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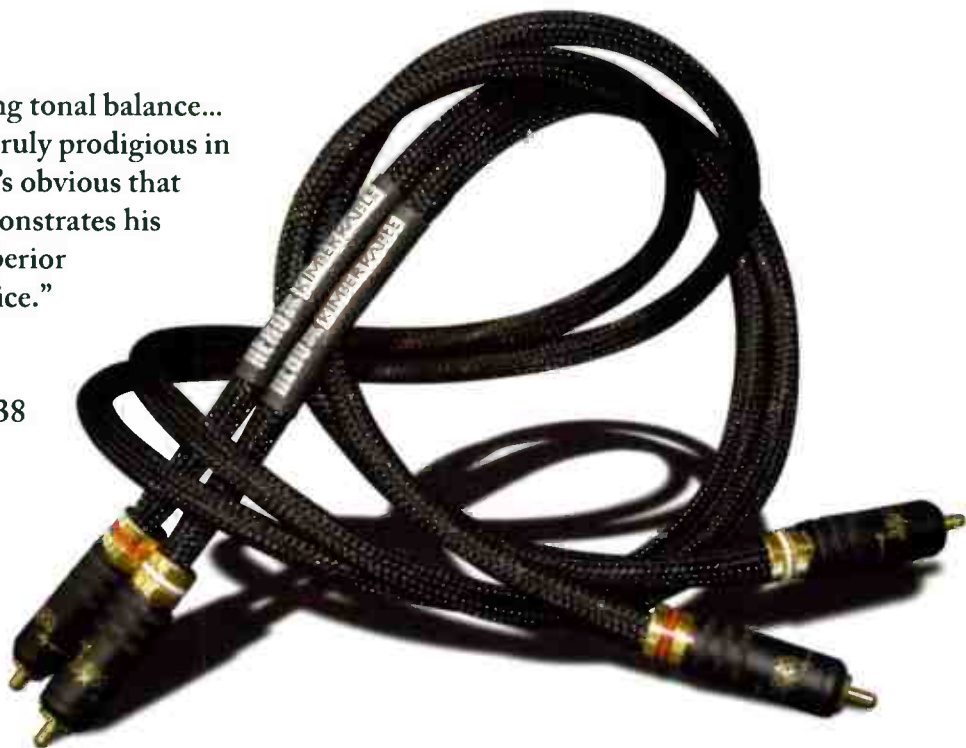
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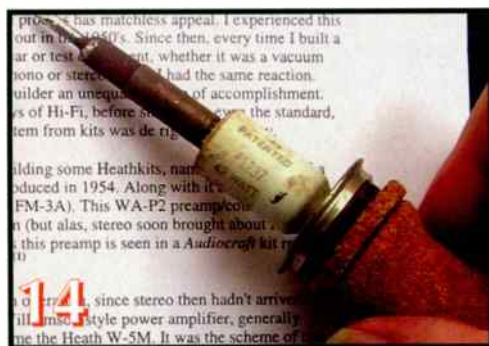
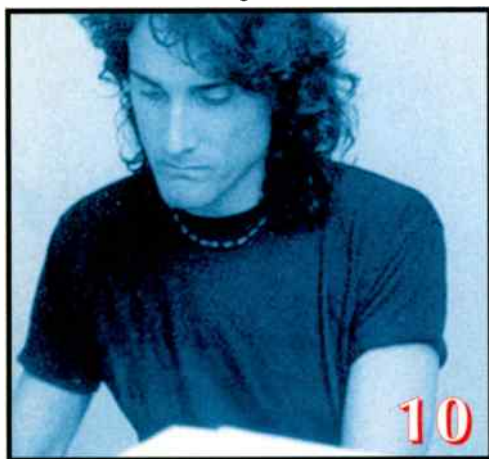
C

O N T E N T S

VOLUME X, ISSUE IV

COLUMNS

- 4 Subscription Information
- 6 New Products
- 8 Obscura: David Nemzer
- 53 Classified Ads
- 55 Ad Index
- 56 Back Page - Humor



What's Up, David Chesky? 10

Larry Jaffee

Dedicated to Perfection

Those Long Lost Hi-Fi Kits 14

Walt Jung

Remember Heath? Dynaco? Eico?

Richter Beethoven Remasters 20

Benjamin Ivry

Refreshing Sounds from JVC

RECORDINGS

Mark Knopfler: *Shangri-La* 23
Jon Tiven

Jimmy D. Lane with
Double Trouble: *It's Time* 24
Don Wilcock

The Mike Kaplan Nonet:
How's That? 25
Jack Skowron

Nellie McKay:
Get Away From Me 26
Michael Tearson

Jethro Tull: *The Jethro Tull
Christmas Album* 28

The Blind Boys of
Alabama: *Go Tell It On The
Mountain*
Michael Tearson

Jamie Cullum: *twenty-
something* 30

Katie Melua: *Call Off The
Search*
Michael Tearson

Tift Merritt:
Triple Tambourine 32
Michael Tearson

The Persuasions: *The
Persuasions Sing The
Beatles* 33

Mike Driscoll

Sam Phillips:
A Boot and A Show 34

Michael Tearson

EQUIPMENT

McIntosh MA2275
Integrated Amplifier 35

Joel Shumer

Bowers & Wilkins 705
Loudspeaker 39

Dan Pond

Dynavector DV-10X5
Moving-Coil Phono
Cartridge 42

Christopher Noblet

Marantz SR9300 Home
Theater Receiver 46

Ron Nagle

Russound ST2 Dual
AM/FM Smart Tuner 50

Don Scott

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David Nemzer

IT STARTED to go down hill for me about four or five years ago. I started to take over running The Audiophile Society and all its activities. Even for someone who loves audio, this is a difficult and trying job. The Society is noted for giving its membership the most active meeting schedule in the New York City Metro area. In fact, we are so successful that our meetings pull members from upstate New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania! We have presentations from manufacturers of the first rank in this industry and to try to maintain this over the years is very time consuming.

So I became quite lax in writing articles for *The Audiophile Voice*. As time went on, the editor lost some of his patience (but not his pleasant attitude about it) and I began to slink around the corners of the room when he showed up for a meeting.

Things started to turn around four years ago when I got a chance to listen to one of the great low-cost (make that very low cost) "pocket systems," the JVC 7000 micro system. Within its limitations, something most audio nuts ignore, this is a great unit for a small room or bedroom; excellent staging, wonderful vocals, and surprising upper bass (if the ported wooden-box speakers are placed close to the back wall). A real deal that now you can get for as little as \$150 as a closeout or used on the net. Anyway, I told TAV's editor how excited I was about this unit, and agreed to write about it. I was all charged up and ready to go, but then I get hospitalized with Lyme Disease and full-facial Bell's Palsy! With a totally dead face, I am incapable of any expression of any kind for almost two years.

Now, what the heck does this have to do with audio and reviewing? Plenty, because if you can't smile in response to what you hear or turn your nose up in disapproval at what you hear, then you quickly can't enjoy music. I hardly listened until I could "feel" again. When that "sensor" part of me got going again, I asked TAV's editor about buying a phono cartridge. Well, the editor is very greedy for manuscripts, and he immediately turned around and asked if I'd review the cartridge (which brand and model doesn't matter). This created a huge problem for me and something I feel obligated to share with the readers.

I am an emotional listener and truly don't have the interest to listen with a critical ear that a reviewer should have. I know what is correct and when something is wrong with a system. For me, the greatest measure of a good system is being able to correctly recreate the human voice and give a good representation of the physical size of that performer. I can't get excited about those finite things reviewers claim to hear.

You sense a little doubt in my statement? If so, this is why. I have over the years, right up to current times, spent many hours and days in the listening rooms of a good number of published reviewers, magazine owners, magazine editors, and manufacturers of really Class-A stuff. What are my conclusions? I believe that most of these guys can, with pretty good accuracy, describe the faults and the good points of what they are reviewing; they can hear the difference.

But with few exceptions, their reference systems or the "way" they listen scares me to death. On the whole, the system is either **WAY** too loud or has **WAY** too much bass. And mostly, there's no soundstage nor any depth! Vocalists on these reference systems have lips the size of blimps!

One person in this class likes his soundstage to resemble a concert where the listener is 400 feet from the orchestra. Another reviewer's system is as bad as his narrow and terrible music software collection; horrible on both counts.

And published reviews! I honestly can only think of one of the above people who comes close to what a system should sound like. As for the rest of them... Well, they think things are just fine! I am really confident of these statements. I have a firm rule when going to these people's rooms; I bring no music, I make no requests for volume, and I let them play whatever they want in whatever fashion they choose, and because they might never talk to me again, I never criticize what I hear or if I do, then I am never totally honest.

Who are they? I'll never tell and the editor has never asked me to tell him if some of them are his. But I'm really distressed by the "reference" point of all of them. (And believe me, all have first-rank systems.) It could freeze my face again.

Now, before you blast me for thinking that my set is the greatest and totally correct, forget it. In spite of costing really stupid money, I'm confident that people could find fault with my system. It could be too big, (104 drivers), have too many tubes (1300 watts), be too old. (Except for my new items for playing vinyl, nothing is newer than 10 years old and my speakers approaching 15 years of age. My cables are so cheap that you'd call me crazy for using them. As always, I'm an open house for anyone's ears.

Over-confidant? No, I'm just someone who chooses to be an emotional listener rather than a technical listener.

Any response from anyone out there? You can e-mail me at dnemzer@earthlink.net but copy the editor at audiophilevoice@comcast.net and you, too, may get published.

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Chesky Records Dedicated To Perfection



Larry Jaffee

IF THERE'S SUCH THING as a contemporary Renaissance Man, David Chesky certainly fits the bill. A composer, arranger, producer, conductor and pianist who is equally adept and fluent in the classical and jazz worlds, he has worked professionally as a musician since the mid-1970s.

Soon thereafter, he convinced his brother Norman, who had more of a business inclination to David's creative genius, the duo could make a go of their own label that would be dedicated to the highest standards of capturing and reproducing music.

Eighteen years into striking out on their own, New York-based Chesky Records (www.chesky.com) has amassed a deep catalog of recordings by jazz legends including Peggy Lee, Herbie Mann, Joe Henderson and

McCoy Tyner, as well as adult contemporary artists Livingston Taylor, Kenny Rankin, Rebecca Pidgeon, Sara K., John Pizzarelli, and Christy Baron. In addition, there's a large selection of Latin and classical selections on CD, Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio. Indeed, Chesky has been a pioneer in the latter two emerging formats.

Chesky Records was the first company to use 128x over-sampling to achieve previously unheard levels of fidelity, while utilizing the finest analog-to-digital converters to attain what came to be known as High Resolution Recordings.

I interviewed David Chesky in May 2004 at the label's Manhattan offices, and he talked about the company's goal of providing the purest and most natural

recordings made today, no multitracking, no overdubs, no compressors in the signal path and no large mixing consoles.

Back when he was a Columbia classical artist, Chesky realized that he might be better off on his own than on a major label. "It was simple, I got fired. So I had to figure out something. I went on to become a studio arranger and conductor. And I learned a lot. I'd be conducting an orchestra, and I'd see microphones all over. On the conductor's podium, it would sound great, and then when you got into the studio, it was multi-mike; you'd have to mix and put it together. I said to myself, 'It would be cool one day to start a label from the perspective of the conductor.' And that's what I did. The band mixes itself. We don't mix the bands."

Chesky notes that for the major labels, "everything is driven by the numbers. Here, we do things and say, 'Let's have fun; let's be creative.'"

"There are two ways of doing things. There's going into a studio and creating a record through a board, which is fine but it creates an artificial environment. The other way to do it is as if I'm a black and white photographer. I'm not airbrushing it. I want to capture everything through a transparent window. That's what we do. It's about resolution. I want to see everything. We tend to airbrush everything today. [Chesky Records] is not about that. It's about reality. Capturing a moment in time.

"Music is an abstraction. If you're driving down the street in your car, and grooving on a song you like, that's all that matters. But remember, recording is an art. First, you had wind-up cylinder record players, then we had LPs in mono, then we went to stereo. So the idea of the recording art has to advance as well. My business is taking the art of recording and making it state of the art. That's what we do, we're cutting edge.

"I'm talking to you right now, but a good percentage of my voice is bouncing around. We live in a three-dimensional world, and that is the way we want to do music. So we use something called 'B' format music where we can record 360 degrees, up, down and every which way and recreate physical space from the point of the listener. The microphone is where the listener is, and we can create a hologram. I'm not even into the word 'surround.' Surround is basically forward speakers and rear speakers. That's all it is. I think in a sound field, you want to be three dimensional. That's what life is, and that's what we want to do. You take some pop recordings and remix in 5.1, and it's still multi-mono; it's a gimmick. The thing is how to record an acoustic event, and recreate the acoustic space 360 degrees? We have the capability to do that now with 'B' format recording. When you hear a stellar recording of a concert, you have the band over there, and the audience is applauding in the same space as the band. When you hear our SACD and DVD-Audio reproduction, our sound field recording, the band is in front of you, the audience is around you on the side. The whole thing is correct. Stereo is wrong. At the end of the day, surround is really approaching absolute sound. It's reality. At home, I like listening through headphones. That's great. Some people like to take a Walkman to the beach. That's cool; I'm not going to tell you how to listen. But state of the art in my studio, we have the facilities to create a 360-degree sound space. We can decipher high channels as well, which 5.1 can't give you but

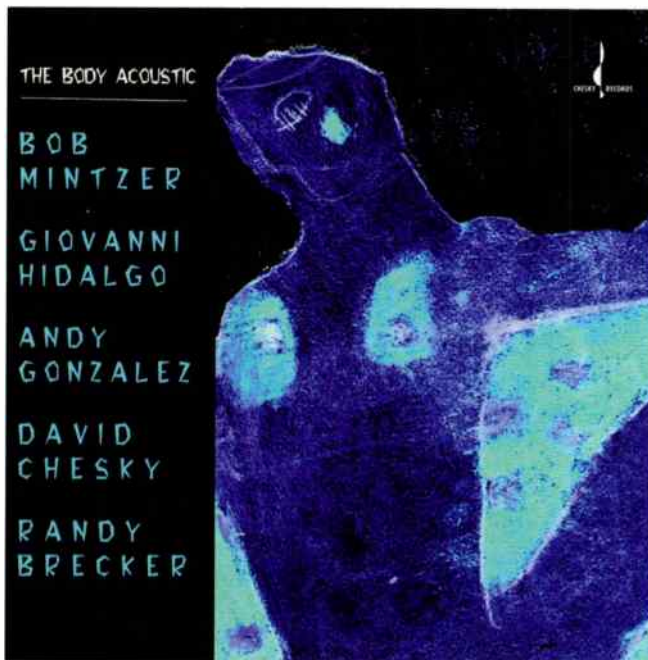


hopefully in the future it will. In our experimental room we sit there and ask, 'How do we recreate physical spaces? How do we hear in real life? How does the room work? What are the acoustics in the room?' All these things are very important. The beauty about 'B' format recording is that we can decode it to a 1,000.1. It doesn't matter. Out of four speakers, we can give you a really good sound field. You don't need a hundred speakers."

At what point did Chesky achieve this realization?

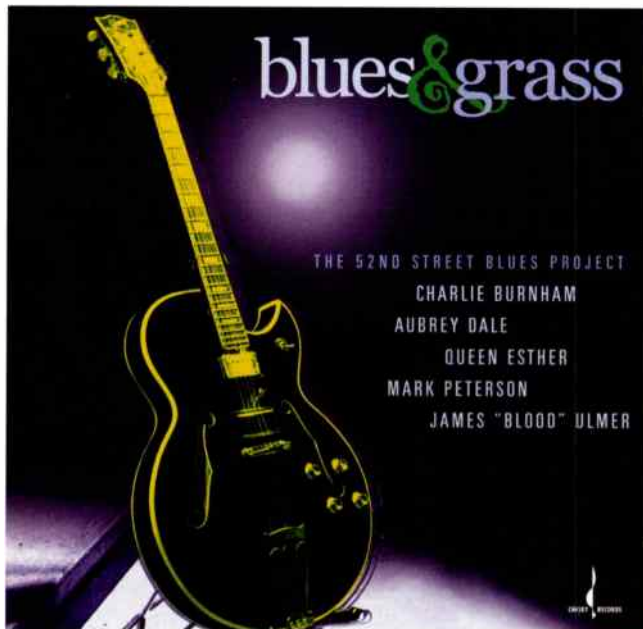
"A few years ago. It took years and years of doing this. It wasn't so easy. Experimenting, trying different things, manipulating things, outing speakers in different areas. Decoding the formulas. This is how we arrived at these things.

"Two opposing forces are going on. One force is the audiophile force movement, which wants to do 5.1, 7.1, 20.1 and recreate a sound space. And then you have the mass public who really doesn't give a damn. Most people listen to music on computer speakers. Forget the audiophile thing. Let's say you're some big pop group, U2, Nirvana, whatever. Do you really want your audience to listen on \$5 plastic speakers on your computer? No, but that's what everybody listens to. The aesthetic is actually going backwards. The technology is there to give you something phenomenal, but the consumer is not interested. We live in this mass consumer society that goes for the lowest common denominator. 'It's good enough.' The problem is people don't really want quality, so you have a whole generation of kids who say, 'it's good enough; I like my little computer speakers.' Another problem is that people are losing the ability to listen attentively. When I grew up in the sixties, seventies, you went home and listened to a record. That was the thing. Today everybody listens background. That's why people don't care. Our whole aesthetic is skewed. We need to get kids into surround, and show them what we can do. If the big guys like Eminem would put out surround, then surround would happen. Then all of a sudden every kid would want it. It has to be driven by them. They'll dig it. The top 100 acts put out 5.1, you'll have a 5.1 world."



Chesky created Dr. Chesky's 5.1 Musical Surround Show, available both on Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio, to demonstrate all that surround sound can deliver. The cover art promises "Fabulous, Absurd & Insane," and contained are "38 tracks of everything from what he calls "monster percussion" to "church mice."

"That was done purely for fun. We've always done all kinds of recordings. If you bought a 5.1 system and want to have a great time, that's because this disk is not a remix of something. It was created — I wrote all the music — especially for 5.1. There's no gimmick. It's totally in surround, but that's the way the artist conceived it. I said, 'Okay, we're going to have a drummer in front, a drummer behind, and some African drummers on the side. There are thunderstorms, the subway. The recordings are truly amazing. We're not trying to get philosophical. We're not advancing art. It's totally to demonstrate what 5.1 can do and have a great time doing it. And it's zany and it's nuts."



Chesky is not convinced that the audiophiles have yet embraced surround, and he believes the DVD-Video revolution and movies are what put the 5.1 systems in homes.

"The audiophiles like their hi-res in two channels."

Are there enough audiophiles out there to keep Chesky Records, now in its 18th year, in business?

"Yes, Chesky Records is like a little French restaurant. We have a niche market around the world. Ferrari exists, but they have to sell a handful of cars next to Volkswagen. That's what we are, a niche market for people who want great music, real musicians who can play in a real acoustic space. That's what we're about. Do you want those things? We can service you. For people around the world who have high-end stereo systems, we provide the software for them.

"We release on SACD (over 40 titles are in the Chesky catalog) and have a few on DVD-Audio. In a few months we're going start releasing everything on SACD as well. This is the reality. It's not even up to me. The consumer decides. It's a marketing thing. At the end of the day, encoders are important, and if they want either one of these formats to fly, they have to have great decoders that are affordable. SACD and DVD-Audio are a lot better than a CD. You're going to have to have great players, and hardware firms are going to have to design great units for this. The software I think is a lot farther ahead than the hardware. We need great players. There are a few appearing, but you need a lot more."

Chesky still gets the itch to record his own works from time to time, thus his jazz CD released earlier this year, *The Body Acoustic*. I asked him about the concept for the recording:

"I'm a jazz musician and also a classical composer. My problem with jazz is that I don't think the harmonic language has advanced that much in the last 50 years. Most people and young kids use a language that is very dated, a minor dominant major. So what I wanted to do was change harmonic language. So if you listen to *The Body Acoustic*, the harmonic language grooves; it has a great bass line, a conga thing's happening. But on top of this, we lay a contemporary, 12-tone different language not predicated on traditional jazz harmony. Therefore, it causes the guys to improvise differently. So we're trying to advance the language of jazz. This is what this band is about. These are guys I've known my whole life. I've known [trumpeter] Randy [Breckler] since I was 17. I've worked with them, and I wrote this especially for these guys. I hand-picked them."

Getting back to his philosophy for Chesky Records and surround, Chesky asked me to imagine he lives in Tahiti, has been surfing all day and retires to his great surround room with the Chesky release *Swing Live* by Bucky Pizzarelli.

"Have a beer, close the lights. Instantaneously you're going to be in a New York jazz club. It's almost like a holograph."

Demonstrating his versatility as a musician, Chesky in June 2004 was working on a violin and flute concerto.

"I'm trying to take a lot of these elements of jazz and contemporary rhythm and fuse them together and apply that to an orchestra. Listen, I'm 47. I'm starting to get my own voice. I think this is the year it's all coming into focus."

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World Radio History



Those Long-Lost Hi-Fi Kits

My 1950's Hi-Fi Beginnings

Walt Jung

Any electronic kit builder knows that the process has matchless appeal. I experienced this over many years of kit-building, starting out in the 1950's. Since then, every time I built a kit, regardless of whether it was Hi-Fi gear or test equipment, whether it was a vacuum tube or solid state design, or whether it mono or stereo, I had the same reaction. Kits are simply *fun* projects, giving the builder an unequalled sense of accomplishment. This article is a re-visit to those early days of Hi-Fi, before stereo even became the standard, and when the building of one's audio system from kits was de rigueur.

I got my Hi-Fi start in the mid-1950's building some Heathkits, namely a tuner. The preamp, the WA-P2, was introduced in 1954. Along with its tuner, the FM-3 (later superseded by the FM-3A). This WA-P2 preamp, selling for \$19.75, became a popular item (but alas, stereo soon brought about a decline). The enthusiasm typical towards this preamp is seen in a *AudioCraft* kit manual describing WA-P2 building and testing. ⁽¹⁾

Both the preamp and tuner were mono in operation, since stereo then hadn't arrived. To complement the preamp, I also built a Williamson-style power amplifier, generally similar in operation to what was to become the Heath W-5M. It was the scheme of the 1950 power amp series (W-3AM, W-4AM and W-5M) to supply the preamp power, which matched that feature in my homemade model. With the addition of a turntable with ceramic pickup, plus the assembly of an odd lot of speakers, I had music!

This may sound a mite pretentious for anyone doing the aging math, but in truth I was a mere lad of about 16 years when all this happened. Hint—I had the good fortune to have a gifted and generous mentor, my late Uncle Harry. He supplied the initial inspiration, some of the parts, and virtually all of the wisdom and oversight to pull this off. My parents also helped substantially of course, both financially and by overseeing all of this with ample patience and support. But for me, it was the start of a life-long love affair and subsequent career, not just with audio, but with electronics in general. Between those 1950's days and now, I have built dozens of kits, and some of them I still have and use.

But, more on those kits. In the 1950's, there were actually many companies producing kits, and among them were Arkay, Dynaco, Eico, and Heath, just to name some that I built. But, the Heath company was the acknowledged leader among the many kit vendors in those days, and remained so for years to come. The company was first established in 1926 by Ed Heath, as a supplier of an aircraft kit. After Ed Heath's death in a 1931 airplane accident, the company was later purchased by an innovative engineer named Howard Anthony. Shortly after WWII he established a market for electronic kits, beginning with a 5" oscilloscope, the \$39.50 O-1 in 1947, and later branching into other test equipment. ⁽²⁾ Ham radio and Hi-Fi gear were also to become product line staples.

The Heath Company set standards for the value of their kit products, the thoroughness of their step-by-step manuals, and the generally high quality of support. They even had a

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The Heath Company set standards for the value of their kit products, the thoroughness of their step-by-step manuals, and the generally high quality of support. They even had a motto, "We won't let you fail!" But those manuals were the real secret of success, and even allowed those with little or no experience to triumph. To quote from a brief history, "The Story of Heath," *"The key to the kit-builder's, and consequently Mr. Anthony's, success, was the instruction manual. Its contents still guide the Heath Company today. It contains simple, non-technical instructions and large 'exploded' diagrams that take the builder through each and every step... show him exactly what to do and how to do it."*(2)

While today they have left the kit business, there still is a Heathkit company in Michigan, which is called Heathkit Educational Systems.

There is the (not related) web-based "museum" documenting many of the kit products, including not just the hi-fi gear, but the impressive array of amateur radio and test equipment. (3) Heath produced mail order kits (later available in stores) until the mid 1980's. In addition, there are also other individually run web sites on Heath equipment. A notable one is Bill Wilkinson's site. (4) Don't miss the Bjorn Heyning "Heath stories"!

So, from those electronic kit beginnings of Howard Anthony in 1947, Heath produced kits of many types, for 40-odd years, under the aegis of many different managements. The company was sold to Daystrom in 1955, later became part of Schlumberger Limited, and was finally sold to Zenith.

The Heathkit list of audio products over the years is far too long to cover here. The listing under the museum's "hi-fi & stereo" category of (3) shows some 24 products—all of them vacuum tube based. So, this list is by no means a complete one as it omits solid state audio products. One would wish for at least some of the later popular products, such as for example the 1980's flagship AP-1800 preamp and the AA-1800 power amplifier. Most kit-builder readers will likely have a Heathkit favorite, such as, among the 1960's products, the AR-15 receiver and AJ-15 tuner (the latter I still have today). Closely related in interest to the many audio kits were the audio test equipment products. For example, the HD-1 harmonic distortion analyzer, the AA-1 audio analyzer, and also general purpose test gear like the V7 vacuum tube voltmeter. Finally, one of the more useful features of the museum website is the indexed mail list on Heath products.

To amplify on the Heath manuals, an example is one for the WA-P2, shown in Fig. 1. Like other kits, this manual contains the specifications, a schematic, a parts list, and instructions for operation, in addition to detailed step-by-step building instructions (with individual check points for step completion). Large foldout diagrams supplemented the pictorials within the manual.

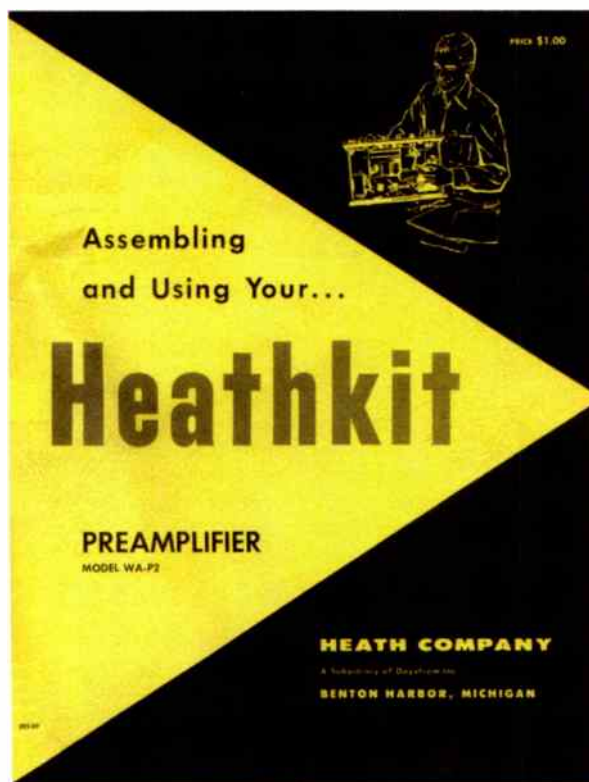


Figure 1: The WA-P2 construction manual shown was typical for the early Heathkits. While part of the kit, it was also available separately for \$1. The WA-P2 sold for \$19.75.

Before beginning the kit, the assembler was instructed to read through the manual for familiarization, and to lay out all the parts in groups for ease of identification in the build process.

Although I did build many other manufacturers' kits successfully, none of them ever came close to the Heath style of instruction and their ease-of-assembly. And it is worth noting that my successful Heathkit resume includes several computers, a color TV, various items of test equipment, all in addition to many pieces of audio gear. These, when assembled as per the instructions, simply worked.

While those original kits have long since disappeared as shelf items, some have survived until today in used form. As a fun aside for this article, I've been re-assembling my 1950s hi-fi system, beginning with the WA-P2 and the FM-3. Figure 2 is a front panel view of a WA-P2 recently purchased online.

Of course, availability of such models today still in their *original* kit form is extremely rare, *but it does happen*. In fact, Nick England has a vintage hi-fi page which includes photos of many unbuilt kits, though he will not sell them. (5) Among these are many Heathkits (including the WA-P2) as well as ones by Dynaco, Eico, and others. Needless to say, do expect to pay a premium if you buy one of these kits. I just missed an Ebay WA-P2 kit, which sold for just under \$100.

There are many caveats to buying used electronic gear such as this, both before and after the transaction. Upfront, *make sure that you have confidence in your seller and shipper, and insure!* I just can't recommend the USPS for large packages. They somehow took nearly three weeks to get an FM-3 from Colorado to me on the East Coast! I've never had any similar experience with UPS, and they offer package tracking and \$100 of insurance — included in the price. (Editor's Note: We strongly prefer to use FEDEX for shipping gear, as we find their careful handling of the package together with their reasonable rates for two-and three-day services, make them the shipper of choice. *Gene Pitts*) With many online sellers, you can pay by check, money order or a payment service such as PayPal. Here you will need to work an agreement with the seller, but do note that the first two options have inherent delays. By contrast, a payment service gets your money to the seller right away, and your item ships that much faster.

Of course, much vintage electronic gear offered is sold "as is," which means that no functionality is really guaranteed. If in doubt, contact the seller and clarify. This is critical to understand! You can get stung easily here when you consider that vintage tube gear like a Heathkit W-5M sells for several hundred dollars or more. If a transformer is bad (they sometimes are), you have a vintage chassis you can clean up and photograph — but not enjoy by listening! Even if everything is functional, you may still need to do some restoration, such as cleaning switches and volume controls, as well as updating electrolytic capacitors which may well have met their death. Obviously, some electronics experience is called for here.

To return to the timeline of kit developments, a major occurrence in the early 1960s was the transition from mono to stereo, which (sooner or later) caused corresponding audio system disruptions. About that time I ventured into other kits, building an Eico HFT90 FM tuner, which sold for \$39.95. With its clever "!"



tuning/signal indicator, this really was a neat tuner, both more sensitive and stable than the Heath FM-3, but alas, still mono. To accommodate system stereo inputs, my next preamp was an Eico HF85, which also sold for \$39.95. This was a very flexible, self-powered preamp, offering both high- and low level inputs, loudness compensation, and other features. Bob Higgins has an Eico page which includes many details on the Eico product line. (6)

A second major player in the audio kit field was Dynaco, a company founded by David Hafler in 1955. Unlike the varied lineup of Heath, Dynaco's products were audio only. They were to become a major player in the audio kit world, initially supplying tube equipment, and later on expanding into solid state. Greg Dunn's dedicated web site includes much Dynaco information; much of it historical in nature, including details on many models, plus many links to information elsewhere. Highly recommended. (7)

Prior to Dynaco, David Hafler's early 1950's design work on amplifiers and transformers with Herb Keroes at their Acrosound company actually formed much of the basis for some of the early Dynaco products. Keroes and Hafler established two key patents on transformers and "Ultra-Linear" beam power pentode output tube operation. (8 - 10) Aimed at audio amplifier builders, an Acrosound design pamphlet illustrated various amplifier schematics for use with the company's transformers. (11)

But, while Acrosound had encouraged individuals to build amplifiers on their own using their transformers, the new Dynaco company took things a step further. They supplied a kit of all the parts required, building around a new series of Dynaco transformers. The first product was the \$59.95 Mark II Ultra Linear output, a 50-watt mono power amplifier introduced in 1955. Another of these models was to be the 1959 Stereo 70, a dual 35-watt per channel unit selling for \$99.95. The Stereo 70 is likely the most popular audio amplifier kit of all time. Notable for many of the Dynaco tube power amplifiers was a simple, three-tube signal path. The input and phase splitter was either a 6AN8 or 7199, and the output pair were chosen for the power required, i.e., EL-34s, KT-88s, 6550s, etc.

There also was a series of tube preamps, the mono PAM-1, followed by a pair of similar stereo preamps, the 1960 PAS-2 (\$59.95), and the upgraded 1966 PAS-3 (\$69.95). These two tube preamps are comparable to the Stereo 70 in popularity, and likewise, are often found as used offerings.

Solid-state products appeared from Dynaco beginning in 1966. Dynaco had two solid-state preamps, the

Figure 2: A recently purchased WA-P2 preamp shows the basic functions. And it doesn't look bad for being nearly 50 years old, after cleanup with just soap and water!

PAT-4 and PAT-5, and many solid state power amplifiers. These included the Stereo 120, Stereo 150, and the Stereo 400 series. While popular themselves, the Dynaco solid-state models have not shown nearly the longevity or popularity that their earlier tube-based counterparts from Dynaco have (and this is true for those of other companies).

Dynaco's history was convoluted in the later years. The company was acquired by Tyco in 1969, and later on sold to ESS in 1979. Thereafter, they ceased operation in 1980, selling off inventory to Stereo Cost Cutters, which extended life another 10 years or so.

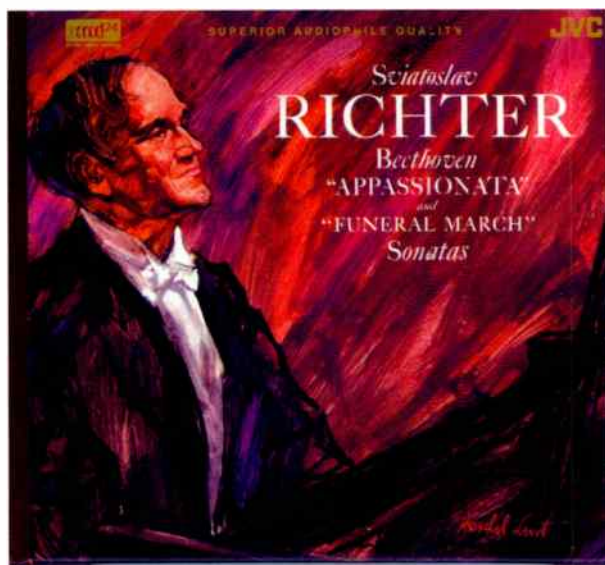
David Hafler's kits (both at Dynaco and later with his namesake Hafler company) were known for the use of pre-assembled circuit boards. Obviously, having 75% of the circuit pre-wired before you start, reduces build time. But kit builders differ in their views of this, with some seeing it as a feature, while other think it is a restraint of their fun. I always saw the Heath approach to point-point wiring and stuffing your own circuit boards (when used) as a feature, i.e., it enhanced my joy and gave me a greater sense of accomplishment. But the Dynaco/Hafler approach made easier kit building for many novices, and as a result, probably made audio kits available to greater numbers of people. So, in that sense at least, it was good policy.

David Hafler formed yet another audio company in 1977, the Hafler company, with a charter similar to Dynaco, but reflecting the by-then-standard solid-state designs. Many notable audio designs came from this company, probably among the better known ones include the DH200, DH500 and XL280 stereo power amplifier series, all of which were popular as kits and in assembled form. Among the Hafler preamplifiers were the DH100, DH101, and DH110. After selling the company to the Rockford Corporation in 1987, David Hafler left the company and retired. He passed away in 2003, leaving a legacy that will likely be best known for the multitude of reasonably priced audio kits that his companies offered.

As I noted initially, there were many different companies that made audio kits say 50 years ago, but certainly the most influential were Dynaco and Heath. Unfortunately, in today's world, not many kits can be found that compare directly with the type of kits that

Beethoven Reissues: Classic Richter on JVC XRCD

Benjamin Ivry



Classical

Beethoven: "Appassionata" & "Funeral March" Sonatas
Sviatoslav Richter, piano; JVC XRCD JM-XR24017
Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 1 & Sonata No. 22
Sviatoslav Richter, piano; Boston Symphony Orchestra, Charles Munch, cond.
JVC XRCD JM-XR24018

MOST AUDIOPHILES will by now be acquainted with the JVC company's XRCDs (Extended Resolution CDs; see www.xrcd.com or read TAV's article on them in Vol. IX, No. 3), which are engineered from classic stereo masters and released as high-resolution CDs. XRCDs can be played on any CD player, and JVC describes them as "24 bit Super Analog" CDs made using a JVC-designed mastering system that vivifies the original recording. They do not come cheap, and typically have the short measure that was the norm for LPs – 40 minutes or so — compared to other, less refined CDs. The real question is, are they worth it?

Anytime a CD promises uniquely good sound quality, the excellence that assures the kind of thrill vinyl lovers achieve with top LPs, then cost becomes a relatively unimportant matter. Judging along these lines, JVC's recent output is worthy of attention, praise, and purchase.

But what about the music and the performances?

Most of the classical titles come from RCA "Living Stereo" material originally recorded in the 1950s and 1960s, material which BMG, its current owner, has irresponsibly allowed to go out of print. Even given current day recording economics, the idea of artistic custodianship is shockingly lacking in the recording industry.

BMG is sitting on dozens and dozens of recordings conducted by Arturo Toscanini, including some of the greatest orchestral performances ever achieved, yet is content to let them remain out of print for budgetary reasons. Would the Vatican decide to close the Sistine Chapel and not let anyone see Michelangelo's frescoes because it was too costly to replace light bulbs? In this context, JVC is doing a service by making some comparably great performances available again, at whatever price.

Part of the *raison d'être* for the extra cost – the latest releases are priced at \$30 but require "no additional equipment or add-on converter," notes the XRCD website – come instead from the "care and time" that are

principal ingredients, along with "sophisticated analysis by both test instrument and ear ... to evaluate every step of signal transfer, from the inception of the mastering process through the final manufacture of the disc." This artisanship goes on at a single factory in Yokohama, Japan.

Previous highlights in the JVC XRCD series include Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony with the Boston Symphony conducted by Pierre Monteux, originally recorded in 1959 (JVC CJVC 24015). Another winner is Fritz Reiner conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in orchestral showpieces (JVC CJVC 24016) originally recorded in stereo in 1955/56 like Liszt's "Mephisto Waltz" and Smetana's "Bartered Bride." These and other outstanding releases create high expectations for the newest CDs in the JVC series, both featuring the great Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter (1915 - 1997).

In Richter's own "Notebooks and Conversations" (Princeton University Press), the Russian pianist speaks openly about the joys and disappointments of his first tours and recordings in the West. There was a disappointing Brahms' Second Piano Concerto conducted by Erich Leinsdorf, whom Richter did not admire as a musician. By contrast, there was also a Beethoven First Piano Concerto recording with Charles Munch (1891-1968), an ecstatic Alsatian French conductor who was far more to the pianist's liking. Indeed, Richter stated, "at the end of a rehearsal of Beethoven's First Concerto with the Boston Orchestra, I was so moved by the wonderful accompaniment that I kissed Charles Munch on the hand."

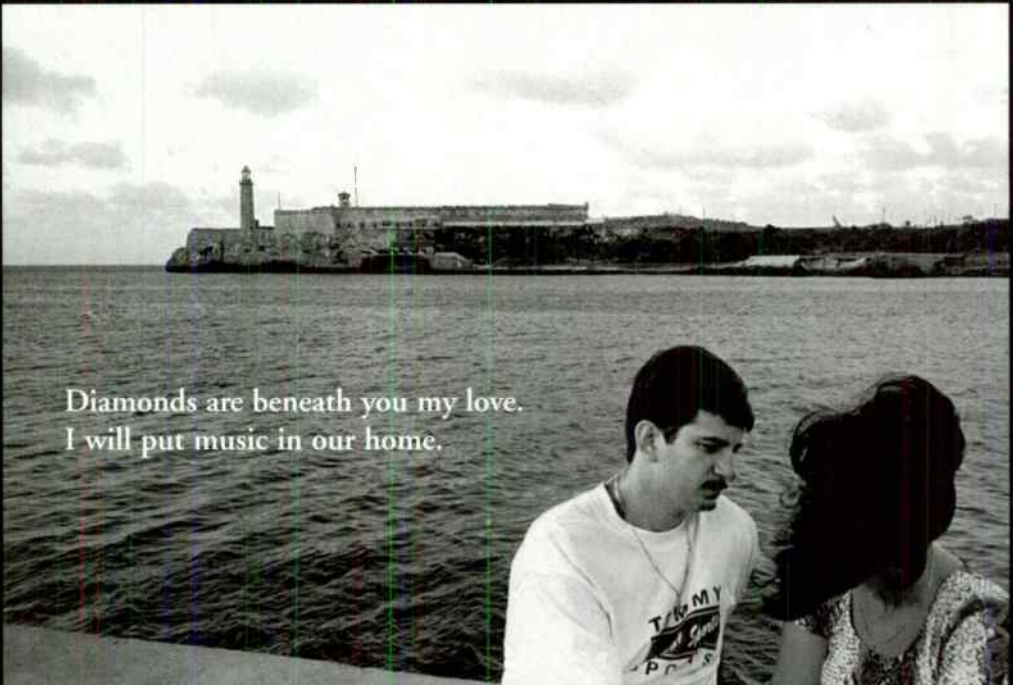
Audiophiles may not quite kiss their JVC XRCD reissues, but they will be grateful for this pliant and spa-

acious sound quality for this performance of great drama and emotional weight. The JVC is at its best in old orchestral recordings, as it allows a bloom to shine through the playing of many instruments. For solo piano recordings, absence of extraneous noise is the main pleasure. Examples are Beethoven's Sonata No. 22 in F, Op. 54, on the same disc as Beethoven's First Piano Concerto, as well as a separate CD devoted to Richter's performances of Beethoven's "Funeral March" Sonata No. 12 in A flat, Op. 26 and the "Appassionata" Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57. In this specific case, RCA Red Seal has quite unusually reissued a CD of the same recordings of Richter playing the Beethoven First Concerto and Piano Sonatas No. 22 & 23 (BMG Classics 82876-59421-2).

However, the JVC release is still very much a first choice for anyone who is not on a strangulation budget. The titanic, Olympian art of Richter deserves finely honed audiophile treatment, superhuman engineering efforts for a superhuman pianist. Who else but Richter would have declared in his "Notebooks and Conversations," that Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata has the reputation of being a "difficult, virtuosic work, but next to [Bach's] "Well-Tempered Clavier it seemed to me almost easy."

This great facility may explain how Richter was able to achieve his wholly masterful performance of orchestral intensity and scale, as if he were a mighty composer improvising great blocks of sound at the keyboard. Many wonderful pianists have recorded sublime versions of Beethoven's "Appassionata" Sonata, including Artur Schnabel, Rudolf Serkin, Harold Bauer, and dozens of others. No one has quite matched Richter's monumentally dramatic approach. Any audiophile who

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To borrow a Michelangesque metaphor once again, a decade ago the Japanese photographer Takashi Okamura paid exquisite attention to the Sistine Chapel

ceiling, producing an unforgettable folio of images showing Michelangelo's paintings more clearly than ever before (Abradale/Abrams Publishers). The images, like JVC's releases which also offer clearer versions of masterpieces, were expensive to make. But who can regret that they exist?

Other Top JVC Releases

Liszt: Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2; Enesco: Romanian Rhapsody No. 1; Smetana: The Moldau; Smetana: Bartered Bride Overture.

RCA Victor Symphony Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski, conductor.

JVC JM-XR24019

Brahms: Violin Concerto
Henryk Szeryng, violin, London Symphony Orchestra, Pierre Monteux, conductor.

JVC CJVC 24021

Brahms: Piano Concerto No. 2
Emil Gilels, piano, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Fritz Reiner, conductor.

JVC CJVC 24022

Chopin: Piano Sonata No.2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 35 and Piano Sonata No. 3 in B Minor, Op. 58

Arthur Rubinstein, piano.

JVC CJVC 24008

Britten: The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra, Op. 34; Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge

Benjamin Britten, conductor.

JVC CJVC 226

Chopin: Scherzos No. 1 in B Minor, Op. 20; No. 2 in B-flat Minor, Op. 31; No. 3 in C-sharp Minor, op. 39; No. 4 in E, Op. 54

Arthur Rubinstein, piano.

JVC CJVC 24009

Brahms: Piano Sonata No. 3 in F Minor, Op. 5; Intermezzo in E, Op. 116, No. 6;

Romance in F, Op. 118, No. 5

Arthur Rubinstein, piano.

JVC CJVC 24010

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FOOKIN' BRILL! (Gene, you can leave that out if you like)

When Mark Knopfler first entered the public eye in the late Seventies, he established himself quickly as a singularly talented guitarist, thoughtful lyricist, and musical innovator. Dire Straits was not a band that was in vogue or in any way typical of its time, but managed to pull itself up by its own bootstraps and achieve success. They had a lengthy and admirable career as a group, but Knopfler himself has been more active doing soundtracks and rather modest projects lately. *Shangri-La* is a bit of a surprise, as it encapsulates his best attributes, demonstrates that he has grown mightily as a singer, and in short, the disc is one of his best collections of songs ever.

First off, if you've not been paying attention, Knopfler has been spending a fair amount of time in Nashville, and he seems to have enjoyed and absorbed the finest attributes of the classic Americana or country songwriters. *Shangri-La* is a true singer-songwriter album, framed in somewhat untypical chord changes and with the expected great guitar playing from Knopfler. One should not ignore the

major contributions from his fine band, which includes Glenn Worf on bass, Chad Cromwell on drums, Jim Cox and Guy Fletcher sharing organ chores, and Richard Bennett playing the second guitar. They provide strong support for the melancholy of the songs. Second, the songs show that Knopfler's inspiration is still strong, and his lyrics continue to display an intelligence and sensitivity, even when the song has a title as seemingly inane as "Whoop De Doo." His vocals are considerably more credible than much of his work in the past, coming across as extremely honest and agile, and he's given himself some really great words to wrap himself around.

There is a consistency to his work here that seemed not be there on many of his previous solo album. There are no filler songs to speak of, no songs that are strictly vehicles for his stirring guitar playing. In fact, all of these songs are well-conceived and fit together as a whole. Title track and "Song For Sonny Liston" are among my personal favorites, but I don't find myself skipping over any tracks. Aside from that, it's just another record.

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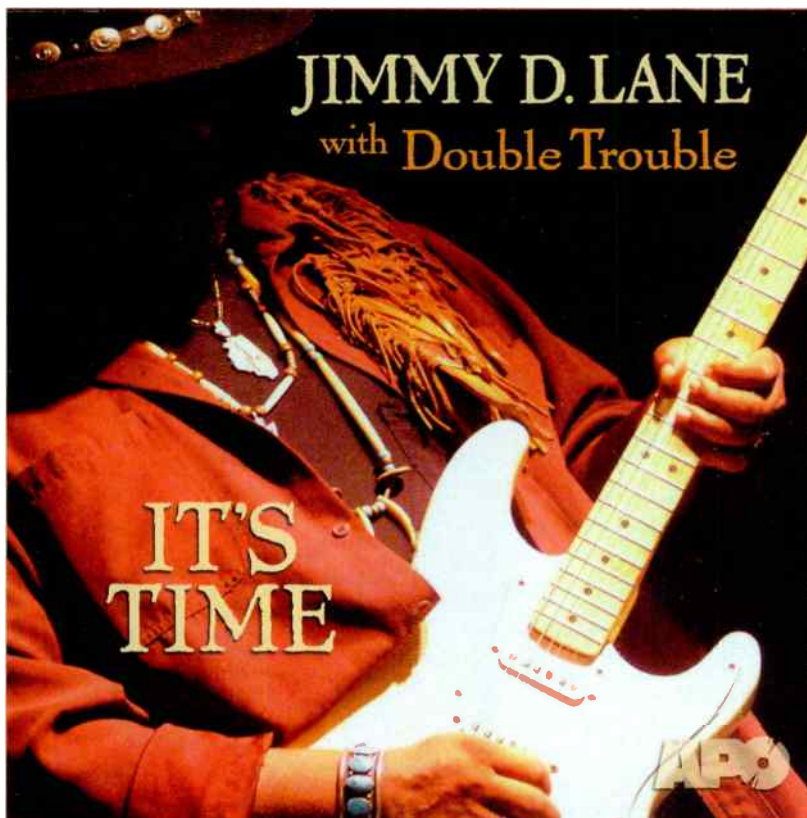
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Donald E. Wilcock

Blues

Jimmy D. Lane with Double Trouble *It's Time*
APO 2020

JIMMY D. LANE is the son of Jimmy Rogers who was Muddy Waters' guitarist and collaborator in turning Delta blues into postwar Chicago electric blues more than half a century ago. Double Trouble was Stevie Ray Vaughan's backup band. The potential that this collaboration conjures is more exciting than the realization.

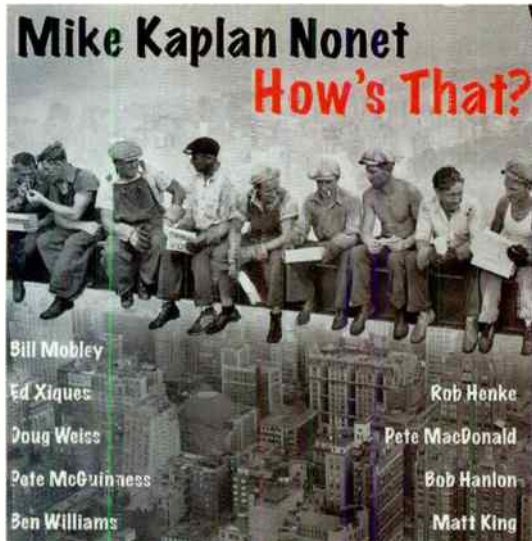
First of all, if you've listened to Double Trouble's work on their own album *Been A Long Time* (Tone Cool), with artists like Susan Tedeschi, Dr. John and Willie Nelson, or their recent backing of Albert Cummings on *True to Yourself* (Blind Pig), you know that they can perform as important a role as The Experience did for Jimi Hendrix. They're a solid rhythm section, but they don't change the dynamic of the artist they're backing. That said, it's tempting to want to hear them push Lane into a post-modern blues idiom. I'd have loved to tell you that this CD presents the best qualities of Lane's daddy in a kind of "Strat on steroids" delivery. I'd have loved to write that Double Trouble does for Lane what Sonny Boy Williamson did for Led Zeppelin.

I know, I know. I'm asking for too much. Look a little deeper at the credits and we see that the CD was produced by Eddie Kramer who engineered many of Jimi Hendrix's albums, and it features another Hendrix alumnus Mike Finnigan on Hammond B-3 for four cuts. Add to that the vintage microphones and analog production values of APO Records, and you get a CD that sounds more like it belongs somewhere between Hendrix circa '69 and Stevie about '86 than it does to Lane '04.

Lane told author Art Tipaldi for his book *Children of The Blues*, "My dad taught me respect for the music and traditions, but Jimi Hendrix showed me where it could go." Asking that his guitar work capture the spirit and magic of his dad, Hendrix and Stevie, may be asking too much. But for my money, on cuts like "Salina" and "Half Love," Lane comes off a little too close to the bombast of, say, Robin Trower than he does the deep passion of his three mentors.

On the other hand, the longest cut on the album and the only non-original, "Bleeding Heart" captures the kind of deep, liquid echo Roy Buchanan got out of songs like "The Messiah Will Come Again." On that one, Roy took us to church, emotionally, with a Southern-fried accent that has nothing to do with Elmore James who wrote the song and everything to do with touching a sincere chord I don't hear in Lane's bulked-up and stinging sustains on the eight cuts where he's emulating Stevie or Jimi. "Ain't It A Pity," "Stuck in the Middle," and "My Nature" each have that lovely "bluer than blue" country gospel feel that made Buchanan so special.

Jimmy D. Lane is to Jimmy Rogers as Ronnie Baker Brooks is to his father Lonnie Brooks and Big Bill Morganfield is to his father Muddy Waters. Each of these sons has some large shoes to fill, but by listening as much to those who were inspired by their fathers as they did the fathers themselves, the sons lost something in the process. It's about the song and the heart more than it's about the guitar. Sometimes, Lane gets it, and sometimes he doesn't. Or so my ears tell me.



Jack Skowron

Jazz

The Mike Kaplan Nonet *How's That?*
Semi-Sweet SM12

HARD BOP LIVES! Or more precisely, Mingus-inspired, post-bop extended ensemble music lives! (Boy, that's a mouthful; try saying it three times fast). As the CD's title indicates, the band here is the uncommon nine-member ensemble. Such aggregations are, however, not unheard of; Lee Konitz had a well-regarded nonet years back). The nonet offers the increased power and arranging possibilities like those of a big band, while keeping the more fleet-footed (and less expensive) of a small group. Kaplan only solos on one track, and he is showcasing his composing and arranging on the disc, having composed five of the nine tracks and arranged them all.

The title track, "How's That?," opens up the CD, and is a funky bit of New Orleans funk, with a catchy, shuffling theme and cool blasses and blats from Ben Williams on trombone (dig the trumpet, trombone and drums trio). "For CM" is dedicated to Charles Mingus, who is clearly a big inspiration to Kaplan, with his penchant for controlled chaos. This track has a lovely melody, and has some elements of "Orange Was The Color of Her Hair, Then Sky Blue," and some "Cumbia and Jazz Fusion" with multiple changes of themes, tempos, and textures (Bob Hanlon blows hard on alto). Things get nasty on "The Crawl" with a sinu-

ous, sleeky theme, growling trumpets, and an infectious swing.

The arranging here is slick, with great band interludes setting up soloists Bill Mobley (cool trombone) and Rick Langmaack (*tres* cool Grant Green-style guitar). Hints of Ellington leavened with Monk adorn "Melody for My Mom," with Kaplan's only solo (on tenor sax) of the CD. He shows Dexter Gordon and Lester Young influences, smooth and swinging, and builds subtly. Monk's "Bye-Ya" gets a bouncy treatment; it's got a good beat and you can dance to it. Ed Xirque's baritone digs deep, the guitar leans into the dancing rhythms, while the trombone-drums duet rocks. "Orange Circle Funk" starts in a lazy, deep, slow, sensuous groove, the trombone blaring over long, sweeping notes held by the band. The temperature continues to rise, until the band breaks into a 4/4 swinging gallop, with a thumb-snapping, head bopping, brassy theme. After playing with this for a bit, we move in to a slow blues, with a searing trumpet solo by Rob Henke.

On to audiophile matters: This is a fine-sounding disc, with a wide, deep stage, and distinct space around instruments. There could be slightly more immediacy to instruments, but then, couldn't there always? At any rate, this is a fine disc.

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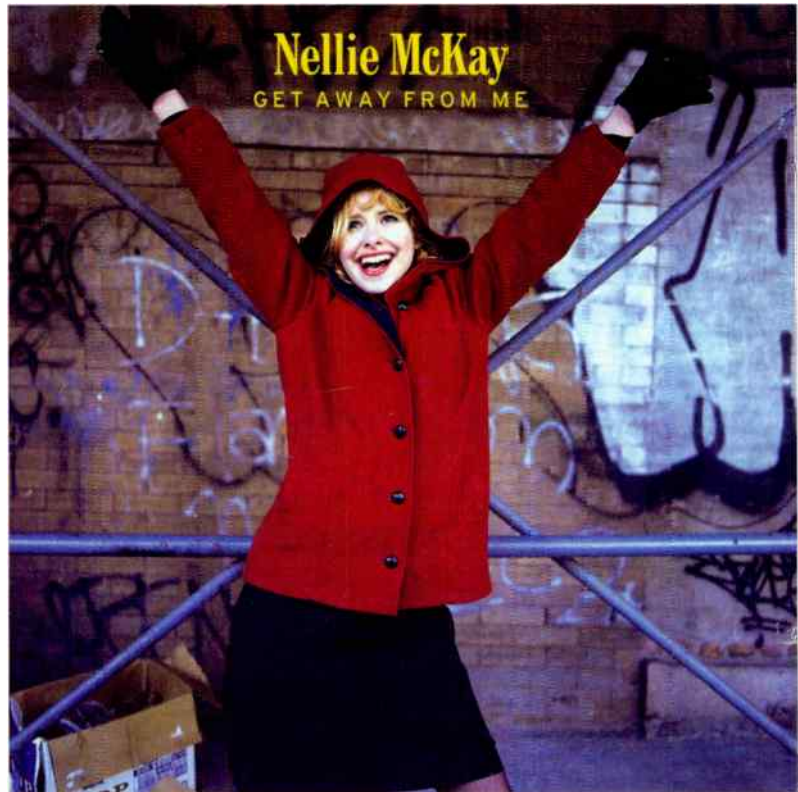
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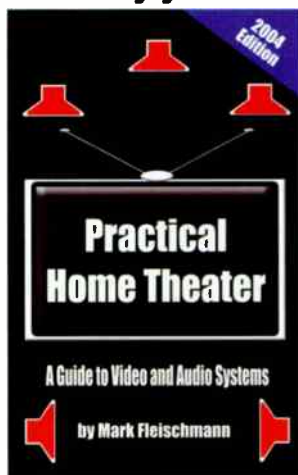
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Rock

**Nellie McKay *Get Away From Me*
Columbia C2K 90940**

EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD Nellie McKay lives in Mt. Pocono, PA. She plays jazz piano and writes songs far too sophisticated for one so young. Her debut album *Get Away From Me* is a two-CD affair even though its 18 songs, 65 minutes in all, could easily have fit upon a single disc. Nellie had a compelling reason to split her album like this. She wanted to recapture the feel of flipping an LP over from Side One to Side Two at the half point. In fact, on the jewel box she labels the two discs as "Side One" and "Side Two."

There's another, even better reason why the odd decision to use

two CDs works exceptionally well. As a group, Nellie's songs are so lyrically dense that trying to listen to all 18 of them straight through as a single program could be exhausting. The two shorter CDs are each a more digestible size to allow the listener to appreciate all the craft Nellie McKay puts into her songs. Some are made very much like vintage jazz standards. The sardonic yet dreamy "I Wanna Get Married" and the atmospheric "Manhattan Avenue" are excellent examples. But most are virtual explosions of lyrics with lots of interior rhyme plus sly topical digs and black

humor that you have to pay close attention to in order to get it all.

Nellie's piano playing is impressive. She has great chops and enough confidence never to feel awkward in essaying the tricky stuff she has written. Her songs are uncommonly melodic. Yet where she raps most of a song, it invariably is rhythmic enough to support that delivery. The album has a very cool vibe running through it, keeping any particular from ever getting too ponderous or pretentious. In fact, Nellie's performance constantly reminds the listener she is having the time of her life recording *Get Away From Me*.

"Walking My Dog" takes that most mundane of chores and turns it into a burst of joy. Her singing keeps poking fun at the song's premise of a dog's companionship as the perfect tonic for a lovers' break-up. "Sari" is one of the rapped songs. It centers on the homonym or pun of sari/sorry. This knowing, rapid-fire piece is full of inside jokes that are shot out with Robin Williams's velocity. The

hilarious "Ding Dong" is triggered by a pet cat's death and an introspective meeting with a bottle of gin. "It's a Pose" is a swinging condemnation of masculine man's con-

boozing and playing around at her age. Her sense of humor is take-no-prisoners wicked, and she clearly loves words as much as she does playing her piano.

Nellie has been exceptionally fortunate in having Geoff Emerick as producer. The resume entries of *Abbey Road* and Elvis Costello's similarly dense and witty *Imperial Bedroom* make a lot of sense in light of this album. The subtle effects and flourishes Emerick has loaded the

album with could easily have swamped a lesser songsmith. Instead the production here illuminates the songs, even as it paces them. Listening to an expert, seasoned producer at the top of his game, shepherding a brilliant young artist through her debut album, is a certified thrill. *Get Away From Me* sounds like nothing else around!

Don't miss Nellie McKay's *Get Away From Me*. Catching an original like Nellie on her launch pad is something you don't get a chance to do very often. The album requires some work from the listener, but the payoff is tremendous.

Nellie McKay is a true original with fine vocal abilities, not to mention her first-rate piano work and songwriting.

stant preoccupation with sex. "Won't You Please Be Nice" is the most darkly funny song of the set. Here the singer pleads with her man to do what she wants lest she blackmail him or do him in, all to the breeziest melody on the album.

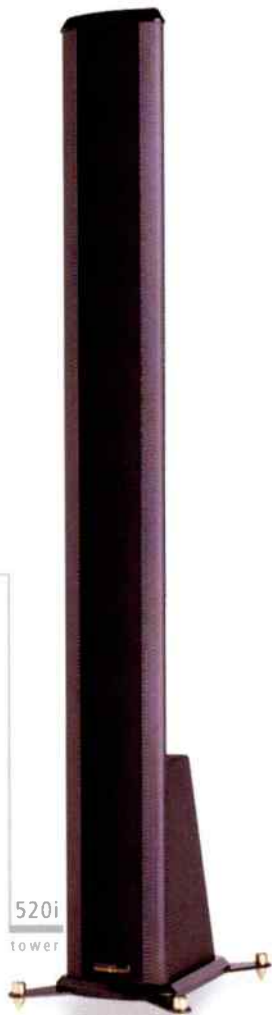
By the end of *Get Away From Me*, it's hard not to have some strong ideas of who Nellie McKay has been listening to. Obviously she's a serious jazz fan, with clear echoes of Blossom Dearie and Rickie Lee Jones in her music. She is also a keen observer of adult mores. She'd better be, since she should not have lived very much of the

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The Jethro Tull Christmas Album

Christmas

Michael Tearson

Jethro Tull *The Jethro Tull Christmas Album*
Fuel 2000 302 061 340-2
Blind Boys of Alabama *Go Tell It On The Mountain*
Real World CDRW115

There's a reason you don't see more reviews of Christmas albums in *The Audiophile Voice*: lead time. Any given year's holiday releases customarily arrive too late to get into print before Christmas. But there is a flip side: Christmas albums, especially the best ones, are perennials as valid a year later.

The 2003 Christmas season saw two releases that jumped immediately to my list of all-time favorites for the season: *The Jethro Tull Christmas Album* and the Blind Boys of Alabama's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Both will be readily available for the 2004 season, and I guarantee they will be just as wonderful as they were upon initial release in 2003.

Christmas has been a subject Tull's Ian Anderson has addressed from the very beginnings of his career. He penned "A Christmas Song" in 1968 and has occasionally returned to the season of joy for

inspiration ever since. Here, Jethro Tull rerecords "A Christmas Song" as well as "Another Christmas Song," "Jack Frost and the Hooded Crow," the glorious "Ring Out Solstice Bells," and the much-loved Jethro Tull Bach pastiche "Bouree." Anderson also wrote a number of new songs for this project: "Birthday Card at Christmas," "Last Man at the Party," "First Snow on Brooklyn" and "A Winter Snowscape." The band reworks several traditional carols, too.

Ian Anderson has a peculiarly personal take on Christmas. He allows that he is a non-Christian who quite loves the concepts of love, peace and togetherness which the season nominally stands for. But he fully notes the compromises made to that spirit in the name of commerce. This dynamic powers his Christmas songs. Sometimes he even alludes to pre-Christian solstice rituals. Jethro Tull's perfor-

mances are bracing throughout, as guitarist Martin Barre, keyboardist Andrew Giddins, bassist Jonathan Noyce, and drummer Doane Perry adroitly navigate Anderson's typically thorny, intricate arrangements.

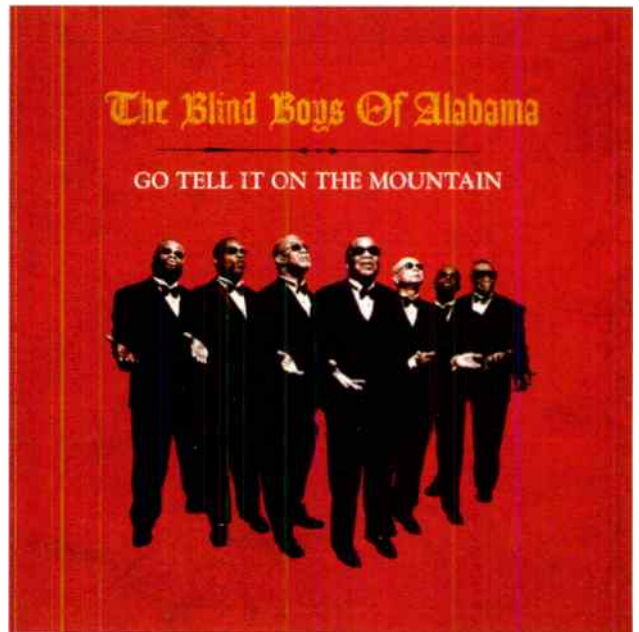
A Christmas take at once more traditional *and* off the wall comes from the Blind Boys of Alabama's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Here, most of the songs are from the usual suspects list of Christmas carols. But the performances are anything but ordinary. A lean, funky band pushes the Blind Boys to brilliant Gospel performances. In the band are guitarist Duke Robillard, John Medeski on Hammond B-3 organ, double bass master Danny Thompson, and drummer Michael Jerome. Most tracks spotlight guest vocalists and occasionally guest instrumentalists.

After the Boys' sizzling opener "Last Month of the Year," Solomon Burke joins to lead Harry Connick, Jr.'s "I Pray on Christmas." This inspired collaboration sets the bar quite high for everything that follows, and the nearly all of rest of the album are highlights. Tom Waits joining for the title track, Chrissie Hynde with Richard Thompson on guitar for a tart "In the Bleak Midwinter," Aaron Neville for a

stunning ensemble a cappella "Joy to the World," Shelby Lynne for a sultry take of Mel Torme's "Christmas Song (Chest nuts Roasting)," Mavis Staples for "Born in Bethlehem (Children Go Where I Send Thee)." The Blind Boys reclaim center stage for the finale "Silent Night."

The guests all mesh beautifully with the Blind Boys. Thus the album never slips into gimmickry as the collaborations are all truly collaborative. It always feels fresh, soulful, inventive and unmistakably alive.

This is John Chelew's third album producing the Blind Boys of Alabama, his third straight masterpiece with them. Clearly both sides have a great working relationship and complete trust, no surprise after both *End of the Century* and *Higher Ground* both received great critical acclaim, sold well and won Grammy awards.



Writing this as I am in 2004, I will say this much: My 2004 Christmas season will surely include healthy doses of both the Jethro Tull and Blind Boys of Alabama's Christmas albums as will many more holiday seasons to come. As I noted at the top, the best Christmas albums never age or grow tired. They become friends you gladly welcome back each year. Try them; I think they'll be your friends too.

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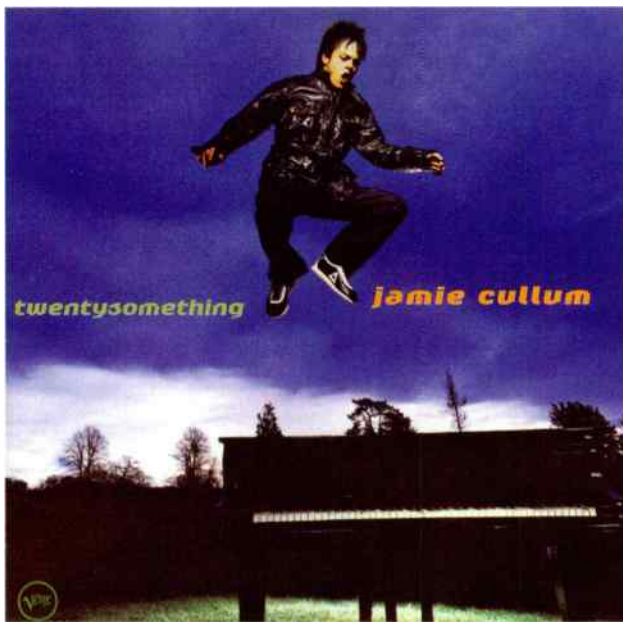
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Jazz

Jamie Cullum *twentysomething*
 Verve B0002273-02
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GIVEN NORAH Jones' monster success, it can't be at all surprising record companies have decided it's worth searching for more new, young singers of melodic jazzy material who might be able to write some songs, too.

Here are two shining examples.

Jamie Cullum, just 24 years old, feels like a major find and a veteran from the first. He plays piano as his main instrument, but he also adds the occasional organ and accordion parts. His only extended piano solo is on the final cut "Frontin'," not coincidentally a live piece recorded for the BBC. The root of his *twentysomething*

album is the classic piano, bass, and drums trio. Horns and string quartet are frequently added to flesh out arrangements. John Paricelli's guitar appears on two cuts, too. Cullum and bass man Geoff Gascoyne did the arrangements.

Cullum is a supple, easy-going yet confident singer with great feel and instincts. He is equally at home on songs he or his brother Ben Cullum wrote (5 of the 15 selections here) or standards such as his refreshing reads of "Singin' in the Rain," "I Get a Kick Out of You," "I Could Have Danced All Night," "What a Difference a Day Makes"

or "Blame It on my Youth." From more recent sources, Cullum nabs Jimi Hendrix's "The Wind Cries Mary," Jeff Buckley's knotty "Lover, You Should Have Come Over," Radiohead's thoughtful "High and Dry" and Bob Dorough's "But for Now."

Strangely, the album opens with a false step, Ben Cullum's "These Are the Days," a venture perilously close to Billy Joel's more maudlin material. However, the set quickly rights itself to become a listening treat the rest of the way.

Producer Stewart Levine's notes explain his decision to record

Cullum in analog to achieve greater warmth than he feels he'd have gotten with a digital recording. He also notes that the mostly live nature of the sessions reduced the need to have additional tracks available to a minimum, again lessening the need for "sanitized" digital recording.

Jamie Cullum looks like a grizzled vet next to 19-year-old Katie Melua. The delightful, diminutive Miss Melua was born in Georgia, the one that was then still part of the USSR. When she was five, her family moved to Belfast where her father found work as a heart surgeon. Clearly, music was a huge part of her upbringing.

Katie came to the attention of Mike Batt, long a successful London pop producer and promoter. Batt was looking for a talent with long-term potential when he found and recognized Katie's instinctively excellent singing. He produced *Call Off the Search* also acting as musical director, piano player and writer of half the 12 selections.

Katie's performance easily satisfies. Her singing is wise far beyond her years, but there is still evidence of a very young woman. Batt's "The

Nearest Thing to Crazy," a song of first love, fits Melua like a kid-leather glove. On John Mayall's "Crawling Up a Hill," she revels in the song's upbeat blues feel. Batt's "Blame It on the Moon" and "Tiger

Singer-songwriters who display truly good talents at both fields are very rare; here are two fine ones.

in the Night" are both torch songs that could easily trip a singer so young and inexperienced as Katie. Yet she deftly maneuvers these, too. James Shelton's "Lilac Wine" takes Katie into cabaret country with hints of Kurt Weill in its melody and arrangement. Again, Melua navigates the inherent drama of the piece for a challenging finale.

Melua wrote two songs here: The impressionistic "Belfast (Penguins and Cats)" and "Faraway Voice" which is dedicated to her hero, the late Eva Cassidy.

Mike Batt drew on long-time friends he trusts musically for this

project. Old pros Chris Spedding and Jim Cregan play guitars with Tim Harries on bass, while Henry Spinetti and Michael Kruk split drum chores. Batt, of course, plays piano and organ and did the arrangements. The Irish Film Orchestra fills out the sound of several selections.

Often a talent as young as Katie Melua will overcompensate for inexperience by trying overly hard and singing too much. Under Batt's direction, Katie has learned to sing with wise restraint, leaving the listener still ready for more when the album has finished playing.

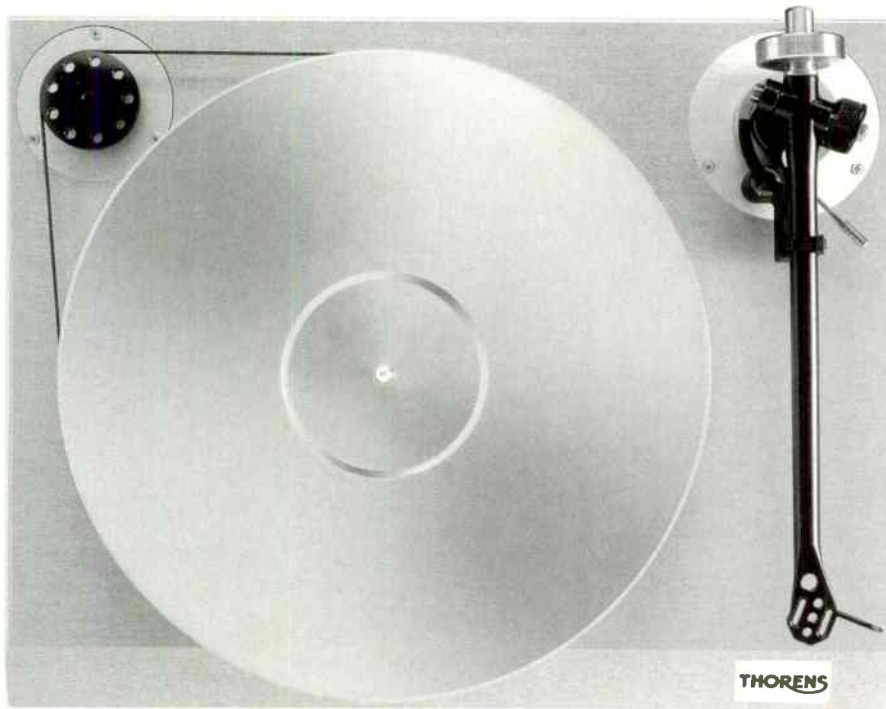
The recording is delicately wrought so as to best showcase the singer and instruments. Excellent clarity throughout.

twentysomething and *Call Off the Search* are each auspicious debuts. Jamie Cullum and Katie Melua both arrive with strong, mature concepts of their art and themselves. Each is a winning singer who makes you want to root for them as they both strive for acceptance and successful careers. With records like these, acceptance isn't going to be too hard to find.

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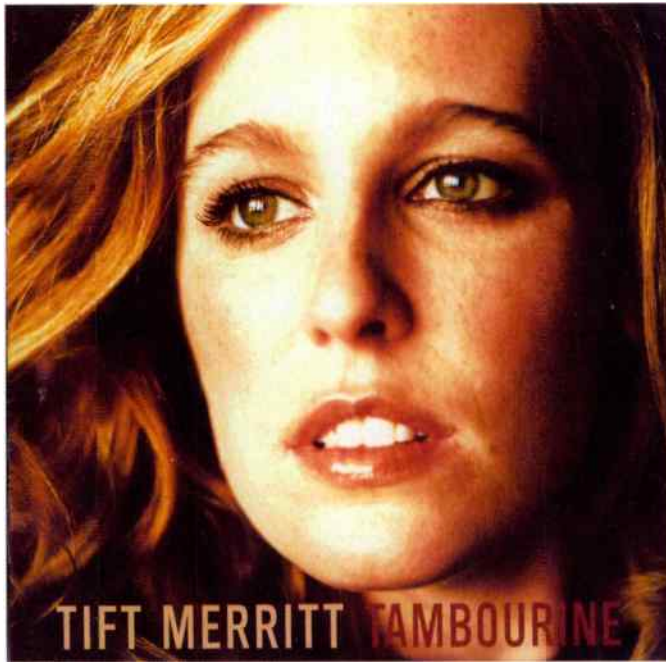
NELSON BRILL, Stereo Times

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Michael Tearson

Pop

Tift Merritt *Triple Tambourine*
Lost Highway 80002528-02

TIFT MERRITT has the goods. She writes fine songs, and sings them with confidence and appeal. *Tambourine* has smart production by George Drakoulias who helmed several excellent Jayhawks albums and knows how to dress up a pop song. Drakoulias assembled a great bunch of studio cats to play the album. Mike Campbell, lead guitar of Tom Petty's Heartbreakers, livens every record he is on. Drummer Don Heffington knows how to propel both rock and country, and his deft touch is a hallmark here. Keyboardist Patrick Warren also has a long resume of fine work. Harmonists Jayhawk Gary Louris, Maria McKee and guitarist Neal Casal help fill out the songs beautifully. Jim Scott and Ryan Hewitt's engineering gives the project a bright, punchy, feisty sound.

Essentially nothing revolutionary is going on here. It is just pop music with seductive appeal.

As if "just pop music" is something inferior. It isn't. Pop done right is as elusive as anything in music, and *Tambourine* is done especially right. There is always a place for

music as purely enjoyable as the music here.

Yes, several songs do feel derivative. "Good Hearted Man" is a throwback to 60s Gospel powered R&B. McClinton Osbie Burnett's "Your Love Took a U Turn," the only song here Tift Merritt didn't have a hand in writing, is a tight rewrite of "Heat Wave." "Still Pretending" is a soul ballad not far removed from "Ruler of My Heart." But what carries the day is how much raw fun, how much pure joy these songs communicate. Clearly Tift and company had a ball making the album.

One song stands out as something extra special. "Laid a Highway," set in the voice of a 55-year-old woman, is the story of a dying town devastated by the closing of its one industry, a mill. The song etches how tight knit the town was when everyone was working, how barren it is now. Powerful song craft.

It really is this simple: For a real good rocking time, try Tift Merritt's *Tambourine*. Catch the girl on the rise.

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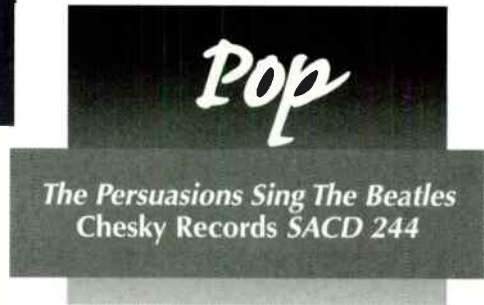
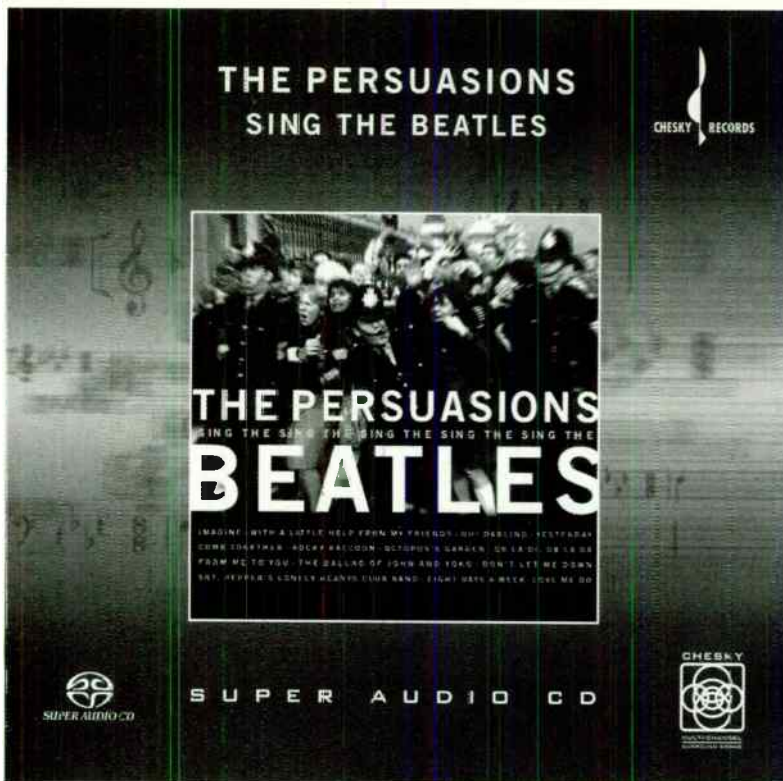
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I HAD A VERY difficult time reviewing this multichannel hybrid SACD, not because it's a bad disc, far from it. The problem I had was that I found I couldn't just sit and listen to it, I had to sing along with every cut! It's hard to review a disc you haven't really HEARD because you couldn't keep yourself from singing along! 'Tis a Chesky recording, with all that says about the quality of sound contained therein, that is to say, it sounds GREAT. The acoustics of St. Peter's church in New York City literally surround you, immersing you in the musical event unfolding around you, and I do mean around you. The lead vocals come from front and center, with the background vocals at stage left, beside and slightly behind the listener, and Bass vocals to the far right, also slightly behind. The effect is of the listener being in the center of the music, which is not an effect I normally particularly enjoy, but it works here.

The Persuasions, in case the reader is unaware, is an acapella harmony group consisting of Jerry Lawson, lead and baritone, Jayotis

Washington, first tenor, Joe Russell, lead and second tenor, and Jimmy Hayes, bass. This is the real thing, folks: street corner do-wop harmony that doesn't sound all that far removed from the corner.

Outstanding cuts are "Eight Days A Week," "Oh Darling," and "With A Little Help From My Friends." All find themselves adapted quite well to the acapella treatment they are given here. My favorite cuts, however, have to be "The Ballad of John and Yoko," and "Imagine," "John and Yoko," never one of my favorite Beatles tunes, shines here, fitting the do-wop treatment to a tee, with the "ooh la la" of the background vocalists, and the strong foundation of Jimmy Hayes' bass filling the air around the listener with some of the most joyous sounds I have heard on disc in quite some time. The SACD closes with "Sgt. Pepper" (reprise) which prompts me to wonder if it should still be called a reprise if the actual song didn't appear earlier on the recording. Anyway, "Sgt. Pepper" notwithstanding, the last song on the disc is a superb rendition of John's wonderful "Imagine."

Quite literally, all of the best of what John Lennon believed and stood for, wrapped up in one song. It's so beautifully done, it could almost bring tears to the eyes of a less manly reviewer than yours truly. Of course I would never let maudlin sentiment affect ME.

Another great cut is "Octopus's Garden," Ringo's childrens' song from the "Abbey Road" album. For some reason, I always loved that song; must be the child inside me coming to the surface. I believe I like this version even better than the original. (Sorry, Ringo.) Other cuts, however don't fare quite as well. "Rocky Raccoon" for example, just doesn't seem to jell here, nor does "Come Together." All in all, however, this is one great SACD: classic (as opposed to Classic) music performed with the touch of folks who obviously have a great deal of respect for it, recorded as well as anyone has the right to expect, in DSD surround, no less.

Very highly recommended, but don't blame me if you can't listen to it without singing along, it's really that infectious.



a boot and a shoe

Rock

Sam Phillips *A Boot and A Shoe*
Nonesuch 79807-2

SAM PHILLIPS' second Nonesuch album *a boot and a shoe* is damnably elusive. Trying to get a firm grip on it is like trying to capture a shadow with a sieve.

Let's start with the sound. Like all her previous work, from her final album as "Christian artist Leslie Phillips" on, this is a T-Bone Burnett production. As with Burnett's other productions, he has designed the song-settings to serve each of the songs, and notably here, no two songs have the exact same roster of participants. On this album that means using quirky and peculiar combinations of sonic textures. The variety stretches from the barest-bones opener "How to Quit," using just Sam on acoustic guitar and Carla Azar's unique idea of drumming, to the five later songs which are buoyed by various styles of string quartet arrangements styled by keyboardist Patrick Warren. The percussion is ever likely to employ

offbeat rhythms and sounds, as Jay Belarose and Jim Keltner join Azar to create these odd yet endearing sounds.

However that may be, the result always feels spare and angular. Nothing ever seems to come at you head on, keeping the listener off balance and hopefully hyper-aware.

Sam's songs here feel desperate, disillusioned and disassociated. Sam told me around the time of the album's release that it came together at a live show. She and Burnett, married since shortly after the first album they'd done together, had split a bit over a year earlier. Suddenly, hearing that, *a boot and a shoe* made sense to me. It is an album of songs reflecting their break-up much like Bob Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* was about Dylan's first marriage unraveling. But where Dylan laid bare the facts in his songs, Phillips aims to capture impressions and fleeting moments.

Yes, this means Burnett produced this album in the aftermath of the breakup with his wife, Sam. Quite a unique situation.

"How to Quit" opens saying "I was broken when you got me." It ends with help coming "One Day Late." In between is the portrait of two people growing apart. The way Sam executes this, the listener must listen closely and try to connect the wide spaces between the dots. I won't try to limn the story here. I don't think I could. In any case that's your job, as they used to say on *Mission: Impossible*, if you choose to accept it.

Even without trying to delve into the uncomfortable story's moments and impressions, *a boot and a shoe* is still quite a sonic sugarplum, one loaded with ear-tweaking treats.

If you like it, go back to Sam Phillips' Nonesuch debut *Fan Dancer*, an album just as challenging and unique.

McIntosh MA2275 Integrated Amplifier



Joel Shumer

HERE IT IS, right up front: Mac's new MA2275 tube integrated amp is one terrific piece of audio gear. My modified Quads sound better using the MA2275 than with any other solid-state or tube amplification that I have ever used, including

my Audio Research preamp and amp which have been my reference components over the past three years.

At \$6,100, the MA2275 isn't cheap but it undercuts the Audio Research units by \$4,000 making

this Big Mac, at least relatively speaking, a super bargain.

Description and Operation

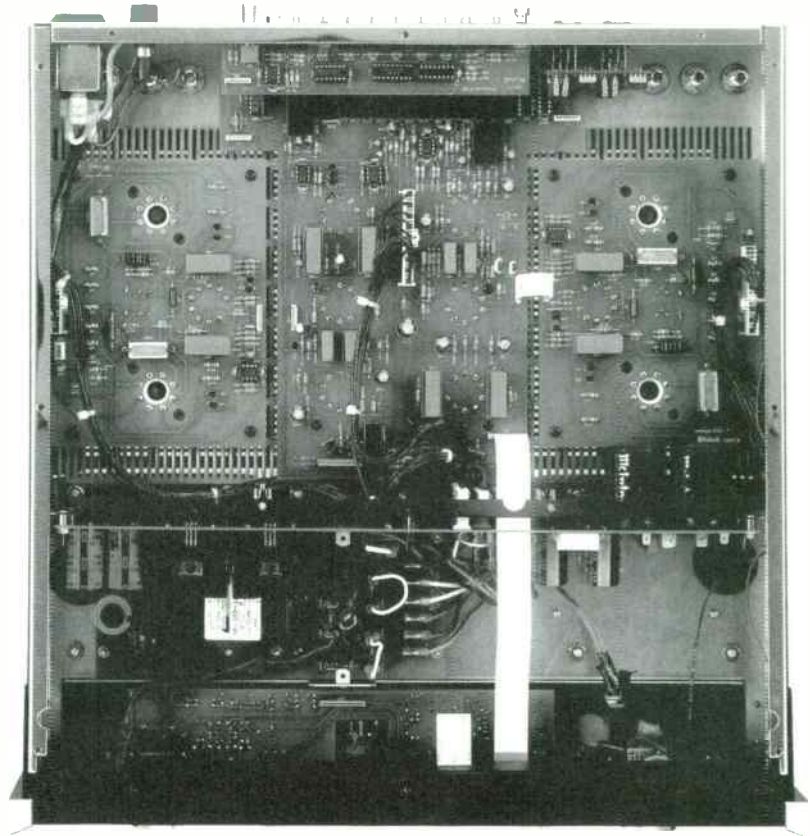
Mac amplifiers tend to be rather large and heavy; the MA2275 is no exception. Although rated at only

75 watts per channel, it has the substantial weight of 77 pounds. You will need to add another 33 pounds for its shipping cartons. And its dimensions, 10¼ inches high, 17¾ inches wide, and 18¾ inches deep, make it too big to slide into most equipment shelves.

Years ago Mac discontinued point-to-point wiring and now uses heavy-duty circuit boards through out. A pair of 12AX7As are used in the high-level circuitry and another pair of 12AX7As in the magnetic phono stage. The power amp employs two 12AT7s and four KT88s, although it can also use 6550s. The amp is self-biasing and McIntosh sees no potential problem when or if an owner replaces the original output tubes when they eventually wear out with a non-Mac tube product. Incidentally, a Mac rep suggested a rather long life expectancy for the KT 88s of over 4000 hours, about double the usual estimate.

The MA2275's front panel consists of Mac's traditional black glass but it is now illuminated from within by fiber optics rather than small bulbs. The upper corners of the panel present four-inch "blue-eyed" 75-watt power meters, one for each channel. Below the meters is a row of six rotary knobs which provide for the selection of six input sources including magnetic phono, bass and treble tone controls, each giving a boost or cut of up to 12 dB and an option to completely remove them from the circuit, a three-click meter knob that allows for a choice of "lights off", "watts", and "hold," balance, and a volume control. At the bottom of the front panel are pushbuttons for "Record/Monitor", tone control "Bypass", "Mono", "Mute", "Standby", power, and a headphone jack.

If you like to listen in the dark, the supplied remote lights up. It is designed to control a McIntosh tuner and CD player as well as a Mac preamp but with the MA2275 only the standby on/off, input selection, volume, and mute buttons are operational. Too bad, I think, that the balance function wasn't included.



This is an adjustment that really is best done from one's listening position.

The rear of the MA2275 has a standard three-wire a.c. power input receptacle, five pairs of RCA input jacks and a sixth set of inputs that accept either XLR-type balanced or RCA interconnects. There are also line level RCA output jacks for making tape recordings and a pair of preamp output jacks. Jumpers connect a second set of preamp out jacks to amplifier in jacks. When the jumpers are removed, it is possible to use the preamplifier and amplifier sections as separate components. Sitting on a shelf above these jacks five-way gold plated binding posts offer 2, 4, and 8-ohm speaker connections. For owners of

other Mac gear, data and power control ports round out the rear panel.

Because of its size, I had to place the MA2275 on top of an equipment stand, which was just as well since the tubes and transformers do produce some heat. With no shelf above the unit, the tube cage and transformers grew warm after several hours of use but never so hot that I couldn't rest my fingers on them.

With its unconventional illuminated black glass front panel, bright blue power meters, mirror-polished steel chassis, large transformers and glowing output tubes, the MA2275 is striking in its appearance. It is hard to imagine that anyone who buys a MA2275 would not take great pride in ownership, so having



the amp sit out in the open, for all to see, might not be a bad thing at all.

Listening

The MA2275 lent to me by Mac had been previously used before it reached me and did not require breaking in. Initially I connected an Audio Research CD3 player to the MA2275 and the 4-ohm outputs to my Quads. My subwoofers sat idle.

My immediate reaction to hearing the MA2275 was one of astonishment. Perhaps that's too strong a descriptive term but I was certainly very surprised and a bit awed by how much better my system was sounding. I decided to postpone my planned A/B comparisons and played CD after CD just enjoying what I was hearing.

Listening to a wide variety of symphonic music, I found a mid range that was more liquid, with a reduced sense of grain and harshness. This was particularly evident in string sections. Upper frequencies were more open and extended, perhaps most noticeable with flutes and clarinets but strings and brass benefited as well. But I was also surprised by the bass. It seemed deeper and more robust. Tube amplifiers aren't supposed to be able to reproduce bass this well and I did a double check to make sure that my subwoofers weren't accidentally getting a signal from my Audio Research preamp.

Not only was the entire tonal pallet sounding better balanced, with fewer annoying artifacts, but transients were sharper as well. Snare drums, tympani, chimes, and triangle all had cleaner attacks. And perhaps more importantly, piano CDs sounded much improved with better transients and as the struck note decayed, the tonal quality had greater purity and realism.

Listening to choruses, opera, and vocal soloists, I was aware of how much more natural their voices seemed. Often it was if they were present in the listening room, their voices emerging from a black background, transparent and pure with a reduction in unwanted sibilants. I think anyone who particularly enjoys the female voice would be quite taken by the combination of the ARC CD3 CD player, Mac's MA2275, and the modified Quads.

As you might expect, jazz recordings, particularly with plucked acoustic bass, were a lot



more involving. Better transients and a bigger, deeper bass really helped. And there is another factor, toe tapping. I am reluctant to say that some pieces of equipment are better able to reproduce rhythm in music than others, but it was pretty obvious that I was responding to the pulse of the piece with more of the sympathetic finger-tapping and dancing-toes than usual.

One other thought, the MA2275's balance and tone controls can really be useful at times. After a few days of listening to the Quads without my subwoofers, I connected the MA2275's secondary preamp outputs to my self-powered Sunfire Signature subwoofers. On some recordings, I get a mid bass hump in my listening room that I was able to reduce by cutting the bass on the MA2275 and increasing

the deep bass on the subwoofers. I don't think that Mac intended to use their tone controls in this way, but it works.

Comparisons

I have long been enamored with Audio Research tube amplification and I have used it as my primary reference for almost 20 years. I have used them with dozens of speakers from WATT/Puppies to LS3/5As. In that time, I have owned five of their preamps and five of their amplifiers. Except for one, all have been tube components. During that time, I have had the opportunity to audition many other tube and solid-state units and I have always felt that the ARC amps and preamps offered the best balance of those attributes that are the hallmarks of a great amplifier. Then along came the MA2275

NOTES

McIntosh MA2275 integrated tube amplifier, \$6,100.00. McIntosh Laboratory, Inc., 2 Chambers St., Binghamton, New York 13903; phones 800/538-6576 or 607/723 3512, fax 607/724 0549; e-mail feedback@macintoshlabs.com, website www.mcintoshlabs.com.

Associated Equipment

Audio Research LS25MKII preamp and VT100MKIII amplifier, McIntosh C22200 preamp and MC275 amplifier, Audio Research CD3 CD player, modified Quad Pro 63 speakers (See TAV Vol. 4, No. 1 for a description of the modifications), Sunfire Signature subwoofers, Music Metre RCA interconnects, Audio Research balanced interconnects, Tara RSC Master Generation 2 speaker cables, ASC Tube Traps, and Target stands.

upending this maxim of mine. Not only did the Mac unit sound better in every important parameter than my Audio Research LS25MKII and VT100MKIII but it's a bargain as well. As you might imagine not only was this a surprise, but a bit of a shock as well. Now, I don't suggest that you have to agree with me, but I do suggest that you make the time to listen.

McIntosh also makes separate units that are similar to the integrat-

ed MA2275 but with greater flexibility and sophistications. I asked Ron Cornelius, product manager at McIntosh, how he thought the separates and the integrated units might compare. His answer was to deliver a C2200 preamp and a MC275 75-watt amp so I could hear for myself. The C2200 has twice as many tubes as the MA2275 uses in its preamp section, has more inputs, output meters, and an alphanumeric read-out on settings. The MC275 has the

appearance of a classic Mac tube amp but its circuitry and component parts are completely modern. It also uses more tubes, although like the MA2275, it has four KT88s in the output stage. As you would expect, the integrated and the separates sound very much alike. The MA2275 is a little cleaner on top and transients are more precise. The separates have a warmer, more burnished mid-range, and a slightly bigger, more powerful bass. Listening to Diana Krall or a Mozart flute quartet, I would prefer the MA2275. Listening to Count Basie or a Mahler symphony, I would rather go with the C2200 and MC275 combo. But overall I preferred the MA2275 and there's another advantage. It costs \$2,000 less than the Mac separates.

What's Not to Like

If you have read this far, then you know that I think the MA2275 is a superb preamp and amplifier, all on a single chassis. So what, if anything, is there not to like? As far as I am concerned, I haven't a single complaint about the sound but a prospective buyer should keep in mind some potential shortcomings. The MA2275 is rated at only 75 watts per channel. Fine for me but others might want more power. It's big. It's heavy. It has only six inputs and only one pair are balanced. Even though Mac says that the output tubes have a much longer life expectancy than usual and the replacement tubes would be self-biasing, it is still a tube unit with the heat and the maintenance so implied. That said, I have no other caveats to my enthusiasm.

Summary and Recommendations

The MA2275 is a wonderful piece of audio gear. It's a handsome 75-watt, integrated tube amplifier with enough flexibility to satisfy most audiophiles' demands. After several months of auditioning the MA2275, I continue to be amazed at how good it sounds. I have heard nothing in my listening room that equals its naturalness and purity. If the 75 watts per channel, the bulk, and hefty weight of this integrated amp are not problems, then I would urge any prospective purchaser to audition a unit in their home and hear it for themselves. I doubt they will be disappointed.

Bowers & Wilkins 705 Speakers

Dan Pond

DIFFERENCES IN BRITISH and American usage of such terms as “bonnet” versus automobile “hood,” “nappies” versus “diapers,” and “knock her up” versus “stop by for a visit” are widely, and sometimes comically, in evidence. But knowledgeable audiophiles on both sides of the Atlantic usually agree that B&W is virtually synonymous with R&D, at least when it comes to the research and development of fine loudspeakers. For more than 30 years, this British manufacturer has been among the leaders in innovative speaker materials (e.g. Kevlar), technology (e.g., tapered-tube driver loading), and style (e.g., their nautilus-inspired “Nautilus” speaker), all of which exemplify their “relentless commitment to absolute clarity of sound.”

B&W’s 700 Series resides in the middle of their extensive line of loudspeakers and comprises seven models: two subwoofers, two floor-standing models, multi-driver units for surround- and center-speaker applications, and the 705, a two-way, 21-pound vented box speaker, mated for this review with its companion 24-inch high, spiked stands. Five different real-wood veneer finishes are available, while stand choices are black and silver. The review pair was a black ash/black combination that I found unobjectionable, though not as appealing as B&W’s maple and cherry finishes, each of which would earn a higher Decor Score in our household.

On the other hand, both eye-catching and indicative of B&W’s craftwork (even their brochures are works of art!) is the use of a single piece of wood to gracefully transition from the vertical front baffle into the upward-sloping cabinet top. The result is both visually appealing and sonically significant. First, the acoustic center of the free-mounted, 1-inch alloy, tapered-tube loaded dome tweeter has been located behind the center of the 6.5-inch, woven-Kevlar cone bass-midrange driver to achieve acoustical time coherence. Second, absence of a cabinet edge in front of the tweeter eliminates diffraction of the high-frequency signals. The result of these two techniques is a significant reduction in the smearing of the sound image. Although I wasn’t able to take



advantage of the capability, the 705s are fitted with two pairs of high-quality binding posts, thereby enabling bi-wiring and bi-amping. Cabinet size is 16.6 inches high by 8.7 wide by 12.6 inches deep, with non-parallel sides to reduce back wave resonance within.

Below the bass-midrange driver is a forward facing "flow-port," the surface of which is aerodynamically dimpled like a golf ball to reduce turbulence and the resulting "chuffing" often associated with ported designs. (I've so far been unable to confirm rumors that, based on B&W's success in transferring golf technology to audio, others are now experimenting with oversized, titanium CDs and U-shaped LP grooves.) While a pair of black foam port stuffers is included, in my set-up these lightened the tonal balance to an unsatisfactory extent and, so, were left aside. Also unused was the bass-midrange driver cover because in use there was a perceptible acoustic veiling. I could discern no such effect from the removable tweeter covers, so these remained in place for the audition.

The impedance of the 705 is 8 ohms nominally with a 4.6 ohm minimum. It's spec'ed as relatively efficient, producing 89-dB SPL for 1 watt at 1 meter. B&W recommends use with 50- to 120-watt amplifiers. On-axis frequency response is 46 Hz – 25 kHz; the high-end performance is helped by enhancements to the Nautilus tweeter and is said to complement the capabilities of DVD-A and SACD technologies without need for a separate super-tweeter. The crossover is spec'ed at 3,700 Hz, and in practice I found the passing of the sonic baton to be smooth and unobtrusive.

The pair of 705s and their stands come well and cleverly packaged in separate cartons, with clear graphical unpacking instructions together with assembly directions for the stands. Notably, stand hardware is selected and sized for each assigned function; there's no "cheaper by the dozen" or other false-economy purchasing strategy in evidence here. And you'll quickly appreciate the ease and final stability of the assembly derived from B&W's specifically designed speaker-stand combination. Hefty, height-adjustable spikes

are provided, as are rubbery feet for use by those seeking to protect hardwood floors; either option yields an exceptionally stable platform for the 705s. The owner's manual indicates that "optional SiO₂" is available to fill the stands' rectangular vertical posts. However, after discovering the propensity of a

after, and the metal tweeter was delightfully free of tizzy artifacts. Center fill of the stereo image, even at quite sizable distances down the listening room, and soundstage width were exemplary, though height was relatively lacking. Elevating the front spikes a bit mitigated this difficulty to a good degree. Safa's *Alight SACD* (Songlines SGL SA2403-2) proved to be an excellent demonstration of this. You'll want to stay within the tweeter's 10-degree vertical dispersion angle or suffer high frequency consequences.

Listening position in the horizontal plane was not overly critical (such dispersion is spec'ed at 40 degrees), and our two-person love seat provided satisfactory listening positions for both my wife and me. (I can't say what the result would be if you happen to have a three-person love seat, but suspect the sonics would be of little interest under such circumstances.) Such changes in speaker positioning as toeing the 705s in towards the listening position, aiming them straight ahead, and placing them further into the room corners had the expected effects of sharper imaging, larger soundstage, and bass reinforcement, respectively, all of which allow you to tailor the sonic performance in predictable ways.

Sonics

The clarinet on Anouar Brahem's *Astrikan Cafe* (ECM 1718 012 159

The Bowers & Wilkins 705's performance is impressive at this price, a good long-term choice.

non-filled stand to ring like a gamelan, I'd say filler is essential; the only thing optional is the choice of filler material. All my listening was done with play sand-filled posts.

One post of each stand is notched top and bottom to permit concealing speaker cables or, at least, cables up to about a half-inch diameter, enroute to the 705s. Perhaps the gang at Bowers & Wilkins will consider notching both vertical posts to accommodate those of us using heavier cables or those taking advantage of the 705's bi-wiring capability.

Although, as usual, I avoided serious listening upon initial hook up, I was aware that the sound had a slightly ragged and aggressive character right out of the box. This subsided after 15 hours or so, revealing a smooth, though never dull or constrained quality there-

NOTES

Bowers & Wilkins 705 Speaker, \$1,500.00 per pair. B&W Loudspeakers, 54 Concord St., North Reading, MA 01864; phone 800/370-3740, e-mail info@bwspeakers.com, website www.bwspeakers.com.

Associated Equipment

Immedia RPM turntable and arm, Grado TLZ cartridge, Sony DVP-S9000ES SACD/CD/DVD player, Placette Passive Linestage, Bryston 7B-ST monaural amps, Dunlavy SC-IIIa speakers, tonearm cable by Yamamura, Placette interconnects, Meitner 25-2-24 speaker cable and Monster HTS 2000 surge protector/RF filter. Quad 34 and 405-2 amplification, Sony CDP-550 CD player, Kenwood KT-42B tuner, and custom-built 2-way stand mounted speakers are used in the satellite-based video system.

494-2) was gloriously clear and room-filling, while the Middle-Eastern percussion was conveyed with outstanding textural details, dynamics, and transient response. On well-recorded, smaller scale recordings such as *Jerry Garcia/David Grisman* (Acoustic Disc ACD-2), the B&W 705s deliver a remarkable sense of realism. In fact, I listened to *Of the Marsh and the Moon* by the group I Ching (Chesky WO144) for the first time through the 705s. So vivid was the thunderstorm that opens Track 3 that, despite living in the high desert where storms are more rare than Lotto winners, I jumped up to look outside!

Another big and pleasurable surprise was the B&W's bass reproduction. While the 705s may not shiver your timbers (especially in a large room), they can certainly rattle your windows and, more importantly, do so in a terrifically taut and tuneful manner. Though, of course, incapable of delivering the ultimate measure of deep bass pleasure of which full-range speakers or subwoofers are capable, the 705s nonetheless offer deeply pleasurable bass. The organ throughout *Phantom of the Opera* (*Highlights*

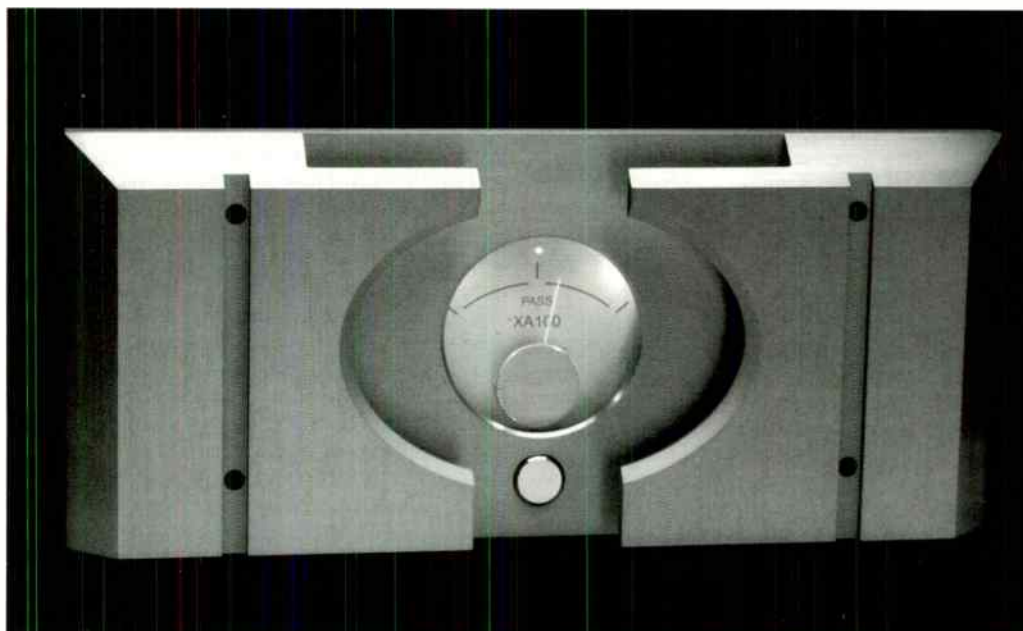
from Phantom of the Opera, Polygram 831 563-2) is impressively visceral and room-filling. So, too, is David Piltch's acoustic bass on Holly Cole's fabulous live recording (and enhanced CD) *It Happened One Night* (Metro Blue CDP 7243 8 52699 0 5) and the synthesized bass and drum tracks on Shao Rong's *Orchid* (Pacific Moon CHCB-10022). With the B&W 705s, you get far more than great-bass-for-a-small-box, you get bass that ably supports the rest of the frequency spectrum and yields a wonderfully balanced musical presentation.

Not surprising in light of B&W's stated mission, is the "absolute clarity" of reproduction, notable both in the treble region—check out the LA 4's fabulous direct-to-disc recording *Pavan Pour Une Infante Defunte* (East Wind EW 100003)—as well as throughout the midrange. Hear, for example, Abdullah Ibrahim's piano on *Mantra Mode* (Enja R2 79671) and, especially, Jane Duboc's Brazilian vocals on *The Art of Gerry Mulligan* (Telarc CD83517). Mission accomplished!

I came to liken the 705s to a first rate, utility baseball player. Though such players are unlikely to make the All-Star Hall of Fame, they are

often reliable, solid contributors at a variety of positions. While typically not suited to the role of Ace Starting Pitcher, utility players are very often among the best athletes on a team, and those knowledgeable about baseball recognize them as key members of a championship organization. Similarly, although the B&W 705s may infrequently be the subject of audiophile braggadocio, as their Big Brothers might be, they can be partnered with some of the best companion gear to effectively render a wide range of musical offerings. Although not well suited to use in large rooms (I found they become constrained and boxy sounding when pushed hard), the 705s will serve you well as stereo transducers, primary speakers in a small surround system, or ambient units complementing their larger, more costly B&W siblings in a first rate multi-channel set up. Moreover, they can be a long-term speaker choice for many audiophiles or a comfortable way station for those on a continuous upgrade path.

In the UK, the USA, or elsewhere, that Bowers & Wilkins makes all this possible for \$1,500 the pair, is as highly impressive as the 705's performance itself.



PASS

Pass Laboratories, PO Box 219, Foresthill, CA 95631, 530.367.3690 - www.passlabs.com

White Stripes' *Elephant* (XL Recordings XLLP162) and the product of a digit-free playing, recording and reproducing chain. Pop music's latest saviors roar and soar and set my listening room a-rockin'. The Dynavector's instrumental reproduction gives the CD version a complete run for its money. What really grabs me is hearing more clearly the plaintive nature of Jack White's voice, a charming quality not revealed to this extent on the CD. On Meg White's sultry "Cold, Cold Night," I can feel the bass notes from Jack's guitar resonating up and down my chest cavity. Shades of sitting in a small club

After a round of such pristine platters, I haul out my precious Beatles and Stones LPs, and run smack into the only downside of the evening. Groove distortion on my olde English pressing of *Revolver* (EMI PCS 7009) reveals the scores of spins this vinyl pancake has endured over the years. The DV-10X5 has a nude elliptical stylus, which means it doesn't have the exotic shape of, say, micro-ridge and Geyger styli that are capable of contacting and tracing the unworn strata of even well-used grooves. Unfortunately, Dynavector does not yet have a high-output cartridge with such a radical stylus shape. So if your collection is well-played and you're looking in the under-\$400 price range, the audio store salesman may urge you to check out the Shure V15 or Goldring 1042, for example, but I believe you will sacrifice musical excitement. Let me also note that while the DV-10X5 is

not, as they say, "ruthlessly revealing," neither is the red Dyna terribly forgiving of mediocre recording, mastering and pressing, as some cartridges can be. And when a performance is phoned in, you'll be able to hear that, too. While it seems quite good at suppressing

New, clean LPs sound really good with the Dyvector DV-10X5.

groove swoosh, it is more matter of fact than some cartridges about pops and ticks. Got 'em? You'll hear 'em. Understand my point here: Clean your records!

However, when I replace the worn-out Brit platter for a virgin Japanese pressing of The Beatles' *Past Masters, Volumes 1 & 2* (Toshiba EMI TOJP-7421-22), the DV-10X5 again excels, rewarding higher volume settings with loud and clean-pounding Beatles. The finale of side three, "Revolution," sounds more ferocious and frightening than I recall. No inner-groove distortion problems either. Another gorgeous, quiet Japanese pressing, The Rolling Stones' *Big Hits (High Tide and Green Grass)* (London Records K.K. L20P1008) really puts across the tightness of their rhythm section, nicely capturing the skin-and-wood aspect of the tambourine (it is a drum after all) and that "playing in a tunnel" effect that was part of the Stones' recorded sound as we heard it in the mid-Sixties. Okay, maybe it was partly a side-effect of reprocessed mono, but we *liked* it.

By comparison, on the remastered hybrid SACDs which have ditched the reprocessed stereo, something of the tunnel effect has been lost in return for more discrete imaging. *Le baby avec le bathwater?* Hey, I love the SACDs but with this piece of vinyl I'm *in* the tunnel with the Jagger and the Stones, man! I wouldn't want to give up that feeling in either format.

Okay, on to *musique serieux*: The Mercury Living Presence stereo LP of Handel's *Water Music Suite and Music for the Royal Fireworks* (Mercury SR90158) brings massed strings into my living room via the DV-10X5 in a glorious and moving way that no component, digital or analogue, has previously accomplished. The snare drum rolls in the *Fireworks Music* surprise and delight. Who cares about ticks and pops? Heck, maybe they're just firecrackers! My wife has one, quiet word to say as the Dorati and LSO performance ends: "Wow." We agree that this is a great stimulus to get back into classical listening via the LP route, and do it big time.

Other Mercurys roll out, allowing the Dynavector to show off its ability to reveal multiple musical lines and complex orchestration while handling crescendos with nice aplomb, delineating all instruments clearly and communicating the big picture and the grand climax alike, seemingly sacrificing no detail. And I mean big picture literally, by the way, with excellent height, good width and as much depth as I'm likely to get out of my setup, considering the flat earth credentials of my naim electronics. The Cary amplifier reveals much more depth, of course, but there's something about the Dynavector / naim / Spendor combination that is just so gold-darned exciting, with no appreciable lack of tone, that I stick with it for most of my listening. *Supah!*

Okay, so the Dyna-V sounds great with a classic phono section like the one in naim's NAC12N. How does it do with something more easily obtainable (not to say a great deal cheaper)? In other words, how does it sound with NAD's bargain-priced PP2 phono preamplifier? Reviews of this little black box have varied from "good for the price" to "giant killer." At 69 euros retail (I'm now in Ireland), it seemed to be worth checking out, so I pur-

M a k e r S p e c s

Type: High-output, moving-coil cartridge with flux damper and softened magnetism
Output Voltage: 2.5mV (1 kHz, 5 cm/sec.)
Channel Separation: 25 dB (1 kHz)
Channel Balance: 1 dB (1 kHz)
Frequency Response: 20 - 20,000 Hz, ± 2 dB.
Compliance: 12 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyn.
Tracking Force: 1.8 - 2.2 grams
D.c. Resistance: 150 ohms
Recommended Load: Greater than 1000 ohms
Cantilever: 6-mm length, aluminum tube
Stylus: Elliptical naked diamond
Weight: 6.6 grams

chased one several months back. After letting the PP2 sit, powered by its wall-wart, for a couple of weeks, I connected the turntable (using the MM side of the PP2's switchable MM / MC inputs) and ran the signal through the naim's line section (and later through my Cary Audio CAD-300SEI integrated tube amplifier). After spinning a couple of LPs for warm-up purposes, the sound blooms and the acoustic environment emerges. But there's more. Listening to Todd Rundgren's hauntingly beautiful "Wailing Wall" (*Runt: The Ballad of Todd Rundgren*, Bearsville A10116), a record I have played at least a hundred times over the years, I got goose bumps, chills, tears even. Game over, folks. The NAD PP2 proves to be a lovely phono section. And the Dynavec- tor 10X5 through the PP2 sounds gor- geous, providing full, rhythmic, fair- ly complex sound, though it doesn't provide the hear-through transpa- rency, detail and definition of the naim (maybe because the NAD isn't powered via that huge toroidal trans- former the naim preamp has, courtesy of its umbilical cord to the NAC160 amplifier). At \$420.00 for

the pair, though, you get a capacity for phono reproduction that I feel confident will not be shamed by any downstream components you may have in your home while you're saving a few quid for a better preamp down the line.

Are there better phono cartridges? Yes, but they will cost you lots more to own one of them.

As I wind up the listening ses- sions for this review, I replace the NAD with the naim into the Cary single-ended triode amp. I listen to a recording I have never heard sound so good, the original sound- track recording of *Jimmy Cliff in The Harder They Come* (Mango MLPS- 9202). I sense that, yes, this is the way they wanted this music to sound, that this is the way they wanted us to hear it. The male voice is assuredly duplicated, with changes in pitch and volume and intensity and grit and projection and *source* of projection (i. e.

diaphragm, chest, vocal chords, facial mask) and duration, all mov- ing so organically together, all pro- viding a sure sense that, yes, this is where he's letting himself get car- ried away by the song and, yes, *this* is where he wants *us* to get the chills. Friends, when you can hear the total *involve- ment* of each backup singer even as you catch the nature of their interplay in those brief moments between Jimmy's (or Toots') lead lines, and I'm talking about song after song here, you just know this cartridge is getting it right.

Have I heard phono cartridges that better the Dynavec- tor DV- 10X5? Yes, but only in the realm of moving coils above \$1,000. Of the cartridges I have owned and used in the \$150 to \$400 range (and that includes all the major top-of-the- line MMs, plus the available mov- ing-iron and moving-coil models in the upper part of that price range), the Dynavec- tor DV-10X5 is my per- sonal favorite. It's as simple as that. I look forward to enjoying this won- derful little gem for a long time to come. Oh happiness! Oh joy! Oh bliss! Oh phono reproduction!

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Marantz SR-9300 Home Theater Receiver



Ron Nagle

IF "SOUND IN THE ROUND" is our Audiophile destiny, and it very well may be, then we had better educate ourselves here and now. No, I'm not going to abandon my stereo system. I skimped and saved through many lean times, once I even sold a life insurance policy to buy my first amplifier, a Dynaco 416 with a C-100 energy storage system. The system I listen to now represents my many years; it has evolved as I have evolved. It is as sophisticated as I am. It is as technically complex as I have grown in my understanding of things. "Turn all my work into a glorified television," horrors, that would be unthinkable. I can envision my wife eating popcorn and watching "All My Children" on my reference system, never! But pay attention: What I propose is an ultra-resolution high bit rate combination of two channel and a surround audio system.

My ears were opened when I reviewed the wonderful Marantz DV-8400 universal disc player. At first I listened to two-channel SACD and DVD-A and marveled at the resolution. The same sound quality in 5.1 surround brought me out of the audience and into the performance. The experience has only whetted my desire to explore this added dimension and expand the boundaries of what is possible.

Raison

The top of the line Marantz SR9300 receiver is by far the most extensive feature filled component I have ever

tackled and it is a challenge to lay it all out in a straight line for you.

Keep in mind that I will not comment on every aspect of this component. Why? Because a lot of what it can do concerns multi room and video selections that are not strictly audio functions.

The Marantz SR9300 receiver is a very flexible component enabling you to use it as a preamp with D/A converter or just a multi-channel power amp. In appearance, it looks pretty much like a typical receiver, but larger than usual, and it measures about 17¼ inches on side and front, and 7¼ inches in height. It weighs 43.6 pounds. It contains seven discrete high-current THX-ultra certified amplifiers rated at 140 watts into 8 ohms and 160 watts into 6 ohms; this amplifier section features current feedback topology for total stability.

The 9300, of course, has an AM/FM tuner but this one can store 50 preset station frequencies. There is audio video compatibility with 5.1-, 6.1- and 7.1-surround modes, and it has SRS audio and advanced THX EX surround, DTS-ES decoder for 6.1, DTS-ES and Neo-6 encoded DVD, DVD-A, and CDs, as well as 5.1 Dolby Digital and advanced Dolby Pro Logic 2 surround from stereo and 5.1 sources. It can decode HDCD discs played on a non-HDCD player, Circle Surround 2 processing which can decode 6.1 surround audio from one- and two-channel sources and CS-2 encoded broadcasts.

The face plate shows us a fluorescent display, plus 20 separate controls in a combination of two knobs and 18 push buttons. There are five input connections, some of these hidden behind a flip-down section of the front panel. Choosing between surround modes while listening is made a lot easier by the large free spinning selector knob on the left side of the front panel. All channels have 24-bit/192-kHz D/A converters and ADDC (Adaptive Double Differential Control) that converts the DACs to dual-differential stereo audio mode to lower noise and optimize stereo sound quality. Additionally (for us purist types), there is a "Source Direct" mode that bypasses the tone controls and bass management to optimize the sound of audio sources.

To summarize, this baby can decode five versions of Dolby, four versions of THX, three versions of DTS, three versions of Circle Surround, two versions of DVD, 16-bit/44.1-kHz stereo CDs, and (last but not least) HDCD stereo input from a non-HDCD player.

So now you think, "That's a lot of decoding." Well, as Al Jolson used to say, "You ain't seen nothin' yet."

Many of the on-screen programming menus listed above have variations or sub menus that can be adjusted to optimize the software you are playing, both audio and video. There are settings that will optimize 5.1 speaker setups that are different than those used for 6.1 and 7.1 as well as for various seating positions in the surround modes.

Before we move on, let's look at Marantz's RC 3200 universal remote control. It is a programmable PDA-style smart remote with a LCD backlit touch screen with some ergonomic hang-ups. The LCD display times out in just 10 seconds and the default setting for the backlight is just four seconds. If you reprogram these intervals longer (like I did), you had better have a lot of spare batteries or a way to recharge them. At the risk of passing over something you may find important, let me focus only on those features that effect the sound quality. Otherwise, I'll wind up writing the 52 pages of the user guide.

Transformation Consternation

What is most important to audiophiles is the recreation of the *original* audio performance and in this case the effectiveness of the audio surround decoding schemes. I realize, as I write this, that I am going outside of the provenance of what would normally be a review of an audio-video receiver. But then this is a publication, "...by Audiophiles, for Audiophiles." Still a fool's quest you might say, but the potential of all that processing power when used to expand two-channel stereo was too much for this audiophile to resist. I'm glad I did it for the journey has been an eye opening experience. Please note that the processing of SACD sources is wholly a function of the DV8400 universal player and the DACs contained within it; such signals are not processed by the SR9300 receiver.

First a few important considerations and common sense, and some things revealed during this evaluation. There are many methods used to simulate or extract additional information from two-channel sources. A

main process is called "decorrelation" and is used to extract two-channel stereo from mono sources. And then there's the old trick of altering frequency response and then summing and finally extracting differences between channels; it's alive and well. Another similar example is the THX Surround EX process for deriving a sixth channel for the phantom rear-center from a 5.1-encoded source. Still another is simulating differing venues (concert hall, etc.) by additional manipulation of time-related information. I recall an ADS system of

some years ago that operated in the digital domain and generated just these types of delay effects; Yamaha and JVC had them, too.

To optimize surround derived from two-channel sources, I settled on what seemed like three promising schemes:

Dolby Pro Logic 2 music, DTS Neo-6 music and Circle Surround 2 music. Using "The Dance" CD by Fleetwood Mac (Reprise 46702-2) as my reference, I was able to spin the selector dial and quickly compare all three modes. The notes I jotted down at the time describe relatively small differences. A short excerpt of those notes would read something like this.

Neo-6. More dynamic, less high frequency extension but 5.1 channels sound more alike than different.

DPL 2. Has a little less dynamic drive than Neo 6 but noticeably better transient speed.

Circle Surround 2. All channels lower in volume with a strange slightly out-of-phase quality from the surround speakers with elevated treble.

I considered whether I might get a better surround effect if I reprogrammed the receiver to shut down the center-front or dialog speaker and turn up the rear surround speakers by, say, 4 dB. Did it work? The answer would have to be yes and no. Without that center speaker getting in the way, the stereo image at least had the potential to render a stage that represented what was on the recording. Most of the time it did that, but I must confess the presence of a large TV between the speakers was a depth-destroying distraction.

To my audiophile ears, any decent stereo setup will not only paint a center image but will show you the movement within that space. It will allow you to track movement that changes depth back to front and shifts to the left or right of center; it will even impart a sense of height without a center speaker.

The rear speakers are a different consideration, and I felt that most of the time at moderate levels the steering logic of the surround matrix was moderately beneficial. Again, results vary and are dependent on the source material, not to mention all the ways possible to manipulate audio information from two channels or mono sources. It is important to note that none of these schemes, not even matrix encoding such as that used by Dolby Labs, can compete sonically with discrete surround-sound sources. I had hoped that I would be able to transform my stereo CD library into something like very good discrete surround with more than two-channel images. But that has proved problematic, with results quite varied, and dependent on sources. In plain English, what might sound better for a particular stereo recording might not work for *any* other recording. It is

What do you get with from the Marantz SR-9300? State-of-the-art processing power and flexibility!



very tempting to fool around with stereo sources, given all the processing options available, but it can also be very frustrating.

The bottom line is that I abandoned my experiment of expanding to surround the stereo performance from any two-channel audio source, as well as putting aside those sources not purposely encoded for surround sound. Anything that might be beneficial is offset by the amount of adjustment necessary to get it to work. And that's after you diddle around and select the best processing mode for that particular recording.

Last but not least, one must realize that after all of this reprogramming, you will have to put it back the way it was in order to play 5.1 surround from DVD-A and SACD recordings.

The Home Theater

I evaluated the Marantz SR9300 using the Marantz DV8400 universal CD player as the primary source component. The resultant picture quality from this Marantz marriage was a combination that surpassed what had previously been in my system. The two components, as you might expect, were a perfect compliment to each other, so that it was difficult for me to divide this combination into two separate entities. Additionally, I tried DSS digital radio, as well as a vintage 1991 Pioneer CLD-2090 laser disc player, which uses an analog video track and Red Book two-channel digital for the stereo speakers. As I previ-

ously mentioned, there is no SACD processing capability from the SR9300, which is logical when you consider it is only sampling the audio process at 2.82 MHz per second. And, further, the SACD signal is available only from the "Analog Out" of the DV8400. I installed the receiver in a very carefully set up THX 5.1 surround system in an acoustically treated room. I started (logically) by playing and watching some of my favorite concert DVD recordings, primarily Fleetwood Mac's *The Dance* and The Eagles' *When Hell Freezes Over*. I used these two recordings because I have both DVD and CD stereo versions of each of them. The Eagles DVD is an interesting disc which uses Digital DTS 5.1 surround and is not compressed PCM for stereo. Geffen Records gathered a superlative team of production people together for this effort. The DVD places you on stage with the performers while the audience are behind you. The DVD video and theater surround-sound presentation through the Marantz SR9300 is thoroughly convincing. Progressive scanning enhances the video image and I think it's beyond doubt that processing by the seven Crystal 24-bit, 192-kHz DACs raises the resolution to the state of the art.

NOTES

Marantz SR-9300 Home Theater Receiver, \$3,199.00. Marantz America, Inc., 1100 Maplewood Dr., Itasca, IL 60143, phone 630/741-0300, web site www.marantz.com.

Associated Equipment Reference Stereo System

Cambridge Audio Discmagic-1 compact disc transport, Cambridge S-700 Isomagic D/A converter, ART DI/O upsampling A/D and D/A converter, Marantz DV8400 Universal CD player, Audio Research Classic 60 tube Power Amplifier for main speakers, Hafler 500 Mos-Fet power amplifier, Krell KAV 300iL integrated amplifier, Gradient crossover, Audio Research SP-9 MK-3 hybrid tube Mos-Fet preamp, QUAD ESL-63 speakers rebuilt and modified to use with dedicated Gradient crossover and woofers, Onix Grandmaster speaker cables to QUAD panels, and Esoteric Ultrapath cables to woofers.

Home Theater System

Hitachi TV, CODA Continuum power amplifier, Marantz MA-800 mono-block amplifiers, Sony SDP-EP9ES digital surround processor preamp, Infinity Prelude Composition and QPS loudspeakers, Sunfire MK 2 LFE True subwoofer, Echo Busters room panels, and various home-made speaker and interconnect cables.

Accessories

Sony Wega 11-inch TV monitor for on-screen programming of surrounds; Islatrol 1-amp and 20-amp a.c.-line conditioners; ferrite bead r.f.i. filters on all interconnects and line cords; Room Tunes corner/ceiling panels; Argent Room Lens mode-reduction panels; Gryphon diffusion panels; VPI Magic Bricks; Monster Cable, Nordost Red Dawn, Audio Research Litzline, and Wireworld Eclipse-2 interconnects; Audiobahn digital cable, Wireworld a.c. power cord, Radio Shack SPL meter, Rives Audio Test CD, and a comfortable chair.

Audio in the Round

To set up with known material, I used my two 5.1 surround reference discs, *The Dark Side Of The Moon* (Capital CDP 7243 s 82136 2) in SACD and *Nitty Gritty Surround* (AIX 80008) in DVD and DVD-A. For a comparison, I did a quick A and B amplifier test, substituting the CODA four-channel amp in the system and used it to drive the three front speakers. With the \$2,000 CODA amp in the system, these two recordings exhibited better stereo imaging and micro dynamics. The audio surround performance also had a more realistic and involving quality some of which I again attributed to the processing power of those Crystal DACs. (Love those DACs!)

The *Dark Side* in 5.1 surround places you on a stage more akin to performance art. Listening to the third track, "On The Run," the sound of footsteps and panting breaths emanate from the left speaker and then cross in front of you to the right, and finally go by your right ear, only to fade into the distance behind your head.

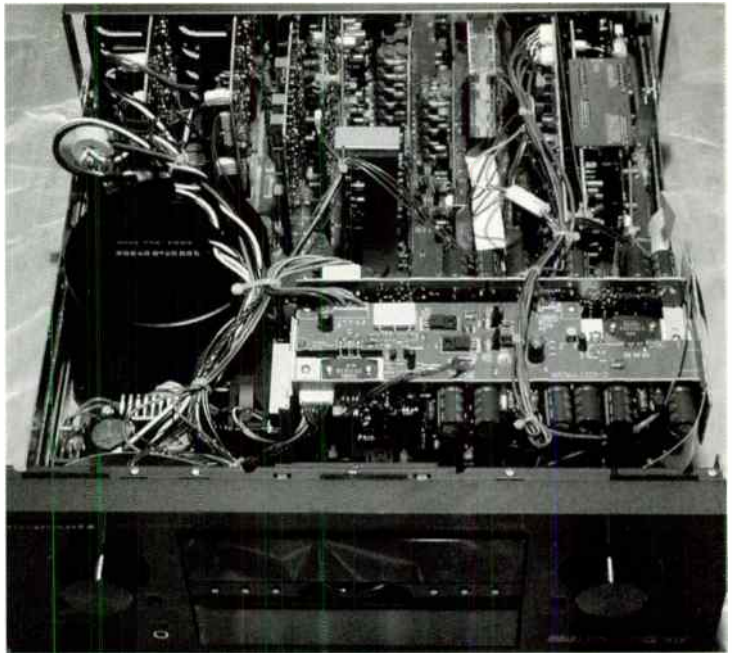
At one point, out of sheer curiosity, I tried the SR9300 receiver in my stereo reference system. My idea was to use the four amplifier channels of the SR9300 to drive the four speakers in my system, two QUADS and two Gradients, in a bi-amp configuration. All four amp channels in the Marantz get power from one large toroidal power transformer with seven secondary output taps. I reasoned they would all be identical and perform to the level signified by the Ultra THX certification badge the 9300 wears. So I connected the 9300, the Gradient's crossover, and all four speakers, using the Gradient's 120-Hz setting.

Coda

The Marantz SR9300 contains every processing option you might conceivably need. (Did I tell you it has a timing function so you can set it like a clock radio to wake you up!) In my testing of this receiver, I found that it was superior to the processors that had been in what I considered a very competent home theater system. The research I did for this report only illustrates the very rapid pace of the technology that drives our hobby.

So what does the M.S.R.P. of \$3,199 buy in this extremely competitive marketplace? Well, the answer for the here and now is, state-of-the-art processing power and flexibility. With the additional benefits of remote system control for whole-house A/V systems and the newest DVI output and down-loadable software upgrades from the Marantz web site.

Another fact emerges at this point; Marantz doesn't make a separate component capable of doing this. My web search turned up nothing for Marantz but I found preamp processors by other manufacturers whose products I know.



To be fair within the parameters defining home-theater systems, I believe Marantz to be justifiably one of the industry leaders. Moreover, it is a newer technology made possible by advances in DAC architecture and design that makes possible high-end surround audio. We should regard it as an entirely separate and emerging form of home entertainment.

We are all on the threshold of a new wave of innovations with a promise of even more realistic and involving entertainment right in our own living rooms. I have no doubt that Marantz will be there with cutting-edge technology.



5 Star
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Winner



Kandy KCD Player



Kandy Amplifier



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Russound ST2 Dual AM/FM Smart Tuner

Don Scott



RUSSOUND WAS FOUNDED in 1967 in New Hampshire to make “hi-fi solution” products: speaker selectors, tape monitor switches, and room volume controls. This led to development of multi-room audio/video systems, multi-channel amplifiers, and in-wall and outdoor speakers. What was missing, at least to this tuner-oriented reviewer, was a dual AM/FM tuner to complement the growing family of consumer audio products. Consequently, the new kid, the ST2, was born in September 2003, a bit over a year ago as I write this.

Description

Features of the ST2 include two AM/FM tuners in one package, compactness, inclusion of rack-mount ears, six banks of six settings per tuner for a total of 72 presets, two “favorite revert” presets per tuner, direct frequency entry, manual stereo or mono modes, local and distant modes, dedicated infrared remote control, supports for two future optional keypads, RNET connections to send tuner frequency and control to “Uno” keypad display, RS-232 control and programming which will allow user settings to be backed up and restored, the potential for software upgrades from Russound via the RS-232 port and an intermediary PC or laptop, and the ability to connect an additional ST2 to an existing ST2 using the “Link Out” of the first unit into the “Link In” of the second tuner. It is basic black, 17 inches wide by 8 inches deep by 1.8 inches high, weighs seven pounds, and the warranty is two years.

While all the ST2’s intelligent electronics are aimed at multi-room applications, my concern was whether

this tuner was “smart” and on-target enough to produce high-quality audio that may go to either multi-rooms or to one set of ears in a typical two-channel audio system. As initially received, the sample included two standard AM/FM stereo modules sharing the same set of controls. A little later on, an XM satellite module became available for enhanced flexibility; this was the section that most intrigued the editor. In addition, it appears that modules to handle other new digital AM or FM broadcasting could be fitted as technologies appear.

Nearly all functions are easily operated using the 14 round white buttons on the front panel. Setting presets is an easy one-button operation, car-radio style. Station naming, preset scan, and direct frequency entry are only via the remote. The main display is green for the left tuner and turns amber for the right one; I didn’t find this particularly pleasant to look at with the front cover down. With the cover up in place and only the display and power switch showing, the ST2 does look rather “smart.”

Interior construction is neat, the quality of construction is exemplary, using four circuit boards, plus the tuner modules, for all functions. The tuner uses a high-grade, regulated 12-v d.c. wall transformer that accepts 100-v a.c. to 250-v a.c. without changing any jumpers. The 12-v d.c. is further regulated and filtered to 5-, 9-, and 12-v. d.c. for all circuit functions inside the tuner. The wall transformer requires a standard IEC power cord and does not plug directly into an electrical outlet. The manual is well-written and easy to understand. There is one minor error in a statement

that "a long wire antenna should be used for FM." This obviously should read "AM." No interstation muting is provided. While this may be annoying to some users, it may avoid the shock of high-powered audio blasting into a distant room if gain controls are cranked and suddenly audio appears.

Performance

AM – Nice. Sensitivity is top-notch, and tonal balance is perfect for newscasts and acceptable for music. At night, several Canadian music stations were clear and fade-free. For example, CHWO, Toronto, on 740 kHz, which has a pre-rock format, exhibited the ST2's more than a thimble full of sensitivity associated with typical tuners.

FM – 80%. Sensitivity is not an issue with the Russound tuner. It received weak stations in stereo as well as any as of 12 quality tuners I have on hand, although a high blend would allow even quieter operation on weaker stations without resorting to quieter mono. Adjacent-channel selectivity might be another matter for you. Where I live in Northwestern New Jersey, I like to listen to WBGO, Newark, NJ, on 88.3 MHz, but the BGO signal has to contend with a strong nearby station on 88.5 MHz. Unfortunately, there was enough splatter from the stronger 88.5 to make listening to WBGO quite unenjoyable, but the tuner is designed as a single-bandwidth unit, so bandwidth had to be compromised in the standard engineering trade-off. If the design called for more selectivity, then fidelity would suffer. Consequently, the ST2 is more suited – and suited well – for reception of stations spaced on alternate channels 400 kHz apart, as most are in this country. For example, 88.1, 88.5, 88.9, 89.3, etc.

FM Sound Quality

Sometimes people don't know I am a reviewer and ask why I have that distortion meter that reads 0.05 per cent full-scale embedded in my forehead. At least it makes me fussy as to what I hear or do not hear. The first thing noted in the ST2 was exquisite stereo. The soundstage was wide and embracing, often sounding like two separate audio sources when vocals and music were recorded on separate left and right tracks. Dynamics and tonal balance, especially in the treble range, promoted very natural sounding vocals. Full orchestra was good too, although I would have appreciated a tad more bass heft. Also, I noticed no audio or r.f. performance differences between the two tuner modules, indicating that quality control is not an issue at Russound.

As far as distortion-free listening is concerned, I would say this tuner offers about 80% of what the state-of-the-art tuners do, which places its audio performance and quality far above typical. Lingering was some slight transistor "grit," which seemed to lessen as burn-in time increased.

XM Module

I was eagerly awaiting the XM version, and was happy when it finally arrived. This allowed me to take my XM-equipped Subaru Forester out of the living room

and hear the new medium through a dedicated home component. Actually, TAV's Editor and I are both glad there are appearances of dedicated home components for satellite radio. Based on the current programming and quality of commercial FM, there needs to be a fresh medium for musical enjoyment.

Operation of the XM section of the ST2 is no different than with any modern AM/FM tuner with remote. However, users need to know that there are unique features related to memory functions derived from data supplied by XM. For instance, pressing the appropriate button accesses next or previous information. Missed that song title while shooting your daughter's boyfriend because of his overly "frisky" hands? No problem. Also, the artist's name will scroll before the display returns to the selected designated display format: *Channel Number*, *Channel Name* or both. Included is a *Signal Strength* mode for aiming the small supplied antenna.

XM Module Performance

R.f. performance appeared excellent with the supplied antenna, combined with the XM module. There was little drop-out of reception, unless there was heavy overcast before a storm – and this was when the system was in my living room without direct access to outside glass. One particular performance aspect I liked was that FM-type noise is present even if you have no signal. I find this an easier method to find the right spot for the antenna than when trying to set up tuners which are completely muted until a threshold signal is found. A threshold still has to be found with digital, but at least the popping in and out is minimized.

Audio – Since my career includes stints as the chief engineer of five radio stations and as the sales engineer for a broadcast equipment supplier, I feel I have a pretty firm grip on what perfect FM should sound like and have this auditory memory stuck somewhere in my brain. But XM and Sirius are new audio mediums for which I will need more exposure to evaluate this equipment with really strong accuracy. In brief, I question whether the limitations I hear are related to the trans-

Russound's ST2 is one of the first of a new breed of home tuners, AM, FM, plus XM Digital Broadcasts.

NOTES

Russound St2 Dual AM/FM Smart Tuner, \$699.00; with XM module, \$999.00. Russound, 5 Forbes Road, Newmarket, NH 03857, phone 603/659-5170, fax 603/659-5388, e-mail info@russound.com, website www.russound.com.

Associated Equipment

Two Audio Source AMP One amplifiers, B&K Pro Five preamp, Amrita loudspeakers, various speaker cables, Cardas and Twisted Pair Pdf interconnects, and a very highly modified Fisher FM2421 tuner as my reference.



mission medium or are they in the reception equipment itself? My best guess is that the ST2 and all other present XM tuners are at the 80% level, and time will breed better. Therefore, until something better comes on the horizon, I can recommend the ST2 as an excellent method of receiving XM radio for individual or multi-zone use.

About XM Itself

A full channel schedule of 100 music channels, plus other features of XM Radio, can be found and printed from www.xmradio.com. Here are the channels I found to have the best fidelity via the Russound ST2. Yes, XM has limitations too, as with all digital formats.

10. America, classic country — outstanding fidelity and punch
 20. 20-20, top 20 hits – good fidelity most of the time.

22. Mix, Contemporary Hits — perhaps the best overall fidelity of all channels

25. Blend, adult contemporary, very pleasing audio most of the time

28. On Broadway, show tunes, seems less compressed than most channels

45. XM Café, soft alternative, nearly as good as America

46. Top Tracks, classic rock, good dynamics but has slight phase error

60. Flow, Neo Soul, clean most of the time

112. Vox, opera/classical vocals – cleaner than other classical channels.

Two channels I wish sounded better because of their content are Channel 4, THE 40's, big band/swing and Channel 73, Frank's Place, America's standards. Gone is the magic of these ancient recordings. What is left is harsh digital sound with almost drive-up window

audio quality. Also missing is traditional Christian music, often with great organ sounds and cathedral choirs accompanied by marvelous acoustics.

Conclusion

"Smart" or "not so Smart" is the question. Russound presents an excellent product for \$699, and this price is not out of line for just a good single tuner. At \$999 for the ST2 with the XM module, it's still very good. Therefore, consider Russound's ST2 as a two-for-one sale, and don't forget the XM module as an alternative to one tuner. You can simply run one set of audio outputs to one input on your pre-amp and the normal AM/FM audio to another input, or use it as intended for multi-room use. So the answer is "Yes, it looks and acts intelligent and is a good buy."

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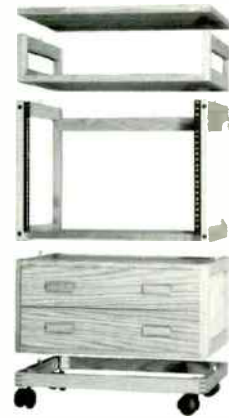
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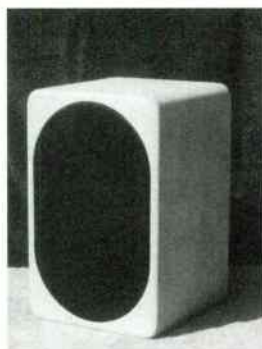
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Ad Index

Acoustic Sciences Corp.....	55
API / Energy	13
Art Audio	22
B & K Components	Cover 4
Bohlender-Grabner.....	28
Boston Audio Society.....	54
Cardas Audio	3
Classé	Cover 3
ELP Laser Turntable.....	26
Fleishman: <i>Home Theater</i>	26
Hsu Research.....	25
Immedia	21
Induction Dynamics	1
JVC XRCDS	9
Kimber	Cover 2
E.M. Long, Speakers	54
Marantz.....	19
Marchand	54
May Audio.....	49
Parts Express	4
Pass Labs	41
PBN	29
Per Madsen	53
Placette.....	45
PNF Audio	32
Purist	23
RealTraps.....	54
Sanus	7
SOTA	52
SoundStrings	5
TekLine.....	53
Thorens	31
Totem Acoustic.....	38
Wisdom.....	27

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Most Recorded Bassist?

I don't know if Abraham Laboriel is, indeed, "the world's most-recorded bassist," as was claimed for him by Glacier Audio, which sponsored him at Stereophile's HE2004 Show at the New York City Hilton. I don't keep track of such things. (Hard enough to figure out how many issues to print.) In fact, I don't know what group or agency would keep track of such a work load, not the Guinness Book of World Records I believe. What I do know is that I like this guy's attitude; he *really* gets into his music! Got to respect that! And I've got to say "Thanks!" to the Glacier guys for bringing Mr. Laboriel to the show and "Thanks!" to Ross Wagner for the photo.

Gene Pitts, Editor
The Audiophile Voice

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