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No.28 April 2010



John Mayer

**Brings His Battle to
Portland's Rose Garden**

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IT IS ALL THAT

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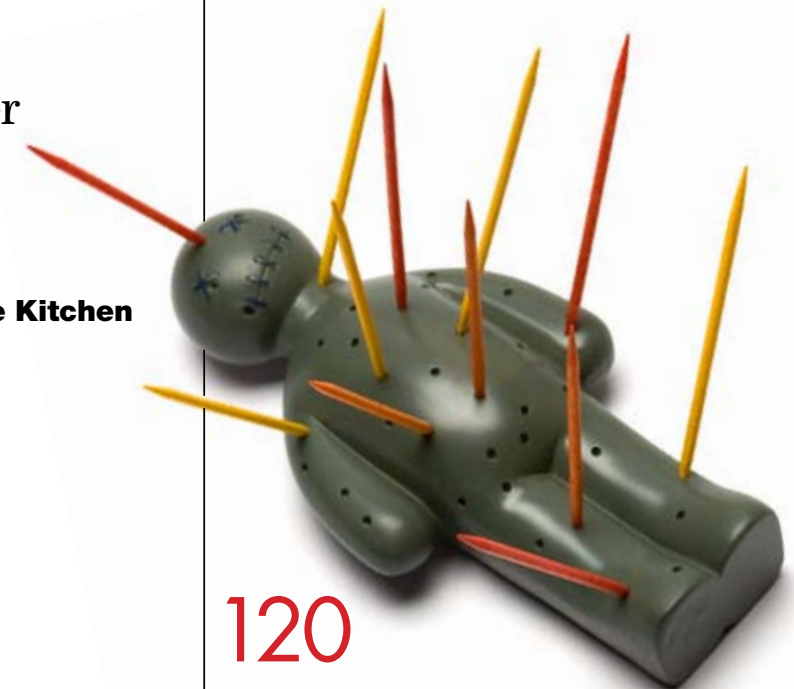
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John
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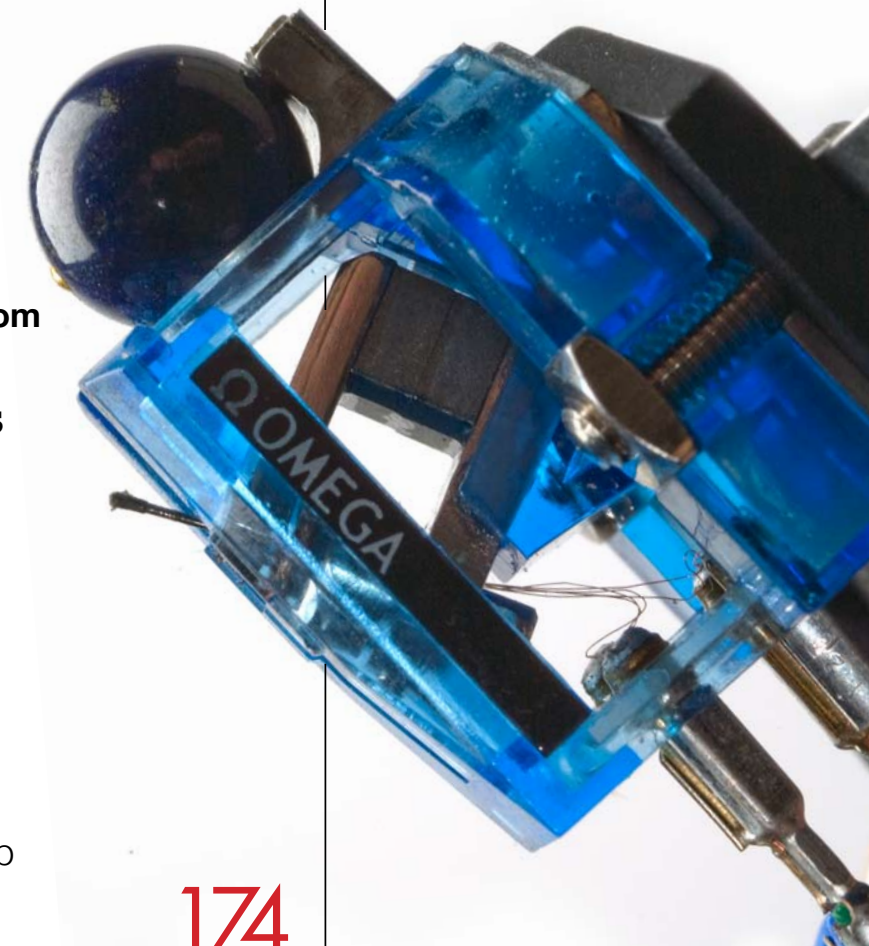
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

THIS ISSUE, I HAVE TO BID FAREWELL to a passing, but highly significant acquaintance, Jim Marshall, who passed away last week. Jim was one of music's greatest photojournalists, becoming famous in the '60s during the dawn of many famous bands. He captured historic photos of The Beatles, The Doors, The Rolling Stones and many more. Our paths crossed about four years ago as his book, *Proof*, was just being released. A few friends assured me that he wouldn't talk to me, but being brand new to the magazine world, I sent a call to his assistant anyway. What did I have to lose?

At 1:30 on a sunny afternoon in the Pacific Northwest, the phone rang as I was knee-deep in packaging various pieces of gear for the weekly FedEx run. "Hey, it's Marshall. Wanna come up to Seattle and have dinner with me? Great, be here at 5:00, *sharp*." Twenty minutes later, I was out of the shower and screaming up the I-5 towards Seattle, tape recorder in hand.

I wasn't disappointed. I met Marshall, some loyal followers and a few representatives from Leica. He used nothing but Leica cameras to capture his trademark images, and he did it without the aid of the digital tools that I now take for granted. But the best part of the evening was still to come.

After dinner, we ditched the entourage and headed back to Marshall's hotel for the interview. He was a gracious host, and when he walked up to the bar to grab a glass of scotch for the two of us,

I heard the bartender say, "That will be \$250..." Marshall came back to the table and said with a wry grin, "Drink up kid, Leica's buying!" When Jim Marshall tells you to drink up, you drink up. A few hours and six more rounds later, I walked out of his hotel, annihilated, and somehow found my way back to my hotel. I got the interview and had a fantastic time talking to one of photography's greats.



Interestingly, when I asked Jim Marshall who his current favorite artists were, he said, "John Mayer. He's a great guitar player. He's no Duane Allman, but he's pretty good. Nice kid, too. He bought a big pile of prints from me last week and paid cash."

John Mayer talks about Jim Marshall in a recent blog post, about how they were both in a bar together, with Marshall giving him a few photography tips while they were *both* trying to pick up girls. Yep, that's the Jim Marshall I met. Rock and roll till the end.

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"I like to think of them as new old stock."

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The Two Best Watts You'll Ever Buy

The Decware Zen

By Jeff Dorgay



BUDGET GEAR:



For those who adhere to the “first-watt” theory of HiFi, here’s a bonus: the Decware Zen amplifier gives you two. Yep, two watts per channel from in single-ended triode mode. I must admit they are pretty big watts, as I had no problem driving my reference GamuT S-7’s to a more than reasonable level. (The S-7’s have a rated sensitivity of 89db at 1 watt and a retail price of \$42k per pair.)

Decware founder and designer Steve Deckert is somewhat of a legend in audio circles for building no-nonsense products with a primary emphasis on sound quality. This unassuming little amplifier has a purity of sound that would cost you a lot more money to approach elsewhere and can be yours for just \$775.

A look under the chassis reveals tidy, point-to-point wiring and a minimalist approach. There are only a couple of resistors and one capacitor in the signal path, and the transformers are custom-made to Deckert’s specs. Deckert mentions on his website that his amplifiers are built by “well-paid employees,” and the care of assembly is obvious.

The back panel features only an IEC socket and two pairs of high-quality Teflon RCA jacks and a power switch, with a pair of WBT binding posts on the top of the chassis next to the power transformer. I’ve seen my share of \$10,000 power amps that didn’t have a pair of these binding posts, making the Zen that much more impressive even before I turned it on.

This tiny amplifier uses a pair SV83 output tubes that are similar to the EL84 tubes. But according to the Decware website, they are even more linear because they are video tubes. I substituted a pair of EL84’s from my toolbox and noticed a slight warming of the presentation, along with less extension on the frequency extremes. If you have a more forward set of speakers, the EL84’s might be the way to go, but I’d suggest sticking with the factory tubes until you really get a handle on the way your system sounds. The good news is that the Zen does not use expensive tubes that will break the bank, regardless of how you want to roll.

The Sound

I started with the Zen in a system that I felt was more in keeping with its pricetag, mated to a pair of Zu Audio Essence speakers, Zu cable and my trusty Denon 3910 universal player. While the Zen will perform better with a high-sensitivity speaker in the 93-100db range, don’t count it out in an environment where high sound-pressure levels aren’t required, while you still crave high quality. As many different speakers as I tried with this little jewel, I kept coming back to the big GamuT speakers in my living room. These big speakers made for a gorgeous match up, with quite a few long listening sessions. This tiny amplifier was well up to the task of driving them.

What surprised me most about the Zen was not only the level of weight it possessed but the control. SET amplifiers are not noted for their bass control, and I’ve owned my share. The only SET I can recall that had this kind of finesse was the \$30,000 WAVAC EC-300B. Tosca’s “Wonderful” from their Delhi 9 album has a hard-driving synth bass line throughout the track, and the Zen grabbed hold of the music’s fundamentals in an impressive way. When I swapped the GamuT’s out for the Zu’s with their higher sensitivity, I was able to blast the music loud enough to get me in trouble with the family.

Right behind the weight provided by this mighty little amplifier is the level of inner detail. When listening to dense, layered music, I was impressed at how much I could hear into some of my favorite test tracks. I had the Zen sitting on top of my reference Burmester 911 MK.3 power amplifier, and I had to keep reminding myself that I was listening to the tiny tube amplifier, not the big Burmester!

Whether it was the brush work on the drums of Joni Mitchell’s Don Juan’s Restless Daughter or Keith Jarrett grunting in the background of his piano, I was always surprised at how much detail this amplifier could provide, even with the GamuT’s and a few other very expensive speakers I had in for review. *(continued)*

The Zen's well-written instruction manual spends a fair amount of time discussing the "weak link" in your audio chain, so while I examined a few more "budget" speaker combinations, most of my listening was done with my reference GamuT speakers and my newly acquired DCS Paganini stack for digital playback. While it sounds wacky to make the diminutive Zen amplifier

the cornerstone of a \$100,000 system, it worked well. This amplifier had the finesse at moderate volume to hold its own with the big boys.

What really sets the Zen apart from all the moderately priced tube amplification I've heard is its incredibly lifelike tonality and bass control.

I love EL84-based amplifiers, but most of the budget ones have notoriously whumpy, uncontrolled bass. Not here. You'll be happily surprised by the sheer realism of this amplifier, and if your musical taste goes more towards acoustic instruments and solo vocal music, the Zen is sublime.

Conclusion

Of course, you can't have it all for 800 bucks and two watts won't fly you to the moon, the way a monster amplifier will. But if you have some relatively efficient speakers and don't need to play music at deafening levels, you could spend a lot more money and do a lot worse than the Zen. There's no fancy box, no remote control and only two high-level inputs, but I can't think of a better way to enjoy great sound on a budget than the Decware Zen amplifier.

For those with high efficiency speakers, your search for a high-quality amplifier to mate them with could end with the Zen. Add your favorite source or two and call it a day. The combination of the Zen with the Zu Essence speakers and a decent CD player is tough to resist. Or if you are of the DIY mindset, a great pair of full-range drivers can be purchased at a minimal cost.

A lifetime warranty and a 30-day money-back guarantee make the Zen an even better value. These days, a pair of 45 output tubes (that can only deliver about 1 watt per channel) will set you back further than the cost of the Zen amplifier. I'm happy to award this amplifier one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010. This is the essence of what HiFi is about to me – great sound and great quality at a price that doesn't break the bank. ●

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FOCAL
the Spirit of Sound

John Mayer

Rose Garden Arena
Portland, Oregon
March 30, 2010

Text and Photos by
Jeff Dorgay

As John Mayer walked onto the Rose Garden Arena stage, he faced a revved-up audience whose hysteria was reminiscent of Beatlemania. Yet he took it all in stride, immediately blasting into “Heartbreak Warfare” from his recent *Battle Studies*. While the excellent two-hour performance was loaded with tunes from the new album, Mayer kept the set interesting and pace varied by playing a wide range of material from his back catalog.

Don’t let the screaming girls or tabloid headlines fool you. Mayer is all about great guitar playing. While his studio albums are all well produced, they don’t match the intensity of his stage presence. And with so many “legacy” rock acts going through the motions during the last few years, it’s refreshing to see a guy in his 30s that possesses a really *strong* voice and that can hit high notes without any electronic assistance. Mayer proved every bit as capable of a vocalist as he is a guitarist.

As he demonstrated time and again, Mayer prefers the natural route. No artificial trickery here, thank you. He played well, relished the experience, and loved his job. Other than one brief distortion-crazed outburst, his solos were tasteful and, even more importantly, relevant to the songs. Even then, he stopped and thanked the sold-out audience “for just letting me play guitar tonight.” Devoid of any pyrotechnics, the concert still served as a treat for guitar aficionados. Mayer grabbed a different six-string for almost every song, switching between his own signature Stratocasters, a favorite Stevie Ray Vaughan model, and a bevy of Martin acoustic guitars. Such diversity also distinguished the setlist. *(continued)*



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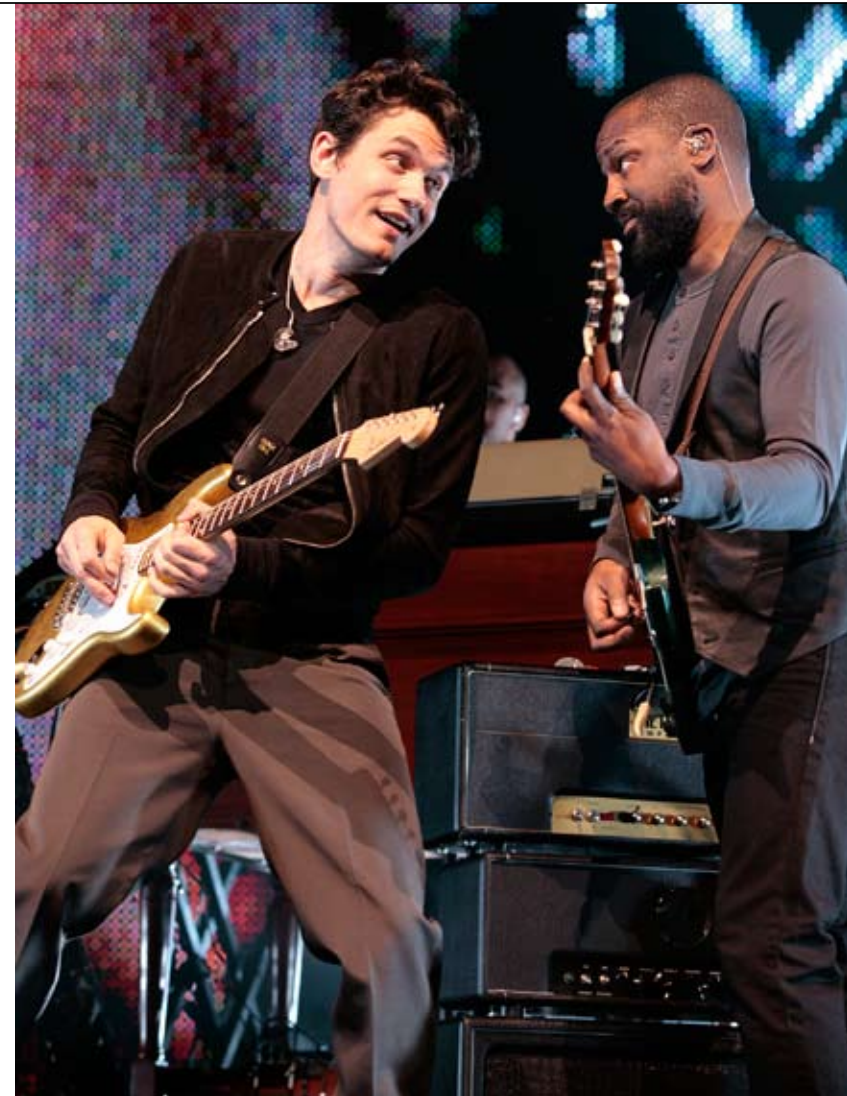


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LIVE MUSIC



While “Heartbreak Warfare” has served as the tour’s primary opening song, Mayer continues to shuffle the deck on every stop by adding and/or subtracting a few classic rock numbers. The night before in Las Vegas, he covered Tom Petty’s “Free Fallin” and Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believing.”

His surprise for Portland was even better. Halfway through the show, Mayer excused the band and performed the last half of the set completely acoustic, noting, “I like to mix it up a lot on tour, it keeps things fresh.” He turned the volume level down for soulful renditions of “Ain’t No Sunshine” and “All We Ever Do Is Say Goodbye,” before ending the acoustic program with “Who Says.”

Mayer’s band returned for the encore, but by that time, it was already evident that the talented star needn’t any support.

Jamie Stewart didn't say a word when he stepped onto the Sail Inn's small stage, which he and bandmate Angela Seo packed with a wide variety of cymbals, gongs, and noisemakers. Instead, the mopey frontman picked up his guitar and whispered the words to "Black Drum Machine," a morbid song that ultimately swelled with swirling distortion, clattering bells, and Stewart's anguished cries of "I'm Sorry/I'm Sorry/ I'm Sorry/ I'm Sorry." After the tune finished, the stunned crowd broke into applause, and Stewart returned to glum-faced silence.

And so it went from Xiu Xiu, touring in support of the new *Dear God, I Hate Myself*, the experimental indie-rock act's first record since Stewart's longtime partner Caralee McElroy left the group to play with synth-poppers Cold Cave. The album features Stewart's goth-like crooning and morose lyrics set to rattling pop. But live, the band seemed more interested in noise than anything else.

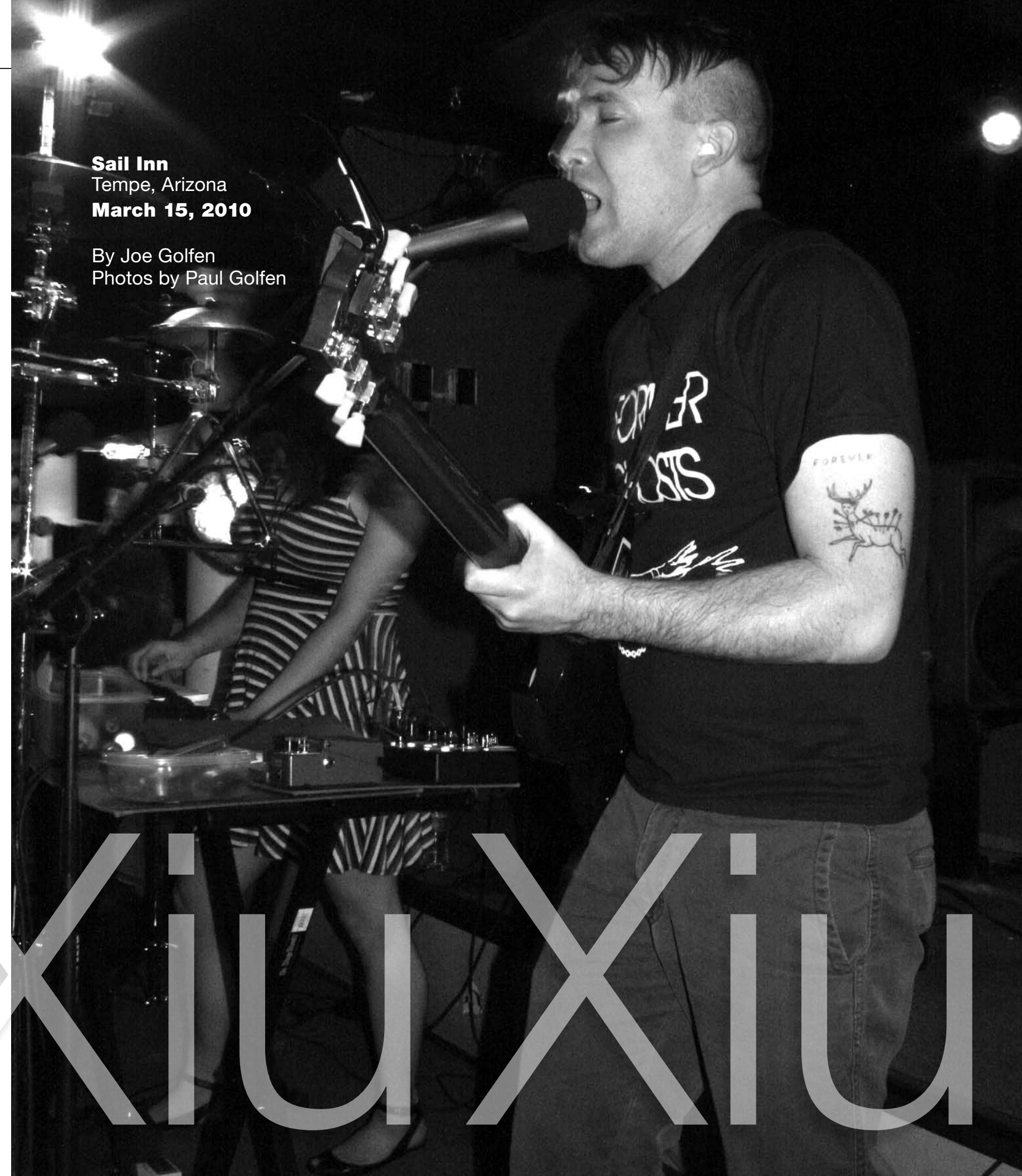
While Stewart's guitar violently wept, keyboardist/percussionist Seo created bombastic soundscapes by crashing cymbals, blowing into odd woodwinds, and crafting ear-splitting levels of white noise. At one point, Stewart pulled out a Nintendo DS and played a progressively distorted electronic riff on the machine's tiny keyboard.

Legendary shoegaze quartet My Bloody Valentine might have even needed ear-plugs for several of Xiu Xiu's songs. But the musical dissonance perfectly matched Stewart's damaged psyche and haunting words, which left several audience members wiping away tears. For all the angry explosions and shouts, such emotional outpourings define Xiu Xiu more than any chaotic noise ever could.



Sail Inn
Tempe, Arizona
March 15, 2010

By Joe Golfen
Photos by Paul Golfen



Kasey Anderson

The White Eagle Saloon
Portland, Oregon
March 15, 2010
Text and Photos by
Jeff Dorgay

When hometown hero Kasey Anderson takes the stage at Portland's White Eagle, the small venue is packed with fans that spill all the way into the street. But there's a bit of a problem with the mix. When it becomes obvious that the literate singer/guitarist is not going to get what he wants from the vocal levels, he walks out to the board and turns the guitars down. Anderson smiles and says, "I guess you'll just have to listen a little harder. This is all we can do." Spoken like a true troubadour. Then there's the performance.

Anderson zips through a quick acoustic set of six songs primarily from his new album, *Nowhere Nights*. Stripped down to voice and guitar, the material takes on more weight than on record, with Anderson's voice possessing a heavier dose of nuance and character. If you didn't know who Anderson was and someone told you that his last name was Dylan, you'd believe them. Yes, he's that good. And he's come a long way since his first gig at Portland's Snake and Weasel. *(continued)*



“I have always loved listening to music on vinyl. I love the warmth. That was what prompted the decision to release [Nowhere Nights] on vinyl.”

“Man, I don’t even know if that place is still open. There were about six people in the audience. It was kind of a Spinal Tap moment,” Anderson cracked, talking with *TONE* about his upcoming tour, new album, and appearance at South by Southwest with a full band. “I don’t know how many people make huge record deals at SXSW anymore, but it’s a great time to be able to play four times in six days. And the tacos are great. I love the tacos at SXSW.”

The venerable Austin festival is serving as a launching point for a long tour in support of *Nowhere Nights*, a sharply focused effort that plays down various styles in favor of sticking to a straight-ahead singer-songwriter approach. Anderson laughs. “The next record will definitely have a bit less twang. I think it’s time to move on from this format.”

Yet one format remains close to his heart. Anderson isn’t shy about declaring his affinity for analog. “I have always loved listening to music on vinyl. I love the warmth. That was what prompted the decision to release [Nowhere Nights] on vinyl.” While great news for analog lovers, LP versions of the artist’s first two records (*Dead Roses* and *The Reckoning*) are available on vinyl only in Europe. Unfortunately, Anderson has no plans to re-release them in the U.S.

“Yeah, they were mastered for CD, so we’d have to go back in and remaster them for vinyl and it’s just not in the cards right now. It’s too bad. CDs are great, but you can’t beat the sound of vinyl. It’s a format that they got right the first time.” ●

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Kasey Anderson

Nowhere Nights
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Kasey Anderson's 2007 release, *The Reckoning*, featured such a wide range of musical styles that it could have served as the soundtrack for a David Lynch movie. And yes, that's a *good* thing. But one can't blame the singer-songwriter for staying closer to a single path on his latest, *Nowhere Nights*. And even though he admitted in a recent interview with *TONEAudio* "that he's just about done with the twang thing," Anderson does an excellent job of utilizing just enough of the tact to be effective without going overboard. He demonstrates a level of restraint that few of his Americana contemporaries can muster.

Dedicated to friends in Bellingham, Washington that scattered after a local tavern closed, the record starts out on a somewhat sad note, Anderson singing, "This ain't never been my home/I woke up here one morning/15 years were gone." It's a fairly dark ride throughout, as the vocalist paints a series of dreams that have gone amiss, laments people that aren't what they seem, and longs for a place where one doesn't fit in. Even the upbeat-sounding title track concerns relationships gone wrong. On "I Was a Photograph," the folk-rock troubadour touches on the recent war and mental state of a soldier who returned home, only to have a sobering conversation with his father.

"You inherit my blood boy, but your sins are all your own," Anderson intones.

Produced by Eric Ambel (Yay-hoos), *Nowhere Nights* sounds as personal as the songs, with a fairly small, intimate soundstage that is particularly apparent on the vinyl. Crunchy, twangy guitars and sparse keyboards add to the mood and frame the despair. Red River Records did everything right, pressing the tunes on to two LPs for maximum sound quality. Once you start listening, you won't be able to let go.

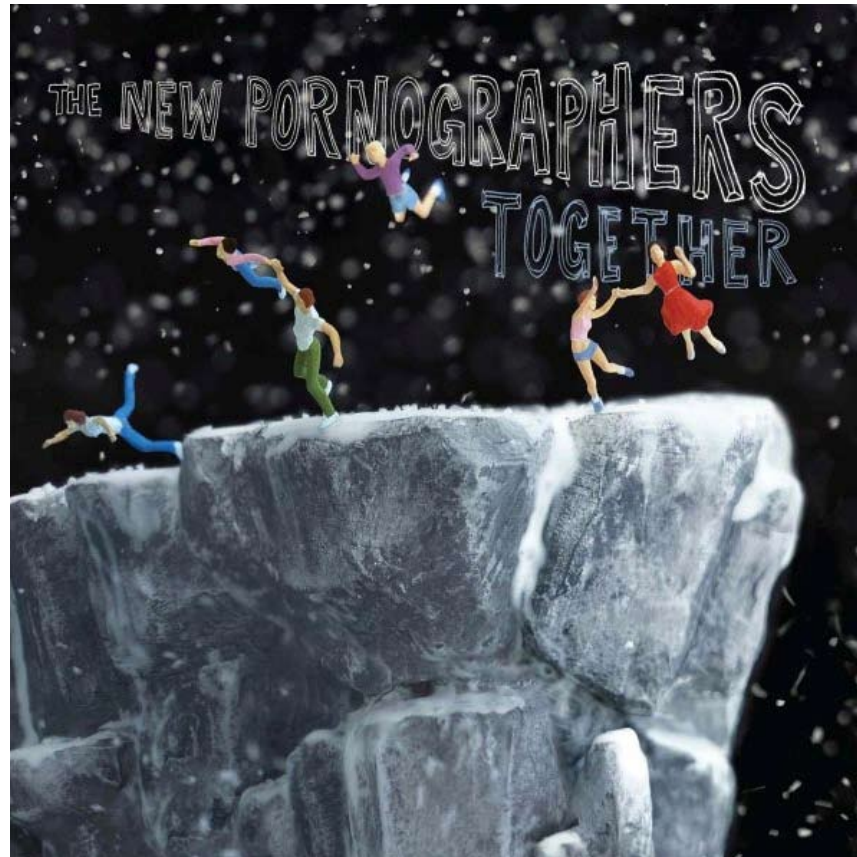
Like a great film director, Anderson draws you into his world again and again. He also mentions in the album's liner notes that he fell in love while finishing this record and that he'll address that experience next time out. We'll be eagerly awaiting. — Jeff Dorgay



Current Releases

By the TONE Staff

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New Pornographers
Together
Matador, CD and LP

Sometimes it's best to keep things simple. While the New Pornographers' sound has evolved from the lost weekender feel of their debut *Mass Romantic*, the Canadian indie supergroup never strays far from its power-pop base. Flirtations with large-scale string arrangements and nuanced ballads pepper 2005's *Twin Cinema* and 2007's *Challengers*, yet the band's greatest asset remains its ability to craft incredible hooks—one of the most understood yet difficult goals in music.

And on the spiraling *Together*, they keep them coming in large doses, showcasing a looser, reigned-in approach that echoes their early material. Absent are the fussed-over compositions, slower tempos, and ruminative emotions that distinguished the two prior albums. Concise track lengths and feel-good vibes also return with palpable urgency. And while there's still an overwhelming sense that the ensemble is largely directed by A.C. Newman—his oblique lyrics and light voice are smeared on the songs like fingerprints on glass—the band's fifth effort embraces its title. *Together* is a collective effort.

As she's been since day one, enchanting chanteuse Neko Case frequently appears as the not-so-secret weapon, pushing choruses and refrains into the ether as her mates—which count Destroyer's Dan Bejar and filmmaker Blaine Thurrier along with a bevy of special guests such as St. Vincent's Annie Clark, Okkervil River's Will Sheff, and the Dap-Kings horn section—supply helium melodies. There's no shortage of upbeat, clap-hands fare. Towering, breathy harmonies and overlapping vocals spring up like tulip stems after a last frost. Guitars jangle and jingle, the strings hopping like a giddy child at a playground. This is music meant for breezy summer afternoons and fun, innocent romances.

The stadium-ready cheerleading of "Your Hands Together" doubles as the finest single Cheap Trick never recorded.

Propelled by a spring-loaded folk strum, "The Crash Years" whistles its own carefree rendition of Dixie. Bejar's nasal timbre, bold piano notes, and wordless refrains coalesce on the rushing "Silver Jenny Dollar."

Better still, the spry, quaint, and superb "Sweet Talk, Sweet Talk" follows the imaginary path of a bouncing ball as it interweaves an infectious combination of boy-girl singing, nimble percussion, dreamy keyboard lines, rattling riffs, and spare hand claps. "A Bite Out of My Bed" bounds along on the sonic rooftops of stacked rhythms, rising horns, and exuberant vocals. Even more well-appointed songs such as the chiming "If You Can't See My Mirrors" stick to the basics. And the lone ballad, the banjo-laden "Valkyrie and the Roller Disco," is infused with a dreamy ambience that prevents it from dead-ending.

Similarly, Newman's production is lively and airy, pregnant with rich acoustic tones and vocal dynamics. Just as the march-and-build pace of "Up in the Dark" seems to issue a lighthearted 'just try and stop us' proclamation, *Together* challenges the listener to resist the urge to hum along.

— **Bob Gendron**

This is music meant for breezy summer afternoons and fun, innocent romances.



She & Him
Volume Two
 Merge, CD and LP

M Ward makes records that sound as if they could have been released 100 years ago or just yesterday. The guitarist's command of deceptively simple acoustic melodies and organic arrangements illuminates his terrific solo efforts, lessons in the art of modest understatement. Several years ago, Ward found an improbable collaborator in darling actress Zoey Deschanel, whose passion for 50s and 60s pop suited her partner's interest in old-timey music. Adopting the anonymous moniker She & Him, the duo's *Volume One* ended up near or at the top of many critics' 2008 best-of lists and went a long way towards correcting the wrong that witnessed an embarrassing number of movie stars failing miserably as wanna-be rock stars. After a splendid club tour proved Deschanel's voice even sweeter live, the only question that remained was whether She & Him would be a one-time side project or an ongoing group.

Volume Two answers in the affirmative, as its indelible blend of Brill Building pop, orchestrated soul, and warm country improves upon that of its predecessor. The creative roles remain the same, with Ward supplying the production and Deschanel the lyrics and tunes. And while comparisons to famous pairings such as Lee Hazelwood-Nancy Sinatra and the Carpenters are merited, She & Him continues to reach deeper. The duo's move towards broader instrumentation and dynamic harmonies is suggestive of the influence of sonic icons such as Phil Spector. Accordingly, Ward and Deschanel's sophomore effort may opt for bigger choruses and crescendos, but it doesn't sacrifice anything in doing so. The secret: Deschanel's impeccable songwriting.

Admittedly, the indie heart-throb isn't doing much that hasn't been done before. Ghosts of Patsy Cline, Bobbie Gentry, and Roy Orbison dance within her songs. Yet the material possesses a timeless quality that owes to a steady balance of happy and sad moods, downbeat and upbeat vibes. Deschanel doesn't come off as a hopeless romantic, but rays of optimism infuse even the melancholy break-up songs. Love is the dominant theme, and Deschanel responds in kind, singing like a woman who knows what it is to live out heartbreak and refuse to give up the hold on the one you desire.

From the opening strum of the tango-laden "Thieves," a lush weeper that climaxes in a whoosh

of strings that transports the listener to a draped bandstand, Deschanel's achy timbre and swoon-worthy falsetto function as the persuasive equivalent of chocolate and roses. Ward swathes her voice in tasteful reverb, an effect that amplifies the drama and heightens the emotions. The twosome's sidewalk-strolling, hands-holding pop ("In the Sun"), Spanish-flavored folk ("Lingering Still"), blushing doo-wop ("Don't Look Back"), steel-guitar-laden C&W ("Me and You"), and goodnight lullabies ("In Your Sleep") all draw from classic girl-group and Seventies AM pop traditions. The loping tempos and eminently hummable melodies only elevate Deschanel's charm.

So, does a woman this kind, caring, and unabashedly cute really exist? Doesn't matter. Rather than cry her eyes out and wallow in pity, Deschanel kills any pain by looking ahead and embracing feel-good sentiments. On catchy fare such as "Gonna Get Along Without You Now," there's no doubting her sugary conviction. Against these odds—not to mention the generous dollops of background vocals and cleverly placed piano lines—loneliness doesn't stand a chance. Ward's production—clean, lively, airy, present, balanced, and replete with contrasts that thrive amidst the ample separation and pinpoint imaging—is equally old-school, devoid of compression and artificial loudness. *Volume Two* is all about the music and the voices. — **Bob Gendron**



Jakob Dylan
Women and Country
 Sony, CD

After a dalliance with Rick Rubin, Jakob Dylan comes full circle on his second solo album. The former Wallflower leader reunites with producer T Bone Burnett, who produced the Wallflowers debut *Bringing Down the Horse*. It's a terrific fit. Featuring backing vocals from chanteuses Neko Case and Kelly Hogan, *Women and Country* starts out sounding (perhaps too much) like Robert Plant's *Raising Sand*.

Dylan proves an excellent storyteller throughout, though most of the tales told here tend to be dark and despairing. The spooky production and pounding drumbeats add to the desperation, especially as Dylan sings, "We come from the country, where the rain follows the plow and the evenings cold enough to pluck your feathers out." Yes, we're a long way from "Three Marlenas." And the record doesn't get any happier. The price we pay for maturity? Perhaps.

Even if it doesn't make it to vinyl, *Women and Country* stands out as an audiophile treasure. The disc sounds fantastic on a great stereo system, with Dylan's vocals full-bodied and right upfront with a wide, deep soundscape.

Women and Country is a great record, featuring an all-star cast and production team. Dylan turns in a stellar performance, to the extent that one wonders if he lost a little bit of his soul on this one. His next record will let us know for certain. — **Jeff Dorgay**

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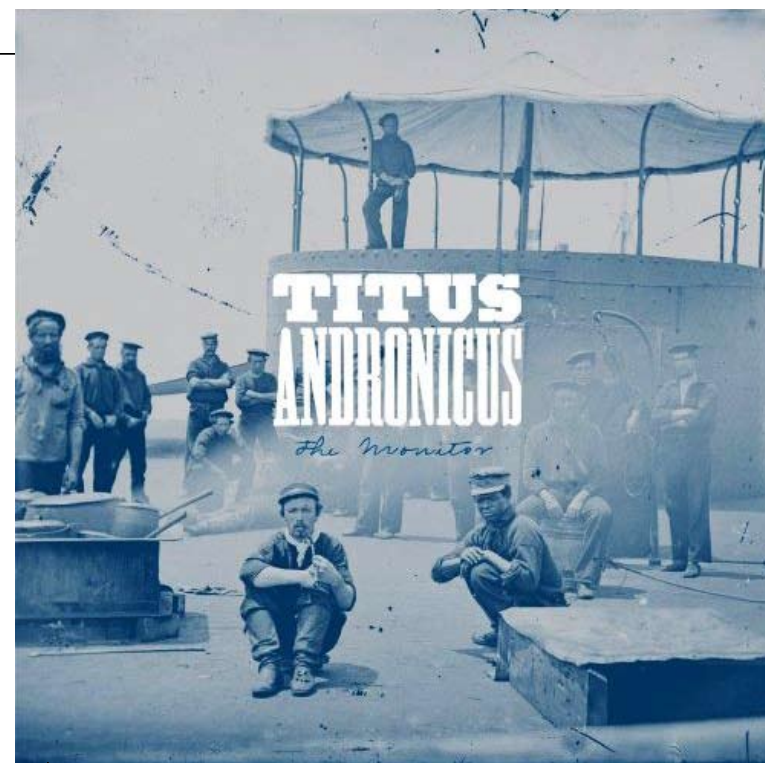
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Titus Andronicus

The Monitor

Beggars Banquet, CD and 2LP

Titus Andronicus cunningly references Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run," includes a segment of the traditional gospel tune "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," pays homage to the 1862 patriotic hymn "The Battle Cry of Freedom," incorporates a portion of a military speech, and throws in contagious "whoa-oh" hooks on their superb *The Monitor*. Oh, and that's all just on the first song, "A More Perfect Union."

Ambitious, daring, and often delirious, the New Jersey indie rock/punk band's sophomore set comes on like a rush of blood to the head and takes its place as one of the must-hear albums of 2010. Utilizing the Civil War as a metaphor for larger themes of discord, alienation, identity, and truth, *The Monitor* is constructed around a narrative that witnesses a protagonist leave his birthplace in hopes of finding a better life. The environments and situations he encounters, and ultimately, his coming to terms with it all, supply endless inspiration. Lofty, for certain, yet the record works independently of the lyrics, which contain a surfeit of clever one-liners ("You've never been no virgin, kid/ You were fucked from the start"; "I took the one thing that made me beautiful and threw it away";

"I'm at the end of the rope/And I feel like swinging") that underscore what it means to live in difficult times and attempt to survive modern culture.

Titus Andronicus' central tenet is that the enemy is everywhere; friends can't be trusted, and no one but yourself can save you. The quintet reinforces its belief by playing as if its own life is at stake. Mastered by Greg Calbi, *The Monitor* teams with urgency, energy, soul, and don't-look-back momentum. Vocalist Patrick Sickles sings and shouts as if his throat hangs from a string. Guitars spark with surging, anthemic lines and fuzz-coated riffs. Drums rumble, march, and stomp. Yet no matter how turbulent the tempos turn or epic the arrangements become (four songs eclipse the seven-minute mark and are unofficially divided into multi-part pieces), great melodies remain in the crosshairs. It's nigh impossible not to get caught up in the band's enthusiasm and honesty.

Titus Andronicus contemplates the demise of the human species. Indignity never sounded so alive or vibrant.

While the allusions are somewhat distant, Civil War-era music infuses a majority of the tracks. "No Future Part Three: Escape From No Future" combines subconscious vocals with gang choruses into a fife-and-drum storm. "Richard II" tumbles forward, the jangling chords nearly tripping over themselves as Spickles' cracked voice emits intensity and jubilation. Wordless harmonies, bar-room pianos, R&B-fueled rhythms, careening violins, and drunken horns combine to make "A Pot in Which to Piss" a celebration of life that underscores what it means to survive no matter the consequences. The group even imbibes in roots country on the rolling "Theme From 'Cheers,'" one of the best drinking songs cut this century. Stickles' alliteration heightens the sense that everything is packed in a powder keg and just waiting to explode; saxophones are called upon on "...And Ever" to light that very fuse.

Used up, coughed up, fucked up, cuckolded, called out, castrated, fried—Titus Andronicus contemplates the demise of the human species. Indignity never sounded so alive or vibrant.

— **Bob Gendron**

TEDLEOANDTHEPHARMACISTS
THE BRUTALIST BRICKS



**Ted Leo and
 the Pharmacists**
The Brutalist Bricks
 Matador, CD

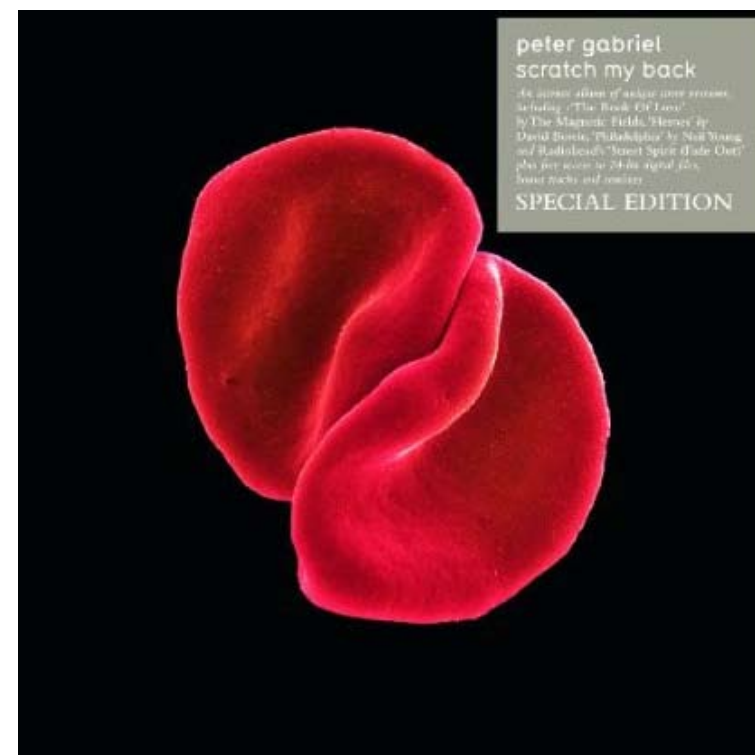
Ted Leo is never at a loss for words. So it's no surprise that the agit-punk kicks off his sixth album with a crash of frantic electric guitars and a mouthful of lyrics. With his strained tenor, Leo belts out lines about café doors exploding amidst a flurry of crunchy riffs, immediately establishing a breakneck speed from which he seldom wavers.

Leo has used the device before, specifically on the protest-fueled "Me and Mia," the fantastic opener to 2006's *Shake The Streets*. But the lighting-fast approach is also what gets Leo in trouble. On 2007's *Living with the Living*, Leo sounds lost, adrift among too many strung-together metaphors and meandering structures. Perhaps the album simply reflected the time: No amount of clever lyrics would prevent the Iraq War from escalating. The peace-loving, Bush-bashing Leo was on the losing side of history.

By contrast, *The Brutalist Bricks* finds Leo reenergized and focused, paring down songs while still packing every moment with ferocious energy and plenty of fast-paced, super-smart lyrics. "Ativan Eyes" starts with a shimmying melody and takes off with a rafter-reaching chorus. Leo sounds at peace with getting older on the jangling "Even Heroes Have to Die," and even though "Bottled in Cork" starts with a charged political rant, it abruptly turns into a sunny acoustic strum-along. "Where Was My Brain?" and "Gimme the Wire" are delivered at such breakneck speeds that they seem like they might break apart. But thanks to Leo's springy hooks, they never do. Every song brims with urgency, but they no longer bubble over with vitriol or hopelessness.

Akin to the concept of Brutalism—the postwar aesthetic that created buildings made of raw, unadorned concrete—this album sparkles in its simplicity and directness. There isn't a needless guitar solo or pointless bridge in the bunch, a tact that allows Leo and his fearless Pharmacists to say what needs to be said and have some fun while they're at it.

— **Joe Golfen**



Peter Gabriel

Scratch My Back

EMI, CD, LP, and High Res Download

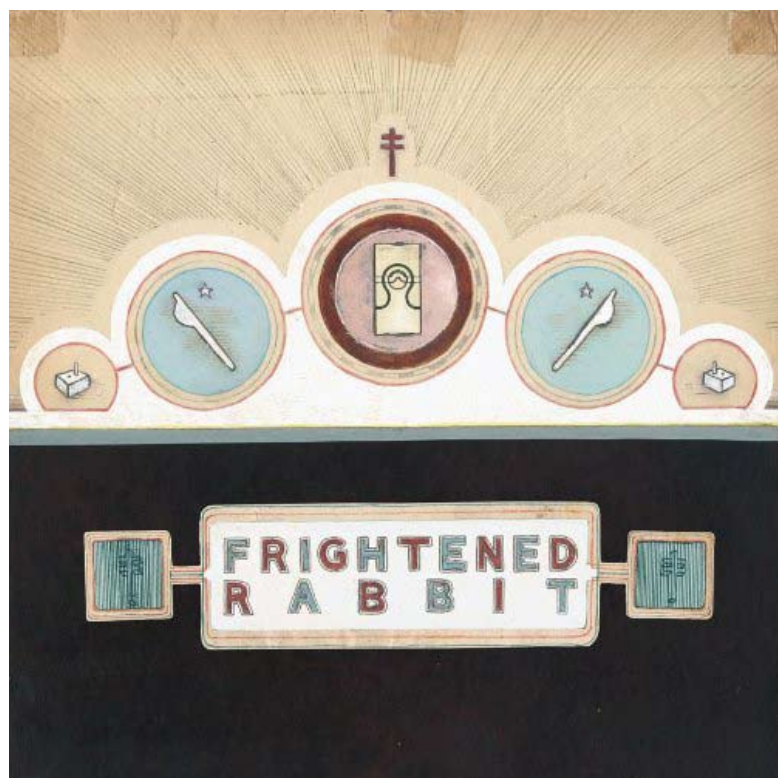
Gabriel mentions that the makeup of the album's tunes leans toward the eclectic, as the record was originally intended to be more of a song swap with the artists he covers.

Peter Gabriel fans are polarized about *Scratch My Back*, which entirely consists of cover material. The multitude of formats on which the work is available seems to be adding to the confusion. For just a few extra bucks, the deluxe version gives you three remixes of "Heroes," "My Body is a Cage," and "The Book of Love," plus a bonus Kinks track, "Waterloo Sunset." While the remix concept conjures up a vision of an artist dramatically overhauling a song, three of the four tracks on the second disc are alternate takes at best; if you aren't paying attention, you might not notice the difference between the bonus cuts and the official versions.

In the album's liner notes, Gabriel mentions that the makeup of the album's tunes leans toward the eclectic, as the record was originally intended to be more of a song swap with the artists he covers. He planned to record one of theirs and, in turn, they'd record one of his songs, which led to the title *Scratch My Back*. Gabriel promises that the companion volume is forthcoming, but I don't think I'm ready for Randy Newman performing a Gabriel tune anytime soon.

Recorded with the London Scratch Orchestra, Gabriel keeps the arrangements very sparse and tasteful. And with his voice full of texture and melancholy, the singer proves that even at 60 years old, he not only possesses the required sustain to pull off convincing renditions of songs from contemporary artists such as Arcade Fire, he still owns a near-flawless upper vocal range.

Sonically, the CD has tremendous dynamic range, and the high res files are exquisite. Like many of Gabriel's other albums, *Scratch My Back* really shows off a high-quality audio system at its best. It will be interesting to see how this material translates on his forthcoming tour. — **Jeff Dorgay**



Frightened Rabbit

The Winter of Mixed Drinks
Fat Cat., CD or LP

The danger in making a breakout album is facing the challenge of how to follow it up with a record that matches it in intensity, surprise, and focus.

Under these pressures, artists are often tempted to go for broke, blowing open the arrangements and scope while striving for the equivalent of the proverbial Great American (or European) novel.

Two years ago, Frightened Rabbit released *The Midnight Organ Fight*, a searing break-up album that immediately put the Scotland band amidst the rare crop of new bands on the cusp of greatness. Singer Scott Hutchinson and company still reflects the vision it takes to attain such glory, but it'll have to wait until the next album.

On the cleverly named *The Winter of Mixed Drinks*, the folk-rock quartet is guilty of overachieving, and in the process, loses a bit of the gut-punching emotion and scrappy finesse that distinguished its prior effort. There's also an abundance of repetition among the lyrics, over-reliant on land/sea/sand metaphors for figurative drowning. Thematic, sure, but it's all too much as the solid albeit ultimately underwhelming set steams along.

Not that the quartet has sacrificed its knack for melodies or homeland-derived textures. The soul-rattling "Nothing Like You" and tense "FootShooter" are irresistible slices of nervous, glistening folk-pop laden with charm and chemistry. But nearly every song on *The Winter of Mixed Drinks* possesses an anthem-like instrumental grandeur that unintentionally disguises the message. Towering strings, background choirs, and layered harmonies abound. They deflect attention from Hutchinson's distinctive timbre, which remains almost impossible not to like, seeing as it's effortlessly capable of eliciting pathos and sympathy without resorting to the usual self-pitying trappings.

Yet a feeling of sameness pervades. And while this is a slightly happier record (albeit still shot through with pain and loneliness), the euphoric bursts, whoa-oh refrains, and hand-waving swells tend to render bland the group's core strengths. The sonics also reflect this bigger-is-better strategy. Cleaner and polished, they almost trick the listener they might be listening to U2 outtakes. — **Bob Gendron**



Everybody Was in the French Resistance... Now!

Fixin' the Charts, Vol. 1
Cooking Vinyl, CD

Valdés provides spirited musical backdrops to the vocalist's cockney poetry, each melody nodding to those of the original tunes but never entirely stealing from them.

Considering that Eddie Argos spends most of his time in Art Brut talking about his obsession with pop culture, it shouldn't come as a shock that he started a side project that also obsesses over the very same concerns. Pairing with The Blood Arm's Dylan Valdés, Argos sets out in *Everybody Was in the French Resistance* to write musical responses to hit pop songs. The result is a funny album that's often more clever than good.

Responding to the cattiness of Avril Lavigne's "Girlfriend," Argos offers up "G.I.R.L.F.R.E.N. (You Know I've Got A)," in which the protagonist fends off aggressive female advances. In his typical, deadpan English delivery, Argos spouts, "I don't know why you're so interested in me/I've something to tell you, so listen carefully/I'm very in love with someone else/We've got concerns about your mental health." And so it goes. He answers Bob Dylan's wandering troubadour with a less-than-courageous response on "Think Twice (It's Not Alright)." On "Billy's Genes," Argos flips Michael Jackson's story on its head and tells it from the brokenhearted girl's perspective: "She can't have been the only girl/Illegitimate children all over the world/One day you're gonna get caught/And that's an awful lot of child support."

Meanwhile, Valdés provides spirited musical backdrops to the vocalist's cockney poetry, each melody nodding to those of the original tunes but never entirely stealing from them. Granted, it all makes for a witty albeit flawed listen. (Note: Unless you read the song titles, you'll probably miss most of the jokes.) Duds such as "Coal Digger" and "Hey! It's Jimmy Mack" aren't up to Argos' high standards. Still, while nothing on *Fixin' the Charts, Vol. 1* approaches Art Brut's brilliance, the record is an interesting throwback to the golden era when R&B artists answered their contemporaries' hits with response songs. — **Joe Golfen**

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Every so often, a band comes along and wins the hearts of the indie scenesters, tough-minded critics, and even the curmudgeonly Grammy board. Enter Hot Chip, a British electropop group that's wowed seemingly everyone ever since its 2006 sophomore release *The Warning*. On that record, as well as 2008's disco-referencing *Made in the Dark*, the band places Alexis Taylor's polished tenor atop recycled dance riffs to create near-perfect 80s dancepop. Musically, it's pleasant enough, but doesn't add much to the genre.

One Life Stand finds the band maturing. Hot Chip borrows tinny beats and fuzzy synth lines from artists like Pet Shop Boys and ABC, but it steers clear of their contemporaries' cynical wit. Yes, Turner's sincere vocals and lyrics always felt out of place on previous releases. But here, the group drops dance-flavored numbers in favor of lush, delicate midtempo tunes that make his sentimental narratives feel more genuine.

"Hand Me Down Your Love" offers an ideal mixture of Turner's soaring vocals and the band's desire to get people dancing. Beginning with stammering, minimalist piano lines and 4/4 drum hits, the song eventually lifts into a string-filled chorus. It serves as a compelling contrast of stark, cold instrumentation giving way to powerful human emotion. Hot Chip strikes a similar balance on the twinkling "Alley Cats" as well as the dark closer "Take It In." Not that there aren't a few missteps. "I Feel Better" features the kind of cheesy mid-90s dance beats and low-register auto-tuning that would make Cher jealous, and "Slush" contains one of the most annoying vocal tracks you'll ever hear. Yet the album's strongest quality owes to its omission of sweaty dancefloor anthems. By dialing down the goofiness, Hot Chip is beginning to craft art that really matters. — **Joe Golfen**



Hot Chip

One Life Stand

Astralwerks, CD and LP

The album's strongest quality owes to its omission of sweaty dancefloor anthems. By dialing down the goofiness, Hot Chip is beginning to craft art that really matters.



Gorillaz
Plastic Beach
Virgin, CD and LP

The third album by Gorillaz (the virtual collective led by Blur's Damon Albarn) begins with a lushly orchestrated instrumental that segues into a blaring fanfare that quickly drops off and finds Snoop Dogg's lazy rhymes in control. Downtempo and relaxed, the rap-laden "Welcome to the Plastic Beach" marks a deceptive start to a record that's less about guest emcees and chopped-up beats and more about Albarn's idea of electronic pop.

When Gorillaz first emerged with their 2001 eponymous debut, the band was mainly about a novel cartoon concept that allowed Dan the Automator to spit freaky rhymes atop spacey beats as Albarn crooned along. On 2005's Danger Mouse-helmed *Demon Days*, the group's sound became more cohesive, full of minimalist beats that demanded the listener pay closer attention to hypnotic choruses and guest rappers that disappeared as quickly as they arrived.

But while *Demon Days* is soaked in mechanical paranoia, *Plastic Beach* is rich with orchestrated bliss—even if those moments often give way to a foreboding atmosphere. Thematically, Gorillaz play up an environmental angle that warns against artificiality and consumerism. The frolicking "White Flag" features grime rappers Kano and Bashy trading lines about waking up in a perfect world over a lilting string section. *Plastic Beach* is best when Gorillaz pursue such ornate orchestral backdrops. "On Melancholy Hill" and "Empire Ants" boast some of the most unabashedly beautiful melodies of Albarn's career.

Akin to previous Gorillaz efforts, *Plastic Beach* is littered with collaborators. Mos Def, Little Dragon, and De La Soul all represent. But it's fitting that pop and rock icons such as Mick Jones, Lou Reed, Mark E. Smith, and Bobby Womack also receive invitations, as *Plastic Beach* finds Gorillaz moving away from their hip-hop roots and taking aim at crafting a lasting pop album. Suffice it to say, they come pretty damn close. — **Joe Golfen**



Lou Bond
Lou Bond
Light In The Attic Records, CD and LP

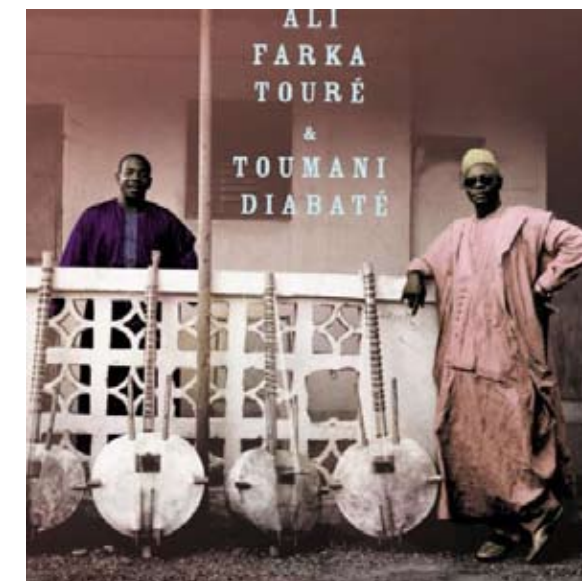
Originally released on Stax, Lou Bond's self-titled debut is one of the most obscure soul gems of the 70s. Best known for "To The Establishment," a track sampled in 1996 by Outkast, the 1974 set has been hiding in cutout bins across the country until its recent re-release on CD and LP by archival pros Light in the Attic. Bond is so obscure, he doesn't even warrant a Wikipedia entry. But the well-written liner notes do a wonderful job of filling in the gaps.

As it happens, Bond was an anomaly that blew in to Stax, recorded a great record and, due to mismanagement, blew right back out the door. The album achieved critical acclaim, but because Bond didn't really conform to the Stax's house sound, it never sold. Who knows what might have transpired if Bond instead headed to Southern California to promote the record?

Bond has been compared to James Taylor on more than one occasion. It's an apt reference point. The opening song, "Lucky Me," eerily feels like it could be an outtake from Taylor's *Sweet Baby James* or *Mud Slide Slim* sessions, with a helping of Glen Campbell on the side. And Bond's versatile and delicate voice stays with you, defying definition.

The rest of the record features a straightforward soul groove, laden with horns with string arrangements that are remarkably similar to what Issac Hayes did on *Hot Buttered Soul*. An 11-minute rendition of Carly Simon's "That's The Way I Always Heard It Should Be" features great rapping at the beginning and again at the end, when Bond says, "Let's have about 13 kids, I don't even care what we call them."

The recording is clean and open, sounding better than many rock remasters that have come along of late. If you are a soul connoisseur that missed the enigmatic effort the first time, don't pass up this chance to add *Lou Bond* to your collection. — **Jeff Dorgay**



Ali Farke Toure and Toumani Diabate
Ali & Toumani
Nonesuch, CD

A continuation of the duo's 2005 Grammy Award-winning album *In the Heart of the Moon*, *Ali & Toumani* is the last record of Ali Farke Toure's career, recorded just before his death in 2006. More melodic than *Talking Timbuktu*, the album Toure cut with Ry Cooder in the mid 90s, this set reflects the extra time and thought taken in its production.

At first listen, *Ali & Toumani* sounds similar to *In the Heart of the Moon*, which marked the two musical icons' initial collaboration. But closer examination reveals the level of comfort they achieved after repeatedly touring together. You can hear an effortlessness and looseness in the mesh of their musical style that, on previous efforts, wasn't as transparent.

If you are a fan of African music and Toure specifically, this is a worthy addition to any collection. As on the Malian guitarist's past Nonesuch albums, much care was taken with the recording, which boasts a massive soundstage and natural decay. All in all, an excellent tribute to a virtuosic talent. — **Jeff Dorgay**

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Even though Jim Campilongo has a regular gig backing up Norah Jones, *Orange* couldn't stray further from his main repertoire. Imagine Jeff Beck imbibing in country/rockabilly twang and you'll get a pretty good idea of the territory he explores.

Other than a forgettable cover of the Rolling Stones' "No Expectations," the first half of the record is filled with blistering guitar work. Campilongo possesses a sense of roominess and decay that very few guitarists are able to capture. He's also got plenty of power when the situation warrants it, but knows when to use the space between the notes to his advantage. Right after steaming through the entertainingly titled "I'm Helen Keller and You're a Waffle Iron," he slows the pace on the title track and "Chelsea Bridge," each a lesson in fantastic note-bending techniques.

Campilongo treats listeners to a brief acoustic interlude with "Because You Like Trombone" before returning to monster twang riffs with *big* echo in "I've Got Blisters on My Fingers." The surprises continue. Vocalist Leah Seigel turns in a torturous rendition of The Stooges' "No Fun" that sounds as if Lydia from *Beetlejuice* does the honors. Eesh. Fortunately, Campilongo rights the ship on the salsa-inflected "Maceo" and album-closing "When You Wish Upon a Star." Besides, no one can say Campilongo lacks a great sense of humor. Or is he just channeling Beck again, since the former Yardbird plays an equally touching "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" on his new *Emotion & Commotion*. Who knew?

Skip the two vocal tracks and *Orange* stands up to anything made by any of your more favorite guitar heroes. If you don't know about Campilongo, you should. — Jeff Dorgay



Jim Campilongo

Orange
Blue Hen Records, CD

Campilongo possesses a sense of roominess and decay that very few guitarists are able to capture.

Black Rebel Motorcycle Club

Beat the Devil's Tattoo
Vagrant, CD and LP

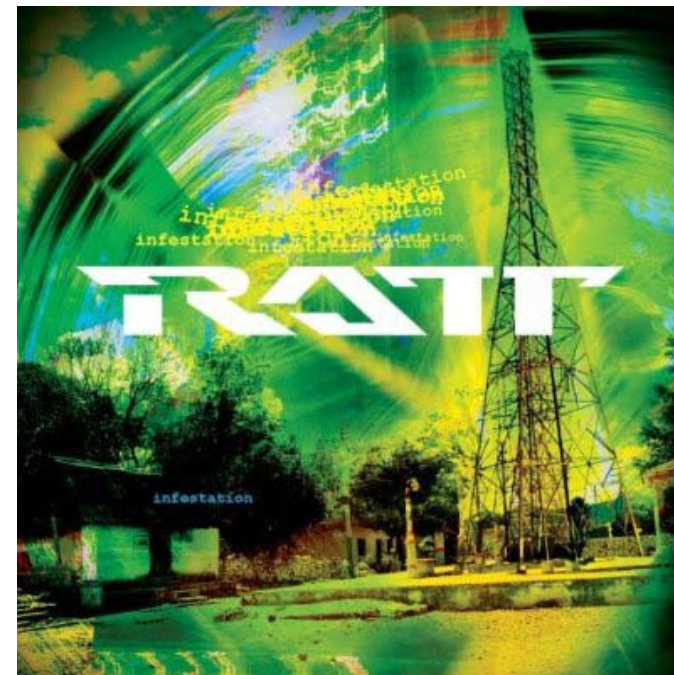
When Black Rebel Motorcycle Club released its self-titled album in 1999, the group seemed ahead of the curve. Along with the Dandy Warhols and Brian Jonestown Massacre, BRMC played the kind of raw, 60s-inspired garage rock that blew up just after the turn of the century. Virgin sensed the trend, signed the band, and re-released its debut in 2001. And though BRMC never attained the status of the Hives or White Stripes, its sludgy, Led Zeppelin-worshiping rock and roll earned the trio a dedicated following.

Yet the group ultimately charted a largely aimless course by switching up styles on a series of mostly forgettable albums. After 2008's self-indulgent instrumental set *The Effects of 333*, BRMC looked ready to mix its influences into one career-defining album. *Beat the Devil's Tattoo* hints at everything the band does well, yet it offers more style than substance and lacks the songs to back up the swagger.



Missed opportunities are everywhere. The title track is a swamp-stomping, chain-gang blues chant, full of groaning guitars, drugged-out vocals, and the sound of boot heels hitting the floor. Akin to most of the tracks, the tune never really goes anywhere. Part of the problem owes to overt mimicry. BRMC conjures up the Stooges for the rave-up "Conscience Killer," and the noise rock during "Evol" recalls the mid-tempo energy of 80s-era Sonic Youth (hence the title). Admittedly, the glam rock kick of "River Styx" proves hard to resist, but the song fails to rise above the groove.

Absent surprises and much to shout about, *Beat the Devil's Tattoo* possesses plenty of soul doesn't quite say (or do) enough. — **Joe Golfen**

**RATT**

Infestation
Roadrunner Records, CD

Arguably the best band to emerge from San Diego, Ratt is back in full force after a number of lineup changes that finally sees the majority of the original band intact. Bassist Robbie Crane and ex-Quiet Riot guitarist Carlos Cavazo have joined original members Stephen Percy (lead vocals), Warren DeMartini (lead guitar), and Bobby Blotzer (drums) to form a viable metal entity once again.

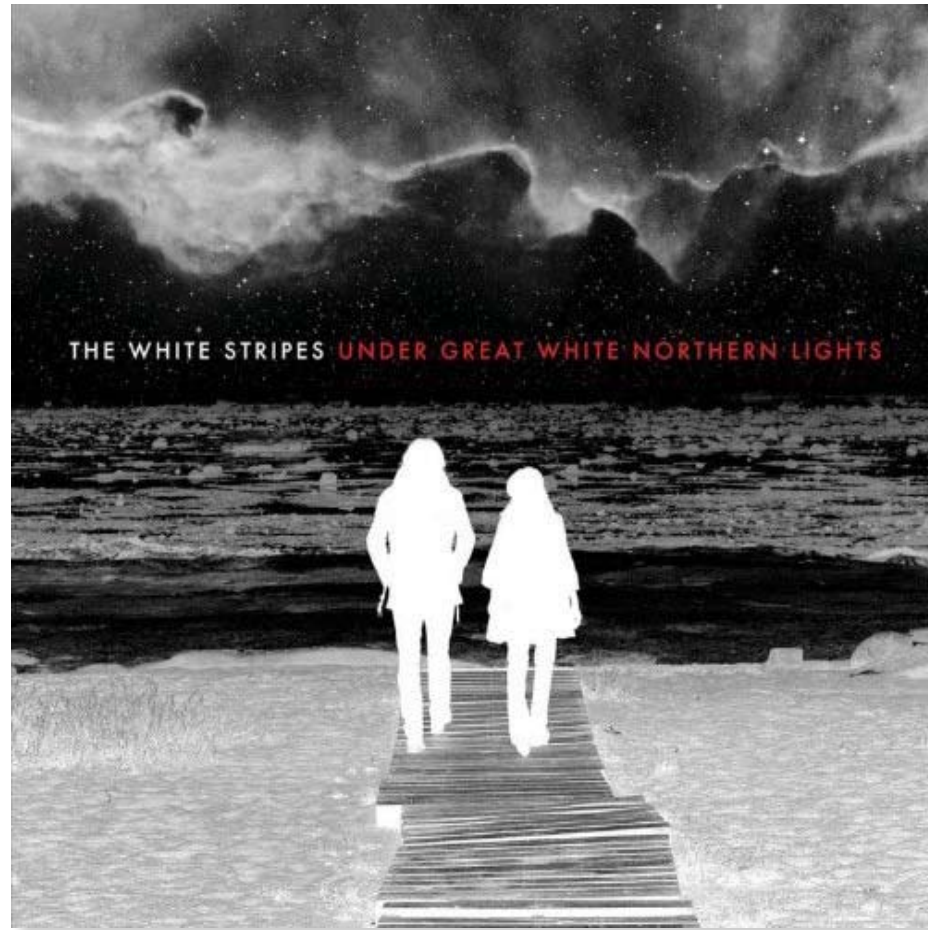
When Ratt burst on the scene with its 1984 debut album *Out of the Cellar*, the quintet was primed for MTV with big hair, big amplifiers, and the infamous "Round and Round" video featuring Milton Berle. Fortunately, Ratt had the chops to prove it was more than just another glam band, with songs bursting with great hooks and massive guitar riffs.

Infestation doesn't waste a second in making its intentions clear. The opening "Eat Me Up Alive" begins with a monster riff that instantly grabs your attention. Sure, there are a few sappy vocal overdubs, but the band hasn't gone soft. The remainder of the record is served up in classic Ratt fashion, with ten more songs replete with swagger and conquest. DeMartini and Crane trade engaging licks and while their fretboard runs recall past Ratt favorites. Everything's in good taste. Wisely, the band definitely looked to its early catalog for inspiration.

None of these guys are too old to rock, and Percy's voice sounds very strong throughout. Band chemistry is obvious. Blotzer's Facebook posts currently indicate that the boys are having a great time playing together. We'll confirm this when we catch their return to the Sunset Strip on April 20. — **Jeff Dorgay**

The White Stripes

Under Great White Northern Lights
Third Man/Warner Bros.
CD or 180g 2LP.



Groups traditionally release live albums for one of two reasons. Either as a stopgap between studio efforts or as a substitute for a greatest-hits collection that usually acknowledges the end of a certain phase of a career. Recorded on the duo's 2007 Canadian tour and the soundtrack to the film of the same name, the White Stripes' *Under Great White Northern Lights* has all the appearances of the latter. The 16-track set also may serve the role of a reluctant farewell.

The White Stripes have been inactive since drummer Meg White developed severe anxiety problems in the fall of 2007, forcing the band to cancel the remainder of its tour. While guitarist Jack White continues to busy himself with other bands (Dead Weather, Raconteurs) and label ventures (Third Man Records), ex-wife Meg has slipped into the shadows. It's not inconceivable that the pair will eventually reunite—the band never officially broke up—yet the timing of the live record leads one to believe that the former Detroit residents are choosing to go out on top, at least for now.

Available on a 180g two-LP set that inexplicably lacks the accompanying MP3 codes for a digital download, *Under Great White Northern Lights* presents the band as it might sound from 20 rows back in a mid-sized theater. This is an old-fashioned live album, with no indication of overdubs or corrections. Amplifier hum, cords being inserted into sockets, and impromptu changes abound—as does omnipresent crowd noise. White's blistering guitar leads and vocal wails are the standout attractions.

His bluesy slide solos and punk-derived jabs stab, recoil, and assault. Unfortunately, Meg's drums lack a complementary punch and stay back in the mix, frequently muddled when songs pick up in tempo and electrifying distortion, which is often. Fans accustomed to the cleaner, more dynamic and open feel of studio sets such as 2005's *Get Behind Me Satan* and 2007's *Icky Thump* will almost undoubtedly be taken aback by the rawness here.

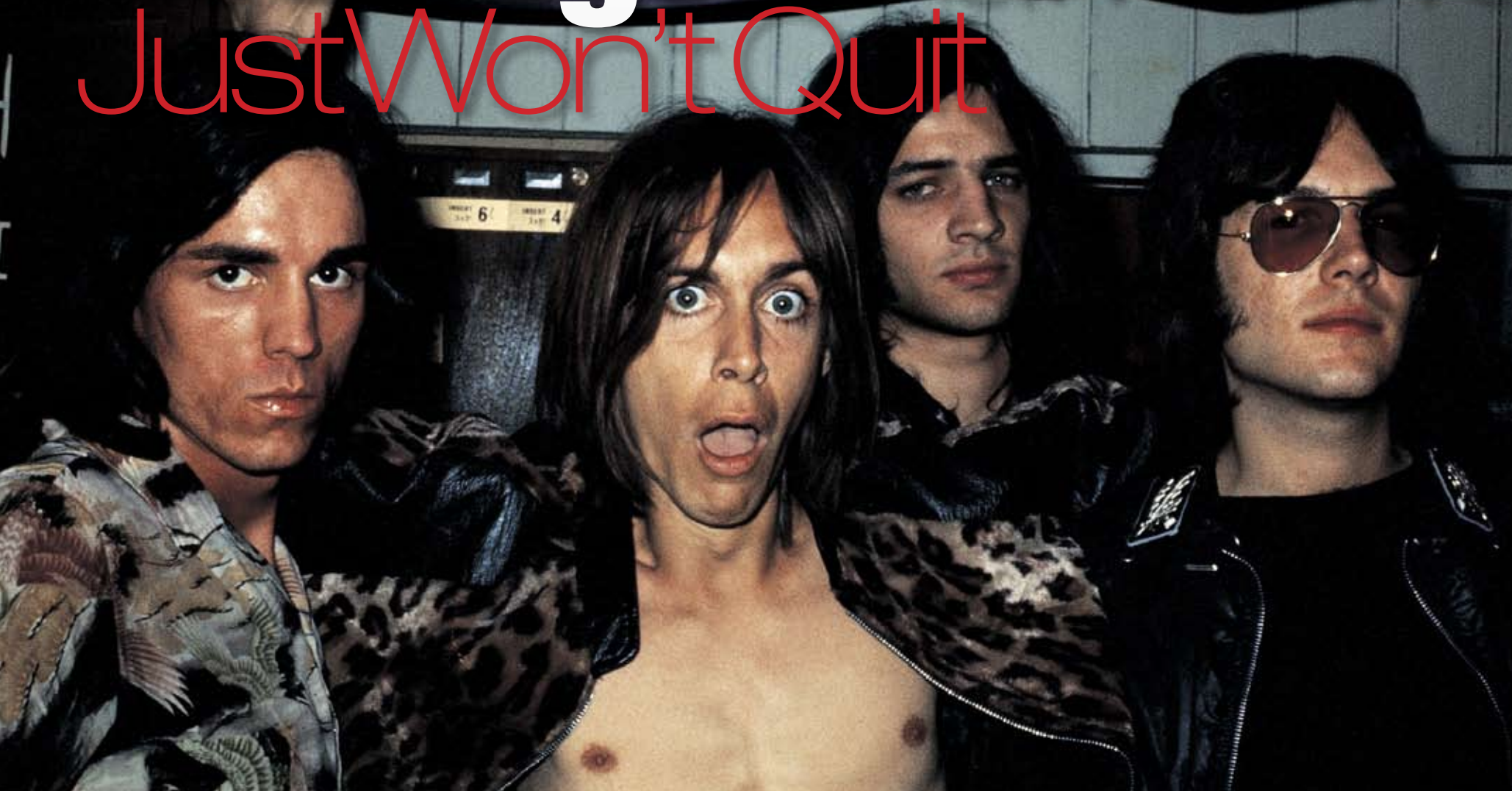
Falling well short of qualifying as a great live record, the affair is nonetheless notable for a few reasons that go beyond the duo's inseparable chemistry and White's transfixing riffs. Even if it can't visually parade Jack and Meg's entertaining interactions, *Under Great White Northern Lights* shows off the band's remarkable onstage physicality. Nearly every song here (save the cute acoustic-based ditty "Little Ghost" and the sweet nursery rhyme "We Are Going to Be Friends") is stripped down, much more bruising and explosive than their studio counterparts. There's also the inclusion of two covers that the White

Stripes make their own: Dolly Parton's desperate "Jolene" and Burt Bacharach's nervous "I Just Don't Know What to Do With Myself." They alone are worth the price of admission, though in hearing them in the context of the band's undecided status, they feel slightly bitter-sweet. — **Bob Gendron**

Nearly every song here is stripped down, much more bruising and explosive than their studio counterparts.

The Stooges: Raw Power

Just Won't Quit



© Mick Rock

Stooges Member James Williamson Opens Up as the Band's 1973 Masterwork is Canonized as a Deluxe Reissue

By Bob Gendron

James Williamson has spent a majority of the past 35 years away from the bars and stages that once made the guitarist almost famous. In 1971, the native Texan joined the Stooges—the groundbreaking, long-unappreciated Detroit proto-punk band helmed by Iggy Pop—and co-wrote all of the material for 1973's *Raw Power*. The group's greatest studio album, and arguably the world's best punk record, is as defined as much by Williamson's edgy, pioneering six-string abandon as Pop's appetite-for-destruction howling. It almost all went for naught.

Following a whirlwind cycle of hard drug abuse, inattentive reception, and slapdash touring, the Stooges imploded in early 1974. Despite its musical genius and emotional wallop, *Raw Power* amounted to commercial failure. Columbia promptly dropped the band. Unable to secure another record deal, Pop went on to team with David Bowie to ignite a solo career. Williamson headed back to school, ultimately joining Sony and working his way up the corporate ladder.

Yet time and circumstance have ways of righting past injustices. Shortly after original Stooges guitarist Ron Asheton died of a heart attack in 2009, Pop approached Williamson about the possibility of rejoining the band, which originally reunited in 2003. Initially, the 60-year-old guitarist declined. But, ironically, due to a fortunate coincidence brought about by the sour economy, he soon relented. As Williamson and Co. prepare for an upcoming tour, the group has returned to billing itself Iggy & the Stooges, just as it was known during the *Raw Power* era.

Spurred by the band's recent induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Sony/Legacy's excellent reissue of the still-extraordinary *Raw Power*, Williamson spoke at length from Los Angeles about the original album, touring memories, the new reissue, his inimitable guitar style, and what lies ahead.

Bob Gendron: What was it like for you to listen to the *Raw Power* material again, nearly four decades later?

James Williamson: It was fun because the reissue has a lot of different material. Some of it I'd never heard before. And some of it takes you back. The [Atlanta] Richards gigs, for example, were things I remember us doing that were fun. Those particular nights that they selected [Legacy's *Raw Power* reissue features *Georgia Peaches*, an exhilarating disc of previously unreleased live material culled from the five-night stand at the Atlanta club] were really good shows, so it was cool to listen to them again. The outtakes that we had never used—I hadn't heard those in a million years. All in all, it was fun just to hear what you hadn't heard in 35 or 40 years.

B: In terms of the album itself, what do you remember about the recording sessions?

J: That album was my first real album. I had been in the studio a few times recording demos but had never actually done an entire album in a studio. I recall being excited and giving it everything I had. We were fortunate enough that everyone in our management chain was distracted with breaking David Bowie in, so they weren't paying much attention to us. That allowed us to do what we wanted to do. The product is unique that way. It's very rare that you get stuff laid down the way you wanted it to be.

B: Opinions regarding the record's mix remain divided. Bowie's original mix is rightly criticized for lacking punch and dynamics. Iggy's remix is said to be overly pronounced. What is your take? (continued)

as the major chords. In order to that I'd have to do that almost exclusively. So that's why that stuff comes off as staccato, tearing, really pounding chord changes.

B: Speaking of manic aggression, what do you recall about the Richards shows? The performances on the reissue sound very contentious.

J: I completely went with my own ideas. I joined the Stooges in 1971, and while we had a short period of having two guitarists, I started introducing my own music into the band right away. Growing up and learning how to play the guitar, I always played my own music as opposed to other peoples' music because that was simpler for me to do. So I developed that style growing up.

“I wrote that music on acoustic guitar, which is something most people don't know. That particular guitar is now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum.”

And that's just the way I play. The approach to writing the songs comes from sitting up in my bedroom in London, and I wrote that music on acoustic guitar, which is something most people don't know. That particular guitar is now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum. In terms of leads and things like that, I'd just go in and let it rip, and see what happens. When we finally got a take we liked, that was it. Some were a bit rough. But you're right. They do fit the music.

B: You note that Bowie didn't understand the music. But no one really did, right? Given the absence of Stooges contemporaries in the early 1970s, where did you get the ideas for the assaultive leads and percussive rhythms?

J: That's just my style. From very early on, long before the Stooges, when I would write music I would write a lot of chords in a very fast progression. You play major chords and then you play the transition chords. A lot of people play the latter kind of wimpy, or up-picked. I didn't do that. I would play in-between chords as strongly

J: The band was on a death march. We were playing as many gigs as we could find just to pay the bills and have food on the table. That stretch had been during a fairly lengthy string of gigs. I found the audience to be fun-loving people. It was a bar but a dinner bar with tables and tablecloths, and things like that. People bringing their dates and such. You can imagine a bunch of fun-loving Atlanta people showing up for a Stooges gig where the singer is out jumping on your table and messing around with your date. Contentious is the right word for it. But all of our shows were, so that wasn't unusual. The band played really well. Everything sounded good. I was proud of those gigs. Some nights were better than others, but it was a lot of fun. I don't know about that night, but it was this series of gigs where Elton John came up onstage in a gorilla costume and us not knowing that was him. He was lucky.

B: What was the tension in the band like at that point? Had any doubts about the future crept in? *(continued)*

J: At the time, we were very cocksure about ourselves. We felt that our mix that came out of the sessions was the best one. When we delivered it to our management, they didn't agree with us. They wanted to put Bowie on it to salvage it, if you will. The main problem is that they didn't understand the music. Neither did David. Anyway, we went in with him and he remixed it. Bowie is very stylized and wants to get his fingerprint on everything. He did it the way he saw it. I can't really say that, even though we complained about it at the time, Iggy and I were sitting there when he did it, so we have some culpability too. It has a unique sound to it. Unquestionably. It has a place. I wouldn't call it my dream mix. And I wouldn't call Iggy's mix my dream mix. But his mix allowed a lot of people who hadn't previously heard the album to listen to it, and I think he widened the audience with the second mix. So bringing the original mix is cool for people who hadn't heard it before. Who knows? Someday maybe I'll get a crack at it too.

B: What would you do differently?

J: [Laughing.] I would hire a professional. There are a lot of guys out there who are really good mixers. That album could benefit from a less-abstract mix. More balance, but authentic. The main thing is that the songs are good. They come through any mix that's on it. Despite everybody's efforts to screw it up, *Raw Power* is still good.

B: Undoubtedly. What was going through your mind in terms of your approach to the guitar, especially given it was your first album? A lot of your playing seems chaotic but it fits. Did you model it off of the Stooges' previous records or go with your own ideas?



© Robert Mattheu



© Heather Harris

J: We all thought that the band had a bright future. At that point, we all thought that the band would get another record deal and that we were out fighting the good fight, and that there was no question we were going to somehow succeed. But that was unrealistic on our part. Things progressively got worse from there.

B: *After the band split, you became a Sony executive. How did you make the transition to businessman from being a guitarist in the chaotic band known for having a chemically addled singer who smears himself with peanut butter?*

J: The band broke up after the last Detroit gigs that are chronicled on *Metallic KO*. Iggy and I tried to make a demo tape that we were going to use to get a record deal. We didn't get the deal. But eventually, that demo ended up being *Kill City*, which, coincidentally, is why I'm here in Los Angeles. I'm helping the guy mixing it for a reissue. It sounds fantastic and will be incredible. Anyway, after that was all done and we couldn't get anything going, Iggy went off to Europe with Bowie, and I got interested in computers. They were more exciting than music had become. One thing led to another and I went back to school and got an engineering degree. I went off to the Silicon Valley and have no regrets about any of that stuff. It's been a fascinating career. After Ronnie died last year, I first got the call from Iggy telling me he had a bunch of gigs lined up for the Stooges, and he was thinking how in the hell were they going to do them. At first, I said, 'Sorry, I've got this day job. I can't do that. I can go play the Hall of Fame gig with you.' But what happened is that Sony wasn't immune to the economic situation and started handing out early retirement packages a couple of months later. I did the math and decided that I couldn't afford not to take it. So then I said, 'Hey, I'm available.' I go back a long way with those guys and they really couldn't do it without me, because they were fresh out of Stooges. I said let's do it. So here we are. *(continued)*

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B: Is there any gratification in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame honor? Or does hearing *Raw Power*, and how well it's held up, mean more to you?

J: It's always gratifying to be appreciated by people. The Stooges certainly paid their dues in terms of not being recognized and not getting any acknowledgement for the groundbreaking efforts that were done. Having this honor is a neat thing, and certainly overdue. Talk to me after the ceremonies and I'll tell you more about what I think of it. Scotty Thurston [current Heartbreaker keyboardist, who began touring with the Stooges in 1973 and can be heard on *Georgia Peaches*] is going to come play with us that night so that's going to be fun, too.

B: Will your upcoming tour focus on *Raw Power* material?

J: Yes. Right now we've got 24 dates, and most of them are in Europe. It's not just *Raw Power*. That's not enough for a set so we've got about 30 or so songs to draw from, with probably a 20-song set. It will be a range of things, all the way from a few songs from the early albums, almost all of the songs on *Raw Power*, several songs from *Kill City*, a couple of songs from *New Values*, which are really Iggy's solo things, but they are good. And we have stuff that's never been properly recorded.

B: The outtakes on the reissue are amazing. Will you play some of those live?

J: We might play "You Don't Want My Name." And we'll play "I Got a Right." And we'll mix it up so it doesn't get boring.

B: That's not a term ever associated with the Stooges. So how did it feel for you to be onstage for the first time in approximately 35 years?

J: It was quite an adventure. [Laughing.] Luckily, I have a lot of good friends who actually know what they are doing, so I had some coasting here and there. I did some serious woodshedding and got so I can actually play this stuff again. The advantage that I have is that most of it is my music, so I play it the way I play it, and that's my natural style, so I don't have to be like anybody else. That makes it easier. People say I sound like the old records, and sure enough, that's the only way I know how to play. It's a good thing.

B: Are you still in awe of Iggy's energy?

J: He's amazing. I have to give him a lot of credit. Even though he's 62, he's up there putting out, big time. There are not many 20 year olds who can get up there and do that stuff. He's just one of a kind. I was a little surprised that he can put on a show like that. It feels good, we're having fun and we'll keep doing it. ●

Iggy & the Stooges

Raw Power

Legacy/Columbia, 2CD Legacy Edition or 4CD Deluxe Edition

Ten years after Rhino Handmade released a box set that presented every single note recorded by the Stooges for 1970's *Funhouse* album, Legacy has responded by celebrating *Raw Power* in two different configurations. The standard, twin-disc Legacy Edition includes the remastered 1973 studio record with the original David Bowie mix and a scintillating, one-hour collection of live performances taken from the group's five-night stand at Atlanta's Richards nightclub in October 1973. Also available exclusively from the Stooges' Web site (www.iggyandthestoogesmusic.com) is a four-disc Deluxe Edition, which adds a third disc of rarities, outtakes, and alternate takes from the *Raw Power* era, a DVD documentary, 48-page book with essays from rock luminaries such as Henry Rollins, 5 x 7 photo prints, and a reproduction of a Japanese 45RPM single. Diehards should opt for the latter version as the disc of rare studio material is alone worth the price. But it's impossible to go wrong with either choice.

While Bowie's thin, flat mix is still heavily flawed, the remaster adds life, clarity, and oomph. The guitars sounds scrappier, as if they're engaged in a street fight, the strings rusty switchblades at the ready to take on all comers. A gritty unevenness persists. Certain tracks boast better separation (space between the drums, pianos, and acoustic guitars are considerably improved) and there's now a sense of the air that singer Iggy Pop draws into his lungs before mauling the microphone. Is it still murky? Yes.

But what really matters here is the music, and there's still nothing like *Raw Power*. Threatening, ominous, desperate, violent, savage, honest, bloody—the cathartic songs are caked in grime that's tough as leather, the coats of dirt, sweat, and stinking sex layered on top of the arrangements. James Williamson's high-voltage guitar screams and shrieks, pounds



and stomps, a percussive force that combines with the drums in mounting a machine-like attack that grinds, chews, and spits. Pop is a primal predator, a banshee whose electrocuted yowls, vulgar mews, snide asides, and frustrated roars amplify the music's deviant intensity and kill-or-be-killed swagger.

Yet *Raw Power* isn't a discombobulated mess or amateurish mayhem. Pop's deliveries are explosive albeit focused, as evidenced by the wait-in-the-bushes ambush of "Gimme Danger" and exaggerated accents on "I Need Somebody." An amphetamine thrust drives the music into in-the-red levels but doesn't conceal the band's technical proficiency or ahead-of-the-curve thinking. Mixing styles, the constant buzz and crunch of Williamson's over-distorted guitar engages in a penetrating intercourse that throws rock, jazz, and R&B into the same bed. *Raw Power* lives up to its name—and then some.

And its legacy is meaningfully expanded by *Georgia Peaches*, an unhinged collection

of eight live tracks from Richards. The confrontational performances are pure sonic blitzkrieg, with the Stooges taking on the identity of a larger, hyped-up ensemble onstage. *Raw Power* songs come off as blistering rave-ups. Scott Thurston turns rapid piano notes into sharp ice picks that further rip open the flesh of hip-shaking tunes such as the then-new "Head On" and "Cock in My Pocket." The Asheton brothers hold noise-polluted rhythms at their mercy. Williamson utilizes his guitar as a nerve-frying stun gun. Not to be beat, Pop terrorizes the noticeably audible Southern crowd, baiting fans with hostile vocals and menacing energy. Randomly tossing in threats and telling raunchy stories, he really is the "street-walking cheetah with a heart full of napalm" protagonist of "Search and Destroy" and sings like a mistreated prisoner trying to break out of a cage. The animalistic vibe extends to "Doojiman," a previously unreleased 1972 outtake at the end of the disc. Invigorating, and not to be missed. — **Bob Gendron**



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Club Mix

By Scott Tetzlaff

The term “trip-hop” isn’t bandied about much these days. Having developed during the mid-90s in the UK, the genre fuses elements of hip-hop, house, electronica, dancehall, and experimental music. The sound is generally spacey and moody, with lots of sampling and sprinkled-in bits of jazz. Trip-hop shares a lot in common with its close musical cousin, “downtempo.” Interestingly, each style’s early works tend to almost exclusively feature female vocalists.

Conventional wisdom suggests that hip-hop lyrics weren’t really the strong suit on the UK scene, but that the popularity owed to artists’ technical abilities. Consequently, trip-hop is more abstract than pure hip-hop, with words often taking a back seat. Hence, the music does the talking as evolutionary wrinkles take the sound in completely different directions. A few household names that got their start in trip-hop (a.k.a., “The Bristol Sound”) include Massive Attack, Portishead, DJ Shadow, and Tricky.

So, has trip-hop gone the way of the sabertooth tiger or betamax? No. It’s alive and well, but people in the club scene don’t refer to it as such anymore. It’s been seamlessly absorbed by a handful of familiar subgenres—chill out, acid jazz, and ambient among them. But the genre’s best pioneers continue to make great music. This month sees Massive Attack return after a long break and solo projects. In this issue’s column, we’ll also look at few classics and some other new releases that tip their hat to Bristol.



Massive Attack

Heligoland

Virgin, CD and LP

On its fifth studio album, Massive Attack (Grant Marshall, et al.) again pairs with founding member Robert Del Naja (aka 3D). The latter is a painter turned MC, who’s spent the last couple of years scoring award-winning documentaries. As one might expect, his art graces the cover. Other notable participants include longtime band friend Horace Andy plus guest vocalists Damon Albarn (Blur) and Hope Sandoval (Mazzy Star).

The collaboration results in a rich, complex disc that you won’t find on a commercial Top 40 playlist. Various textures bubble beneath the surface; *Heligoland* takes a few listens to appreciate just how much Massive Attack’s style has changed over time.

“Girl I Love You” edges into Middle Eastern territory, flirting with dangerous chaos before pulling back. The slightly creepy “Paradise Circus” serves up delicate vocals and fragile melodies, the track coming on as if it could be part of a horror movie soundtrack. “Atlas Air” is the most instantly recognizable song, the cut tracing a solid line to Massive Attack’s older works due to its hooks, subtle shifts in rhythm, and Del Naja’s hallmark talk-sing deliver. The solid beats and changes in style should keep *Heligoland* in heavy rotation for a long time.



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Soma Sonic

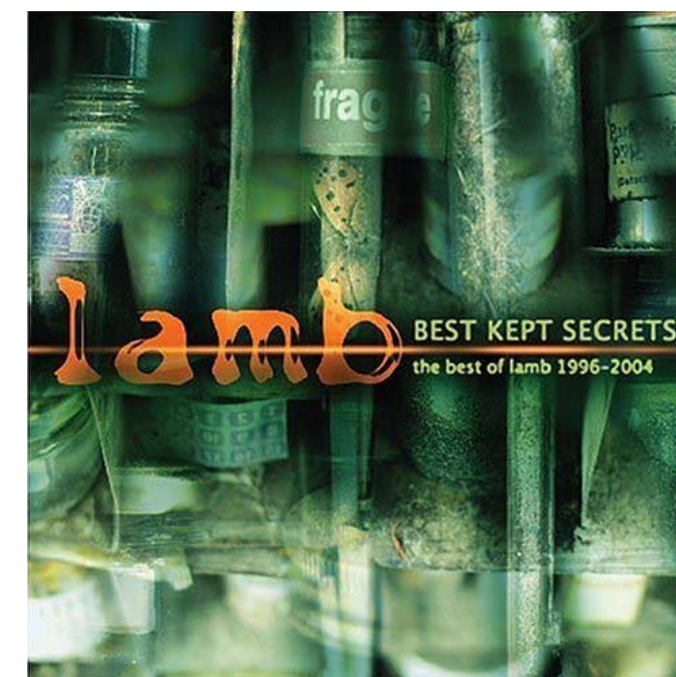
Future

Sonic Images, CD

Soma Sonic (brothers Francois and Dominic Paterson) always come up with cool, dreamy, downtempo music that resonates with the trip-hop aesthetic. After encountering logistical difficulties, they chose to self-release their debut album and were subsequently picked up by Sonic Images, an imprint owned by Tangerine Dream member Christopher Franke.

Not surprisingly, the duo's highly atmospheric fare has since made its way into movies and television. *Future* opens with "First Wave," featuring a layer of sparse keyboard riffs over drum and bass tracks, and proceeds to move into the trance-like vocals of "Crazy Moon." The title track and "Relapse" possess a sense of urgency that could be a great accompaniment for deep thought, long road trips, or a cinematic bank heist.

As it nears its tenth anniversary, *Future* remains true to its name and withstands the test of time.



Lamb

The Best Kept Secrets:

The Best of Lamb 1996-2004

Koch Records, CD

Lamb is dead. Or not. Despite rumors, the Manchester-based duo of Andrew Barlow and Louise 'Lou' Rhodes keeps getting back together for one more show—even to this day. The group's distinctive sound evolves around Lou's sometimes girlish, sometimes brittle voice. His unique, complex timbre blends perfectly with the music's chilly, sparse vibes.

Lamb is at its best with ballads and love songs that are almost hymnal in nature. The twosome's best-known track, "Gorecki," taken from its debut, functions as one of the darkest cuts on this engaging compilation. Keeping things in balance, "Til The Clouds Clear" offers a soft, acoustic, much lighter coffeehouse sound. Lamb's appeal resides in such sonic dichotomies.

If you aren't familiar with the band's work, this is a great sampler. And if you're already a fan, it's a great way to have your favorites in one place.

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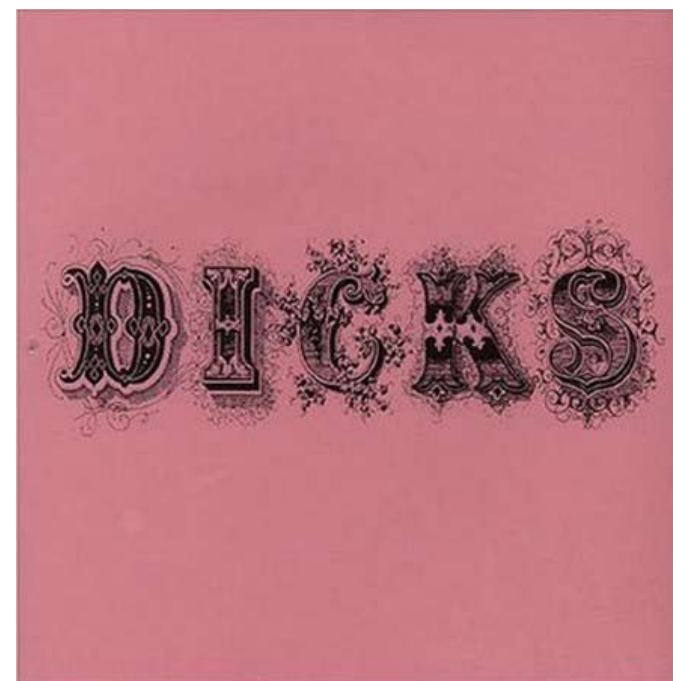


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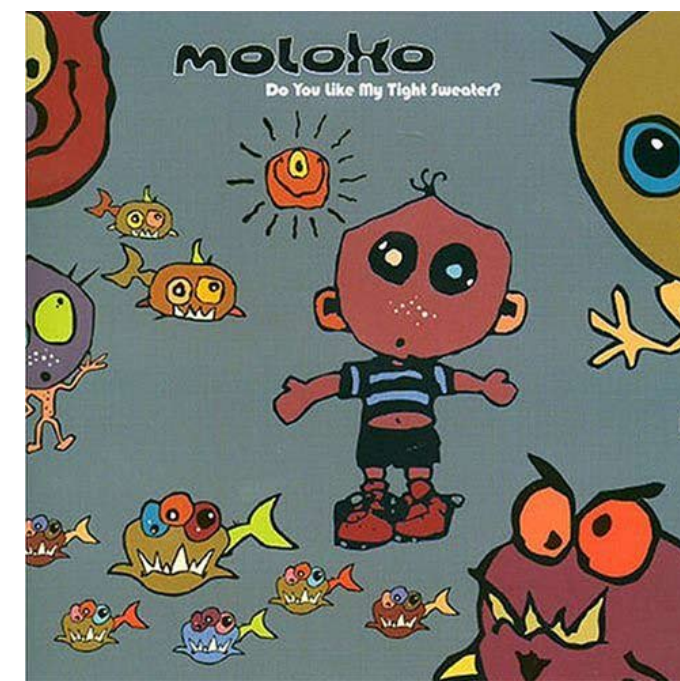
Fila Brazilia

Dicks
Twenty Three, CD

Fila Brazilia is a Northeastern England duo comprised of Steve Cobby and David McSherry. Released in 2004, *Dicks* is the band's most recent album. Wildly inventive, Fila Brazilia is an unsung hero of trip hop; the collective never received the respect it deserved.

You never know what's around the corner when listening to the tandem's fusing of multiple styles, samples, and instruments. There's even a banjo in the mix on "Kiss My Whippet." Intriguingly, the first few tracks here are relatively shy on bass, but everything kicks into high gear on "D'Avros"; don't turn up the subwoofer until you hear it. It's another example of the group's wacky humor.

Other standout cuts include "Sidearms and Parsnips," which has an upbeat 70s retro instrumental vibe, and "The Great Attractor," a veritable "Where's Waldo" of 60's R&B samples. *Dicks* ends on a simple jazz note with the subtle "Septentrion," infused with piano and bongos. If you dig these sounds, be certain to also discover Fila Brazilia's *Another Late Night* series.



Moloko

Do You Like My Tight Sweater?
Warner Brothers, CD

Setting the way-back machine to 1997, we encounter the debut from Moloko. The band is comprised of Ireland's Roisin Murphy and Britain's Mark Brydon, who began their partnership at a party. Featuring inspired weirdness and an album title taken from their first conversation, Moloko's take downtempo genre is quite lighthearted.

"Fun For Me" is a bouncy, jazz-laden cut that's layered over great bass beats that recall those of Deee-Lite. "I Can't Help Myself" resonates as a funky electro tune complete with ultra-wide stereo ping-pong effects. "Dirty Monkey/Killa Bunnies" is just plain demented ("Killer bunnies are coming, killer bunnies are on their way!") and likely composed while the members were in a highly altered chemical state. It all makes for big fun. Also, don't miss "Who Shot The Go Go Dancer?," a hidden track at the end of the disc.

Sadly, the band is not currently together but is talking about reuniting. We'll be waiting. ●

Refinement and Finesse

The Octave V-40SE

By Jeff Dorgay



Just when you think the standard push-pull tube amplifier has been done to death, something comes along to redefine the genre. In the best Bauhaus minimalist tradition, the Octave V-40SE amplifier is a true treasure, with a few interesting twists on what has come before.

Available in silver or black, our test amplifier arrived in silver, which adds to the understated style of the piece and should be at home in any décor. Though a substantial tube cage is provided to pass worldwide safety standards, it begs to be removed so that you can see the glowing power tubes inside. Even with the cage in place, the tops of the driver tubes can be seen toward the front panel. Fit and finish are exceptional, the controls have a solid feel, and the casework is flawless.

Though this might not be as much of a hot button for you as it is for me, I was highly impressed with the excellent instruction manual. Even a complete novice will have no problem setting up the amplifier and biasing the tubes, thanks to its variable bias adjustments on the front panel and accurate LED biasing indicators. The low bias range will handle the EL34, KT66 or 6L6 tubes, while the high range works with the 6550, KT88, KT90 and KT100 tubes.



What makes the Octave amplifier so special is the level of refinement offered at a price point that is not much higher than what you'd expect to pay for more mid-level separates.

The V-40SE uses one 12AX7 (ECC 83) and one 6922 (ECC 88) tube to drive a combination of power tubes, with a minimum (10db) of negative feedback. The amplifier is rated at 40 watts per channel with EL34 output tubes. According to designer Andreas Hoffmann, the amplifier puts out "slightly more power, about 5 percent" with the KT88 tubes. Interestingly, Octave also offers a Big Box or a Super Big Box, which are large capacitor banks to increase the power supply capacity of the amplifier. Hoffman said that these offer more clarity to the presentation and about 20 percent more dynamic power (with the Super Big Box).

Though I'm giving away the conclusion of the review at the beginning, what makes the Octave amplifier so special is the level of refinement offered at a price point that is not much higher than what you'd expect to pay for more mid-level separates. This \$4,900 integrated

amplifier easily holds its own with separates I've heard that cost quite a bit more. The only downside to the equation is that it is only 40 watts per channel, although for many, that will be more than enough. If you have speakers that are in the 90-93 db range of sensitivity, you'll be surprised with how well the Octave V-40SE can drive them.

We will have a follow-up review later this year when the Super Big Box arrives to compare the difference. The Big Box is an additional \$1,200 and the Super is \$3,500. This is much like the modular approach taken by Naim in regards to power-supply design; I'm in favor of a product with an upgrade path. Should you become smitten with the V-40 SE but desire an upgrade in the future, one of these power-supply upgrades might give you exactly what you need without parting with the sound you already like, or forcing you to sell the product at a loss.

Going beyond the traditional soft-start circuitry, the V-40SE uses an analog processor that controls a soft start of the mains supply as well as the high voltage system. This also manages the overload protection of the output and driver stages. This processor manages the switchable "Ecomode" that keeps standby power consumption to only 20 watts, but it minimizes warm-up time upon power up. When in this mode, the amplifier will switch into standby if no signal is detected for five minutes or more. When listening for an extended period, Ecomode can be switched off, which can be handy when going on vacation to completely power down the amplifier.

Let's Get Started

The V40SE is a snap to set up. It should only take about 10 minutes to unpack, plug the tubes in and bias them up. By switching the input selector to the Bias mode, the LED indicators become available to adjust to your choice of output tube. As with any vacuum-tube power amplifier, it's a good idea to check the bias adjustment on a new set of tubes fairly often at the beginning of their life. Once a week for the first month, then after they settle in, perhaps every couple of months just to be safe.

Octave includes a nice remote that can be programmed to work with your TV, DVD player and cable box, which is an excellent attempt at reducing "remote clutter" and there are five high-level inputs on the rear panel. There is also an H/T pass-through as well as a fixed output, should you still have an analog recorder. A nice touch, considering the resurgence of reel-to-reel tape. There is also a variable output, should you have speakers that require bi-amplification or use a powered subwoofer.

Almost all of my listening was done with the Naim HDX music server (with PS555 power supply), and for someone wanting a compact yet high-performance, all-digital system, these two components made for a very synergistic combination. *(continued)*



Thanks to the ease in which bias can be reset, I was able to easily rebias and optimize the system to the speakers I used.

A few other CD players at different price points were used with excellent results. Toward the end of the review when I was encouraged by the high level of playback quality I was hearing, I switched to some analog playback via the Naim Superline (with HighCap2 power supply) phono preamplifier, Rega P9 turntable/Dynavec-tor XV-1s cartridge combination.

The entire system was cabled with a combination of Audioquest Sky and Colorado interconnects, Colorado speaker cable and Shunyata Python CX power cords. A Running Springs Haley took care of power conditioning; though this was one of the quietest tube amplifiers I've heard in a long time, it still benefited from plugging it in to the Haley, resulting in an even quieter background.

Your Choice of Sound

While most would expect the amplifier to have a somewhat warmer, more fluid midrange character with the EL34 tubes, with the KT88's having more extension and dynamics, the difference between the two tubes was minimal. Both sets of supplied tubes were the "winged" SEC Russian tubes. Thanks to the ease in which bias can be reset, I was able to easily rebias and optimize the system to the speakers I used.

The Harbeth's definitely benefited from the extra top-end punch of the KT88's, while the GamuT and Dynaudio speakers were more to my liking with the EL-34's. The good news is that this makes it easy to fine-tune the V-40SE to what you prefer.

For the fanatical tube lover, there are definitely some NOS variations that could offer a different perspective, but these are very expensive. I did not get a chance to sample any vintage 6550's, but I did have a set of the EAT KT88's (full review in next issue) that, while expensive at \$1,500 for a matched quad, took the performance of the Octave one more click ahead of the stock tubes in terms of bass extension and even more clarity in the highs.

The other 99 percent of you will be thrilled with the performance provided by the stock tubes.

A Strong Performer

As I mentioned at the beginning of the review, the strongest suit of the Octave amplifier is its level of resolution and refinement. I used it primarily with the Harbeth Monitor 40.1's, a pair of Dynaudio Confidence C4's and the GamuT S-7's. All high-quality, five-figure speakers. From the moment I turned on the V-40 SE, I never felt like I was listening to a \$5,000 amplifier. I've owned enough separates in this price range that I feel confident saying that it sounds much more musical than any combination of \$2,500 preamplifier and amplifier that I've heard in recent memory.

Though the midrange magic possessed by all great tube amplifiers is here in spades, the V-40SE delivers great refinement at both ends of the frequency spectrum, which is a rarity with all but the most expensive tube gear. The only moderately powered tube amplifier that I've ever heard with this kind of bass control is my BAT VK-55SE, and it costs \$6,000. (And you still need a suitable preamp. Adding the matching VK-31SE to the mix adds another \$6,000 to the price total.) All of the Supreme Beings of Leisure catalog has

very deep, synth bass beats, but their current release, *11i*, outdoes the first two records in the grunt department. This was the first disc that really gave me a good look at the capabilities of this amplifier.

Usually when listening to a lower-powered tube amplifier, I just give up the idea of hearing any major bass weight with this music. But the Octave took me by surprise when I cued up my favorite track, "I'll be Good," and all of the lowest bits of the tone were still there. This amplifier definitely has big bass. Also impressive was the Octave's ability to unravel very dense music. Even though there are no acoustic instruments at all on *11i*, it is a densely recorded record, and when played on lesser equipment, it is easily mistaken for a compressed recording. With the Octave, I had no problem discerning the multiple layers of information being presented.

When listening to "Too Proud" from Mighty Sam McClain's *Give it up to Love* disc, I could hear that the bass line is deep and controlled, while McClain's vocal stays put just slightly left to center, even at high volume, while the Hammond solo just floats behind the speakers, larger than life. Of course, solo vocals are out of the park, with tons of texture; this amplifier definitely has a "reach out and touch it" quality that is seductive. *(continued)*

FEATURE

Tonality is fantastic, with just a smidge of body that really shines on acoustic instruments, especially piano, acoustic guitar and violin. Best of all, this is an amplifier that is up to playing some heavy rock, too. Thanks to the gentle compression of tube amplifiers, when pushed hard they get to a point where turning the volume control any further in the clockwise direction no longer results in an increase in volume. The music just flattens out. Whether I was playing Jimi Hendrix or the Scorpions, this understated little tube amplifier would blast a lot louder before compression kicked in, a better quality than I thought a 40-watt amplifier could deliver. I can't wait to hear the Super Black Box.

I used a wide range of speakers during the test period, ranging in price and degree of difficulty to drive. The owner's

manual mentioned that the V-40SE has no problem driving speakers as low as 2 ohms without problem, so it begged for the MartinLogan challenge. The CLX is notoriously difficult for most tube amplifiers to drive due to its impedance dropping to .75 ohms at 20khz. Many of the tube amplifiers I've tried with it made the speakers sound like they had a blanket over them, with severely rolled off highs.

The Octave amplifier passed this test with ease, and I was amazed to see that it would even drive my Magnepan 1.6's to adequate levels. I couldn't listen to VanHalen at brain-damage levels, but acoustic and vocal music played at more reasonable levels was very yummy.

No Negatives

While my favorite audio conspiracy theorists always crave negativity in

product reviews, I can find no faults with the Octave V-40SE. It is elegantly designed, sounds like an amplifier easily costing 50 percent more and is easy to use. It even has a great remote and instruction manual. That I spent most of my time listening to speakers in the \$20,000 to \$40,000 price range, and didn't feel like anything was out of place, speaks volumes about the amplifier.

If you are a fan of tube-integrated amplifiers, I can't suggest the Octave V-40SE highly enough. Even if you suspect that you might need more than 40 watts per channel, I'd give it a thorough listen; you might come away from the demo as pleasantly surprised as I was. Highly recommended. ●

The Octave V-40SE
www.octave.de

FEATURE

I can find no faults with the Octave V-40SE. It is elegantly designed, sounds like an amplifier easily costing 50 percent more and is easy to use.



ORIGINAL MASTER RECORDING™

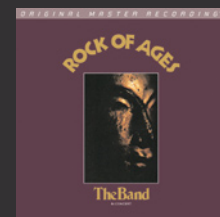
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Frank Sinatra & Sextet
Live in Paris



Frank Sinatra
Sinatra & Strings



The Band *Rock Of Ages*



The Band
Music From Big Pink



Little Feat
Waiting For Columbus



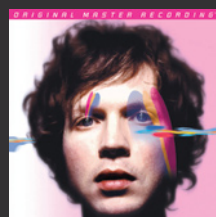
Marvin Gaye
What's Going On



The Cars *The Cars*



Santana *Abraxas*



Beck *Sea Change*



Marshall Crenshaw
Marshall Crenshaw



Pixies *Surfer Rosa*



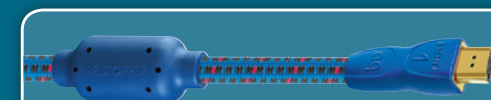
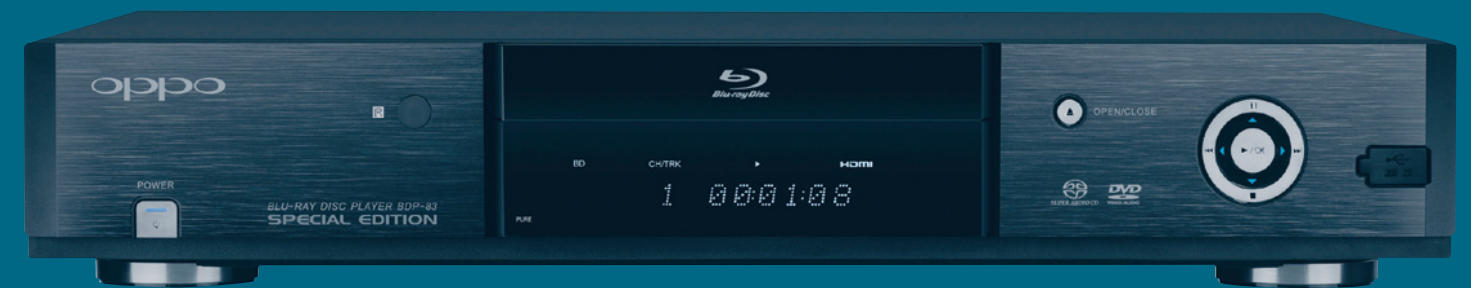
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Upon seeing the officer, I not only made no effort to slow down, I actually waved at him while I stepped on the accelerator and blew on by, smiling. Brilliant.



Time Warp

By Bob Gendron

Slayer's *Decade of Aggression* came out during one of the most fruitful release seasons in music history. Namely, the fall of 1991, which counted Nirvana's *Nevermind*, Guns N' Roses' *Use Your Illusion* volumes, Public Enemy's *Apocalypse 91*, and Soundgarden's *Badmotorfinger* among its bountiful harvest.

Designed to give listeners a taste of the group's onstage experience and assemble the best of the quartet's older music under license to Metal Blade,

Slayer's first "official" live effort also came on the heels of the band's co-headlining appearance on the Clash of the Titans Tour. Given that I was then working at Co-op Tapes and Records, a cool independent record store located in the heart of the metal-crazed Midwest, my decision to purchase the double-disc set on release day (October 22nd) was never in doubt.

Blistering, energetic, and engaging, the album would serve as the ideal soundtrack for an upcoming road trip I was taking to Peoria to see Metallica kick off its *Wherever We May Roam* Tour. While my broken ankle made any long drive somewhat uncomfortable, Slayer could provide an immediate pain remedy--and something stronger than caffeine to keep me awake for the ride home.

And so with discs in hand and tickets in my pocket, the journey began. Minutes after hitting I-74, with the frantic sounds of "Hell Awaits" pummeling my compact car's weak audio system and frying the beleaguered tweeters, the 55MPH speed limit seemed a bit too slow. Slayer's adrenaline-rush attack demanded a faster pace. I obliged. Now cruising along north of 80MPH and feeling impervious to everything around me--all I could think about was Metallica taking the stage in a few hours--I spotted a sheriff's car on the side of the interstate, lights flashing, just having snagged a speeding victim.

What happened next is the stuff of dumb legend. To this day, I insist I was controlled by the superhuman, authority-defying power inherent in Slayer's ferocious cacophony. Upon seeing the officer, I not only made no effort to slow down, I actually waved at him while I stepped on the accelerator and blew on by, smiling. Brilliant. Of course, common sense has a way of catching up with such punkish teenage antics.

About 15 minutes later, flashing lights appeared in my rearview mirror. Same sheriff's car. Same officer. Busted. Apparently Slayer couldn't ward off a costly ticket. Or a future appearance in county court to justify why I was going more than 20MPH over the limit. Why was I in such a rush? Who knows? Maybe the devil made me do it. It was, after all, Slayer.

I still occasionally listen to that album in the car. I just keep a closer eye on the speedometer. Too bad I can't say the same about my tweeters. ●

Where were you when you bought one of your favorite records? Send us your story. If we publish it, we'll send you a \$100 gift certificate from Music Direct. Who knows? That disc may be the next one you tell a story about someday. Email your article to our publisher: tonepub@yahoo.com and put **Time Warp** in the message header.



Audiophile Pressings

By Richard Colburn

Joe Henderson

Our Thing

Music Matters, 45RPM 2LP set

Audiophile imprint Music Matters makes hearing familiar Blue Note records into a fresh experience that feels akin to standing on the precipice of a cliff and diving into a wondrous ocean. And so it goes on *Our Thing*, which pairs tenor favorite Joe Henderson with an outstanding band that features Kenny Dorham on trumpet, Pete La Roca on drums, Eddie Khan on bass, and the amazing Andrew Hill on piano.

The session reveals Henderson and Dorham's duo playing to be at once provocative, accessible, and mesmerizing. Both musicians are at the top of their game. The music swings, bops, and keeps you rooted in place, begging for more. Sonics are pristine in their presentation; this pressing truly sounds as if it could have been recorded yesterday instead of in 1964.

Kudos to Music Matters in creating a living, breathing document on high-quality vinyl. From the reproduction of the cover art to the great photographs inside, the whole package epitomizes coolness. Jazz lovers, this is the real deal. No wonder the label's limited-edition releases sell out so quickly. Consider yourself warned.

Art Ensemble Of Chicago
Reese And The Smooth Ones
 BYG Remaster, 180g LP



The Art Ensemble of Chicago emerged fresh from the chaos of the 1968 Democratic Convention and amidst considerable political turmoil that fueled many forms of protest against the establishment. Rooted in jazz, the collective's music is experimental, avant-garde, and just plain out there.

Reese And The Smooth Ones contains two pieces fittingly titled "Reese" and "The Smooth Ones." They appear on side one and two but lack any musical relationship to the respective flipside versions. There is, however, a political connection that runs through both sides. Members Joseph Jarman, Lester Bowie, Roscoe Mitchell, and Malachi Favors tackle an amazing array of instruments that include sirens, bells, whistles, clarinets, steel drums, and flugelhorn in addition to the usual sax, bass, vibes, and drums. The frenetic, often-confusing playing and outright cacophony functions as a call to action—an outright revolt that, at the time, didn't seem too unusual.

The fact that the music was recorded is somewhat miraculous. Would a label release something this audacious nowadays? Likely not. Sonically, it's recorded pretty well, and you can distinguish what's happening amidst the chaos. The message is clearly stated and understood.



This recording is so involving that you might feel the same wild surmise that Keats experienced upon reading Chapman's *Homer*.

Grant Green

Talkin' About

Music Matters, 45RPM 2LP set

Even if you're familiar with most of Grant Green's albums, few prepare you with what you'll hear on *Talkin' About*. Boasting the power trio of the guitarist Green, Larry Young on organ, and Elvin Jones on drums, the band steamrolls on the Coltrane-inspired "Talkin' About J.C." with a sound that is rich, full, and wonderfully layered. This recording is so involving that you might feel the same wild surmise that Keats experienced upon reading Chapman's *Homer*.

From Young's "Luny Tune" to Johnny Mercer's "I'm An Old Cowhand," the three accomplished musicians weave a spell that isn't soon forgotten. Jones' reputation is long solidified but listening to Green as an original voice on guitar while Young lays the foundation for his innovative body of work will have many re-evaluating their roles and searching for more recordings from both artists. Exactly what a great record should do.

Per usual, Music Matters' packaging is first rate. The eerily quiet vinyl presentation is best this classic has ever sounded. It'll have you talkin'.

GamuT
S5

www.gamutaudio.com



The music hails from an era when blues and soul still held great sway over rock musicians, and when melody, harmony, and logical progressions regularly featured in the tunes.

Humble Pie

Smokin'

Analogue Productions, 180g LP

S*mokin'* is the first post-Peter Frampton Humble Pie release on which Clem Clempson stepped in as the replacement, yielding a more bluesy and boozy feel. In addition, singer Steve Marriott took a more commanding role and found the slight change in style to his benefit.

True to its name, the album not only smokes, it rocks hard too. The music hails from an era when blues and soul still held great sway over rock musicians, and when melody, harmony, and logical progressions regularly featured in the tunes. Song titles such as "Hot 'N' Nasty" and "30 Days In The Hole" convey the inherent swagger and in-your-face attitude.

Sonically, the original was somewhat muddy despite being released on A&M, whose LPs tended to sound better than average during the 70s. The sound on this reissue is excellent. You can hear each musician clearly, the dynamic range is fairly good, and Marriott's vocals aren't buried in the mix. The vinyl is dead quiet, and Kevin Gray's mastering job is top notch.

Humble Pie fans can now hear this band like never before. Analogue Productions and Universal Music Special Markets deserve props for bringing us a nice blast from the past. Think Free's "All Right Now" and you'll understand what's smokin' here.

Trichotomy*Variations*

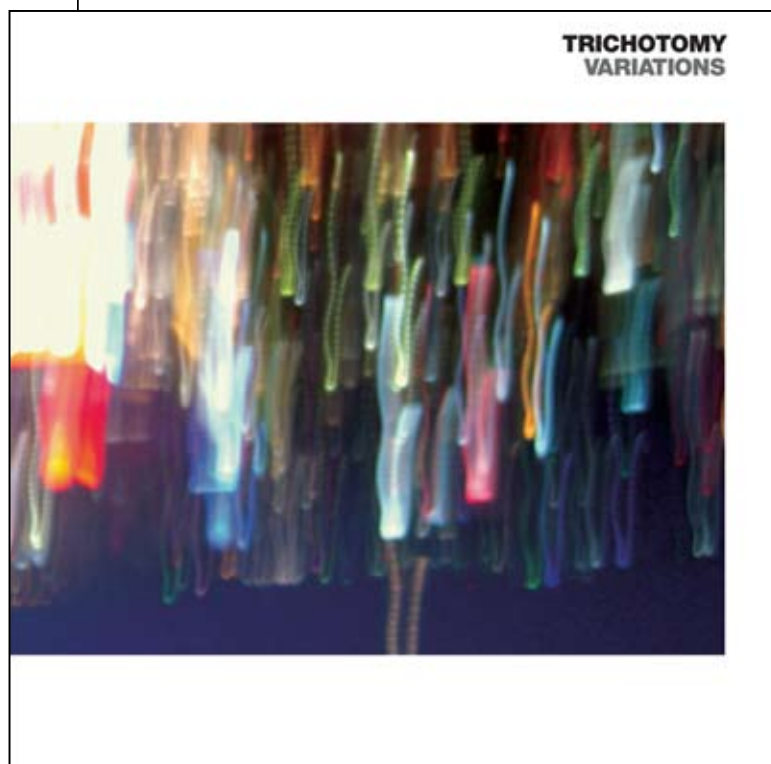
Naim Label, CD and 24/96 download

In mathematics, trichotomy refers to a splitting into three disjoint parts. In philosophy, the term refers to the body, soul, and spirit of man. But in this instance, it refers to an excellent jazz/new music trio.

Sean Foran plays piano, John Parker plays drums, and Pat Marchisella weighs in on acoustic bass. The three met while attending the Queensland Conservatorium, one of Australia's leading music schools. Piano trios aren't ordinarily this intricate or challenging. Influences range from Bach to Radiohead, but the music drifts in a direction that keeps the head engaged and the feet determined to move. Picture The Bad Plus visiting ECM with Michel Camilo in tow, and you'll get the idea.

Variations is an apropos title as it describes much of the music on the record. The piano casts a baroque theme to many of the pieces while the propulsive qualities of the straight-ahead jazz remain evident. Some of the tunes are bright and happy while others create an almost ominous atmosphere. Of course, getting great sound from three musicians is usually easier said than done. Here, the trio is presented in a setting that sports a deep, wide soundstage that stretches well beyond the far edges of the speakers. The percussion is very detailed and spacious, the piano properly proportioned, and the bass muscular without being overbearing.

Naim offers *Variations* in physical format on CD and via downloads that range from 320kb/sec MP3 to 24 bit/48khz. The disc is excellent, but if you have the capability to play high res files, you will be rewarded with even better fidelity.



The piano casts a baroque theme to many of the pieces while the propulsive qualities of the straight-ahead jazz remain evident.

Jimi Hendrix Experience*Valleys of Neptune*

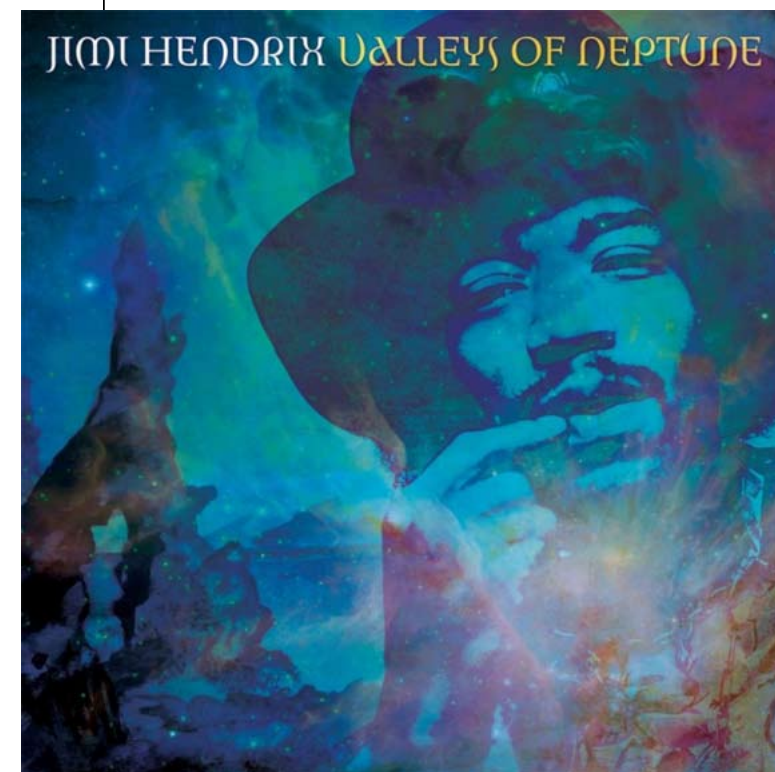
Sony Legacy, 180g 2LP

Purists might frown upon *Valleys of Neptune*, taking the stance that because Jimi Hendrix didn't officially release it, the album should have stayed on the cutting room floor. Yet most fans should embrace it, as the set sheds light on the Experience in transition.

Sessions for *Valleys of Neptune* began just after *Electric Ladyland* had been recorded. The band was not getting along, and Hendrix had sights on a new direction that eventually led to *Band Of Gypsys*. With the exception of three tunes ("Stone Free", the title cut, and "Bleeding Heart"), everything here features the original Experience lineup working either at Olympic Studios in London or the Record Plant in New York.

Several of the record's songs were re-released in some form over the years, but these particular versions have never been heard. And treasures abound. For starters, the rendition of "Stone Free" blows away all previous takes. When the Experience gets into high gear on Cream's "Sunshine Of Your Love" or its own "Fire," hairs stand on end. Even "Hear My Train A Comin'," a woodshedding staple, simply cooks.

The crew that assembled *Valleys of Neptune* deserves major recognition. Whether it's the well-documented liner notes, photos, cover art, or super quality of the vinyl, the dedication shows through. And given what the engineers had to work with, the sound is excellent. Hendrix's vocals are always front and center, and the bass is nicely weighted and detailed. Mitch Mitchell, one of the most underappreciated drummers in rock, is clear, crisp, and punchy. The CD even has better-than-average sonics. Highly recommended.



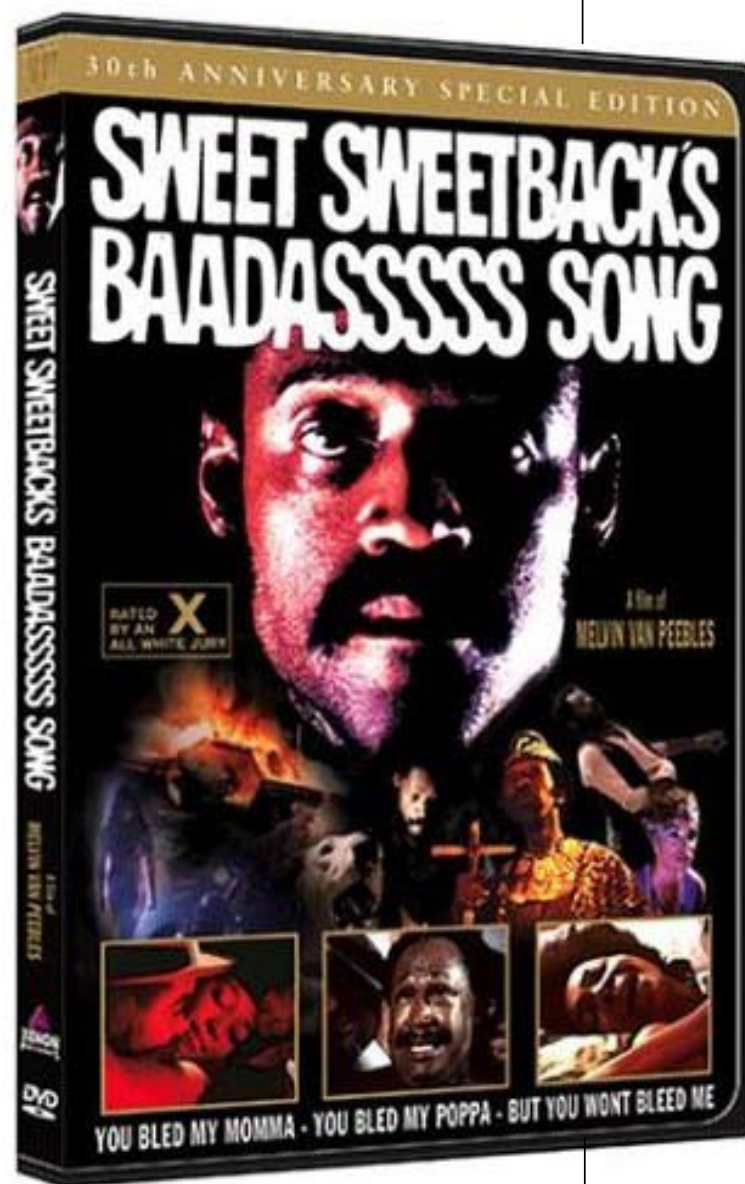
Several of the record's songs were released in some form over the years, but these particular versions have never been heard. And treasures abound.

THE MUSIC OF BLAXPLOITATION CINEMA

By Anne Farnsworth

Kingpins, junkies, private dicks, and vigilantes. Handsome, athletic men sporting wide-lapelled pimp suits or leather jackets accompanied by gorgeous women in mini-skirts and palazzo pants. Borsalino fedoras perched on puffy 'fros and everyone cautiously teetering on ridiculously high platform shoes. No, there's nothing like looking back at the 70s American film genre known as Blaxploitation. And while we might giggle at the fashions, comically bad kung fu (Dolomite!), and sometimes-sketchy production values (unintelligible dialogue, blood squibs that explode before someone gets shot), the music has stood the test of time.

As the late 60s hippie subculture began to transform rock music that, in turn, became a touchstone and unifying force, a parallel cultural shift was taking place in black America. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements fueled the black pride ethos, seeping into the work of black artists whose music circled back to reinvigorate the faithful. The composers and musicians who scored blaxploitation films sat in the red-hot center of the zeitgeist, combining new, R&B-inspired funk grooves with socially conscious, in-your-face lyrics. While only scratching the surface, here are a few essentials that no music lover should be without.



ONE MAN BAND (1971)

Sweet Sweetback's Baadass Song is considered the progenitor of the blaxploitation era. It was a *tour de force* for Melvin Van Peebles, the indefatigable auteur that produced, wrote, directed, starred in the film and scored the soundtrack as well. At the time, Van Peebles was strapped for funding, so composing may have out of necessity—never mind the fact that he couldn't read or write music. To compensate for those deficiencies, he numbered the keys on his piano and wrote the music as a series of those numbers.

It all must have proven an interesting code-breaking exercise for Earth, Wind & Fire. The then-relatively unknown band recorded the music, which was released in conjunction with the film's premier, another unique Van Peebles touch, for even musicals didn't release their soundtracks until months after they opened. Van Peebles did it as a promotional gambit; he had no advertising budget.

And what a soundtrack. It remains a head-spinning amalgam of down-home gospel, dialogue over free improvisation, and loose, funky jazz grooves. Listening to it feels like a stroll through the cerebellum of a very complicated man.



NOT CHEF...SHAFT (1971)

Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Shaft* was a \$12m crossover smash. Isaac Hayes' funkified score further contributed to the film's success. Shaft is a hero in the Gary Cooper tradition, the lone righteous man fighting a sea of depravity. Hayes' description of the protagonist as the 'bad mother...' who 'won't cop out' is spot on.

The soundtrack charted for 60 straight weeks and won Hayes a Grammy, an Oscar, and Golden Globe. The title song gave Richard Roundtree's John Shaft even more sex appeal (if that is even possible), with the insistent pulse of the guitar's wah-wah pedal beating like an over-stimulated heart. What's more, the opening high-hat groove that accompanies the guitar for more than two minutes before the vocals begin may have single-handedly launched the Disco Era.

Hayes' score is also notable for its variety. Sophisticated Quincy Jones-style big band cuts mix with soulful organ trio backdrops and hopped-up funk. Renowned jazz trombonist J.J. Johnson, who played on Miles Davis' *Birth Of The Cool*, arranged and orchestrated the music. The blending of styles and musicians—disparate yet owing to a similar parentage—is typical of black culture's ecumenical attitude toward different music genres.



Gaye's vocals drift over the instruments like a spooky cloud, half scat, half Sprechstimme as if he had just awakened and was in the midst of recounting a strange dream.

TROUBLED MAN (1972)

Although *Trouble Man*, the movie, didn't fare well with the critics and flagged in the face of competition like *Super Fly*, *Trouble Man*, the soundtrack, is considered to be among Marvin Gaye's best work. One reason for the superior artistry of Gaye's recording relates to the fact that the film was reportedly shot after the soundtrack was recorded—not, as usual, the other way around.

The mostly instrumental tracks are fully realized jazz orchestrations that groove with a relaxed, steady pulse. The wah-wah guitar in the "Main Theme" functions more like a vocoder than a rhythmic element, creating an eerily human moan. And the saxophone on "Poor Abbey Walsh" predates the quiet storm genre by several decades. Gaye's vocals drift over the instruments like a spooky cloud, half scat, half Sprechstimme (or speech singing), as if he had just awakened and was in the midst of recounting a strange dream.

Yet the title cut is the standout, with Gaye turning the movie title from a reference to the main character—Mr. T, a vigilante private dick in trouble for the bad guys—into a personal recollection. Although he's suffered hard times, he sings of redemption via his own hard work and merits. Now, *Trouble Man*, a bogey nemesis or, better still *Trouble, Man*, is understood as a general state of malaise. "Don't get in [his] way."

Given Gaye's tumultuous life and untimely death, the song's hopeful sentiment is heartbreaking. The man who hated society's ills as much as he loved its drugs, while saddled with a cross-dressing fundamentalist father who ultimately took his life, make Gaye the real *Troubled Man*.

SUPER FLY'S BETTER HALF (1972)

Before he began scoring movies, Curtis Mayfield's "Keep On Pushing" and "We're A Winner" were anthems for the Civil Rights and black pride movements of the 60s. Along with contemporaries James Brown, Gil Scott Heron, and Sly Stone, he pioneered "message music," injecting social commentary and "do the right thing" admonitions into his lyrics.

Mayfield's score for *Super Fly* is groundbreaking on several levels. First, there's the music itself, which garnered rave reviews from critics and hit the top of not only the pop and

black charts, but also reached number two in jazz. Then there's the direct and opposing commentary on the action. While the movie's ethics regarding the drug trade remain murky and relativistic, Mayfield's lyrics highlight the repercussions of the characters' actions. Dr Todd Boyd, author of *The Notorious Ph.D's Guide To The Super Fly 70's*, calls Mayfield's intelligent text a "Greek chorus, a running commentary on the film... almost operatic" and considers it the greatest soundtrack.

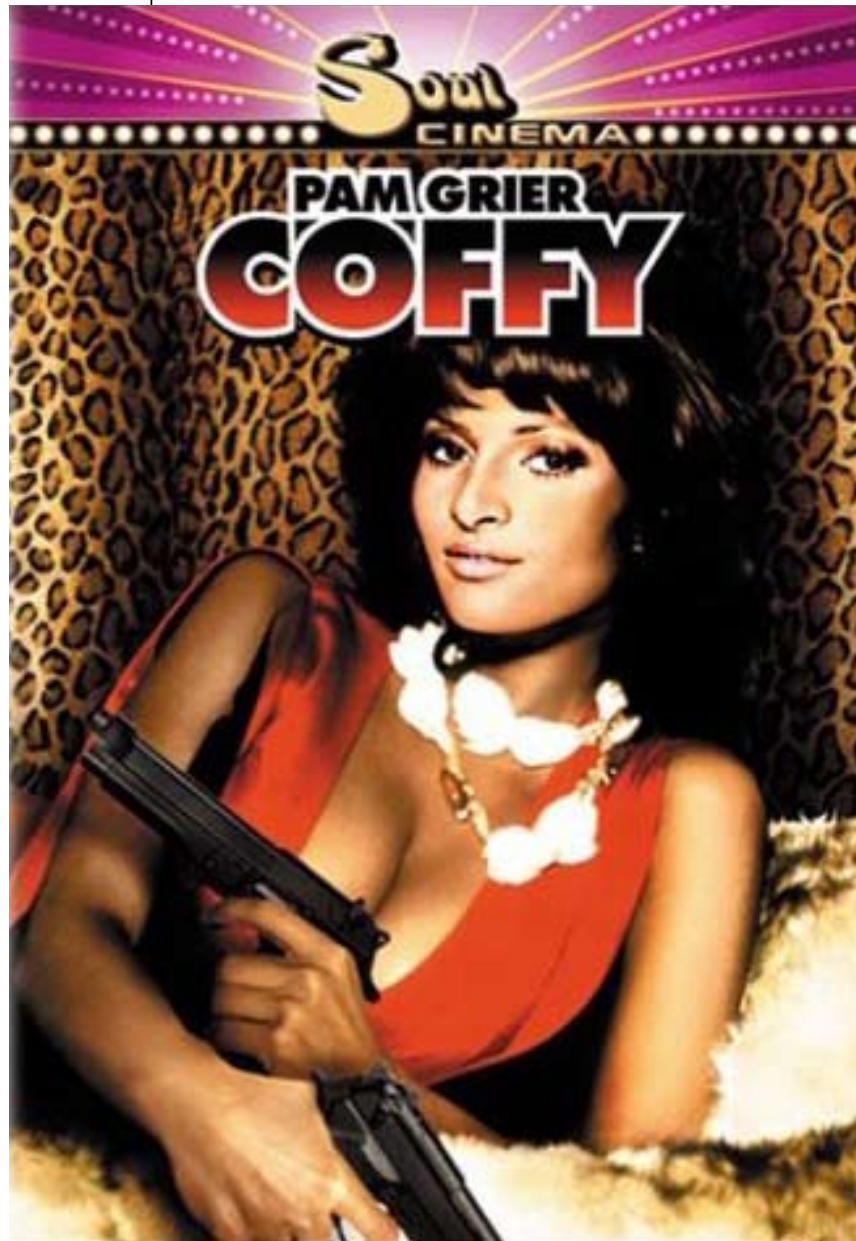


JAZZ AND COFFY (1973)

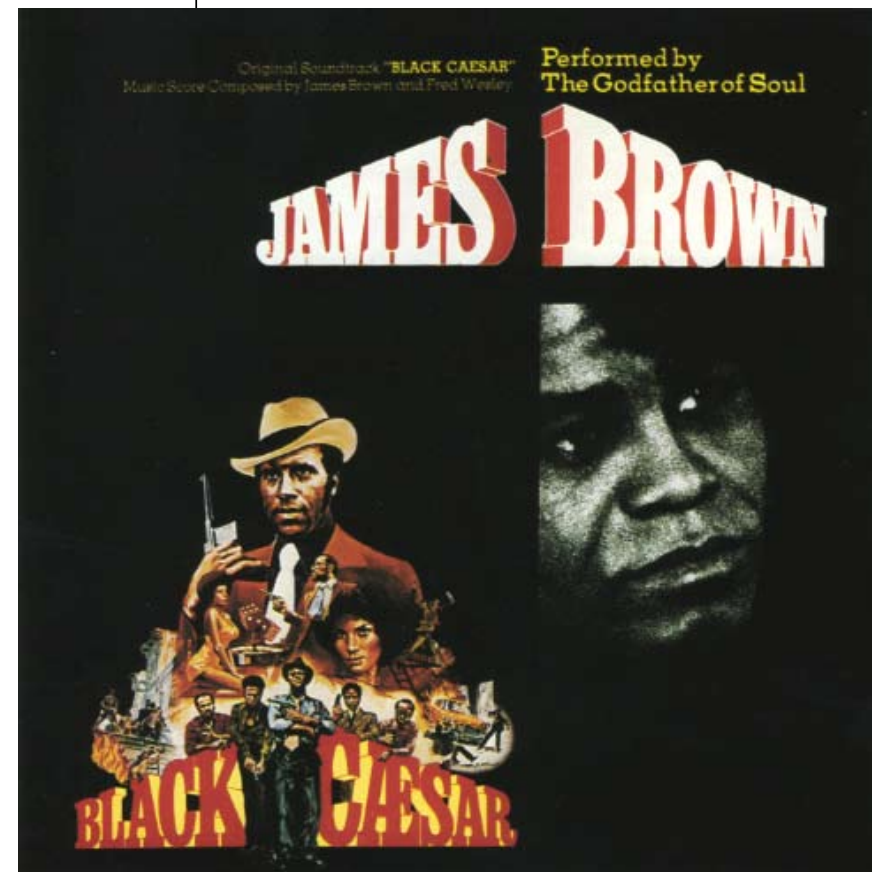
Vibraphonist Roy Ayers began his career as a jazz artist, having been anointed at the age of five when Lionel Hampton gifted him with a pair of mallets. The Los Angeles native grew up near Central Avenue, the famed heart of L.A.'s African American music scene. So it seemed natural that he branched out into other popular black genres like funk, soul, and disco.

Coffy, which featured Pam Grier in her first lead role, tells the story of a nurse turned murderous anti-drug crusader. It's only fitting that one of the few blaxploitation movies to feature a female heroine would be scored with jazz's gentler sounds.

"Pricilla's Theme" is a mellow bossa nova featuring flutist Hubert Laws. "Coffy Sauna" is a sound painting with atmospheric vocals that echo what Chick Corea did at the time with Gayle Moran. "End of Sugarman," a short bit of free jazz, is as compellingly disjointed as anything by Ornette Coleman. Yes, there's some down-home funk. But there's also, on "Vittroni's Theme," a harpsichord. Far out, man.



It's only fitting that one of the few blaxploitation movies to feature a female heroine would be scored with jazz's gentler sounds.

**TWO GODFATHERS (1973)**

Larry Cohen's *Black Caesar*, starring Fred Williamson as the Godfather of Harlem, was a remake of the MGM gangster classic *Little Caesar*. It was also the first soundtrack album for James Brown, the Godfather of Soul, who received considerable assistance from his long-time bandleader Fred Wesley. Although Brown's legendary black pride esthetic is missing, his heart and passion are in full view.

Most of the soundtrack's instrumentals, like "Dirty Harri" and "Sportin' Life," boil Brown's typical hyperkinetic grooves down to an energized stroll. But he steps it up on vocal tracks like "The Boss," which is vintage JB. But be aware: Singer Lyn Collins proves herself Brown's deserving female counterpoint and a true "painkiller" on "Mama Feelgood."

This summary represents just a sampling of the wealth of artists that contributed to blaxploitation movies in the 70s. Never before (or since) have so many prominent musical names lent their sounds and talents to filmmaking. Aretha Franklin, Herbie Hancock, Mavis Staples, Aaron Neville, The Temptations, Ohio Players—a complete reckoning requires a book-length treatment.

Blaxploitation birthed the hip-hop esthetic, both in the portrayed lifestyle and in the music that's been sampled, quoted, and rearranged. The fat horns, greasy guitars, and tight funk at the center of formal orchestration created a sound that feels both retro and strikingly contemporary. And it seldom gets any better than that. ●

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TONE STYLE

Ducati All Stars

ROCK THE ROXY

By Bailey S. Barnard

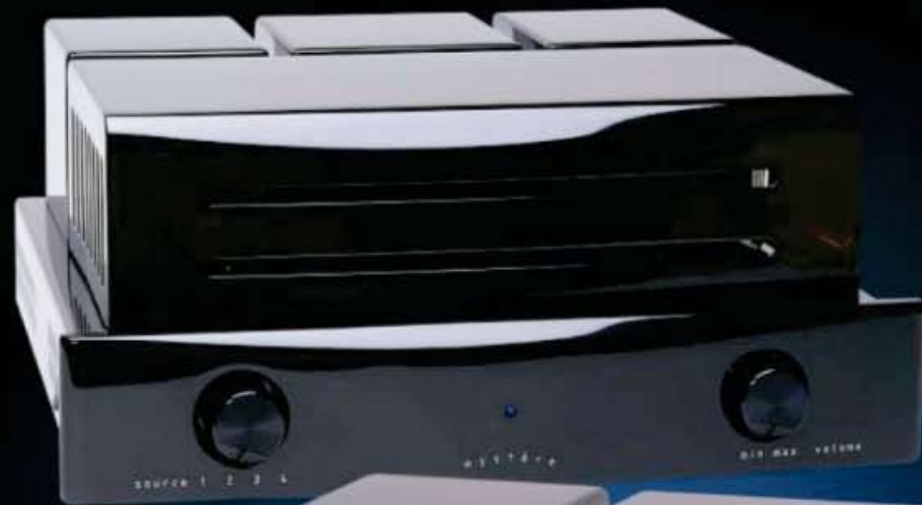


On the second day of the new decade, West Hollywood's Roxy Theater – the storied, 37-year-old music venue located on LA's historic Sunset Strip – hosted a collective of rockers bought together by their love of Ducati motorbikes.

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TONE STYLE



While the North American branch of the Italian superbike builder sponsored the event, the majority of the event's performers brought their own Ducatis, which were lined up on Sunset outside the Roxy. A full house of leather-clad motorbike enthusiasts and rock fans came out to see the inaugural Ducati All Stars show and, judging from the crowd's reaction to the set, the group of rock royalty did not disappoint.

The Ducati All Star lineup included: Steve Jones, guitarist and founding member of the hugely influential punk rock band the Sex Pistols; Mark McGrath, front man for '90s pop-rock band Sugar Ray and a host of various music-related TV shows; Jason Bonham, son of Led Zeppelin drummer John Bonham and himself a drummer for numerous well-known acts, including Zeppelin during their 2007 reunion concert; and Steve Stevens, bona fide guitar shredder and co-writer for Billy Idol during his success in the '80s.

(continued)



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Also, Billy Morrison, guitarist for English rock group the Cult during their 2001 tour and axe man for various acts, including Ozzy Osbourne and cover band Camp Freddy; Chris Wyse, Morrison's former bandmate and current bassist in the Cult; Donovan Leitch, Jr., son of Scottish singer-songwriter Donovan Leitch and Camp Freddy vocalist; and finally, Frankie Perez, the energetic and talented singer of Scars on Broadway.

The set consisted entirely of rock covers that ranged from Bowie's "Suffragette City" and Idol's "Rebel Yell" to AC/DC's "Highway to Hell" and the Pistol's "God Save the Queen." The All Stars banged out each song with emblematic rock enthusiasm and a vivacity of volume, with

the group's vocalists rotating frequently on a stage that spotlighted a gorgeous red-and-white Ducati Desmosedici RR on an elevated platform behind Bonham's drums.

Although the crowd received an ample fix of hard-hitting rock throughout the set, McGrath's nearly overzealous presence was perhaps the highlight. The Ducati GT1000 owner provided a surprisingly accurate rendition of Johnny Rotten and, towards the close of the show, utilized various expletives to encourage the crowd to get some Italian metal between their legs. Or something to that effect. ●

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TONE STYLE

THE TONE BEER SNOB:

What You Could Be Drinking

By Bob Gendron

UNIBROUE MAUDITE

The best North American brewery? Debates will persist, but it's hard to go argue with the quality-control obsessed Unibroue. Interest in the Chambly, Quebec-based company's brews has exploded. And it's easy to understand why. Unibroue's line is uniformly excellent. Its beers are made exclusively from natural ingredients and inspired by European traditions. No pasteurization of preservatives here.

The Belgian-styled Maudite, featuring a label inspired by the legend of the flying canoe (a Quebecois folktale in which lumberjacks make a deal with the devil to fly home in canoes in time for Christmas) and a mahogany appearance, pleases with a warm, smooth, gently spicy taste that possesses hints of hops, pears, plums, grapes and coriander. Meant to be savored, it's one of the very few North American beers that improve with age. But it's likely you won't want to wait that long before cracking open the foil-sealed cap and reveling in Maudite's soulfulness.



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Billed as “Germany’s Original Wheat Doppelbock” ale, Schneider Aventinus is a multi-award-winning beer that deserves to be poured slowly into a genuine Schneider glass. It’s that good. With its dark, caramel appearance and off-white head, Aventinus offers up fruity scents that involve apple, raisins, brown sugar, bananas and cloves. There’s nary a whiff of alcohol. The biscuit-malt taste is even better, sweet but not overly so, as chocolate and dark malts balance the clove, banana and vanilla notes. Complex, but not busy, Aventinus impresses with a flavorful feel that never overwhelms or dominates. Outstanding.





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TONE STYLE

HALF ACRE LAGER

While the exceptional Goose Island brand has long dominated Chicago's craft-brew market, a handful of recent upstart micro companies are enriching the city's beer culture. Half Acre Brewing Company, which was started by a group of friends in October 2006, went from drop-shipping bottles to local distributors in July 2007 to getting its beers into more than 100 establishments by the following summer. The manufacturer's steady growth resulted in its opening of a new brewery in the city's Lincoln Square neighborhood last fall.

Half Acre Lager is the one label's four year-round beers. With an orange-yellow appearance and appreciable head, the small-batch beer boasts faint scents of citrus hops and toasty malts, and it delights with a clean taste that's both simple and crisp. A surprisingly bitter aftertaste complements the initially sweet beginning and adds to the overall character. It won't top the list of anyone's favorite session lagers, but it's definitely worth seeking out if you're in the area.●



Apple's iPad is the future of...

By Jeff Dorgay



Apple's new iPad is here and it's fantastic. For the curmudgeons in the crowd that are already squealing that Apple has missed the mark, the sales figures speak otherwise. 120 thousand *new* preorders were taken on Friday, April 2 and when they officially went on sale the next morning, they flew out the door to the tune of 20 thousand per hour. Hey, maybe the folks who have sold over 250,000,000 iPods know a thing or two.

Our music editor Bob Gendron put it best, "Other companies build products to fit a particular need, but Apple seems to invent products that we need before we even know we need them." Exactly.

In case you missed it, we have an in-depth review up on the TONEAudio website that you can access here, along with some tips and tricks from the popular website Gizmodo, to help you set yours up quickly, should you decide to take the plunge.

As cool as the iPod/iPhone is, even the first generation of the iPad is outstanding. For those who ordered their iPad about a month ago when it was first announced, deliveries were made on Saturday as promised, many before noon. Though die hards waited up to three days in some major cities, by noon on Saturday there was still product in many stores, so you could actually put your hands on one. Apple has figured out that having product when you've built up the buzz is critical to a successful product launch. The *Wall Street Journal* predicts that Apple could sell 7-10 million of these in the first year if they can build them fast enough.

For those of you old enough to remember the Super Bowl ad in January of 1984 when the first Macintosh computer was introduced, this is much, much bigger. I suggest you all mark April 4, 2010 as the day that the publishing and computing paradigm shifted in a major way. Ten years from now I'll be happy to say "I told you so..." ●

"Other companies build products to fit a particular need, but Apple seems to invent products that we need before we even know we need them." Exactly.

Steinway Lyngdorf

Swimming Innovative Waters

By Bailey S. Barnard

American poet Robert Creeley once said, “Form is never more than an extension of content.” Though he was undoubtedly referring to the role of a poem’s structure, syntax and diction in serving the work’s greater meaning, I find the statement quite applicable to other realms as well.

Take, for example, the audio systems from Steinway Lyngdorf, the Copenhagen, Denmark-based company formed in December 2005 as a partnership between world-renowned piano maker Steinway & Sons and Danish audio innovator Peter Lyngdorf. While the numerous audio systems produced by Steinway Lyngdorf represent the absolute pinnacle of digital audio reproduction, the systems’ exterior forms allude to a level of craftsmanship and superiority that is unquestionably an extension of their auditory capabilities.

Last November, I caught up with Lyngdorf at his company’s glass-walled showroom at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles to experience Steinway Lyngdorf’s extraordinary product range and to discuss what the innovations embodied therein represent to the broader audio market, both in terms of style and performance.



Peter Lyngdorf

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Attempting to attain an echelon of style and performance as unequaled as that of a Steinway piano is an act that does not transpire without its setbacks and second guesses.

"Two days before showing the original design to Steinway, we scrapped it and redesigned everything," says Lyngdorf, referring to his efforts in conceiving the aesthetics of the Steinway & Sons Model D Music System. This was Steinway Lyngdorf's inaugural product, first shown in early 2007 as a pre-production model. "We worked all day and night on a new design."


The result at which Lyngdorf and his designers finally arrived is a true work of art, even without considering its impeccable ability to reproduce audio. Two monolithic speaker towers and a CD player head unit - all of which are finished in the same lacquer that Steinway & Sons applies to its pianos - comprise the Model D, which is priced at \$188,000. Each Model D requires 170 hours of machining and roughly eight weeks to assemble by hand, a process much like that of a Steinway & Sons craftsmen in constructing the world's finest pianos. While a high-gloss black exterior is standard on the Model D, Steinway Lyngdorf makes countless custom finishes available, ensuring that its systems will blend seamlessly with any interior environment. Indeed (and in retrospect, not suprisingly), the initial iteration of the Model D shown to Steinway garnered significant praise.

"The whole Steinway management team was there and they were really flabbergasted."



"They were truly positive about it," Lyngdorf told me, a gleam of almost child-like exhilaration in his eye. "The whole Steinway management team was there and they were really flabbergasted."

Lyngdorf's derives his enthusiasm from a satisfaction in knowing that he and his design team had conceived a music system that succeeds in matching the physical beauty of a Steinway & Sons piano and, thus, proudly bares the 157-year-old company's illustrious moniker and logo. However, as poet Creeley would argue, the aesthetic form of the Model D does nothing more than to serve its inner beauty. *(continued)*



“I promised Steinway
that I would make it sound perfect
anywhere in the room.”

The Confluence of Form and Function

Back in September 2005, prior to unveiling the prototype Model D (named after the piano maker's legendary concert grand), Lyngdorf met with Steinway to discuss the potentiality of such a project. Before concluding the conversation, Lyngdorf made several lofty promises to the Steinway executives that went well beyond the realm of mere aesthetics.

“We said we would make it sound as good as a Steinway grand piano so that a Steinway pianist would not hear any problems with the reproduction,” said Lyngdorf, noting with a grin that he also promised to reproduce a symphony orchestra without flaw or artifact. These goals, while ambitious, were not so impossibly attainable. A number of audio systems on the market today reproduce audio that is nearly indistinguishable from live performance.

Lyngdorf's perfectionist nature and stubborn sense of aspiration, however, drove him to do something with the sound that very few, if any, music systems have achieved. “I promised Steinway that I would make it sound perfect anywhere in the room,” he said, again smiling slyly.

At the heart of the Model D, and all of Steinway Lyngdorf's music systems, resides a proprietary technology appropriately dubbed RoomPerfect. Lyngdorf founded research that led to the first incarnation of this innovative digital room-correction concept in the early 1990s while owner of Snell Acoustics. After nearly two decades of research and development, Lyngdorf has effectively perfected this technology so that the audio reproduced by his systems sound virtually the same throughout the entire listening environment. Regardless of spatial dimensions or the relative location of objects and walls that typically cause undesired reflections, RoomPerfect enables the often-elusive “sweet spot” to exist everywhere in the room.

“Room measurement is the key to getting consistent sound quality,” Lyngdorf said, “but from a single measurement, you cannot determine your subjective perception of frequencies.”
(continued)



This realization led Lyngdorf and his team of engineers to conclude that when calibrating the system, one must take multiple, random microphone measurements and combine them with those taken from the sweet spot. They soon found that this method serves to achieve a balance in the listening space no matter where in the environment the system is placed. Once Steinway Lyngdorf's trained installers have acquired the measurements and input the time delays manually, the Model D implements a computerized process to establish target amplitudes and limitations for the various filters employed.

"What we end up with is a system that is so intelligent that it automatically compensates for everything throughout the listening space," Lyngdorf said. Of the numerous innovations embodied within the Steinway Lyngdorf systems, RoomPerfect definitively places the company's audio reproduction capabilities out of reach of its competitors. In fact, Lyngdorf currently has 55 patent claims for new technology, the development of which has taken him about 15 years.

Another innovation that the company first executed in the Model D is digital amplification, a concept that Lyngdorf also pioneered. "When you look at how we manage the multi-channel system, all of the signals are full-scale digital," he said. "It's only at the end that we decide how big the amplification should be."

Lyngdorf takes a great deal of pride in the fact that his company's proprietary digital link enables the audio signal to remain in the digital domain from the input to the loudspeaker drivers. The system's amplifier acts as a digital-to-analog converter that drives the signal to the speakers.

"That is the nature of a fully digital amplifier, and few people have understood that," Lyngdorf said. "It is really not an amplifier. It does not amplify a signal. It creates a signal at exactly the level you want to have it in. When we change the volume, we change the level of the D-to-A conversion."

In essence, when turning up the knob on the Model D's weighty gilded-brass volume wheel remote, the actual voltage of the power supply to the DAC increases. This results in an absolutely pure digital signal, one that provides the most faithful reproduction of audio available on the market. When Steinway Lyngdorf unveiled these innovative technologies combined with the unparalleled beauty of the Model D, the company and its captain had only begun to breach the tip of the auditory iceberg.

Beyond the Horizon

In the fall of 2008 at the CEDIA tradeshow in Denver, Steinway Lyngdorf unveiled the marvelous wonders that lay beneath the innovative waters of the Model D. Entering into the realm of whole-home audio, the company released a dynamic range of products that would challenge the very boundaries of possibility. *(continued)*

"It is really not an amplifier. It does not amplify a signal. It creates a signal at exactly the level you want to have it in. When we change the volume, we change the level of the D-to-A conversion."

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TO NE STYLE

As a follow-up to the Model D, the company created a more compact version called the Steinway & Sons Model C Music System. Toting smaller versions of the Model D's open-baffle dipole speaker drivers, the \$148,000 Model C system also includes twin floorstanding boundary woofers for added bass response. While the aesthetic styling and audio performance of the Model D and C music systems are certainly unrivaled for a freestanding setup, the broader audio market is not likely to match any time soon the grandiose vision embodied within Steinway Lyngdorf's in-wall and home-theater systems.

The Steinway & Sons Model M architectural in-wall speakers and Steinway & Sons Model LS Grand Theater System represent the absolute pinnacle of digital audio reproduction and will complement without comparison any home decor. The very basic Model M setup – which includes a pair of dual dipole loudspeakers, twin boundary woofers and a wheel remote, as well as dual rack-mounted amplifiers and a processor – is priced at \$64,500, but it can run much higher depending on how many speaker units are included. The Model M in-wall speaker units can be mixed and matched with either the Model D or C systems, as well as with Steinway Lyngdorf's line-source home-theater system, the Model LS, to create a 5.1-channel or 7.1-channel surround-sound setup.

The Model LS system can include any variety of the collection's speaker modules to accommodate any desired arrangement, which is best determined in consultation with one of Steinway Lyngdorf's home-audio specialists. While a basic

Model LS setup is priced at \$145,200 for an in-wall stereo system, the Steinway & Sons "Grand Concert Surround" setup, which is just an example of the massive configurations available with the Model LS collection, approaches \$1 million and provides the absolute best dedicated home-cinema audio that money can buy.

After having discussed at length the numerous innovations implemented throughout his company's product range and the years of swimming up the innovative stream that was required to develop

Lyngdorf has achieved something truly exceptional here, and like a dedicated piano maker, or a poet, goes beyond the boundaries of the medium to define innovation.

them, Lyngdorf invites me to simply sit and listen to some classical music courtesy of the Model D. A late-autumn Los Angeles evening lingers into the night, and Lyngdorf releases an airy, satisfied chuckle.

"You know something," he said. "I'm just so pleased with the fact that we can make an orchestra sound like an orchestra, so that, regardless of your listening environment, in a fraction of

a second you feel like you're really there."

Lyngdorf is right. While we remain at the Pacific Design Center, our images reflected in the glass walls of the showroom, I close my eyes. The sound of a symphony fills the room and I think to myself for a moment. Such superior levels of craftsmanship, though painstaking and costly, are necessary for the industry to progress. Lyngdorf has achieved something truly exceptional here, and like a dedicated piano maker, or a poet, goes beyond the boundaries of the medium to define innovation. ●

Steinway Lyngdorf,
www.steinwaylyngdorf.com



The Quadraspire Q4 EVO

A high-performance equipment rack that won't empty your wallet.

By Jeff Dorgay

For many audiophiles, the equipment rack is the last thing in the chain to address for any number of reasons. Many of us are too busy acquiring the next cool piece of hardware, while others just refuse to spend money on something that doesn't necessarily contribute to the overall sound of the system.

But a good rack will offer a better overall presentation, and it always adds to the visual presentation. Once you get use to the tidiness that a rack (or multiple racks) provides, it's tough to do without. The four-shelf Quadraspire EVO rack is reasonably priced at \$700, available in black as well as a number of attractive wood finishes. Additional shelves are \$175 each and can be easily attached. The Q4 EVO rack has a 19¼-inch opening for components, and it's 15½ inches deep. Those with massive components can order the Sunoko Vent rack, which is an additional three inches deep. This is Quadraspire's top product and has a cost of \$395 per shelf.

**Built with care in the lovely town of Bath**

The racks are meticulously made in the town of Bath in the UK. Quadraspire has a state-of-the-art facility, with the latest in CNC machining for the raw shelf components and an automotive spray facility to apply all of their finishes. Everything is done in house at their shop. I was impressed with the level of care put into all of their racks when I visited the factory last summer. You can get a mini tour from the Quadraspire website here:

<http://www.quadraspire.com/about-us.html>

To help in the development of their products, Quadraspire maintains a good demo room so that they can compare products in various stages. They had some top-line Naim gear with some floor-standing Tannoys that had a highly musical sound. Owner Eddie Spruit showed us the difference between their past products and the new EVO shelves, which have some precise grooves cut in the bottom face to reduce resonance. *(continued)*



TO NE STYLE



The difference was instantly apparent, with the EVO shelved gear taking on a more open and focused presentation. It was enough of an obvious difference that can be easily heard even with a modestly priced system. While my current use for the Q4 EVO is a \$60,000 dCS Paganini stack, I noticed a substantial jump in image focus with my Naim Uniti and Rega P3-24 turntable on the EVO rack, compared to one of my DIY racks that pays no attention to vibration control.

The Q4 EVO arrives well-packed, with high-density foam bumpers to protect all of the edges, and it can be assembled in about 15 minutes. It is worth noting that the enclosed instructions are excellent. I found that a fairly large pliers used with a thick piece of rubber (to protect the hardware from damage) was the best way to tighten the rack enough so it was not wobbly. The caps that attach to the top of the rack have holes that can be adjusted with the supplied tool.

TO NE STYLE

I did notice that after a few weeks, the rack required additional tightening, but it remained stable after that.

While some equipment-rack manufacturers take the high-mass approach to eliminating vibration, Quadraspire goes the exact opposite, going in a low-mass direction.

An excellent addition to your system

Only so much can be said about an equipment rack, but the Quadraspire is at the top of my list for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it makes an audible difference in the system. Second, it is tastefully designed and should fit well into any decor scheme. Finally, it is well-built by skilled craftsmen, which assures that it will last for a long time.

If you are in need of a new rack for your HiFi system, I can't recommend the Q4 EVO highly enough. ●



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Benz Micro Ace



Marantz SA-KI CD/SACD player

Ouch!

The Voodoo Doll Toothpick Holder
Fred and Friends, Amazon — \$10.95

This handy little device can be used to store toothpicks, or to torment your friends. It just depends on the mood that you are in. As it says on the Amazon website, this is a great conversation starter, perhaps a good way to break up with someone, hmm. Regardless of how you'd care to use it, this little kitchen gadget is sure to be a source of big fun.



Mix Stix Spoons

Fred and Friends, Amazon — \$10.95

What could be better than Fred's Mix Stix, to show off your drumming prowess in the kitchen while preparing dinner? The tasteful and informative packaging clearly indicates which is the mixin' end and which is the rockin' end. I just wonder if Neal Peart has a set of these?



The PS Audio Perfect Wave Transport and DAC

www.psaudio.com \$6,000, the pair

PS Audio's use of the word "perfect" in the naming of its current digital-playback transport and DAC system might seem a bit arrogant, but I am sure it relates to creating an ideal data stream that is read by the transport and converted by their DAC. Available in silver or black finish, the hefty case weighs in at 30 pounds and is coated with a black high-gloss piano finish.

A small master power switch located on the back panel and a standby power switch on the front coupled with a touch sensitive color LCD screen are the only controls on either unit, creating a clean and intuitive front panel. An infrared remote and a pair of white-linen gloves are also included in the packaging to keep the PS Gear smudge free when removing the PS Audio units from their innovative trampoline packaging.

The Perfect Wave Transport reads Red Book CD's or high-resolution .wav files that can be written on DVD media, though it will not read DVD-a discs. It outputs its data stream via Coax, Optical, XLR or PS Audio's proprietary I2S (eye-squared) link via HDMI cable. According to PS Audio, data transfer via the I2S link is the preferred audio connection with a noticeable difference in sound quality versus other digital connections.

The transport LCD display is auto dimming via a sensor in the front panel and will display a cover image of the playing CD as well as title and track information whenever the PWT is connected to the internet via its rear port Ethernet connection. An SD memory-card slot just below the Ethernet connection will store this data for quick access next time this CD is played. Slick.

When a CD or DVD is initially loaded into the PWT, the data is read into a buffer, then fed into PS Audio's Digital Lens, which allows for the software and circuitry within the PWT to create the analog output, via RCA or XLR jacks.

The Perfect Wave DAC accesses audio data from the PWT ideally from the I2S HDMI connection, but it also will receive digital audio via Optical, Coax, XLR, USB or the soon-to-be-released Ethernet digital-bridge connector. *(continued)*

This connector will allow the PW DAC to act as a music server converting streamed audio from the internet, NAS hard drive or the upcoming Perfect Wave Library component, which consists of a network hard drive and built in CD/DVD reader. The touch-sensitive LCD screen controls the DAC and can be configured to display your inputs by custom name and connection. An upcoming program will allow your Iphone or Ipod touch to control either unit or display music playing or in the queue. The PW DAC can also act as a preamp connecting to your power amplifier via Coax or Balanced output connectors, eliminating the need for a linestage/preamplifier in an all-digital system.

Sample rate conversion is quickly adjustable by the touch-sensitive color screen, giving options from Native (bypassing the sample rate conversion) to a high of 192 khz in six incremental steps. Accompanying these sample rates are corresponding filters that smooth out and remove digital artifacts, such as ringing that may occur when up conversion is applied to the digital data. You can mix and match filters and sample rates to suit your taste and system.

All of these features and high-tech circuitry matched with complicated software is great for the spec sheet, but the most important spec in the end is the sound. The initial auditions indicate a dynamic, detailed musicality with a smoothness and continuity that was unmistakably close to analog in my system. The most remarkable characteristic of the PWT/PWD combination is its ability to resolve amazing amounts of information in current Redbook CDs beyond anything I have ever heard in my current reference system. In Bill Evans recording *A Waltz for Debbie*, Track 1, the detailed sound of the wire brushes rubbing on the drum head actually created a visual image in my mind of the performance. The sound had plenty of texture with depth, openness and speed of a live performance.

The PS combo is destined for a full review shortly, but I was convinced enough by the DAC to purchase one for my reference system, and I'm waiting impatiently for the upcoming bridge to be released.

Full review in Issue 30.

— Rich Kent

Acoustic Signature Analog One Mk.III

www.ktaudioimports.com
\$10,000 (without tonearm)



While many are familiar with the Acoustic Signature Final Tool turntable, that model is only two-thirds of the way up their range. The Analog One Mk. III is just behind their Grande Reference flagship model.

A simple, yet elegant design based upon a highly sophisticated power supply and high mass, the Analog One Mk. III is as much a treat for the eyes as it is for the ears. We are still investigating a number of different tonearm and cartridge combinations, but initial listening impressions are extremely positive.

This table has a big presentation with a lot of weight and drive.

The Analog One Mk. III arrives with one motor and one tonearm pod. But ultimately, it can be configured to feature two or three motors (resulting in even better speed stability and lower background noise) and up to two more tonearms, making it an ideal reference for the vinyl fanatic with a wide range of different recordings.

Full review in Issue 29.

— Jeff Dorgay



dmitri

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"...my new reference in AC conditioners."
 – Robert Harley,
 The Absolute Sound,
 Issue 193



"The Dmitri represents the state of the art in power line conditioning."
 – Jeff Dorgay,
 TONEAudio
 Magazine,
 Issue 18



running springs audio

Verity Audio Finn

www.verityaudio.com \$6,500, the pair



I've always admired Verity Audio speakers whenever they've made a pit stop at the *TONEAudio* headquarters for a number of reasons: they are exquisitely constructed (probably one of the most wife/girlfriend-friendly speakers ever), they are tube friendly and they rock. These aren't wussy audiophile speakers that can only play chamber music. Thanks to their high sensitivity and dynamic range, you can enjoy your favorite violin solo and your favorite electric-guitar solo as well.

Only 39.5 inches tall and taking a 10 x 13.5-inch patch of floor space, the Finn's give you the performance of a great floorstander with the footprint of a mini monitor on a stand. Utilizing a soft-dome tweeter and five-inch midrange on the front face, with a rearward firing six-inch woofer, this svelte speaker has a 3 db down point of 35hz.

Our publisher came home from the Consumer Electronics Show highly impressed with the Finn, mated with Nagra electronics, and initial impressions in the TONE studio have been equally exciting. This looks to be a fantastic speaker for those wanting high performance for a small space.

Full review in Issue 30.

— Jerold O'Brien

Music Hall DAC 25.2

By Mark Marcantonio

In the past few years, my audio affections have leaned to those companies that recognize both the value of tried-and-true methods as well as the future of audio. Topping that list is the simple acceptance that digital music servers, whether portable (iPod, etc) or streamed from the computer, are a permanent part of the audio landscape and need to be a part of the design of audio components. This concept starts with the inclusion of USB as an input source.

The Music Hall DAC 25.2 is one such multi-purpose unit. Not only does it have the traditional digital RCA and Toslink inputs for a DAC, but USB as well. The designer, Roy Hall, wisely saw the rise of music streaming not only from the computer hard drive but Internet radio as well. When I setup the DAC 25.2, one thing I was anticipating was the dearth of quality online radio, but more on that later.





Under the hood, the DAC 25.2 is designed around the Texas Instruments PCM 1796, a 24-bit, 192kHz chip, formerly Burr-Brown.



As with other products in the Music Hall lineup, the front panel of the DAC 25.2 is well laid out. The power button on the left is slightly larger than both the input button and sampling choices buttons. Just as nice, the distance between them is far enough to avoid confusing one for the other while pushing without looking. The headphone jack has a sure grip.

Straightforward Setup

Though the DAC 25.2 is only 8.5 inches wide and offers four inputs (COAX, Optical, XLR, USB) and two pairs of outputs (RCA or XLR), the back panel doesn't seem crowded. I filled up all the inputs for fun and found that my slightly thick fingers had no problem grasping individual cables. If there is one feature I've always appreciated about Roy Hall's products is that the labeling of the inputs and outputs is in a large-enough font to be easily read by the middle-aged and beyond.

Under the hood, the DAC 25.2 is designed around the Texas Instruments PCM 1796, a 24-bit, 192kHz chip, formerly Burr-Brown. Clocking, sampling and jitter are under the control of the TI SRC4192 chip. The physical layout is a bit unusual, with the power supply situated just behind the front panel, followed by the board. A single Electro-Harmonix

6922 tube bathes the interior in an orange glow.

Since the DAC 25.2 was created with the computer/digital audio crowd in mind, virtually all my time was spent with it paired with my iPod 160 gig with the Wadia i170 Transport, iBook laptop, or through the COAX out of a McIntosh MS 300 Music Server. Normally, I only have lossless files installed, but for this review, I loaded in a handful of lossy ones at 128, 256 and 320kb/sec sample rates.

Headphone Prowess

Music Hall solidly addresses the head-fi people by including a respectable solid-state headphone amplifier inside the 25.2. The volume-control knob rotates with just a slight tick for each incremental movement, an ergonomic feature I've always preferred. I tried a budget headphone, the Sennheiser 650, and their over-the-ear, top-of-the-line HD800. Good headphones are nice, but great ones transport you into musical nirvana, and that's where I stayed.

The HD 800's in combo with the DAC 25.2 did a fine job of covering up my frustration with not being able to listen to my main system while my wife worked the phone from her home office. *(continued)*

Cold Play's *Viva La Vida*, a recording usually listened to only when she is out of the house, became a part of my daily playlist. The same went for several Elvis Costello discs as well. The headphone amp section gives the listener a fairly wide soundstage.

Obviously there are some fine dedicated headphone amps out there that will go beyond what the DAC 25.2 can do, but remember that this is a jack-of-all-trades unit for just \$599, so there are going to be a few compromises along the way. Hardcore headphone enthusiasts might want to invest in their dedicated ph 25.2 headphone amplifier, which is an additional \$395.

Choices, Choices, Choices

It's highly suggested that one play around with the three sampling choices – non-upsampling, 96kHz and 192kHz – to find the one most sonically pleasing. The real treat for me was the bump up in musicality when hearing the DAC 25.2 output with the glassy warmth of the 6922 tube. With the exception of the Neko D100, budget DAC's and some others exude a dryness that ranges from subtle to downright sterile. With the 6922 in place, Roy Hall found a reasonable way around this issue.

With its slim footprint, the DAC 25.2 was easy to plug into my three systems, keeping the power cord and interconnects consistent.

In my home-office system, the DAC 25.2 plugged into an Aura Note 50wpc all-in-one music system powering ACI Emerald XL mini-monitors. This setup gave me an excuse to try out a variety of Internet radio stations, including two from my college days. The DAC 25.2 really shines in this sort of non-headphone setup. Between the chips and the tube, the office never sounded better.

For classical- and jazz-music fans who live outside large population centers, Internet radio is a great ride. The DAC 25.2 tube output brings out the third dimension that gives horns and strings the rich sound quality that goes missing so much of the time with digitally sourced music. Even the 128K streaming from Pandora improved to where I could actually listen without being critical of the quality I was hearing. The DAC 25.2 is no Paganini, but it does bring back a portion of liveliness that was lost during the compression process.

With lossless files, the news is even better. The DAC 25.2 is a tremendous step up from the D/A conversion coming out from the built-in chips and software of a desktop or laptop computer. It's instantly recognizable that improvement is at hand, much like a new set of tires on a car. The acoustic guitar work on my favorite William Ackerman CD's had the depth and decay that were

missing prior to the inclusion of the DAC 25.2.

System Synergy

Tubes for all their intoxicating warmth can get too heavy in some situations. I found the combination of the DAC 25.2's 6922 tube paired with the all-vacuum-tube Vista Audio integrated amplifier too gooey for my taste. Speed and attack lagged; much like a really rich dessert, it's good but just too much. However, those with a system that's a little more on the sterile side, particularly many with class-D amplification, the DAC 25.2 could be a pleasant upgrade. When paired with my modded PS Audio Trio C100 integrated amplifier, the additional warmth and detail was welcome and female vocals that were thin in the past now had an extra dose of sultriness.

The DAC 25.2's final stop was my reference system, featuring the Sim Audio i7 integrated amp, Neko Audio D100 DAC, McIntosh MS300 music server and Eficion F200 speakers, connected with AudioArt cabling and Shunyata Venom cords. In comparing the DAC25.2 with the Neko Audio D100, the Neko offered up greater resolution, speed, warmth and a bigger sound. The DAC 25.2 has advantages in that it offers four input sources, user-switchable sampling choices, and the headphone output.



Final Call

At \$599, it's tough to find fault with a product as versatile as the DAC 25.2. This is an affordable DAC that offers great functionality, and it's a significant jump in resolution from a budget CD player, or a computer with basic soundcard.

The narrow footprint makes it easy to integrate into a compact space, and when used with something like the Wadia 170i, it can be the cornerstone of a great office system. Thanks to balanced and RCA outputs, it also works well as the control center of a digital-based HiFi system. Or a dedicated, compact headphone system. I'd love to see Music Hall follow Benchmark's lead and add one analog input for those wanting to add a turntable to the mix. ●

The Music Hall Dac 25.2
MSRP: \$599

MANUFACTURER

Music Hall Audio
www.musichallaudio.com

PERIPHERALS

Amplifier Simaudio Moon i-7 integrated, PS Audio Trio C100, Vista Audio

Speakers Eficion F200 w/ MartinLogan Grotto i Subwoofer

Digital Sources McIntosh MS300, Wadia i170, MacBook Pro

Cable Shunyata, Audioquest

Perfect Azimuth Every Time With The Fozgometer!

By Jeff Dorgay

This probably sounds like something you'd expect a con man to be screaming at the top of his lungs from down the midway while he's trying to swindle you out of 10 bucks. You know that you'll never be able to knock three bottles over, and even if you do, he will only give up a chintzy prize. (Not the big teddy bear your girlfriend *really* wants.) But with the Fozgometer, you win every time.

Correctly adjusting the azimuth on your turntable can be just as frustrating. The prize at stake here is perfect channel balance. That's better than a teddy bear any day, right? So step right up and hand Musical Surroundings \$250 for a genuine Fozgometer, designed by Jim Fosgate himself. Used in conjunction with Acoustic Sounds' *Ultimate Test LP*, you'll have this aspect of your table dialed in quickly and precisely.

The Fozgometer makes use of a Log Ratio Detector, which the manual says was developed for adjusting surround-sound processor logic circuits. For those not familiar with Jim Fosgate's career, he has more than 25 patents to his credit and was the man responsible for inventing Dolby Pro Logic II decoding technology.



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REVIEW

Easy to Set Up, Easy to Use

The Fozgometer comes with a 9V battery and excellent instructions, along with a basic circuit overview. This handy little device is built like a tank; it reminds me of my trusty Simpson 260 multimeter.

For those of you in the audience who are only going to set up your turntable up, dial it in and forget it, the Fozgometer is probably an unnecessary expense. You can get pretty close using a voltmeter and the Acoustic Sounds test record. However, if you have more than one table, change cartridges fairly often or have a table with removable headshells/wands for different cartridges, this device is worth its weight in gold.

There is a phono preamplifier built in, so you plug your tonearm cable directly in to the Fozgometer and get to work. Use the Acoustic Sounds test record's bands two and three, which feature a 1000hz tone in the left channel, then the right. Observe the reading on the first channel, then measure the second. If the right channel reads higher, twist your head shell clockwise (very slightly) and read again. If the right channel reads lower, go slightly counterclockwise. If you are patient and have a steady hand, you will be able to get *exactly* the same reading on the right and left channels.

Finally, play the first track on the test record, which features a 1000hz mono signal. If you've done everything perfectly, the meter should read zero. And because the Fozgometer can read signals as low as -70db, when you dial your arm in this accurately, you will now have perfect channel balance.

A Time Saver

What used to be mildly annoying at best and a major struggle at the worst, reconfiguring your system to achieve enough gain to make these measurements with a voltmeter is now one simple operation with the Fozgometer. And trying to attach said test probes to the ends of an audio cable is a thing of the past.

Much like a good digital scale (I highly suggest the Clearaudio Weight Watcher), the Fozgometer takes the guesswork out of one more aspect of turntable setup. Highly recommended. ●



The Fozgometer
MSRP: \$250

MANUFACTURER CONTACT

Musical Surroundings
www.musicalsurroundings.com

Still at the Top

The Meridian/Sooloos Control 10

By Jeff Dorgay

It's always nice to be right. When we reviewed the Sooloos Music Server two years ago, we put it on our cover claiming it was the future of music. During the next year, other HiFi magazines saw the light and came around to singing its praises.

I was amazed at the Sooloos' ability to organize and display a large music collection, and I purchased the review sample to integrate into my system, which at the time had very good analog and digital sources.

Guess what? I ended up listening to the Sooloos most of the time, using the DAC section of my Wadia 781SE. While it did not have the ultimate fidelity of my discrete sources, the sound was good enough using the DAC that I considered it a serious high-end component. And the convenience was intoxicating, with all my CD's in one spot for instant access and no more review sessions with CD cases scattered all over the studio.

The best part of having a Sooloos was that everyone else could enjoy my music collection, oo. Whatever your level of paranoia with non-audiophiles interacting with your music system – and perhaps your rare discs – ends with the Sooloos. No one has to actually touch your precious anymore. Just point them towards the 17-inch touch screen and hand them a remote to control the volume.

No one has to actually touch your precious anymore. Just point them towards the 17-inch touch screen and hand them a remote to control the volume.

Those wanting a minimalist high-performance system can now just use a Sooloos Control 10 and a pair of Meridian-powered loudspeakers. Very cool.

Even my 75-year-old mother-in-law can find her favorite Ella Fitzgerald album in the blink of an eye. Nothing is more user friendly than the Sooloos, exceeding even Apple in this respect. (iTunes, even in Cover Flow mode, pales in comparison)

However, all version 1.0 products have limitations, and the Sooloos had a few. The system was somewhat cumbersome physically, requiring three separate components to work: the Control, Store and Source were each required to be a fully operational system, and there was no support for high-resolution music files. But it was still a fantastic effort for a fledgling audio company.

Meridian Enters the Picture

In May 2008, Meridian Audio made Sooloos a division of their company, adding their digital and large-scale manufacturing expertise to Sooloos' strength in programming and interface design. When the partnership was made official, Sooloos principal Enno Vandermeer and Meridian founder Bob Stuart agreed that they each picked up where the other left off almost seamlessly in their areas of engineering strength.

The first new product resulting from this partnership is the current Sooloos Control 10, which integrates the former

Control and Source into one component, and barely larger than the original Control. The Control 10 retains most of the functionality of the original Sooloos, with only the analog outputs missing and a pair of analog inputs on the rear panel, which have not yet been defined. Owners of Meridian powered speakers can now plug directly in to the Sooloos via Meridian's speaker link, which only requires standard Ethernet cable. Those wanting a minimalist high-performance system can now just use a Sooloos Control 10 and a pair of Meridian-powered loudspeakers. Very cool.

The biggest advantage of Meridian acquiring Sooloos is the depth of manufacturing expertise at their extensive facility. Control 10's are made in the UK factory alongside their legendary 800-series components. This has also helped dealers, providing more access to stock along with addressing the peripheral issues (such as warranty repair and technical support) with which a small company always struggles. In short, the Sooloos has matured as a product and rather well in a short time. *(continued)*



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Multiple Backup Solutions

In the past, additional Sooloos Stores had to be purchased, and while expensive, still made for the easiest way to keep all of your digital music data covered. After all, who wants to be bothered with backup? While not as seamless, manual backups can be accomplished with ease using your NAS of choice. As the price of hard drives continues to plummet, a reasonable NAS with 3-8TB of space can be assembled for around a thousand dollars, so those with mega collections can still have a reasonably priced backup solution outside of the Sooloos envelope.

If you have a more modest CD collection and don't want to be bothered with manual backups, adding a TwinStore will back up your collection automatically. An MP3 version of your files is also generated so that music can be downloaded to your iPod and taken with you. No fussing with tags and such. Everything gets done as you rip the disc. The entire system is scalable, so adding more storage and backup requires only an open port on your network hub.

This can be configured two ways: you can use one 2TB TwinStore for music storage and one for backup (allowing about 5,000 albums to be stored at standard 16 bit/44khz resolution in .flac format, or each TwinStore can be

configured to use half of it for storage and half for backup, offering a capacity of about 2,500 CD's. While the most expensive backup solution, choosing a complete Sooloos situation is the most tidy. A Twin Store with drives installed is \$3,000.

Price Drop

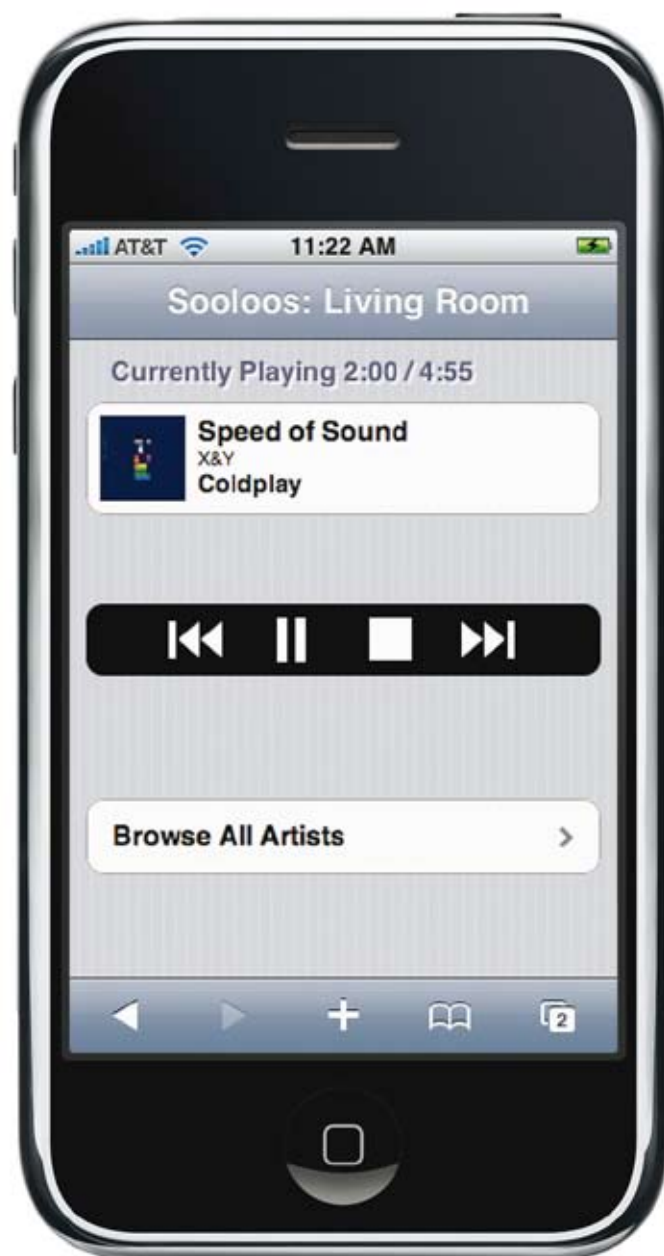
The first Sooloos had a five-figure pricetag, which put it out of the market for many, but the current hardware has come down in price. The Control 10 has an MSRP of \$5,500 and combines the features of the Control and Source in one component. Pairing it up with a single Twin Store that can hold 2,500 CD's brings the total system cost to \$8,500.

While this is by no means inexpensive, it is a game changer for Sooloos. If we make a quick comparison to its nearest competitors from QSonix, McIntosh, Naim and B&O, the Sooloos actually has more features, more functionality and greater expandability than its rivals, which are all priced very closely.

Those of you more in the DIY frame of mind can put a computer-based music system together from scratch for \$1,500 - \$2,000, but it will not provide the ease of use or the level of support that the Sooloos does. And forget about your wife allowing it in the living room, or any hope of resale. *(continued)*

You can use one 2TB TwinStore for music storage and one for backup or each TwinStore can be configured to use half of it for storage and half for backup.





With Control Mac/PC installed on other computers in your home environment, anyone on the network can play the music from the collection locally, without affecting playback on other zones.

The ultimate value of the Sooloos is a turnkey system that you can enjoy now. I've read countless tales of woe on the internet about ripping, tagging, finding album covers, etc., etc. If you just want to start enjoying your music on one platform, just buy a Sooloos. It is as easy to use as toasting bread.

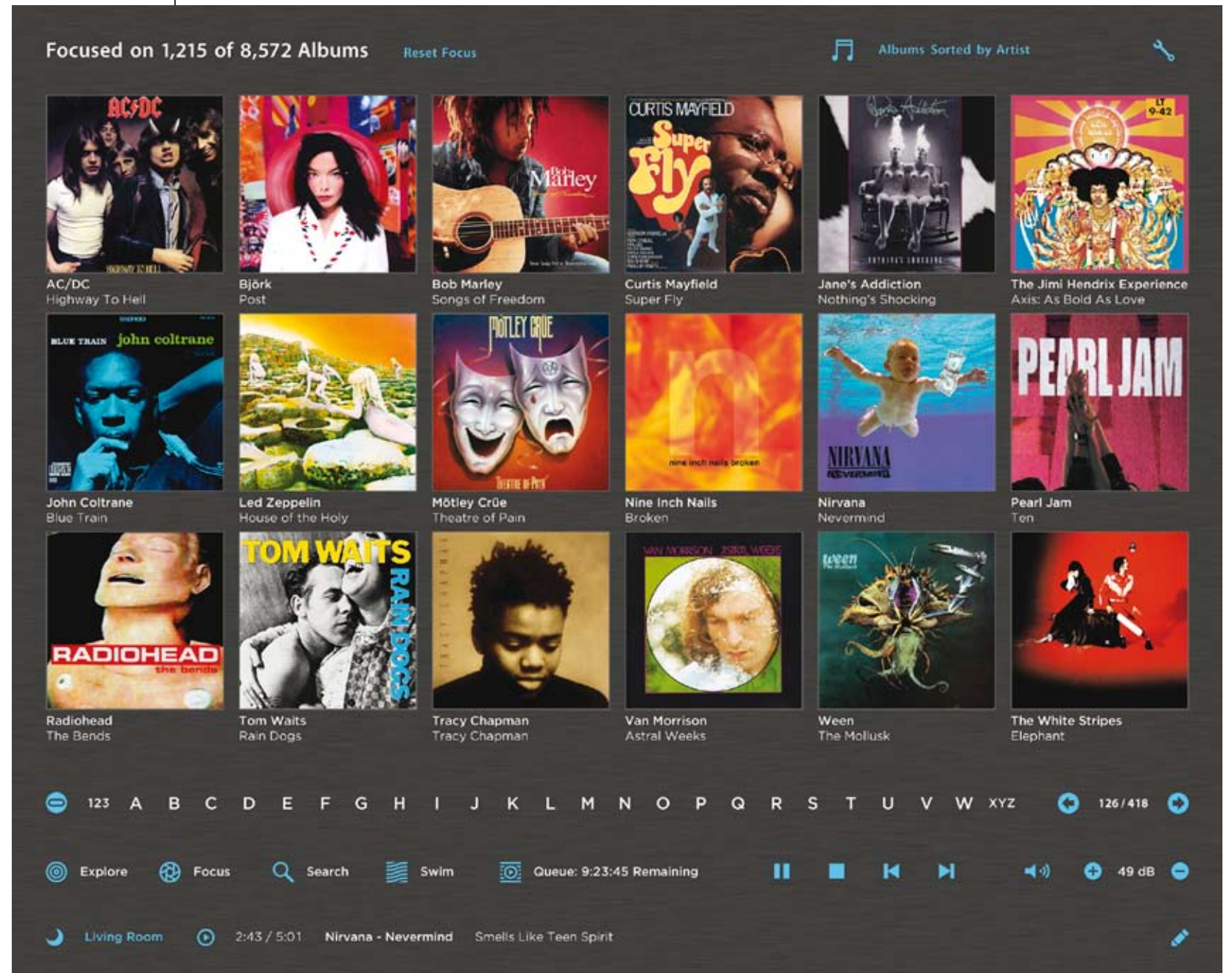
Additional Network Functionality

One of the only weaknesses of the Control 10 is the laptop CD drive used for importing CD's. It works well for the occasional CD that you bring home from the music store, but if you have a large collection to import, talk to your Sooloos dealer, or else use a Mac or PC on your network. Thanks to the Sooloos Control Mac (or Control PC for PC users) application, you can use your desktop or laptop computer to import music from disc or files.

Based on EAC technology, the quality of rips I've experienced have been consistently high. And the use of All Music Guide for album artwork and metadata has been accurate about 90 percent of the time. If you have multiple computers on your network, you can rip from each workstation. Commandeering a few friends' laptops for the weekend allowed me to rip a thousand CD's in short order.

When using Control Mac/PC, it is very easy to edit metadata. So if you have a special pressing that isn't listed, the correct album covers are only a drag and drop away. If all else fails, a digital camera will capture JPEG files, and you can import the album art. This proved to be invaluable when digitizing older LP's or rare CD's that are off the AMG radar.

With Control Mac/PC installed on other computers in your home environment, anyone on the network can play the music from the collection locally, without affecting playback on other zones. This is another great way to let your kids or guests have access to your full music library with ease.



High Res Support

Now that the Sooloos works with 24/96 files, I've been able to greatly expand my music collection on the system, downloading files from Naim and HD tracks as well as burning most of my DVD-a collection. Utilizing the Nagra LB digital recorder, 24/96 captures have been painless, and adding my favorite LP's to the collection allows me to enjoy my vinyl collection that much easier,

especially with recent 45 rpm records having 5-8 minutes of music per side. For those who require even higher fidelity, Sooloos principal Enno Vandermeer has hinted that a future software upgrade may even offer 24/192 capability ...

The ability to play standard CD, high-resolution and streaming files together from one location makes the Sooloos a ubiquitous part of your system. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

The Sooloos Control 10

MSRP: \$5,500,
(2 TB TwinStore,
\$3,000 additional)

MANUFACTURER

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Meridian America Inc.
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www.sooloos.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamp

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Power Amplifier

Burmester 911 MK.3

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SimAudio Moon 750,
McIntosh MCD500,
dCS Paganini stack

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and S-9, MartinLogan
CLX w/JL Audio
Gotham Subwoofer

Cable Shunyata Aurora
interconnects, Shunyata
Stratos SP speaker cable

Power

Running Springs
Dmitri and Maxim power
conditioners (system),
Shunyata Hydra 2 power
conditioner (Sooloos),
RSA Mongoose and HZ
power cords, Shunyata
Python CX power cords

Now you can enjoy *all* of your music in one place. A music server is only of limited use if it can only access part of your music collection. The minute you have to hunt around for other software, it becomes less interesting.

While I haven't lost my love for physical media, the Sooloos adds to my musical enjoyment in two ways: I get to sample a wider range of music on a daily basis because it is so easy to access, and I'm not putting additional wear on my vinyl collection for "casual listening." Now I listen to my LP's only when I can give them my full, undivided attention.

Rhapsody Support and Internet Radio

Thanks to the recent 2.1 update to the Sooloos software, it also supports the Rhapsody music site. There are more than nine million tracks on demand, and you can access all of them for your Sooloos and via the search function, listen to a track or the whole album, or make the album part of your permanent music collection.

This is another treat for the music lover looking to expand his or her vocabulary. While Rhapsody only streams at 128kb/sec MP3 rate, it's still more than acceptable for background music or for sifting through an artist that interests you. It probably won't save you any money on music purchases (if anything, you will probably buy *more* music), but the percentage of stuff you buy that you truly will enjoy will go up dramatically.

I've had great fun using Rhapsody as a place holder for music in my vinyl collection that I'd ultimately like to digitize, so that I can listen to the music in the meantime. It's also been very handy for creating an ongoing wish list of music that I'd like to own in physical format. This is especially good for exploring artists with deep catalogs.

Sooloos 2.1 also features support for internet radio, though somewhat limited at this point. It only allows the choice of your favorite stations, which can be saved for future use. Unfortunately, the station chosen does not include any information about the music while it's being played. If you have a computer handy, you'll find that many channels have a feed online that allows you to keep track of the music. It would be outstanding if the next release of the Sooloos software would offer this functionality.

To Know it is to Love it

After almost three years, the Sooloos Music Server is still the one to beat. The interface is easier to use than any other product on the market (and I've used all of them), and that's the key to truly enjoying a product like this. If you are forced to become an IT person, it takes the fun out of music. The Sooloos will work well with a moderate collection, but is only limited in its scalability by the amount of hard-drive space you can add to your network.

Nothing has brought me (or my family and friends) closer to a larger percentage of my music collection than the Sooloos music server. Thanks to high-resolution file support and Rhapsody, my enthusiasm for the product is even higher than it was the day I took it out of the box. ●

Nothing has brought me (or my family and friends) closer to a larger percentage of my music collection than the Sooloos music server.

The PMC fact.8

High Performance for a Smaller Room

By Jeff Dorgay

In keeping with my new mantra of “high performance sound for a small space”, I’ve made some significant upgrades to my living room system. It’s a small room, only 11 feet wide by 17 feet deep, with the standard issues that most audiophiles face; hardwood floors, glass coffee table, leather couch, etc. And of course in terms of room treatments, anything beyond a throw rug from IKEA on the floor, is out of the question.

The PMC fact.8 speakers retail for \$10,000 a pair and at 6” W x 15” D x 40” H, do not take up more space than small minimonitors on stands, but do they pack a wallop. One of my favorite speakers of all time was the Penaudio Serenades, which I used as reference speakers for a few years, but they would not work in my living room because of the side-firing woofers. But I loved the slim form factor and the Fact 8’s are almost the exact same size, with one critical difference. Thanks to the pair of 5 1/2-inch front firing woofers, loaded with PMC’s legendary transmission line technology (that is also front firing), these speakers are outstanding in a slightly cramped space.

The fact.8’s are svelte and understated, especially in the dark grey Graphite Poplar finish of the review pair. When hit by halogen lighting at just the right angle, they almost have a dark purple, eggplant cast. They are also available in Light Oak, Rich Walnut and Tiger Ebony. The cabinet construction is flawless and befitting of a speaker at this price point.

The fact.8 is rated at a nominal 8-ohm impedance, with a sensitivity of 89db/1 watt. They are a two-way design, crossed over to a .75-inch soft dome tweeter. Claimed low frequency response cutoff is 28hz without a specified decibel range. In the main studio, out in the room, when I ran a series of test tones, the fact.8’s were starting to run out of steam around 40 hz, but in my living room with more of a corner placement, I had solid output to 35hz, with output at 30hz, but somewhat diminished at this point. Remember, there’s no way you’d get this kind of bass from a pair of minimonitors.

We reviewed PMC’s smaller TB2i monitors in issue 22 and everyone on the staff was thrilled with how easy these speakers were to drive and the extraordinary performance in such a small cabinet. *(continued)*



When I heard the fact.8's at the 2009 Rocky Mountain Audio Fest in a relatively small room, I was immediately impressed. Though show sound is never the ultimate judge of any component's performance, it's always been my experience that something sounding great at a show will usually sound a lot better in my listening room. The fact.8's did not disappoint.

Built in the UK, PMC has been building both professional studio monitors as well as home audio speakers since 1990. They've based their designs around their ATL™ (advanced transmission line) concept. Though much more difficult to construct and tune than a standard ported design, the transmission line offers more solid bass output in a smaller space and also has the benefit of a very benign impedance curve. The effective length of the transmission line is 9.8 feet, and the horn lovers in the audience know what you can accomplish with a long horn and a small speaker.

The fact.8's are easy to drive with tube or solid-state amplification and though the majority of my listening was done with the darTZeel amplifier, I achieved excellent synergy with the Octave V-40 integrated as well as my Luxman L-590A II. The fact.8's have a neutral enough character that you can easily tailor the overall sound balance of your system by picking the amplifier that suits you best. Want to go a little more romantic? Your favorite tube amplifier should do the trick. Those wanting neutral and powerful will be just fine with the solid-state amplifier of your choice and you can easily split the difference with a class-A solid-state amplifier like the Luxman. It's all good. *(continued)*



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Setup

Playing along with the stellar darTZeel CTH-8550 integrated amplifier that we reviewed last issue and the Ayre CX-5eMP universal player, I had a very compact yet robust HiFi system in my living room.

The fact.8's are very easy to set up, and are not terribly critical of placement. Initially, the speakers were used in my studio, where I had infinite speaker placement options. In this room, which is 24 feet wide and 16 feet deep, I got the best balance of bass extension and upper midrange clarity just under 8 feet apart, with a few degrees of toe-in, with the tweeters three feet from the rear wall and my seating position 10 feet back. The next goal was to see how much of the sound in this room could be achieved in the living room environment. Fortunately, even with a somewhat compromised placement, a little closer to the side walls than I'd prefer, I felt I was able to keep about 85% of what I heard in the treated room. The speakers were now about 10 feet apart (tweeter center to tweeter center) with more toe-in and the listening position was now 12 feet back.

Man, I Love These Speakers

The fact.8's are one of those rare speakers that do everything well. They go deep; they play loud and have enough resolution to use with world-class electronics. In a smaller living room with the darTZeel amplifier, Ayre CD player and my Oracle Delphi V turntable with Soundsmith Voice cartridge, I had a killer system that fit tidily on one Finite Elemente Pagode Signature rack. High performance, nice and tidy with high wife acceptance factor.

The darTZeel CTH-8550 is rated at 220 watts into 8 ohms and over 300 ohms into 4 ohms, but my MartinLogan CLX's drove the darTZeel crazy, making it heat up like a toaster oven. Not so with the fact.8's, they ran only moderately warm, even when driven to punishing volume levels. When listening to Van Halen's Van Halen II, I played all of side one with the pleasure control on the darTZeel cranked up to neighbor annoying volume. The fact.8's will definitely stand and deliver if your taste in music is on the heavier side. Fortunately a glass of McClelland's and a quick program shift to Sonny Rollins calmed down my next door neighbor, revealing the natural tonality of the fact.8's in the process. Cymbals had the proper timbre and decay and Sonny sounded spot on.

The fact.8's threw a big soundstage in both room environments, but again I was impressed with how much of the qualities I was able to observe in my treated room in the living room with careful placement in the living room. If you love the pinpoint imaging that the best minimonitors offer, but crave a fuller bottom end to round the presentation, the fact.8's should be at the top of your list.

Especially with acoustic bass, the fact.8's had a great balance of tunefulness and speed, thanks to the small woofers. No one-note bass here, the bass response still has enough grunt to make the Pink Floyd, Genesis and hip hop lovers very happy, yet enough finesse to give Stanley Clarke's acoustic bass the proper texture.

What really makes the fact.8s worth the asking price though, is the level of resolution they offer. *(continued)*



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REVIEW

The PMC fact. 8
MSRP: \$10,000/pair

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PMC Limited

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United Kingdom
www.pmc-speakers.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source Oracle
Delphi V w/SME 309 arm and
SoundSmith Voice cartridge

Digital Source Ayre C5e-XMp
combination player

Amplifier darTZeel CTH-8550
integrated

Cable Shunyata Orion Speaker
cable, Shunyata Aurora
Interconnects

Power Running Springs Haley,
RSA mongoose power cords

When using them to evaluate a pile of CD players that we currently have in for review, it was easy to hear the difference between a \$1,000 CD player and my reference Ayre as well as the Ayre and a few \$10,000 plus players. But most importantly, it was easy to discern the subtle differences between similarly priced players. I had the same results with cables. When I swapped a few different sets of interconnects between the Ayre player and the darTZeel amp, the tonality changes from each cable were almost as easy to discern as with my main reference system. You don't get this with a pair of \$4,000 speakers. Everyone who had a chance to experience the fact.8's commented at how "immersive" the experience was and the ones that have had time with my reference system were always impressed with what the PMC's could accomplish in my living room.

Conclusion

If you want big system sound in a small to medium sized room, the PMC fact. 8 should be at the top of your list. They are easy to set up, will work well with whatever amplification you have at your disposal and are very attractive. The only thing they won't do is give you that last bit of bass grunt from about 35hz down, but if you're in a small room this isn't going to happen anyway. Highly recommended.



Music Through and Through

A Visit to PMC Loudspeakers

It was great to see the PMC factory after finishing the Fact 8 review. The trip started on the right foot with a first stop to the listening room. The huge sound room had every model on display, with most of them also available as cutaways so that I could see the craftsmanship inside. Sales manager Keith Tonge and company co-founder Pete Thomas not only gave me a proper tour, we spent a lot of time listening to music, which is the most important component, after all.



Their large-dome midrange is made in-house by hand. This driver weighs about 20 pounds, and PMC even makes their own magnets for it!



Their massive facility handles all of their production from start to finish, except for the cabinets that are produced at another facility in the UK, mostly for dust reasons. As Tonge explained, "With the driver manufacture in-house, it's much easier to assure no MDF dust gets into any of the assemblies."

Woofers and tweeters are custom built to their specification by a few manufacturers, but their large-dome midrange is made in-house by hand. This driver weighs about 20 pounds, and PMC even makes their own magnets for it! I was shown the giant electromagnet that magnetizes the raw iron, and it was incredible. It uses 480 volts of power with approximately 100 amps of current to create the magnetic field.

Much like a missile silo, the magnetizer requires two hands to operate, and as Tonge pointed out, "All that voltage seems to stop time for a moment." Taking Tonge on his word as to its effectiveness, I did *not* ask for a demo of this part of the assembly process.



All of the crossovers are hand-built by three meticulous ladies who know their jobs inside and out. All parts are of top quality, with top-shelf capacitors and inductors throughout. Once assembled, all parts are zip tied in place and hot glued to make sure no damage occurs in shipping.

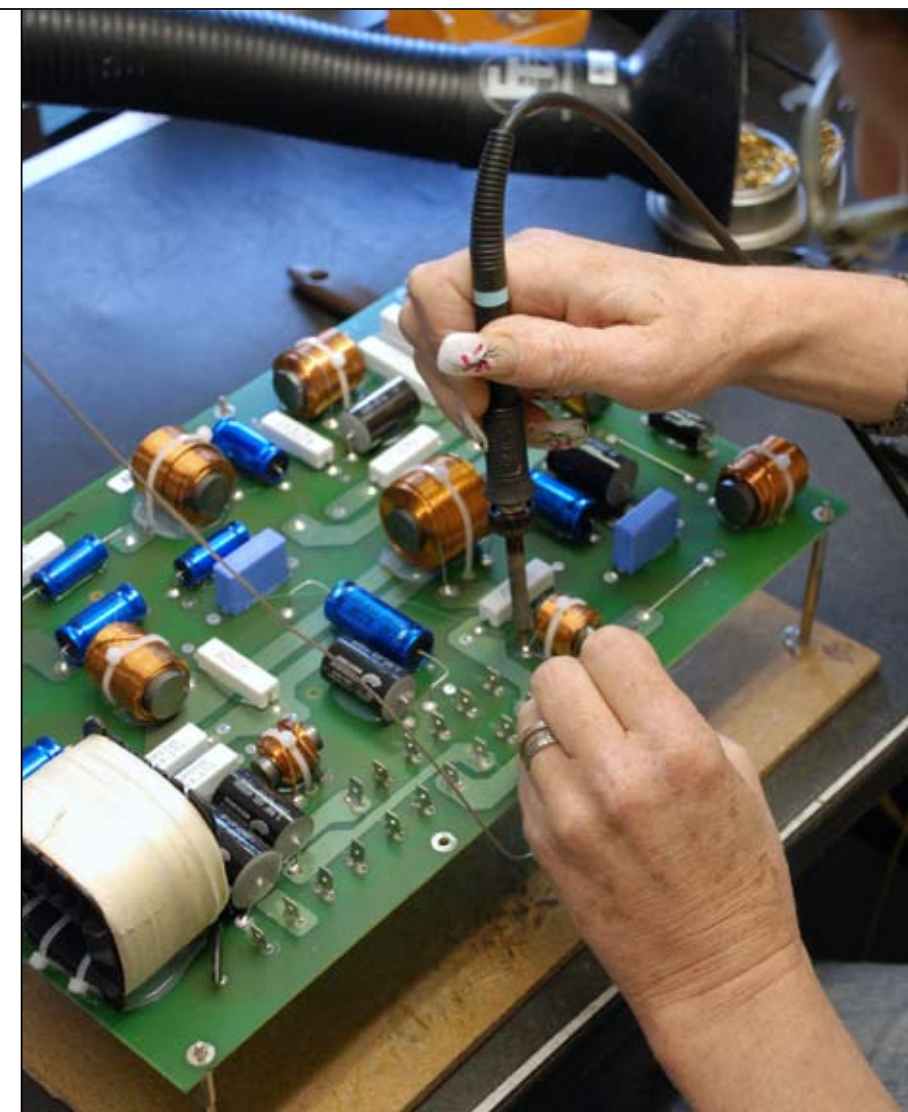
When final assembly is complete, every single PMC speaker is measured to be within spec compared with the reference example they have of each model. Anything not passing muster is reworked or discarded.

Though looking more like a rock star than a speaker designer, Thomas is a proper electrical engineer, having started his work at the BBC. Though always a speaker designer, he had the opportunity to work on all aspects of audio and recording technology, which he feels was critical to his education and on the job training.

"The lovely thing about working at the BBC was that you got to do a bit of everything," Thomas said. "It was a fantastic training ground. It encompassed every aspect from the recording session to the radio transmitter.

"Being able to walk behind the glass, listen to the bands performing and then come back behind the console and hear the playback immediately after allows you to see the whole process in action." He also was able to experience a wide range of musical genres.

Part of PMC's signature sound comes from the utilization of a transmission-line-loaded woofer, which Thomas feels offers a much lower level of distortion than a simple ported design. "The lack of distortion in the bass allows the mids to open up and breathe."

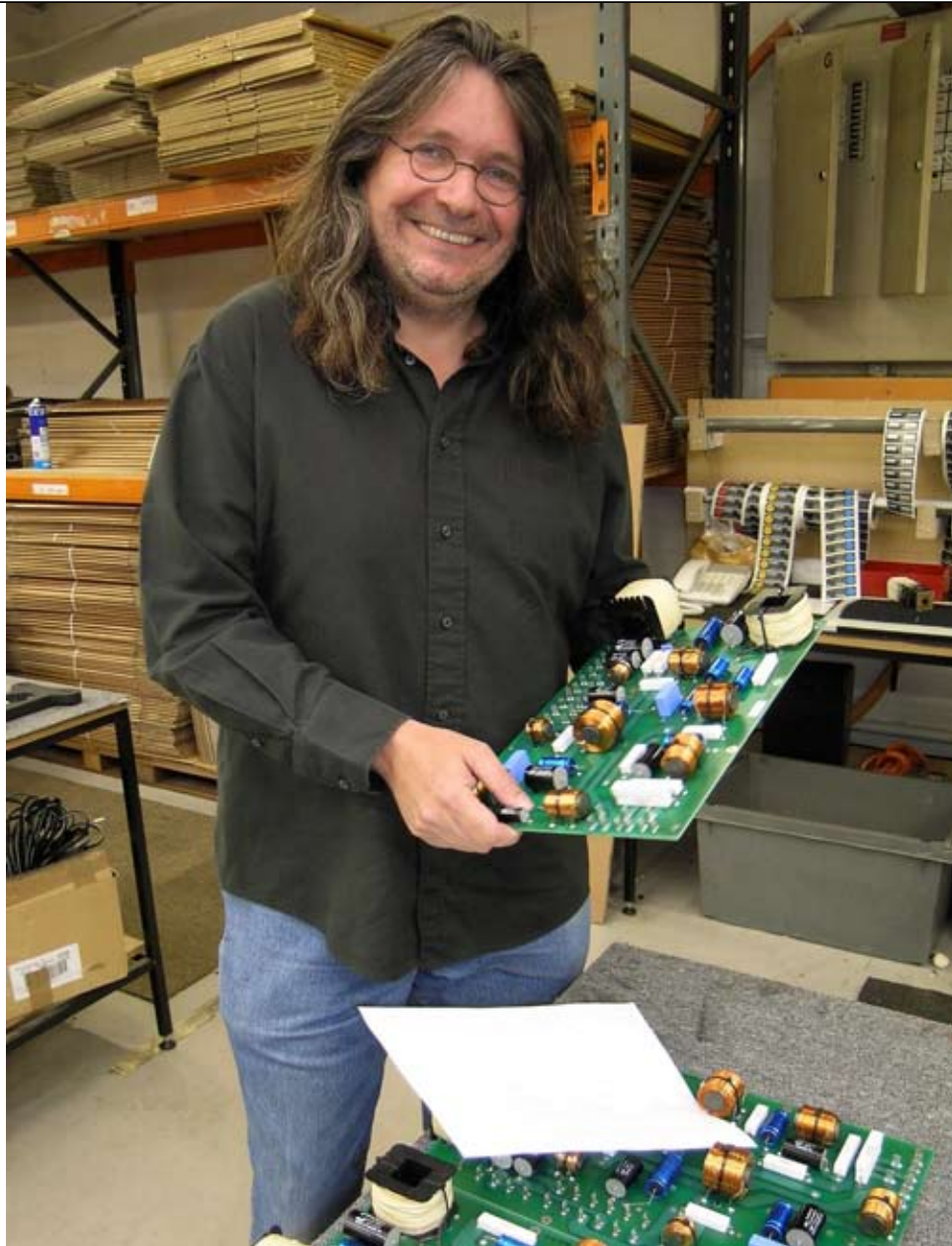


The Company's Beginning

The company came to be in 1990 after Thomas and his partner, Adrian Loader, had done a few years of their own research, purchasing quite a few different speakers to analyze. Both men had been big fans of the IMF speakers, which were also transmission-line products.

"To be quite honest, we heard a lot that was different, but not a lot of serious improvements had been made," Thomas said. "That's what prompted us to start PMC and couple what I'd learned at the BBC with some active amplification concepts. The first effort was our BB5." The BB5 remains in the product line, albeit improved over time.

Though the midrange drivers are made in-house, all drivers are made to Thomas' specs and are not off-the-shelf products. He explains: "The transmission line requires different woofer parameters than a ported or reflex design. It's actually similar to an open-baffle design because the transmission line terminates the woofer resistively." *(continued)*



PMC relies on 24 dB/octave-based crossovers, because of their vertical dispersion characteristics, and again the recording studio influence takes over. “The 24 dB/octave design doesn’t alter the sound as much as low order slope crossovers do and this is very important when you are sitting behind a console,” he said. “The sound has to stay the same when you go from sitting down to getting up and working the controls on the mixing board.”

“Back in the early ’90s, this went against the grain of traditional speaker design in the UK at the time, when most designs had simple order crossovers.” Thomas also attributes the improvements in their designs to the improvements in parts quality over the past 10 years. “The best designs are always the ones that take a bit extra work to get it just right.”

Back to the Present

The demo room has most of their models available as cutaway versions so you can see the intricacy of the design. Tonge adds, “Getting the length of the foam is just as critical as the length of the transmission line. Even a half-inch discrepancy can dramatically affect the bass response.” Seeing a long line of almost finished speakers in the factory, it is easy to see this attention to detail.

One of the most important aspects of PMC’s design ethos is that while constant development is ongoing, they are not making model changes every year to be fashionable. “We only change a model in the range when we can make a meaningful upgrade,” Thomas said. Where PMC used to take about four years to go from concept to market, this is now accomplished in about two years.

He then mentions their new Fact line of speakers that are targeted more as a high-performance yet stylish range of speakers.

“It’s fun to start from a clean slate from time to time,” Thomas said. “We’ve designed every aspect from scratch. When you are constantly improving a product in your range over years, you might not start from the same point. It’s always nice to explore some new avenues, and I feel we’ve done that with the Fact range.”



Thomas feels that there are three basic camps of speaker designers: the ones who measure, the ones who design by ear and the ones who do a mixture of both. He laughs, “We’re the do-both guys.” Talking again about his work at the BBC, he mentions the process in which they would make five or 10 pairs of a speaker design, measure them and then send engineers home with the speakers and a logbook so that the comments could be collated and another round of changes made.

“What you ultimately end up with is a speaker that sounds great *and* measures great. That’s our goal here at PMC,” he said. “Another aspect of our designs that is critical is that the speakers have to measure well off-axis. That’s the hard one to get, and our new Fact’s measure exceptionally well off-axis.”

A different approach to be sure, but the proof is in the listening. The consistency of sound from their smallest DB1i (which will be reviewed shortly) to their largest BB5/XBD-A active system all share a common sound and tonality. Though their top speaker will reproduce a wider range of frequencies and, of course, play much louder than the smallest in the PMC range at modest volume, it is uncanny how much the small speaker sounds like its big brothers. I’d say the folks at PMC have accomplished their objectives very well. *(continued)*

“What you ultimately end up with is a speaker that sounds great and measures great. That’s our goal here at PMC.”

Off to Metropolis

The next stop on the journey was a trip to Metropolis studios in London. They use PMC speakers in all aspects of mixing and mastering, including their 5.1 surround mixes.

Utilizing PMC's flagship active monitors, the sound in the studio was open and effortless. Engineer Miles Showell's mixing suite sounded like a six-figure HiFi system. The room acoustics were perfect, with a nice balance of tonality and a wide soundstage top to bottom with incredible depth. Not to mention some massive bass grunt. Showell let Tonge and me play some discs we happened to have with us, and I was highly impressed with the effortlessness of this all-active PMC system. Voices in the room sounded extremely natural, and when we played some voice test tracks from the BBC, it sounded as if the gentleman doing the reading was standing right in the room with us.

Showell told me that this made it a lot easier to do his job and, as a side benefit, did not require the potentially damaging sound pressure levels that other engineers often use in the studio environment. The consistency of the speakers in the PMC range also allows Metropolis to get a near identical tonality from room to room, again making everyone's job easier when they have to go from initial mix to mastering.

When cornered about the "loudness wars" that have been infecting the music world during the past few years, the engineers at Metropolis are committed to the best sound they can get. Showells laughed, "We're trying to capture as much as the original tape as we can. Every chance we get, we make it quieter whenever we can, and that's usually what the artists prefer. In the end, we have to accommodate the client (the record company), but we do our best to get the maximum from the master tapes."

With a client list that is a virtual "who's who" of the music world, Metropolis continues to set the bar for excellence, and part of that sound quality you hear is there because of their PMC monitors. ●

You can read more about Metropolis here:

<http://www.metropolis-group.co.uk>

"We're trying to capture as much as the original tape as we can. Every chance we get, we make it quieter whenever we can, and that's usually what the artists prefer."





MANLEY
JUMBO SHRIMP

MUTE

New and Improved

The Manley Jumbo Shrimp

By Todd Sageser

As much as I wanted to make fun of the name Jumbo Shrimp with a series of puns throughout the review, I must refrain. I've had so much fun listening to the Jumbo Shrimp that it's changed my listening habits, and that's a great thing. As a recording engineer, I am fully aware of Manley's reputation in my industry and I thoroughly enjoyed reviewing Manley's Massive Passive Stereo EQ back in Issue 17. It was my first experience with Manley's products, and I was blown away at how well it worked on a few of my mastering projects and the way it transformed my HiFi system. So I was curious to sample some of their home gear.



For those curious as to the difference between the old Shrimp and the new Jumbo Shrimp, Manley's Chris Dauray told us that in addition to the volume control functionality, they have added a White Follower buffer stage to better drive the volume control. "This configuration also increases headroom while reducing distortion."

Affordable Excellence

As a reviewer on a moderate budget, I was glad to learn that the Jumbo Shrimp is affordable, as far as audiophile electronics are concerned. In today's world where \$10,000 for a preamplifier is commonplace, it's nice to see a product like this where every penny was put into what matters most, those things that maximize sound quality. Seeing six tubes under the hood brought back great memories of the Massive Passive – two 12AT7WA tubes are in the input section directly following the Input selector switch. Their output boosts the gain by about 12 dB, fed through the volume control, which is a high-quality Noble stereo attenuator, and two Noble balance-control potentiometers. A pair of 7044 tubes is used in the output stage. The circuitry uses high-quality polypropylene dielectric film-and-foil capacitors at all signal coupling points and a pair of metalized caps on the output.

Manley chose the simple, non-inverting single-ended signal path so that balancing ICs or transformers that could color the sound would not be needed, and the volume control is motorized, keeping additional circuitry to a minimum. It is controlled by the Remora Remote via RF.

In keeping with the overall look of other Manley products, the Jumbo Shrimp features a brushed dark-blue front panel in a standard 2U size with mounting holes. Its functionality is self-evident, with the volume control being the largest of the four control knobs. The remaining three control the power on/off, balance and five inputs. True to their old-school ethos, Manley includes a "tape" input. Nice. A small but bright blue Mute button

is directly underneath the backlit Manley logo on the front panel. Much like the ergonomics of their studio gear, you can get right to the business of listening without reading the instruction manual.

Around back, the Jumbo Shrimp features five pairs of gold RCA jacks for inputs, with two pairs of variable-output jacks wired in parallel. There is also a fixed output to use with a recording device of your choice. *(continued)*



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Easy Integration

My modest system is built around a pair of Martin-Logan Summits, with the rest a combination of some old favorites and the equipment I use for studio mixing and mastering. My two main audio-input sources are a Technics SP10 MkII turntable with a Stax arm, Sumiko Blackbird MC cartridge and a modified Mark Levinson ML-1 preamp, and a pro DAC made by Digidesign, connected to a MacBook Pro. I mention these devices because the Jumbo Shrimp helped me rethink how I use each of them, and I will explain that.

For the first listen, I took the quarter-inch monitor outputs of my Digidesign DAC and routed them through the Jumbo Shrimp's RCA CD input jacks, then took the first pair of outputs to my amp, in essence just adding it in the chain of what I was already using. I put on some modern jazz just to see that I had the connections right and what gains might have changed. Immediately, I knew something good was happening. The music took on a new life. I had a flashback to the late 1970's when I connected my Audio Research SP-6 for the first time, but I knew that this was a far cry from the more staid sound of my last real experience with tube audiophile equipment.

With all of my initial music choices, I was hearing new layers, a wider sound space, and I noticed immediately that the low midrange had a power that I had not ever experienced in my current system. This was happening at no expense to the clarity of the lowest frequencies. The highs had a silkiness that gave me goose bumps. This was becoming a fun test drive, indeed.

After familiarizing myself further with the Jumbo Shrimp sound, I ventured into vinyl playback and made use of my SP-10, with the vintage Levinson preamp strictly as a phono stage going from the ML-1's tape outputs to minimize the signal path. Though I expected a warm, almost vintage sound from this arrangement, the bass was punchier than it sounded on the all solid-state Levinson preamplifier, and I could play the turntable louder than ever with no bass feedback.

During the next few months, I used the Jumbo Shrimp to audition my recording projects, and I patched in my Blu Ray player to use my system for two-channel playback of some of my favorite movies. *(continued)*

With all of my initial music choices, I was hearing new layers, a wider sound space, and I noticed immediately that the low midrange had a power that I had not ever experienced in my current system.



Digital playback took another big jump in clarity and forced me to listen to many of my test selections again.

This preamplifier worked well, no matter what the situation. I became more and more a believer in this preamplifier's abilities.

The last step was to put the Jumbo Shrimp in the full control position of my system, eliminating the monitor control circuits, mute switch and level control (no doubt removing a handful of op amps from the signal path), going straight through the Digidesign DAC into the Manley. Digital playback took another big jump in clarity and forced me to listen to many of my test selections again.

The Sound

Joe Sample is one of my favorite go-to jazz artists, best known for his piano and keyboard playing with the Crusaders. With a number of his group and solo recordings on vinyl and CD, I started with *Carmel* for the balance of instruments in the mix. I've always been convinced *Voices in the Rain* was edgier and lacking life, but the Jumbo Shrimp showed me what I had been missing. With back-to-back comparisons to my vintage preamplifier, everything from the piano to the violin solos had more texture. Vocal textures that had been flat hovered hauntingly in the mix, and the vocal sibilance was gone.

I heard Sample's mastery of subtle layers of synths hidden behind the piano, the vocal and the real strings. Even the drumming showed plenty of new activity. The snare tones were varied so much, the side stick was so rich, and the bass drum that before could only be discerned as a thud was turned into a big round sound with incredible snap. When the drummer really got on it, I could distinctly hear varying stick technique on the cymbals. The mushiness that used to hamper the sound of the bass now could be heard as a whole variety of phasing and flanging effects, and the Jumbo Shrimp really showed the intricacies of the player.

I listened to Oliver Vernet playing a range of Bach organ favorites and could hear a

wider soundspace than ever – the action of the organ, the differences in voicing on different ranks of pipes and the occasional rumbling of the blower. I was amazed at how well this affordable preamplifier was at rekindling the excitement in my music system, proving you don't need to invest megabucks to get great sound. I spent a lot of time revisiting music that I've been listening to for years, both for enjoyment and equipment evaluation.

I must admit that I'm also a lover of pop music. I was blown away when listening to John Mayer's first album, *Room For Squares*, noticing how much more the variety of vocal overdubs and guitar layers popped out of the mix. The song "Neon" builds layer upon layer of subtle, beautiful guitars as it progresses, and the drum kit is stellar, with the bass drum now sounding like it is right in front of you.

I had a similar experience with Michael Franks' last album, *Rendezvous in Rio*, with Franks' voice on the title track standing out much better than before, with no hint of the vocal harshness I've noticed on other systems when playing this cut. I was even surprised at the great transient attack while listening to some of my favorite techno tracks; I had been worried that a tube preamplifier might round things off too much, but this was just another test the Manley passed with ease.

Conclusion

I could go on and on about my music selections and what I heard, but I can sum it up best by saying that I never thought a preamp in this price range could make such a huge difference in my system. If you are a music lover that has to work on a budget, I highly recommend the Manley Jumbo Shrimp. It is a solidly built product with a lot of musical character that should make for an excellent anchor to your system.

Additional Listening

By Jeff Dorgay

I spent quite a few hours with the original Manley Shrimp preamplifier, and I was ready to give it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for last year, when Ms. Manley let me know that there was a newer model on the horizon and we should “stop the presses” for now. It was a great little preamplifier at a great price, but the new Jumbo Shrimp is an improvement in every way.

Living up to the promise, the Jumbo Shrimp is an outstanding pre-amplifier that offers up a slightly warm overall presentation. For almost all systems, this is a good thing; I’ll always take a touch of romance over a touch of harsh detail any day. The Jumbo Shrimp reminds me of all the great tube preamps of my youth from Marantz, McIntosh, CJ and ARC. It’s a simple, basic, no-nonsense design that delivers the goods.

While I had a great time listening to it through a few modestly powered solid-state amplifiers, I got all the way in the time machine by pairing it up with my recently acquired Marantz 8B power amplifier. Yeah baby, that’s tube romance at its best. Now you know why EveAnna Manley’s company slogan is: “Tubes Rule.”

There’s not much I can add to Todd’s insightful commentary in terms of the sound quality of the Jumbo Shrimp, but it is worth noting that the Manley website mentions that this new buffer circuit “will drive anything.” I can verify this claim, using a 20-foot pair of Cardas Golden Reference cables between the Manley and the Marantz with no problems whatsoever.

For 2,300 bucks, I can’t think of a better tube preamplifier on which to spend your hard-earned dollars, and I award the Manley Jumbo Shrimp one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2010. ●

The Manley Jumbo Shrimp
MSRP: \$2,300

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

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

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

Speakers MartinLogan Summit, Harbeth Monitor 40.1

Cable Shunyata, Cardas, Audioquest



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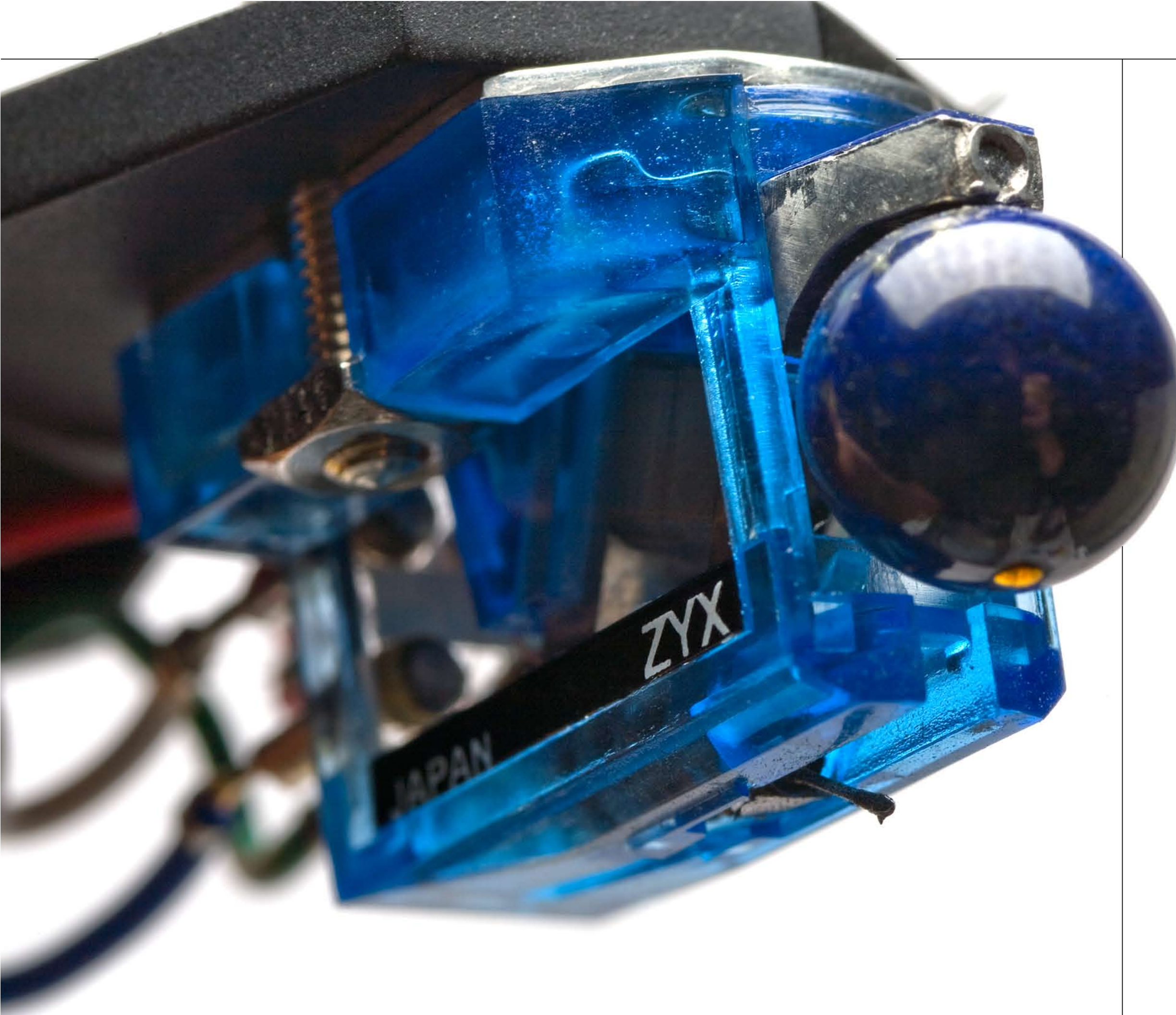
Dreamy...

The ZYX Omega X

By Jeff Dorgay

Analog has often been compared to chocolate and various spirits (the liquid kind, not the Casper kind), but there seem to be two major camps: those who desire every speck of detail the record has to offer “warts and all,” and those who want a lush, hyper-real magical sound. Of course, there are plenty of subsets, but these are the major two that I always seem to bump into. The red and blue delegates, if you will.

In the midst of all this analog madness, there are a few cartridges that tread a fine line, offering a high degree of resolution yet with an extra drop of warmth that doesn't go too far. My favorites in this department include the Dynavector XV-1S, the Koetsu Rosewood Signature Platinum and at the top of that list, the Lyra Olympos. I'm sure there are a few others, but you get the idea.



Add the ZYX Omega X to my list; this is a delectable cartridge indeed. This is one of ZYX's 4D cartridges, one range beneath their top cartridges that all carry five-figure price tags. The Omega range stays within four figures, consisting of the X, with copper coil wire (\$7,500), the S with silver coil wire (\$7,850) and the G with gold coil wire (\$8,250). All cartridges are cryogenically treated and feature 18-karat gold terminals and a sapphire mounting board, along with a "Lapis Balance Weight." This one gram sphere rests at the front of the cartridge as a vibration damper. As it is not removable, there is no way of determining its effect, although the cartridge as a whole is fantastic.

Setup

My first exposure the Omega X was at this year's Consumer Electronics Show, where it was mounted on the Musical Life Vocalitas tonearm and the Acoustic Signature Analog One table. This was enticing and we will be following up this review with both of these pieces. However, to begin the review in a more "apples to apples" context, a comparison with a known reference first had to be established.

Mounting the Omega X on an SME iV.Vi arm made it a snap to hear the difference between it and another reference cartridge, the Clearaudio DaVinci (on an identical SME iV.Vi arm) on the TW Acoustic Raven Two turntable. The Nagra VPS phono stage on a Nagra VFS anti-resonance platform handled most of the listening sessions, but the Boulder 1008 phono stage – also reviewed in this issue – proved invaluable for a different perspective on the Omega X. I took this cartridge for a quick spin around the block with the Naim Superline/HiCap 2 combination, and the bottom line is that it should work well with whatever phono preamplifier you are currently using.

Settling on the high end of the tracking-force range, the Omega X worked perfectly with a tracking force of two grams. I started with Furutech AG-12 tonearm cables on both tonearms, and once the difference in sound between the ZYX and Clearaudio cartridges was firmly established, the last half of the review was completed with the Furutech Silver Arrows tonearm cable.

Click here for more information:

There's that word again, dreamy

As this cartridge arrived with a few hours on the clock from CES, it came out of the box sounding gorgeous. The first listening session began with a few favorites from Mobile Fidelity, old and new. Those of you with a penchant for listening to female vocal recordings will be in heaven. Having seen Madeline Peyroux a few times now, I found her *Careless Love* LP on MoFi to be a good

reference, with a healthy dose of breathy vocals, a great lineup of acoustic players and a gigantic soundstage.

Here's the key to what makes this cartridge so special: your best records sound stunning, but even the *average* records in your collection sound fantastic.

Sticking with female vocals, I moved on to Joni Mitchell and was taken by surprise by Jaco Pastorius' bass line in "Overture-Cotton Avenue" on the first side of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. The piece starts out very slow with a gigantic grunt from Pastorius, which normally sounds much less intense. With the Omega X, even on this recording of only moderate quality, every one of the instruments takes on a life of its own in a specific space. The last track on this side, "Jericho," is a notoriously tough one to track and sends most cartridges into fits of distortion. But the Omega X slid through perfectly. I had similar results with other tough-to-track records and came away highly impressed.

(continued)



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Here's the key to what makes this cartridge so special: your best records sound stunning, but even the average records in your collection sound fantastic. This is not one of those analog setups on which you can play and enjoy only a handful of audiophile-approved records. Even my worst records sounded better than they had any right to.

Even though you can't bring back lost dynamics from a drastically compressed record, this cartridge retrieves so much information without being harsh that it almost feels as if it's reclaiming some dynamics, even though we know that can't be happening. A great example of this happened with one of my favorites from the 80's, Doug and the Slugs. *Cognac and Bologna* is not a very well-recorded record, but it's always great to pull out at parties to stump the music know-it-alls in the crowd. This record usually has a soundstage with no depth and struggles to reach even to the edge of my speakers. So I was duly impressed when I heard the tom-toms on "Soldier of Fortune" extending a good two feet beyond the speakers.

Was there anything the Omega X couldn't do?

KISS Alive! still sounded dreadful, so I guess there is a limit to all magic. But everything else I sampled sounded glorious. Another impressive parameter of the Omega X was its ability to minimize background noise, much as a Koetsu does. Where the Clearaudio DaVinci tends to accentuate background noise on all but the cleanest records, the Omega X seemed to minimize background noise. This is no excuse to abandon vinyl hygiene, but it is a bonus.

Even more amazing was that this cartridge did not perform this feat at the expense of low-level detail. It had more resolution on tap than all of my other reference cartridges. Listening to the MoFi test pressing of Aimee Mann's *Lost In Space*, each of the tiny electronic noises in the record took on a life of its own. It was like listening to a 7.1 surround mix, yet there were only the two speakers in my listening room. This is truly the mark of phenomenal analog, and the Omega X delivered it with every record I played.

In conclusion, the ZYX Omega X is one of the finest phono cartridges I've had the pleasure of auditioning. The cost is in the stratosphere, but the performance is commensurate with the price. I can only imagine what their top-of-the-line cartridge sounds like! ●

The ZYX Omega X

MSRP: \$7,500

www.ktaudioimports.com

Analog Source

TW Acoustic Raven turntable w/ SME iV.Vi tonearm

Phono Preamplifiers

Boulder 1008, Nagra VPS w/ VFS Base, Naim Superline with HiCap 2 power supply, Furutech AG-12 tonearm cables

Preamplifier

Burmester 011

Power Amplifier

Burmester 911mk. 3

Cable Shunyata Aurora interconnect, Shunyata Stratos SP speakers cables

Power Running Springs Maxim and Dmitri power line conditioners, RSA HZ and Mongoose power cords, Shunyata Python CX power cords



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Designed by Yoav Geva (Gonczarowski)

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Technology

Carmel incorporates the same technologies that make YG Acoustics' Anat Reference II Professional the best loudspeaker on Earth: YG's DualCoherent™ crossovers produce the best frequency response and relative phase available today; Carmel's enclosure is milled using 4-axis technology as opposed to the competition's 3-axis milling, which avoids the parallel internal surfaces common in other so-called "complex enclosure" designs.

Detail

Carmel utilizes Scan-Speak drivers, modified to YG Acoustics specifications, with the tweeter assembled in-house. The unique enclosure design keeps mechanical losses lower than any competing speaker¹, by combining the minimized turbulence of a sealed design with the low friction otherwise associated with enclosure-free concepts. All this is made possible through extremely tight manufacturing tolerances, and vibration-free pressurized assembly of the precision-ground and hardened CNC-machined enclosure panels².

Sound

The end-result is a speaker of remarkable refinement. Carmel is ultra-transparent, and presents a huge yet precise soundstage, with the neutrality and warmth of a live performance that YG Acoustics is famous for. This is all presented in a speaker with elegant lines and a shape that invites inclusion in the finest home environments.

Reviews

Neil Gader from The Absolute Sound
reporting on CES 2010

**"Best Sound:
the new and smaller two-way YG Carmel."**

Robert Harley from The Absolute Sound,
January 2010 (issue 199)

"...the Kipod was capable of an enormously appealing and captivating sound. It disappeared in the sense that it was a transparent window on the music, with extremely low coloration. ...the Kipod Studio achieved its lifelike vitality by imposing so little of itself on the music."

"This quality was, I concluded, not just the result of the Kipod's lack of tonal colorations in the midband, but of its transient quickness and coherence. Leading edges of notes seemed to jump out of the presentation with startling speed... Transient information had a coherence that was world-class..."

"This quality is the Kipod Studio's greatest strength – the ability to sound highly resolving and alive without a trace of fatigue-inducing etch. ...its resolution was musically authentic..."

Wes Phillips from Stereophile, March 2009

"But most of all, the YGs were so adept at presenting dynamic details that, instead of simply making the music come alive, they presented living, breathing musicians making music in my living room."

"Wow – a speaker that makes me reevaluate an entire instrument's capabilities."

Adam Goldfine from Positive-Feedback, Issue 45

"...goose bump inducing realism..."



¹ See YG Acoustics' ad titled Reason #3 for measurements of mechanical losses.

² YG Acoustics is unique in the industry in having in-house CNC precision-grinding equipment in addition to CNC milling machines.

Slummin'

By Jeff Dorgay

First Generation Apple iPod

\$78, eBay

It seems only fitting that with featuring Apple's latest and greatest that we pay tribute to where the digital music craze began in earnest. Much like the original Macintosh computers, when compared to today's models, the lineage is instantly apparent, yet today's iPod does so much more. And isn't that the Apple way?

While sales were somewhat sluggish when the iPod was introduced on October 23, 2001, partially due to the economic downturn that followed 9/11 and customer reluctance to follow a new trend, by 2004 Apple dominated the portable music player market, a trend that continues to this day. With over 240 million iPods sold to date, it doesn't appear that Apple will relinquish that position anytime soon.

Though you couldn't see the album artwork, and there was no wi-fi support, that original iPod actually sounds better than today's 64GB iPod touch, primarily because it had bigger output coupling capacitors that don't roll off the bass as much as today's ultra miniature models do.

I managed to steal this one, but first gen iPods are making a comeback among collectors and music lovers alike, and for a brief period, were still available on the Apple store for around \$200. \$150 – 200 seems to be the going price for a clean, 5GB example, with the 10GB model slightly more.

For those sniping about the \$499 price of the iPad, back in the day, the 5GB iPod had an MSRP of \$399, with the 10GB model coming in at \$499. Here's to joining the next digital revolution.



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