

toneAudio

Music.Gear.Style.

No.33 November 2010

Product of the Year 2010

Gamut S9

BOB, ELVIS, JIMI, SYL, STONES & MORE:
2010's Best Music Box Sets

LISTEN TO THIS: 2010's Best Albums

HOLIDAY
Gift Guide

THE 2010
toneAudio
AWARDS



GOTHAM®



Stereotypes
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386-253-7093

Sound Components
Coral Gables, FL 33146
305-665-4299

Audio Advisors
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Independence Audio
Independence, MO 64055
816-252-9782

Definitive Audio
Bellevue, WA 98005
425-746-3188

Audio Design
Fairfield, CT 06825
203-336-4401

Sound City
Denville, NJ 07834
973-627-0083

The Sound Concept
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**Sound Image Audio and
Video Design Group**
Carrollton, TX 75006
972-503-4434

**Advanced Home
Theater Systems**
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972-516-1849

Speaker Shop
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716-837-1557

Audio Classics
Vestal, NY 13850
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Home Theater Concepts
Morton, IL 61550
309-266-6640

Global Sight & Sound
Sussex, WI 53089
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Freeman's Stereo
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Hi Fi Buys
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615-832-3121

**Electronic System
Consultants**
Aspen, CO 81611
970-925-1700

**Shelley's Stereo
Hi Fi Center**
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818-716-8500

**DSS- Dynamic
Sound Systems**
Carlsbad, CA 92088
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L & M Home Entertainment
Tempe, AZ 85285
480-403-0011

Joseph Cali Systems Design
Santa Monica, CA 90404
310-453-3297

Systems Design Group
Redondo Beach, CA 90278
310-370-8575

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Covina, CA 91724
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San Francisco, CA 94109
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Media Enviroments
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Wilmington, DE 19803
302-478-6050

**3800 Watts.
360 lbs.
Devastating Bass.**

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Photo by Rankin

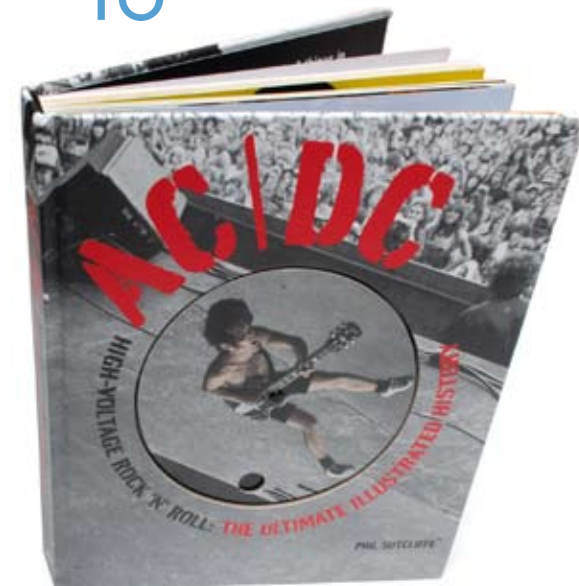
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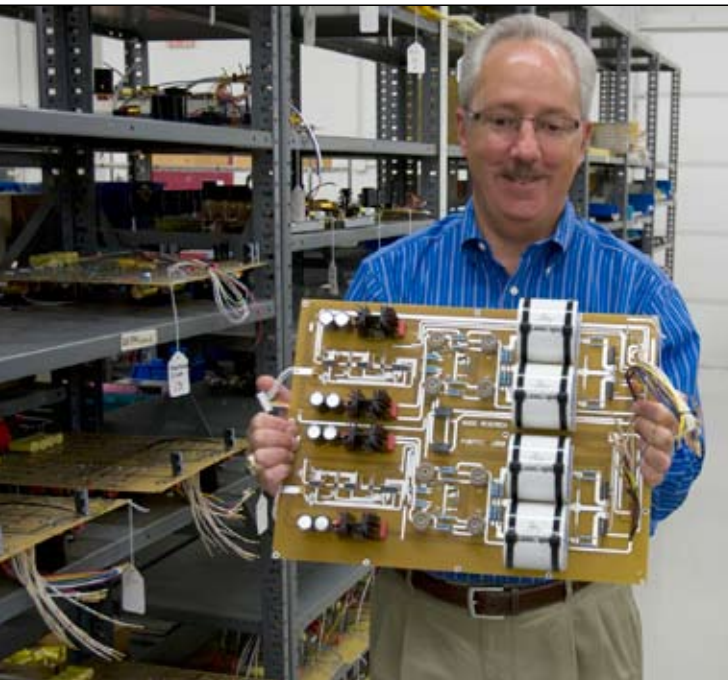
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER

It's that time of the year again: holiday-shopping season and time to hand out our awards for 2010. As always, this is tough because throughout the year, we try to make it a point to review gear that we are really excited about. But in the end, we have to narrow it down to our absolute favorites. Our Exceptional Value Awards go out to the gear we've reviewed throughout the course of the year that offer that little bit extra for the money; the Product of the Year Awards go to the things that we feel represent the best in class, regardless of price; and of course, the Product of the Year – Overall goes to the one thing we've reviewed all year that is in a class of its own.



The GamuT S9 is this year's winner overall, and I have to say that after listening to these speakers for the better part of the year, they truly are beyond what I had ever expected in speaker performance. They image like a pair of mini monitors, have the coherence of a pair of ESLs and rock out without strain when pushed to the limit. In short, they make no compromises, and that's important when you are asked to write a \$140,000 check for a pair of loudspeakers.

The Publishers Choice awards are bestowed on a small handful of products that I think are very cool, with no price or class justification. Consider these to be a few of my favorite personal things that I had the chance to review this year.

We've scoured the globe to find you some fun holiday-shopping items in a wide range of budgets – from a shaving kit to a new car – so you should be able to find something for your favorite person no matter what you planned on spending. Those of you needing a White Elephant gift, feel free to email me; I recently acquired some dreadful records in a collection that I purchased, and I could fix you up with a couple of them.

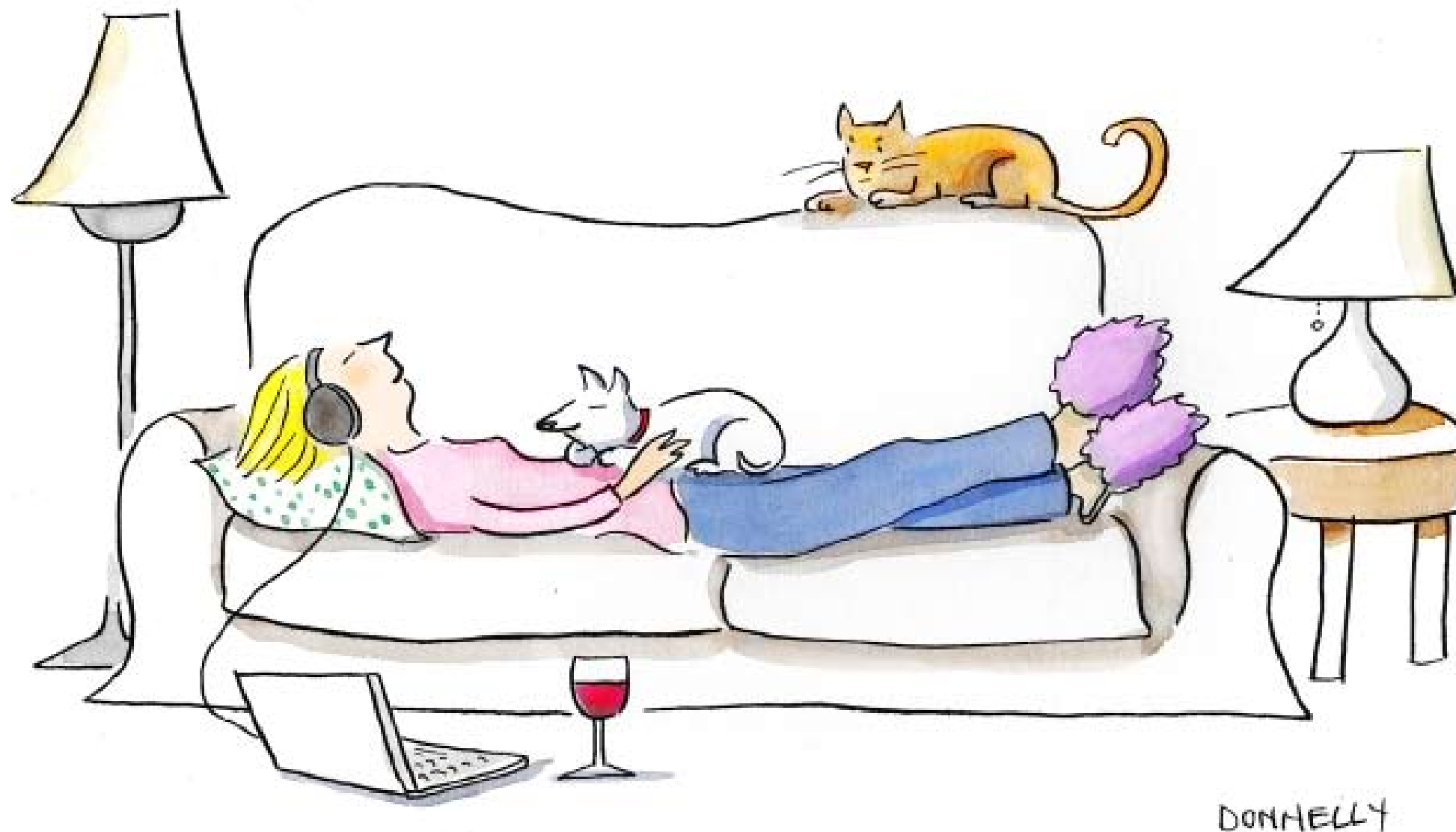
Music Editor Bob Gendron has gone above and beyond to find you some great box sets, as well as offering his take on the best music of the year, and I've brought you my choices for the best recordings that I heard this year.

If that isn't enough, we also had time to squeeze some great gear reviews into the issue and take a visit to the Audio Research factory. If you are an ARC owner and have never been to their facility in Minneapolis, you will get an extra special treat seeing just how massive their operation really is.

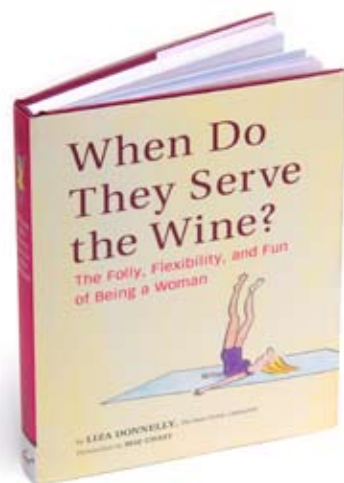
We hope you enjoy this issue. It certainly was a lot of fun to produce.



verityaudio.com



Staff Cartoonist, Liza Donnelly is presently on holiday but will return in the December issue.



Check out Liza's latest book, *When Do They Serve The Wine*, in our Gift Guide on Page 41.

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*Photo of GamuT S9
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Burmester 100 Phono Preamp

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

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

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

Burmester
ART FOR THE EAR

For more information about this phenomenal Burmester product or to arrange a demo call:
801.558.1625



Audio Acoustics . Brinkman . Burmester . Cardas . Chord Cable
Dali . Dynavector . Feikert . FIM . Furutech . Joseph Audio
Hannl . Harmonix . HRS . Manley Labs . Lindemann . Millenium
Mobile Fidelity . Naim . Nottingham . Oppo . Quadraspire
Rega . Reimyo . Running Springs Audio . Shakti . Shure
Stage III Concepts . Synergistic Research . Target Audio . Torus
VPI . Wadia . Weizhi . Well Tempered

WE STAND CORRECTED

Errata:

While we strive to get our facts straight, every now and then something manages to fall through the cracks. I'm the first one to admit when I've made a mistake, so here's the scoop.

In our review of the Loricraft PRC-3 record cleaning machine in issue 32, it was brought to my attention by Jon Monks, (maker of the Keith Monks Ruby Record Cleaning Machine that we reviewed in issue 31) that where I mentioned that the platter on the Ruby was phenolic and was concerned about its ultimate durability with extended exposure to record cleaning fluids was incorrect. As it turns out the model that I reviewed was a *pre* production sample and did not have the final platter design, hence my misinterpretation of its quality.

To clarify, Mr. Monks states: "The platter is made from moisture-proof 'green' MDF board, a standard material for bathrooms and outdoor joinery work. The green tint visible throughout our special form of MDC is from pre-impregnated resins which prevent the moisture absorption and resulting material expansion found with standard MDF. We then seal each disc inside seven layers of industrial grade clear and slate grey lacquer- this is not for decoration, it protects and seals the material completely. Each layer takes 10 minutes to apply, but to be absolutely sure of the integrity, I insist they leave it on for 24 hours before applying the next layer."

So, to those of you that may have been apprehensive about purchasing the Ruby, you can write the \$7,000 check with confidence. We sincerely apologize for any inconveniences this may have caused.



Classic Mr.Potato Head

© Hasbro Toys
www.hasbro.com



It's a mixed bag for our holiday shopping suggestions, and we've got something for everyone, from expensive German sports cars to beer. No matter what your budget, we can help. Here are the staff's favorite picks for the holiday season. And remember, you don't need an excuse to buy someone (or yourself, for that matter) a fun present.

Enjoy.



HOLIDAY

HOLIDAY

Gift Guide

By The TONE Staff



Simpsons World

The Ultimate Episode Guide (Seasons 1-20)

By Matt Groenig
Harper \$150

Aye, carumba! Weighing in at nearly nine pounds, encompassing more than 1000 pages, containing one dozen appendices, housed in a box, and containing every conceivable morsel of information related to *The Simpsons* imaginable, *Simpsons World: The Ultimate Episode Guide (Seasons 1-20)* may indeed be the most manically obsessive and scarily over-the-top companion to a pop-culture phenomenon ever assembled.

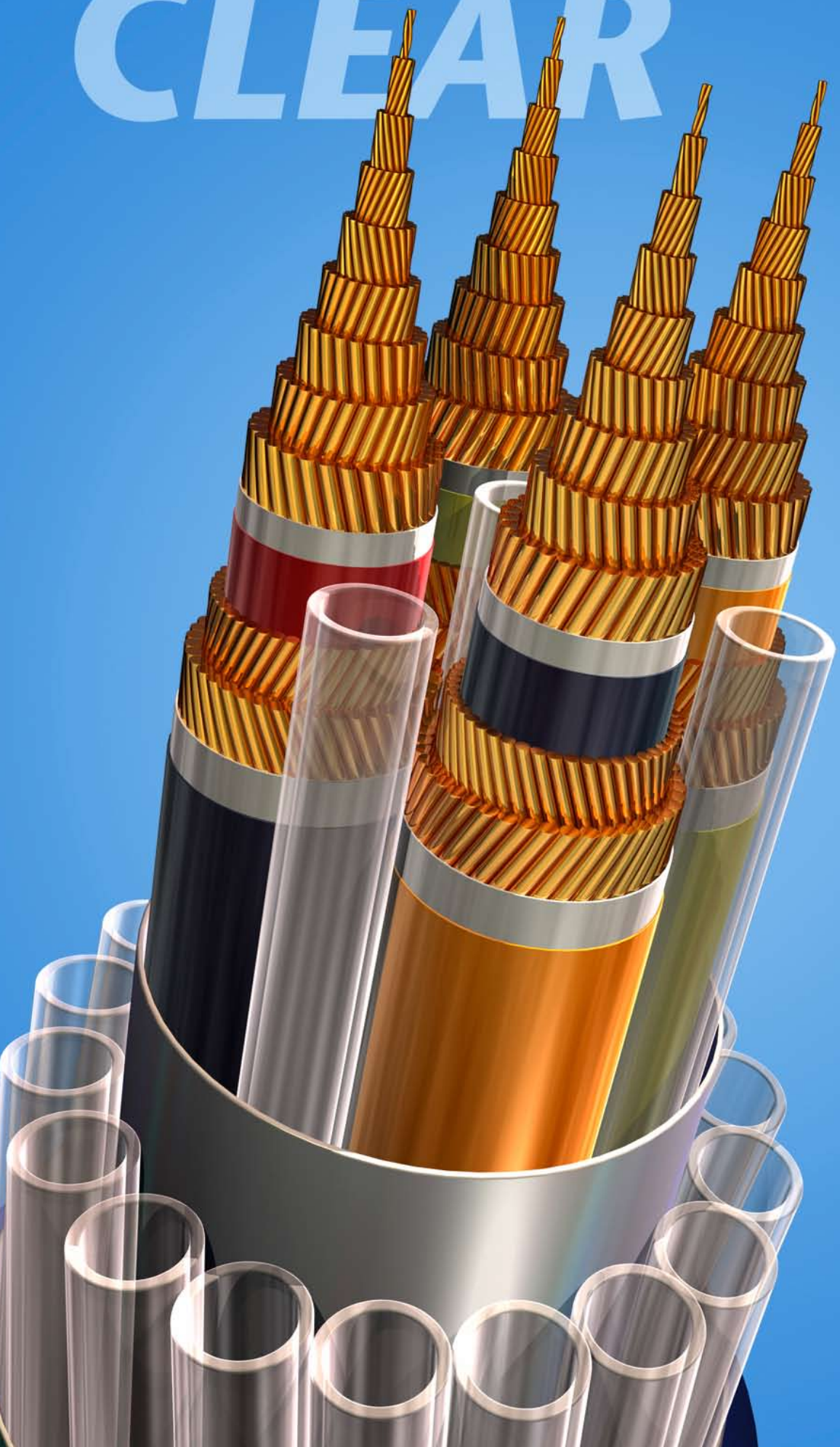


There's no question that this 1200-page hardbound cartoon bible stakes its claim as the largest, comprehensive print volume devoted to a single television show.

Equivalent to *The Dickson Baseball Dictionary*, *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, and other ridiculously researched, scholarly erudite, and statistic-packed coffeetable pieces, creator Matt Groenig's tome is designed for fanatics, connoisseurs, pop-art devotees, and anyone that appreciates cutting-edge wit, silly humor, and savvy satire. The phrase "work of art" is as overused as any in the English lexicon, but in this case, it's totally deserved.

Each chapter is arranged by season, with complete with color-coded legends on each page to help the reader keep track of their progress and make sense of where they're at in this gargantuan undertaking. *(continued)*

CLEAR



Clear Beyond Speaker

cardas.com

GIFTS



Every episode gets at least a two-page spread that includes: Episode name; synopsis; run-date stats; writer, director, and producer credits; select lines and exchanges; song lyrics (if applicable); blackboard jokes (i.e., “I Will Not Celebrate Meaningless Milestones”); screen shots; and any references to films, television series, pop culture, and/or world history. In addition, a biography and picture of everyone from bit to major characters occupies the left-hand space of the left page. And, for total Simpsons geeks, sidebars titled “The Stuff You May Have Missed” divulge exactly that: vague references to previous episodes, hidden visuals that require you to hit the “pause” button, clever signs, and passing sonic cues. And that’s just the normal chapters.

The appendices are, in certain ways, even more impressively itemized.

How many times does Homer utter “D’oh!” during the first 20 seasons? So many that it requires eight pages to document each occasion, and why he says it. There’s also an “Itchy & Scratchy” filmography, Krusty merchandising guide, season-by-season list of every song sung (replete with lyrics), celebrity guest star account, and an insanely annotated index that may make your head spin. The detail-fixated, perfectionist-aimed publishers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* should hire the team that put this book together.

Is it all too much? Of course!

And that’s okay. It’s *The Simpsons* after all, and in relishing the extremes and parodying America’s fascination with consumption, entertainment, crassness, and contradiction for so long on (ironically) the most vapid medium vacuum, television, it’s only natural that Groenig and Co. do the same in print. The brilliance of the book resides not only the sheer excessiveness and wholesale thoroughness, but in the way it reminds us how shrewd, inclusive, and intelligent the series has been for the better part of two decades—facets that, like expectations of always watching a new Simpsons episode, are easily taken for granted.



The Tasburgh House

From \$125/night
www.bathtasburgh.co.uk

If Peter Gabriel says he doesn't have a spare room for you the next time you visit, don't panic. Head down the road a bit and stay at The Tasburgh House; it is the pinnacle of English hospitality. Just outside the town square in Bath, you will find exquisitely manicured grounds, wonderful food and perhaps the best night's sleep our publisher has ever experienced.

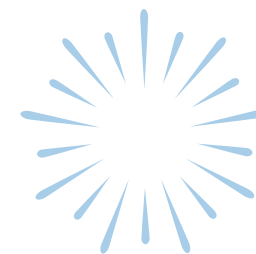
The Tas' proprietor, Sue Keeling, and her staff are very attentive and will see to it that anything you might need from the surrounding area is readily available. If you can tear yourself away from the relaxing atmosphere, there are plenty of other interesting things to partake in Bath. Whether your final destination or just a stop on your journey if your travels include the UK, you owe it to yourself to spend a few nights at the Tasburgh House.



Cardas Double Banana Plugs

\$25 each
www.cardas.com

For those who switch speakers and speaker cables on a regular basis, having the right termination can be problematic, especially if you have a pair of speaker cables that you absolutely love. As there is nothing worse than terminating high-quality cable with cheesy banana plugs, Cardas has a great solution. Their dual banana plugs are only \$25 each and can be separated easily if your amplifier or speakers have binding posts that are relatively far apart. Made from non-magnetic brass, these plugs are easy to attach to your favorite speaker cables, and they are durably made. A must have for every audiophile toolbox.



Connect with your music like never before



UnitiServe
Compact Hard Disc Player
1 TB Music Server

NaimUniti
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UnitiQute
Compact All-In-One
Digital Streaming Player

UNITI
SYSTEM

Rip • Store • Stream • Spin • **Play**



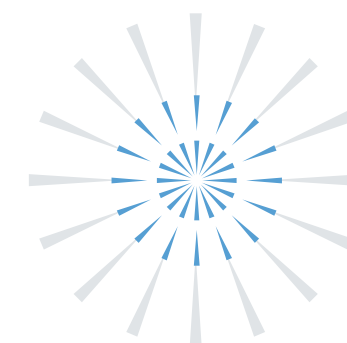
Naim Audio, Ltd. • Southampton Road • Salisbury, Wiltshire • SP1 2LN • UK • www.naimaudio.com

Proudly imported in the US by: NAIM, Inc • 8481 Bash St Ste 1800 • Indianapolis, IN • 46250 • www.naiminc.com

Grado GR10

\$399
www.gradolabs.com

Leave it to the folks who make some of the world's best headphones to make one of the sweetest-sounding earbud sets. Yeah, these will set you back as much as your iPhone, or maybe iPod Touch, but they are worth every penny. The Grado GR10's will transform your iPod experience to the point that you will be spoiled for anything else.



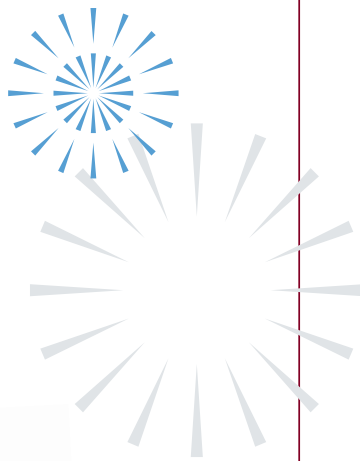


Audio Engine A5 Speakers

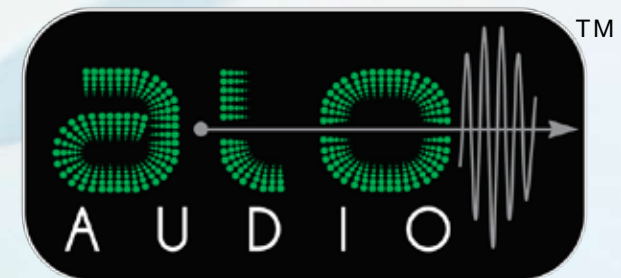
\$349/pair
www.audioengineusa.com

The Audio Engine A5 speakers could make a great addition to your space, regardless of the application. Whether you are shipping your son or daughter off to college, need a spare system in the garage, or anywhere that you need great sound in a compact location, the A5's will rock the house. They also work great as the cornerstone of a high-performance compact system that you can pack along on vacation.

The A5 features a built in iPod dock (that keeps your iPod charged), so setup remains simple and the number of wires running around your living space minimal. They come with a 30-day return policy so you can return them if not fully satisfied. But we doubt you would.



Don't let your interconnects be your weakest link.



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 Web. ALOAUDIO.com

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Sunday 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

EXHIBITION SITE

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900, de La Gauchetière West
Montreal (QC) H5A 1E4

INFORMATION

(450) 441-5989
info@salonsonimage.com
www.salonsonimage.com



stereophile



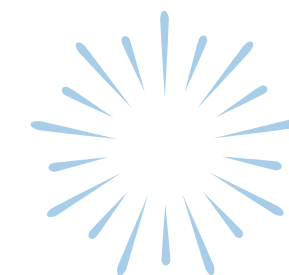
HRT Music Streamer PRO

\$499

www.musicdirect.com

Building on the success of past Music Streamer products, the PRO version is fully balanced and provides an asynchronous USB input, making it the perfect choice for computer-based music systems. Fortunately, it uses your computer's USB bus for power so there is no unsightly wall wart to contribute RFI noise to your system. Working seamlessly with Mac or PC systems, the Music Streamer PRO will work with digital-music files up to 24bit/96khz resolution.

It will need a pair of mini XLR cable adaptors to work in your system, but these can either be made (by the ambitious DIY'er) or purchased from Music Direct for about \$125 per pair. The sound from this budget DAC is anything but – it will surprise you. The HRT Music Streamer PRO is a great way to get into computer-based audio.



Quadraspire Q4 EVO

Approx. \$175 per shelf
www.quadraspire.co.uk

Peter Gabriel isn't the only great HiFi guy who lives in Bath. Quadraspire principle Eddie Spruit and his crew have built a great business there producing outstanding audio racks that do not cost an arm and a leg. Their state-of-the-art CNC facility produces a full line of audio and TV stands for a very wide range of components, and they can be configured specifically to your needs.

The Quadraspire racks offer high performance at a cost that will leave a few quid in your wallet for buying records.

**Rega RP1 Turntable**

\$449
www.rega.co.uk

This Christmas, go beyond the gift of music and give someone you love a Rega RP1 turntable. It's a great way to introduce anyone to the joy of vinyl, offering ease of use and high performance in a compact package. Five minutes after you get it out of the box, you'll be digging the analog magic. While the RP1 will be enough for some, it could be a gateway drug for others. Once they get the analog buzz, they may not be able to stop.

For those who just can't resist the urge to tweak, Rega offers an upgrade pack that features one of their Bias cartridges, an upgraded drive belt and a small washer that you place between the counterweight and rear of the tonearm so that a stylus force gauge is not required. This handy upgrade will bump the price another \$195, but it's well worth the increase in performance.



Alo Audio Rx Mk. 2 Headphone Amplifier

\$575

www.aloaudio.com

If you are on the go and don't want to leave awesome sound behind, make sure to pack ALO's RX Mk.2 amplifier in your briefcase, along with a great set of phones. This little jewel will make long-distance trips much easier. One of our references, the RX will drive low- and high-impedance phones with ease, and it provides liquid, lifelike sound that will make your speakers jealous. Check out ALO's great modded headphones and headphone cables while you are at it; Santa might be able to get all of your presents in one place.



Silent Running Audio "Ohio Class" isoBASE Equipment Platforms

Price on request (dependent on size and weight of components)
www.silentrunningaudio.com

Decidedly anti-tweak, our publisher is completely sold on the effectiveness of the SRA platforms that are now under his Burmester power amplifiers. Available in five standard or any number of custom colors, the isoBASS utilizes technology that SRA supplies to NASA and the U.S. Navy to stop vibration dead in its tracks.

All of this rocket science works together to eliminate airborne, floor-based and equipment-sourced energy to a level unlike anything else on the market. Each platform is custom built and optimized to your specific piece of gear's exact size and weight. While more expensive than some of the off-the-shelf solutions, SRA is by no means the most expensive game in the world of vibration control, but they are the best we've had the opportunity to use. And best of all, there are no materials inside these mystery platforms that will degrade over time.

Give your system the ultimate upgrade with SRA.

The Bremont U2

Around \$6,000
www.bremont.com

One of the hottest new brands of wristwatches is Bremont, founded by two brothers who happen to be ex-RAF pilots. As their last name is English, it's no surprise that they're part of a wave of companies hoping to revive the British watchmaking tradition.

Their specialty is unbreakable pilots' watches; the steel in the cases is treated to 2,000 Vickers, roughly three times as strong as a normal stainless-steel watch. Bremont fans include Ewan McGregor, Liam Neeson, Tom Cruise, Orlando Bloom, Charlie Boorman and Bear Grylls – the cool factor has been established. Latest to join the fold is a stealthy model called the U2, named for the spy plane rather than the world's most-overrated, tedious, irritating rock band.

Having seen the Bremont military air-crew watch, the MB, developed in association with the world's largest ejection-seat manufacturer, Martin-Baker, the U.S. Air Force's elite 9th Reconnaissance Wing at Beale wanted a similar watch, but tested to their own requirements. The result is the stunner you see here, the U2 chronometer. It shares many features with the MB, including the anti-shock rubberized movement mount, which was designed to withstand the ejection-seat testing program.

Unless you're part of the squadron, you're unlikely to get your hands on the limited edition of 150 pieces, but one of the watches seen here – available in stainless steel or with black DLC coating – can be yours for around \$6,000.

**Doggie Style Classic Pale Ale**

\$10 per six pack
www.flyingdogales.com

Music editor Bob Gendron reviewed Flying Dog's Raging Bitch in his Beer Snob column, but some of you might prefer the slightly lighter taste of Doggie Style to go better with your favorite pizza or snack treats. Either way, you have to love a great American beer that features the illustrative genius of Ralph Steadman on all of their packaging along with a quote from the late, great Hunter S. Thompson: "Good people drink good beer." Though Flying Dog ales are not available everywhere, its Web site will lead you directly to a vendor in your home town.



The Cartright

Approx. \$895
www.sound-smith.com

Precise phono-cartridge alignment is a lot like sex. Seriously. Everyone says they are getting it but few really do and even fewer get it right. Phono-cartridge wizard Peter Ledermann has spent the last couple of years developing the Cartright, which along with his test record, makes setting VTF, anti-skate, azimuth, overhang and stylus rake angle as easy as twiddling a knob. How awesome is that? The only bad news is that you can't get one of these by Christmas, but they should be rolling off the production line in early 2011.

For those who balk at the price, consider this: how many records do you own? If you have anything beyond a budget turntable, you probably have a substantial investment in LPs, so getting your whole collection to sound better is an enticing proposition. Should you be one of our readers with multiple table/tonerarm/cartridge combinations, the Cartright just might be the savior of your mental health.

Think of it as getting a good, four-corner alignment on your favorite sports car.



Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



We know. Sorting through the jungle that is pre-owned hi-fi gear can be tough. Myriad Internet forums and online shopping sites just don't offer the expertise required to make sound decisions.

That's where Echo Audio comes in. We have more than 20 years of retail experience in selling hi-fi equipment the way it should be sold: In a brick-and-mortar environment that provides you with personalized attention.

While we will certainly ship any of our gently used classics directly to your door, we invite you to stop by our shop in beautiful downtown Portland, Oregon to browse our inventory in person. Thanks to an in-house service department, we not only service everything we sell, but every piece of used gear is thoroughly checked before being put on display. Consider our white-gloves treatment your guarantee against potential problems.

So, when you are looking for high-quality, lightly used hi-fi gear, look no further than Echo Audio. Be sure to check out our Web site for current products and new arrivals.

echo)))
audio

www.echohifi.com 888.248.echo



Record Revirginizer

\$55/bottle
www.recordrevirginizer.com

If you have a stubbornly dirty record, the blue goo in this bottle is tough to beat. A little spendy at \$55 a bottle, it's not going to become part of your daily cleaning regimen. However, when you just can't get it clean any other way, the RR solution works better than anything we've yet tried. Spread it on, let it dry overnight, then peel off the mask to reveal a record as clean as the day it came off the press.



Naim HDX-SSD

\$8,150
www.naimaudio.com

Naim's version of the disc-based server fits on your rack easily and now uses an internal solid-state drive for system speed, yet it moves all of your music files to a NAS (network attached server) for the maximum flexibility. Easily configurable to work as part of an IP-based system, the HDX-SSD will provide music throughout your home that can be controlled by any of the computers on your network as well as any iPod/iPad devices you might happen to have on hand.

Like most other Naim components, the HDX-SSD works well as a stand-alone digital player or can be upgraded to take advantage of an external DAC and power supply, offering the hard-core audiophile a path to even higher performance.



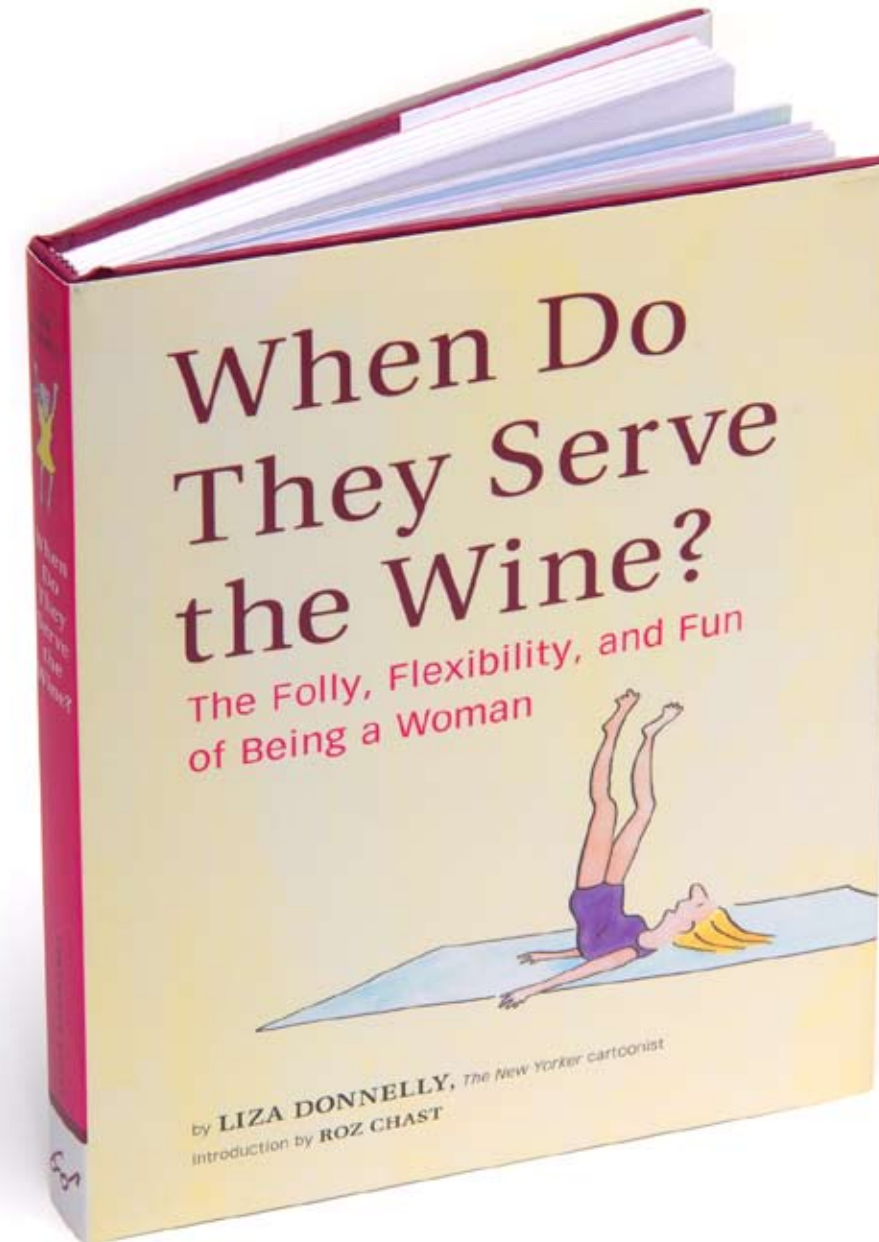
Sony NEX-Alpha 3

\$449

www.sonystyle.com

Another contender for king of compacts, Sony's NEX series of cameras offer interchangeable lenses within the form factor of a compact camera. Capable of incredible high ISO performance and HD video capture, the NEX is claimed to be the world's smallest camera with interchangeable lenses.

While the NEX-3 does not have as wide a selection of lenses as the Olympus PEN that is its direct competitor, it does have a very interesting accessory microphone. Watch for a shootout in TONEPhoto very soon...



When Do They Serve The Wine?

By Liza Donnelly
Chronicle Books \$19.95

When *TONEAudio* cartoonist Liza Donnelly isn't busy with her real job, producing clever cartoons for *The New Yorker*, she's usually got a book project going. Her current release, chronicles the changes in women's personalities and their priorities as they age; broken down decade by decade from "growing up" to "the 60's and beyond." If you've been a longtime follower of *TONEAudio* or *The New Yorker*, you'll instantly recognize her style.

Aimed more squarely at the female audience, *When Do They Serve The Wine?* should get you some brownie points (male or female) with your favorite female friend as a holiday gift, but don't let the book's subtitle, "The Folly, Flexibility, and Fun of Being a Woman" fool you. Donnelly's clever wit and spot on analysis of interpersonal relationships offers up plenty for both sexes to chuckle about, preferably over a good glass of wine.

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Music Hall Mat, \$49

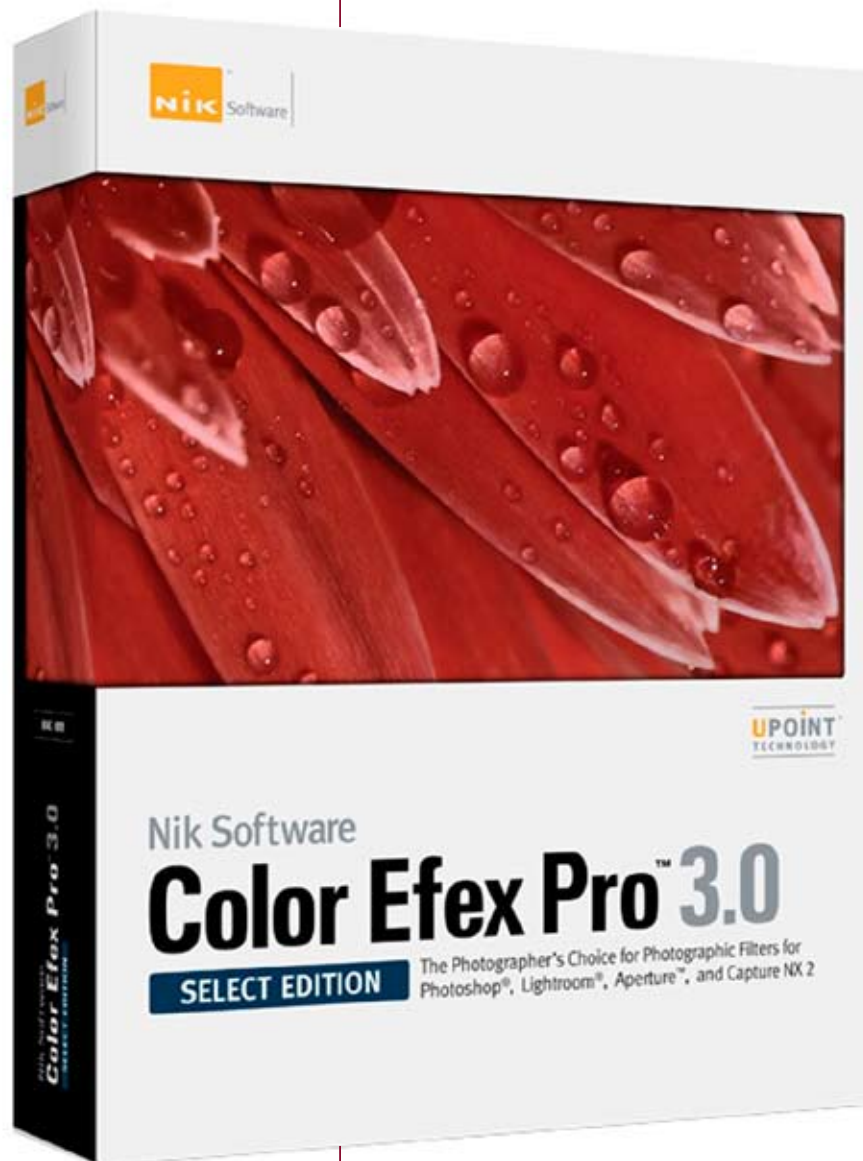
www.musicdirect.com

A23 Mat, \$99

www.whetstoneaudio.com

Another hotly contested topic on any audio forum is what to put between your LP and the platter of your turntable. Some take the Brooke Shields approach and use nothing, but for the rest of us, a mat is an essential. Here are two that take somewhat opposite approaches to achieve their goals.

Which one is better? Depends on your turntable and the one you plunk down your Master Card to buy, though after initial tests, the A23 seems to be the perfect match for Rega tables and the Music Hall is faring better on tables with acrylic platters. But we can argue about this forever...



NIK Color Efex Pro 3.0

\$99 - \$299

www.niksoftware.com

If your favorite audiophile happens to be a photography lover, NIK Software's Color Efex Pro 3.0 will unlock a whole new world of creativity. CEP is still the only Photoshop plug-in suite offering color correction and enhancement features that feel analog and look as if you haven't manipulated the original photos at all. Still not convinced? We've been using NIK filters since day one on every single shot in the magazine. CEP is so much fun, your favorite audiophile might even spend less time fussing over the HiFi system and more time creating works of art.



Aston Martin V12 Vantage

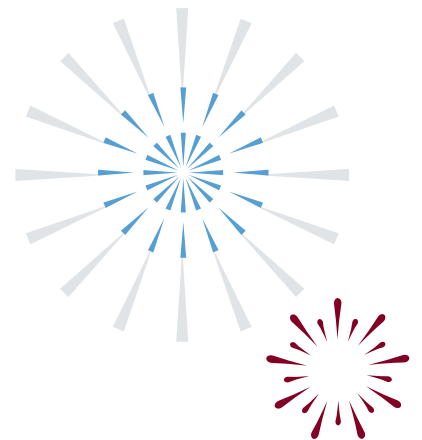
Starting at \$182,000

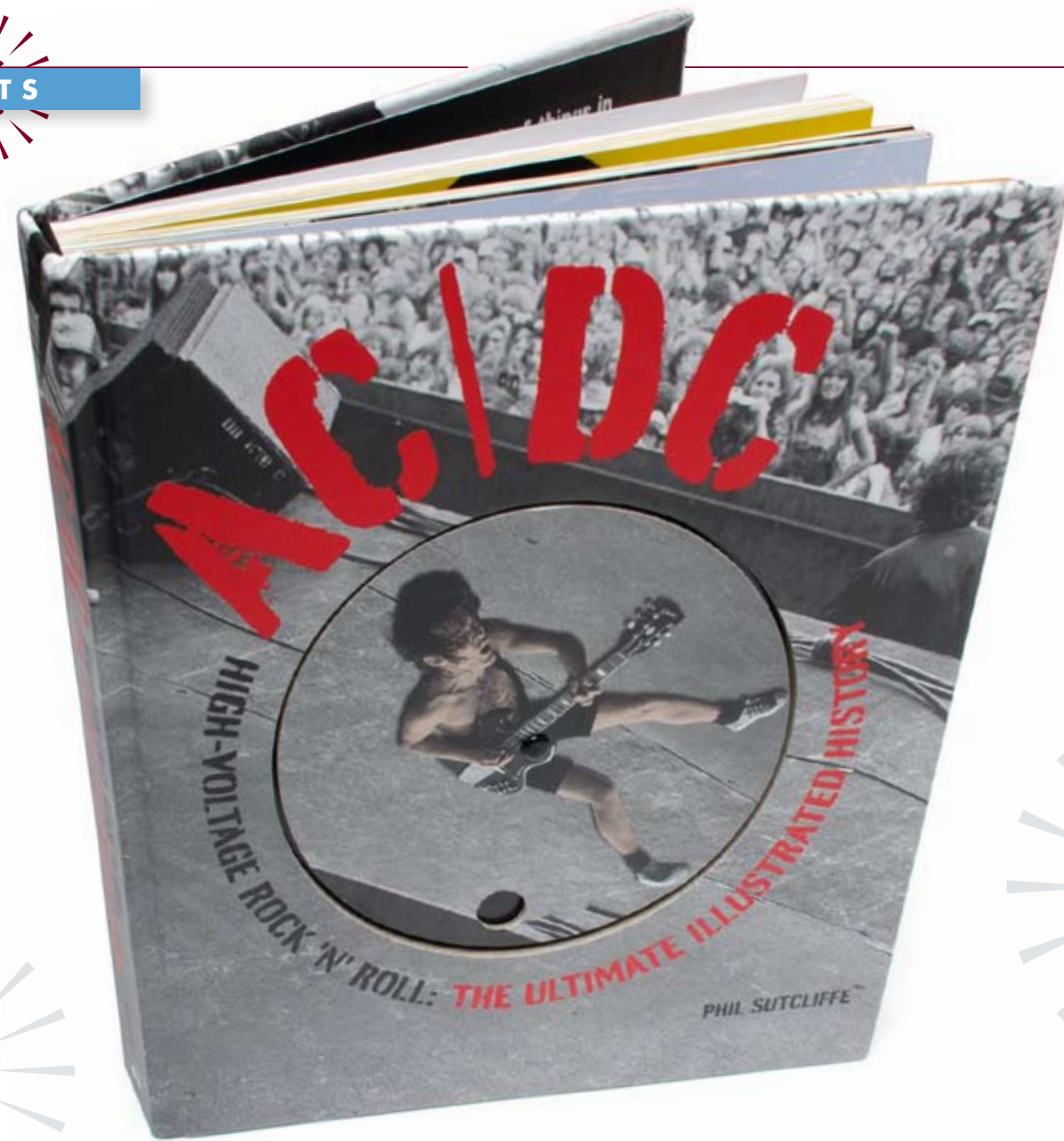
www.astonmartin.com

Should the \$300,000 DBS prove a little tough to justify to the CFO, or perhaps you'd just prefer a bit smaller Aston to fit in your garage, the V12 Vantage could be the ticket. Either way, the minute that the sumptuous 510 hp V12 comes to life, you'll forget about anything that might be preoccupying your brain.

Though Aston Martin claims a "combined" mileage of 17 mpg, you will have to achieve a high level of discipline to yield that kind of fuel economy on anything but a long-distance road trip with cruise control engaged. Our experience with the DBS, with the same engine and nearly identical weight, couldn't do much better than 13 mpg, but we were exhibiting less than gentlemanly driving behavior at the time.

If a Porsche feels slightly "me too" and a Ferrari a little too "dig me," consider the V12 Vantage. It also has a top speed of almost 200 mph, yet it combines style, comfort and dignity in ways that the others can't match.





AC/DC High-Voltage Rock 'N' Roll: The Ultimate Illustrated History

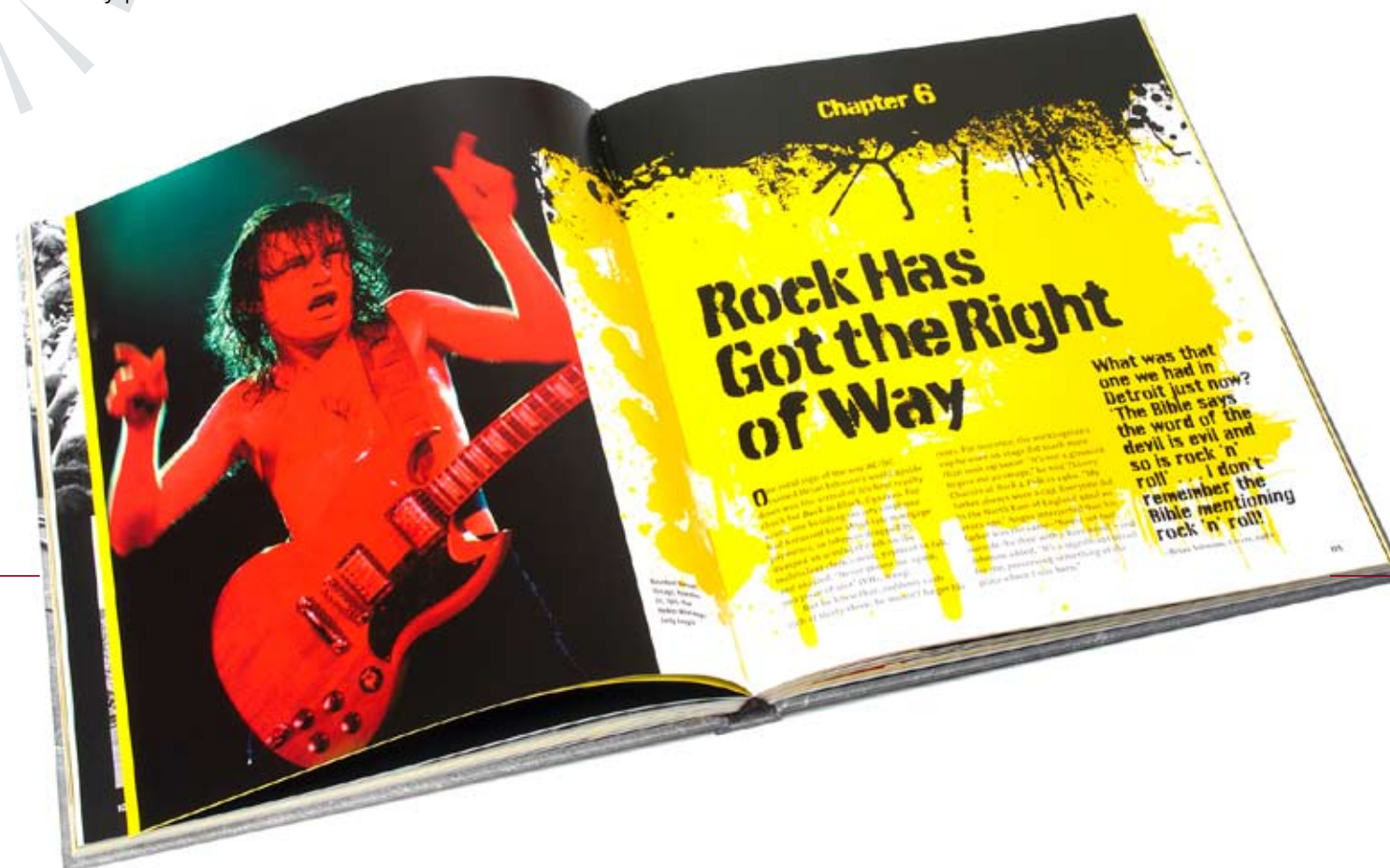
By Phil Sutcliffe with various contributors
Voyageur Press \$35

For the past few years, Voyageur Press has published coffee-table books focused around several of rock's legendary bands. Past tomes on Led Zeppelin and the Velvet Underground are worth exploring, and so, too, is English scribe Phil Sutcliffe's edition on Australia's long-running problem children, AC/DC. Those seeking an expertly reported, hard-hitting, secrets-revealing, historically insightful narrative won't get it here; unfortunately, the definitive AC/DC book doesn't yet exist. However, fans that desire a colorful, memorabilia-packed, smoothly annotated journey through the band's 35+-year career via pictures, words, images, and posters will be extremely pleased.

True to its title, *AC/DC High-Voltage Rock 'N' Roll: The Ultimate Illustrated History* teems with rare studio and concert photos as well as shots of album jackets, import singles, advertisements, groupies, t-shirts, handbills, tickets, patches, pins, music sheets, advertisements, reviews, backstage passes, publicity prints, and just about every other imaginable piece of merch related to a rock band. Clever touches—the hardback book's cover features a spinning wheel, so, with a twist of an index finger, guitarist Angus Young rotates just like he does when he falls to the floor onstage—and the reprinting of old quotes make the volume a celebratory, chronologically ordered scrapbook in which

the reader can start or finish on any random page. Sutcliffe pens the 225-page book's primary verse while 21 other journalists each tackle one of the band's albums in sidebars. The prose is largely frothy and infrequently blunt, yet, to his credit, Sutcliffe doesn't completely gloss over some of the group's rougher phases. Mostly, however, the story is simply a background for the trove of images that brings the always-animated band to life.

It's a winning formula, a fun-over-critical approach that spotlights the group's everlasting appeal, seldom-changing consistency, and bawdy humor.



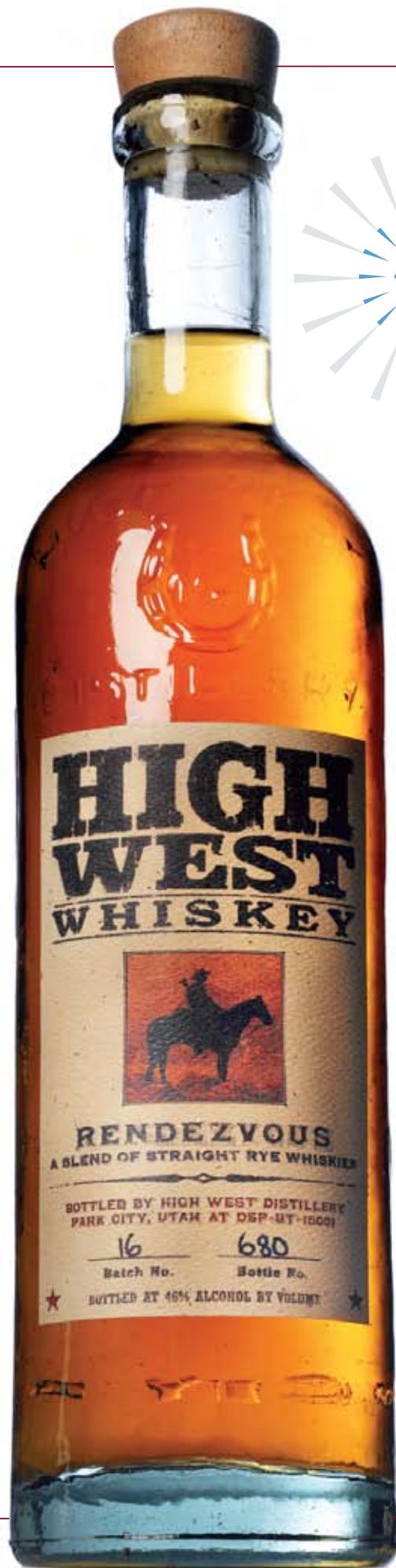
High West Whiskey Rendezvous Rye

About \$50 per 750ml. bottle
www.highwest.com

There's more to Park City, Utah, than the Sundance Film Festival and excellent skiing. Located exactly 7,000 feet up in the Wasatch Range of the Rocky Mountains, High West Distillery is responsible for one of the tastiest, complex and reasonably priced premium rye whiskeys on the market. Founded in 2007, the firm has already garnered several awards and gained distribution in most significant markets.

A blend of two full-flavored straight rye whiskies – a six-year-old containing 95 percent rye and five percent barley malt, and a straight 16-year-old with a mashbill comprised of 80 percent rye, 10 percent corn and 10 percent barley malt – Rendezvous is released in limited batches, with each bottle hand-numbered. Even those who normally turn up their noses at ryes should at least sample this balanced, aromatic version in an Old-Fashioned or Manhattan. But it's also superb neat. No shrinking violet, the rye is both spicy and warm, infused with discernible cinnamon notes, fruity accents, caramel and sugar sweetness, and subtle vanilla undertones. Bold and ballsy, and better than almost any single-malt scotch. Don Draper would doubtlessly approve.

Oh, and for those in the neighborhood, High West is the world's only ski-in distillery. That's as good an excuse as any to hit the slopes.



McIntosh MR-88 Tuner

\$4,000
www.mcintoshlabs.com

McIntosh tuners are the stuff that legends are made of, and the MR88 is poised to continue the tradition. With one foot in the past and the other in the present, the MR88 can receive your favorite broadcast no matter how it's delivered: AM, FM, HD or XM. It combines fully balanced XLR and single-ended RCA analog outputs with an optical TOSLINK and coaxial SPDIF digital output to offer major flexibility no matter what your system might be.

Though the MR-88 is clearly future tense, the engineers at McIntosh have not abandoned their past – it looks and *feels* just like one of their famous analog tuners, with a weighted flywheel that feels just like an MR72 as you move along the dial. So whether the rack on your McIntosh system has one open spot left, or you are new to the world of Mc, the MR88 is a great way to add radio broadcasts to your system.

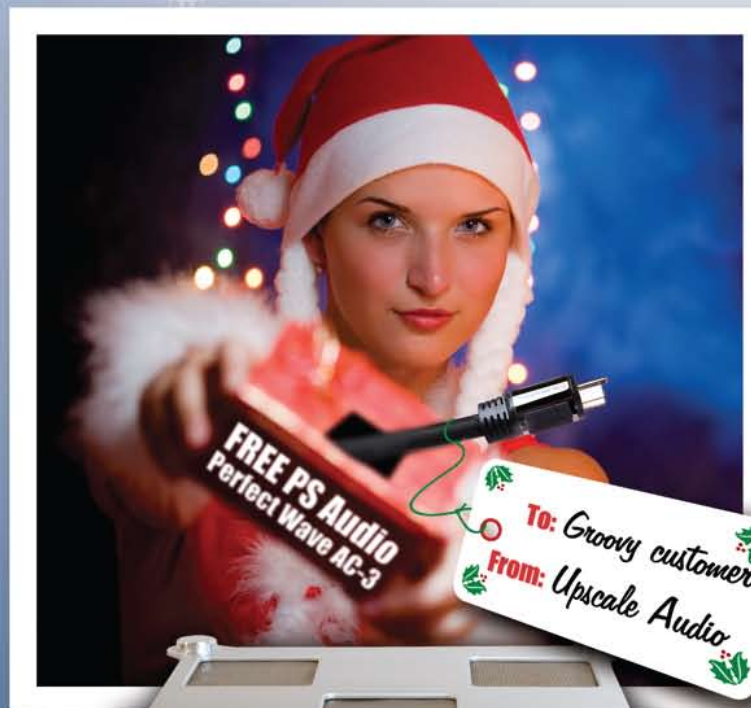
The Skiing Ninja Shaving Kit

\$49.95

www.skiingninja.com

A guy I used to work with in a record store always wore a button that said, "Give Your Face a Joyride." I can't think of a better way to implement this philosophy than with the full compliment of Skiing Ninja products. Enclosed in the goodie bag you see here is a pair of handmade Peppermint Pine Sage Body Soap bars, After Shave Lotion (So that you look good behind your Ninja mask) Shaving Cream and a shaving brush.

The proof is in the shaving; the Ninja goo works and smells great. Forget about Hai Karate, go with the Ninja.



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The Beatles vs. The Rolling Stones: Sound Opinions on the Great Rock 'N' Roll Rivalry

By Jim Derogatis and Greg Kot
Voyager Press \$35

A good friend of mine, who is a pastor by day, once asked me, "If you could ask God one question, what would it be?" I instantly responded, "Beatles or Stones," to which he laughed harder than I'd ever heard this normally reserved man laugh. The Stones-Beatles argument is certainly one of the oldest discussions in music, and when I posed the same question to late rock photographer extraordinaire, Jim Marshall, he said, "Neither. The Allman Brothers is the best band in the world." And so the conversation continues.



Chicago-based rock critics Jim Derogatis and Greg Kot, who also host the national radio show *Sound Opinions*, break the discussion down into several categories such as "Myth Making 101," "Yeah I'm the Axeman," and "Give the Drummers Some" while directly comparing the various members of each band, Pokemon-battle style. They even contrast each group's respective double albums, *Exile on Main St.* vs. *The Beatles*. For those more in the Beatles' camp, this discussion may come across as a mismatch, because while most Stones' fans consider *Exile* Jagger and Richards' masterpiece, most Beatles' aficionados deem *Sgt. Pepper's* as the Fab Four's peak moment.

The book begins with a somewhat pro-Stones push. But, ever the elegant wordsmith, Kot weasels out of being misconstrued as biased by stating that the collaboration gave him a "greater appreciation for both bands." Everything here is in good fun here, and although there aren't any new pebbles overturned (a fact that both authors admit), the material is presented with an excellent mixture of intellectualism and enthusiasm that would make even *The Simpsons'* stodgy comic book collector smile. Best of all, the plethora of pictures is reproduced with better-than-average quality. The coolest feature? The cover, featuring a 3D hologram that, when tilted, alternates between revealing images of the Stones and Beatles.

An enjoyable read, and welcome addition to any music lover's coffeetable.





Olympus PEN E-PL1

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www.olympusamerica.com

No compact camera has created more buzz than the Olympus PEN series. Combining Olympus' technical prowess with the reputation of their legendary PEN film cameras, the PEN cameras combine the power of a DSLR with the form factor of a compact as few other cameras have.

Utilizing a set of micro four-thirds lenses to keep the size down, you can go from the ultra compact 17mm lens all the way to a distance shrinking 75-300mm lens that is the equivalent of a 150-600mm lens on a 35mm film camera; perfect for your favorite sports event! The most intriguing, though, is the 14-150mm zoom that is barely larger (or heavier) than the standard 14-42mm lens. Even though it is the same price as the camera at \$599, this extends the range of the PEN so significantly, you may never need anything else. Add a high-capacity SD card and take pictures forever!



B&W MM-1 compact speakers

\$499

www.bowers-wilkins.com

While the pictures might lead you to mistake these small speakers for salt-and-pepper shakers from a 1950's House of the Future, the B&W MM-1's are actually about nine inches tall and pack quite a wallop. Built upon the award-winning technology in the Zeppelin and Zeppelin Mini, the MM-1's are a gorgeous solution to high-performance, highly portable audio.

Bob Gendron, Ken Kessler, Tom Caselli, Scott Tetzlaff and Jeff Dorgay contributed to this article.

TONEAudio

Music Gift Guide 2010

By Bob Gendron

Here they are: 2010's biggest, baddest, boldest music box sets and collections, each promising hours of enjoyment, intoxicating sound, and the relentless capacity to improve your life—or at least your mood.

Some might notice that a few tempting sets aren't listed here; there's a reason. While we admire the myriad contents involved with the hyper-deluxe reissue of David Bowie's *Station To Station*, it seems like overkill for the sheer sake of overkill, especially considering the steep price. And while it's definitely become a trend, just because an artist can throw in tons of memorabilia and multiple mixes into a carton doesn't mean that the release merits a significant cash expenditure. In the cases of the Bowie box, Soundgarden's *Telephantasm: Super Deluxe Edition*, the White Stripes' *Under Great White Northern Lights: Deluxe Edition*, and a few other shelf-busting sets, the ends don't justify the means.

For the handsome collections that do, and for those to which you'll repeatedly return, read on. Oh, and make sure to keep a pen and your Santa wish list handy.



Miles Davis

Bitches Brew: 40th Anniversary Collector's Edition
Columbia/Legacy 180g 2LP + 3CD + DVD Box Set

MILES DAVIS' *KIND OF BLUE* is commonly referred to as the greatest jazz album in history, the best-selling jazz album in history, and the jazz album that even people who dislike jazz need to own. Over the years, the 1959 landmark has become the single jazz title that's inserted into "greatest lists" by music publications and outlets that don't otherwise concentrate on jazz. Likewise, its name is casually placed into reviews and cultural essays, as if by mere mention, the record ensures instant credibility and nodding-head responses among readers. Reissued numerous times and repeatedly fawned over, it survives as the jazz equivalent of David Foster Wallace's tome *Infinite Jest*. Like Wallace's hefty book, it's something people own just to say they have it, an album that sits on the shelf but is rarely enjoyed. Akin to Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, it's common currency for appearing hip and savvy. *(continued)*

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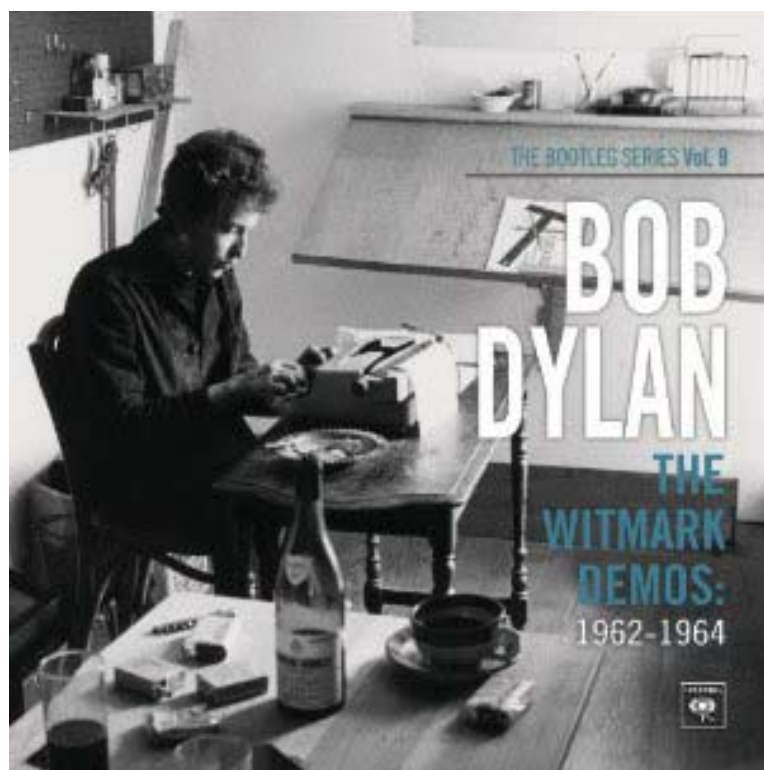


While there's no inherent problem with *Kind of Blue's* ubiquitous status and name-dropping cache (after all, one jazz record has to fulfill the role), several ironies pertain to the fact that *Bitches Brew* has always been a far cooler, adventurous, creative, and superior album. From the truly iconic, African folklore-inspired artwork to the sonic voodoo within, performed by an ensemble Davis intentionally chose because of its youth and ability to challenge him, the 1970 double album eviscerates boundaries, takes jazz into outer space (as well as outré space), and swims in such deep funk, R&B, rock, soul, and poetic waters that it threatens to drown. By comparison, *Kind of Blue* is formal and conventional; it's the one Miles title your parents would own.

In his over-the-top albeit highly entertaining, colorful essay included in this exquisite box set, Greg Tate maintains that *Bitches Brew* is Miles' Salvador Dali painting. It's an apt metaphor. And no matter how one views the record—be it Davis' reaction to Ornette Coleman and

John Coltrane dominating the scene, his rejoinder to the era's wholesale cultural and social changes, or his extension of embracing electric jazz and stretching ideas proffered by Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, Santana, and Sly and the Family Stone—it doesn't alter the impact. The compositions continually unfurl different shapes, textures, and shades. An organic animal, *Bitches Brew* is a chameleon that never dies.

In addition to presenting the original album in fabulous sound on both CD and LP, Legacy's 40th Anniversary Collector's Edition adds a previously unreleased 1970 concert on disc and unissued 1969 show on DVD. Yet the strongest argument for this blow-out edition owes to physical media that further broaden and highlight the record's exotic colorful palette: A stupendously designed, 52-page 12x12 book chock full of period photos and quotes, paintings, and a memorabilia envelope containing concert-ticket reproductions, prints, and a poster. Few albums are better served by visual complements. Resplendent.



Bob Dylan

The Bootleg Series Volume 9: The Witmark Demos
Columbia/Legacy 180g 4LP Box Set or 2CD Set

THE MOST STRIKING ASPECT ABOUT the music on *The Witmark Demos* isn't that these 47 Bob Dylan compositions were written and recorded before the artist turned 24 years old. It isn't that more than one thousand artists have covered versions of these songs over the past several decades. And while staggering, it isn't how confident, original, or beyond his years Dylan sounds on semi-rough cuts of landscape-shifting fare such as "Masters of War" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall." Rather, what's truly astonishing is how the material revolutionized not only cultural, political, and social mores but how it impacted the music industry as a whole, and, within a span of less than three years, wholly redefined industry concepts and relationships.

Comprised of material Dylan laid down for the Witmark publishing company—all demos featuring the Bard solo, self-accompanied on guitar, harmonica, or piano—the latest Bootleg Series entry magnifies how quickly the icon evolved as a songwriter, moving from traditional folk storytelling and to topical protest to the surrealist genius and humorous stream of consciousness of the tunes that made him the most impactful musician of his or any generation. Early on, his manufactured Okie accent and hobo drawl color songs like "Talking Bear Mountain Picnic Massacre Blues" and "Hard Times In New York Town," tracks that don't lack for authenticity but which are mere stepping stones for what would soon come.

A total of 15 previously unreleased Dylan originals never recorded for any of his albums, not the least of which is the daunting "The Death of Emmett Till" and personal rambler "Guess I'm Doing Fine" debut here. Diehard fans will be overjoyed to hear these uncovered gems, but casual listeners should be drawn to this set for the manner in which it reveals how Dylan's prolific skills forever altered the business of the music industry.

Accompanied by an illuminating essay by historian Colin Escott that sheds light on the procedures, contracts, strategies, and motivations associated with songwriting and publishing (as well as Dylan's experiences in this field), *The Witmark Demos* is at its core the soundtrack of the moment when singers/musicians became artists and the separation between performers and writers shrank. Consider *The Witmark Demos* an essential partner to *The Original Mono Recordings*.

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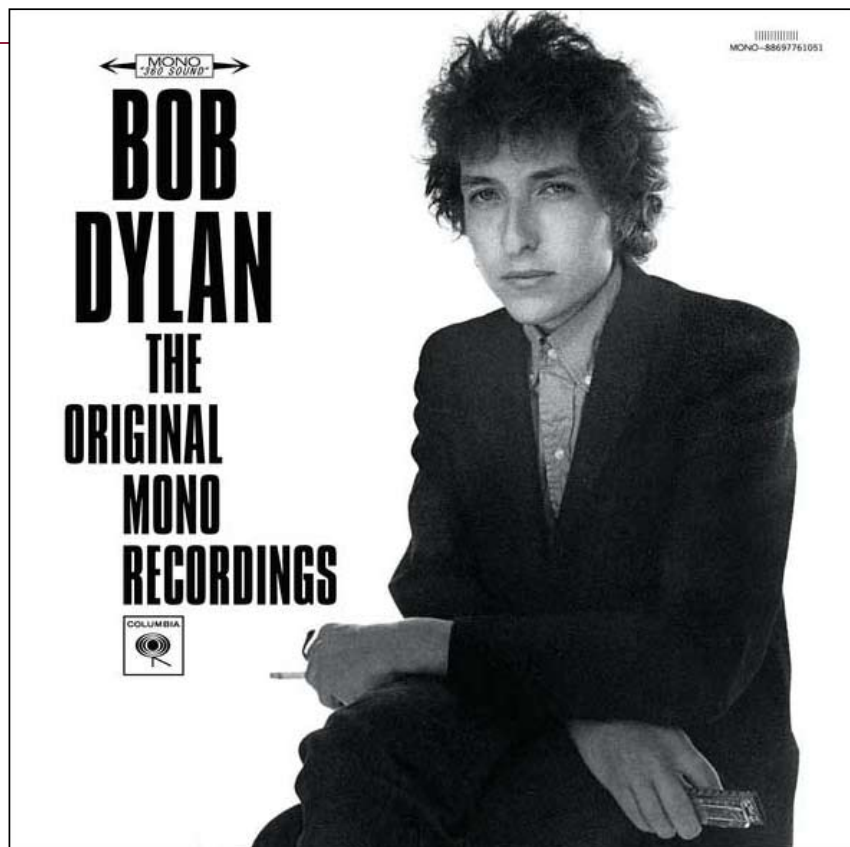
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Bob Dylan
The Original Mono Recordings
 Columbia/Legacy 180g 9LP Box Set or 9CD Box Set

T

AKING A PAGE FROM LAST YEAR'S Beatles releases, Columbia/Legacy has gone under the hood and reissued the Bard's first eight groundbreaking studio albums—*Bob Dylan*, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, *Blonde On Blonde*, *John Wesley Harding*—in exquisite mono.

Musically, these records need no introduction. Save for a self-titled debut on which Dylan is in full-on folkie mode to the point where he's mimicking the past, every one of these LPs is flawless, and, amazingly, more than 40 years after their original release, still revealing new layers of information, meaning, and significance with each successive play. Need evidence? While listening, consult Sean Wilentz' excellent new *Bob Dylan In America* book, which offers fresh insights that even the hardest Dylan fans thought fully sussed-out.

Mastered from the original mono master tapes by Mark Wilder at Sterling Sound, and packaged with individual jackets complete with the original artwork, inserts, and labels—as well as a booklet containing illuminating, previously unreleased Dylan photos and a Greil Marcus essay—*The Original Mono Recordings* is on the same level as Capitol's Fab Four remasters. Granted, there aren't as many astonishing revelations, but the clarity, transparency, imaging, richness, and dimensions never fail to impress. In mono, there's a direct signal path from Dylan's voice, guitar, and harmonica to the listener's room. Studio spaces, instrumental reverb, vocal artifacts, guitar tones, and slap-back echoes come alive in an intimate, realistic manner that stereo couldn't yet provide.

Those that own the hybrid stereo SACDs of some of the albums in this set are still in for a treat. Ditto those that have Sundazed's mono LPs, which don't claim the level of detail retrieval or sheer openness on these pressings, which come straight from the masters. Then, of course, there's the meticulous replication of the labels and inserts, as well as the high-quality jackets, all reproduced with immaculate care. Not to be missed.



Every one of these LPs is flawless, and, amazingly, more than 40 years after their original release, still revealing new layers of information, meaning, and significance with each successive play.

B

Y THEIR OWN ADMISSION, the members of the Grateful Dead conceded that they were never as sharp in the studio as they were on-stage. Not that the band didn't make multiple efforts at transferring its live chemistry onto studio platters. Alas, by the time the late 80s rolled around, the Grateful Dead gave up on albums—which accounts for why nearly a dozen, new original songs performed between 1990 and 1995 were never formally recorded. However, during its three-decade career, the collective did manage to craft a few often-overlooked studio gems—all but two, *From the Mars Hotel* and *Blues For Allah*, coming within a three-year period.

In particular, 1970's *American Beauty* and *Workingman's Dead* stand as folk-rock classics, etched with the sort of organic emotion, warm chemistry, flexible playing, laidback feel, and stellar songwriting that often eluded the band in the studio. In addition, 1968's *Anthem of the Sun* remains a psychedelic juggernaut—a synthesis of improvisational abandon, atmospheric whimsy, collage-based structure (and lack thereof), and experimental production. All three albums, along with 1967's satisfying albeit hodgepodge *Grateful Dead* and 1969's innovative *Aoxomoxoa* (one of the first albums to employ a 16-track Ampex recorder), are included in *The Warner Bros. Studio Album Box Set*, a gorgeously packaged and even more gorgeous-sounding collection that presents the band's music in a lavish fidelity it's never enjoyed.

Pressed at RTI and featuring the original mixes of *Anthem of the Sun* and *Aoxomoxoa*, both unavailable for decades, the set puts the country, folk,

roots, and bluegrass accents back into the acoustic-based material and vivid, three-dimensional colors into the previously congested, muddily layered hallucinogenic fare. Jangling, contemplative folk-rock songs such as "New Speedway Boogie" and "Dire Wolf" possess magnificent presence and seem as if they're being played around a campfire just feet away; the reemergence of the crackling banjo lines and rustic harmonies throughout render "Cumberland Blues" a revelation. Who knew about what sounds like a Theremin and bells on "Saint Stephen," which hits with the majesty of a freak-out symphony? The down-home calliope melodies and gypsy vibes on the boundary-pushing "Dupree's Diamond Blues" makes "Sgt. Pepper's" seem pretentious.

And the vocals? Superb. Not only do Jerry Garcia's tuneful narratives glow with purity, but Ron "Pigpen" McKernan's bluesy, blustery, wine-coated voice is extremely defined. As are the abundant percussion and spliced-in live-show segments, which help "Caution (Do Not Step on the Tracks)" come on like a mystical voodoo dance. If that's not enough, the album jackets feature textures faithful to those of the originals. As a bonus for Deadheads, the pop-art orange box reflects the design of the hallowed 1967 "Trip or Freak" concert poster designed by Mouse Kelley and Rick Griffin. Nice.

Admittedly, the booklet is rather slim, and Blair Jackson's reflections dashed-off. Yet it doesn't prevent Rhino's effort from being one of the finest reissues (digital or analog) in recent memory, and plenty good enough to forever change the mistaken belief that the Dead never created a studio masterpiece.



Grateful Dead

The Warner Bros. Studio Albums Box Set
Warner Bros./Rhino 180g 5LP Box Set

The set puts the country, folk, roots, and bluegrass accents back into the acoustic-based material and vivid, three-dimensional colors into the previously congested, muddily layered hallucinogenic fare.

W

HAT ELSE OF VALUE COULD POSSIBLY BE LEFT IN THE JIMI HENDRIX VAULTS? Surprisingly, quite a bit. Designed not as a traditional career summation that focuses on familiar classics but as a compelling, largely chronologically assembled set that tells the guitarist's story through music and words, *West Coast Seattle Boy* collects 58 rare tracks, 45 of which are previously unreleased and definitely worth hearing.

The project's uniqueness is evident from the start, as it compiles fifteen songs Hendrix cut as a sideman for various R&B artists—the Isley Brothers, Little Richard, and Don Covay included. And that's the readily available material.

The remainder of the mammoth box homes in on rarities in the form of alternate versions, demos, live sessions, and impromptu studio jams. Fans that already invested in posthumous volumes such as *Valleys of Neptune* would be right to be skeptical of any apparent leftovers. Yet the producers have done a wondrous job in selecting unheard tracks. Indeed, *West Coast Seattle Boy's* towering achievement is the manner in which it makes Hendrix sound new again. Even live versions of evergreens such as "The Star-Spangled Banner" kick with fresh energy. Much of the credit goes to the context in which they're presented, as well as the relatively high sonic quality and Hendrix's fiery performances. *(continued)*



Jimi Hendrix

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By balancing initial song sketches, fully formed ideas in various stages of development, inspired live takes, and studio explorations that utilize then-cutting-edge techniques, the compilation gives us a clearer portrait of how Hendrix thought, operated, and, in the span of just three years, exploded with unrivaled creativity. The playing teems with a liberation and rawness that exceeds that on the guitarist's formal studio efforts. There's also uninhibited intimacy, especially on six tracks recorded in March 1968 in Hendrix's New York hotel room with friend Paul Caruso.

Highlights? A stripped-down cover of Bob Dylan's "Tears of Rage"—a song that hadn't yet even been released by the bard—joins a humorous, near-chaotic "Calling All the Devil's Children," off-the-cuff "Hear My Freedom," spontaneous burst of "Peter Gunn," 1965 sessions with R&B singer Rosa Lee Brooks, and an unedited 20-minute-plus collaboration with jazz organist Larry Young (dubbed "Young/Hendrix") as unearthed, unlocked treasures that distinguish *West Coast Seattle Boy* as the most insightful Hendrix set around.

A 90-minute DVD functions as an autobiographical companion. Yet the well-annotated track-by-track liner notes that describe the origin, location, and happenstance for every cut here are even better. Engrossing.

T

EN YEARS AFTER RHINO

Handmade celebrated 1970's *Funhouse*, Legacy commemorates the Stooges' *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, 5x7 photo prints, and a reproduction of a Japanese 45RPM single.



Iggy & the Stooges
Raw Power
Legacy/Columbia
2CD Legacy Edition
or 4CD Deluxe Edition

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.

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.

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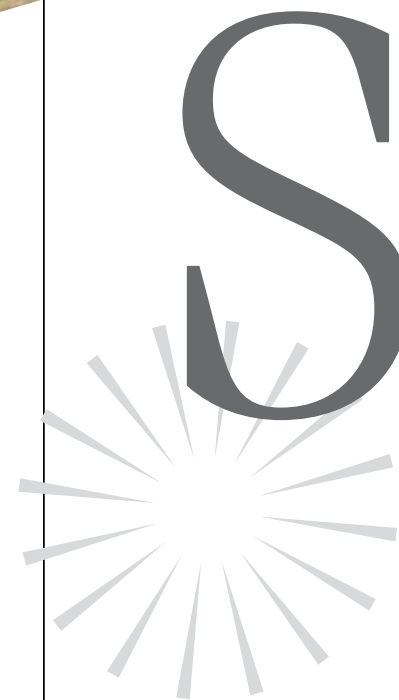
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Syl Johnson
The Complete Mythology
Numero Group
6LP + 4CD Box Set



SOUL MUSIC'S HISTORY IS RIFE WITH OUTRAGEOUS CHARACTERS. Yet Syl Johnson might have the market cornered. According to the singer/guitarist, his father was none other than blues legend Robert Johnson. His single "Different Strokes" is "bigger than Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean.'" And James Brown sabotaged Johnson's otherwise guaranteed success at Federal Records in the 60s because, according to Syl, the Godfather of Soul was envious of youth, looks, and voice.

Coming from anyone else, such statements would simply be laughable. But connected to Johnson, they're not only humorous but part of an exaggerated personality that makes Johnson so thoroughly irresistible and engaging. It's not for nothing that archival reissue specialists Numero Group coined this four-years-in-the-making box *The Complete Mythology*.

Save for soul fanatics, crate diggers, and "dusty" collectors, as well as older Chicagoans, the almost-famous Johnson largely remains an unknown. After playing with the likes of Magic Sam, Junior Wells, and Howlin' Wolf in the 1950s, Johnson began a solo career that took him to Federal, Hi Records, several small Chicago-based imprints, and, most prominently, Twinight Records, for which he became the label's resident producer and hitmaker. He left the industry in the early 80s, only to return in the mid-90s upon discovering that numerous hip-hop artists sampled "Different Strokes." *(continued)*



With his output scattered amidst various inferior compilations and out-of-print collections, Numero's heroic set is the first release that gives the cult figure what he's long been overdue: A musically exhaustive, incredibly detailed, meticulously produced, and stunningly annotated anthology that convincingly makes a case for Johnson as a soul, funk, and R&B great.

Filled with period photos, charts, and images of 45RPM singles, Numero has assembled one of the most impressive booklets to ever grace a box set. A lengthy essay acts as an easy-to-understand guide to Johnson's difficult-to-follow career path. Journalist Bill Dahl supplies track-by-track recording notes that, for the devotee, will function as a secret history of soul. Then there are the songs, spilling over with ass-shaking grooves, lick-a-stick beats, and sweaty, musty rhythms. Johnson is convincing in the traditional soul roles of pleader and promiser, but also delivers impassioned socially conscious and African-American identity messages on several sides on par with the era's finest protest/wake-up material. And his take on the Beatles' "Come Together" simply crackles. Consider *The Complete Mythology* your own private jukebox of horn-stoked Memphis and Chicago soul that you never knew existed.

Numero is also to be commended for its excellent remastering and achieving an astonishing degree of consistency. The only caveat: The 6LPs (which replicate the contents of the four CDs and sport authentic-looking covers) are pressed at United in Nashville and subject to more surface noise than vinyl that comes out of RTI, Rainbow, and the like. However, given the set's price (retail: \$75), it's a minor quibble.

NEARLY FOUR DECADES AGO, Klaus Dinger and Michael Rother flipped the conventions of art-rock music on its side with NEU!, a pioneering electronic band that bridged their native Germany's Krautrock heritage with exotic European timbres. The group's impact continues to be felt in the work of contemporaries such as U2, Radiohead, Wilco, and countless others.

For years, the ensemble's records—that, like those of the Velvet Underground and Pixies, sold poorly upon initial release but reached the ears of artists and artists-to-be that spread the word—have been hard to find due to logistics and circumstance. By the mid-80s, NEU!'s record label stopped distributing LPs. Over the next 20 years, Dinger and Rother couldn't come to agreement with imprints that sought to release the band's albums. Consequently, court cases ensued and bootleg versions appeared. Finally, a deal with Gronland Records in 2000 resulted in the international release of Neu's first three efforts, all of which have since long been out of print on LP.

Mastered from the original tapes, housed in a giant white box, and accompanied by the first-ever release of *NEU! '86* and *NEU! 72*, a test single, *NEU!*, *NEU! 2*, and *NEU! '75* are reborn here as phenomenal-sounding, creatively limitless records that still seem light years ahead of their time.

Based around subtle contrasts, the band's largely instrumental output clings to metronomic beats and phase-manipulated guitar lines that cast the illusion of stretching into an infinite horizon. In the set's 36-page book, Radiohead vocalist Thom Yorke rightly equates hearing NEU! with encountering "a brand-new motorway [and] you are the first person to drive along it." Unquestionably, the sensations one gets evoke the thrills of speeding on the Autobahn. Only NEU!'s highway is cleaner, smoother, more linear, and, in its own odd way, orchestral. Not that there aren't plenty of involving, intentionally roughened grooves that propel the compositions forward and backward.

Highly atmospheric, tonally surreal, and tethered to the dynamic tension that takes places in the regions where rhythm and melody, improvisation and structure collide, NEU!'s music toys with unconscious suspense. Without immediate peers, the songs and their faint tempo shifts exist in their own parallel universe. Rother, Dinger, and co-producer Conny Plank's conception of sound matches that of any visionary producer: Meticulous adjustments of tape machines, radical overdubs, backward playback of melodies, closely miked instruments, amplifier drones, volume fades, ambient echoes, and multi-track collages all figure into compositions. As for the sonics: Mind-blowingly great.

The four full-length LPs are also available individually, but the box exclusively yields the finely designed pop-art-style book, a test single, and download code for the entire contents. Absolutely essential.

Highly atmospheric, tonally surreal, and tethered to the dynamic tension that takes places in the regions where rhythm and melody, improvisation and structure collide, NEU!'s music toys with unconscious suspense.

NEU!

NEU! Vinyl Box Set
Gronland 180g 4LP
+ Test Single LP Box Set

OASIS CRAMMED MORE CONTROVERSY, drama, and primadonna antics into 15 years than most feuding married couples do during an entire lifetime. Brothers Liam and Noel Gallagher played the roles of two bickering women, seemingly disagreeing on certain occasions just for the sake of causing a stink, each flexing their ego no matter what the cost. Indeed, the siblings' War of the Roses spats began to grow stale years ago, with the predictable turmoil starting to seep into their later-period albums, which progressively declined in quality.

Surpassing the 2006 double-disc collection *Stop the Clocks*, which focuses on deep cuts and B-sides, and complementing 1998's *The Masterplan*, an assembly of B-sides, *Time Flies...1994-2009* lays out Oasis' 27 singles and makes a damn convincing case for the group's status as the finest singles band of its generation. (Important note: The standard 2CD version doesn't include "Sunday Morning Call" but features "Champagne Supernova," technically not a single but a huge radio track in America. The superior British configurations—a 4CD clamshell box and the 180g 5LP vinyl box, each complete with colorful booklets—claim all of the singles at the expense of "Champagne Supernova.")

Whether soaking up the swirling textures of the chiming "Live Forever" or bang-a-gong-and-get-it-on stomp of "Cigarettes and Alcohol," the winding riffs on the so-silly-it's-good "Shakermaker" or magnetic hooks of the still-phenomenal "Don't Look Back In Anger," the plaintive meditation on the Lennon-esque "Let There Be Love" or full-on electric rush of the anthemic "The Shock of the Lightning," or the folk-grounded crunch of "Little By Little," the melodic consistency, instinctive structures, and brilliant songwriting defy expectations. Think of the anthology as a communal jukebox that just doesn't quit.

In addition to presenting the singles across two discs, the 4CD clamshell set also includes a DVD of all 38 of Oasis' videos. Better still, a fourth disc presents the band's last-ever recorded concert, a July 2009 date at London's Roundhouse that finds the group in fine form. For digital fans, this is the way to go. And while no remastering is involved on any of the configurations, the deluxe limited-edition vinyl box set offers terrific sound, with the songs packing more punch, dynamics, and details than they do digitally. Almost all of what you need (several great non-single tracks are missing) is here.

Oasis

Time Flies...1994-2009: The Complete Singles Collection
Big Brother/Columbia/Legacy
180g 5LP Box Set
or 3CD/1DVD Box Set
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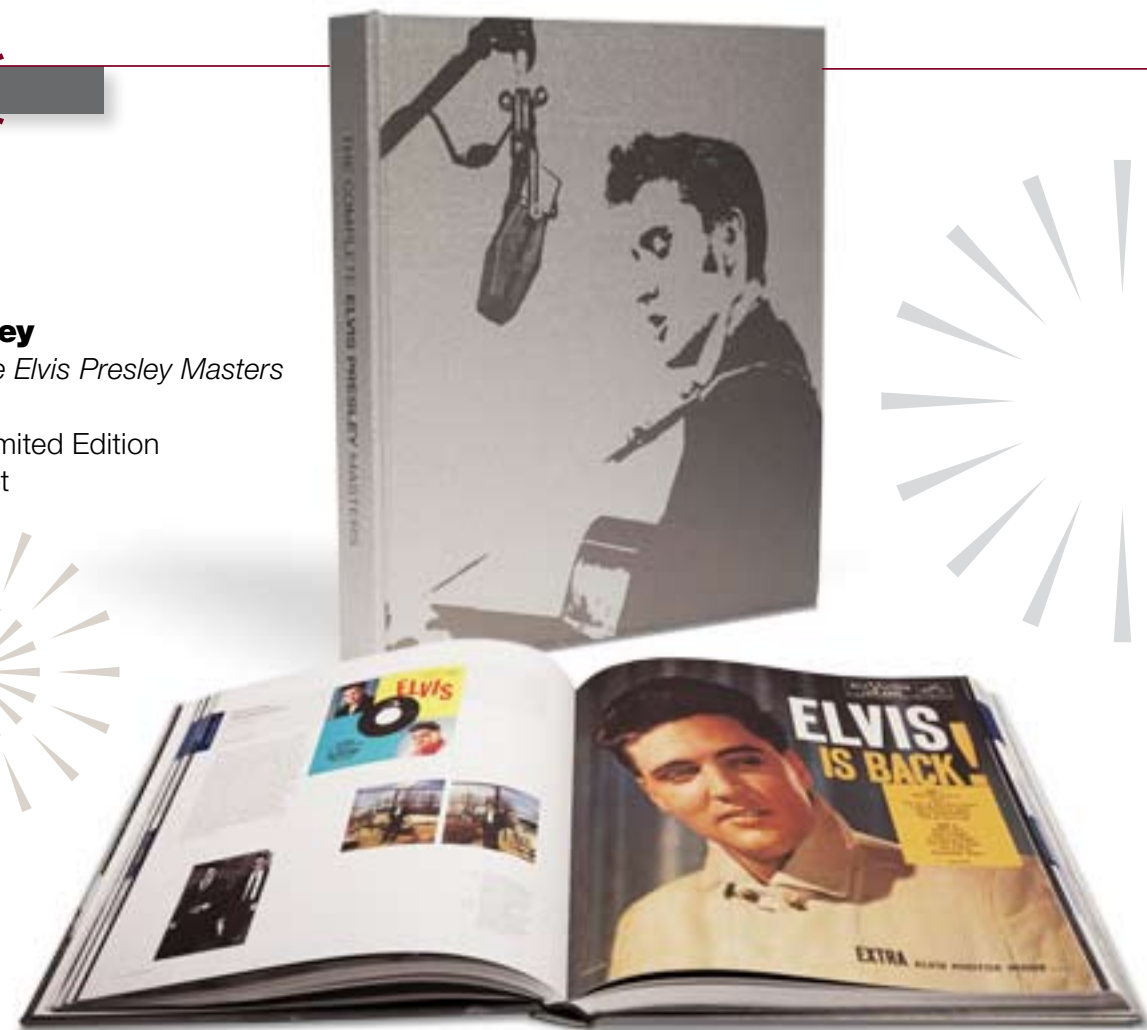
"These albums were transferred from a Studer A80 via Mogami cables to Apogee converters at 96k/24bit, but more important than the equipment used is the actual tape handling. We've eliminated phase cancellation issues that have been present in previous transfers and brought a new level of clarity and depth to these recordings. Basically, by going back to the very first generation master, and then adjusting for each song individually, we're able to play these tapes back just as if you were sitting in the control room with Sam Phillips listening from the very same machine used to make the original master.

"As an engineer and a huge Sun Records fan, this is awesome... and these sound GREAT (better than they ever have)!"

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Elvis Presley
The Complete Elvis Presley Masters
 RCA/Legacy
 Numbered Limited Edition
 30CD Box Set



GARGANTUAN MULTI-DOZEN-DISC BONANZAS have always been exclusive to classical music, where collections of a single composer's symphonies or concertos are housed in one place and deeply discounted. No more. Spanning 30 discs, 814 songs, and more than 35 hours of music, *The Complete Elvis Presley Masters* takes its place as the biggest rock/pop collection ever assembled. Available only through www.completeelvis.com and featuring a 240-page hardbound book replete with an exhaustively annotated discography, artwork for every original Elvis LP, and new essay by Presley expert Peter Guralnick, the behemoth compilation is true to its name: Here, chronologically arranged, is every single master recording that the legendary singer put on tape, record label be damned. The great, the good, the bad, the ugly. As such, it's meant exclusively for collectors and fanatics—and those that can spare \$750.

Practical roadblocks aside, most any listener would be crazy not to at least be curious. Particularly given the superb mastering job. The producers took years to locate the original analog master tapes for every selection possible. During the transfer process, the latest 24-bit technology was employed to give the music the best dynamics, clarity, and life that it's ever enjoyed on a digital format. No, the resolution doesn't top what's available on a few audiophile LP pressings, but it blows away the sonics on RCA's three five-disc *Essential/Complete Masters* volumes and any other Presley disc you'd care to name. The early material, in particular, pops with instrumental realism, studio echoes, and the feeling that the

noise that Presley, Scotty Moore, and company made would change the world. Moreover, a majority of the songs here have never been available on an audiophile format—and those that are, say on *24 Karat Hits*, present a vastly incomplete outline of Presley's giant personality.

While it will be excessive for even many of those that can afford it, *The Complete Elvis Presley Masters* is a veritable lesson in the creation, evolution, and progression of popular music—a conclusion easily gleaned from the dozens upon dozens of cover songs the Tupelo native tackles. Debates about Elvis' place in history aside, this set renders inarguable the vocalist's understanding and emotional grasp of the material, no matter

what the style. And yes, before the drugs and drama took hold, the boy could sing. Sure, about a midway through this hulking treasure, the goings get tough. Occasionally embarrassing. But surprises—the ridiculously upbeat, breathless, likely cocaine-fueled Madison Square Garden 1972 concert, for example, or a run of terrific gospel sides—emerge, and spur further investigation.

Another way to look at this multi-pound monster: Americans love celebrity tragedies. In tracing the rise, peak, fall, brief re-emergence, and eventual pantomime nature of one of ten-biggest entertainers in history, this 30-disc set might just be the most gripping crash-and-burn cultural story of them all.



The Rolling Stones
The Rolling Stones 1964-1969
 ABKCO, 180g 13LP Box Set

While announcements of the pricey albeit tempting compilations hit in October, information regarding the sourcing of the remastered 180g LPs has remained shrouded in secrecy. There's reason for the mystery. But first, the good news: The ABKCO set utilizes the Bob Ludwig-mastered super high-resolution masters, which GZ Digital Media then cut using Direct Metal Mastering (DMM); there are no traces of compression. Anyone who missed out on getting the LPs that followed the release of the SACDs should celebrate. The pressings are clean, dynamic, and rival their great-sounding digital companions, with the analog versions getting the nod in top-end extension and the SACDs claiming slightly better transparency. Debates about what format is superior will ultimately come down to each listener's system, and just how symmetrical one's analog and digital set ups are with the material. With all else is considered even, the 1964-1969 set sports several advantages over the SACDs.

Namely, the artwork is reproduced in its original full-size form, and the center labels are faithfully recreated. Moreover, *The Rolling Stones* (EP), *The Rolling Stones, Five By Five*, *The Rolling Stones No. 2*, and *Out of Our Heads* are presented in mono. (For those hoping for a mono *Aftermath*, sorry.) Plus, track listings reflect those of the original U.K. releases, and *Through the Past, Darkly (Big Hits Vol. 2)* claims its original octagonal artwork and cover. And, the two EPs (*The Rolling Stones, Five By Five*) aren't available on physical digital media. *(continued)*

T

here's good and bad news concerning the simultaneously released, multi-pound vinyl Rolling Stones box sets that, together, trace the band's entire studio output. Sensibly, the volumes are divided by label—the earlier of the two chronicling the group's work for ABKCO (just as the out-of-print hybrid SACDs did in 2002) and the latter period edition beginning with *Sticky Fingers* and culminating with 2005's *A Bigger Bang*. (Quick, name two songs off that album.)

AN IMAGE OF U



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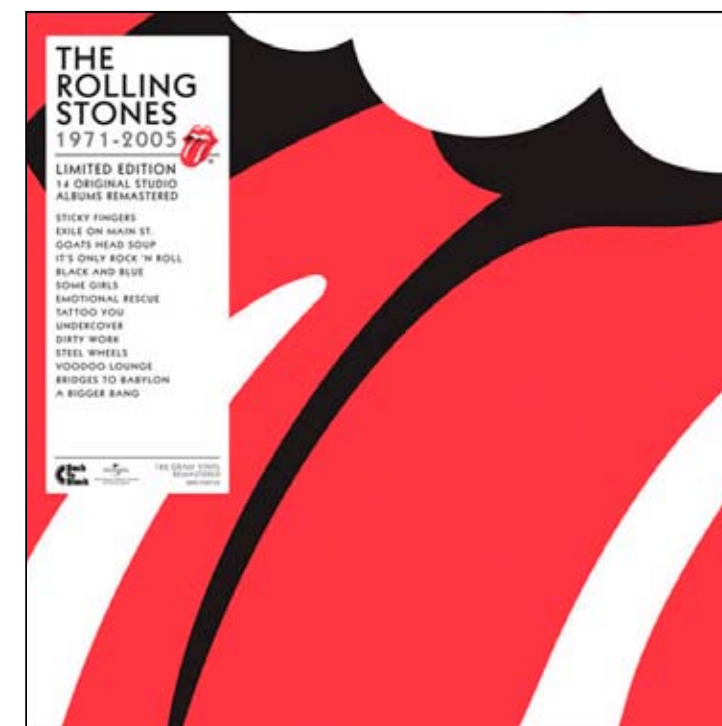
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The completist mentality, meticulous graphic detailing, and excellent sound denote *1964-1969* worth the investment for analog fans.

What's missing? For the hefty price, consumers should get a hefty book with rare photos, insightful essays, and memorabilia. There's none to be had. The absence of any sort of extras is egregious, particularly given the work that Sony Legacy continues to exact with its wonderful vinyl box sets (see the reviews of Dylan's *The Witmark Demos* and Hendrix's *West Coast Seattle Boy* in this feature) as well as the fact that the Stones must have more than enough unseen/unheard vault footage to satiate followers for a lifetime. Nonetheless, *1964-1969* should please anyone looking for high-quality analog versions of the quintet's formative work. Alas, the sibling volume is another matter. If *1964-1969* is the equivalent of *Beggars Banquet*, *1971-2005* represents *Dirty Work*.

Confirming many listeners' worst fears, Universal's box is mastered to digital from lower-res files by Stephen Marcussen and, in the context of the recent Beatles remasters, Dylan Bootleg Series volumes, and Hendrix remasters, just to name a few examples, done on the cheap. And that's a shame. Half of the albums in this set haven't been readily available on LP in many a year. And while every post-*Tattoo You* record is flawed, forgotten treasures lie scattered amongst the detritus, whether they take the shape of "Memory Motel" on *Black and Blue* or "The Worst" from *Voodoo Lounge*. For Stones aficionados willing to pony up \$400, *1971-2005* should offer the chance for them rediscover nuggets they missed the first time around or relive old favorites completely forgot about. But the disappointing sonics, marred by flatness on certain LPs and noticeable compression on others, will likely prevent that from happening.

Simply put, if Universal's recent *Exile on Main Street* reissue offended you, this one will sting worse. No, *Exile* didn't sound horrific. It still has merits that surpass those of the digital remasters and various analog pressings. But, when listeners are asked to purchase records they've already bought, and teased with "limited edition" and "remastered" hype, let alone confronted with a three-figure cost, one is justified in demanding great fidelity and the ultimate in analog sound. This box set doesn't come close.



The Rolling Stones

The Rolling Stones 1971-2005
Universal, 180g 18LP Box Set

In fact, inner cuts on a *It's Only Rock And Roll* fall victim to distortion in the inner grooves. Yes, the majority of pressings are squeaky clean and quiet, but that's small consolation. And no, the packaging doesn't vary from that of the sister set. No booklet, no rare photos, no insightful commentary, no bonus tracks to compensate as incentives. At heart, *1971-2005* is a Universal Back to Black vinyl release, and it's no different from the other mostly disappointing titles in that series.

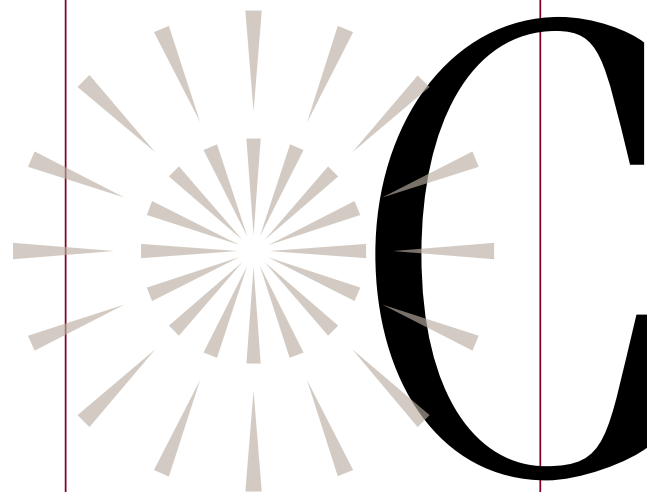
Do the Stones deserve better? Certainly. That said, as you potentially gnash your teeth and lean towards blaming the label, keep in mind that the English legends constitute one of the most powerful and influential entities in music. If Jagger or Richards demanded that the original tapes from the past three decades be painstakingly sourced, ala the Beatles, Hendrix, Dylan, and countless other archival reissues, they would've gotten their wish. Apparently, they don't care. So neither should you.

Slayer

The Vinyl Conflict
American/Columbia
180g 11 LP Box Set



These records are frighteningly good, possessing the kind of air, dimensions, dynamics, details, and imaging normally expected of a high-end classic Blue Note jazz pressing.



COLLECTING NINE SLAYER studio efforts (spanning *Reign In Blood* through last year's brutal *World Painted Blood*) well as 1991's double live album *Decade of Aggression*, all made for American, *The Vinyl Conflict* takes its unique place as the hands-down

best-sounding metal package ever produced. Mastered from the original flat analog master tapes and pressed on 180g LP at RTI, these records are frighteningly good, possessing the kind of air, dimensions, dynamics, details, and imaging normally expected of a high-end classic Blue Note jazz pressing. Sparing no expense, lacquers were cut and re-cut several times to ensure the highest-possible sonic excellence. The meticulous quality control has paid immense dividends.

There's not a metal band more deserving of the honor. With the exception of the punk detour covers album *Undisputed Attitude* and slightly experimental *Divine Intervention*, Slayer has persisted as a model of consistency while continuing to both push limits and take innovative approaches. Moreover, eight of the records in this set, housed in a slipcase, have been out of print for years; some, for decades. In one fell swoop, generations too young or then without turntables can now

realize the unrelenting riffs, immersive tempos, and head-spinning rhythmic architectures that, even on the CD remasters, never delivered the massive level of disarming gut-punch and searing slam present on these LPs. The degrees of instrumental isolation and textural colors astound; these sound like completely new albeit familiar records.

In particular, Dave Lombardo's inhuman drumming has, almost impossibly, become more astonishing by virtue of the fact that his precise timing, double-bass beats, and blistering speeds are that much more apparent and visible. Kerry King and Jeff Hanneman's guitars come on like marching armies, the grinding textures and fanatic momentum split evenly between the left and right channels, with solos often hovering near the center. And Tom Araya's vocals are nearly three-dimensional, with previously unheard echoes and howls carrying and decaying across an extra-wide field.

For those that seriously want to rock and experience what's possible across the dynamic spectrum via decibel-pounding, surface-quiet, amazingly produced LPs that bring to life several of the greatest metal records ever made in a way that places Slayer on a stage feet away from where you sit—a thrill as exhilarating as any in audio—*The Vinyl Conflict* is a godsend. ●



The Grado Statement 1

A Major Leap Forward

By Jeff Dorgay

Grado Labs has always offered a great alternative to moving-coil cartridge technology with their moving-iron cartridge design, a cross between moving coil and moving magnet. Other than The Soundsmith, Grado is the only company still producing moving-iron cartridges in quantity, and they have refined their process to perfection.

Their new flagship, the Statement 1, replaces the Statement at the top of their product line, and the price has risen from \$2,500 to \$3,000. While this is a far reach from the budget Grado cartridges that many audiophiles are familiar with, in the day of \$15,000 Koetsu's and the Goldfinger tipping the scale around \$12,000, a \$3,000 top-of-the-line cartridge is still considered reasonable by many serious vinyl aficionados.

If you are new to the vinyl game and haven't heard of Grado, or perhaps you only know about them from the world of headphones, meet John Grado, president of the company started by his uncle, Joe Grado, just over 50 years ago. And in case you didn't know, Joe Grado is acknowledged as the inventor of the stereo moving-coil cartridge. Interestingly enough, Joe Grado was originally a watchmaker by trade, so he was quite familiar with working on a very small scale before he turned his attention to building phono cartridges.



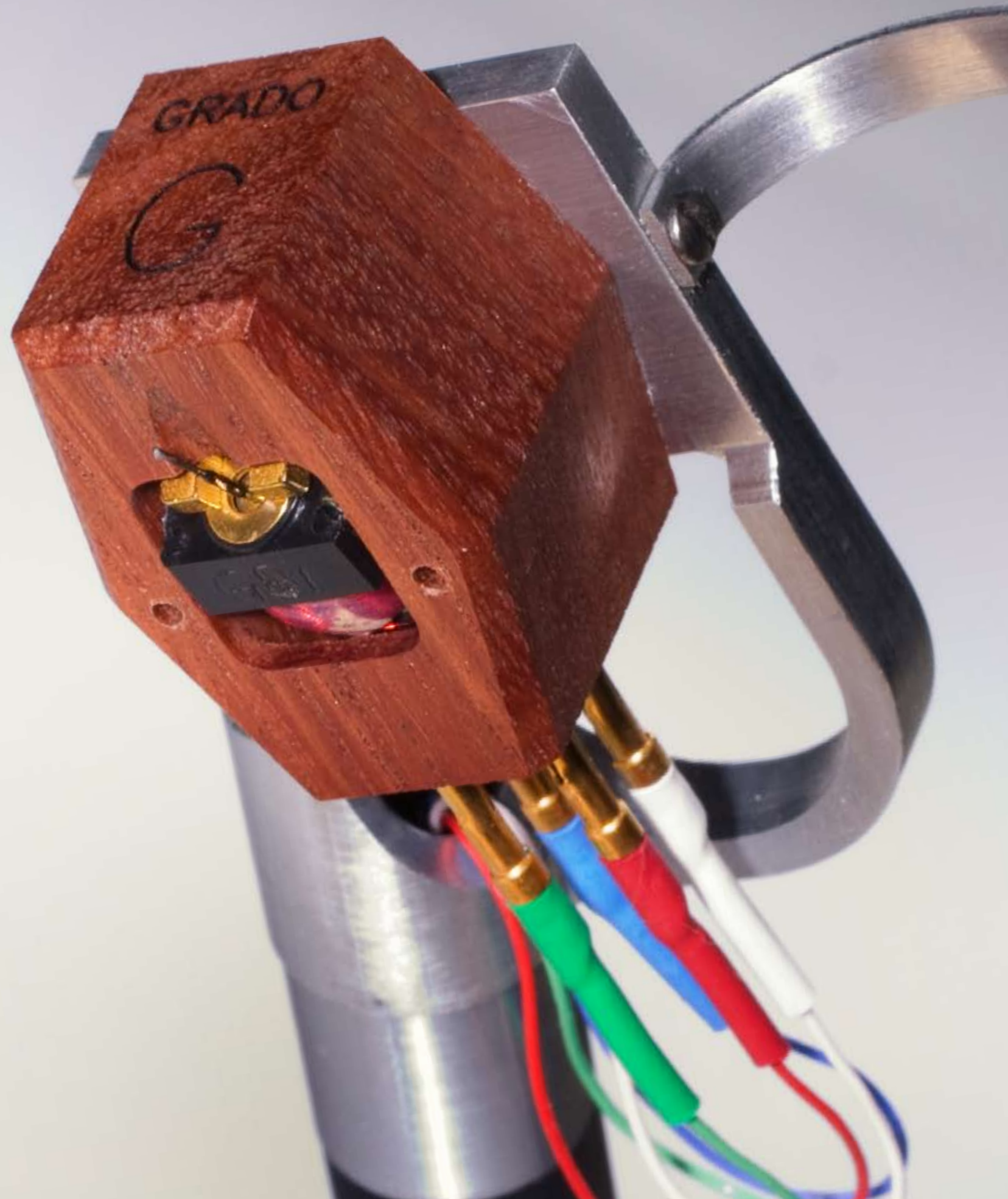
Grado Labs has always offered a great alternative to moving-coil cartridge technology with their moving-iron cartridge design, a cross between moving coil and moving magnet. Other than The Soundsmith, Grado is the only company still producing moving-iron cartridges in quantity, and they have refined their process to perfection.

First, the Past

All cartridges have somewhat of a “signature sound” and the Grados are no different, possessing a slight to moderately warm tonal balance. For those who don’t approve of this reference, you might consider a Grado cartridge to be richer or full-bodied. One thing is certain, you *will not* mistake vinyl playback with a Grado cartridge for digital. Considering how many records have been poorly mastered, and how many new LP’s are produced from digital files, I personally think a few drops of warmth goes a long way toward making analog more palatable. As you go up the line with Grado wood-body cartridges, they all look the same, but each model progressively reveals more music.

My past experience with the original Statement has always been great, though that model has some limitations. While the original Statement can be too much of a good thing on certain records, it was also slightly limited in its ability to track complex musical passages with the ease that I’ve come to expect from my other cartridges made by Dynavector, Lyra and even Koetsu. The more of an analog maniac you become, the less chance you have of achieving a “one size fits all” solution to playback.

The Statement 1, just like the Statement before it, requires 47k phono loading, but because of the moving-iron design, Grado claims that is it relatively impervious to changes in input capacitance. A brief experiment with the original Statement, combined with the McIntosh C500 preamplifier (which allows capacitance loading to be made from the front panel) and the current cartridge confirm this.



However, because the Statement 1 has an output of only .5mv, you will still need a phono preamplifier or phono stage capable of fairly high gain.

A Quantum Leap

The new Statement 1 is miles ahead of the cartridge it replaces in two major areas: trackability and frequency extension, particularly at the upper frequency limit. The best news is that the current model has lost none of the midrange magic of the original, but it has gained additional purity and airiness that none of the other cartridges in the Grado line possess. Grado mentions a new special ellipsoid diamond stylus profile and seven feet of gold wire for the coils, so while the new cartridge looks virtually identical to the original Statement, it is essentially new from the ground up.

Fortunately, I had my original Statement here for comparison and after mounting both cartridges on identical SME 309 arms for side-by-side playback on the TW Acustics Raven TWO, it was easy to tell the two apart. I was also able to make some comparisons to the Koetsu Urishi Blue, the Clearaudio DaVinci and the Lyra Skala cartridges – all somewhat in the price range of the Statement 1. While all side-by-side listening comparisons were done with the Audio Research REF Phono 2, now my reference phono preamplifier, I did use the Statement 1 with a handful of other phono preamplifiers as well: the new Audio Research PH6, which is in the middle of review listening, as well as the Burmester 100 and the new AVID Pulsare. All were an excellent match with the Grado.

The Statement 1 did not need terribly long to break in; it sounded great right out of the box. After a few album sides, it loosened up a bit and by the end of a full day’s worth of LP playback, it was in its groove rather nicely. There was no noticeable change between the 50-hour mark and the 300-hour mark, so this is a cartridge that gets down to business right away. *(continued)*

Defining the Sound

This is such a different cartridge from the one that it replaces that I wasn't quite sure where to start the comparisons. One of the first records that I listened to critically was Brand X's *Moroccan Roll*. The last track on the first side, "Collapsar," opens with a driving fretless-bass riff that collides with drums and percussion. This track a relatively dense musical passage cut near the center of the record, has everything going against it. Where the original Statement struggled, the Statement 1 just glides right through effortlessly, keeping everything in the mix as it should be, in its own space. Another favorite inner-groove torture track is "Jericho" from Joni Mitchell's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* album. Mitchell's vocal is recorded hot, and lesser cartridges stumble here. Again, the Statement 1 passed through this track easily. When changing musical style to hard rock, the Statement 1 did a flawless job with the 12-inch, 45-rpm single of AC/DC's "Let's Get It Up." Brian Johnson's voice was out in front of the wall of Marshall amps, with the backing vocals coming through loud and clear instead of getting lost in the mix.

Trackability is an important part of the analog mix, but it's not everything. When playing the new Statement alongside the old, the increased dynamic capabilities of the new cartridge is

much better, in a full-scale sense as well as its ability to reproduce fine detail. No matter what kind of music you favor, you will notice that the Statement 1 has a sufficiently weighty presentation to play your favorite large-scale orchestral pieces as well as capture the most subtle vocal nuances, which is a tough balancing act to pull off.

Finally, this cartridge has a tonality that will woo all but the coldest of hearts. As mentioned at the beginning of the review, the Statement 1 definitely has a full-bodied sound. But thanks to greater extension at both ends of the frequency range, acoustic instruments sound more lifelike than ever. On many levels, the new Statement 1 "out Koetsu's" my Koetsu Urushi Blue, having all the warmth while adding more definition to the mix.

Listening to the differences between the plucky guitar style of Michael Hedges and Alex De-Grassi on their early Windham Hill releases was a treat, with the resonant qualities of their instruments coming through in a more distinct way than I had heard before. The extra dynamic capability of the new model also did well with piano and violin, again keeping the core tonality intact, with decay that faded ever so gently into the blackness.

Equally important is the huge, three-dimensional soundfield that this cartridge is able to reconstruct in your listening room.

Just as the Statement before it was a glorious match with the ARC REF Phono 2, the Statement 1 enlarges the presentation in all dimensions. While we all know that pinpoint imaging in a three-dimensional space is not really an accurate reproduction of music, rock fans will easily become addicted by the way this cartridge really does place things distinctly across the soundstage.

In the End, Balance

In summary, the greatest virtue of the Grado Statement 1 is its balance of all aspects of analog reproduction. There are a few (more-expensive) cartridges on the market that will perform any of the individual tasks better, but I challenge you to find a \$3,000 cartridge that does this well handling everything. While I am fortunate to have this cartridge in my reference arsenal, if I were going to live with just one phono cartridge, the Grado Statement 1 would be it. Highly suggested. ●

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PERIPHERALS

Phono Preamplifiers ARC REF 2 Phono, ARC PH6 AVID Pulsare, Nagra VPS, Burmester 100, Boulder 1008

Turntables Spiral Groove SG-2 w/ Triplanar VII, Rega P9, TW Acoustic Raven Two w/SME 309

Preamplifier Burmester 011, McIntosh C500

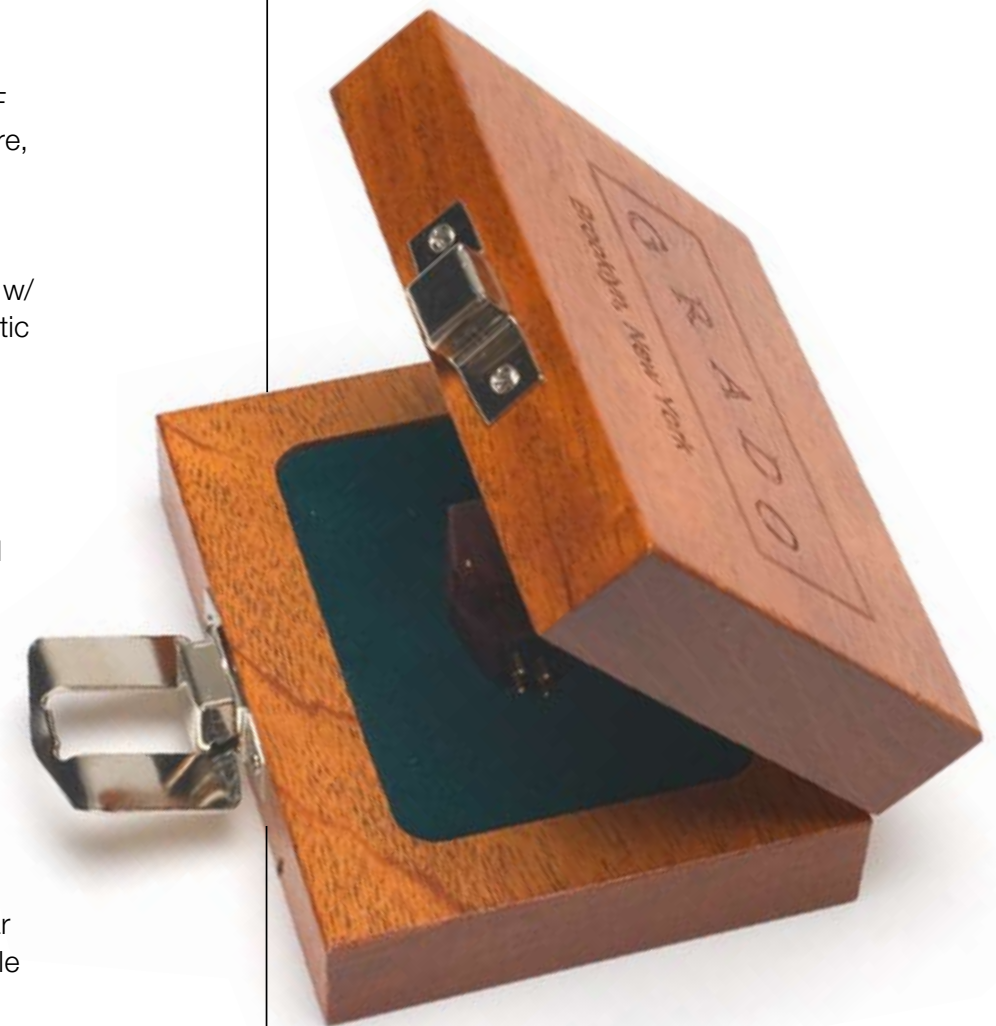
Power Amplifier Burmester 911 mk. 3, McIntosh MC1.2kw's

Speakers GamuT S-9, YG Acoustics Anat II Studio, MartinLogan CLX w/Gotham subwoofer

Cable Shunyata Aurora Interconnects, Shunyata Stratos SP Speaker Cable, Cardas Clear Interconnects and Speaker Cable

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim power conditioners Running Springs Mongoose and Shunyata Python CX power cords

Accessories Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators, Furutech DeMag, Loricraft PRC-3 record cleaning machine, MoFi Record Cleaning Products.



Current Releases

By the TONE Staff



Kanye West

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy
Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, CD

The last time Kanye West released a record—the introspective, Auto-Tuned *808s & Heartbreak*—the Chicago rapper appeared to be channeling *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy's* downtrodden robot, Marvin the Paranoid Android.

West's fifth album, alternately chest thumping and self-lacerating, finds the MC returning to a more triumphant posture. "This is more than just my road to redemption," he explains on "Gorgeous," keenly aware of how he's viewed by many in the wake of well-publicized dustups with everyone from Taylor Swift to former president George W. Bush.

Indeed, part of what makes West such a compelling figure is his acute self-awareness. The day after *South Park* lampooned his over-developed ego, the rapper responded with a lengthy, contrite blog post, writing, "The crazy ego is played out at this point in my life and career."

Judging by his words here, West has since significantly changed his tune. "Do it better than anybody I ever seen do it," he spits on the tribal, thundering "Power." "Screams from the haters/Got a nice ring to it/I guess every superhero need his theme music."

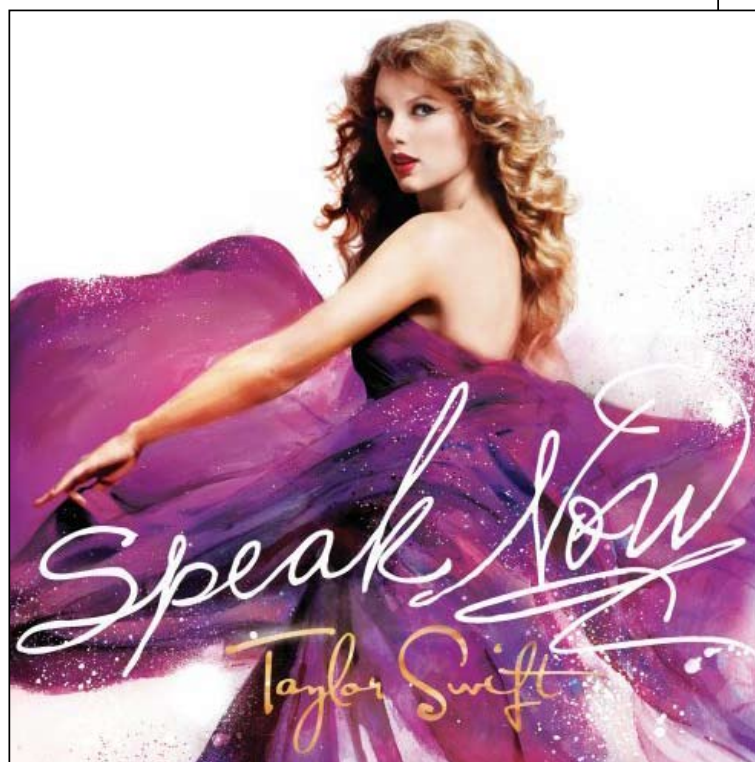
Like a hip-hop version of the Spike Jonze-directed *Being John Malkovich*, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* finds 'Ye delving deep into his own psyche.' The picture that emerges is one of a musical genius prone to bouts of egomania (the porn star-fueled wet dreams of "Hell of a Life") and unflinching self-examination. The epic, nine-minute "Runaway," which glides along on porcelaneous piano and padded drums, has to stand as one of the most self-lacerating pop songs ever recorded, with the MC toasting to his myriad self-destructive tendencies. It also stands as a monument to West's brilliance as both a producer and an artist. While most musicians would have ended the song when the beat drops out at 5:50, West keeps things running for another three-plus minutes, piling on an urgent string section and singing through a vocoder like some busted-down, brokenhearted cyborg.

The same could be said of "Lost In the World," which samples Bon Iver and twists the indie-rocker's meditative snow cave of a tune into a strangely buoyant dance cut. Few producers could have located that common ground between the pair's seemingly disparate styles. And fewer still could have executed it so flawlessly.

West's Midas-like touch doesn't extend to Chris Rock's appearance at the close of the "Blame Game," however, with the comic delivering a grating performance roughly on par with his work in the films/aborted fetuses that are *Grown Ups* and *Head of State*. Elsewhere, West nods to hip-hop's pass-the-mic past on guest-laden, street-corner nuggets like "Monster," flashes a wicked sense of humor (asking rapper-turned-preacher Mase for his prayers), and samples everyone from King Crimson ("Power") to Black Sabbath ("Hell of a Life") to Gil Scott Heron, whose "Comment No. 1" drives the album-closing "Who Will Survive In America."

Heron's 1970 piece speaks to a culture that has lost sight of the most essential human needs, an attitude West echoes in his own particular way on "Lost In the World." "Lost in the plastic life/Let's break out of this fake-ass party," he raps before being swallowed by the ecstatic beat. He's still out there. Lost in the world, searching for some kind of deeper truth as the Gatsby's around him carry on dancing, twirling, celebrating. —**Andy Downing**

West's fifth album, alternately chest thumping and self-lacerating, finds the MC returning to a more triumphant posture.



Taylor Swift

Speak Now

Big Machine Records, CD and LP

It's obvious she's already broken some hearts. On "Speak Now," she sings, "I'm not the kind of girl that should be rudely barging in on a white veil occasion/ But you're not the kind of boy that should be marrying the wrong kind of girl." The vocalist goes on to suggest that the groom should bail on the occasion and meet her behind the church and make a run for the border. There's that grit again. She flashes more wry humor on "Mean," lamenting about a childhood friend while realizing, "Someday I'll be big enough that you can't hit me/And all you're gonna be is mean."

With so many current pop-country records ruined by life-sucking compression, it's refreshing to hear that Swift gives most of these tunes room to breathe. No, the sonics aren't quite in the same league of a Lynne or KD Lang release. Yet *Speak Now* sounds far better than 95% of what's coming out of Nashville. Perhaps taking part of the project to Hollywood and Bowling Green was a good thing after all. Even better, this is a record to which you'll return. By assembling a smart collection of songs, Swift leaves the highly forgettable fare to her lesser contemporaries.

Given its myriad merits, it's not surprising that *Speak Now* has been given the double LP treatment. Swift recently mentioned that she not only has a turntable, but loves to listen to records. Let's hope her love for analog translates into an even better *Speak Now* experience. —**Jeff Dorgay**

Really, who can resist Taylor Swift? Even if you don't play the "gorgeous" card, Swift has a great sense of humor and holds her poise. When rudely interrupted by Kanye West on the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards, the girl showed true grit. Maybe not Shelby Lynne-level grit, but hey, Swift's only 20. And while many of her slightly younger peers continue to put out petty drivel often penned by other writers, Swift has evolved into a damn good character study. Besides, if her songs are as autobiographical as she claims, she's been in more than a few scraps along the way.



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My Chemical Romance

*Danger Days:
The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys*
Reprise/Sire, CD

In just under a decade, New Jersey quartet My Chemical Romance has progressed from a one-note screamo act to one of North America's most ambitious groups. On 2006's *The Black Parade*, the crew came across like a more unhinged/dangerous Queen, cramming everything from marching bands to a guest spot from Liza Minnelli (!) into a host of widescreen, fist-pumping anthems for the broken, the beaten, and the damned.

In the four years since, frontman Gerard Way and Co. have scrapped one attempt at a follow-up album, authored a comic book mini-series (Way's *The Umbrella Academy*), and dealt with the usual array of marriages/deaths/child births that become commonplace as one enters their early 30s. Fortunately, the crush of day-to-day life has done little to dampen the band's fire. "I'd rather go to hell than be in purgatory," Way sneers on the awesomely titled "Na Na Na (Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na Na)." "Let this world explode!"

Much of *Danger Days* is the sound of the group exploring the landscape after the mushroom cloud has settled. There are mentions of streets buried in ash and glass, skies choked with methane, and packed emergency rooms. Between songs, a DJ's radio broadcasts—ostensibly delivered from a bunker far removed from the chaos—provide a human link for the lucky (?) few left clawing for survival aboveground.

But despite a concept that seems lifted from one of Way's comic books (the band members themselves pose as the four Killjoys—Party Poison (Way), Jet Star (Ray Toro), Fun Ghoul (Frank Iero), and Kobra Kid (Mikey Way)), this isn't a dense, joyless record that requires some thick manual to decode.

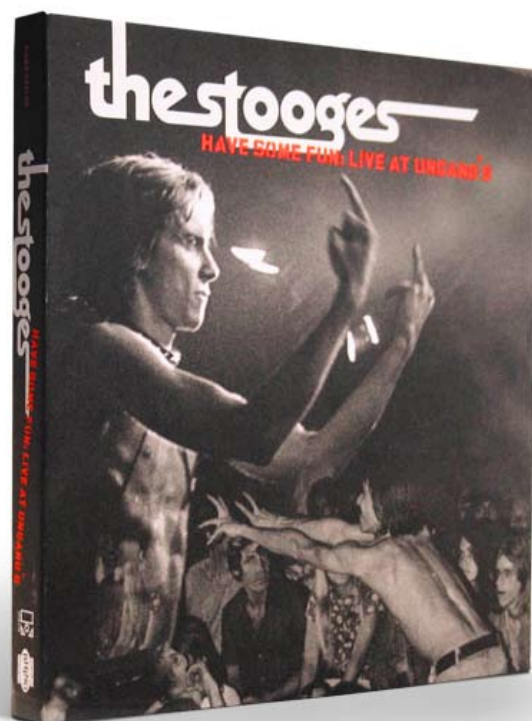


Instead, the band strips the music down to its rawest, dirtiest essentials, layering glam-metal cuts like "Bulletproof Heart" and the garage punk of "Vampire Money" with slash-and-burn guitars, thundering drums, and bratty vocals.

Way, who recently dyed his hair fire-engine red to match the outlandish character he portrays on record, finds plenty to rage against here, including his own perceived rock-star status. "Fame is now injectable," he bleats on "Planetary (Go!)," a song that falls somewhere between a futuristic prison break and a darkened discotheque. As guitarists Iero and Toro engage one another in an epic, bare-knuckle rumble on "Party Poison," Way again turns on himself, howling, "Keep your cars and

your drugs and your famous friends."

The group only stumbles when they slow things down for the dopey, faux-cheer of the synth-laden "Sing" ("Sing it from the heart...sing it for the world!"). Indeed, much like the work of Cormac McCarthy, things are at their best when they're at their bleakest. Such is the case on "Summertime," an oddly melodic tune that's less a love song than the desperate words of a man clinging tightly to the last vestiges of humanity. "I'm terrified of what I'd be," Way sings atop a bed of jangly guitar that stretches across the landscape like the first kiss of sunlight. He never quite finishes the thought, but arriving as it does amidst the horrors that populate the rest of the album, he doesn't have to. —**Andy Downing**



The Stooges

Have Some Fun: Live at Ungano's
Rhino Handmade, CD

Live mayhem at its best, *Have Some Fun: Live at Ungano's* contains some of the most lethal, ferocious, and visceral rock ever captured on tape. The sonic quality is as dingy as the New York City dive bar where the 1970 set got recorded on a reel-to-reel machine perched on a cocktail table. But fidelity isn't what matters here. This is all about the head-shearing performance and dirty, maniacal churn that, together, constitute the epitome of primal urges.

Abetted by a second guitarist (Bill Cheatham), the Stooges tear through *Fun House*, following the original song order, and skipping only "LA Blues." The raw maelstrom writhes, pounds, yowls, pounces, and screams. Playing for a small audience largely comprised of the press, and in celebration of the recent release of *Fun House*, the Detroit band lets loose, sparing no one, lest themselves.

"1970" and "T.V. Eye" seethe with danger, brothers Scott and Ron Asheton backing Pop's manic-boy intensity and erotic stammer with jackhammer riffs and rhythms. The secret weapon? Saxophonist Steve MacKay, who blows so hard and feverishly it's a wonder he didn't collapse a lung. On the 10-minute-plus freak-out finale "Have Some Fun/Dream Is Dead," McKay comes on as the second coming of Albert Ayler. What a rush.

Rhino packaged the disc in a small, lift-lid box that also includes two photos taken during the concert, a replica advertisement for Ungano's, and liner notes from Patti Smith guitarist Lenny Kaye, who was present. Even better is the program's opening track on which the conversations of a few attendees was captured on tape. The humorous exchange is invaluable and ironic, as declarations about how much the Stooges' first album "stunk, but this one's about 4500 times better" are couched within other statements that debate Pop's worth, and how he turns off one of the unnamed party companions because "he cuts himself." You couldn't imagine a better contextual set-up or historical introduction to the noisy music that follows. Riveting.

In related news, Rhino Handmade also reissued the mind-blowing *1970: The Complete Fun House Sessions*, initially released in 1999 as a 7CD box set that contains every note the band recorded for *Fun House*. Limited to 3000 copies, it became an immediate collector's item that fetched hundreds of dollars on the aftermarket. Here are some my original reflections the collection:

"Beginning with Disc One, we hear the Stooges breaking in each of the songs before the sessions turned the focus to securing one song, no matter how many takes that demanded. Disc One also eases us into the producer's chair. [Producer Don] Gallucci plays with sound levels, experimenting

with the soundboard to find just the right balance for the guitar, bass, drums, vocals, and sax.

"As [you] make [your] way through the set, [you] sense the frustration that builds after so many false starts, broken strings, collapsed rhythms, missed lyrical cues, and wrong turns. But there's also the elation that goes with letting it all hang out, extending a song's boundaries, daring to play this bar instead of the one that's planned, and substituting this phrase for another. It's all here, seven hours and then some. *Sessions* is [priceless] because it captures the raw mixture of Detroit car-press punk-rock and free jazz as it should sound—carnal, thick, unrefined, strong—the way the inky toxic sludge from a Ford plant would sound if it had the power to transform itself into a band."

Stick it deep inside, and don't pass up either of these archival titles.

—**Bob Gendron**



The Stooges

1970: The Complete Fun House Sessions
Rhino Handmade, 7CD Box Set

The good news is that Elvis Costello's latest record has much less of that dreadfully boring Americana vibe than its predecessor, 2009's *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane*. However, *National Ransom* is somewhat of a mixed bag. The music's enjoyment is largely related to your familiarity with Costello himself. If you've only recently taken a liking to him, you may find this set's stylistic twists and turns quite intriguing. That said, long-term fans will likely view this as another of his attention-deficit disorder experiments.

Costello rustled up many of the same cast members from *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane* (right down to the same graphic design and illustration team), and added Impostor and longtime collaborator Steve Nieve on keyboards. Yet any musical parallels between the two records end after the first song. On the majority of *National Ransom*, Costello bounces between lively folk-rock and the straight-ahead crooner style that he debuted on *Almost Blue* and refined to perfection on *Painted From Memory*, his duet collaboration with Burt Bacharach. For good measure, he adds in a few bits from time spent with the Brodsky Quartet and a side of skiffle.



The mix-and-match combination walks a fine line between genius and madness, a juxtaposition that's both the appeal and struggle associated with listening to the record and its occasionally dense arrangements. If you're expecting another "Alison," you won't find it here. But *National Ransom* is solid, even if it's sequenced in an odd order. And thankfully, Costello's trademark cleverness remains in tact. A cursory glance at the song titles reveals that the master hasn't lost his touch for spinning a good yarn. Standout tracks include "A Slow Drag With Josephine," "Bullets for the New-Born King?," and "That's Not the Part of Him You're Leaving."

Recorded in Nashville, the CD is fairly compressed and dull, which is a shame, given that this is a fun record. The 2LP set is less compressed but still possesses a major treble roll-off. For \$30, you shouldn't have to suffer this lack of quality. Get this one on iTunes for \$9.99 and enjoy it in the car, where it sounds best. —**Jeff Dorgay**



Elvis Costello
National Ransom
Hear Music, CD and 2LP



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December People

Rattle & Humbug
Magna Carta, CD

If you buy only one Christmas album this year, make it *Rattle & Humbug*. Comprised of seasoned veterans, the December People features bassist Robert Berry (Sammy Hagar, GTR), guitarist Gary Pihl (Boston, Hagar, Norman Greenbaum), drummer Mike Vanderhule (Y&T), guitarist/vocalist Jack Foster, and keyboardist Dave Medd (The Tubes). That's right: Get your Bic lighters ready.

Rattle & Humbug offers up your favorite holiday tunes in a plethora of familiar classic-rock styles. "What Child is This" has a U2 feel, "We Three Kings" echoes Sting, and "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" features a killer ZZ Top groove. There are eight other gems but, not wanting to spoil the surprise in your Christmas stocking, you'll have to buy it to hear the rest and play your own "name-that-tune" game.

The recording quality is well above average and the musicianship first rate. Slip this one in the CD player once everyone in the family has had a drink or two and you'll be the hit of the festivities. It's much better than that Trans-Siberian Orchestra CD your mom *wanted* you to buy! —**Jeff Dorgay**

Boomers Beware: Three To Avoid

Why can't these
guys just retire with
dignity?

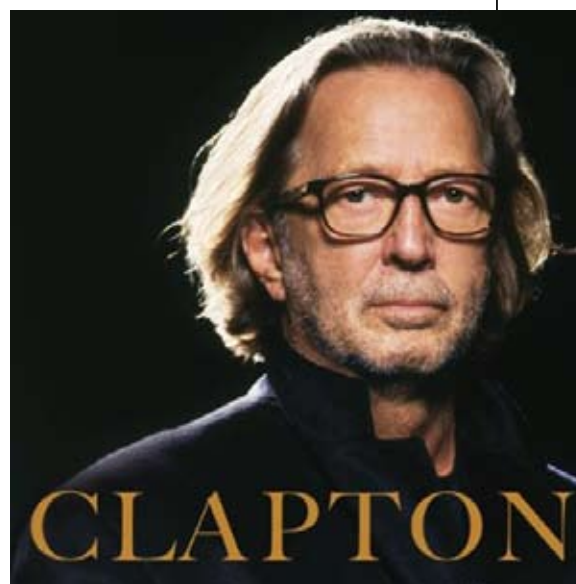


Phil Collins

Going Back
Atlantic, CD and 2LP

Quick, what's one of the only things that sucks more than Rod Stewart doing yet another snooze-inducing edition of his *Great American Songbook* project? You guessed it: Phil Collins singing Motown classics. When I rule the world, this kind of sonic chaff will be *outlawed*, with the death penalty being the consequence for violators.

Collins has stated that "he's not trying to bring anything new to these records." Well, if that was the goal, he's certainly succeeded. This album is a true music lover's worst nightmare. You hear an epic Motown song. But wait! The awesome vocals have been replaced by Collins' cheesiest singing. First he killed Genesis. Now he murders Motown. What's next? I shiver to think about what debauchery Collins will attempt in the future. —**Jeff Dorgay**



Eric Clapton

Clapton
Reprise, CD and 180g 2LP

I want whatever Eric Clapton is on these days. Hell, he's got to be downing some amazingly powerful sedatives to make him this delusional. On the PR copy that accompanies the disc, Clapton is quoted as saying, "It's actually *better* [italics mine] than it was meant to be." That's just scary, because this has to be the lamest record of his career.

The lack of imagination on *Clapton* is evident from the title, and things don't get any better from there. I can just hear Beavis in the background, the little thought bubbles coming out of his head, screaming, "Rock, rock!!" But this album never rocks. Just when you think it can't get any worse (remember, this is the guy people thought was GOD back in the 60s), Clapton does the oompa-loompa tune "My Very Good Friend The Milkman." This set is so painfully tired, don't be surprised if it makes you want to use all of your older Clapton records for target practice.

Oh, amusingly, the Amazon "review" (read: sales copy) says "the result [on *Clapton*] is both relaxed and revelatory." *TONEAudio's* short take? This is blues laxative. If this record doesn't make you lose your last meal out of one end or the other, nothing will. Why can't these guys just retire with dignity? —**Jeff Dorgay**



Elton John and Leon Russell

The Union
Decca, CD and LP

The only thing wrong with this star-studded affair is that it's merely good and not great. These guys are both just too old and too tired (even though Sir Elton just knocked one out of the park in mixed doubles recently) to really make this duet as meaningful as it should be. *The Union* has some decent playing, and thanks to production from T Bone Burnett, it sounds great. But it's yet another set full of songs about regret, lost love, and being really old. Unfortunately, Burnett left too much *Lion King* in the mix, so it also ends up being sappier than expected.

Out of respect for these two elder statesmen, one can only guess about how amazing this collaborative effort could have been if made 30 years ago, when John and Russell were at the peak of their respective careers. As it stands, *The Union* reminds me of that 60-something guy that finally gets an awesome sports car but is too weary to drive it at the pace it demands.—**Jeff Dorgay**

paganini

Digital Supremacy The dCS Paganini

By Jeff Dorgay

*paganini**paganini**paganini*

While many in the audio and music industries claim that we are near the end of shiny spinning discs and physical media in general, some of us aren't ready to give them up quite yet. The analog LP has had a steady resurgence, but they still aren't being produced in anywhere near the numbers of their heyday. The moral of the story is not to count out a format that you might think is dead. At least not yet. Even if the powers that be stop producing compact discs and SACD's tomorrow, there are still a tremendous amount of used CD's on the market, and with prices at an all time low, it's a great time to be adding to your digital collection.

The past few years of CD production have been bright and compressed more often than not, but I have heard more than my share of well-produced CDs. For the ultimate sound junkie, there have been excellent remasters from DCC, MoFi and a few other labels that offer positively stellar results from the standard redbook format.

Even though world-class analog is highly enticing, not everything is available on LP. If you have a fairly large collection of CDs, I'm guessing you are still intrigued about extracting the maximum from the music you already own and cherish.

I came to appreciate world-class CD players about four years ago when I stepped up to the original Meridian 808 and later the Naim CD555, which was my reference digital player until the Paganini entered my realm. Even though world-class analog is highly enticing, not everything is available on LP. If you have a fairly large collection of CDs, I'm guessing you are still intrigued about extracting the maximum from the music you already own and cherish.

For those that can't quite stretch to the complete dCS Scarlatti system (MSRP \$79,996) the full four-box Paganini system featured here will only set you back about \$54,000. Certainly a major expenditure, but it's not as outrageous as it might seem initially, and you can purchase the four components individually and work your way up, if you will. The PTT transport, which plays CD and SACD discs, has an MSRP of \$16,999; the PDC DAC, \$17,999; the PUP Upsampler, \$10,499; and the PCK clock \$7,999.

While the Paganini shares the same DAC board as the Scarlatti and most of the same electronics, the higher priced model features even more robust power supplies (with completely separate digital and analog supplies in the DAC, along with better vibration isolation. An even higher quality transport mechanism is featured as well. Seriously, though, you really need the whole stack, but that's just the devil's advocate speaking. Or you could buy a new Porsche Boxster S. Hmm.

The Paganini stack might just be built more solidly than a Porsche Boxster S, though. The casework is machined from heavy-duty aluminum and the front panels are machined from solid billet. While this does make for

a very attractive appearance, it serves dual duty by providing a mechanically stable environment for the sensitive components within. The Paganini components are available in silver and black anodized finish.

The full Paganini system makes perfect sense for the person who has abandoned analog completely, as the DAC has a variable output that works extremely well, eliminating the need for a separate line stage. Configured for every possible digital source, you could utilize a music server, computer and even a Wadia dock with iPod/iPad to complete your system; just add the power amplifier and speakers of your choice. Thanks to balanced and single outputs, the Paganini will be compatible with whatever your configuration might be.

Most current digital disc players and DAC's make use of one of a few available chipsets to convert the digital bits to analog information to feed your system. While there are a few arguments on which chipset provides the optimum performance, dCS takes a different route entirely.

The system uses a large group of Field Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGA) along with another batch of DSP chips that work together with dCS' own software to convert the digital signal to analog. This makes for a much more obsolescence-proof digital front end because most upgrades can be done via a software upgrade. Should the need for a hardware upgrade occur, even these can be easily performed thanks to the internal modular construction. Think of the Paganini as an investment in your digital future and hopefully the last digital front end you would ever have to buy. *(continued)*





A Myriad of Inputs and Outputs

The Paganini system allows connection of almost anything in your digital world except those devices with ST Optical or Toslink. There is a fully asynchronous USB input, a pair of SPDIF RCA inputs, a pair of AES/EBU XLR inputs and a pair of IEEE 1394 (fire-wire) inputs that are reserved for DSD inputs and are only compatible with dCS equipment. There is also an input for a word clock, which we will discuss later. Needless to say, you should be able to plug whatever is at your disposal into the Paganini without reservation.

One pair of RCA analog outputs and one pair of XLR balanced outputs are also available, and both sets feature variable output level that can be configured for a maximum level of either two or six volts.

Should you be using the Paganini stack as your preamplifier as well, this will allow you to optimize the output level to get maximum useful range from the volume control in your system. Both sets of outputs are individually buffered so they can drive separate sources. This is a bonus for me in a test situation, being able to use the Paganini in both of my systems as a reference component.

Setup

The four-box Paganini is *not* a plug-and-play device. All four boxes must be interconnected with a variety of cables that need to be connected very specifically. Fortunately, the Paganini is supplied with excellent manuals, but if there was ever a case where you must *read the damn instructions before you begin*, this is it. No worries, your dCS dealer

will provide full setup and instruct you on operation, but keep that manual handy. Once everything is in place, power up the stack and verify that you have all of the components working in harmony, or you will not get the full magic that the Paganini can deliver. Shortly after the stack is powered up, a thermometer symbol lights on the front panel of the clock to let you know that it is thermally stable. I found the dCS stack to sound its absolute best after being powered up for a full 24 hours.

Because this is such an extensive digital component, we will cover it one box at a time and discuss the changes that adding each subsequent box makes to the overall system sound. It is also worth noting that there are four to six different digital filter schemes at your disposal, depending on which mode you are listening to the DAC. *(continued)*

this beauty is a beast

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The Transport

Only you can decide whether the added \$17k expenditure for a separate transport is worth it, but after living with the Paganini for the better part of a year, and comparing it to a number of music server and computer sources, I still feel that the most realistic playback came from the transport, at least with redbook and SACD.

Near the end of the review period, dCS U.S. importer John Quick stopped by with his highly modified Macintosh G5 server, loaded with a wide collection of 24bit/192khz music and a high-zoom RME sound card. Quick was armed with the latest version of Amarra, the playback engine that optimizes a Macintosh computer for digital audio playback. I found the most unique feature of the new

release to be its memory playback function, which allows the user to load any number of tracks into the computer's RAM (random access memory) so that it was no longer dependant on the hard drive for playback. Using the extreme high-resolution files, not only was the playback quality on par with the transport, it was in some cases better than my analog front end.

As physical media draws near the end of its product lifetime, the actual mechanism used inside the box should be of great concern to anyone purchasing a disc spinner at this price point. When visiting the dCS factory earlier this year, I saw the massively overbuilt Esoteric mechanism used inside the dCS transport. This mechanism acknowledged by many to be one of the best-built in the industry. *(continued)*





The Paganini DAC

If you thought the analog world was a fast track to analysis paralysis and a severe case of indecision, the different filter choices available with the Paganini DAC (and the various upsampling rates available with the Paganini Upsampler) might just drive you to drink. However, drinking too much will negate the effectiveness of the filter choices, so perhaps in the end, this might be the best approach!

All kidding aside, the dCS manual says that in PCM mode, the first four filters “offer different tradeoffs between the Nyquist image rejection and transient response.” For those not completely familiar with digital signal processing, this all relates to how the DAC processes high-frequency signal information above 20kHz, usually half the limit of the sample rate. (In the case of the original redbook CD, this was 44.1kHz,

which theoretically limited the upper frequency limit of CDs to 22.05kHz)

Various manufacturers have utilized different filtering methods over the years, but the Paganini gives you a number of different options from which to choose. For straight PCM sources fed into the DAC, filter 1 is said to have the best rejection of unwanted Nyquist images and the sharpest rolloff, resulting in the poorest transient response of the four. This sounds a lot like the traditional “brickwall” filter that early CD players utilized. Filter 2 is suited more for classical music, and they say Filters 3 and 4 are more suited for rock music. Two more filter operations are available when you feed data to the Paganini DAC 176.4 and 192kHz: Filter 5 is a gaussian style filter and Filter 6 has the lowest amount of digital pre-ringing, which sounds much like the apodizing filters that have become

popular. When feeding the DAC a DSD datastream from SACD or the upsampler, 4 different filters are available, each progressively limiting output bandwidth for system matching.

All of the digital inputs for now are limited to 24bit/96 kHz data streams, but using the dual-channel AES ports together allows for a full 24 bit/192kHz data stream to be imported natively. Using this with the soundcard of the G5 was one of the most amazing ways to experience digital playback that the Paganini has to offer. It is worth noting that dCS was the co-inventor of the professional Dual-AES interface.

Listening tests confirmed dCS’ impressions of the various filters approach, but the differences between them were slightly subtler than initially expected. This DAC does a great job no matter where you happen to have it set and I would compare

these differences to slight adjustments on your turntable. Think of settling on a filter combination similar to getting the VTA and VTF exactly right on an analog setup.

The hidden key to the power of the dCS DAC is their proprietary five-bit Ring DAC that runs at the native DSD sampling rate. The traditional DSD format has always been a “one-bit” decoding scheme at 2.822 mhz, but dCS takes it a step further and processes all incoming data to a five-bit word length running at the same sample rate of DSD – providing essentially the same benefit that upsampling provides to the PCM data stream; digital artifacts are taken further upstream. The result is the most natural-sounding SACD playback I’ve ever experienced, but this becomes even more important as we discuss the next box in the Paganini chain. *(continued)*

The hidden key to the power of the dCS DAC is their proprietary five-bit Ring DAC that runs at the native DSD sampling rate.

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The Upsampler

There are plenty of arguments for and against upsampling digital data, but the strongest reason in favor of this technology is that when the original 44.1kHz data stream is multiplied to a higher frequency rate, the artifacts resulting from the filtering operation are much higher in frequency as well, and further away from the threshold of human hearing.

Like the filter combinations on the DAC, the Paganini upsampler allows you to upsample your incoming data to 88.2, 96, 176.4, 192kHz and DSD resolution. Again, plenty of arguments abound as to which multiple of the original is the most effective at relaying the ultimate musical experience and you can spend days if not months investigating the options at your disposal. I know I did. Which one is the best? Read on.

Because dCS takes a more-thorough approach to DSD processing than anyone else, again with all data coming into the DAC converted to their five-bit upsampled DSD rate, this ended up being my favorite way of using the Paganini on all but 24bit/192kHz sources.

All arguments aside, I remain amazed at how much more natural my standard redbook discs and 16/44 content from the Sooloos music server sounds when upsampled to DSD resolution. Almost all of the grain and HF harshness is gone and again, a well-recorded disc could easily fool me into thinking that I was listening to native high-res files or even analog.

As exciting as this was, I was flabbergasted by how well upsampling to DSD worked with 128kb/sec Rhapsody files played through the Paganini. Granted, this is a bit wacky, using a \$54,000 player to play low-res files, but since many of you may be using a music server, computer or Squeezebox, it's nice to know you can incorporate this into your Paganini with excellent results.

At this stage, the three-box Paganini was on par with my Naim CD555 when playing redbook discs, with an advantage when playing DSD or 24bit/192kHz files. But the best was yet to come when the last box in the chain was added. *(continued)*



The Overall Sound

Once acclimated to the four-box Paganini, it was virtually impossible to listen to other digital sources, and it's frightening to think that the Scarlatti would reveal even *more* music. If described in just one word, it would be "natural." Provided that the source material is of equally stunning quality, the Paganini will provide musical playback that leaves you with no excuses.

It nailed flawlessly every aspect of playback that I could throw at it. Dynamics were powerful and controlled. Classical music lovers, especially those with large SACD collections, would be amazed at the sheer weight the Paganini brings to the table as well as the tonal accuracy. I'm convinced that the over-sampling DSD functionality has much to do with this.

While I could go on and on listing the nuance in this bit of music versus that, ad infinitum, suffice to say that the Paganini combines the best of the digital and analog worlds. It has the smoothness and fine texture of the best analog reproduction combined with the additional range and lower noise floor of the best digital reproduction. You truly need to experience a demo of this player, if it is within your financial reach. Fifteen seconds into your favorite disc will tell you more than I've been able to in this entire review.

Additional Sources

As mentioned earlier, the Squeezebox touch worked very well with the Paganini, though this was merely used for investigation. Most of my music-based listening is with the Sooloos and the rest with the Naim HDX. If it appeals to the geekier side of your personality, I feel that a heavily modified Mac (or possibly PC) using the Dual AES connection, strictly fed 24bit/192khz files, will provide the ultimate in musical reproduction. I also was very pleased using a standard Mac Mini via USB.

While USB is currently limited to 24/96 resolution for now, dCS is currently developing a software and hardware upgrade that will allow 24/192 resolution via the USB port, and we will report on that as soon as it is in place with my Paganini. So stay tuned. *(continued)*

The Master Clock – Four is a Charm

Adding the word clock to the equation is what takes the Paganini from great to sublime. I was not prepared for the difference that adding this additional box to the mix would bring to the presentation. While I am greatly oversimplifying things, the master clock connects to both the DAC and the Transport (just the DAC if you are not using the transport) and syncs everything in the system, virtually eliminating jitter. Just as you would use an external phono stage to optimize your phono system's performance, the master clock is an even higher-accuracy clock than the one inside the DAC, concentrating on just that function.

An added benefit is that the master clock has six BNC outputs and you only need two for the Paganini stack. So if you have another digital source that could benefit from an external clock, you can use it with the Paganini clock as well. This is something that will come in handy with future upgrades to my reference system, I'm sure.

White papers aside, the master clock is the crucial piece in the digital puzzle, taking my experience with digital playback considerably further than I had experienced. Once you've made the necessary connections and power up the clock, the "sync" light in the transport will now be visible, and there is a change in the DAC display indicating that the clock is now active.

While the Paganini sounded fantastic at this point, engaging the clock gave the whole presentation a much more tonally rich feel. In essence, redbook playback was now knocking on the door of the best analog and in many ways, high-resolution digital playback was superior. Tough words, I know. Listening to the 24/96 copy of Neil Young's *Harvest*, and comparing it with the recently remastered version (mastered by Chris Bellman), the high-res digital copy had a more open, spacious presentation and was smoother at the top of the HF range. This was truly impressive digital playback! I had a similar experience with the rest of the high-resolution files in my music collection, and this was the first time in months that my

turntables started collecting dust.

The added bonus, for those of you with a large collection of rare vinyl, the digital captures that I had made with my Nagra LB studio recorder and the new Burmester 100 phono preamplifier (which features a built-in 24/192 ADC) were virtually indistinguishable from the vinyl playback. If you are still in love with analog and would like to put less wear and tear on irreplaceable records, the full Paganini system will reveal all of the magic of your analog front end, provided you have equally high-quality digital capture. Even 24/96 comes dramatically close, and this is how I've been enjoying a lot of the Music Matters Blue Note series, on my Naim HDX music server through the Paganini.

Conclusion

Having listened to a lot of great digital over the past few years, I have to put the Paganini at the top of my list. I've only listened to the Scarlatti at the dCS factory and did not have a Paganini side by side to compare, so for now, the four-box Paganini system represents the most musical experience I've had yet with digital, and the Naim CD555 was a tough act to follow.

While I have tried to be as comprehensive as possible in exploring all of the possible combinations, I feel that there are still a few I've undoubtedly missed. Other than upgrading the stock power cords to four Python CX cords from Shunyata and giving the Paganini stack its own dedicated AC circuit with a Running Springs Haley power conditioner, I haven't even begun to address the possible performance gains resulting in optimizing every one of the cables involved in this highly complex digital-playback system. So I feel there is still more performance to be had here. Stay tuned to the TONEAudio website because we will have updates as we discover more about this player.

Though the price of admission is very high, in the context of a reference system that is well into the six-figure range, I still marvel at how musical this combination remains. It has not only redefined what I've come to believe is possible with digital playback, it has prompted me to make some serious upgrades to the analog side of my system as well. While the

Paganini stack can be as simple or complicated to use as your level of OCD will allow, keep in mind that you can narrow it down to one or two settings that will work in all situations. You will either love it or it will drive you to madness.

And those tiny buttons will not help your situation, especially if you order your Paganini stack in silver; they are nearly impossible to read, even with reading glasses. As you can see from the photos, the black models have silver writing, which makes it much easier to discern. Many dCS dealers are delivering them with universal remotes for the more technologically challenged, and this is probably a good idea. My only suggestion to dCS going forward would be to allow the stack to be operated in either a default mode or allow you to program all of the settings in a memory, like the power driver's seat in a Lexus or Mercedes. I guarantee that your kids and audiophile friends will not be able to resist the urge to diddle all those buttons, and it could take you a while to get back to your preferred settings.

In the end, tiny buttons be damned. Listening to the dCS Paganini stack is a truly awesome musical experience. If you have a large collection of high-resolution files, you could go a long time, perhaps forever, without spinning a record again; it's that good. We are proud to award the dCS Paganini our Product of the Year in the digital category for 2010. ●

The dCS Paganini System

MSRP:

PTT Transport - \$16,999

PDC DAC - \$17,999

PUP Upsampler - \$10,499

PCK Clock - \$7,999

MANUFACTURER

Main office

www.dcsLtd.co.uk

US Distributor

www.temposales.com

PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier Burmester 011

Power Amplifier

Burmester 911 mk. 3

Speakers GamuT S9

Add. Dig. Sources Sooloos

Control 10, Squeezebox Touch, MacBook Pro, Mac Mini, Wadia 170i and 171i

Analog Source Spiral Groove SG-2/Triplanar/Lyra Skala/ARC REF Phono 2

Cable Shunyata Aurora I/C, Shunyata Stratos SP speaker cable

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

Accessories Burmester and Quadraspire Racks, Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators, Furutech DeMag



Best Albums of 2010

By Bob Gendron

RECORD SALES IN DECLINE? Pish. Thousands of new studio albums competed for listeners' attention in 2010, the bulk of which will be as quickly forgotten about as overhyped buzz bands from yesteryear. Nonetheless, hundreds of noteworthy records held our ear and warranted that we revisit them, time and time again. Suffice it to say that it was a good year for newer artists and, despite the prevalence of nostalgic reunions, a lesser year for veteran musicians. If you only get the opportunity to hear a couple of albums from 2010, here are the select few that should be on your shortlist—and why they are worthy of your attention.

1

Titus Andronicus
The Monitor
XL, CD or 2LP

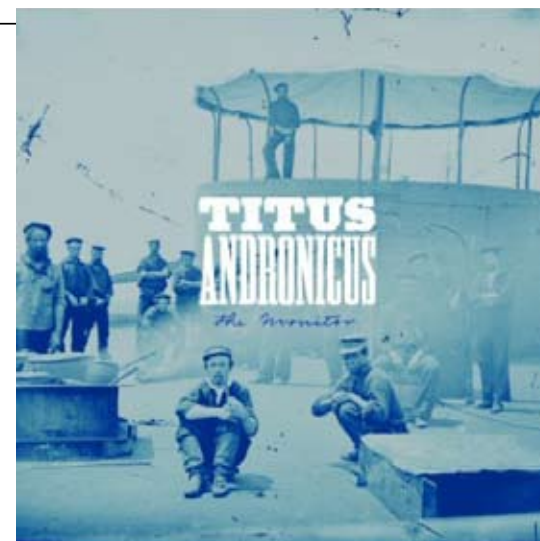


Photo by Victoria Jacob

Ambitious, daring, and often delirious, indie rock/punk quintet Titus Andronicus' sophomore set comes on like a rush of blood to the head and takes its place as the best album 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. But the record works independently of the lyrics, which contain a surfeit of clever one-liners that underscore what it means to live in difficult times and attempt to survive modern culture.

Interspersed with interludes that quote Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and other period historical luminaries, the record's central lyrical tenet is that the enemy is everywhere; friends can't be trusted, and no one but yourself can save you. The band reinforces its belief by playing as if its own life is at stake. As such, *The Monitor* teems with urgency, energy, soul, and don't-look-back momentum. Vocalist Patrick Stickles 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. No matter how turbulent the tempos turn or epic the arrangements become, great melodies remain in the crosshairs. It's nigh impossible not to get caught up in the enthusiasm and honesty.

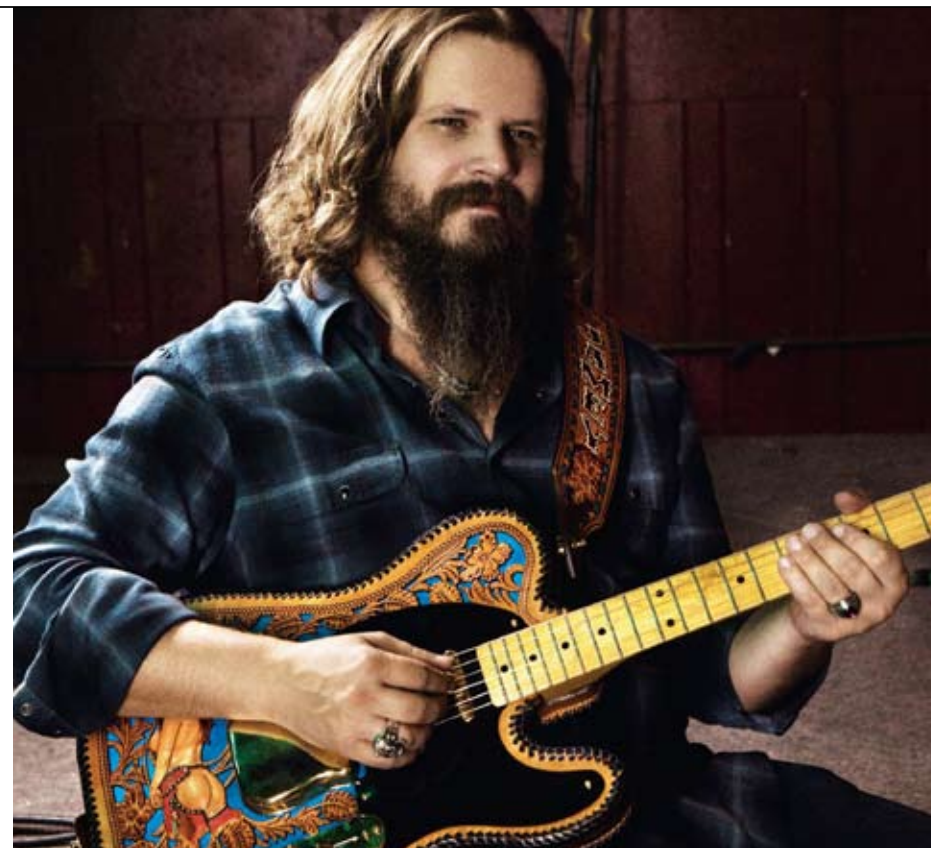
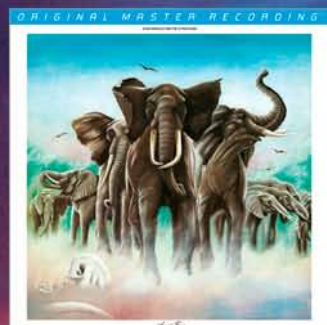
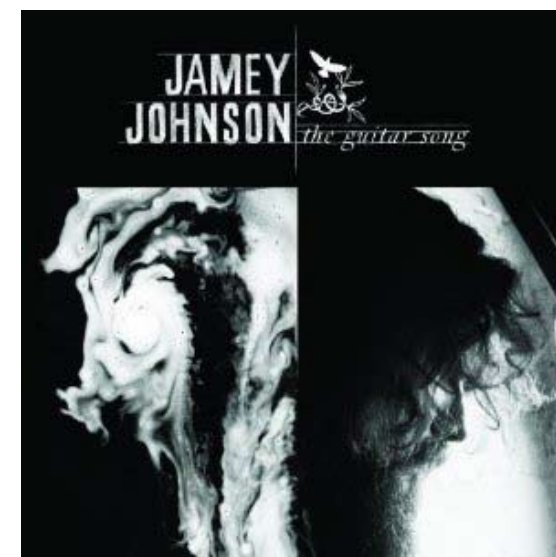


Photo by James Minchin

2

Jamey Johnson

The Guitar Song
Mercury/Universal, 2CD or 3LP



MUSIC

Double albums have a way of sounding great on paper but poor in practice. More often than not, they are usually disorganized, sprawling, and, to a point, stuffed with filler that drags down the superior material. Split into “black” and “white” halves, Jamey Johnson’s outlaw-leaning *The Guitar Song* falls victim to none of those pitfalls. What’s more impressive is that Johnson is an authentic country (read: no slick Nashville pop disguised as country or *Country for Dummies*-like lesson-heeding here) artist that isn’t out to hock a particular brand of pick-up truck, promote a self-serving agenda, or look pretty for the camera. Throughout, his songwriting and execution are unfailingly consistent, evocative, and earnest. In no way is this rough-hewn vocalist/guitarist to be ignored.

Whether lampooning the spoils that accompany commercial success, reflecting upon his Alabama roots, or getting to the empathetic heart of a soured romance, Johnson clings to a working-class nature and independent disposition that anoint the music with a grittiness too often absent from contemporary country. Backed by a no-frills band, Johnson sprinkles blues, gospel, and Southern soul on a batch of originals spiked with hard truths. At no moment does Johnson pander to fashionable tastes, deliberately turn retro, or pine for the past. And by being himself, and ripping open the hurtful and redemptive layers of myriad universal emotions, Johnson is more than qualified to be the man crooning the tender, simple, and disarmingly effective “That’s Why I Write Songs,” a theme statement if there ever was one.

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3

Arcade Fire*The Suburbs*

Merge, CD or 2LP



Photo by Eric Kayne

Three albums into its career, Arcade Fire confirms its position as rock's most vital band, *The Suburbs* following the thematic-oriented paths of its two excellent predecessors but completely changing the musical and topical course. Saliently addressing childhood memory, the concept of home, fleeting innocence, emotional transience, and the search for something pure, the Montreal septet has made an imperative statement about our era's communicative disconnect, unquestioned speed, and gamut of feelings and meanings that arise when one looks back at what was—and what is now.

Moving away from the density and grandness of 2007's political *Neon Bible*, the group sews nuanced yarns of urgent guitar-laced rock, bouncy synth-folk, and atmospheric pop through lyrical tapestries checkered with longing, desperation, and constant questioning. Arcade Fire centers dialogues around the universal construct of suburbs, their sprawl, emptiness, and alienating characteristics serving as metaphors for matters of anxiousness, wanderlust, and regret that consume vocalists Win Butler and Regine Chassagne. In several ways, the work bookends Bruce Springsteen's *The Darkness on the Edge of Town*. Whereas the latter reacts to the late-70s era's decline with fighting resilience, *The Suburbs* leaves open-ended many of the major ideals and dreams it directly invokes. Here, the future isn't as certain, and there's no Thunder Road on which to escape. Tapped into a personal tension that occupies the realm between contentment and restlessness, it's as magnetic a convergence of bittersweet sentimentality and youthful insouciance as you'll experience on record.



extraordinary

+

synergy



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Featuring Neil Young just playing guitar and singing, *Le Noise* is a record that changes how music can be presented and heard. Recorded live with no overdubs and no outside band assistance at producer Daniel Lanois' Silver Lake home, the album is like nothing else in Young's catalog—or that of contemporary music. How Lanois got such terrific sounds, and what he does with the guitar, is part of the genius, the dynamic contrasts paralleling striking juxtapositions of intimacy and enormity, calm and turbulence.

Chords are augmented, magnified, echoed, stretched, thickened, stripped; arrangements unpredictably build, decay, and disintegrate, with some of the random pieces then reassembling into different shapes that collect like iron shavings on a moving magnet. Individual notes break off from parent structures, occasionally taking the form of jagged chords, other times doubling as the clink of a piano or stop of an organ. Riffs seem as if they've been filtered through a multitude of distortion devices, choral pedals, sustain gadgets, and delay boxes. An entrenched sense of melody and rhythm allows the songs to hold their shape, and Young's singing is as clear, attentive, and passionate as it's been in years. Straightforward and direct, and occasionally autobiographical, the songwriting is equally superb. What an album.



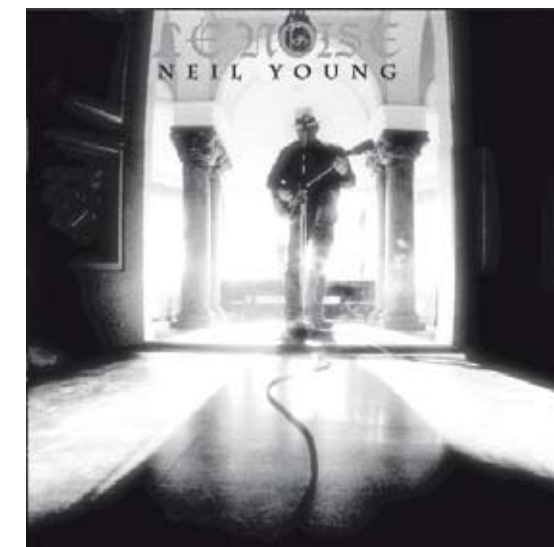
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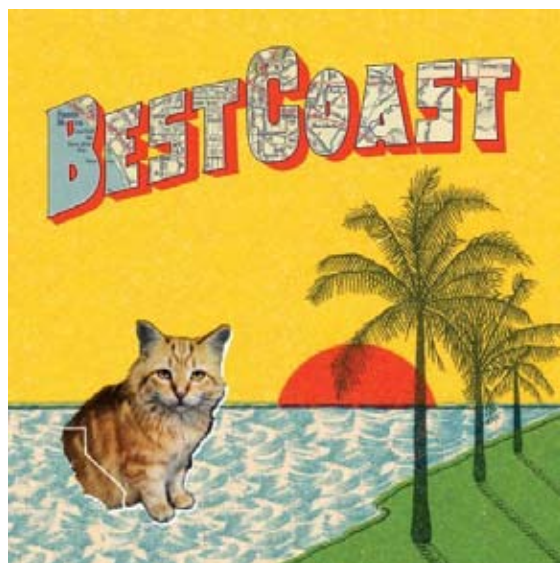
4

Neil Young

Le Noise

Reprise, CD or 180g LP





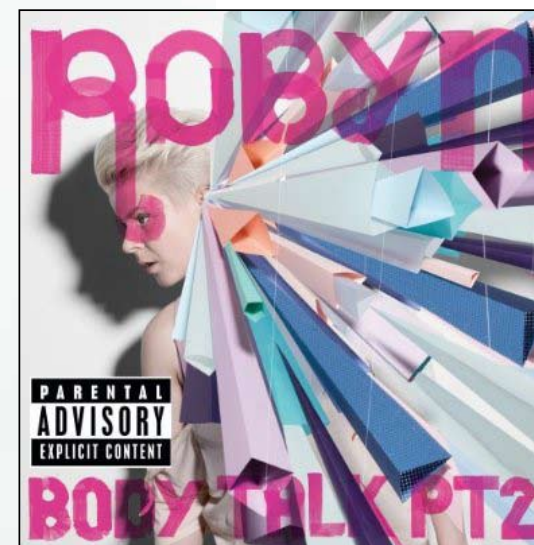
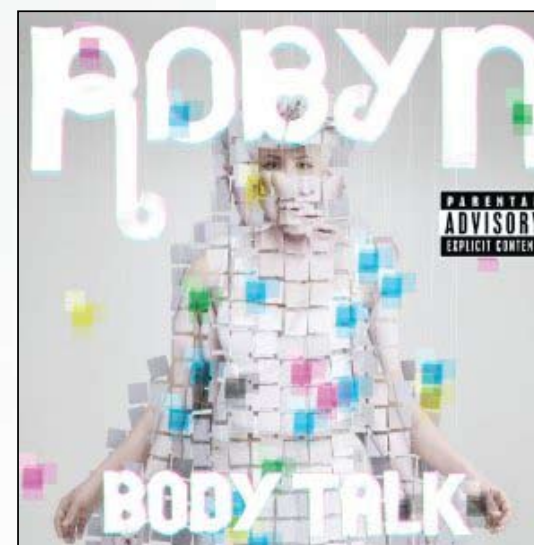
5

Best Coast*Crazy For You*

Mexican Summer, CD or LP

Best Coast leader Bethany Cosentino pens what, to the naked ear, could easily be dismissed as amateurish pop-rock songs given that they're largely comprised of three or four chords, don't demand solos, and offer limited variety. The lyrics suggest an unpolished, possibly rushed demeanor. Simple and uncomplicated, narratives could come off like the scrawled diary entries of a girl obsessed with a high-school crush. But a closer listen reveals there's a lot more underneath the surface.

For starters, there's an undeniably effective catchiness gleaned from girl-group pop legends. Best Coast's plain directness—and the songs' heartfelt sentiments—both trump and complement a breezy aura. Along with guitarist/bassist/drummer Bob Bruno, Cosentino delights in reverb-drenched melodies and quaint hooks that double as the sound of the thin haze that appears over ocean beaches during early mornings. Yet Cosentino's delivery and words ultimately distinguish Best Coast and *Crazy For You*. Serious heartache, maddening restlessness, and emotional paralysis bubble under the multitude of murmuring harmonies and wishful sentiments. Lovesickness has seldom sounded so mellifluous, emotional, or disarmingly honest.



6

Robyn*Body Talk, Body Talk Pt. I, Body Talk Pt. II*Konichwa/Interscope
Three individual CDs

Not since M.I.A.'s arrival in 2004 has an artist like

Robyn emerged and shown that catchy mainstream pop doesn't have to be disposable, meek, or vacant. The Swedish singer's habit-forming *Body Talk* trilogy (released as three separate mini-LPs) heads for the hips, heart, and head—and doesn't miss any of the targets. Blending house grooves, lean rhythms, kick drums, pulsing electronics, bubblegum choruses, physical beats, twinkling string arrangements, disco accents, and clever voice-over samples, Robyn bridges American and European club music into a cutting-edge hybrid. Yet her vocals and songwriting are the attributes that elevate the 31-year-old to Dancehall Queen status. Robyn doesn't view as mutually exclusive pairing lyrics that lay bare emotional vulnerability, relationship heartache, and liberating independence with kinetic tracks. It's an inspired approach. More sensual than salacious, more sleek than swaggering, *Body Talk* reveals a pop genius at work.



7

Kanye West

My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy
Roc-A-Fella/Def Jam, CD

Kanye West's crazed antics, outspoken comments, and ego-massaging self-importance may irk and confuse millions, but give the man his due: No matter his faults, there's no mainstream artist or celebrity that possesses such brutal honesty about themselves or their polarizing actions. Retreating from the somber approach he took on 2008's *808s & Heartbreak*, the Chicago-reared MC valiantly celebrates and castigates his seemingly well-intentioned albeit often-alienating persona on the enterprising (aptly titled) *My Beautiful Dark and Twisted Fantasy*. Every jarring juxtaposition he inspires and invokes—humor and seriousness, irritation and empathy, bulletproof swagger and unguarded vulnerability, calm and brusque, indulgence and sacrifice, bold entitlement and soft retreat—lyrically and musically play out over the course of a complex, involving record that draws from a deep well of sounds, styles, and samples. Grandiosity bursts from almost every seam. An enveloping array of metal riffs, heavy rock beats, funk rhythms, chamber strings, elegant pianos, chanting choirs, bombastic trumpets, and hip-hop tracks frame West's vocals and rhymes, dragging the listener down and through a hole that would cause the likes of Freud and Jung to salivate. Despite West's apparent attempts to elucidate upon his motivations and thoughts, and make them more understandable to the public, the album ultimately promulgates the drama, contradictions, and confusions that have turned the superstar into such a fascinating figure. The line between reality and perception remains obscured, and even West, for all of his confessions and observations, can't ultimately reconcile what it all means or what he should do next. It's an unforgettable therapy session.



8

Janelle Monáe

The ArchAndroid
Bad Boy, CD or 2LP

The one obvious obstruction to falling in love with Janelle Monáe's conceptual *The ArchAndroid* relates to its sheer outrageousness. Leaning on an over-the-top plot, Monáe frames widescreen songs and thematic sound effects around a narrative that witnesses the singer taking on the alter ego of futuristic archandroid savior Cindi Mayweather and traveling back in time to save the day. The real draw is how Monáe uses the captivating, genre-liberated music—orchestral pop, bouncy R&B, percussive swing, playful hip-hop, sweaty blues, dance-demanding funk, and even swooping classical strains coarse throughout the engulfing program—to underscore the sci-fi journey and her pliable voice to drive home the scenarios and personalities within what, on record, plays like an impossible-to-put-down graphic novel.



9

Sleigh Bells

Treats
Mom + Pop, CD or LP

Sleigh Bells singer Alexis Krauss and guitarist Derek Miller seemingly come from divergent poles of the musical spectrum. She's enamored with bubblegum pop, breathily innocent coos, and hyperactive playground screams. He's besotted with thrash metal riffs, bomb-dropping hip-hop beats, and practically any sound effect or sonic fragment that can be flush till its red in the face with abrasive distortion. On its addictively melodic debut, *Treats*, the duo's opposites-attract tastes combust in the form of concise, catchy, room-shaking electro-rock bursting with stadium-ready hooks, pieced-together backdrops, electrocuted guitar notes, and earthquake-caliber bass lines. This buoyant album should be blared at full volume by every cheerleading team, rehearsing noise-rock band, personal-training coach, mash-up artist, and dance-bound raver.



Shown: LTX 500 Projector



AVM 50v audio/video processor

+



Anthem Room Correction (ARC™)

+



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10

Grinderman

Grinderman 2

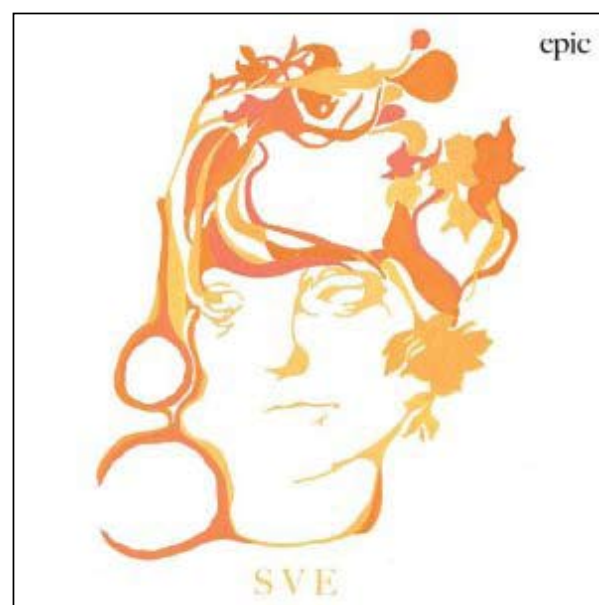
Anti, CD or Deluxe LP

Around a harlequin assembly of characters and creations, Nick Cave constructs outlandish tales of mayhem and mercy, desperate pleas for love and deliverance, possessive threats of desire and destruction. And around these, his simpatico cohorts in *Grinderman*—the rambunctious quartet comprised of Cave and three of his mates from the Bad Seeds—wrap hoodoo storms of pounding rhythm, random noise, and undulating melody in seemingly free-form manners that extend the wild, severely neglected traditions established by musical personalities such as Howlin' Wolf and Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Hysterical, humorous, volatile, *Grinderman 2* epitomizes what rock and roll should be but seldom is—a Wild West of ideas, sounds, sex, menace, rawness, and fun.



Photo by Deirdre O Callaghan





11

Sharon Van Etten*Epic*

Ba Da Bing, CD or LP

The title of singer/guitarist Sharon Van Etten's sophomore album doesn't allude to its seven-song, 32-minute length. As for its sound and music? That's another matter. Beginning the record with one of the most soul-lacerating opening verses in recent memory, Van Etten surveys broken romances, self-assertive recoveries, and acerbic disappointments with an unsparing candor and mature disposition. Her gorgeous voice conveys ache, anger, irony, hope, and affection with equal degrees of conviction, the words seemingly curling in her mouth before they tumble out. And while arrangements largely remain sparse, Van Etten's powerful timbre is couched against hovering folk-rock and reverb-drenched country-rock backgrounds that massage the often-bruised (or bruising) lyrics. Harmonium passages, pedal-steel guitar lines, and tastefully overdubbed vocals complete an intimate, mellow, beautifully surreal piece of catharsis. ●



Photo by Kristianna Smith

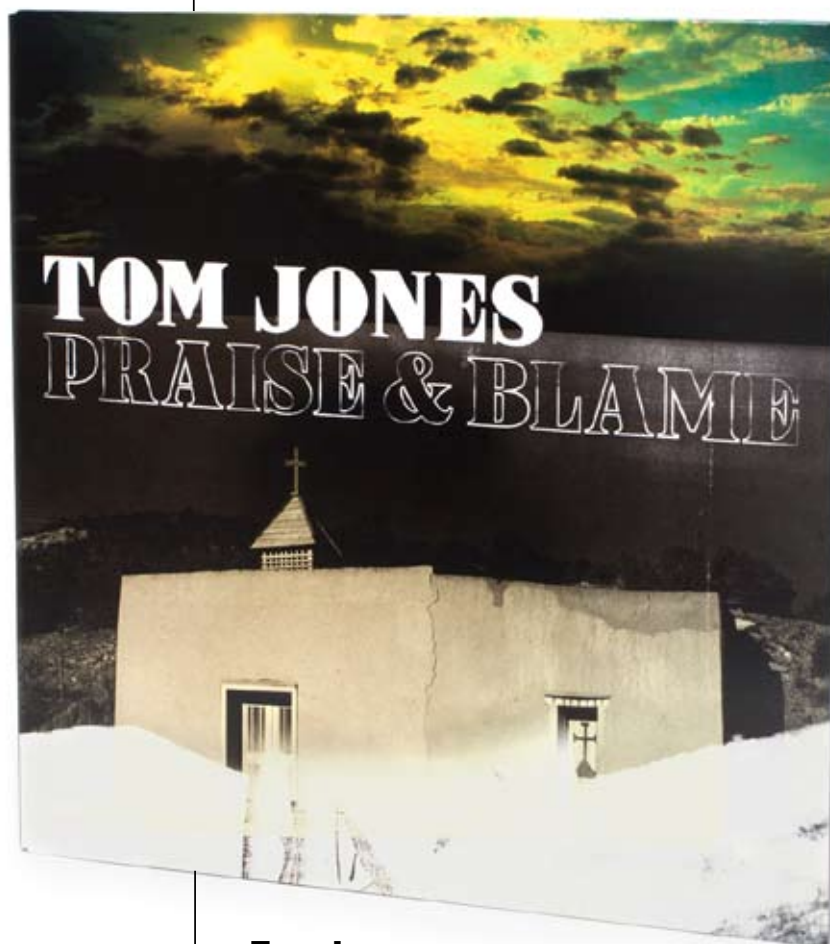
NINE MORE ALBUMS THAT CAME THIS/CLOSE TO LANDING IN THE TOP 11:

Agalloch: *Marrow of the Spirit*, **Besnard Lakes:** *Besnard Lakes Are the Roaring Night*, **Deerhunter:** *Halcyon Digest*, **Charlotte Gainsbourg:** *IRM*, **Kylesa:** *Spiral Shadow*, **MGMT:** *Congratulations*, **Shearwater:** *The Great Archipelago*, **The Tallest Man on Earth:** *The Wild Hunt*, **Richard Thompson:** *Dream Attic*

Recordings of the Year

By Jeff Dorgay

SINCE *TONE* IS A MUSIC MAGAZINE with an audiophile bent, Music Editor Bob Gendron addresses the year's most significant performances on album while here, I weigh in on 2010-released records and reissues with the ultimate sound. It was another bumper-crop year for great-sounding remasters, with a bit of crossover from standard-issue pressings as well. In addition to releases from the usual classic jazz and rock suspects, there were a few unexpected jewels that trickled in from the beaten path. Note to the industry: More of this, please!



Tom Jones
Praise & Blame
Lost Highway, LP

The best \$10 you'll spend on a new record this or any other year is on this stripped-down acoustic set, as Jones delivers a breathtaking performance. Yet there is also plenty of production cred: Recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studio and mastered by Bob Ludwig. So the question needs to be asked: If Tom Jones and Lost Highway can make a great-sounding LP for ten bucks, why can't Elvis Costello and Hear Music do it for \$30? If the vinyl resurgence is going to maintain its push, we need a *lot* more records like this. What's more, the Jones CD sounds even better than the LP!

NEU!

NEU! Vinyl Box Set
Gronland Records, 5LP Box Set

If you are a Krautrock fan, NEU! is essential, as the band constitutes one of the building blocks of that electronic music subdivision. The group's three highly influential original studio records have been out of print for years, and very expensive on the used market. They're all here, as well as first official release of *NEU! 86* and the previously unheard *NEU! 72*. While the set contains plenty of collectible ephemera for the enthusiast, what's most important is that the music is treated with the care it deserves and the format demands. The discs are dead quiet, revealing all the low-level texture that helps define NEU!'s sound. (See full review, this issue.)



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Everyone is talking about today's current "Vinyl Resurgence." At Music Direct, vinyl and all things analog have been our top priority for the last two decades. Our analog experts know more about turntables, cartridges, phono preamps, record care, and vinyl records for one simple reason: We never stopped listening! We'll make your music listening experience more fun—guaranteed. After all, isn't that what we all want?



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 and Two-time TAS Golden Ear Award Winner

Marantz TT-15



AVID Diva II



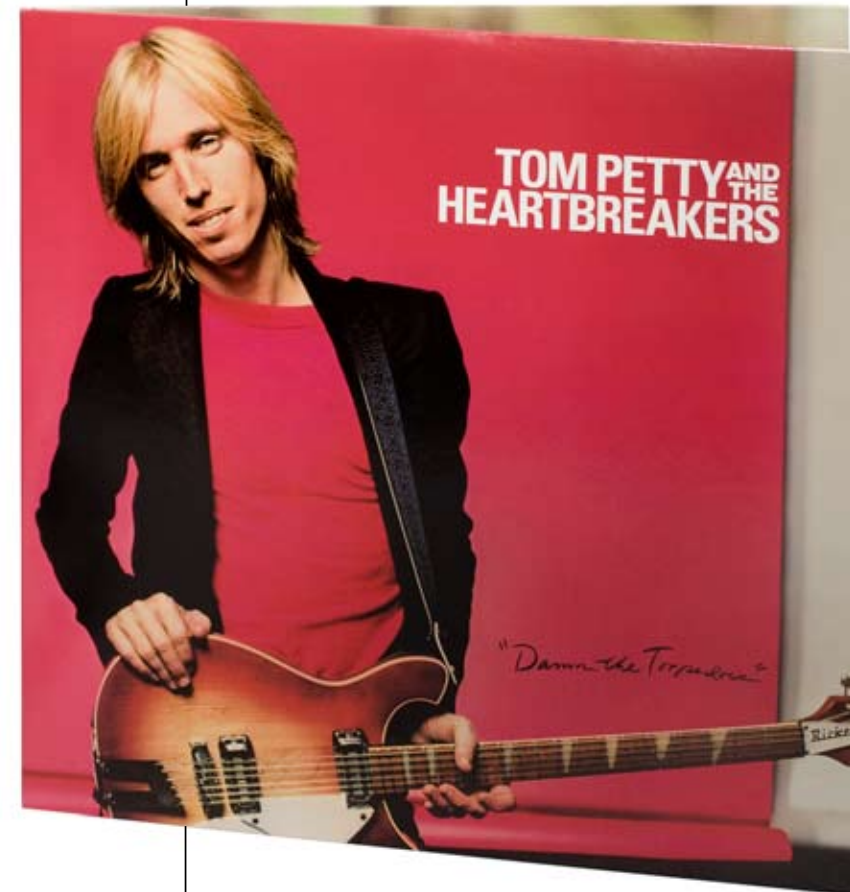
Clearaudio Concept



Rega P-3 24



We've heard
 more cartridges
 than anyone.



Tom Petty
Damn The Torpedoes
 ORG, 180g 2LP Set
 + hi-res download

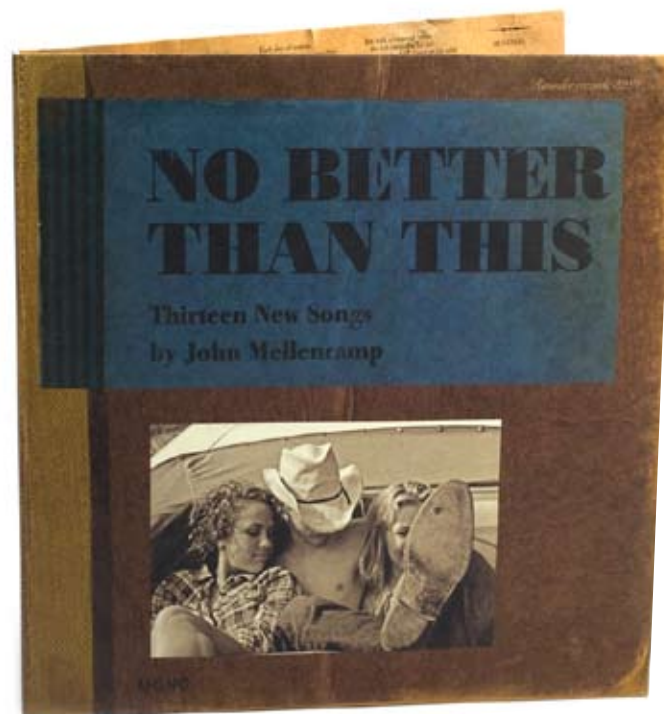
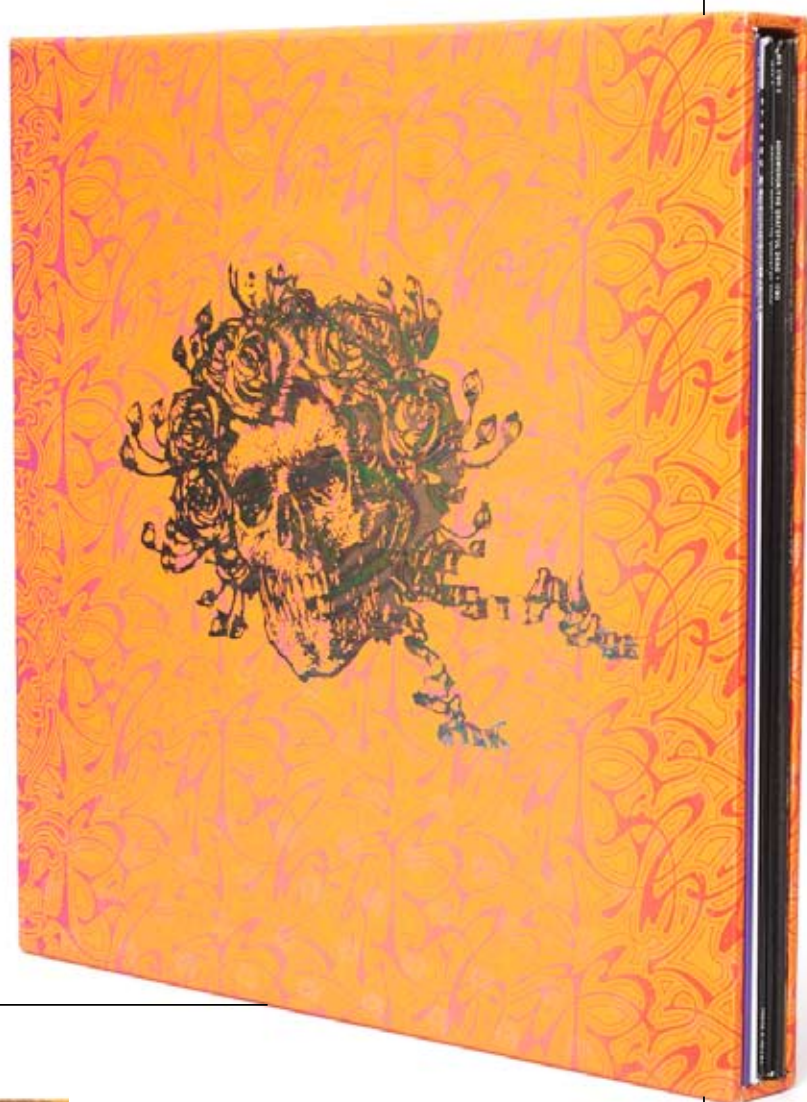
Audiophile label ORG has been doing fantastic work since its inception, and it's been particularly exciting to see the imprint venture off the well-traveled path and restore a wide range of rock titles. Mastered by Chris Bellman at Bernie Grundman Studios, this Petty breakthrough takes a different organizational approach than its recent Joni Mitchell reissue. Whereas Mitchell's *Wild Things Run Fast* is spread out over two 45RPM discs, *Damn the Torpedoes* is cut at 33 1/3, with the second disc full of previously unreleased outtakes and alternate tracks.

As cool as the rare material proves, the real bonus is that the album includes a free download of all the music in 24 bit/96khz FLAC format. I hope this is a trend that ORG (and the other audiophile labels) will continue to embrace. The only downside? Deciding what format you prefer. For me, after several critical listening sessions, digital and analog are locked in a virtual dead heat. No matter. A fantastic bargain, especially considering that HD Tracks charges nearly \$30 for the HD files alone.

Grateful Dead

The Warner Bros. Studio Albums
Rhino, 180g 5LP Box Set

Our staff *collector emeritus*, Tom Caselli, is the penultimate Dead collector, and with multiple copies of early Grateful Dead pressings at his disposal, feels that the Rhino set is “easily the equal” of the original first-stamper Warner Bros. pressings. Again, we have an over-the-top winner that satisfies the most meticulous collector *and* fussy audiophile. And, as the Dead were known for their attention to sonic detail, this box more than does their legacy justice. These LPs sound so good, you may not even need hallucinogenic drugs to get right back into that long, strange trip. (See full review, this issue.)



John Mellencamp

No Better Than This
Rounder, 2LP Set

Going back to basics and using vintage gear to produce a new *mono* record in three of the country’s best old-school locales sounds like a PR maven’s wet dream for hyperbole, but Mellencamp does it right. Not only is this collection of songs some of the singer’s best work in years, the LP quality is outstanding, and the CD damn good.



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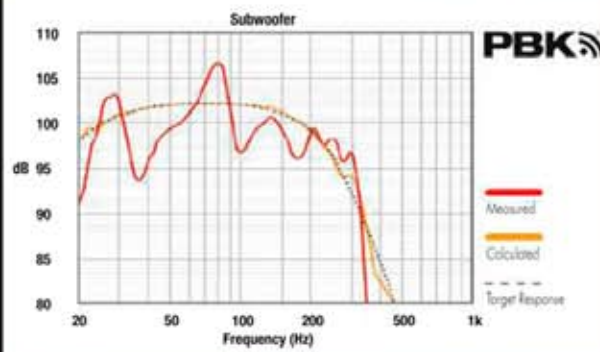
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— Chris Martens, AV Guide

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MUSIC

Elvis Costello
Armed Forces
MoFi, 180g LP

While Mobile Fidelity did an outstanding job with Costello's first two albums earlier this year, they were primitive recordings. Granted, those involved made the best of what was available. But on his third release, Costello received more record company support and a bigger budget, meaning that extra care was lavished on what went down in the studio. Finally given the treatment this rock classic deserves, MoFi's LP version of *Armed Forces* brings back great memories and, in this case, sounds better than it did when you may have first heard it all the way back in 1979.



Yes
The Yes Album
MoFi, 24K Gold CD

Even when compared to the original early stamper vinyl, MoFi's version of this Yes masterpiece stands at the top of the heap. For all the detractors of standard 16 bit/44khz Redbook CD, Mobile Fidelity proves that, when done correctly, CD is still a medium capable of incredible sound. Even a cursory listen reveals the layers of detail that are recovered, along with major weight and dynamics. If you are any kind of Yes fan, this should be part of your collection. It's a fantastic demo disc.





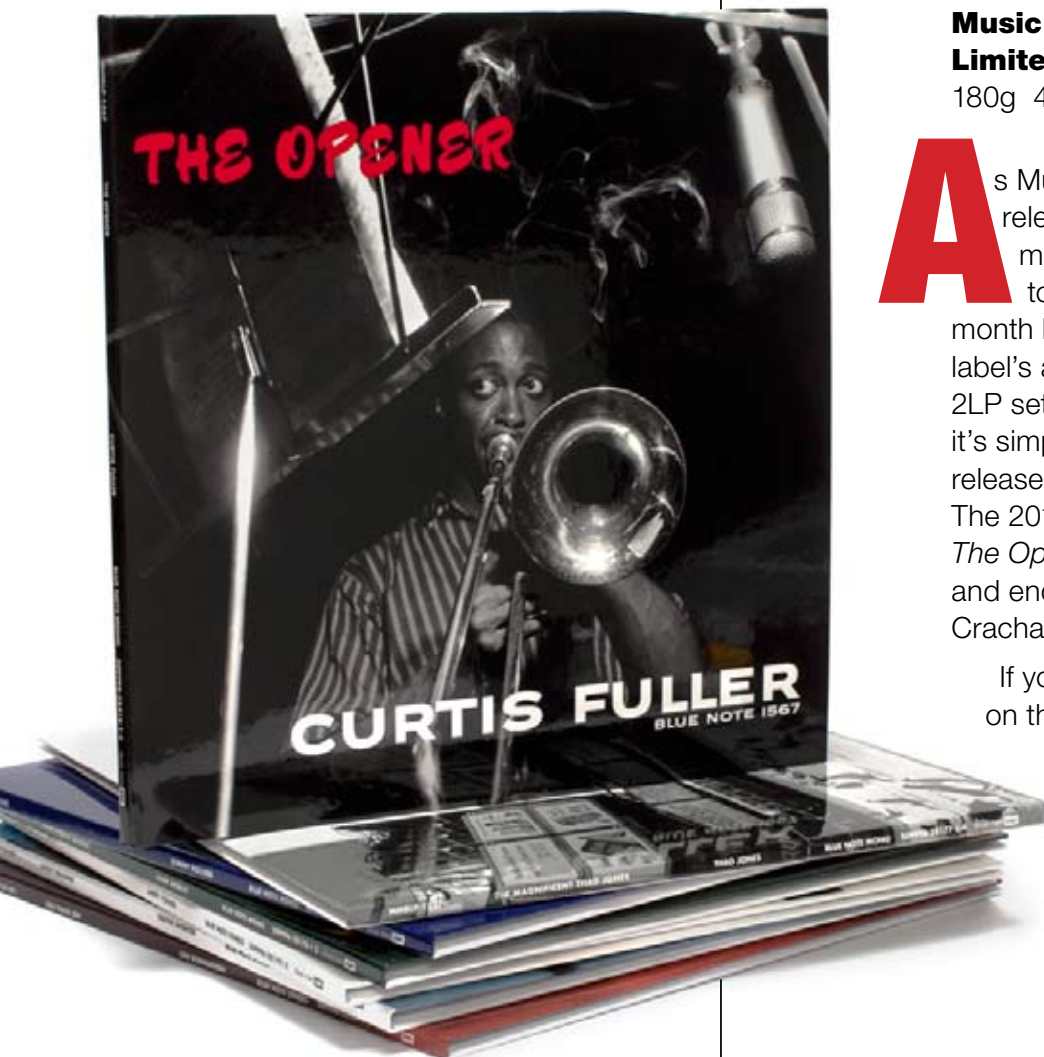
Joni Mitchell
Wild Things Run Fast
 ORG, 180g 2LP Set

A pivotal record in Joni Mitchell's career, *Wild Things Run Fast* continues to polarize her longtime fans. But there's no arguing about the sound quality here. Mastered by Bernie Grundman and pressed at Pallas, these two 45RPM discs possess a massive soundstage along with CD-quiet surfaces. Another homerun from ORG.

Music Matters 2010 Numbered Limited-Edition Jazz Series
 180g 45RPM 2LP Sets

As Music Matters sticks to its schedule of releasing two classic jazz LPs every month, there's never been a better way to mark time this or any other year. My month begins when I get a new pair of the label's albums in the mail. With each 180g 2LP set exquisitely produced and packaged, it's simply unfair to single any one of the releases out as being "better than the rest." The 2010 series started with Chris Fuller's *The Opener* and Grant Green's *The Matador* and ended with *Paul Chambers Quartet* and Crachan Moncour's *Evolution*.

If you love Blue Note's classic years, get on the list and buy these records. They are as good as vinyl gets. And order them now, because a majority of the albums that Music Matters released in 2007 and 2008 are already sold-out. You can bet the collectors that bought multiple copies are hawking them at steep prices. ●



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"Damn close to a perfect piece of equipment."
The Audio Critic

ALPHA ANALOG

The ARC REF Phono 2

By Jeff Dorgay



In the past two years since the Sooloos music server has entered my life, I must admit that the music-lover side of my personality has been dominating my audiophile side. I've always loved vinyl, but having 7000 CD's that you can mix and match to your hearts content has gotten, well, addictive. Add two world-class digital front ends to the mix (the Naim CD555 and now the dCS Paganini) and it gets tougher to stay on the analog bus every day. Who really wants to screw around with VTA anyhow? Let's play some more Slayer.

Analysis paralysis is equally virulent to the avid audiophile as well as the reviewer; it's easy to sample too many wares and get lost somewhere along the journey. And this has happened to me more than once. A number of combinations have brought me close to analog bliss, which I thought would last forever. But in the end, the convenience of the Sooloos/dCS had me saying, "I'll clean that pile of records tomorrow..." Then another change, and that fleeting happiness was lost again.

“Using tubes at the input is just too noisy; the input FET’s are the only way to get that low-level signal to emerge from a black background.”

I was lost but now I’m found

Joe Harley from Music Matters was the man that saved me. At this year’s CES, he and his partner Ron Rambach said, almost in unison, “Get the new ARC REF and stop screwing around.” Shortly thereafter, I had a chance to hear the REF in Harley’s system and I was pretty overwhelmed (in a great way) while listening to quite a few of his test pressings from the current Blue Note catalog as well as some of his past efforts on Audio-Quest records. This was truly the analog magic I’d been seeking.

Everything I heard that evening left me feeling like I was listening to a great surround-sound mix, except it was coming from two speakers, not six or eight. Best of all, the second I closed my eyes, those speakers were gone and I was swimming in a gigantic fish bowl of sound.

About two years ago when we reviewed the PH7 phono preamplifier, I asked ARC’s Dave Gordon if they would ever produce another REF phono stage. “Not at present,” he replied, “but we haven’t ruled out the idea of another REF if there is enough demand.” And here we are, two years later with the REF 2. I must extend my heartfelt thanks to all of you who kept the pressure on ARC to produce the REF 2.

Past vs. Present

The original REF Phono had a massive compliment of tubes, using 11 6922’s in various locations, a 5AR4 rectifier tube and a 6550 along with another 6922 to perform voltage-regulator duties, as they

have done in some of their other designs. The new REF Phono 2 utilizes four 6H30 tubes along with a FET input stage, as they have in the PH5, 6 and 7. Gordon said, “Using tubes at the input is just too noisy; the input FET’s are the only way to get that low-level signal to emerge from a black background.” The REF 2 Phono also uses solid-state rectifiers but retains the 6550 as a voltage regulator, this time in conjunction with another 6H30 tube.

The original REF Phono had a pricetag of \$6,995 and the current REF Phono 2 costs \$11,995. This is a substantial increase in price, but the new version offers quite a bit more under the hood as well as on the front panel, which is available in silver or black finish.

ARC has made an interesting style change with the REF Phono 2, the top panel is now a grey smoked acrylic, allowing full view of the tube complement. Those wanting the traditional metal top panel can order their preamp this way at no additional charge.

While the original REF Phono for all practical purposes had one input, you could switch between a low-gain and a high-gain input via a rear panel switch, so using two turntables was not terribly convenient. The new version has been designed from the ground up to be a two-input phono preamplifier, using microprocessor controls to switch between inputs. ARC has incorporated the large vacuum-fluorescent display from their other components to excellent use here. *(continued)*





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Another big change in circuitry is the REF Phono 2's fully balanced design.

You can view input, gain, loading and equalization at a glance from across the room. The remote control will also allow you to see how many hours have elapsed on the tubes, and those who are driven crazy by lights in their "deep listening" sessions can dim or completely darken the display.

Another big change in circuitry is the REF Phono 2's fully balanced design. Though its two phono inputs are single-ended, the preamplifier is balanced throughout and offers single-ended RCA and balanced XLR outputs. For those doing any recording of their vinyl via tape or digital means, it's worth noting that I was able to drive a recorder from the single-ended outputs and send the balanced outputs to my Burmester preamplifier with no degradation in performance. The resulting captured files were fantastic, being fed straight from the REF into my Nagra LB digital recorder or Technics RS-1500 open reel deck.

Interestingly, even though the REF Phono 2 only draws a maximum of 140 watts from the AC line, it has a square 20A IEC power socket. I'm assuming that this helps to make a more solid connection to the power cord, also showing that no detail was left unexamined in the creation of ARC's flagship phono stage. *(continued)*





If you have a plethora of cartridges in your collection, the REF Phono 2 is a dream come true. Now you can geek out with ease.

Needs a little time to cook

Like every other component I've auditioned with a large compliment of Teflon capacitors, the REF is going to take 500 hours to sound its best, and ARC even suggests 600 hours in the owner's manual. For the naysayers in the audience who feel break-in is pure poppycock, I had a unique situation with the REF that verifies this concept beyond doubt. My initial review sample had made a few stops before it got here, so I was able to sidestep the break-in process and begin evaluating it immediately. The REF sounds OK directly out of the box but there is substantial improvement after 100-200 hours. It really comes out of the fog right around 350 hours, getting even better until the 500-hour mark. Fortunately, ARC includes a timer linked to the display on the front panel to help you keep track. It's critical to note that you have to pass a signal through the unit during these hours; just keeping the unit on is not enough.

As the REF I was using was the one from ARC's demo room, when I decided to purchase the review sample, Gordon insisted that they send

me a brand new unit from production and that I return the review sample. This, of course, caused some anxiety as I did not want to go through the break-in process with a component that I use daily. Fortunately, I was able to keep the review unit for a couple of weeks while my new REF racked up hours. It did provide a unique opportunity to compare a fresh unit to one with almost 1,000 hours on the clock, and the difference was staggering. The fresh, out-of-the-carton sample sounded flat and lifeless when compared with the fully broken-in unit, with everything else being the same.

If you aren't enthused about running up 500 hours on your exotic (and expensive) phono cartridge just for break in purposes, I suggest the Hagerman IRIAA. Unlike so-called "cookers," this is a passive device that attenuates the signal from a high-level input and applies an inverse-RIAA curve so that your CD player now presents a signal that mimics what comes from your phono cartridge. Unless you are completely OC, I'd suggest getting one of these handy little devices and let the REF rack up at least a couple

hundred hours before listening, if you can bear it. You can buy one as a kit for \$29 or a fully assembled one for \$49 here: www.hagtech.com/iriaa2.html I can't suggest this device highly enough. Remember: 300 hours equals about 450 albums. Do you have that kind of patience to hear what your REF is really capable of? I know I don't.

Adjustable and Compatible

While I've heard many great phono preamplifiers over the years, ease of adjustability makes or breaks the sale for me because I'm always auditioning phono cartridges. If you are a set it and forget it person, this may not be as big of a deal. I'm guessing that most analog devotees willing to spend a dozen big ones on a phono stage have more than one turntable and a few different cartridges around to listen to mono recordings, perhaps some 78's, early Deccas, or they would just like to have an a cartridge with a completely different tonality at their disposal. With two inputs, each can be configured as high (68db) or low (54db, check both of these) gain, adjustable loading (50, 100, 200, 500, 1,000,

47k and custom) and switchable EQ (RIAA, Columbia and Decca) *all from the remote*. That's as good as it gets. If you have a plethora of cartridges in your collection, the REF Phono 2 is a dream come true. Now you can geek out with ease.

All this talk of multiple turntables brings me to my two minor complaints about the REF Phono 2: the single ground post is a pain and I wish it had three inputs. Honestly, I wish it had four inputs, but I don't expect anyone else to share my madness. Every cartridge I used with the REF sounded so good that I just didn't want to go back to any of the other phono preamps on my rack. Even my modest Rega P25 with Shelter 501 II revealed so much more music through the REF than it ever had before, I just didn't want to take a step backward.

Dynamics, Tone, Texture

The debate on live versus real sound seems to be a hot topic these days, with one faction claiming their HiFi system is more real than real, while the others shake their heads in denial saying that any attempt at reproducing sound in inherently flawed.

I submit that with the right music (especially music that is more sparse than complex) and the right system, it can get scarily close to sounding like the real thing.

Dynamics are a big part of the equation. You need a system that can go from 0-200 in a heartbeat without distortion or overhang. Those who feel that you have an inadequate "audio vocabulary" need not worry; when it's wrong you know it. When a system or component lacks the necessary horsepower to deliver full-spectrum dynamic contrast, your ears and brain object instantly. The REF passes this test with ease, offering up a large dose of weight and grip that is apparent the minute you play your favorite record. I went through some of my favorite classic rock warhorses (Led Zeppelin, The Who, Genesis, etc.) and was instantly taken aback by how much more raw power these discs now possessed.

Classical-music lovers will also appreciate the combination of dynamics and low-end grunt, coming a step or two closer to convincing you that you are there after all... *(continued)*

I must say the REF Phono 2 was a perfect match for my reference system, offering up just that drop of tube warmth that I really enjoy without sacrificing any resolution that a few of the other contenders also possess.

Regardless of what might be on your top 10 list, the REF Phono 2's ability to completely get out of the way of the music and present acoustic instruments in such an incredibly accurate way will astonish you record after record.

In comparing a few other top phono stages from Aesthetix, Boulder and Burmester, they all offer up their own take on musical reproduction, from warm and romantic to analytical. The perfect one for you will be that which best suits your musical taste and achieves the best synergy with your system. I must say the REF Phono 2 was a *perfect* match for my reference system, offering up just that drop of tube warmth that I really enjoy without sacrificing any resolution that a few of the other contenders also possess. If you want a phono stage more on the warm, gooey and romantic side of the tonal scale, consider the IO or the Zanden. Conversely, if you'd like a somewhat more analytical presentation, the

two solid-state options from Boulder might be your cup of tea. Having listened to them all extensively in the past year, the REF 2 Phono was the one that gave me the biggest dose of *everything*. And it has a relatively small tube complement that is easy to source. As the 6H30 really doesn't offer a lot of options for tube rolling, I suggest just calling ARC when you are ready for new tubes, which they claim last about 5,000 hours.

Much like a power amplifier with a massive power supply, the REF Phono 2 has an uncanny ability to keep low-level details intact. I'm sure this was due in part to its incredibly silent background as well as its hybrid design. This is where the all-tube phono stages really fall down; they just can't achieve this kind of silence. Again, classical- and acoustic-music lovers will pick up on this instantly. If your source material is of high enough quality, it adds to the sense of realism, with instruments coming right out at you in space as they would in real life.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the REF 2 Phono, though, is its uncanny ability to delineate texture, again giving the nod to acoustic-music lovers. Granted, it's always nice to hear more electric-guitar growl on your favorite rock record, but the REF 2 Phono always allowed me to hear further into my favorite recordings, electric or acoustic.

Finally, that gigantic soundstage I heard at Joe Harley's house was always present in my system as well. When playing Cream's live recordings from their 2005 Royal Albert Hall performances, my speakers disappeared completely, and thanks to the additional dynamic range of adding a second Burmester 911 mk. 3 power amplifier to my system, I felt that this was as close as I would ever get to having Eric Clapton in my listening room. A good friend who has a multichannel version of this recording said that he doesn't get this much depth on his 5.1 setup! I rest my case.

I'm back and I'm diggin it

The ARC REF Phono 2 has renewed my love for analog, plain and simple. It has all of the qualities that I value in a phono preamp: a stunningly low noise floor, massive dynamics and tonal realism in spades. And it is extremely easy to change gain and loading, making it an excellent tool for evaluating cartridges, as well as being a complete blast to listen to. A great side benefit of having the REF in my system is that the 24/192 digital captures I've been producing have been better than ever, so this phono preamplifier has had a positive impact on the digital side of my system as well.

If you are shopping for a statement phono preamplifier, I can't think of a better choice than the ARC REF Phono. Considering some of the other choices in the \$15,000 - \$25,000 range, it's actually quite a value, which is why we've given it our Product of the Year award in the analog category. I'm truly happy to be this excited about analog again.



The Audio Research REF Phono 2 Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$11,995
(available in silver or black)
www.audioresearch.com

PERIPHERALS

Turntables Spiral Groove SG-2 w/Triplanar VII, Rega P9, TW Acoustic Raven Two w/SME 309

Phono Cartridges Lyra Skala, Clearaudio DaVinci, Grado Statement 1, Dynavector XV-1s, Shelter Harmony and 501II

Preamplifier Burmester 011, McIntosh C500

Power Amplifier Burmester 911 mk. 3, McIntosh MC1.2kw's

Speakers GamuT S-9, YG Acoustics Anat II Studio, MartinLogan CLX w/Gotham subwoofer

Cable Shunyata Aurora Interconnects, Shunyata Stratos SP Speaker Cable, Cardas Clear Interconnects and Speaker Cable

Power Running Springs Dmitri and Maxim power conditioners Running Springs Mongoose and Shunyata Python CX power cords

Accessories Shunyata Dark Field Cable Elevators, Furutech DeMag, Loricraft PRC-3 record cleaning machine, MoFi Record Cleaning Products.

A Visit to Audio Research



My pet peeve with audio sales people and audio reviewers is that they tend to decide for the customer what they can and can't afford. For the most part, writing about HiFi gear or selling it isn't a high-roller job, so it's often easy to fall into the trap thinking the customer doesn't have any more change in their pocket than you do. Hence the idea of putting a five-figure value on a component in a realistic manner is often out of reach.

As their 40th year of doing business comes to a close, part of the price tag on ARC's Reference Series of components is justified by the amount of engineering and manufacturing wherewithal that exists under their 48,000-square-foot roof. As Dave Gordon took me on a comprehensive tour of their facility, he told me that they used to have a 60,000-square-foot facility. After they moved to the current location, the old factory was leased to Best Buy.com for their online data center. "Ironic, isn't it?" Gordon laughs as we go through the engineering and purchasing departments out into the factory proper.



170iTransport

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

The 170iTransport combines the convenience of personal audio with the performance and connectivity of your home audio/video system, delivering bit-perfect digital audio signal via a coaxial S/PDIF output, DVD quality video via component outputs, and built on a sleek stackable cast aluminum chassis.

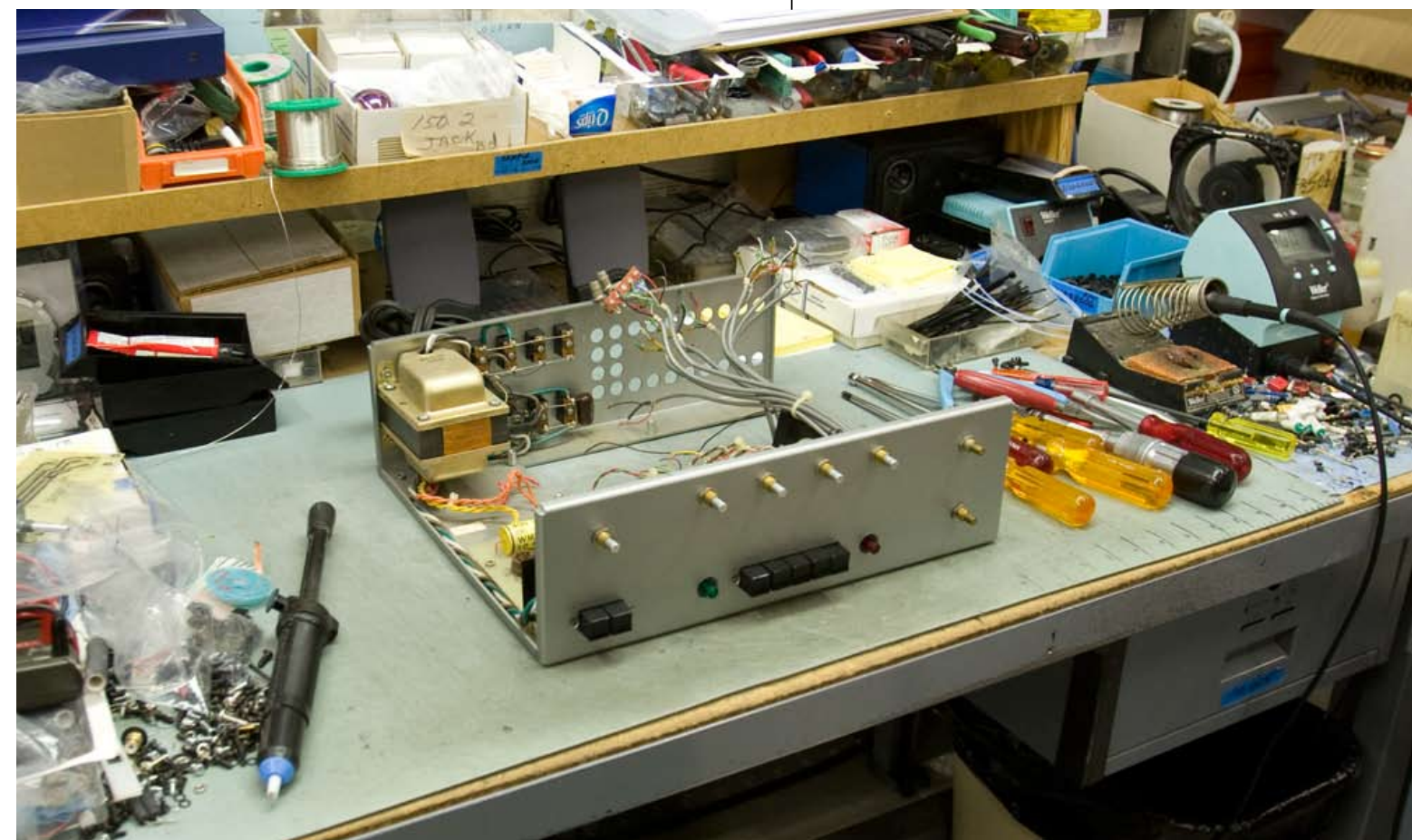
When the iPod docks with 170iTransport, the iPod transforms into an audiophile-grade media server that rivals some of the top performing digital source components available.

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Product of the Year
Award

If you had to describe Audio Research in one word, it would be "precise." Nothing in their assembly process is left to chance. All of their circuit boards are stuffed and soldered by hand, with each board compared with a reference board nearby. From what I could see, they had a reference board for almost every piece of gear they have ever made, except for a couple of really old pieces.

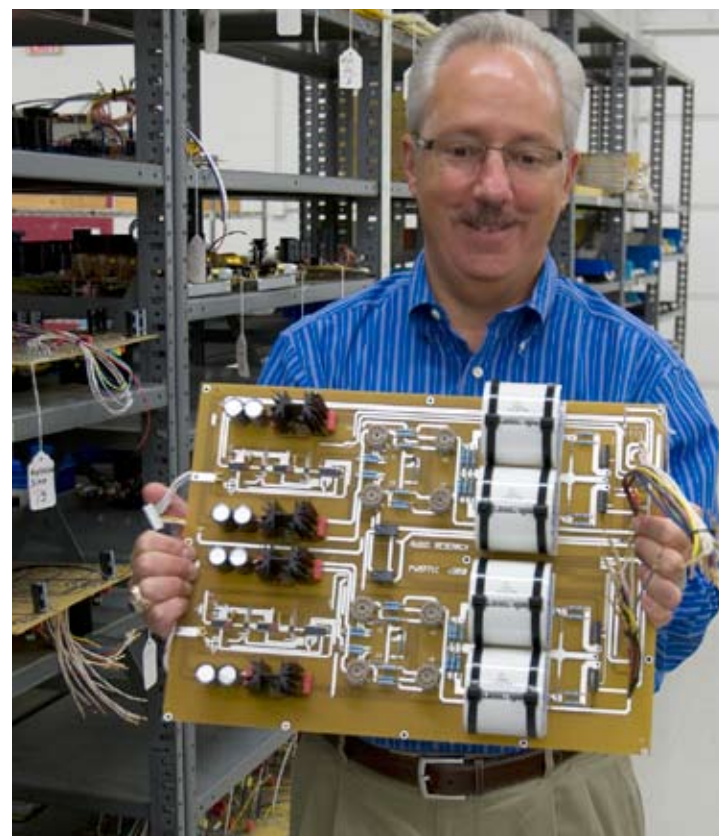
Every final board is tested, populated with tubes that have all been burned in for 50 hours, measured and numbered. As we go through a gigantic holding area where power tubes are being burned in, Gordon says, "This way with everything measured and marked, if you do have a tube failure, you can just tell us the number. We can then ship out a tube with the same measurement so you don't even have to re-bias your amp." We went past piles of transistors, resistors and capacitors that had not passed muster; all of the components on those circuit boards have been hand measured. And when the component is built to the point where all it requires is a front face plate and the signature ARC rack handles, it's tested again.
(continued)



TONE ON TOUR

Then, upon completion, the gear is auditioned in one of the sound rooms before being packaged and placed on the shipping docks. If you have ever owned an ARC product, you know how thorough they are, with each box being inserted into an outer box, protected by a thick inner shell of high-density styrofoam. Again, nothing left to chance.

As we get shooed away from the listening area by Warren Gehl, the man who does the final listening on the ARC gear (something new in the sound room, that he doesn't want the press to see...), we strolled past the area where all of the vintage gear is serviced and updated. I also get to see row upon row of ARC's massive parts inventory, full of electronic parts and sheet metal for all of their past and current products. Again, everything is meticulously numbered and cataloged. When I asked Gordon how they inventory all of these tiny parts, he said, "We do it by the pound, actually..." *(continued)*



Power Cord Measurements!

REVOLUTIONARY **DTCD** ANALYSIS

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

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

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

The measurements represent three critical performance criteria:

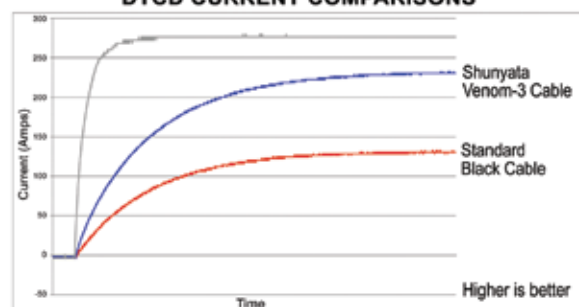
- 1 The quantity of instantaneous current available through a specified power device or circuit. Measured in amperes.
- 2 The amount of voltage drop across the device during the conduction period.
- 3 The stored residual noise component rate of dissipation after the current conduction period (displayed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

DTCD (DYNAMIC TRANSIENT CURRENT DELIVERY) ANALYZER

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

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

DTCD CURRENT COMPARISONS

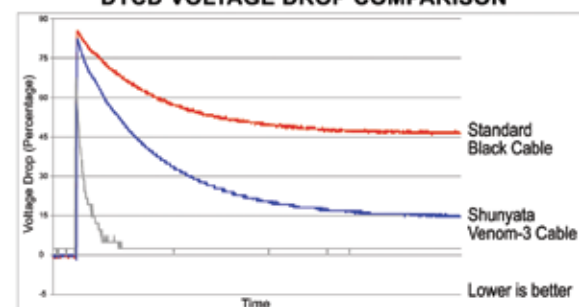


DTCD CURRENT MEASUREMENT:

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

See more measurements and complete info at shunyata.com/Content/dtcd.html

DTCD VOLTAGE DROP COMPARISON



VOLTAGE DROP COMPARISON:

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

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



There was another complete work area dedicated to amplifiers and preamplifiers of different vintages, and some going way back to almost the beginning of the company's history underscoring the philosophy that any ARC component you purchase today, will be supported in the future. This is why ARC components have always had such high resale value, something worth considering as you get ready to write a five figure check.

After lunch, we got to visit the sound room and listen to a full system of REF components, including the REF Phono 2 that was in my studio for this review. Mated to a pair of Wilson speakers, they've assembled a highly resolving yet highly musical reference system, using an Immedia RPM turntable (the precursor to my Spiral Groove SG-2) with a TriPlanar arm and Lyra Skala cartridge. It's almost like being back home!

A skilled workforce and meticulous attention to detail – in essence, precision – is what makes Audio Research components some of the most coveted items in high-end audio today, a reputation well-earned by 40 years of great customer service. ●

A skilled workforce and meticulous attention to detail – in essence, precision – is what makes Audio Research components some of the most coveted items in high-end audio today, a reputation well-earned by 40 years of great customer service.

TONEAudio AWARDS 2010

This year, we've expanded our list slightly because we've reviewed more gear on a full eight-issue schedule than in years past, when we had only six issues. I would like to stress to those of you who have equipment that's not on "the list" to not panic or feel like you've invested your hard-earned money on gear that is somehow less worthy. We won't even review a piece of gear in TONEAudio unless we think it's great. While that always sparks the debate about "negative reviews," we aren't trying to be *Consumer Reports* (which isn't always right on product assessments either, though they claim loftiness by not being tarnished with *advertising*), nor are we trying to stand on top of the audio mountain proclaiming the Holy Grail.

What we are trying to do is share the equipment that we've experienced and feel very positive about, and describe why we feel that way. If we've described a product well enough that you've made the effort to seek it out, then we've done our job. If you actually reach for your checkbook and the product truly serves your needs, then we've hit a home run. We want you to have an audio system that *you* enjoy. That's what perpetuates the audio industry, not reviewers blathering about the trendiest must have thing that ultimately leaves you cold.

Ultimately, the awards are the handful of products that we feel either define the state of the art, in our Product of the Year category, or go above and beyond what we've experienced at a particular price point, in the Exceptional Value category. Publishers Choice Awards are my indulgence. These are products that I think are really damn cool and I don't care what they cost, or how practical/impractical they might be.

So, prepare your arguments and rationalizations, here are our choices for 2010:

UNLIMITED ENJOYMENT. LIMITED PRODUCTION.

The ART amplifier

with its seemingly

unbounded power

reserves places

no limits on your

enjoyment of

recorded music.

But only 250 units

(125 pairs) will be

available to

audiophiles

world-wide.

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MIM

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Corner of Tatum & Mayo Blvds., just south of the 101 in Phoenix

HOURS: Mon., Tue., Wed., Sat. 9 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Thu., Fri. 9 a.m. – 9 p.m. | Sun. 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.

AWARDS

2010 Product of the Year OVERALL

The GamuT S-9 Speakers

\$140,000
www.gamutaudio.com
Review in Issue 32

The GamuT S-9's are expensive, rare and beautiful. Hand built with care in Denmark, these 400-pound speakers are among the world's finest loudspeaker systems at any price. Thanks to three 10.5-inch woofers and a massive, ported enclosure, the S-9 reaches down to 20 hz with ease (-3db point is 17hz), so this is a true full-range speaker.

But the magic is in the details, with every part of the speaker system hand-designed and tuned by GamuT principal Lars Goller. If you have the room and the system to accommodate a pair of these, you will be rewarded with incredibly natural sound.

All talk aside about drivers, crossovers and enclosure technology, the GamuT S-9's deliver the musical goods. This is truly a loudspeaker with no weaknesses.



2010 Product of the Year SPEAKERS

The Verity Audio Finn

\$5,995 - \$7,450 (depending on finish)
www.verityaudio.com
Review in Issue 30

This was a tough call in the sense that we weren't sure whether to give these an Exceptional Value Award or POY, but the Product of the Year award seemed more fitting; even though the Finn's are a tremendous value, they offer so much more.

While it is easier to hand a major award to something like the GamuT S-9 or the dCS Paganini because they are each such a technological tour-de-force, they are out of the reach of most audiophiles. As a good percentage of audiophiles live with a system worth \$10k - \$20k, the Finn represents a level of excellence and balance that is rarely ever achieved at this price point.

Verity Audio is well known for sonic excellence and understated elegance. There is an ample amount of both in the Finn. In a small- to medium-size room, it would be very easy for even the most experienced audiophile to confuse these for one of Verity's larger models, and that is their strength. Easy to place and easy to drive, along with an uncanny level of resolution and musical accuracy, put the Finn at the top of our list.



Purity

Pure sound • Pure design • Pure Swedish

It has always been Primare's mission to develop products of elegant style, simplicity of use, exceptional value and high performance, providing a wholly pleasurable music and movie experience.

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Partial product list:

- Integrated Amplifiers
- Two Channel, Three Channel and Five Channel Amplifiers
- Two Channel Pre-amplifier
- DVD & CD Players
- Home Theater Processor
- Accessories & more

THE SOUND ORGANISATION
MAKES MUSIC

The Sound Organization is the exclusive Primare USA distributor. www.soundorg.com

2010 Product of the Year

AMPLIFICATION

The McIntosh C500 Preamp System

\$11,995 (solid state or tubes)
www.mcintoshlabs.com Review in Issue 34



McIntosh has been in business for 61 years and although they've been well-known worldwide for their vacuum-tube components (highly coveted by collectors globally), their engineering staff continues to develop innovative products that combine their core strengths with functionality that embraces today's music lover. Mac gear has always been famous for offering huge control flexibility, but the C500 takes it a step further, offering you a choice of a solid state or vacuum-tube amplification stage.

In addition to more inputs than you might ever use, now you can custom tune your system's sound to best suit your amplification choice as well as your personal taste. With the C500, you can tube roll to your heart's content with a full compliment of 12AX7 tubes under the hood.

The C500 is a preamp that would prove tough to outgrow, combining almost unlimited input and control flexibility with two phono inputs (MM and MC). And it has a set of big blue meters, too!

RedEye, the **personal** remote.

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

Personal.

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

Simple.

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

Smart.

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



Wi-Fi to Infrared

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



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

redeyereMOTE.com

AWARDS

2010 Product of the Year

ANALOG



The Audio Research REF Phono 2

\$11,995
www.audioresearch.com
Review in Issue 33

As you might guess from our review in this issue, the ARC REF Phono 2 is a spectacular phono preamplifier, offering a level of performance that few others can match at any price. What makes the REF Phono 2 so special is that it offers huge helpings of musicality and tonal richness, which you would expect from a world-class tube preamplifier, yet it also has a level of weight and dynamic slam that you might mistakenly think only a solid-state preamplifier could offer.

With a dramatically reduced tube compliment than the REF Phono 1, this unit uses four 6H30

tubes in the gain stage along with a 6550 and another 6H30 in the power supply, so tube replacement will not break the bank.

But one of the best features in the REF Phono 2 is its ability to change gain, loading and EQ from the comfort of your listening position. And unlike some multi-input phono preamplifiers that make you choose between MM or MC operation, both inputs on the REF can be configured either way; a blessing to the analog aficionado using multiple tonearm and cartridge combinations.

AWARDS

2010 Product of the Year

DIGITAL

The dCS Paganini System

\$17,999 - \$53,499 (varies with configuration)
www.dcsLtd.co.uk
Review in Issue 33



It was tough to knock my Naim CD555 from the top of the digital mountain, but the dCS is spectacular in every way. And unless you have spent a fortune on an analog setup, the Paganini is tough to get close to, especially with high-resolution digital source material.

The full Paganini stack (DAC, Upsampler and Word Clock) offers mind-blowing sound. For the music lover who does not want to abandon physical media (both CD and SACD), it gives you the option of adding a transport as well. It also allows you to build your Paganini system as your needs require and your budget permits.

Versatility is the name of the game with the Paganini, making it the perfect digital front end, with modular hardware and software that is easily field upgradeable and a plethora of inputs. So no source should be left behind. USB, Firewire, SPDIF and dual-channel AES should cover all of the bases. The bank-vault-like construction and use of the massively overbuilt Esoteric transport mechanism fulfills the promise that this can be a destination digital front end. Unless you decide to jump off the cliff for the flagship Scarlatti, that is...



CM-IW2000

The iPad has become the face of the modern home, with Apps for anything and everything. So doesn't it make sense to have a central location to check emails, post notes, update social networks, or even work out what to wear and which route to take to work.

With iPort, the iPad is neatly installed into the wall, fully charged, and always ready to use.

 iPort®



AWARDS

2010 Product of the Year ACCESSORY



The Shunyata Venom 3 Power Cord

\$125

www.shunyataresearch.com

Review In process

Don't be confused by the "in-process" label on this one. I've been having so much fun passing the Venom 3 power cords between staff members that I just haven't put the words to paper yet, but the review will be finished before year's end.

In a world of power cords that can cost more than a house in Detroit, it's refreshing to see Shunyata bring its engineering resources to bear on a product that is not only this good but in the reach of every audiophile. To every cable naysayer out there, I defy you to put your hands on a few of the Venom 3's and not have a smile on your face after about five minutes worth of listening.

At \$125 a pop, you can easily replace all the power cords in your system, and this is the approach that Shunyata designer Caelin Gabriel and I both suggest you take. Swap out all of those black cords with Venom 3's. You'll be happy you did. For the ultimate test, go back to the black cords. Then you'll know that you're really on to something special.



AWARDS

2010 Product of the Year BUDGET-ANALOG



The Rega RP1 Turntable

\$495 (with Ortofon OM-5e cartridge)
www.rega.co.uk

Review: TONEAudio website
www.tonepublications.com/media/RP1-1.jpg

Rega has always been known for providing great value with a minimalist approach, but the new RP1 is a legitimate high-end turntable at a budget price. If you want to tweak your analog setup ad infinitum, this may not be the table for you (although you could easily upgrade the stylus on the Ortofon OM5e cartridge a few levels...). But if you'd like to be playing records *now*, I can't think of a better way to roll.

The RP1 is all about bringing people into the world of vinyl with as little effort as possible. The cartridge and anti-skate come preset from the factory; all you need to do is install the counterweight against the stop of the tonearm to get the optimum tracking force.

The only way you can get a more effortless analog setup is to have someone else do it for you, and how much fun would that be? You will be amazed at how good the RP1 is.

Excellence is a habit... and our new models prove it.

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New ProLogue Premium Series in stock!
Integrated amp with EL34 tubes, remote,
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Mystère all-tube audio

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2010 Product of the Year

BUDGET-DIGITAL

The Furutech GT40 Phono Preamp/ADC

\$495

www.furutech.com

Review: [TONEAudio website](#)

If you are one of the many music lovers who would like to convert all or part of your record collection to digital files for use on your music server or iPod, here's a single box solution.

The GT40 will capture your vinyl in 24bit/96khz resolution, and thanks to a variable output, it can even be used as a preamplifier as the cornerstone of a great budget system. The phono stage works with MM and MC cartridges, and there is even a decent head-phone amplifier on board.

Whether you are a budding audiophile or a die-hard analog lover who would like to dip your toe in the water of digital capture, the GT40 offers great performance at a reasonable price. (And it works incredibly well with the Rega RP1)



2010 Product of the Year

GADGET

Apple iPad

\$499-\$849

(depending on config.)

www.apple.com



Perhaps more than a gadget, Apple's iPad has already revolutionized the way we think about a handheld device, causing many to leave their laptops and Kindles on the shelf collecting dust. Some still long for a camera and direct USB support, there are sure to be improvements in the next generation iPad, which will probably reveal itself after this year's Consumer Electronics Show. Whether you use yours as a gigantic iPod or much more, the iPad is here to stay and once you get your hands on one, you'll find out just how hard it is to live without.



Hear More Music.

Meridian Sooloos' powerful media server system makes any digital music collection a joy to explore. Not only do you have instant access to your entire library with an intuitive touch-screen interface; you'll also rediscover forgotten albums as the system finds music for you based on what you want to hear. Meridian's DSP Active Loudspeakers combine 30 years of high performance digital loudspeaker excellence in a simple, elegant design. Bring them together, and you have an astonishing listening experience.

The Meridian Sooloos Control 10 connects quickly and easily to your Meridian DSP Active Loudspeakers to form a complete digital audio system in a single room – or throughout your entire home.

It's the ultimate music system for simplicity and elegance, power and performance, enjoyment and discovery.

Call 404-344-7111 to arrange for a personal demonstration of Meridian's distributed audio, home theatre and music server systems, or visit www.meridian-audio.com to learn more about Meridian products.

"A complete reinvention of how we relate to music" —ESQUIRE

"Arguably the most intuitive and rewarding piece of audio technology ever conceived" —WHAT HI FI

"The Sooloos system gave us a musical epiphany... it's sheer genius" —STEREOPHILE

"Sooloos' ability to instantly sort through your library and present to you exactly the music you might want to hear at any particular moment borders on the magical..."

—THE ABSOLUTE SOUND

2010 Publisher's Choice

As I mentioned at the beginning of the issue, the Publisher's Choice Awards are some of my favorite products, picked from what we've reviewed this year. While the trend in high end audio has always been to separate components out into their individual functions, so that they can be optimized, three of the five award winners this year do exactly the opposite.

The Burmester 100 Phono preamplifier is a fusion of new and old technology, incorporating a high quality analog to digital converter onto the same chassis with a world class phono stage. The Conrad Johnson ET3 SE merges linestage and phono preamplifier together in a compact chassis and the Naim UnitiQute puts everything but a phono stage all inside a very small box.

The Loricraft PRC 3 only does one thing, but it does it incredibly well, as does the EAR 834P. They both get to the essence of analog.

Publisher's Choice

Burmester 100 Phono Preamp

MSRP: \$16,000 - \$22,000 (depending on configuration)

www.burmester.de

Review in issue 34

Although I'm already a big Burmester fan, I must admit my initial skepticism when Burmester announced that they would be making a full-function phono preamp that was going to retail for about \$20k. But when Dieter Burmester sets out to do something, he does it right, and the 100 is no exception.

The fairly wide range of MSRP on the 100 is because there are a number of ways in which you can have the preamp configured: one phono input or two (MM or MC as well) and you can add an internal 24 bit/192khz analog-to-digital converter to digitize your favorite vinyl for use with whatever music server platform you happen to have on hand.



While I can't say that the fully appointed model 100 with two inputs and ADC is exactly a *bargain*, it certainly is handy and it works flawlessly. Of course, it was easy to integrate into my main system, which already consists of a Burmester amplifier and preamp, but it worked equally well in system two featuring McIntosh gear and system three featuring CJ gear.

Taking the ADC out of the equation for a second, the phono preamp is right on par with its peers that are comparably priced, and it certainly possesses a tonality that will have you removing the top plate as you'd swear that there are a couple of valves under the hood. But there are none.

Fully balanced, the 100 also features unbalanced RCA outputs, but you will need to use the supplied Burmester adaptors to use an RCA input from your turntables.

If possible, I highly suggest having your tonearm cables rewired to balanced configuration because like a pair of headphones, a phono cartridge is a fully balanced device. Going fully balanced will yield every bit of performance that the 100 is capable of delivering and it's worth the small charge to have your cables re-terminated.

The sound is pure Burmester, large, dynamic and delicate at the same time. If you order yours strictly as a phono preamp, you will not be disappointed. But should you choose to take advantage of the ADC, the resulting digital captures are sublime and with a minimum of fuss, being that everything is on one chassis. The Burmester 100 is the perfect match of these two worlds.



dmitri

The new RSA Dmitri is the ultimate evolution of our work in power line conditioning technology. Utilizing our new RSA platinum series capacitors and proprietary inductors, the Dmitri takes power line conditioning to the next level and beyond.

- All components are designed and manufactured in our ISO 9001:2000 approved facility in Anaheim, California – USA
- Tolerances on capacitors and inductors meet or exceed 1%
- 100% passive, non-current limiting topography
- New carbon fiber resonance vibration control
- Significantly lower noise floor and improved dynamics

With meticulous attention to detail, coupled with raw science, the Dmitri allows your components the opportunity to deliver all of the performance that your system has to offer.



The Dmitri can be ordered as a stand alone unit, (without 20A power cord), with our world famous Mongoose power cord or with our new flagship PC, the HZ Crown Jewel, for ultimate performance. Stop by your Running Springs Audio dealer and audition the future of power line conditioning.



"...my new reference in AC conditioners."

- Robert Harley,
The Absolute Sound,
Issue 193



Product of the Year
Award

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

- Jeff Dorgay,
TONEAudio
Magazine,
Issue 18



running springs audio

AWARDS

2010 Publisher's Choice



The Loricraft PRC 3 Record Cleaning System

MSRP: \$2,235

www.audiofederation.com

Review in issue 32

The more-common record cleaners from a number of manufacturers (VPI, Nitty Gritty, Clearaudio, etc.), which feature a slot with a vacuum attachment, will do an acceptable job of getting your records clean. But if you are a true vinyl maniac, stepping up to a Loricraft will bring you even closer to dead-quiet backgrounds when playing your favorite records.

It's more expensive than a Nitty Gritty or VPI, but the Loricraft is nowhere near the price of the Keith Monks machines. I had the opportunity to use their recent Ruby and can vouch for the effectiveness of the Loricraft; it does just as good a job at one third the price. Using a similar tonearm system with a cord that keeps the vacuum nozzle ever so slightly lifted from the surface of the record, the PRC 3 will lift you to a new level of cleanliness.

CLEANPOWER PURESOUND

Power Line Conditioners Hand Made in California . Tel: 714.765.8246 . www.runningspringsaudio.com

AWARDS

2010
Publisher's Choice



Conrad Johnson ET3 SE

MSRP: \$5,500 (with phono) \$4,000 (linestage only)

www.conradjohnson.com

Review in process

Back in the '70s, when the compact disc was still on the drawing board, most preamplifiers came with a phono stage already on board. Today, the vinyl resurgence has brought an abundance of outboard phono stages, but the idea of having it all on one chassis is very appealing.

Conrad Johnson returns to its roots with the ET3SE, featuring what is essentially the TEA2 SE built onto the same chassis as the ET3 linestage. The SE designation means that all of the critical capacitors in the signal path have been upgraded to the company's CJD Teflon capacitors. The result is stunning.

Based heavily on the design of their flagship GAT preamplifier, the hybrid ET3 uses only a single 6922 tube, so tube-rolling fanatics can invest in one or two of their favorite unobtainium tubes and not have to break the bank. For the less o/c in the audience, it sounds pretty darn good even with the stock tube. Those Teflon caps under the hood will require some break-in time, but once you get over that hill, prepare for a treat.

Power

Emotion

Soul



Introducing 30th Anniversary editions of the MOON 750D DAC and MOON 600i Integrated Amplifier. Featuring performance that pushes the envelope even further and an astounding 30 year warranty ... Available for a limited time.

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30 Years of
Excellence

Frugalicious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

For more information, call 972.234.0182, or email steve@soundorg.com



rega

THE SOUND ORGANISATION
MAKES MUSIC

The Sound Organization is the exclusive Rega USA distributor. www.soundorg.com

AWARDS

2010 Publisher's Choice



Naim UnitiQute

MSRP: \$1,995
www.naimaudio.com
Review in issue 29

There is no cooler compact HiFi component than Naim's UnitiQute. It features a 30-watt-per-channel amplifier that has a slightly warmer sound than the larger Uniti that won our Product of the Year Overall last year.

Though the Qute lacks its larger siblings CD drive, most of you won't miss it. Those using their iPod as a high-quality source can tap right into the digital bitstream with lossless and uncompressed files. But the fun doesn't stop there; you can configure a UnitiQute in more ways than a Volkswagen Thing. There are four digital inputs on the back (two SPDIF and two Toslink), a USB port on the front and an analog input, in case you still have a turntable. The Naim Stageline phono preamp is an excellent choice that holds the line on the "smaller is better" theme.

You can also listen to FM radio, and there is a CAT 5 jack to connect to your network as well as a built-in wireless internet antenna, should that be your network preference. So you can stream internet radio as well as access your iTunes network.

If you become a true Naim fanatic and decide to expand your system further (and many do...), there is a pair of preamplifier outputs that will allow you multiple options to add more amplification or a powered subwoofer. There's even a SPDIF digital output to use the Qute as a digital preamp/controller and feed it to an outboard DAC. Again, the new Naim DAC makes an excellent choice should you decide to take things this far.

But perhaps the best news is that the Qute is just fine all on its own. Add a pair of your favorite speakers and just enjoy.

AWARDS

2010 Publisher's Choice



The EAR 834P Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$1,595
www.ear-usa.com
Review in issue 30

With vinyl showing no signs of slowing down whatsoever, it seems as if a new solid-state phono preamplifier with a wall-wart power supply comes on the market every time you turn around. The EAR 834P has been around for years, and it's every bit as exciting as when it was first introduced. Housed in a small black box, with MM and MC (via a step-up transformer) inputs, the EAR uses three 12AX7 tubes, so you can knock yourself out fine-tuning your system. We found that this one definitely benefited the most from replacing the first tube, with a significant reduction in the noise floor and more midrange bloom, if that is what you desire.

A great match with every phono cartridge we tried with it, this small but mighty phono preamplifier will make a big difference in your analog front end. While the 834P's overall tonal balance is slightly more lush than neutral, this will be a good thing for most listeners. If you'd like a healthy dose of analog magic, the EAR 834P does a better job than any of the similarly priced competition.

Performance Inside. Beautiful Outside.

The design staff at Virtue Audio puts equal value on performance and aesthetics in order to create a new line of compact components that redefine affordable audio. Critics and customers are raving about our new Sensation M451 amplifier and Piano M1 CD player.

Plus, you can customize Virtue gear, inside and out, to suit your particular needs and decor. Visit our Web site to explore the possibilities!



Welcome to The Family!

Both a newborn and a proven Olympic athlete:

USB Audio joins reel-to-reel tape, the LP and DSD as having legitimate claim to being the quality end of the audio frontier.



Once upon a time, the shift to dot-matrix printers meant new-found versatility, but lousy looking type, then came laser and inkjet. Once upon a time, the shift to digital music files meant new-found opportunities, but ...

Now the digital sun has come out. Possibly the best quality consumer audio ever available, on planet Earth anyway, has finally appeared in the form of 24/96 and 24/192 audio files, transferred through USB to a new generation of superb DAC's (Digital Audio Converters), whether built into today's best receivers and amps, or stand alone components.

To ensure that your favorite music is transferred with minimal corruption (jitter), AudioQuest offers 5 models of USB cable, featuring better metals, better geometry, Dielectric-Bias System, Noise-Dissipation System ... all of AudioQuest's expertise and proven techniques for delivering superior digital audio, whether through coax (RCA or BNC plug), balanced cable (XLR plug), HDMI, 1394 (FireWire®), Ethernet (RJ45), Toslink ... and now USB.

Whether you're playing 128K files, or lossless 44.1 (CD quality), or 24/96 ... it's a bright and wonderful day in the audio world!



2010 Exceptional Value

can't believe another year has gone by already! The Rocky Mountain Audio Fest is anniversary time for us, and in addition to seeing all the great gear, it means that the awards are here again. The Exceptional Value Awards are the only ones we mention throughout the course of the year as we review the components that we feel are worthy of this award, so this part of our awards issue is not draped in secrecy.

Somewhat in keeping with the wacky economy this year, 10 of our 12 finalists have price tags under \$2,500, as we sharpened the pencil as much as we could to find the things that we really felt represented the absolute best values. Ten of the 12 choices are from companies that have been around for quite some time, so it's great to see legacy companies not ignoring the new recruits. Of the other two, Hegel has been in business for awhile but new to the U.S. market and Virtue Audio is the new kid on the block. Here's to hoping at least one of these happen to be something you are looking for!

2010 Exceptional Value



Naim Stageline Phono Preamplifier

MSRP: \$499
www.naimaudio.com
Reviewed in Issue 27

You might think of the Naim Stageline as the little phono stage that can. Housed in such a tiny box, it doesn't even have room for the traditional lime-green Naim logo on the front panel, just a small lime-green LED. But this is a hell of a small phono preamplifier. There is no power supply in the box, either, so you are paying for *circuitry*, and that's what makes the Stageline such a great deal. Easily powered from the Uniti or a number of other Naim preamplifiers and integrated amplifiers, an outboard supply can also be used, though it starts to diminish the budget aspect of the Stageline.

While the Stageline can be powered with everything up to the mighty SuperCap, I had phenomenal results with a Naim i-Supply that I just happened to have around. There are four different versions, all with different gain and loading, so you must check with your Naim dealer to see if the Stageline will be compatible with your cartridge. If it is, you will be in for a major treat indeed.

Decware Zen Amplifier

MSRP: \$775
www.decware.com
Reviewed in Issue 29

Two watts per channel never sounded this good. Truly old school in appearance, the Zen wears its triodes on top of the chassis just as tube amplifiers from the '50s and '60s did. Its tiny white chassis has a power switch and a volume control level and two inputs. That's it.

As soon as this amplifier warms up, you will be astonished by just how musical two watts can sound when this much care is paid to the construction. Decware owner Steve Deckert is so confident of the Zen's quality that the amplifier carries a lifetime warranty to the original owner. If you own a pair of super-efficient speakers such as the new offerings from Zu or perhaps a pair of JBL Everests, this could be all the amplifier you will ever need. In the day of four-figure power cords, it's refreshing to see this much quality with such a reasonable price tag.



2010 Exceptional Value



Manley Jumbo Shrimp Preamplifier

MSRP: \$2,300

www.manleylabs.com

Reviewed in Issue 28

Reviewer Todd Sageser is a recording engineer by day, and he's always had a keen ear for what sounds musical. He felt that the Jumbo Shrimp "helped to redefine his system." The Jumbo Shrimp replaces the older Shrimp preamplifier and adds a remote control and some minor circuit improvements. It is a line-stage-only preamplifier, but it offers up a huge helping of the Manley sound: just a bit old school and romantic, yet very dynamic. In essence, highly musical and rich in tone.

Built with pride in Chino, California (not China, as it says on the box) the Jumbo Shrimp is big and beefy with the thick blue anodized faceplate for which Manley gear is famous. Easy to use with plenty of control flexibility, the Shrimp offers a lot of performance for the price. And now that it has a remote control, a truly modern classic.

Magnepan 1.7 Speakers

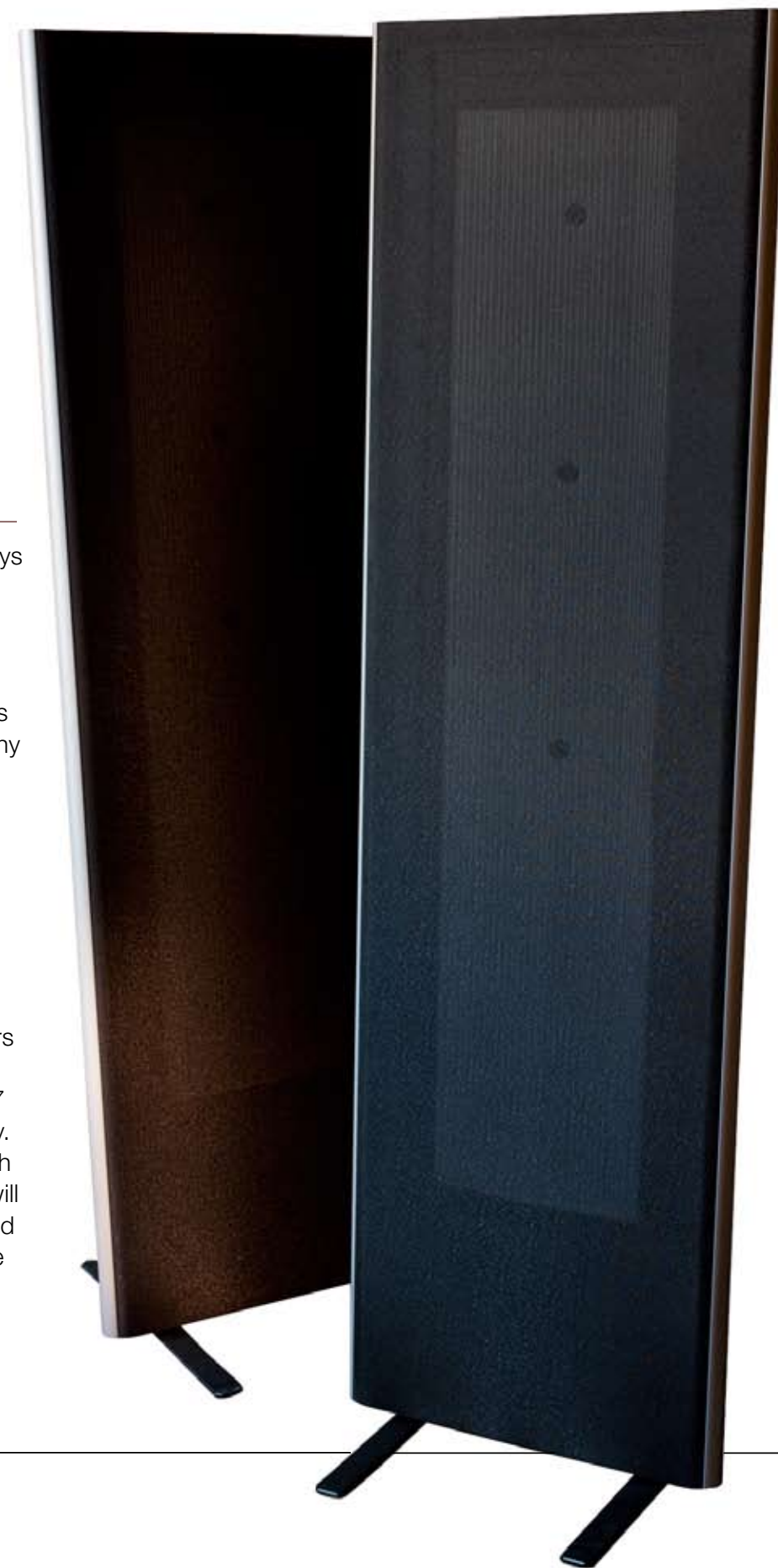
MSRP: \$1,999 per pair

www.magneplanar.com

Reviewed in Issue 30

The mid-size Magnepan speakers have always represented tremendous value. Last year, we also gave our exceptional value award to the 1.6 that was the previous model, not knowing that Magnepan had something new up its sleeve. After all, this is not a company that caves into the fad of introducing a new model just for a new model's sake. (The 1.6 was around for about 15 years.)

Now a full quasi-ribbon design, with both woofer and tweeter made of the same materials, the 1.7 has a level of coherence not present in the previous model. Magnepan speakers have always been known for their open, "non-boxy" sound, and the 1.7 takes this to another level completely. If you have enough room and enough amplifier power, the Magnepan 1.7 will give you a healthier dose of "high-end sound" than anything else in its price class.



AWARDS

2010 Exceptional Value

MartinLogan Motion 4 Speakers

MSRP: \$249.95 each
www.martinlogan.com
Reviewed online

Even though MartinLogan is well known for its curved panel, electro-static loudspeakers, they have always been a very fashion-forward company. Using their "folded motion tweeter" that is highly reminiscent of the Heil Air Motion transformer from the '70s, the Motion 4 offers up the transparency that ESL owners are used to, in a compact yet purposeful package.

The four-inch woofer provides a fair amount of bass, which can be maximized by corner placement, and the Motion 4's 90dB sensitivity makes them compatible with even modestly priced amplification. For best results, combining these tiny speakers with one of the MartinLogan powered (or new wireless) subwoofers can be the cornerstone of an outstanding 2.1, 5.1 or 7.1 system at a very reasonable price indeed.



"The best CD playback under \$5k... for \$1799!"

Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07



azur



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

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

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

Robert Harley - The Absolute Sound - 09/07



Your music + our passion

www.cambridgeaudio.com

2010 Exceptional Value

Shunyata Hydra 2 Power Conditioner

MSRP: \$399

www.shunyatalabs.com

Reviewed online

There is a plethora of power-line conditioning products available today, but precious few of them actually work. Go ahead, say that 10 times as fast as you can. But seriously, the Hydra is just what the doctor ordered if you have a smaller system and want to dip your foot in the water of cleaner power.

The Hydra 2 is compact and with two outlets, it's great for a small tube system (it works wonders on SET amplifiers) or your favorite flat-screen TV. We even had excellent results in our photo studio, getting cleaner color from our Apple Cinema Displays as well as less noise in the scans made on our flatbed scanner. This is definitely a handy device that we highly recommend.



Prima Luna ProLogue 1 Integrated Amplifier

MSRP: \$1,279

www.upscaleaudio.com

Reviewed in Issue 31

PrimaLuna has become a household name in the past seven years and they've done it the right way by building high-quality products that also offer high value. Kevin Deal and his partner, Herman Van Dungen, have brought legitimacy to the words "Made in China" when uttered in the same sentence as high-end audio; they've kept their standards high and field failure almost nonexistent with the PrimaLuna brand. Today, the line has expanded quite a bit, but this was the amplifier that started it all. Staffers, family and friends have all bought them, and they are all digging the tube sound.

The ProLogue One uses a pair of EL34 tubes per channel, but thanks to Prima Luna's patented Adaptive Auto-Bias™, you can use a handful of other compatible tubes without issue; 6550, KT88 and 6L6's will work equally well. Another benefit of the auto-bias circuitry is that the care and feeding of vacuum tubes is a thing of the past. Power it up and go.

With 35 honest-to-goodness tube watts per channel, the ProLogue One will drive all but the most inefficient speakers to rocking levels. With a sound somewhere between that of vintage and modern tube gear, this amp oozes musicality.



2010 Exceptional Value

Clearaudio Concept Turntable

MSRP: \$1,400 (cartridge not included)

www.clearaudio.de

Review: TONEAudio website

Though there are quite a few great choices in this highly competitive price range, the Clearaudio Concept redefines what is possible for \$1,400, revealing more music than we've yet experienced at this price point. With your eyes closed and a great cartridge, you could be fooled into thinking this table costs quite a bit more.

The Concept is exquisitely built and incredibly versatile, with 33.3, 45 and 78 rpm speeds easily set with a control knob right on the plinth. Set up is straightforward, and even an analog novice should be able to be

spinning records in no time. And the sound is clean, powerful and big, with a substantial amount of analog magic, especially if you've spent a few extra bucks on a good cartridge. Many audiophiles may never feel the need to go beyond the Concept.

If you'd like to order your table completely "set and forget," your dealer can send it with the Concept MM cartridge for only \$100 extra or the Concept MC cartridge for an additional \$800 pre-installed. All you need to do is attach the counterweight and roll.



Hegel H100 Amplifier and CDP2A CD Player

MSRP: \$3,000 (H100) \$2,695 (CDP2A)

www.hegel.com

Reviewed in Issue 29

New to the U.S. market, Hegel has been building gear in Norway for quite awhile. The gear is well-built and understated in terms of aesthetic design – the perfect thing for the music lover who wants a high-performance system that will integrate into a design-conscious environment.

The H100 amplifier shares Hegel's patented "Sound Engine Module" technology and their own, latest-generation FET output devices that produce a level of sound quality rarely found in an integrated amplifier at this price. It also produces 120 watts per channel into an 8-ohm load (doubling into 4 ohms), which is class leading. To make the H100 an even bigger part of your music system, it features an on-board

USB sound card, which although limited to 16bit/48khz will still prove an excellent means for those using computers for music storage to merge it into their systems without buying additional hardware.

The CDP2A follows the design ethos of the amplifier, utilizing a 24bit/192khz upsampling architecture and fully balanced outputs, along with an SPDIF digital output for those wanting to use it as a transport. Even with naysayers predicting the end of physical media, if you have even a modest collection of shiny discs, you will find that the CDP2A/H100 makes for a formidable combination of performance and elegance.



AWARDS

2010 Exceptional Value



Virtue Audio Piano M1 CD Player

MSRP: \$699

www.virtueaudio.com

Reviewed in Issue 32

The folks at Virtue Audio may be the new kids on the block, but they have made a stunning first effort with their Piano M1 CD player. Utilizing a 176.4khz/24 bit upsampling architecture, this player proved to be smooth and relatively free of digital artifacts, sounding much better than its modest price tag would suggest.

Virtue keeps the cost down by going factory direct to you and keeping a tight rein on costs. Great sound aside, one of the most exciting features of all the Virtue Audio gear is that you can customize the casework to fit your decor. Company principle Seth Krinsky really understands the need for high-performance gear that looks as good as it sounds. Keep an eye on these guys; they are on the right path.

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- sim 2
- simaudio moon
- sonos
- soundsmith
- spiral groove
- vpi

2010 Exceptional Value



Simaudio Moon 750 CD player/DAC

MSRP: \$11,995

www.simaudio.com

Reviewed in Issue 31

We've saved the most expensive piece for last. Even though Simaudio's 750 carries a five-figure price tag, it offers such a large helping of cost-no-object CD player sound at this price, we feel it is a tremendous bargain. Saying that it is robustly built is an understatement, yet the 750 also has a serious upgrade path. With a power socket on the rear panel for an upcoming "external power supply," the 750 has the promise of even more performance sometime early in 2011. Rest assured, we will have the scoop on the power supply as soon as it is available.

For those of you who would like to purchase "the last CD player" while keeping your options open for a computer or music server in your future, the Moon 750 should be at the top of your list.

Marantz PM-KI Pearl Integrated Amplifier

MSRP: \$3,499

www.marantz.com

Reviewed in Issue 27

So far, both pieces of the Marantz Pearl series have been award winners here at *TONEAudio*. The PM-KI amplifier matches the black aesthetic of the Pearl SACD player and features similar functionality and remote controls. The brainchild of chief Marantz designer Ken Ishiwata, the PM-KI has had its complete signal path optimized for improved results. In addition to having 90 watts per channel on tap, this amplifier features defeatable bass and treble controls as well as an onboard MM/MC phono stage, which we found to be an excellent performer.

No detail has been spared on the PM-KI, all the way down to the copper chassis – just like the top-of-the-line Marantz Reference series – the round, blue readout paying homage to the early Marantz tube amplifiers and the excellent headphone amplifier built in.

Those lucky enough to buy the matching set will have rare jewels indeed, as production has been limited to 500 units worldwide. Our last contact with Marantz North America revealed that there are only a few of these left on dealers' shelves.





YG ACOUSTICS
HIGH-TECH HIGH-END LOUDSPEAKERS

**A new model from the
manufacturers of
The best loudspeaker
on Earth**

Introducing **CARMEL**

The new Carmel redefines value in ultra-high-end audio by incorporating a fully-CNC-machined, all aircraft-grade aluminum enclosure in a breakthrough price category. In times where prices of all-aluminum speakers are a hot topic, YG Acoustics makes it all seem like "yesterday's news" by offering superior technology at unprecedented prices. YG Acoustics has been producing fully machined all-aluminum speakers for eight years. The introduction of Carmel brings this manufacturing expertise to a broader audience.



Designed by Yoav Geva (Gonczarowski)

YG Acoustics LLC
4941 Allison St. #10, Arvada, CO 80002, U.S.A. Tel. 801-726-3887
E-mail: info@yg-acoustics.com Web: www.yg-acoustics.com

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.