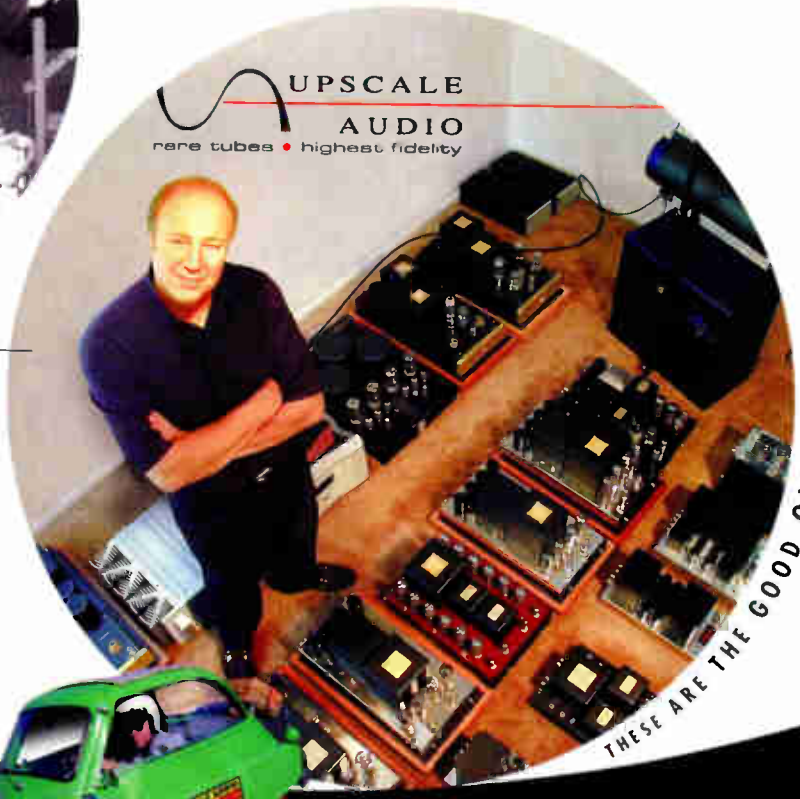

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cool huskiness on "Ode to Billy Joe," from *Café Blue* (SACD, Mobile Fidelity UDSACD 2002), was completely intoxicating and spooky-real.

The male voice fared just as well. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's creamy baritone solos in *Carmina Burana* (LP, Deutsche Grammophon SLPM 139 362) had a richness and solidity that was dreamily addictive. It's a rare speaker that can present the timbres of woodwinds with the same kind of individualized character one hears in the concert hall, especially when the context is orchestral. The Andra got the differing tones of oboes, English horns, bassoons, and the various members of the clarinet family juuust right. The deservedly renowned Maag/LSO performance of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (CD, Decca 466-990-2) was filled with subtly glinting woodwind colors and shimmering, fairytale strings that perfectly suited the music's subject.

Treble-wise, the Andra stood, again, at the head of the class. The Dynaudio Esotar tweeter gave the speaker tremendous extension and smoothness, with no grain structure I could detect—in the II, this fabric dome had the minimal sonic character I'd previously associated only with ribbon tweeters, but a dynamic power and responsiveness that fragile ribbons seldom manage. The air and space around Martin Drew's drum kit on *A Tribute to My Friends* was to marvel over. Every tiny variation in the way Drew struck the cymbals was superbly shaded and inflected. Stage height, often a function of a tweeter's dispersion and evenness of response, was exemplary. And in terms of timbre, looking for things to criticize about the Andra was like searching for penguins in the Sahara.

Few speakers disappear into the soundfield as well as did the Andras. In his review in August of the Rockport Technologies Antares, Mike Fremer observed that he could not "stare down" the speakers. Likewise, the Andras proved exceedingly difficult to identify as a source of sound. With any good CD or LP, the music existed as something like a living, breathing plasma field wholly independent of the boxes at the far end of my listening room. With a sonic showcase such as *Rhapsody in Blue*, the stage was wall-to-wall and treetop-tall, very deep, and utterly disconnected from the speakers.

As for imaging, the IIs ranked with the best to be found. Each voice, each instrument had a full-fledged three-dimensionality and distinctiveness as singular as a fingerprint. They were particularly impressive for their ability to faithfully capture the distinct way that each instrument launches sound into space, while simultaneously describing the sound of the recording site. Their sound was so integrated and continuous that it was possible to suspend disbelief at will and wallow in the sound of the recording venue.

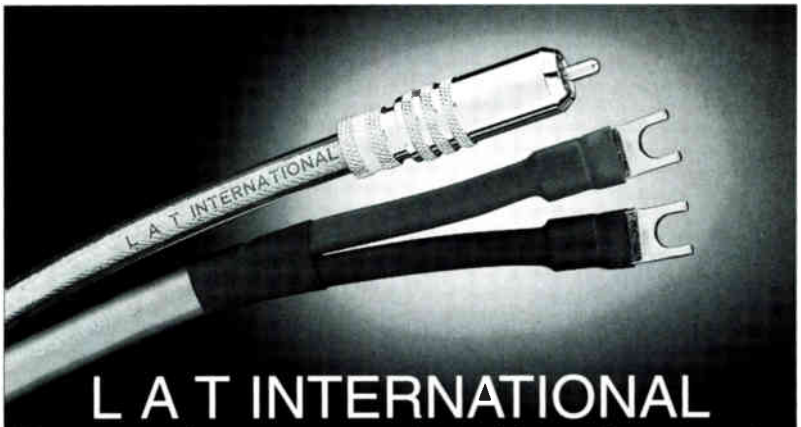
The Andra II has at last convinced me that cones and domes in a box, albeit very special cones and domes in a most extraordinary box, can hold the higher cards.

Andra Verdict Is?

I suppose that if you have a listening room of kingly dimensions or an unquenchable thirst for the very biggest sound and bass down to 12Hz, you might need more speaker than the Andra II. After all, EgglestonWorks doesn't make the Savoy and Ivy Reference for the sheer fun of it. But the Andra offered everything (and then some) that I, for one, could ask of any speaker costing less than a mid-sized Mercedes: enormous dynamic range, superb deep bass, impeccable transparency, and a timbral balance as uncolored and harmonically true as the state of the art permits. It spoke to head and heart in equal measure, and did absolutely anything asked of it with no hint of strain or complaint.

For most of my audio life I have lived with large planar speakers, convinced that no dynamic design could offer the coherence and continuousness of panels. The Andra II has at last convinced me that cones and domes in a box, albeit very special cones and domes in a most extraordinary box, can hold the higher cards. While $19,000 is a hell of a lot of money for a pair of speakers, the Andras have to be considered an eminently fair deal given their superb build quality and extraordinary sound.

Pure Class A in every respect, and a more than worthy successor to the storied original Andra, the Andra II is one of the world's great loudspeakers. It proves that, like love, a speaker, too, can be lovelier the second time around.



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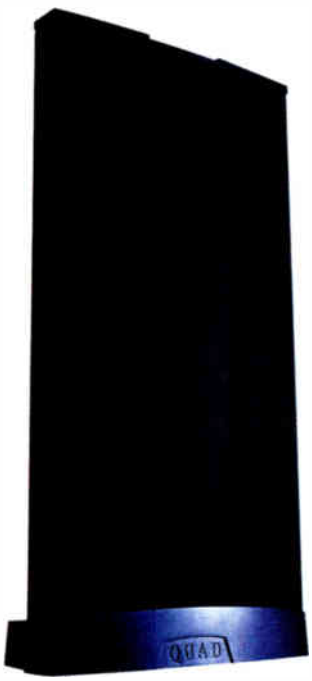
Larry Greenhill

Quad ESL-989 electrostatic loudspeaker

I first heard Eugene Gigout's pipe-organ masterpiece, the *Grand Chorus in Dialogue*, in the Smetana Concert Hall of Prague's Municipal House (Obecnim Dome) on a Saturday evening before the 2002 flood. I recall seeing the delicate, youthful Michele Hradecka sway from side to side to reach the pedals. In response, a massive wall of deep organ chords shook the hall, the magical acoustic blending the delicate, extended highs with the thunderous bass. But this memory mixed the music with the beauty of Prague's soaring church spires, brilliant red terracotta roofs, and lavish palaces.

Similarly, Quad's ESL-989 electrostatic loudspeaker caught my visual attention before I ever heard them. I was already strongly attracted to the speaker for its unique place in the history of high-end audio. Just as Prague's historical richness enhanced the classical-music performances I heard, the Quad ESL's unique reputation was appealing on its own.



Quad ESL-989 loudspeaker

History and Rebirth

The ESL-989 is the fourth version of the longest-surviving consumer-grade electrostatic speaker, which is now approaching its 45th year of sales. Back in 1988, when I last did a full review of a Quad ESL for *Stereophile*, it was one of only 11 full-range electrostatic systems listed among 1376 loudspeakers in *Audio* magazine's "Annual Equipment Directory." These 11 models were made by only four of the 257 speaker companies listed. Today, full-range electrostatic speakers are even rarer.

The first Quad loudspeaker was the ESL-57 (the number indicates the year of design), which remained in production for 25 years. It employed a "constant charge" feature to distribute electrons across its entire Mylar diaphragm. The speakers' curved rectangular panels imaged beautifully, yielding an extraordinarily lucid midrange, speed, and transparency.

However, owning a pair of ESL-57s required dedication and a generous masochistic streak. The speaker had low power handling, high-frequency beaming, limited bass response, and widely fluctuating impedances. The driving amplifier had to be able to handle the '57's capacitive load, whose impedance fell to 1 ohm at high frequencies. This required an amplifier designed to swing low amounts of voltage while remaining stable; the Quad 303 and the Levinson ML-2 worked the best.

Nor was that all. Configured as a gnarly, stubby panel, the speaker was often mistaken for an oversized space heater. Left on, it sucked up dust and grime as its panels filtered the air. Worst of all was the danger of arcing—the flickering blue lights in the panel that signaled diaphragm perforation and destruction. Wilson's Peter McGrath, then running Sound Components in Miami, offered to teach me how to do my own Quad repairs using rolls of Mylar and a hairdryer.

Quad designer Peter Walker sought electrical and sonic relief in the next generation, the ESL-63, which premiered at the 1981 CES[1] and featured two major innovations. The first was the speaker's unique radiating element, which used driver plates that employed a printed circuit board of concentric rings fed by delay lines comprising some 11 miles (!) of wire, which allowed the flat diaphragm to radiate the sound first at the center and last at the periphery, as if it were a radiating sphere—the ideal shape for approximating sound emanating from a point source 12" behind the panels.

The ESL-63's single electrostatic element also eliminated the Venetian-blind, treble-beaming effect found in

1 See Reg Williamson's detailed description of the Quad ESL-63 in *Speaker Builder*, February 1982, Vol.3 No.1.

Description: Full-range electrostatic loudspeaker. Power capacity: 100W, 10V RMS, 40V peak maximum signal input. Program peak for undistorted output: 40V. Permitted peak input: 55V. Impedance: 8 ohms nominal, 6.2 ohms minimum. Sensitivity: 86dB/2.83V/m. Frequency response: 30Hz–20kHz, ±6dB.

Dimensions: 52" (1335mm) H by 26" (670mm) W by 12.25" (315mm) D. Weight: 55.7 lbs (25.3kg) net.
Finishes: black, blue, or silver.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: 901969, 901970, 9890003, 9890004.
Price: $7999/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 20.
Manufacturer: Quad, IAG House, Sovereign Court, Ermine Business Park, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire PE18 6WA, England. Tel: (44) (0)1480-447700. Fax: (44) (0)1480-431767. Web: www.quad-hifi.co.uk. US distributor: IAG America, 15 Walpole Park S., Walpole, MA 02081. Tel: (508) 650-3950. Fax: (508) 650-3905. Web: www.iagamerica.com.

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– Wayne Garcia, *The Absolute Sound*, Issue 137 August/September 2002

"Chad, I simply can't BELIEVE how good 'I Heard It Through the Grapevine' sounds!!! It is impossible to sit still through it. Hell, it's impossible to sit, period. I am SO impressed. All the others are great too (especially 'I Put A Spell On You'), but '...Grapevine' just blows my mind. (And I had NEVER heard those congas before...!)
Thank you sincerely for sharing this with me."
– Art Dudley, editor of *Listener Magazine*

"I've just listened to the first two CCR test pressings mastered by Kevin Gray and Steve Hoffman at AcousTech Mastering (at RTI) and let me tell you: when the bass kicked in on 'I Put a Spell on You' I thought I was playing a 45 at 33 1/3 it was so deep and THICK but it was 33 1/3 and when the guitars kicked in, it was WOWIE!!!!! The transparency, transient SNAP and overall clarity without brightness or edge is phenomenal! This is as close to listening to a master tape as I've heard from vinyl – not hyperbole. Based on this, I think Kevin has put together the best-sounding lathe/cutting set-up I've heard yet – better than what they were using at Future Disc for the DCC cuts and without the hum — and those were gooood of course... the top end is just right – dynamics, depth, detail, the whole ball of waxxxxxxx. I was cautiously optimistic having heard how great the Ella/Gershwin box cut there came out, but I was not prepared for THIS.....congrats to all."
– Michael Fremer, senior contributing editor of *Stereophile*, music editor of *Listener Magazine*

"I didn't have the chance to compare these to the master tapes. It's gotta be damn close! Shit man, it don't get any better than this.
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– Rich Brown, aka Speaker Boy, *Klipsch Audio Technologies* and *Acoustic Sounds* customer

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speakers with multiple panels. This design had near-perfect phase coherence, as shown by Quad's show-stopping demos, in which two squarewaves out of phase with each other were fed to two Quad speakers. A microphone placed between the speakers showed that the two signals canceled each other out completely.

The ESL-63's second major innovation was its triac clamping circuit, to protect the speaker from arcing. The circuit operated by limiting voltage at the input. If that failed, the input was shorted by an electrical "crowbar," activated by an RF "sniffer" that detected the ionization of air that occurs just before an electrostatic speaker arcs.

Other improvements were on the way. In 1983, Quad changed the ESL's protection circuitry so that the speaker could tolerate higher voltage levels, increased its shutdown time to four seconds, modified the metal grille louvers to reduce resonances, and built a pad into the dustcover to damp a 60Hz resonance.[2] In addition, a brisk aftermarket industry of Quad modifications emerged: stands from Arcici to replace Quad's own Stand and Deliver units, new grillecloths, new AC connections, rewiring internal connections with heavier cables, capacitor bypasses, and replacing the snap-in power-cord terminals.

The speaker's structural rigidity was increased for the launch of the ESL-63 USA Monitor in 1988. This evolved from a special "pro" version used by Philips' European recording division for location recording. Quad replaced the '63's aluminum frame with steel, and put handles on the sides and rubber kick pleats at the base. Philips was delighted, and soon other studios requested the "pro" version. Quad decided that the improved structural rigidity made it the best version for export, even though it increased the speaker's weight by 30%.

The ESL-63 maintained a firm hold on its Grade B ranking in "Recommended Components" from 1987 through 1996. Why? The '63 produced a sense that one could "reach out and touch the musicians," as John Atkinson noted in the December 1992 article naming the ESL-63 his "Editor's Choice" component in *Stereophile*'s Product of the Year listings for 1992. JA also enthused over the speaker's precise imaging and lack of coloration. I also felt the ESL-63s had formidable imaging, specifically its front-to-back depth and horizontal dispersion—it was possible to move around and keep the stereo image (no pinpoint "sweet spot"!). On the other hand, the '63's midrange lacked the ESL-57's transparency, its image height was restricted, and its bass response remained limited, requiring a subwoofer. The Finnish Gradient subwoofer, designed for the ESL-63, made an extremely smooth acoustic and visual match, but the Velodyne HGS-18 sub went far deeper.

John Atkinson's choice of the Quad ESL-63 USA Monitor as his "Editor's Choice" for *Stereophile*'s 1992 Product of the Year listings summed up the yin-yang experience of many audiophiles: "...as good as the '63 is, it could be better. It doesn't go loud. It doesn't go deep. It needs to be used on stands to get the cleanest upper bass. (The recommended Arcicis clamp the speaker in a loving embrace, stiffening the rather torsion-prone frame.) The limited lateral dispersion in the top two octaves renders the sound rather dull for those who sit more than 10' away in well-damped rooms. There is a slight fizzle in the mid-treble that annoys some listeners more than others. But in

2 See Anthony Cordesman's review in *Stereophile*, Vol.7 No.7.

Measurements

Although the different kind of interaction between a panel speaker and the room can make it sound louder than its measured sensitivity would suggest, the Quad ESL-989 is still on the low side, at an estimated 83dB(B)/2.83V/m. Given its strict 100W power handling, this puts quite a low ceiling on its maximum loudness capability, as LG found. Over most of the audioband the Quad is not a difficult load for an amplifier to drive, the impedance (fig.1) remaining above 6 ohms from 32Hz to 3.7kHz and from 18kHz to 32kHz. And though the magnitude drops to below 4 ohms at 10kHz, the electrical phase angle is close to 0° at the same frequency, which mitigates the drive difficulty. The impedance does drop to a very low value above 50kHz. Fortunately, there will not be any significant musical energy in this region, even with SACD and DVD-A.

Interpreting the measured frequency response of a fairly large panel speaker like the ESL-989 is not straightforward. First, the assumption that the microphone is in the speaker's farfield at my routine 50" distance is no longer true, which means that there will be a slight downward trend with frequency, due to the proximity effect. Second, my usual nearfield measurement of the low frequencies will not show the effect of the dipole cancellation, as the antiphase backwave increasingly wraps around to cancel the speaker's direct output with decreasing frequency. The peaked-up bass shown in fig.2 will therefore tend to be more flat in the farfield than it appears in this graph, with useful extension reaching below 40Hz, as LG found in his auditioning.

Looking higher in frequency, there is a broad depression in the midrange compared with the low treble, while

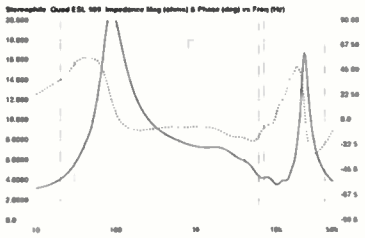

Fig.1 Quad ESL-989, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)

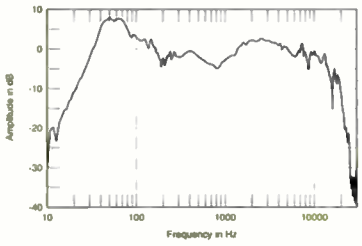

Fig.2 Quad ESL-989, anechoic response on mid-panel axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield response plotted below 300Hz.

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with heavier-duty connectors of their own design. According to Julian Maddock, "If we do go ahead, then the new terminal should be an easy retrofit for the customer or, more likely, the dealer. This cannot be confirmed at this time, but I'm 99% certain this will take place and be retrofittable."

Final adjustments before audition included comparative nearfield (9') and farfield (16') listening, phase checks, pink-noise listening, and finding the listening position that gave the best soundstaging and imaging. Setting the volume so that the 100Hz output registered 0dB on my RadioShack sound-level meter (C weighting, fast response), the '989's bass response was within ±2dB from 200Hz down to 50Hz. At 41.5Hz, the output rose to +4dB; at 31Hz, it was down by –4dB. By 25Hz, the signal had dropped to –10dB, with no doubling (second-harmonic distortion) apparent.

Playing *Stereophile's Test CD 3* to check channels and phasing, I moved my listening chair into the speakers' nearfield until I could hear the in-phase pink-noise signal as a centrally focused patch. Soundstaging was optimized when speakers and listening chair described an isosceles triangle 9' on its longer sides, measured from the centers of the panels.

The '989's panel extends from 5" to 52" above the floor. This covered an area from below my seated ear height of 38" up to my standing ear height, which explains why the '989's tonal balance didn't change when I stood up while playing pink noise. In fact, I heard no major changes in pink-noise tonal balance until I stood *beside* a '989, in the null point of its figure-8 dispersion pattern.

During most of my listening I drove the '989s directly with a Bryston 14B-SST power amplifier. Later I used either Mark Levinson No.334 or Krell FPB 600C two-channel amplifiers. Alternatively, I routed the line-level signal directly to the internal electronic crossover of my Velodyne HGS-18 subwoofer, in which case all signals of 80Hz and higher were redirected to the Levinson No.334.

Paradoxically, the higher-powered amplifiers were less apt to trigger the ESL-989's protection circuit than the Mark Levinson No.334 (125Wpc into 8 ohms). Although the Levinson's power rating is within the 150W maximum specified in the '989's instruction manual, the speakers frequently shut down with some static when I played highly dynamic percussion music that exceeded peaks of 94dB, as measured at my listening chair, 9' away, with the RadioShack meter. (The RS meter under-reads peaks by 10–15dB; so more power is involved.) When overdriven, the '989's triac clamping circuit cuts in, short-circuiting the speaker terminals. This in turn would activate the Krell's protection system, indicated on its front panel by a single blue LED and, of course, no sound. After I switched the '989s off, the Krell's usual three LEDs came back on and music could be played.

Quad sent another set of '989s for me to check that the protection circuit of first pair hadn't been set to be too sensitive. However, the protection system in the second pair was activated at the same volume level with the same recordings. I concluded that moderate sound-level settings were necessary with highly dynamic music.

Was the ESL-989's protection circuit more sensitive than the ESL-63's? It's hard to say, because I always use my *ca* 1989 ESL-63s with the Velodyne HGS-18 subwoofer, which shunts all deep-bass signals away from the Quads, which in turn means that the Levinson No.334 rarely triggers the '63's triac. I did most of my listening with the '989s run full-range, where they proved to be more sensitive to voltage peaks. I had to do some gain-riding to determine the maximum preamplifier setting and volume level.

Associated Equipment

Analog source: Linn Sondek LP12/Lingo turntable, Ittok tonearm, Spectral moving-coil cartridge.
Digital sources: Krell KRC-28 CD transport, Sony SCD-C555ES multichannel SACD player.
FM tuners: Day-Sequerra FM Reference Classic, Rotel RH-10, Magnum Dynalab MD-102 with Model 205 Sleuth RF amplifier, Fanfare FT-1A.
Preamplification: Krell KCT, Sony TA-P9000ES, Mark Levinson ML-7A with L-2 phono section, Conrad-Johnson Premier 18LS preamplifiers; Duntech MX-10 moving-coil, Margulis phono preamplifiers.
Power amplifiers: Mark Levinson No.334, Krell FPB 600C, Bryston 14B-SST.
Loudspeakers: Quad ESL-63 with Arcici stands, MartinLogan Prodigy, Velodyne HGS-18 subwoofer.
Cables: 75 ohm digital coax: Silver Starlight, Ultralink. Interconnect, balanced: Krell CAST, Bryston, Krell Cogelco Yellow, PSC Pristine R-30 silver-alloy. Single-ended: Randall Research, Mark Levinson HFC (with Camac connectors), Totem Acoustic Sinew, Coincident CST Interface, Ultralink, Performance Audio. Speaker: Mark Levinson HFC 10, PSC Pristine R50 biwire double ribbons, Ultralink Excelsior 6N OFHC, Coincident Speaker Technology CST 1. **–Larry Greenhill**

Sound

Set up near the corners of my large listening room, the Quad ESL-989s generated lots of satisfying bass from Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* (tracks 3, 5, 7) and *The Rite of Spring* (tracks 21–24), both from Eiji Oue's recording with the Minnesota Orchestra (CD, Reference RR-70CD). The bass whack at the end of track 7 shook the room before it shut off one of the '989s. The speaker's pitch definition and solidity of bass response was surprisingly good, though it was optimal above 30Hz in my room, where it was so solid that I had to check twice to make sure my subwoofer wasn't turned on. "Gnomus," from Jean Guillou's organ transcription of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (CD, Dorian DOR-90117), was reproduced with a mix of solid deep-bass notes balanced with delicate highs from the organ's flute and trumpet pipes.

I tried extending the '989's bass response deeper and increasing its output level by routing the line-level signal from the Krell preamp through the Velodyne HGS-18 subwoofer's electronic crossover. This filters all signals below 80Hz to the subwoofer and passes the remaining midrange and treble information to the Quads. After several hours of fussing with cables and matching the 30Hz output of the '989-Velodyne combination to the '989's 200Hz output, I found that the reproduction of organ-pedal chords and bass-drum whacks was tighter, better-defined, and somewhat airier than when the '989s were played full-range. While I was able to play the entire system about 5dB louder, the Quads still shut down on peaks exceeding 98dB. I further tamed the protec-

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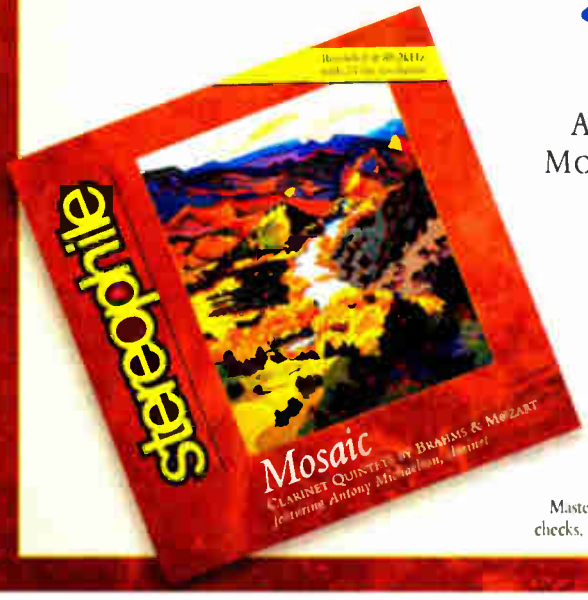

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5° backtilt and the more rigid frame have reduced the floor bounce that caused these problems. In fact, the ESL-989's treble and upper-midrange responses equaled those of the $46,500/pair Burmester B-99 I reviewed last June, showing that even at $8000/pair the ESL-989 offers strong value for money.

Kicking back and listening to the Quad ESL-989s' warmth, transparency, transient response, and power...I couldn't think of another loudspeaker I'd rather own.

However, the '989 did not play much louder than the '63, and you've got to determine the maximum volume for the electronics and the room if you want to avoid triggering the protection circuit. This might convince some audiophiles to seek an electrostatic speaker with wider power limits, such as Martin-Logan's Prodigy ($10,000/ pair), whose dynamic woofer permits it to play 10dB louder. As for moving-coil speakers, "companies like B&W, Sonus Farber, Wilson Audio, and Thiel were just getting started when the Quad appeared, and they haven't stood still," noted Sam Tellig in the November 2001 issue.

The Quad ESL-989 is a study in contrasts. It delivers topnotch imaging, smoothness, focus, low distortion, and low listening fatigue. Yet as supplied, its binding posts accept only 22-gauge wire, or cables terminated with pins. Even with better terminals, the '989 won't break any leases, because its protection circuit will shut things down before the party gets going. This may lead some to use the '989 in smaller, less damped rooms, paired with amplifiers in the middle power range, playing classical music and jazz.

Not I. Kicking back and listening to the Quad ESL-989s' warmth, transparency, transient response, and power as they played Keith Johnson's recording of Eugene Gigout's *Grand Chorus in Dialogue*, from *Pomp and Pipes* (CD, Reference RR-58 HDCD), I couldn't think of another loudspeaker I'd rather own.

"I wasn't ready to take on another amplifier line, but you guys leave me no choice. This is the best amplifier I have ever heard".

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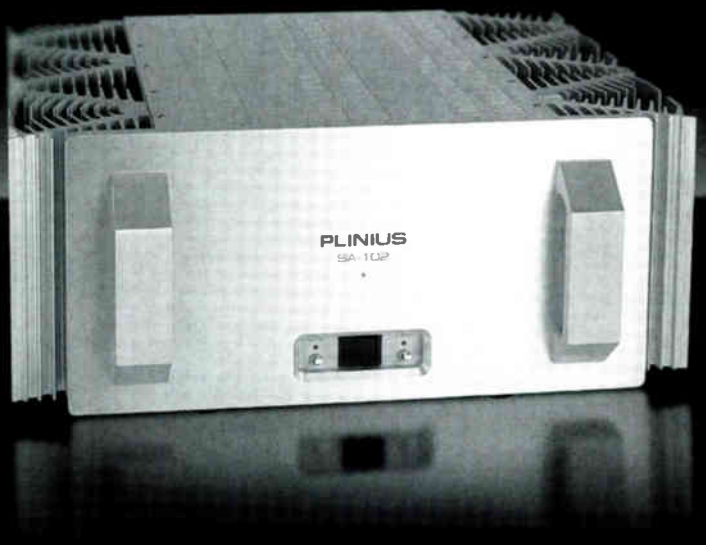

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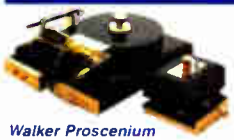

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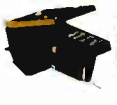

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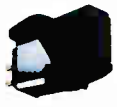
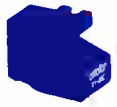


Grado Silver $150



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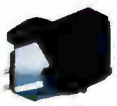

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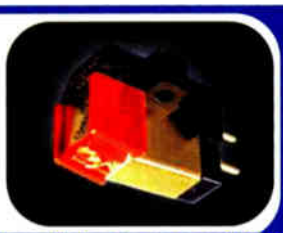
stening to music with the Garrott Optim FGS was eply moving and emotionally intense, among the st that I have ever experienced. The building of nsion in classical music had me unconsciously lding my breath the way I respond at live performces. The feeling of exaltation when the tension s released was equally stirring. I found it impossible to listen to music casually and had to choose usic of lighter emotional demands when doing the ore mechanical reviewing listening chores.
aul Szabady, www.stereotimes.com



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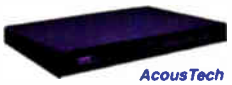

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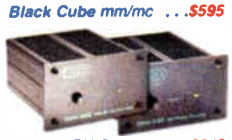

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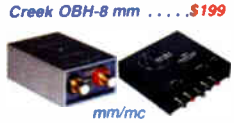

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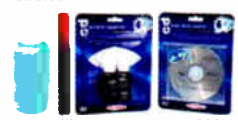

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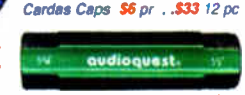

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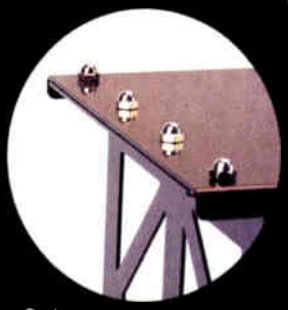

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Robert J. Reina

NHT SB-3 loudspeaker

I first met NHT co-founder Ken Kantor in 1971 when we were both undergraduates at MIT. Kantor was sponsoring an extracurricular class entitled "Musical Ideas." The concept was to stick a dozen or so musicians in a classroom for free improvisation and hope to create music à la Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*. The result was a mess; although talented guitarist Kantor meant well, there was no common vision or consistency of musical talent. Nevertheless, I had a blast trying to simulate a tamboura drone with a Hohner Clavinet, phase shifter, and volume pedal.

I ran into Kantor at a Consumer Electronics Show in the mid-'80s, where he told me that he was now designing speakers and was at CES to launch his latest project, Acoustic Research's Magic Speaker. I followed Kantor's career with interest, especially after 1986, when he launched, with Chris Byrne, a new speaker company: Now Hear This (NHT). NHT's ownership has changed hands several times since then—International Jensen bought the firm in 1990, and Recoton, NHT's current owner, bought it in 1996. Ken departed somewhere along the line but the company is still run by Chris Byrne and is still based in Benicia, CA. The design team is led by Jack Hidley, a protégé of Kantor's who has been directly involved with most of the NHT designs for the last 10 years.

NHT was formed to develop high-quality, affordable loudspeakers. When I auditioned one of their first bookshelf models, the 1.3,[1] I was impressed with the speaker's resolution of detail, overall neutrality, and quality of construction, but its forward, more-exciting-than-real sound was not to my taste. Nevertheless, I was interested in seeing what the company had been up to since.

1 Reviewed for *Stereophile* by Robert Harley in September 1990, Vol.13 No.9. —Ed.

NHT SB-3 loudspeaker

I chose to review the SB-3 bookshelf speaker, which, at $600/pair, is midway in the price range of NHT's SuperAudio series, which comprises four models ranging from $300 to $1000/pair. The SB-3, the largest SuperAudio bookshelf model, is a two-way design featuring NHT's proprietary 1" metal-dome, neodymium-magnet tweeter. A large heatsink is attached to the rear of the tweeter. This is intended to improve power handling and strengthen the cabinet to minimize resonant effects. The tweeter is positioned close to and *below* the 6.5" long-throw polypropylene-cone woofer. According to Hidley, the unusual driver arrangement of this acoustic-suspension cabinet is intended to get the output of both drive-units in phase at the 2.4kHz crossover frequency for listeners seated in typical chairs.

The SB-3 is finished in a stunning seven-layer, hand-polished, gloss-black finish in a slightly rounded cabinet that reminded me more of the original Wilson WATT or Entec subwoofer than a budget-priced bookshelf model. The SB-3 is also available with the equally attractive Last Stand, a $200/pair speaker stand that can be loaded with sand and/or lead shot, with a choice of spiked or rubber feet. For this review, however, I used my customary Celestion Si stands, their central pillars filled with sand and lead shot.

Sound

The SB-3's overall tonal balance was quite natural. Its few minor deviations from neutrality were consonant with the musical experience and, with certain musical programming, quite attractive. Vocal reproduction in the critical midrange was detailed, dimensional, and

Description: Two-way, sealed-box stand-mounted loudspeaker. Drive-units: 1" metal-dome, neodymium-magnet tweeter; 6.5" polypropylene-cone woofer. Crossover frequency: 2.4kHz. Frequency response: 39Hz–22kHz, ±3dB. Sensitivity: 86dB/W/m. Nominal impedance: 8 ohms. Recommended amplification: 15–175W.
Dimensions: 13" H by 8" W by 10" D. Weight: 16 lbs.
Finish: gloss black.
Serial numbers of units reviewed: 004197 & 8.
Price: $600/pair. Last Stand speaker stands, $200/pair. Approximate number of dealers: 500.
Manufacturer: NHT, 527 Stone Road, Benicia, CA 94510. Tel: (800) 648-9993. Fax: (707) 748-5945. Web: www.nhthifi.com.

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realistic. Well-recorded female vocals—such as Madeline Peyroux (*Dreamland*, Atlantic 82916-2) and Aimie Mann (*Bachelor #2 or The Last Remains of the Dodo*, Super Ego SE002)—were rich and clear, with tremendous body. Sibilants were produced clearly and crisply but without a trace of edge.

Male voices also fared well. Mighty Sam McClain (*Give It Up to Love*, JVC JVCXRCD-00122) growled with resonance and depth. Woodwind reproduction was so natural that the SB-3 could be the ideal budget speaker for fans of small jazz groups. John Coltrane's tenor on *Coltrane's Sound* (Atlantic 1419) was biting and brash, yet warm and natural. And I'd never heard Sonny Rollins sound more convincing (*Way Out West*, JVC XRCD VICJ-60088). It was spooky—Rollins' subtle articulations reminded me of exactly from whom my late father had derived much of his own tenor style.

Instruments had a certain crispness and front-of-hall presentation in the lower treble, but without a trace of forwardness or brightness.

The lower high frequencies were natural and detailed, with quick articulation of transients. Instruments in this region had a certain crispness and front-of-hall presentation, but without a trace of forwardness or brightness.[2] I did not, however, get the sense that the SB-3 reproduced extreme high frequencies with as much articulation or resolution. Overall, the SB-3's high-

2 I noted this natural high-frequency reproduction by following NHT's instruction to leave the grilles on. Designer Jack Hidley explained to me that removing the grilles gives the sound a 8kHz boost. I also listened with the grilles off, but didn't like the exaggerated reproduction of the upper partials of orchestral strings, electric guitars, and brass. —BJR

Measurements

I didn't find the NHT SB-3 to be as sensitive as the specification claims: my estimate of its B-weighted sensitivity was around the same as the similarly sized LS3/5A, at 82.5dB/2.83V/m. Fig.1 reveals that the speaker is easy to drive in the upper midrange and above, where its impedance remains above 8 ohms. However, in the lower midrange the impedance drops to 4 ohms, with a somewhat demanding combination of 42° capacitive phase angle and 5.7 ohms magnitude evident at 81Hz.

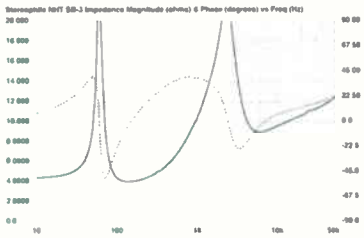

Fig.1 NHT SB-3, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed). (2 ohms/vertical div.)

The fig.1 traces are free from the wrinkles and discontinuities that would hint at the presence of cabinet panel resonances. While a vibrational mode at 332Hz could be detected on all surfaces (fig.2), it is low enough in level, and the cabinet surfaces are of sufficiently limited surface area, that I doubt this mode will have any subjective consequences.

The single impedance peak at 60Hz in fig.1 indicates the tuning frequency of the sealed enclosure, which is confirmed by fig.3. The woofer's response peaks between 200Hz and 55Hz before rolling off at 12dB/octave. This upper-bass peak will be partly due to the nearfield measurement technique, but it does appear that the SB-3's designer has gone for a lightly underdamped woofer alignment, which, in combination with the relatively slow rolloff below resonance, will give the impression that the speaker has more bass than it really does.

The nearfield woofer response, shown to the left of fig.3, is spliced to the NHT's farfield response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the woofer axis. Overall, the balance is neutral, with peaks being balanced by dips. However, I was a bit perturbed by the peak apparent in the octave between 600Hz and 1kHz. This will tend to throw midrange detail forward a little in the soundstage, as well as make the speaker a little

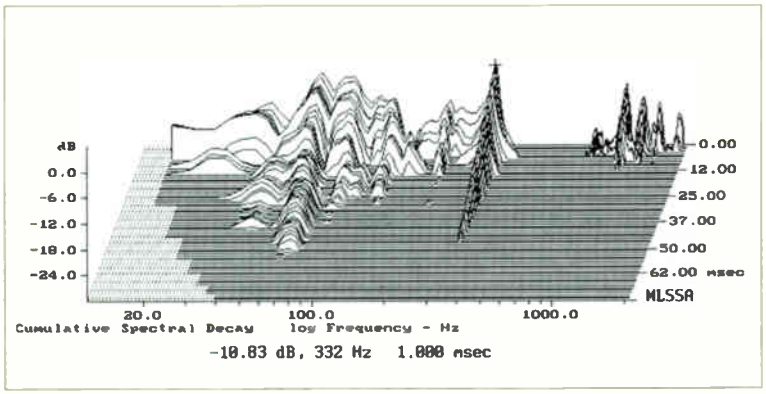

Fig.2 NHT SB-3, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from the output of an accelerometer fastened to the cabinet's side panel. (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz.)

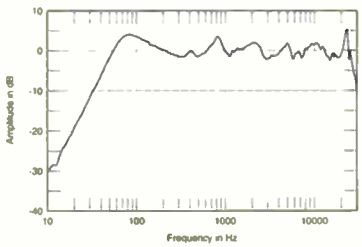

Fig.3 NHT SB-3, anechoic response on listening axis at 50° with grille on, averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield woofer response plotted below 300Hz.

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frequency performance made it the most realistic reproducer of orchestral marimba and xylophone and jazz vibes of any speaker under $1000/pair I've heard. Classical violins also sounded quite natural.

The SB-3's midrange and high-frequency strengths combined to make it an excellent reproducer of solo piano. On *Two Hours with Thelonious Monk* (Riverside 460/461), recorded live in Europe in the early '60s, Monk leaves his trio for one tune to do a touching, breathtaking solo rendition of "Body and Soul." Through the SB-3, Monk's upper-register right-hand figures were pristine, detailed, and dynamic, but without any unnatural edge.

Bass reproduction was remarkable on several fronts. Midbass reproduction was a touch warm and ripe but did not sound colored; this character was uniform throughout the spectrum, with no hooting or overhang evident on any notes. Interestingly, on delicate bass passages—John Ore's double-bass solos on the Monk set, Gary Wilson's upper-register bass-guitar figures on "When You Walk into My Dreams," from *You Think You Really Know Me* (Motel MRLP007)—were articulate, fast, resonant, and uncolored. However, on a bombastic rock blockbuster with considerable bass-guitar content (Janis Ian's "This Train Still Runs," from *Breaking Silence*, Analogue Productions CAPP027) or bass-synth blasts (Sade's "Feel No Pain," from *Love Deluxe*, Epic EK 53178), the bass instrument blasted forward and rocked on, as it should.

The NHT SB-3's midbass reproduction was a touch warm and ripe but did not sound colored.

Lower-bass extension was quite impressive for a bookshelf speaker. NHT intolerant of high-level voices. Moving higher in frequency, the ultrasonic peak at 22kHz is lower in height than we usually see with metal-dome tweeters, while the region covered by the tweeter is reasonably flat.

Measurements

All the measurements were taken with the SB-3's grille in place, as recommended by the speaker's designer. Fig.4 shows the effect of removing the grille on the NHT's on-axis response. The 1.5dB peak at 3kHz actually fills in one of the suckouts in fig.3, making the measured low-treble response flatter in the presence region. However, removing the grille results in considerably more energy in the octaves between 5kHz and 10kHz and between 15kHz and 30kHz. As BJR noted, removing the grille will make some instruments' upper harmonics sound exaggerated.

Figs. 5 and 6 show the NHT's lateral dispersion, the latter having the off-axis response curves normalized to the on-axis response. The peak at 800Hz is persistent, which, all things being equal, might be expected to add a slight nasality to the SB-3's balance. As BJR noted no upper-midrange col-

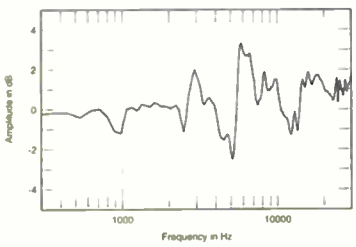

Fig.4 NHT SB-3, effect of removing the grille on anechoic response (1dB/vertical div.).

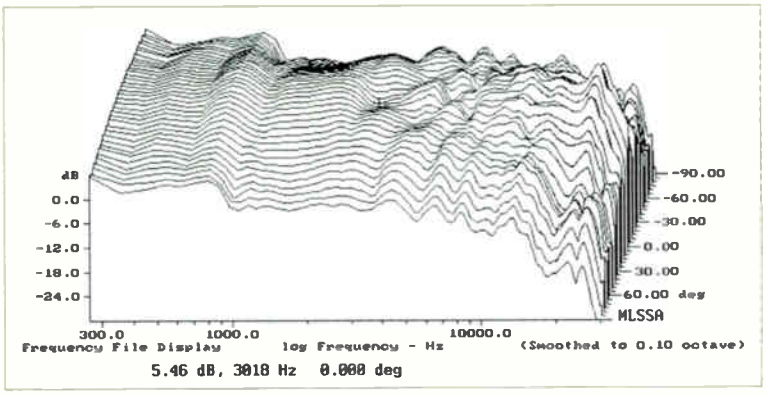

Fig.5 NHT SB-3, lateral response family at 50", from back to front: responses 90°–5° off-axis, on-axis response, responses 5°–90° off-axis.

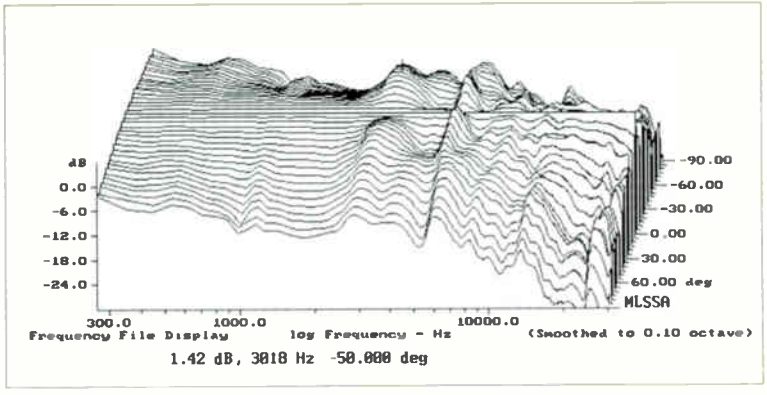

Fig.6 NHT SB-3, lateral response family at 50", normalized to response on listening axis, from back to front: differences in response 90°–5° off-axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–90° off-axis.

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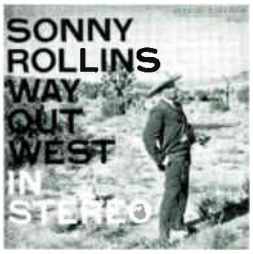

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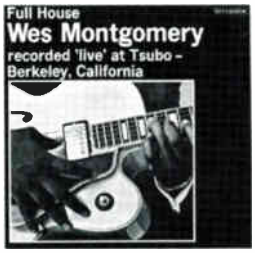

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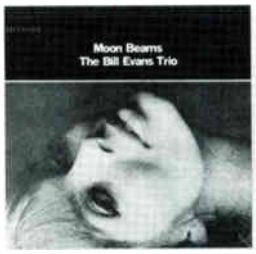

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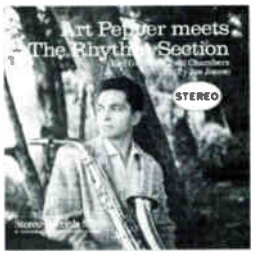

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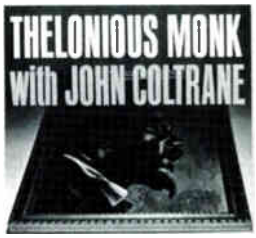

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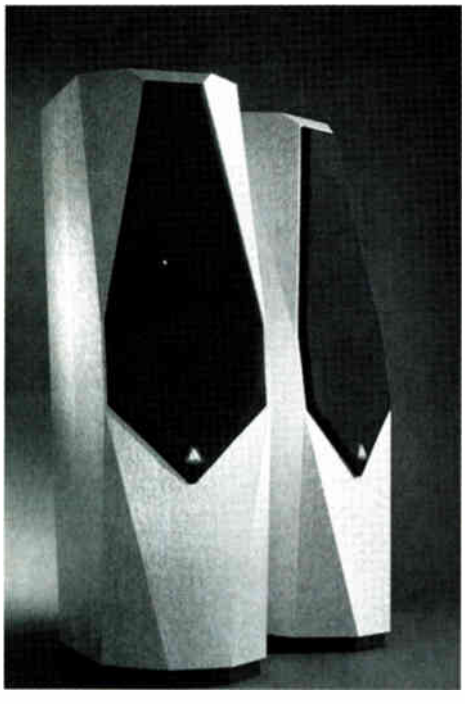

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Larry Greenhill

Bryston 14B-SST power amplifier

Talking to fellow audiophiles, I sometimes hear generalizations about power-amplifier design: "High-power amplifiers don't sound as good as low-power amplifiers." "Tube amps are more musical than solid-state amps." "Class-A circuit designs always sound better than class-AB." "Bridged amplifiers don't image precisely, throw deep soundstages, or have the transparency of non-bridged output stages." Etc.

How did bridged output stages acquire this reputation? Bridged circuits double the voltage of the amplifier's single-ended output, boosting the amplifier's output power and headroom. However, while the available voltage swing is doubled, the maximum current remains that of one of the single-ended outputs. Low-impedance speakers can thus result in the output stage's safe operating areas for voltage, current, and heat being more readily exceeded.

So it came as a surprise when Bryston's Chris Russell told me that the company's new flagship solid-state amplifier, the 14B-SST, is a bridged-output design. Why would a large, heavy amp with separate power supplies for each channel, computer-designed heatsinks, switchable input gain, rugged bipolar output transistors, and mechanically quiet power transformers need a bridged output circuit?

Bryston 14B-SST power amplifier

Why bridged amplifiers can sing

Bridged circuits offer a designer the ability to cancel out distortion. If this can be accomplished—and it must be part of the amplifier's design from the beginning—the bridged circuit can then deliver the highest possible current to the speakers at the lowest possible distortion.

Examples include the 600Wpc Electrocompaniet Nemo (reviewed in Vol.23 No.3) and Bryston's 500W 7B-ST monoblock (Vol.19 No.10, Vol.22 No.3). On the top, the Nemo had a "crystalline, translucent quality," and its bottom-end extension had "ample focus and detail without being overly pronounced or tightfisted." The 7B-ST "excelled in speed, drive, slam, bass control, and effortless dynamics, and made dynamic contrasts more seamless."

Like those amplifiers, the 14B-SST was designed only for bridged operation. Each of its channels contains two amplifiers, wired in series and operated out of phase with each other. The 14B-SST's two ±65V rails allow each channel to swing ±135V. If the owner wants to drive very-low-impedance loudspeakers—say you're a diehard fan of the 1 ohm Apogee Scintilla—then you must return the amp to the factory to have it reconfigured. This differs from Bryston's 7B-ST, which allowed the owner to switch the arrangement of the bridged circuits between series and parallel. Why? Bryston engineers found that the 7B-ST's circuit-configuration switch was the source of a tiny but measurable

Description: Solid-state, dual-mono power amplifier with balanced and unbalanced inputs. Specified output power (at 2kHz): 600Wpc into 8 ohms (27.8dBW), 900W into 4 ohms (26.5dBW). Distortion: 0.007%, 20Hz–20kHz. Intermodulation distortion: 0.002%, 60Hz+7kHz, mixed 4:1. S/N Ratio: 112dB ref. full output, input shorted, 20Hz–20kHz bandpass. Power bandwidth: 1Hz–100kHz –3dB. Damping factor: >300 at 20Hz, ref. 8 ohms. Input sensitivity: 2.2V unbalanced, 4.5V balanced, both for full output. Input impedance: 50k ohms unbalanced, 20k ohms balanced. Polarity: noninverting.
Dimensions: 19" (490mm) W by 7" (180mm) H by 19" (490mm) D. Weight: 85 lbs (38.5kg) net.
Serial number of unit reviewed: 140129.
Price: $5995. Approximate number of dealers: 200.
Manufacturer: Bryston Ltd., 677 Neal Drive, Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7Y4, Canada. Tel: (705) 742-5325. Fax: (705) 742-0882. In US: Bryston Service USA, 30 Coventry Street, Newport, VT 05855. Tel: (802) 334-1201. Fax: (802) 334-6658. Web: www.bryston.ca.

amount of distortion. For that reason, 7B-STs produced after May 2002 will be sold, without the switch, as 7B-SSTs (for "Super Stuart Taylor") — see sidebar.

The 14B-SST is a dual-mono design; *ie*, one power supply per bridged channel, both mounted in a single chassis. The two amplifier channels are arranged on either side, with common circuit boards for power-up, fault detection, logic, and front-panel LED control. Short lead lengths bring the eight 27,000µF electrolytic filter caps to within 1" of the output circuitry. The protection circuitry is designed to handle most fault conditions, including shorts and DC offset. The 14B-SST's discrete input circuitry features the ST buffer circuit, now standard in all ST amplifiers for both their single-ended and balanced inputs. The input circuits are completely symmetrical.

The 14B-SST's output stage uses 32 (eight pairs per channel) of a new type of bipolar output transistor, each PNP/NPN pair controlled by a single driver transistor. The power transistors in the 14B-SST (and now in the SST line) are larger, faster, and can handle more power than those in the 7B-ST, and have been proven to be more reliable, says Bryston. Output devices are hand-selected to ensure that the transistor gains are matched.

Chris Russell noted that the 14B-SST gained from the extensive redesign done for Bryston's five-channel 9B-ST. This involved a computer simulation to implement a more sophisticated grounding scheme to combat electrical hum and physical noise from large toroidal transformers. A special grade of steel was selected for each toroid's core. Furthermore, filter capacitors are mounted to the PCB using five-pin rather than three-pin connectors, so that any torsion of amplifier movement will not twist the filter caps off the board. The power supply's eight 27,000µF filter capacitors are guaranteed to run at 105°F for 5000 hours, but the 14B-SST is designed to shut down when it reaches a temperature that would make the temperature of the filter caps exceed 70°F.[1]

Rugged construction

Like the 7B-ST, the 14B-SST has a mas-

1 Each time a filter capacitor's temperature is lowered by 5°C, its operating life is doubled.

Measurements

After checking for continuity and the optimal grounding between the device under test and the Audio Precision System One test gear, my usual routine for an amplifier review is to run the amp for 60 minutes at ⅓ power into 8 ohms. This preconditioning both thermally stresses the amplifier and makes sure its operating conditions have stabilized.

With the Bryston 14B-SST, however, not only was its chassis too hot to touch after just 20 minutes of driving 200Wpc into 8 ohms, it turned itself off after 25 minutes. While this IHF-recommended test is very much the worst case for a design with a class-B output stage and it is unlikely the 14B-SST will get this hot under normal use with music, it does suggest that the amplifier's heatsinking is underspecified for continuous use at high levels. (Unlike the Chord integrated amplifier that I measured in our July 2001 issue, the Bryston's THD didn't increase in level as the amplifier heated up.)

Once the amplifier had cooled down and turned itself back on, I went on with my testing. The input impedance at 1kHz was to spec at 14.8k ohms balanced and 46.4k ohms unbalanced, and the amplifier didn't invert polarity from either input. (The XLR/TRS jacks are wired with pin 2 hot.) The voltage gain into 8 ohms was 28.9dB unbalanced and balanced, this dropping by 6dB with the balanced attenuator engaged. The output impedance measured 0.12 ohm across most of the band (this figure includes the series resistance of 6' of speaker cable), rising slightly to 0.21 ohm at 20kHz.

As a result of this low source impedance, there was very little interaction between it and the speaker impedance: just +0.2dB, –0.1dB, according to fig.1. This graph also reveals that the 14B-SST's ultrasonic bandwidth decreases with decreasing load impedance. The response is 3dB down at 148kHz into 8 ohms, at 100kHz into 4 ohms, and at 55kHz into 2 ohms. The response is down 1.4dB at 20kHz in the latter case, which might be just audible. These curves were taken using the unbalanced input; via the balanced input, the ultrasonic output was slightly more curtailed, at –3dB at 105kHz into 8 ohms, though this will not be subjectively significant. As a result of the high –3dB frequency, the 14B-SST's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave was essentially perfect (fig.2).

Channel separation was superb, at better than 110dB in both directions below 3kHz, while the Bryston was also very quiet. The A-weighted signal/noise ratio ref. 1W into 8 ohms was 96.5dB. The unweighted audioband ratio was only slightly less good, at 93.5dB, though this did worsen to 78dB with a wide measurement bandwidth. These figures were all for the left channel; the right channel was somewhat worse due to the presence of some 60Hz, 180Hz, and 300Hz hum components. Nevertheless, these were still well low enough in level to be inaudible.

This increased noise level in the

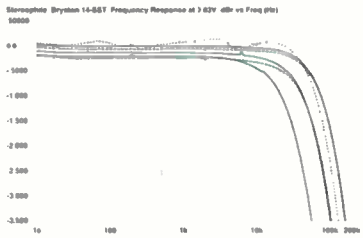

Fig.1 Bryston 14B-SST, unbalanced frequency response at (from top to bottom at 2kHz): 2.83V into dummy loudspeaker load, 1W into 8 ohms, 2W into 4 ohms, 4W into 2 ohms (0.5dB/vertical div., right channel dashed).

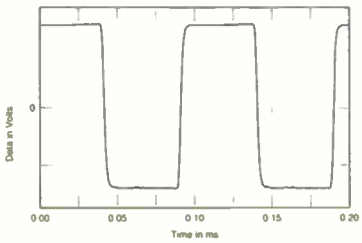

Fig.2 Bryston 14B-SST, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

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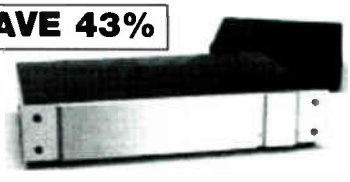

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S11

sive chassis with Bryston's black "thermal monolith" styling, including a row of heat-radiating fins lining each chassis side. The hand-assembled 14B-SST is available in two versions in North America, including the standard 120V 15-amp and a 20-amp model. There is also a 10-amp, 240V version for the European market.

Only a power switch adorns the 14B-SST's front panel. The only lettering besides the company name is the "SST" logo (for designer Stuart Taylor), which can be found on the membrane-type power switch. Two tricolor LEDs, one for each channel, turn green when the unit is powered on, red if the amplifier overloads or distorts (detected by the 14B-SST's clip-sensing comparator circuit), or yellow-orange during thermal shutdown. The LEDs also briefly flash red before the circuit voltages stabilize during power-up.

All set-and-forget switches and controls can be located on the 14B-SST's rear panel. These include the new On/Off Circuit Breaker switch and switches for power-up mode and external-trigger voltage turn-on options, as well as a new switch that selects balanced inputs set at 0dB or +6dB gain. Individual level controls are included for each channel. Also new is an external trigger switch. When this is set to Local, the 14B-SST will ignore the external trigger 4/12V turn-on signal, and will power up only with the front power switch.

The rear panel also contains balanced and single-ended connectors, and a switch to select one of these inputs. The balanced input uses a dual-function connector by Neutrik that takes either a balanced XLR plug (pin 2 hot) or a balanced, ¼" TRS (tip-ring-sleeve) phone plug (tip positive). For amplifier output, Bryston supplies its 60-amp-rated red and blue five-way speaker-binding posts, which were developed to meet rigorous CE standards. Instructions clearly printed on the rear panel make it possible to set up the 14B-SST without having to refer to the instruction sheet. Finally, there is a detachable power cord and associated IEC socket.

The 14B-SST's superb build quality is evident in the minimal point-to-point wiring. The circuit boards are very-high-quality double-sided epoxy-glass,

Measurements

right channel can be seen in fig.3, which plots the amplifier's small-signal distortion and noise against frequency. Other than at high frequencies, where there is a very slight increase in THD into the lower impedances, in this graph you're really looking only at noise. (The rise in the right-channel percentage in the mid-treble is with the 14B-SST driving our simulated speaker load.)

Increasing the power level and averaging 32 separate measurements to reduce the effect of noise reveals that what distortion is present—just 0.0038%—is almost pure third harmonic (fig.4). There did appear to be some high harmonics (fig.5) at high power and low frequencies, but these are at vanishingly low levels. The level of intermodulation products present with the demanding mixture of 19kHz and 20kHz tones was also very low (fig.6), despite the very high power at which this spectrum was taken: 331W into 4 ohms, which was close to visible clipping on the oscilloscope screen.

Finally, fig.7 plots the percentage of THD+N against continuous output power with both channels driven into 8 and 4 ohms and one channel driven into 2 ohms. Despite its 600W, 27.8dBW specification, the 14B-SST delivered no less than 690W into 8 ohms (28.4dBW) at the 1% THD point we define as clipping. The clip point into 4 ohms was just over a kilowatt (27dBW), but the amplifier was running out of grunt into 2 ohms, with 720W available at clipping (22.6dBW). **—John Atkinson**

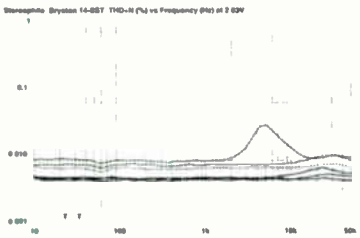

Fig.3 Bryston 14B-SST, THD+N (%) *vs* frequency at 2.83V into (from bottom to top at 4kHz): 8 ohms, 4 ohms, 2 ohms, simulated loudspeaker load (right channel dashed).

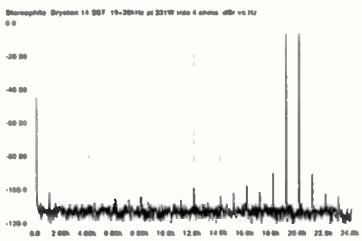

Fig.5 Bryston 14B-SST, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 100W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

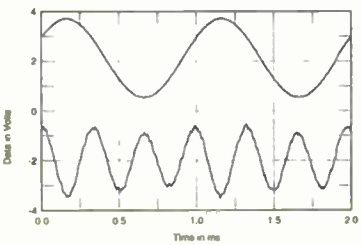

Fig.4 Bryston 14B-SST, 1kHz waveform at 17W into 4 ohms (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

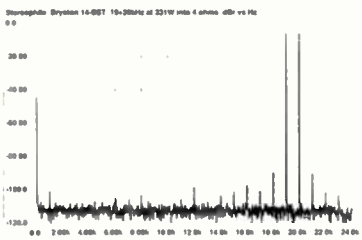

Fig.6 Bryston 14B-SST, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–24kHz, 19+20kHz at 331W into 4 ohms (linear frequency scale).

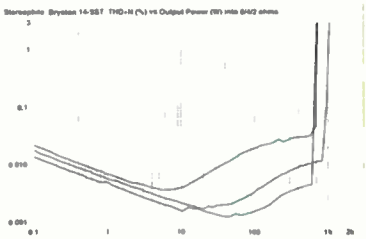

Fig.7 Bryston 14B-SST, distortion (%) *vs* continuous output power into (from bottom to top at 1W): 8 ohms, 4 ohms, 2 ohms.

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with component-designator screening. Bryston uses 0.1% metal-film resistors, polystyrene capacitors, and transistors hand-selected and -matched to reduce noise and distortion to the absolute minimum.

Each 14B-SST gets a rugged four-day factory burn-in consisting of a square-wave input signal driving the amp into a load capacitor at clipping. The driving signal is gated one hour on, one hour off, and is repeated many times. The amplifier is thus heated, cooled, and heated again; the resulting expansion and contraction expose loose connections and any devices subject to early failure. After burn-in, each 14B-SST is again bench-tested, and those results are shipped with the amplifier.

Asked why such a rigorous break-in is used, Chris Russell replied, "Nothing on the amplifier should last less than 50 years; every time there is a repair, it costs us money." Bryston offers a warranty program unique in high-end audio: all parts and labor costs, plus shipping one way, is paid by Bryston for the first 20 years of the amplifier's life.

Setup & Sound

The Bryston 14B-SST was a breeze to install. Although the amp weighs 85 lbs, the weight of its power transformers is just behind the front-panel handles, which allows one person to lift a 14B-SST out of its shipping carton and move it into place on the floor. Unlike other Bryston amps, however, the 14B-SST has no rear handles, which would have been...handy.

The 14B-SST's turn-on sequence is simple: Flip up the rear-panel circuit-breaker switch, then run your finger across the membrane, as you'd operate a touchscreen cursor control on a laptop computer.

The 14B-SST was put in service doing reviews as soon as it arrived, driving dynamic, electrostatic, and hybrid loudspeakers. It was not as fast or zippy as the Bryston 7B-ST, nor did it reproduce the shimmering, translucent highs of chimes or bells like the Krell FPB-600C, nor was it as warm and forgiving as the Mark Levinson No.334.

In fact, the Bryston 14B-SST seemed to have no character at all. It was a chameleon. Driving the Burmester B-99 speakers, the amplifier had reticent highs. With the Revel Ultima Salons, it was neutral and polite, without the snap and zip that the 7B-ST gives to percussion sounds. With the MartinLogan Prodigys, the big Bryston made the MLs' ForceForward woofers blossom and become forceful and taut, while expanding their dynamic range.

The 14B-SST's sonic character ranged from polite to powerful, but no simple profile emerged. In some instances, I loved what I heard; in others, I wasn't certain. Then I hooked up the Quad ESL-989s, which arrived near the end of my listening sessions, which I also reviewed for this issue [see page 137].

The Bryston's midrange had no discernible character of its own, only the character of the recording.

The 14B-SST and ESL-989Bs made a wonderful combination. The amp brought out the electrostatics' bass response, opened up the midrange, and delivered some of the most translucent, effortless highs I've heard in a long time.

My notes: "This is a bridged circuit? The sonics aren't supposed to be this lovely, distortionless, clear, and neutral." The bass was outstanding. Whether driving the Quads or a purely dynamic system, the 14B-SST rendered fast, solid bass notes with great pitch definition. This was evident playing Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite* (tracks 3, 5, 7) and *The Rite of Spring* (tracks 21–24) from Eiji Oue's recording with Minnesota Orchestra (Reference RR-70CD). The bass whack at the end of track 7 shook the room before it shut off one of the Quads for 30 seconds, and forced me to back off the volume.

With the Burmester B-99s or the Revel Salons, the 14B-SST enabled the reproduction of sustained, solid organ-pedal chords during John Rutter's *The Lord is My Light and My Salvation* (Reference RR-57CD). The staccato plucked bass and deep synthesizer in "Something's Wrong," from the *My Cousin Vinny* soundtrack (Varèse Sarabande VSD-5364), was as good as I've heard with any amplifier. Terry Dorsey's "Ascent," from *Time Warp* (Telarc CD-80106), shook the room with synthesizer pulses. Pitch changes in deep-bass synthesizer passages were abundantly clear in "Behind the Veil," from Jeff Beck's *Beck's Guitar Shop* (Epic EK 44313).

Driving the Revel Salons, the 14B-SST provided solid, massive deep bass that was rich and expansive. Bass lines were easily resolved, with precise pitch definition and articulation. Deep organ-pedal notes from Jean Guillou's transcription of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (Dorian DOR-90117) shook my room and produced bass room lock. The Bryston re-created a sense of space and depth appropriate to each recording venue. Double-bassist Glen Moore's plucked notes on "The Silence of a Candle," from Oregon's *Beyond Words* (Chesky JD130), had distinct tonal steps, and were taut and well-damped.

The Bryston's midrange had no discernible character of its own, only the character of the recording. This was heard on a range of recordings. Paul Simon's voice on "Trailways Bus" (*Songs from the Capeman*, Warner Bros. 46814-2) remained clear and free of muddiness even at high volumes. The ESL-989B/14B-SST combo conveyed the lovely harmony of Richard and Linda Thompson's voices on "Dimming of the Day" (*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, DMZ/Columbia CK 86534). This song has one the sweetest, saddest,

The 14B-SST against the 7B-SST

The 14B-SST differs from the 7B-ST and 7B-SST in several ways. The 14B-SST is a single-chassis product that is 6.6" deeper, 1.75" taller, and 41 lbs heavier than a single 7B-ST. Only the 14B-SST is available in both 240V/10A and 120V/15- and 20A versions.

Like the 14B-SST's, the power supply of Bryston's new 7B-SST will feature 100,000µF of capacitance, and will use the 14B-SST's more rugged bipolar output power transistor, supplied in a larger package with higher power handling. Also included will be the 14B-SST's new power-supply design, much higher filter capacitance, new output devices for higher power and lower distortion, and the elimination of the Series/Parallel switch. The 7B-SST will be sold in two models, the Series and the Parallel, each of which can be changed into the other by Bryston's service department.

—Larry Greenhill

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most beguilingly beautiful melodies I've heard—a tribute to the singers' talents and to the Bryston, which could be sweet when driving a full-range electrostatic loudspeaker.

The amplifier captured the brassiness of trumpets without creating an irritating edginess. On lesser systems, the trumpets from Oue's *Rite of Spring* recording are irritating and nasty. Played through the Quad ESL-989Bs and the 14B-SST, those trumpets had an attention-grabbing brassiness that was hot and passionate, with just the right amount of raw texture this work demands.

The 14B-SST's imaging was first-rate, equaled only by that of the huge Krell FPB-600C, another dual-mono solid-state design. During the instrumental finish of Richard Thompson's "Why Must I Plead" (*Rumor and Sigh*, Capitol CDP 7 95713 2), the acoustic guitar's image fell well outside the right-channel ESL-989B. Soundstage depth and width captured the intimacy and relaxed atmosphere of the Green Mill nightclub where Patricia Barber recorded *Companion* (Premonition/Blue Note 5 22963 2). José Carreras singing Ariel Ramirez's *Misa Criolla* (Philips 420 955-2), with a huge chorus and drum, was spacious and eerie, hinting at the solitude and desolation of the Mexican plateau.

The 14B-SST's treble was clear and extended. My beliefs about bridged circuits—which were already changing—had led me to expect etched highs and zippy transients. Not so with the 14B-SST. It delivered effortless, grain-free, extended highs. Vocal sibilants, which could trouble the beginning of Paul Simon's "Trailways Bus," didn't hiss, but were natural without being too soft. Billy Drummond's opening brushwork on his ride cymbal in "The Mooche," from the Jerome Harris Quintet's *Rendezvous* (Stereophile STPH013-2), had the characteristic buzz and shimmer of wire brushes and not—as it does through lesser amplifiers—of static.

The Bryston 14B-SST amplifier is a beefy, rugged, reliable amplifier whose 20-year warranty and $5995 price make it a real value.

Macrodynamics? Previously, through the Revel Salons in my large listening room, only the Krell FPB-600C and the Bryston 7B-STs could play full-volume percussion music without compression. The sternest test was the opening timbales solo in "Tito," from Arturo Sandoval's *Hothouse* (N2K 10023). Through the 7B-STs, the rim shots were explosive, like gunshots; through the 14B-SST, they lost some of the glaring, searing quality that made them exciting, but were more natural and realistic in size. Even so, I could easily hear the crescendo in the opening drum solo. The soundstage remained deep, wide, and rich, but the dynamic contrasts were less exaggerated. This naturalness benefited "The Hand-Off," from the *Sneakers* soundtrack (Columbia CK 53146), in which explosive piano scales erupt from dead-black silence.

With the 14B-SST, I could increase the power to the Burmester B-99s or Revel Salons until the soundstage stretched from wall to wall. This made listening to the drum solo in "The Maker," from Emmylou Harris' *Spyboy* (Eminent EM-25001-2), a mind-blowing experience. I had headroom to burn. Rim shots, tom-tom beats, and kick-drum notes were so dynamic and effortless that I felt I could have advanced the volume control even more.

Conclusions

The Bryston 14B-SST amplifier is a beefy, rugged, reliable amplifier whose 20-year warranty and $5995 price make it a real value. Its power and headroom are competitive with such great amplifiers as the $14,995, 600Wpc Electrocompaniet Nemo. The 14B-SST has the midbass punch and solidity, transparency, high-end openness, and soundstage depth of the 7B-ST, but it's smoother and less harsh on peaks. And, claims Chris Russell, it's built to last 50 years.

But the 14B-SST is one amplifier to listen to carefully before purchasing—on a first impression, you might prefer the sounds of other amplifiers. It's easier to warm up to an amplifier that accentuates midrange character, as does the Mark Levinson No.334, or that exaggerates sudden sharp transients, as does, sometimes, Bryston's own 7B-ST. I'd wager that some audiophiles will find the 14B-SST's predictable neutrality downright boring.

I'll take neutrality any day. Combined with its power, effortless dynamics, soundstaging, and open highs, the 14B-SST's impartiality allowed me to hear the most subtle details of the Burmester B-99s, the Revel Salons, and the Quad ESL-989Bs. The 14B-SST got out of the way of the music, and its unflappable neutrality shook my longstanding assumptions about bridged output circuits. Contrary to popular opinion, a well-engineered bridged output circuit might just be the ideal solid-state design for producing high power with low distortion.

Associated Equipment

Analog source: Linn Sondek LP12/Lingo turntable, Linn Ittok tonearm, Spectral moving-coil cartridge.
Digital sources: Krell KRC-28 CD player, Sony SCD-C555ES multichannel SACD/CD player.
FM tuners: Day-Sequerra FM Reference Classic, Rotel RH-10, Magnum Dynalab MD-102 and 205 Sleuth RF amplifier, Fanfare FT-1A.
Preamplification: Krell KCT, Sony TA-P9000ES, Mark Levinson ML-7A with L-2 phono section, Conrad-Johnson Premiere 18LS preamplifiers; Margulis phono preamplifier; Duntech MX-10 moving-coil preamplifiers.
Power amplifiers: Mark Levinson No.334, Krell FPB-600C, Bryston 7B-ST monoblocks.
Loudspeakers: Quad ESL-989B, Burmester B-99, MartinLogan Prodigy, Snell XA Reference Tower, Velodyne HGS-18 subwoofer.
Cables: Digital coax (75 ohm): Silver Starlight, Ultralink. Balanced Interconnect: Bryston, Krell Cogelco Yellow and CAST, PSC Pristine R-30 silver alloy. Single-ended Interconnect: Randall Research, Mark Levinson HFC (with Camac connectors), Totem Acoustic Sinew, Coincident CST Interface, Ultralink Performance Audio. Speaker: Mark Levinson HFC-10, PSC Pristine R50 biwire, Ultralink Excelsior 6N OFHC, Coincident Speaker Technology CST 1.

—Larry Greenhill

HiFi Farm *Newswire*

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Construction To Begin On Building Dedicated For High-Resolution DVD-Audio Multichannel Playback

In This Issue:

HiFi Farm Plans New Building for High-Resolution, 5.1 DVD-Audio Demos — *Steve Davis, Owner of HiFi Farm*

A HiFi Farm Customer Speaks — *Eric Ford*

HE 2002...A Closing Comment — *Steve Davis*

Hi-Fi Farm Product Listing

DVD-Audio Primer: Dispelling the Myths II — *Mark Waldrep, AIX Records*

What They're Saying About AIX Records

"Nitty Gritty Surround" Wins Best DVD-Audio Award — *Josh Santos, AIX Records*

Image Entertainment To Distribute AIX Records

HiFi Farm is very excited to announce that we re expanding our commitment to high-resolution, multi-channel sound and the DVD-Audio format in particular. As fall approaches, we re preparing to break ground on our second new building in 2 years, a building conceived, designed, constructed and equipped to bring our customers the very best in surround audio reproduction. When finished early next year, our new 1000 square foot acoustically tuned room will feature amplifiers by Aloia, 5 full range Piega speakers, a Piega sub woofer, wiring provided by Cardas and add-ons by companies like Audio Tekne and Fisch.

For the first time, audiophiles will have access to the same "mixing/mastering room" sound found in professional studios because Sanibel Sound will be providing an identical playback system to the West Hollywood-based, AIX Records studios. Products produced and released by AIX Records over the past year have earned them a well-deserved reputation for showing the full potential of the DVD-Audio format. The recent 2002 Discus Award for Creative Excellence in the category of "Best DVD-Audio" product was awarded to AIX for Nitty Gritty Surround — featuring John McEuen and Jimmy Ibbotson with special guest Jennifer Warnes over runners up Queen — A Night At the Opera and Graham Nash — Songs for Survivors. Interested audiophiles are invited to contact Dr. Mark Waldrep (mwaldrep@aixrecords) to arrange for a demonstration of his recordings at the AIX Records studios.

This new DVD-Audio format when properly produced gives listeners a greater sense of involvement with music of any genre than anything I ever thought possible.

During the past year, I have continued to follow the trends in high-resolution, multi-channel audio and the formats available to audiophiles to playback this new standard. As previously stated in this newsletter and during the HE 2002 show in New York, I believe the future of recorded music lies with the DVD-Audio format. This new format when properly produced gives listeners a greater sense of involvement with music of any genre than anything I ever thought possible. That s why Sanibel Sound, Hi-Res Music and AIX Records in collaboration with Meridian decided to bring a state-of-the-art DVD-Audio playback system to the Hilton in New York last June. Unaffiliated with any manufacturer or organization, we wanted consumers and members of the media to hear the very best that DVD-Audio could deliver and they did. Those lucky enough to gain entry to the "Murray Suite" for the half-hour demonstration and explanation session by Mark Waldrep, Ph.D. were treated to the best of the best. More than a few writers and visitors called our presentation the "Best of the Show", a response that helped me decide to push our

An audiophile and customer s thoughts...

I am a music lover and an avid collector of high-end audio equipment. Because I have been fortunate enough to have the financial resources to pursue and acquire some of the best audio gear available. In that quest, I have met many dealers from across the country but one stands out because of his intimate knowledge of the gear, open-minded approach to new trends, and representation of many of the top audiophile brands. That dealer is HiFi Farm. Steve Davis, the owner, has uniformly made solid recommendations and I have come to trust his advice with respect to the audio equipment that I purchase.

Four years ago, I decided to make a trip up through the beautiful mountains of Virginia to the HiFi Farm showroom, which I had seen ads for in various audio magazines. Not knowing what to expect when I arrived, I was warmly greeted by Steve who showed me around his store. I couldn t take my eyes off of the exotic hifi system he had on display. It was both beautiful to look at but more importantly it provided a truly memorable listening experience. Ever since then, I've been drawn back to Virginia to visit Steve and hear the latest gear. It has been Steve's dedication, passion and talent for his craft that has genuinely lifted my appreciation for music to a new plateau. If great experiences in audio are built on the relationship with your dealer, then Steve Davis has filled that bill for me. With his newest venture into the DVD-Audio format and his plans to build a dedicated listening room exclusively for multi-channel audio, I look forward to more trips to the mountains for great hospitality and listening experiences. Knowing Steve, they will be nothing less than extraordinary.

Eric Ford

HE 2002...A Closing Comment

In the months following the 2002 Home Entertainment Show held at the Hilton in New York, I have been extremely encouraged by the response to our independent presentation of high-resolution, multi-channel DVD-Audio. It s been particularly gratifying to have both audiophiles and many writers express their thanks that we took the initiative to bring what we believe is some of the finest hardware and software to a gathering of dedicated music lovers. Demonstrations of this quality take a lot of planning, effort, money, and coordination... and thus far have been rare public events. The consortium of companies, both manufacturers and record companies, and organizations responsible for launching the new DVD-Audio format have struggled to make the public aware of this exciting new format. Writers and publications covering the emerging formats have not always been even-handed with their words...at times even knowingly inaccurate. As a lifelong audiophile and equipment dealer, I m less interested in the politics of the debate and focused more on what I believe will bring the best listening experience to my clients...my friends. Many of my staunchest stereophile friends have been convinced over the summer that it s more about the music and less about the format. I want to publicly thank Meridian, Dr. Mark Waldrep of AIX Records and Hi-Res Records for helping make our HE 2002 presentation possible...we are proud of our effort and will do it again! *Steve Davis*

commitment to this revolutionary format including our decision to build and equip a permanent 5.1 high-resolution, DVD-Audio playback room. I m very sure you ll agree with me and my clients that once you ve heard a true high-resolution, multi-channel recording like those from AIX Records, you ll be looking for ways to get a few extra speakers in your listening environment as soon as possible.

I am still slightly baffled as to the lack of interest in this amazing technology by the audiophile community in general. I don't know if it's the fact that they simply haven t been exposed to a great demonstration, or if it's the emotional attachment to older days when that first smoky experience made music bigger than life. Everyone owes it to himself or herself to find a dealer capable of providing a quality demo with a high-resolution, multi-channel system. HiFi Farm is proud to be able to bring this new audio world to its customers. *Steve Davis*

HiFi Farm is an independently owned Audio retailer. Sanibel Sound is an independently owned distributor. Steve Davis is a consultant to and director of Sanibel sound in charge of product acquistion. Steve is the owner of HiFiFarm.

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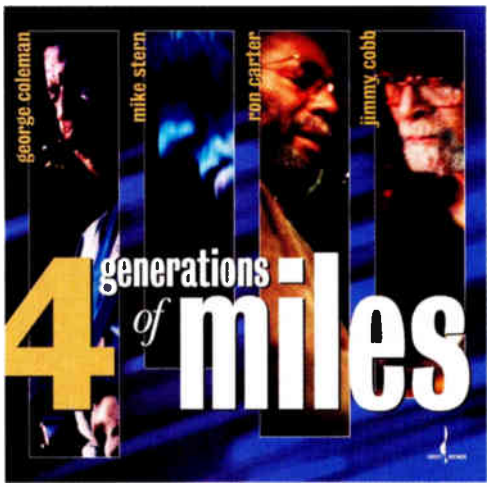
Recording of the Month



CARTER, COBB, COLEMAN, STERN: *4 Generations of Miles*
George Coleman, tenor sax; Mike Stern, electric guitar; Ron Carter, bass; Jimmy Cobb, drums
Chesky JD23B (CD). 2002. David Chesky, prod.; Barry Wolifson, eng.; Nicholas Prout, mastering. DDD. TT: 67:06
Performance ★★★★½
Sonics ★★★★★

May 26, 2001—the 75th anniversary of the birth of Miles Davis—engendered an outpouring of celebrations and remembrances, from an all-day homage at Symphony Space on Manhattan's Upper West Side, to a bevy of reissue packages geared to both the collector and the new jazz listener.

4 Generations of Miles, recorded May 12, 2002, is a welcome addition to that musical bounty. A quartet of the trumpeter-composer-bandleader's top former sidemen gathered at Makor, the music club near New York City's Lincoln Center and the site of the March "Recording of the Month," Bucky Pizzarelli's *Swing Live*, to vigorously and thoughtfully render numbers Davis recorded between the mid-1950s and the early '60s. The program is made up of staples—"My Funny Valentine," "On Green Dolphin Street," "All Blues," etc.—but the vitality with which they're delivered proves that, in the hands of genuinely creative artists, even the most well-worn selections can sound fresh.

The lineup is intriguing, and not because there's neither a trumpet nor a keyboard—the latter a must for Davis—but because of the diverse styles of the two front-liners. In the rhythm section, big-toned, supple-lined bassist Ron Carter, who played with Davis from 1963 to 1968 in his second great quintet, with Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and Tony Williams, fits hand-in-glove with Jimmy Cobb, the in-the-pocket drummer who was with Davis from 1958 to 1961 and drummed on Davis' best-selling album, 1959's *Kind of Blue*.

But wiry-sounding Mike Stern, whose electric-guitar style bounces from bop to fusion to rock, and a Davis man intermittently from 1981 to 1985, would seem an odd choice to share the lead with tenor saxophonist George Coleman, who worked with Davis from 1963 to 1964 and remains a no-holds-barred bebop-based improviser. However, both men are in the same mindset, working with amazing restraint and empathy, feeding off each other, and never losing the groove. In fact, given how Stern, Coleman, and their partners bring off these standards, this group sounds more like a working band than a one-time affair.

4 Generations is presented as a concert, one number flowing easily into the next, interspersed with applause and audience chatter. The opener, "There Is No Greater Love," sets the tone. Coleman, with a glowing, buoyant sound, states the theme, then solos. He has a simply remarkable technique that he often displays unabashedly, but only in a few moments here does he unleash lines that blur in the ear. For the most part, he stresses tunefulness, mixing bluesy elements with sweet-noted thoughts that, together, tell an engaging story. Stern eschews fusion in favor of bebop and beyond, his lines swinging and tantalizing the ear with a wide, ringing sound that could have been run through a phaser, or perhaps simply echoed a bit. Underneath, Cobb quietly pushes the beat as Carter walks with big notes. It's hard not to be moved, exhilarated, pleased.

"All Blues" has some down-home blues gruff and high shrieks from Coleman, whose bluesiness is deep-rooted: early on, he played with B.B. King and Lloyd Price. He also offers bullet-train-fast lines that still manage to sing. Stern's electric tone is in contrast, but the warmth and grit of his lines fit right in with Coleman. The calm "Blue in Green" finds Coleman's lingering, lyrical notes and occasional speedy gush backed by softly gleaming chords from Stern, who then, in his own solo, plays single-note lines with the same subtle sound. Here, Carter is more animated and energetic in support.

The bassist's appealing blues variant, "81," is as close to funky as this disc gets. Cobb kicks things up with a rousing pulse enlivened with charged cymbal and drum accents. Coleman again ardently blends blues feeling and modernity, and Stern is similarly inclined in high, ringing notes that are decidedly impactful. "My Funny Valentine," which Davis made an essential of the modern jazz repertoire, is a vehicle for Coleman's and Stern's warm, melodic sides, and Carter's improvisation is filled with choice notes played with firm rhythmic whammy. The closer, "Oleo," is a fast romp that spotlights a most musical solo from Cobb.

Makor is not a tremendously large space; the sound is life-size and lifelike, giving a realistic presentation of the room from a table about a quarter of the way back from the stage. There's depth to the soundstage, and air around the musicians. Despite a fully present band sound and the audience's responses, there's still plenty of detail. And the instrumental timbres are well-balanced—the more complex sounds of Stern's amplified guitar don't override Carter's bass throb or Cobb's cymbal wash. —**Zan Stewart**

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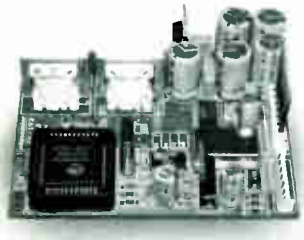

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classical

DEBUSSY

Pelléas et Mélisande

Anne Sofie von Otter, Mélisande; Hanna Schaer, Geneviève; Wolfgang Holzmair, Pelléas; Laurent Naouri, Golaud; Alain Vernhes, Arkel; Florence Couderc, Yniold; Choeur de Radio France, Orchestre National de France; Bernard Haitink
Naïve V4923 (3 CDs). 2002. Michael Gache, prod.; Cyril Becue, eng. DDD. TT: 2:41:25
Performance ★★★½
Sonics ★★★

Bernard Haitink's reading of this glorious, misty work is gloriously misty, if that's what you're looking for. Haitink is a conductor who, to my ears, invariably refuses to interpret—he allows the music to speak for itself, with a steady hand and impeccable ear, but (at least in opera) he either doesn't have any strong notion about "meaning," or if he does, he doesn't care to share his information. This works to some extent with *Pelléas et Mélisande*, but while I admire his distance and the manner in which he allows the score's more languid moments to unfold, in the end, I find this reading somewhat faceless.

This is one of the slowest *P&M*s on discs, but there's great transparency and the storytelling is clear. His Radio France Orchestra plays beautifully. The singing is uniformly good—even the terribly miscast Yniold of Florence Couderc, obviously and incorrectly a grown woman, is actually well sung. The three principals are impressive: Von Otter's Mélisande is appropriately unknowable, but a bit too much so—she seems to have no profile whatsoever. Compare this with the tangible Maria Ewing for Abbado (obviously a sex kitten), de los Angeles (weirdly girlish), and Söderström (too sophisticated), and you'll feel a bit lost. Like Haitink, Von Otter leaves all doors open; simply as a voice, she's unmatchably nuanced.

Wolfgang Holzmair's Pelléas grows in passion as the opera goes on until, in his final scene, he can barely contain himself. The top of his voice frays occasionally (and he does not sound young), but his fascination with Mélisande and the clear pickle he's in are never in doubt. I prefer, again with Abbado, François Le Roux: smitten from the start and gorgeously sung throughout, with an Italianate *legato* that mirrors what Abbado does in the orchestra. Laurent Naouri's Golaud is rich in texture. He's an angel until he discovers the missing ring—after that, he whirls inexorably to the obsessed tower scene with Yniold, and to a truly monstrous hair-pulling scene. He's still out of control in the final scene—his grief and self-loathing are as terrifying as his rage. Naouri is in a class with the fantastic Van Dam (Abbado) and is better than Donald McIntyre (with Boulez), who always sounds too gruff. The rest of the cast is quite good.

Almost more than with any other opera I can think of, engineers and producers can interpret *P&M* as much as the players do. Here, from two live performances, we get something with a matte finish, very soft-edged, and favoring neither voices nor orchestra. Perhaps this is the blend Debussy wanted, but it doesn't quite do it for a home-listening experience. As with the performance, there's nothing actually wrong, but I never felt that the music was present, and I must take that as a fault. Pastels are one thing; pastels from a great distance are another—and the sound makes no commitment, much like the conductor. Unseasoned roast turkey on white with mayo—a matter of taste.

I will return to the forward-placed Abbado for the most approachable, dynamically varied, lyrical, and swirlingly emotional performance. (Could his orchestra have been augmented? It sometimes sounds bigger than those of other recorded versions.) And if I want to hear every note from every instrument, almost individually, that Debussy wrote (albeit in a slightly too shiny acoustic), I'll pick Boulez. But I doubt I'll return to Haitink, despite his fine principal singers. *Pelléas et Mélisande* has done very well on discs; other recommendable sets remain available. **–Robert Levine**

MAHLER

Abbado & Symphonies 3, 7, 9

Symphony 3
London Symphony Chorus, City of Birmingham Symphony Youth Chorus
Deutsche Grammophon 289 471 502-2 (2 CDs). Anthony Sellars, prod. TT: 97:40
Performance ★★★
Sonics ★★

Symphony 7
Deutsche Grammophon 289 471 623-2 (CD). Christopher Alder, prod. TT: 78:07
Performance ★★★★★
Sonics ★★★★★

Symphony 9
Deutsche Grammophon 289 471 624-2 (CD). Christopher Alder, prod. TT: 81:03
Performance ★★★★★
Sonics ★★★★★

All three: Claudio Abbado, Berlin Philharmonic 2002. Klaus-Peter Grosz, eng. DDD.

The world has waited long for recorded evidence that Claudio Abbado can achieve the greatness that long seemed within his grasp. The alert, passionate musicmaking that won him the position of chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic gave way to a remarkably uneventful maturity. He became a paragon of corporate musicmaking with a discography of "me-too" interpretations, some of them so lifeless as to suggest he was sight-reading. In interviews, he seemed blandly unaware of problems in the recording industry that he had helped to create (namely, too much "me-too"), and seemed even

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more out of touch when he announced his intention to record the Beethoven symphonies again. The result, surprisingly, handily bested Daniel Barenboim's near-contemporaneous set. A new Abbado—an artistic elder statesman—seemed to be emerging.

Now, amid his waning Berlin Philharmonic tenure and bouts with cancer, Abbado is returning to the symphonies of Mahler, and two of these three live recordings are everything I've waited decades for. His readings of Symphonies 7 and 9 are outstanding fusions of conceptual strategy, with phrasings that brim with great thought and emotional depth, plus an almost Bernsteinesque energy of live performance (though without Bernstein's freewheeling tempos).

In both symphonies, Abbado seems to focus on the problem movements, making them the starting point of his interpretations, most obviously Symphony 7's sarcastically mocking finale, which so often sounds as if dropped in from the wrong piece. Cannily, Abbado brings the rest of the symphony more into line with the final movement, emphasizing at every turn the brass and piercing woodwind doublings that give the orchestration an unsettling tint. Though his tempos aren't particularly fast, his sense of narrative seems particularly vital throughout the first movement, which has rarely been more craggy, cranky, or so much like the last. Given that, the final movement is its compressed counterpart, and a manic celebration—not dismissal—of what has come before.

The phrasings could have been conceived only with the Berlin Philharmonic in mind. I've heard Abbado conduct Symphony 7 with other orchestras, but with this one, his steady, integrated tempos seem particularly arresting thanks to the Berliners' intense coloration. With Abbado's zeal to give even the loosest musical ends a sense of purpose within the symphonic whole, each new musical paragraph unfolds like worlds within worlds of sound. Symphony 7 can sound like a scattered, overly ambitious juxtaposition of foreign elements, but never here.

Such cogency isn't new: You heard it in Lorin Maazel's Mahler cycle on Sony, but at the expense of expressive urgency. The breakthrough of Abbado's new Mahler Ninth is that the inner movements no longer sound oddly matched to the outer ones, or in need of revision (which has been long suspected; Mahler often made major changes after his premieres, but never lived to hear this symphony). Abbado generates such a sense of incident from the first movement's opening theme group—what often sounds like dreamy wonder seems fairly shattered here—that you can't believe that the Ninth was ever considered one of the easier-to-parse Mahler symphonies. The counterpoint of the first movement, which was never glossed over, here contains much tension, which makes it more of a piece with the two knottier, nastier movements that follow.

Abbado's keen ear for finding the more subtle variations in the thematic development intensifies the music's sense of diversity within unity. The third movement, often the most difficult to pull off, becomes the climax of Abbado's interpretation, with a madly accelerated tempo in the final moments that suggests someone's life passing before your ears. After that, the slow final movement, with its gradual leave-taking, is all the more moving, though not, as in other readings, a confrontation with death. In the more meditative moments of Abbado's interpretation, you know death has already occurred here, and that the movement is about earthly life disappearing like a mirage.

In contrast, the recording of Symphony 3 was botched. There are hugely arresting moments, but many more lacking concentration. However, I'm not ready to place the blame on Abbado. Symphonies 7 and 9 were both recorded live—and well—at the Berlin Philharmonie, with its marvelously warm, resonant, yet focused acoustic. Symphony 3 was taped at Royal Festival Hall in London, and there, everything feels somewhat remote. Abbado's sense of interpretive integration in the other symphonies is thrown to the winds as he embraces the music's almost Ivesian sense of diversity. The last thing this performance needed was an acoustic that allows *pianissimi* to disappear and *fortissimi* to jump out. Abbado's coloristic sense is about the eloquence of pure sound; a partly cloudy acoustic makes that impossible. **–David Patrick Stearns**

VERDI

Aida

Jane Eaglen, Aida; Rosalind Plowright, Amneris; Dennis O'Neill, Radames; Gregory Yurisch, Amonasro; Alastair Miles, Ramfis; Peter Rose, The King; Susan Gritton, High Priestess; Geoffrey Mitchell Choir, Philharmonia Orchestra; David Parry

Chandos CHAN 3074(2) (2 CDs). 2002. Brian Couzens, prod.; Ralph Couzens, eng. DDD. TT: 2:21:52

Performance ★★½

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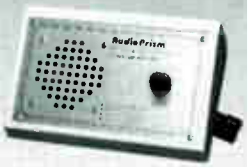

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Sonics ★★★

Soprano Jane Eaglen is, one assumes, the selling point for this, the latest in Chandos' Opera in English series. She's a known quantity—the voice is grand and appealing, her Isolde and Brünnhilde are world-class, and her forays into bel canto (Norma, in particular) have been more successful than one might imagine, if hardly erasing memories of Callas, Caballé, Sutherland, or even some lesser sopranos in that repertoire. Here, as Aida, it is—as one might imagine—in the more extraverted moments that Eaglen shines: "Ritorna vincitor" is quite wonderful. But when intimate singing is required, the voice loses quality; rather than soft and caressing, it sounds thin. And when all is said and done, she does not give us the impression that she's gotten into the role at all, emotionally or vocally. There are good moments, but that's all they are: moments.

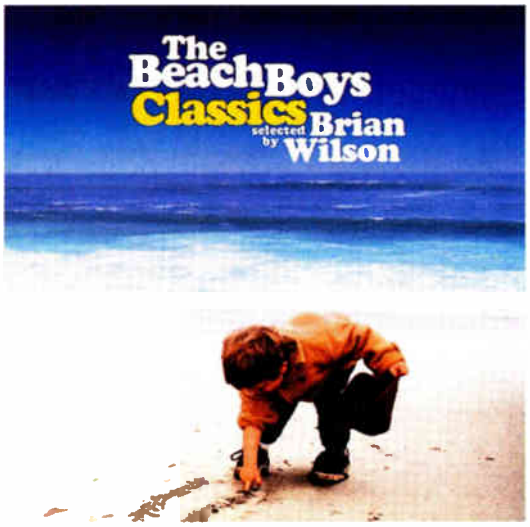
Rosalind Plowright was a thrilling if not particularly Italianate soprano known for her dramatic interpretations. Here, she's miscast in the unarguably mezzo role of Amneris. Much of the role requires big, from-the-chest singing, and Plowright's mid-voice remains weakish and, well, un-mezzo-ish. She exclaims the text and lives the role well, but if the quality of the voice is wrong, what difference does it make?

Tenor Dennis O'Neill remains a fine singer, always attentive to the text and adding insights to the role of Radames. But his voice is aging and he's under strain, both above the staff and above *forte*. He ends "Celeste Aida" softly, but I think the engineers had a hand in that. Gregory Yurisch is a thrilling Amonasro; rarely have I heard such single-minded revenge or nationalism from this fanatical character. The tone is big and exciting, and he enlivens every scene he's in. Peter Rose is a good Pharaoh, Alastair Miles a truly absorbing Ramfis, and Susan Gritton's High Priestess is the best on discs.

David Parry's leadership seems oddly off the mark here; he makes some strange tempo choices and awkward transitions. Could he be tailoring the music to his cast? The chorus and orchestra are very good. The translation is as stilted as the original Italian: "then with a garland I would adorn you / build you a throne nearer to the sun!" sings Radames at the close of his opening aria, and we realize how far we are from Memphis and Thebes.

The engineers seem to toy with the voices throughout, focusing on Eaglen in the Act I trio and twirling knobs elsewhere as well. Those who are crazy about opera in English or Jane Eaglen will have to own this set; for most opera lovers, it simply does not have enough going for it to be recommendable.

–Robert Levine



pop/rock

THE BEACH BOYS

Classics Selected by Brian Wilson

Capitol 40087 (CD). 2002. Brian Wilson, Carl Wilson, prods.; Mark Linett, compilation eng. AAD? TT: 56:55
Performance ★★★★★
Sonics ★★★★ to ★★★★★

In the introduction to his track-by-track annotations here, Brian Wilson calls this exquisite collection his "19 favorites on February 11, 2002"—which suggests that at sunrise on February 12 he might have selected an entirely different set of songs. Therein lies the rub, particularly if your last name is, say, Love: These 19 Wilson favorites are not necessarily aimed at keepin' the summer alive, at least not in the same sense as the many prior Beach Boys anthologies assembled by record labels.

But this time around it's Brian's show from start ("Surfer Girl," his very first composition) to finish (track 20 is a bonus, the slight but heartfelt "California Feelin'," written in the '70s but newly recorded in 2002 with Wilson's solo touring band). He apparently was in less of a "dance, dance, dance" mood and more inclined toward such sweetly mellow gems as "Don't Worry Baby," "Caroline, No," "God Only Knows," "In My Room," and "The Warmth of the Sun" (several of those weren't hits but B-sides). The CD is also unique in that it includes, alongside Capitol Records tracks, underappreciated material from the Beach Boys' Brother/Reprise era, particularly the astonishing orchestral grandeur of "Surf's Up" and the most heartbreaking song of the 20th century, "'Til I Die."

In that regard, St. Brian's selection does indeed keep the sunshine memories alive for those of us still in awe of his songwriting and production skills. As Wilson writes, "Wonderful" is "a happy, beautiful song that makes you feel lighthearted." As does the entire collection.

–Fred Mills

GUIDED BY VOICES

Universal Truths and Cycles

Matador OLE547 (CD). 2002. Todd Tobias, GBV, prods.; Todd Tobias, John Shough, Scott Bennett, engs. AAD? TT: 46:32
Performance ★★★★
Sonics ★★★

Some critics have suggested that *Universal Truths and Cycles* is Guided By Voices' indie-label "comeback" album after the overproduced major-label efforts of *Do the Collapse* (with Ric Ocasek) and *Isolation Drills* (with Rob Schnapf). Those albums weren't exactly duds. It's probably more accurate to say that GBV main man Robert Pollard, having benefited from those records' belly-of-the-beast perspective, has refocused his attention on what made the band so beloved in the first place. He's a natural hookmeister anyway, and, much like his idol Pete Townshend, Pollard's home recordings are frequently as strong or

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stronger than the final, fully produced songs. That instinct for songwriting brilliance, and his partnership with immensely talented guitarist Doug Gillard (also of Gem), have consistently outweighed any notions of sonic perfection in the GBV oeuvre to date.

Universal Truths brims with a varied vibe of rocking out for rocking out's sake. It kicks off with a half-minute blast of Anglophilic, Who-style fury, "Wire Greyhounds," then plows into a brace of windmilling crunch'n'jangle hard rock ("Skin Parade") contrasted to folk-pop ("Zap"), and then to prog-tinged psychedelia ("Christian Animation Torch Carriers"). Incredibly, the ante keeps getting upped through the next 15 songs—the ornate, Hollies-like "Cheyenne," the edgy, complex, rock-operaish "Storm Vibrations," the garage-pop grooviness of the title track. (And how can you resist a band that titles one of its tunes "The Ids Are Alright"?)

This album is not destined to be a stereo demonstration record on the order of *Dark Side of the Moon*. GBV is all about visceral, tuneful, dynamic songs and a whole heapin' helpin' of pure rock'n'roll soul, all of which is abundantly present on *Universal Truths and Cycles*. To paraphrase Pete Townshend, meet the new GBV, same as the old GBV.

–Fred Mills

LAURYN HILL

Unplugged No.2.0

Columbia (2 CDs). Lauryn Hill, prod.; Adam Blackburn, eng., mix. AAD? TT: 106:46
Performance ★½
Sonics ★★★½

Lauryn Hill thinks she sees everything clearly now, but she's trippin'.

The former Fugees singer whose Grammy-winning, multi-platinum solo debut, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, was one of the landmark albums of the 1990s, claims that stardom made her "a slave"—hmmm, where have we heard that before?—and that she's through with that life. On *Unplugged No.2.0*, she says she doesn't consider herself a performer anymore, then spends the better part of two hours making sure that we don't, either.

This two-disc set finds Hill playing an acoustic guitar and singing mostly new songs—some of them unfinished—in a voice almost completely shredded and often painful to listen to. She chalks her raw vocals up to "reality" and challenges the audience to take her as she is. But this is reality: Listening to Hill struggle her way through this set will cause a powerful craving for some hot tea with honey. Better keep some on hand if you intend to listen all the way through.

Even worse are the sanctimonious spoken-word interludes in which Hill tries to explain her new but still inarticulate theories about life, spouting ridiculous aphorisms like "If we weren't supposed to turn around, why does a car have a steering wheel?" What's the deal here? Has Hill written a song cycle meant to accompany a set of Tony Robbins tapes?

Speaking of the songs...listening to these spare, one-dimensional versions of quality tunes like "I Find It Hard to Say (Rebel)" or "Oh Jerusalem" makes clear just what Hill has lost by abandoning her former self. She's still a terrific songwriter who can express much more in a lyric than she can in any amount of speechifying. If she's truly interested in getting her message—whatever it might be—out to the masses, she might have done it with some fully produced versions of these songs. As it stands, *Unplugged No.2.0* makes *Miseducation* sound profoundly learned.

–Daniel Durchholz

NITIN SAWHNEY

Prophesy

V2 Music Limited 27103-2 (CD). 2002. Nitin Sawhney, prod., mix; Toni Economides, mix. AAD? TT: 52:08
Performance ★★★★
Sonics ★★★★½

On this brooding, intricate, often self-conscious disc, acclaimed London-based Anglo-Asian producer-composer Nitin Sawhney creates music that delves into the heart of the human condition.

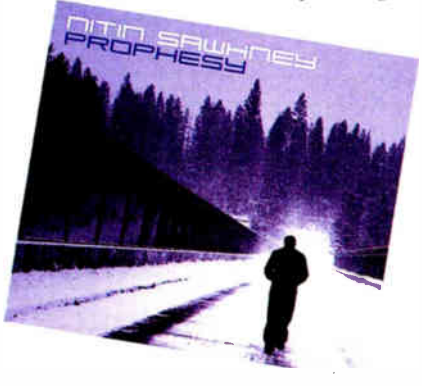
The artist's fifth album (first domestic release) and a follow-up to 1999's *Beyond Skin*, which was nominated for a Mercury Prize, *Prophesy* melds a fusion of down-tempo electronica with elements of drum and bass, flamenco, R&B, and Indian classical music into a cohesive and fluid work that transcends simple categorization, although what it most resembles is film music. *Prophesy* documents and reflects on Sawhney's ambitious year-long journey across several countries, including South Africa, India, France, Spain, Brazil, England, and the US, along the way recording with more than 200 musicians and vocalists.

Highlights include: "Sunset," a vocal duet featuring Jayanta Bose and Eska Mtungwazi, complete with lush harmonies from the London Community Gospel Choir; the sweeping Bollywood epic "Acquired Dreams," with famed Anglo-Yemeni chanteuse Natacha Atlas; the flamenco- and rai-driven "Moonrise," with revered Cheb Mami and Brazilian vocalist Nina Rocha Miranda of UK-based duo Smoke City; the hauntingly intense "Cold & Intimate," with Tina Grace; and the delicate, breakbeat-infused "Breathing Light."

At times, *Prophesy* is a bit self-righteous and cumbersome, as in "Street Guru Parts One & Two," "The Preacher," and the dreary, rap-riddled title track. But it does succeed in commanding attention with supple grooves and powerful songs that retain their captivating

SUKI DHANDA

Electronica with a heart? Nitin Sawhney may have found the beat.



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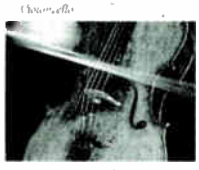

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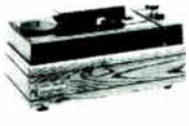

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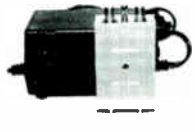

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and endearing earnestness. This is definitely not another derivative electronic album suffocating in the mire of manufactured spirituality and "deepness." In fact, it is painstakingly authentic. Fans of such artist-composers as Hector Zazou, Craig Armstrong, Harold Budd, and Daniel Lanois should take notice.

—Craig Roseberry

THE REIVERS

Saturday & End of the Day

Saturday
Dualtone 80302-01117-2 (CD). 1987/2002. Don Dixon, John Croslin, prods., engs. AAD? TT: 44:53
Performance ★★★★
Sonics ★★★½

End of the Day
Dualtone 80302-01116-2 (CD). 1989/2002. John Croslin, Andy Metcalfe, prods., engs. AAD? TT: 45:51
Performance ★★★★½
Sonics ★★★½

It's often the "other" music scene—the one *within* a scene—that's most interesting. Take Seattle, for example. In the 1980s, Nirvana was an undeniably life-altering musical experience, but beneath or outside the grunge universe were the Posies, who sounded very unlike grunge and were almost a separate scene unto themselves.

The same thing happened in Austin late in that decade. While Stevie Ray Vaughan's power-trio blues got all the national ink, the so-called "new sincerity" movement of '60s-influenced pop guitar bands, many peopled by students from the University of Texas, was infinitely more happening.

Originally called Zeitgeist, The Reivers (after the Faulkner novel of the same name), changed their name and signed with Capitol, who then released these two albums. Softer than the Posies yet ballsier, with more guitar growl than power pop, this upbeat folk-rock shows, in retrospect, many of the attributes—sturdy tunes, spare arrangements, a bandwise esprit de corps—that made alternative music appealing in the first place.

DEIRDRE O'CALLAGHAN

Macca munching crudités: The Furries know art when they hear it.

The key ingredient of the Reivers' appeal was its gender balance: two women and two men, with one singer of each sex. John Croslin's weedy, almost talky "voice" and Kim Longacre's soaring mezzo often interwove to great effect.

Purists inevitably prefer *Saturday*, which has tunes like "In Your Eyes," which first typified the band's songwriting style and overall sound, and dumb/fun instrumentals like "Karate Party." But *End of the Day* is a more polished, tuneful, and coherent album of ballads, rockers, poet-eyed lyrics, and a canny sense of alternating loud and soft tracks to great advantage. "It's About Time," "Almost Home," and "Discontent of Winter" are all very distinct "alternative" rock numbers recorded at a time when that genre was rapidly exploding its way into blandness. American pop has seldom been as compelling.

Considering that both albums were DIY efforts backed by a major label, the sound is decently spacious and immediate. Kudos to Dualtone for bringing both back into print.

—Robert Baird

SUPER FURRY ANIMALS

Rings Around the World

Beggars Banquet XL 85026 (CD). 2002. Super Furry Animals, prods.; Christopher Shaw, prod., eng. AAD? TT: 52:54
Performance ★★★½
Sonics ★★★½

Super Furry Animals are ridiculously imaginative and eclectic, the sort of outfit that prompts earthbound rock-crit types to say things like "imagine Negativland, the Flaming Lips, and Spring Heel Jack ripping apart the space-time continuum to join Brian Wilson at the *Smile* sessions." Thing is, it's as easy for a band to be bonkers and ambitious as it was for me to write that sentence. The question is, can they do so with enough focus, musicality, and chops to reach true greatness? With their fifth album, *Rings Around the World*, Super Furry Animals answer, "Ie! Ie!" (That's Welsh for "Hell yeah!" Sort of.)

The Furries have toured with an armored tank, crafted a punk anthem around Steely Dan's "Showbiz Kids," and made a record in their native tongue for a mere £2000. *Rings Around the World* cost hundreds of thousands and has the string sections to show for it, but Gruff Rhys and company remain capricious—among the guest performers is Paul McCartney, crunching celery and carrots on the ba-ba-ba-bubblegum folk-strum of "Receptacle for the Respectable." And the record is available on DVD mixed in 5.1-channel surround.

Rings swings from acoustic acid house ("No Sympathy") to Vocoder faux funk ("Juxtaposed with U") to hypnotic spaghetti-Western soul ("Run! Christian! Run!") without choosing among melodic pleasure, rock'n'roll attitude, and prog experimentalism. Hand in hand with the harmonic splendor and nonstop pop riffage is a highly provocative concept album, particularly since Rhys' apocalyptic global musings were fashioned well before you-know-when (the record was released in the UK in July 2001). Everything comes to a head, if you will, on the soaring "Presidential Suite," a lush ache about Bill and Monica and Boris Yeltsin that's worthy

of Burt Bacharach. "You know that when we met / there were fireworks in the sky," sings Rhys, and you can almost feel the love before he finishes the thought: "sparkling like dragonflies / spelling 'All bad folk must die.' "

—Jason Cohen

KELLY WILLIS

Easy

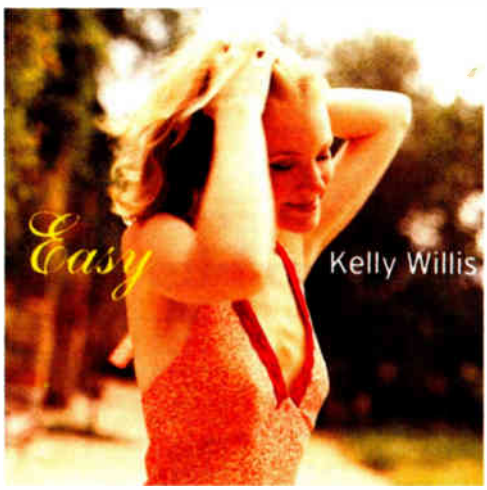
Rykodisc RCD 10622 (CD). 2002. Kelly Willis, Gary Paczosa, prods.; Gary Paczosa, eng. AAD. TT:36:52
Performance ★★★½
Sonics ★★★½

Up till now, it's felt as if Kelly Willis was struggling to prove herself. A decade ago she was Nashville's newest ingénue, but the subtext of her records was that there was more to her than she was allowed to reveal at the time. Any deviation from the program costs you a hit in Music City, and Willis floundered there.

Her first post-Nashville album, 1999's *What I Deserve*, let her real personality shine through and sent a message to the country establishment: "You're gonna miss me now I'm gone." As well they should.

With *Easy*, though, Willis seems to have let go of all that. Perhaps for the first time, she comes across as someone doing exactly as she pleases, singing with a ready confidence that suits her as well as you always knew it would. After all, making an album as pleasant and pleasurable as this one shouldn't be a struggle.

Willis' writing seems more assured, too, from the bittersweet title track and the languid "Wait Until Dark" to the gorgeous lullaby "Reason to Believe," in which she sings "Now my dreams can all come true / And now my life can follow through / Suddenly it's all so clear / There's not a thing that I should fear."



Her choices of covers seem equally natural. Willis turns in a plaintive version of husband Bruce Robison's "What Did You Think," and a world-weary "Don't Come the Cowboy with Me Sonny Jim," by the late, great Kirsty MacColl. The album's liveliest tracks are her finger-wagging take on Marcia Ball's "Find Another Fool," and Paul Kelly's bluegrass-fueled "You Can't Take It With You."

Easy boasts an impressive cast of side musicians, including guitarist Chuck Prophet, keyboardist Ian MacLagan, and vocalists Vince Gill, Alison Krauss, Dan Tyminski, and Nickel Creek's Chris Thile. But it's Willis herself who's front and center here, doing things her way and doing them well. Who knew it could be this easy?

—Daniel Durchholz

jazz

NEW ORLEANS JAZZ

Three from Basin Street

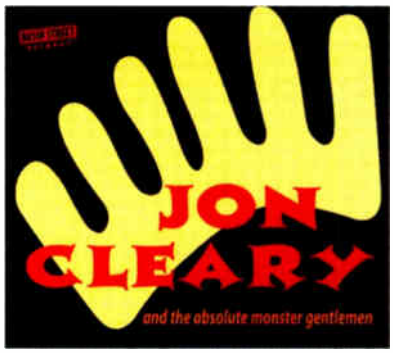
HENRY BUTLER: ***The Game Has Just Begun***
Basin Street BSR0801-2 (CD). 2002. Henry Butler, prod.; Steve Reynolds, eng. ADD. TT: 71:57
Performance ★★★½
Sonics ★★★½

JON CLEARY ***and the Absolute Monster Gentlemen***
Jeffrey Alexander, drums and vocals; Derwin Perkins, guitar and vocals; Cornell Williams, bass and vocals.
Basin Street BSR0901-2 (CD). 2002. John Porter, prod.; Marty Horenburg, eng. ADD. TT: 48:33
Performance ★★★★
Sonics ★★★★

DR. MICHAEL WHITE: ***Jazz from the Soul of New Orleans***
Gregory Stafford, Clyde Kerr, trumpet; Lucian Barbarin, trombone; Steven Pistorius and others piano; Detroit Brooks, banjo; Kerry Lewis, bass violin; Herman Lebeaux, drums; Juanita Brooks, Thais Clark, vocals.
Basin Street BSR0502-2 (CD). 2002. Jerry Brock, prod.; Mark Bingham, eng. ADD. TT: 64:22
Performance ★★★★★
Sonics ★★★★★

New Orleans' diverse music tradition has mostly been overlooked by the major labels but has been well-served by several local independents. No label has done a better job of documenting the heart of the Big Easy scene than Basin Street Records, home of such local stalwarts as Los Hombres Calientes, Kermit Ruffins, Jason Marsalis, and Irvin Mayfield. Basin Street recently released a trio of records that offer a good idea of the range, not to mention the eccentricity, of the city's music scene.

New Orleans has no more eccentric a performer than Henry Butler, a virtuoso keyboardist who can play



jazz piano like Bud Powell, funk and R&B like Stevie Wonder, and blues like you-name-it. Butler is a musical chameleon who shows tremendous range on *The Game Has Just Begun*, which actually includes too much—at nearly 72 minutes, there's a fine album mixed with an interesting EP, but the two don't work together. The first four songs form a spirited but bizarre suite in praise of Viagra, the miracle drug that has changed Butler into "Mack Daddy Henry." He goes on from there to cover several oldies, including a soulful "You Are My Sunshine," in between a series of New Age instrumentals. The album's strangest moment is a straight-faced cover of the Doors' "Riders on the Storm," salvaged by an outstanding guitar solo from June Yamagishi.

Jon Cleary and the Absolute Monster Gentlemen is a solid studio effort from one of the most popular working bands

in New Orleans. Though not originally from Louisiana, Cleary is a virtuoso keyboardist who has absorbed all the nuances of the Big Easy piano "Professors," from Jelly Roll Morton to Allen Toussaint. Cleary's voice is in good form, and his crack band, the Absolute Monster Gentlemen, plays flawlessly. The unit demonstrates that it can play traditional funk with its cover of the Meters' classic "Just Kissed My Baby," with Bonnie Raitt sitting in on slide guitar.

Cleary also shows that he can come up with original material suitable for the canon with the Dr. John–like "More Hipper" and the terrific album-closer, "Too Damn Hot." The only criticism Cleary's fans might have of the album is one often applied to the city's top live bands—missing from this spanking-clean studio session is the magic feel of live performance, where the music breathes and the audience and performers merge into one pulsing entity. Those fans will just have to wait for the live album; this disc is definitely broadcast-friendly.

Basin Street's biggest successes have been with jazz records, and Dr. Michael White's *Jazz from the Soul of New Orleans* is one of their best ever. White, the dean of New Orleans traditional clarinetists, plays with a rich, broad tone and a nimble rhythmic sense. Produced by music historian par excellence Jerry Brock at Mark Bingham's superhip new Ninth Ward studio, Piety Street, during Mardi Gras 2002, *Jazz from the Soul* captures the spirit of carnival time in New Orleans. White's full-bodied playing on "Summertime" evokes the spirit of Sidney Bechet, while "Martinique" and "Caribbean Girl" explore the "Spanish tinge" that Jelly Roll Morton always claimed was one of the secrets of New Orleans jazz. The album's centerpiece is a 10-minute romp through the jazz standard "Fidgety Feet," a celebration of the dance-till-you-drop spirit that lies at the heart of jazz. —**John Swenson**

TOM HARRELL

Live at the Village Vanguard

Tom Harrell, trumpet; Jimmy Greene, tenor sax; Xavier Davis, piano; Ugonna Okegwo, bass; Quincy Davis, drums
Bluebird/RCA 63910-2 (CD). 2002. Tom Harrell, Angela Harrell, prods.; David Baker, Katsuhiko Naito, engs. DDD? TT: 70:11
Performance ★★★★
Sonics ★★★½

In the first half of 2002, the three most important trumpet players in jazz released recordings featuring their new working bands. Like Dave Douglas' *The Infinite* and Tomasz Stanko's *Soul of*

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After a majestic brass prelude, "Upswing" gets down, accelerated by an upbeat tempo that makes the piece perfect for open-highway driving. It's followed by the sole ballad of the collection, "First Snow," a tune both reflective and romantic.

What Goes Around ends with a bang. The festive "Shadow Dance" features pockets of spirited improvisation among several players as well as a series of Mingus-like tempo changes instigated by Holland's bass surges. There's a frolic of saxes chirping like birds, a unit of trombones in marching form, and a rollicking drum exhibit by Kilson.

One of Holland's best friends and a longtime bandstand associate, Jack DeJohnette, has marveled at the bassist's ability to get a crowd on its feet during a solo. On *What Goes Around*, Holland humbly takes only two breaks, and both are highlights of the CD. As in his compositions, he eschews a simple—and potentially boring—plan of attack. He varies the expression on the solo that opens "Shadow Dance," moving from a blues-bent line to a more rhythmically urgent section to a fast-plucking stretch, then quieting the pulse before the band dives in. And, as they do throughout the album, they plunge in with a splash, delivering exclamatory big-band music at its best. **—Dan Ouellette**

short takes

MIKE LeDONNE: *Bags Groove: A Tribute to Milt Jackson*

Mike LeDonne, piano, organ; Steve Nelson, vibes; Jim Snidero, flute; Steve Wilson, alto flute, soprano sax; Jim Rotondi, trumpet, flugelhorn; Steve Davis, trombone; Bob Cranshaw, bass; Mickey Roker, drums

Double-Time Jazz DTRCD-182 (CD). 2002. Mike LeDonne, prod.; Mike Marciano, eng., mastering. DDD. TT: 53:17

Performance ★★★★½

Sonics ★★★★

Bags Groove is superbly crafted by Mike LeDonne, a top New York bop-based pianist who worked with bebop vibes giant Milt Jackson from 1988 until his death in 1999. This gem showcases a team of aces, including bassist Bob Cranshaw and drummer Mickey Roker (the vibist's longtime rhythm partners), and offers seven succulent Jackson originals and a ballad in a completely authentic, swinging manner. The leader's choice arrangements variously employ flute, alto flute, soprano sax, trumpet, trombone, and vibes to give the theme statements and solo backdrops a quality simultaneously dreamy and muscular.

Among the delights: the bold, driving "Namesake"; the hefty blues of "Reunion"; the Middle Eastern-tinged "Harem"; and a pretty waltz, "Sava Bella." Spotlit are LeDonne's keenly chosen, motoring-along ideas and Steve Nelson's subtly buoyant vibes lines; the others add juicy-noted improvs. And Cranshaw and Roker deliver punch throughout. The clear, detailed, life-sized sound is a plus. **—Zan Stewart**

KITTY MARGOLIS: *Left Coast Life*

Kitty Margolis, vocals; Eric Crystal, saxes; Steve Erquiaga, Joyce Cooling, guitars; Paul Nagel, piano; Jamie Sieber, cello; John Schiflett, bass; Jason Lewis, drums; Mike Spiro, percussion; others

Mad-Kat MKCD1008 (CD). 2002. Kitty Margolis, Alfonso Montuori, prods.; Gary Mankin, eng.; George Horn, mastering. DDD. TT: 56:18

Performance ★★★½

Sonics ★★★★

Left Coast Life is veteran San Francisco jazz singer Kitty Margolis' fourth album on Mad-Kat, the label she co-founded with fellow singer Madeline Eastman. It's an aural smorgasbord: swingers, a Brazilian-tinged original, listen-here ballads, funk-bolstered jazz, rock tunes—Margolis applies her ringing, vibrant voice to them all. Though more focus would have made a better record, most of these tracks are winners. Margolis nimbly rides the speedy "I Want to be Happy" as saxophonist Eric Crystal tears it up, and she has fun with Randy Newman's "Lonely at the Top" and Roger Waters' "Money." Her "You Just Might Get It" has grit, while Dave Frishberg's ballad "Heart's Desire," and Margolis' collaboration with guitarist Joyce Cooling, the Brazilian-bent "It's You," are rich in substance. Some tracks, though, like the way-fast "Without a Song" and the almost monochromatic "Devil May Care," have more surface flash than real emotion. The musicians are top-drawer, every one. **—Zan Stewart**

etc.

ALTAN

The Blue Idol

Narada 11955-2 (CD). 2002. Altan, prods.; Gary Paczosa, eng. DDD. TT: 49:28

Performance ★★★½

Sonics ★★★½

I don't know if people get to be National Treasures of Erin, the way it works in Japan, but if so, Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh (mahr-ADE nee WEE-nee) ought to be one. If a single voice exemplifies the current state of Irish music, it is hers. *The Blue Idol* begins with that hoariest of traditional chestnuts, "Daily Growing," which you may know as "The Trees Do Grow High." I can't possibly begin to tally the times I've heard this sung, from Baez on down, but Ni Mhaonaigh and guest vocalist Paul Brady make it sound new. This tune is followed by that peculiar children's ditty "Uncle Rat," which I seem to remember from an ancient Robin Williamson record, and again Altan makes it worth rehearing (although no one can match Williamson's eccentricity).

Altan is not the flashiest of Irish bands, but it may well be the steadiest. There are few purely showoff solo riffs, and tempos are never fast to show how many notes per minute they can produce. The musicians know as well as any playing in the neo-trad world when to step up and when to get out of the way. They display this to perfection in the gorgeous duet between Ni Mhaonaigh and her friend from the green fields of Amurricay, none other than Dolly Parton. The connection between British and Irish traditional music and its American cousins has been explored by musicologists from the 19th century up to the present, but it has never been more gloriously illustrated than here. Anyone requiring a lesson in harmony singing need only cue up this track and hit Repeat. The experience will also make you wonder if Parton has an LP up in her attic that keeps sounding older and older.

I can testify from personal experience (a lovely pub crawl to Matt Molloy's in Westport) that traditional music is genuinely alive and well on Paddy's Green Shamrock Shore, and bands like Altan are busy keeping it alive. *The Blue Idol* contains several songs collected from friends and family members. (Mairead's relatives seem to be an especially fertile source.) These tunes are presented mostly unadorned with modernity, but there are a few little jazz touches here and there that serve to move things along nicely. Sound is also relatively unadorned, although some tasteful processing does serve to thicken the stew just a bit.

Speaking of stew, I must in fairness point out that while traditional music is going strong in Ireland, traditional food is not. ("A wee bit o' salsa on your quesadilla, me laddie?") This could prove serious: without beef, potatoes, and lamb boiled beyond recognition, the great tradition of Celtic lamentation could well die out. You'd better grab this CD—it might be the last.

—Les Berkley

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Musical Fidelity CD-Pre24

Editor:

Thank you for such a generally excellent review of our CD-Pre24. I am very pleased that Michael Fremer so enjoyed himself connecting many different sources and using the CD-Pre24's facilities to record them on different media; for a moment there, I thought I was alone in deriving pleasure from using a product rather than from just listening to it.

When I read the measurements, I was gobsmacked that the first CD-Pre24 sample was faulty. It was the very first one out of the factory, as you can see from the serial number. What do they say about more haste and less speed? I reckon that either the DAC or the sample-rate converter was faulty. I was relieved that the second sample performed properly.

Regarding the few technical wrinkles John Atkinson found, I would like to point out that the digital circuitry and the ICs used in the A324, Nu-Vista 3D, and CD-Pre24 are all identical.

Once again, thank you for such an excellent review. I hope that many *Stereophile* readers will get to enjoy the sonic and tactile pleasures of the CD-Pre24.

– Antony Michaelson
Musical Fidelity

VTL TL-5.5 & MB-450

Editor:

First, my hearty congratulations to *Stereophile* on reaching 40 years of unparalleled critical analysis. May there be many more!

All of us at VTL would like to thank you and the staff at *Stereophile*, especially Chip Stern, for the sterling review of the VTL TL-5.5 Signature Line Preamp and the October "Follow-Up" on the MB-450 Signature monoblock. That's what we at VTL call a real seal of approval, confirming the products' true abilities, both musically and on the test bench. Chip Stern, a musician himself, clearly approved of the sound of both the '450 and the '5.5, and John Atkinson positively confirmed the measured performance of the latter.

I also read with some amusement the mistaken notation in the HE2002 Show report in the September issue, which placed VTL in the Sony SACD room with EgglestonWorks speakers; I believe they were actually Manley amplifiers. While readers may be forgiven for confusing the brands, VTL and Manley in fact make very different products! While we'd love to take the credit from Showgoers' votes for best sound, we noted the poor measured performance of the Manley Neo-Classic 250s in the same issue, and remind readers that those weren't VTLs!

Indeed, looking back at VTL's history of measured performance in past issues of *Stereophile*, readers will find that even our entry-level ($1995) ST-85 stereo amplifier offers, in many respects, better measured performance than the $9000 Manley!

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there will never be a VTL product that offers such nonlinear measurements. Rather than being a loud'n'proud Harley-Davidson, we'd like to think that the similarly priced VTL Signature MB-450 (and, indeed, all VTL designs) possesses the refinement that can come only from a long history of solid audio engineering and iterative listening, with constant reference to the sound of real, live music, rather than "sonic tailoring."

VTL products have earned numerous awards and reviewer accolades in both *Stereophile* and *The Absolute Sound* over the past 15 years for their timbral accuracy and solid sonic (and measured) performance.

In October, Chip confirmed the more refined sound of the VTL MB-450 Signature monoblock as offering "textured majesty and dulcet intimacy...with a level of absolute authority in the low end that conveyed a sense of physical presence that must be experienced to be believed."

And in the review of the VTL TL-5.5 Signature Line Preamplifier in this issue, Chip describes it as "tonally accurate" with "soulful emotional connection," and that its "bass control, midrange smoothness, sparkling highs, and quiet authority suggest the performance of solid-state."

That's the way all VTL products are designed: "finely tuned" and "blissfully free of euphony," offering the musicality of tubes with the performance and reliability of transistors—truly the best of both worlds. (For our ultimate expression of this philosophy, readers might want to check out the innovative new hybrid TL-7.5 Reference Line Stage, released at HE2002.

In our view, the ideal design should be "very linear," with "nothing to indicate that its use of tubes has compromised its performance"—all of which earned the VTL TL-5.5 the "well-engineered" nod of approval from *Stereophile's* measurement analysis.

Thanks for the opportunity to comment.

—Luke Manley President, VTL

NHT SB-3

Editor:

I hope that all of our customers have the same taste in loudspeakers that Mr. Reina has. If they do, we will have no trouble selling SB-3s past serial number 004198!

In all seriousness, I'm very glad to hear how much Mr. Reina liked the SB-3. Hearing how much a customer likes a product that you have put endless hours of work into is a great feeling.

I do have a few comments about the acoustic measurements. I can reconcile some of the difference between *Stereophile's* measurement of the SB-3's SPL sensitivity and NHT's specification, but not all of it. *Stereophile* is using a windowed MLS measurement to determine the SPL sensitivity. NHT uses a nonwindowed swept-noise technique for this measurement. The speaker's directivity and the room's reflectivity can cause a large difference between these two measuring techniques. *Stereophile* used a B-weighting when taking the measurement. At NHT, we average the sensitivity between 500Hz and 2kHz.

The peak at 85Hz in the response curve of fig.3 appears only in the very nearfield. The woofer alignment is not underdamped; rather, the transfer function of the woofer crossover has a slight downward slope beginning at 100Hz. This slope is necessary for a two-way system with a small baffle to have flat response in the mid- and farfield. If the SB-3 is measured in the anechoic farfield, it has a flat response down to 60Hz, then drops off at a rate of 12dB/octave below that. We specify the –3dB point of 39Hz as an in-room rating. In any real room, the speaker is going to be close enough to several walls to reinforce the output below 60Hz. This extends the bass response to just below 40Hz.

NHT designs all of its loudspeakers to be used in real rooms. There isn't much point in designing a system to sound good in an anechoic chamber or with its grille off when almost no one is going to use the product under these conditions. As a result of this, most of our measurements are taken in-room, not anechoic.

Once again, I'd like to thank *Stereophile* for the excellent review.

—Jack Hidley
Director of Engineering, NHT

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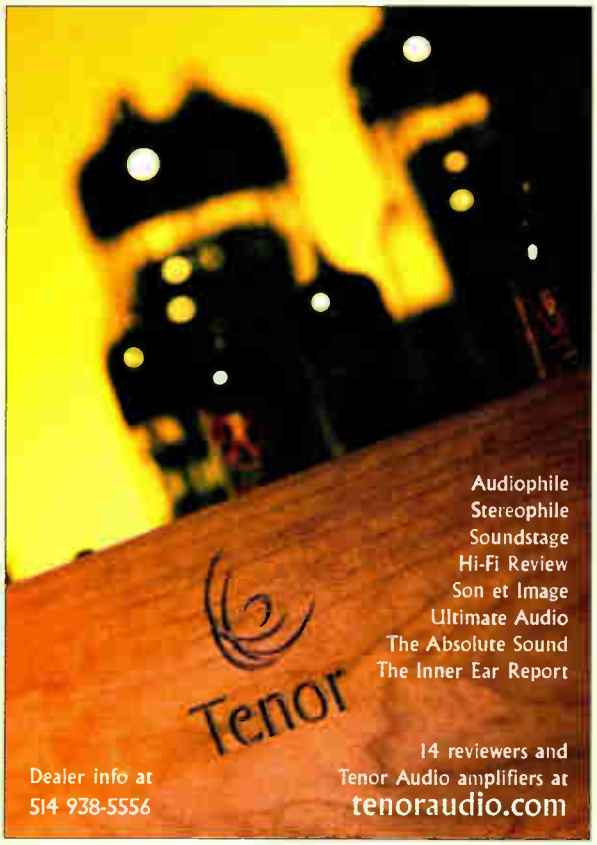

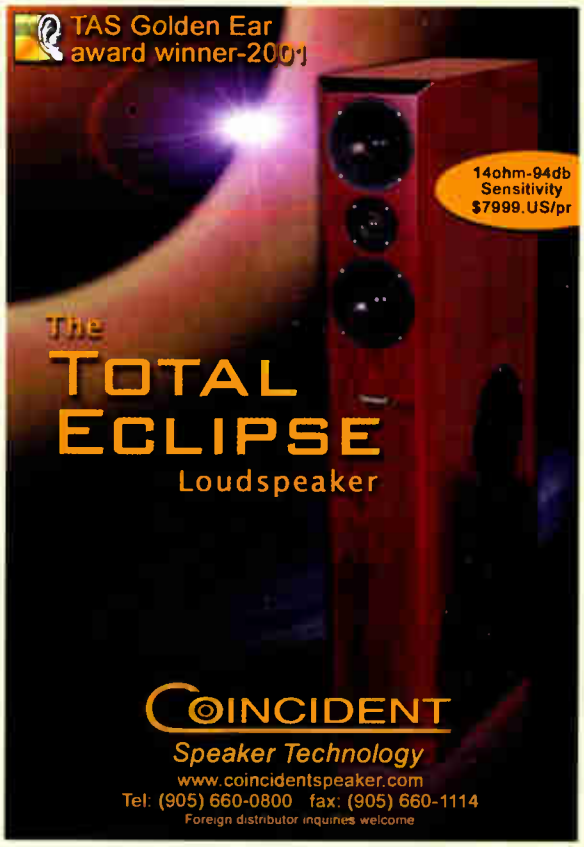

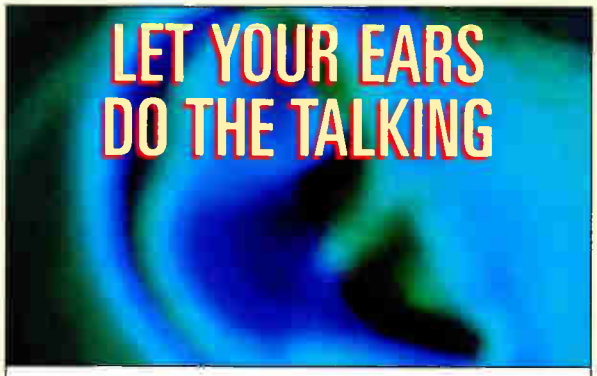

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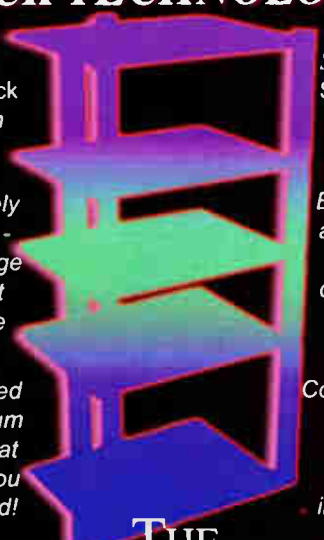

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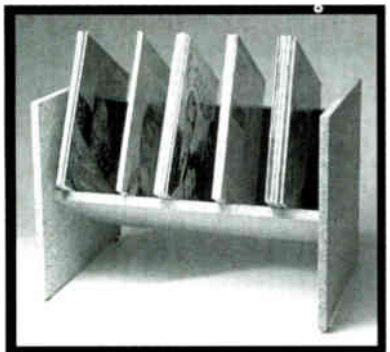

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Aural Robert

Robert Baird

To anyone who's been in or around the record business any length of time, the biz's current well-documented problems—semi-disastrous corporate mergers, loss of market share, the boogieman of computer file sharing—are music to our ears. A business that's grown greedy and arrogant (I mean other than Ticketmaster) is finally gettin' theirs.

Unlike major-league baseball, which has staved off finally fixing its problems and making things right for another four years, the music business is now face to face with its many sins. Artists want to owe less and have more control. Consumers have had enough of the obscenely high price of new CDs. CD sales are down by ten percent from the previous year. An industry that prides itself on command and control seems unable or unwilling to right itself.

The downside to all this deserved carnage is that artists often get caught in the gears of the increasingly desperate drive to make a profit, and end up torn and broken, both financially and musically.

It was to avoid just that kind of predicament that Bettina Richards founded Thrill Jockey Records in 1992. Richards, still the owner and resident visionary of the indie label, recently celebrated its 10th anniversary in New York with a three-day showcase of Thrill Jockey artists. In the early 1990s, when she was a New York A&R rep for London Records (where she worked with the Meat Puppets) and Atlantic Records (Lemonheads, Eleventh Dream Day), Richards saw a business model she didn't like.

"I found out that that system was a good system for some things," she said in a recent interview, "but a large company, by its nature, isn't very flexible—and when the music doesn't immediately fit into certain slots, it's hard for something of that size to bend affordably.

"It's not that I think the system is inherently evil—I'm not one of those people. But it wasn't of use for the kind of music I was interested in working with. I just thought there was—*is*—a better way to treat the artist that, I think, then will result in better music. If an artist is happy, and feels like you're respecting them and participating in working for them, then they're gonna make a better record."

Working out of her apartment in New York's lower east side, Richards used as her models such indie labels as Touch & Go and Dischord. Soon, though, the logistics of running a record company out of a fifth-floor walkup became too expensive and exhausting—she has fond memories of hauling records to her local UPS pickup point. Already connected to Chicago through her work and subsequent friendship with that city's Eleventh Dream Day, Richards made the move west in 1995. After 119 releases (a figure that includes a number of early 7" discs but doesn't include the label's series of 12", Richards has become a battle-scarred veteran of the indie world. To avoid the problems she saw at the majors, she eschews multi-album contracts and becomes a business partner with each of her artists, sharing the profits of album sales with them 50:50.

Thrill Jockey was at first a rock label, with bands like Austrian retro-rock trio H.P. Zinker and sneering punkers Gaunt but has since spread into jazz (AACM's Fred Anderson) and even alt-country (Freakwater). Along the way, Richards has released records by such angular but important acts as the Krautrock-meets-electronica Mouse on Mars, the eclectic, all-instrumental Tortoise, rock-electronica band Trans Am, and, most recently, Howe Gelb's ongoing artistic sojourn, Giant Sand, and a solo record by PJ Harvey's longtime partner, John Parrish. More impressive than the roster is the fact that the label hasn't fallen prey to the kind of insular institutional geekiness that plagues most successful indies. So far at least they haven't become too cool for the room.

The label's A&R has, not surprisingly, always been Richards' province. "I don't quite know how to say this," she says, laughing self-consciously, "but my philosophy about what's on the label is selfish and simple-minded, really. I'm a music fan, that's primarily what I am—just a superfan. I love to go buy records. I love to go to shows. The artists on the label reflect my growth as a listener."

While there may be significant differences between running Thrill Jockey and, say, Sony Music, it's still the music business, and some pressures and problems are common to both. And running a small label with records that appeal to hardcore music consumers means that Richards, too, has had to wrestle with the file-sharing gorilla.

"I understand that, for most of our artists, it's the superfan that is exchanging live shows, therefore it's feeding into an interest they already have—and even though they may download a large portion of the record, I tend to think that a high percentage of them will end up buying the record. It's not that much more devastating than a cassette. It's just a little easier and faster to proliferate.

"On the other hand, the culture of not understanding the value of the copyright to the artist is dangerous. It can be harmful. They need to understand there are other ways to show your luuvvve. At least wait until the damned thing is out!"

Trampoline at 0

As Thrill Jockey celebrates 10 years in business, another very promising indie label bravely pushes off into the raging waters of the music biz. Los Angeles–based Trampoline Records is an artist-owned label founded by the trio of Marc Dauer (Jukebox Junkies), Rami Jaffee (The Wallflowers), and, most significant, singer-songwriter Pete Yorn. Judging by the sounds on their first sampler CD, *Trampoline Records Greatest Hits, Vol. 1*, Trampoline's roster will be mainly solo singer-songwriters plus some rock acts, most from the west coast and all working somewhere between twang and alt-rock. Yorn, Pete Droge, Peter Himmelman, Gary Jules, and The Minus 5—all represented on the sampler—make tuneful, well-crafted music that ranges from folk rock to outright rock. Trampoline will begin releasing full-length albums this fall; this introductory compilation has every sign that, like Thrill Jockey, the new label will be a contenda.

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