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The audiophile voice™

Volume 2, Issue 4

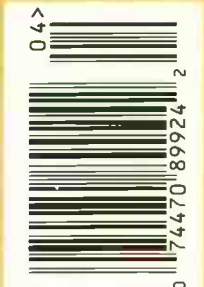
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Count Basie: Mosaic Box Set

Dr. George Walker: Interview Pulitzer Winner



World Radio History



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Peter Aczel, *The Audio Critic*; Issue No. 23; Winter 1995-96

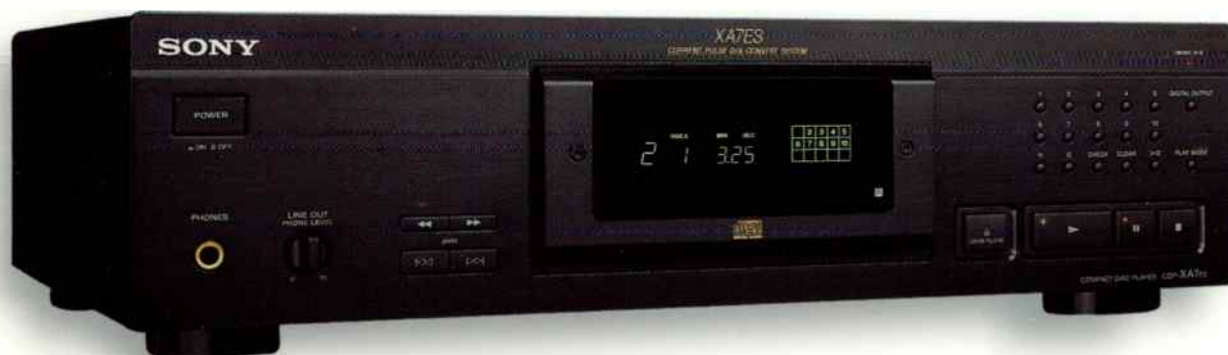
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Ed Foster, *Audio*; March, 1996



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Carver Research Lightstar Reference Amplifier

Recommended Component, *Stereophile*, April 1996
(Vol. 19, No. 4)

"Innovative, powerful (350 Wpc) power amplifier that impressed RD [Robert Deutsch] with its dynamics and sense of power in reserve, while sounding impressively neutral."

Carver TFM-35x THX Amplifier

Stereophile Guide to Home Theater, Fall 1996
(Vol. 2, No. 3), Robert Deutsch

"It's very modestly priced but doesn't sound like it... There are two groups of audiophiles to whom I particularly recommend the TFM-35x: those who are drawn to the tonal qualities of tube amplifiers but don't want the responsibility of their care and feeding, and those who are attracted to the sound of the Carver Lightstar Reference but deterred by the price... In the right system, it can give the big boys a good run for their money."

Carver AV-806x Multi-channel Amplifier

Recommended Component, *Stereophile*, April 1996
(Vol. 19, No. 4)

"I was expecting competent performance; what I got instead was magic," enthused TJN [Thomas J. Norton] about the six-channel Carver... "My favorite current multichannel amp."

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INTERVIEW:
DR. GEORGE WALKER

Kathleen Giuffra Comini

Winner of this year's Pulitzer Prize, Dr. Walker is also an audiophile. He shares some of his intriguing insights about audio.

HI-FI '96 SHOW
IN NEW YORK

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As good as being at the Waldorf? Nah, but fun to read with lots of good tips on hot new equipment and gear you may have overlooked. Besides, you'll save your feet. Pix by Charles Hinze.

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“SOME OF THE SWEETEST VALVE AMPS IN THE WORLD COME FROM VAC . . .



“In this age of 10-watters masquerading as real amps, the PA80/80 is something of an animal, rugged enough to wear 2 ohm taps as well as 4 and 8 . . . the fit and construction are superb . . . the PA80/80 looks expensive and, well, classy.

“Sonically the VAC is simply a dream . . . The bass is so well controlled that KT88 devotees will buy it just to flip the bird to 300B users . . . Imaging? It could teach the PC cretins a thing or two about virtual reality. Speed? Up there with some serious solid-staters. Composure? This baby could have been through Eton.

“This stuff is too nice to ignore.”

Ken Kessler, HiFi News & Record Review, September 1995

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When we started working with the specs for AC-3 (Dolby Labs' new digital home theater format), two things were apparent: One, AC-3 is nothing short of spectacular. And two, to realize the advantages of AC-3, speakers must work a lot harder than before.

First, AC-3's improved definition means if your front stage speakers aren't tonally matched, your ears will know it. That's why both our Lynnfield mains and center channel speakers use identical VR tweeters and matched midranges for uniform tonal balance and dispersion. So they easily reproduce the dialog clarity and stunning front soundstage effects that AC-3 promises.

Another AC-3 consideration: Since all speakers may be fed bass extending to 80Hz, centers and surrounds must play low. Good thing our VR10 and VR12 center channels and new Lynnfield VRS Pro surrounds were built to handle this very spec. Finally, a subwoofer must cleanly reproduce five discrete bass channels, plus AC-3's thunderous LFE (low frequency effects) channel – something our new VR2000 300-watt powered subwoofer can do without breaking a sweat. Get the whole scoop on our new AC-3-capable speaker system. Call 508 538-5000. Just remember to do some stretches before dialing.



This Lynnfield VR system includes our award-winning VR40 mains and VR12 center channel, plus our new VRS Pro surrounds and VR2000 300-watt powered subwoofer. (This system reproduces 21–20,000Hz \pm 3dB and an astounding 105dB at normal listening position.)

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World Radio History

NO MAGIC FORMULA. NO SECRET INGREDIENTS. NO MUMBO JUMBO.

Cambridge SoundWorks' new Tower series speakers combine musical accuracy, very natural tonal balance, precise stereo imaging and an incredibly dynamic presence – all without reinventing the laws of physics.

In 1988, we changed the way people bought loudspeakers when we introduced our *Ensemble* subwoofer/satellite speaker system by Henry Kloss (founder of AR, KLH & Advent) – selling it factory-direct, with no

expensive middlemen.

In 1996, we're changing things again...by introducing a series of ultra-high-performance Tower speakers by Henry Kloss – selling them factory-direct, with no expensive middlemen.

NO MUMBO JUMBO.

Unlike many companies in the ultra-high-performance category, we do not claim to have based our designs on some amazing scientific breakthrough.

No mystery materials. No magical formulae. No revolutionary technologies. No mystical shapes.

What we offer instead are very carefully fine-tuned designs (the result of, as Henry Kloss says, "fussing, fussing and fussing"). These designs are based on years of experience, using the best materials available today. But we aren't obsessed with materials. We're obsessed with sound.

Our new *Tower* series features the wide range, precise stereo imaging and natural tonal balance of our acclaimed *Ensemble*® systems – and adds subtle-but-noticeable improvements in efficiency, dynamic range and "presence."

The result is somewhat unusual – speakers that combine the dynamic presence normally associated with high-efficiency studio monitors, and the precise musical accuracy and pinpoint stereo imaging of low-efficiency "reference" speakers.

With our *Tower* speakers, you get goose bumps and precise musical accuracy.

Tower III by Henry Kloss.

Tower III is a two-way design using a wide-dispersion tweeter and a single 8" woofer very similar to those used in *Tower* and *Tower II*. Like the more expensive models in the *Tower* series, it combines natural, wide-range sound (including extended deep bass) with high sensitivity and outstanding dynamic range from a generously-proportioned cabinet. It has been meticulously "voiced" by Henry Kloss (more "fussing, fussing and fussing") for superb octave-to-octave tonal balance and precise

INTRODUCING *Tower*™ By Henry Kloss.

The *Tower* three-way, dual-woofer, bipolar speaker system in black ash or lacquered walnut veneers.

**FACTORY-DIRECT
PRICE:
\$1,499 pr.**





Tower III

stereo imaging. Its comparatively high sensitivity makes it ideal for use with moderately powered amplifiers and receivers, while its robust construction makes it suitable for use with the most powerful amplifiers designed for home use. These benefits have been realized at significantly lower cost than other,

"Good sounding loudspeakers are mostly the result of fussing, fussing and fussing...and a lot of field experience." - Henry Kloss

superficially similar model through a combination of Henry Kloss' unique speaker design expertise, plus Cambridge SoundWorks' highly efficient direct-to-the-consumer sales policy. Tower III is the most affordable high-performance tower speaker we know of.

Like other models in the series, Tower III features removable black grilles and fully-finished cabinets (front and rear), to permit operation without grilles in place. It also includes gold-plated binding posts. Magnetically shielded, Tower III is ideal for use in the best home theater systems. It is finished in black ash vinyl. **FACTORY-DIRECT PRICE: \$599 pr.**

Tower II by Henry Kloss.

Tower II is a substantially larger speaker, with a three-way design, featuring two 8" woofers with polypropylene cones and rubber surrounds, a 5 1/4" midrange driver with polypropylene cone and rubber surround, and a 1" soft-dome fabric tweeter. A flared low-frequency vent is located at the lower rear of the enclosure.



Tower II

The large cone area of Tower II's multiple drivers contributes to an "effortless" sound quality, giving music a strong feeling of "presence" that is easier to hear than to describe. That presence, together with Tower II's smooth, musical octave-to-octave tonal balance and precise stereo imaging, produce what we think is the finest speaker system ever offered for under \$1,000.

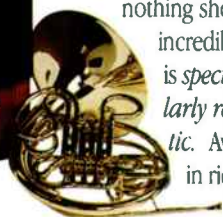
Tower II is finished in vinyl that simulates black ash or Vermont walnut. It is bi-wire/bi-amp capable and features gold-plated binding posts. **FACTORY-DIRECT PRICE: \$999 pr.**

Tower by Henry Kloss.

The flagship of our new series is a three-way, bipolar model named Tower by Henry Kloss. The bipolar dispersion pattern helps eliminate the usual "point source" effect of direct-radiator speakers - and ensures a proper stereo effect at the widest variety of listening positions.

Tower features two forward-facing 8" woofers with polypropylene cones and rubber surrounds; a forward-facing 5 1/4" midrange driver with polypropylene cone and rubber surround; a 1" soft-dome fabric tweeter; and separate rearward-facing midrange and tweeter units identical to those used in front. A flared low-frequency vent is located at the lower rear of the enclosure.

Because it has even more cone area, Tower's feeling of "presence" is, if anything, stronger than that of Tower II. That presence, when combined with the "all around" sound of Tower's bipolar design, and its smooth octave-to-octave tonal balance, results in sound that is nothing short of incredible. It is spectacularly realistic. Available in rich black ash or Vermont walnut veneers, we believe that Tower is one of the finest speakers ever offered. It is bi-wire/bi-amp capable and features gold-plated binding posts. **FACTORY-DIRECT PRICE: \$1,499 pr.**



CenterStage by Henry Kloss.

Complementing the new Tower models is CenterStage, a two-way, three-driver center channel speaker for use in home theater systems. With its two 5 1/4" bass/midrange drivers and 1" soft dome tweeter, CenterStage perfectly matches the tonal balance of all three Tower models. Bass reach of the system is significantly greater than most center channel speakers, thanks to its dual-vent enclosure. The dynamic range of the long-throw drivers is enough to handle the most demanding of video soundtracks, while their dispersion is broad enough to include all listening positions. It has been designed so that, in the most



CenterStage

elaborate of home theater systems, two CenterStage units can be used (one to each side of the TV screen) for optimum dispersion - and an audio focus that is perfectly centered on the picture. It is finished in black vinyl. **FACTORY-DIRECT PRICE: \$349.**

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All three Tower speakers and CenterStage are backed by our seven year parts and labor warranty and our 30 Day Total Satisfaction Guarantee. Audition them in your home, with your music, with no sales person hovering nearby. If you aren't absolutely thrilled with them, return them for a full refund. We'll even refund your original UPS ground shipping fee.* You just can't lose.

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EW PRODUCTS

These cables extend the benefits of biwiring by using two "Symmetrical Coaxial" cables for complete isolation between the high- and the low-range conductors, reducing interaction between the speaker, amp, and cable. Two designs are available, both of 13-ga. copper: Atlantis II with polymer-coated strands at \$12 per bulk foot or \$310 per 2.5-meter biwire pair, and Oasis II with bare strands at \$7.80 per bulk foot or \$225 per 2.5-meter biwire pair. Data: 954/962-2650.



WIREWORLD DISCRETE BIWIRE CABLES



The latest in the firm's Coherent Source series, this three-way, floor-standing system uses a 1-in. dome tweeter, a 4-in. midrange, and a 10-in. woofer—all with metal diaphragms designed and made by Thiel. Response is 27 Hz to 25 kHz; sensitivity is 86 dB. A concrete baffle reduces energy radiation from the front of the enclosure, as the heavy internal bracing and mid-range sub-enclosure do for the back and sides. \$6,900. Data: 606/254-9427.

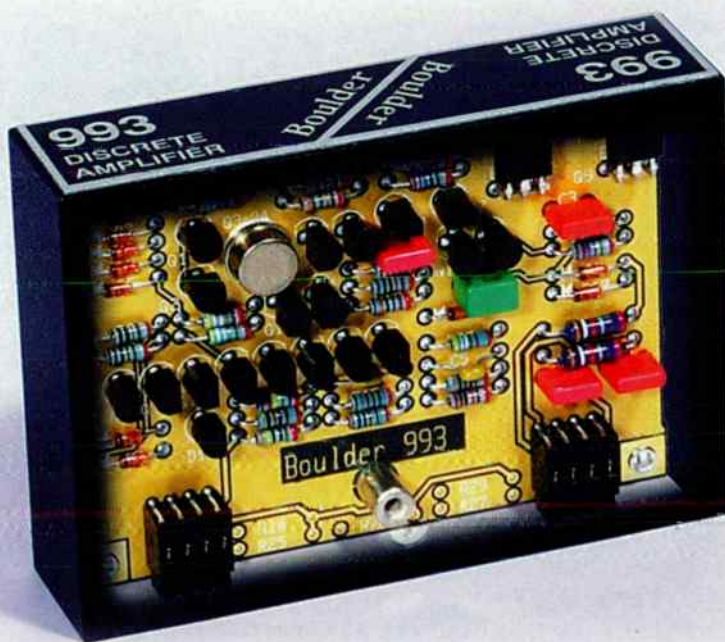
THE THIEL CS6

Out of the U.S. hi-fi market for several years, Tandberg has returned with several sophisticated components: TCA 4038 preamp, \$1095; TPA 4036 power amp, \$1595; TIA 4062 integrated amp, \$1695; TCP 4035 CD player, \$1495; TCP 4025 CD player, \$1895, and the TPT 4031 tuner, \$1595. All these remote-controlled units share a sophisticated Norwegian look, using solid wood and aluminum, while including the features you would expect from the firm instrumental in making quality home recording possible. Data: 215/836-9944.



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Eighteen 993s are used in the **2010 Isolated Balanced Preamp**. A 3 piece chassis separates the left and right audio signals from the digital controls by optical isolation. No microprocessor noise is allowed to enter the sacred audio path.

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Five converters per channel assure the lowest distortion and noise possible today. A digital time advance feature allows "relocation" of speakers in your room. And it is upgradeable to DVD. \$32,000.

Boulder

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Miscellaneous Blather



The six largest CD manufacturers in the U.S. have been hit with a class-action lawsuit alleging that the firms kept retail CD prices artificially high when the actual cost of CD manufacture dropped from \$3.00 or more when the CD was introduced to under \$1.00 now. The Big Six, as the group is known within the record industry, includes Thorn EMI, Sony (which owns Columbia and Epic), Warner Elektra Atlantic, MCA, RCA with its parent Bertelsmann, and the Polygram unit of Philips. According to *The New York Times*, a law firm representing two CD buyers filed suit in Knoxville in July 8th, winning immediate class-action status. Establishment of this class means that other CD buyers and owners could join the suit, and if the complaint is upheld, share in the judgment. It is unclear whether avid CD collectors, i.e. the folks who read this magazine and have more extensive collections than the average, would be entitled to a greater than average share of the judgment. Watch this space.

DIGITAL CONVERTER DESIGN	Dan D'Agostino of Krell for the Reference 64
SIGNAL PROCESSOR DESIGN	Mike Moffat of MMLabs for the Angstrom 20 surround-sound processor
TUBE ELECTRONICS DESIGN	William Z. Johnson of Audio Research for the Reference 600
SOLID-STATE ELECTRONICS DESIGN	Nelson Pass of Pass Laboratories for the Aleph 3
CABLE DESIGN	Jack Sumner of Transparent Audio for the Music Link Reference
PERIPHERALS DESIGN	Arthur Noxon of Acoustic Science Corp. for the Revised Corner Traps and Tube Traps
LOUDSPEAKER DESIGN	Dave Wilson of Wilson Audio for the Watt 5/Puppy
BEST LOUDSPEAKER VALUE	Gayle Sanders of Martin Logan for the Aeries
AESTHETIC DESIGN	B&W Design Team for the Nautilus
BEST NEW COMPANY	Mike Moffat of MMLabs with the Angstrom
BEST RE-ISSUED RECORDING	Classic Records for Harry Belafonte's "At Carnegie Hall"
BEST ORIGINAL RECORDING	AudioQuest Music for Mighty Sam McClain's "Keep on Movin"
INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES	Bob Stuart of Meridian for the Model 518 Noise Shaper.

Congratulations to all of the winners, and to the Academy of High-End Audio for a fine show.

Golden Note Awards

The Academy for the Advancement of High-End Audio announced the 1996 winners of the Golden Note Awards at a banquet held during Hi-Fi '96 held at New York City's Waldorf-Astoria May 29th to June 2nd. A special Lifetime Achievement award went to Mike Kay, owner of Lyric Hi-Fi, and to Peter Mitchell, well-known journalist and technical writer whose biography appeared in our last issue. Both were also inducted into the Academy's Hall of Fame.

Winners of the 15 Awards were:

ANALOG SOURCE DESIGN	Harry Weisfeld of VPI for the TNT III with flywheel
DIGITAL SOURCE DESIGN	Dan D'Agostino of Krell for the KPS 20VL

Dept. of "Oops"

I forgot to credit Audiophile Society President Arnie Bgalgalvis for the several photos he took at the Winter CES in Las Vegas and which we ran in our last issue of TAV. Arnie's pix appeared on pages 25, 28, 36, and 41. Many thanks, Arnie, and my apologies, too.

Satellite and Subwoofer Speakers: The "Overnight Success" of the '90s.

Overnight, it seems, virtually everyone has discovered the advantages of the satellite-subwoofer speaker concept—*especially* for use in the home theater.

1994 marks M&K Sound's *twentieth* year at the forefront of this technology.

After two decades of developing and refining this concept, we are flattered to see satellite and subwoofer speaker systems become

the dominant choice for the multichannel home theater.

M&K speakers have been found in Hollywood screening rooms (the earliest home theaters) since the 1970s.

Long acknowledged as the deep-bass specialists, we've also been pioneers in direct-to-disc and digital audiophile recording with our RealTime Records label—the first U.S. label to release compact discs.



MX-100
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Interview

Dr. George Walker

Pulitzer-Winning Composer ...and Audiophile

The April 10 front-page headlines of The Montclair (NJ) Times announced that Dr. George Walker, distinguished pianist, composer and recently retired professor of music, had received this year's Pulitzer Prize for his composition "Lilacs." Scored for soprano and full orchestra, the piece had been commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra which premiered it on February 1st. Since Dr. Walker and TAV share the same neighborhood, we called to introduce ourselves and requested an interview. Dr. Walker accepted and we met at his home after the national media had cleared town.

Tall and elegant, poised but not aloof, Dr. Walker warmly ushered us into his living-room where we were stunned by the presence of two magnificent speakers from Yankee Audio, each six feet high, micro-thin, framed in satiné wood and cabled to an astounding array of audio equipment. We were further surprised when Dr. Walker said he knew and had often read TAV, that he has been an ardent audiophile for years, and that Hy Kachalsky, founder of The Audiophile Society, had been a friend.

Mentally, we threw out most of our prepared questions. Few words were needed before Dr. Walker and Gene Pitts, TAV's new editor, realized they knew many of the same people and shared knowledge of and attitudes about audio equipment and technique. Regrettably, the shock-of-recognition pushed the dialogue along so rapidly we didn't get the recorders set up quickly enough to catch the conversation from its beginning. (Regrettable and ironic.) Thus, the interview starts in "mid-stream."

TAV: Most people feel there are different aspects of what constitutes good reproduced sound. One of them has to do with linear output over a long scale. Things might be fine when there is a low sound level, or even OK in the middle. But for me, often there is something in the timbre that changes and also with the imaging of some speakers. At high levels, there ceases to be a dB out for a dB in.

GW: Yes, I agree. In fact, I've come up with this peculiar image, after hearing an inexpensive system recently. I think of a man going into a barber shop. He has long hair and asks for "a nice hair cut." The barber starts to trim but is not satisfied, and so he keeps trimming. The hair gets shorter and shorter. Eventually the man ends up bald! For me, it suggests the perception I have of some systems. A piano, as an example, will sound like a cymbalon. With a closely miked piano, the vibration of its strings should be heard. Different colors ensue. However, with some audio systems, everything is clean-shaven with a minimum of ambiance. The sound can be forceful and visceral, but it would be difficult to tell if it was recorded 10 feet from the microphone or three feet from it. Complex speakers, with many drivers, on the other hand, produce types of distortion that mask many subtleties.

TAV: However, there's no question whether you are listening to a real piano or not. What you're finding fault with is not only the recording technique but the reproduction of the sound of the instrument itself.

GW: Well, yes. In digital recording, the sound is being filtered. If the original tape is made at 20 bits, you must come down to 16 bits. That loss is troublesome. Other processes inevitably follow. In doing so, the end result can be severely compromised. With most engineers, the recording process represents a pre-conceived conception of an idealized result. After I make a recording in my home, I listen to determine how closely it reproduces what I was hearing when I was playing. These Baton cables from Yankee Audio that you see here are, in my estimation, the best available because they transmit more of the original sound than any other I have used, the sound heard from being right there at the piano.

TAV: It isn't just being there at the piano, it's being in the same room. It could be 10 rows back.

GW: Yes. But when I record in my room, I have to position the mikes fairly close to the piano. I can hear the interaction of the strings. It's not a pure sound at all. Of course, there is the additional interaction of a larger acoustical area.

TAV: Do you think the recording process has tipped into the science of sound vs. the sound of music?

GW: Well, I think that the process of re-creation poses a number of complications. The amplifiers that I have in my system are the first tube amplifiers that I have used in years. John Taylor of Yankee Audio found that they worked synergistically with his full-range ribbon speakers. The first thing that one notices is that the

sound is so totally different from that produced by a transistor amplifier. You are able to hear spatial depth and a fuller instrumental timbre. Most tube amplifiers are euphonic. (The most expensive of them, the Ongaku, is clearly colored.) But these are not. A very few tube amplifiers are more accurate than transistor amplifiers in general. The latter are incapable of conveying the sense of warmth or of reproducing subtleties of sound. Amps with huge outputs, built like battleships, are some of the worst offenders.

TAV: Many people find more differences within each genre, transistors and tubes. That the whole scale of, say, tube amp sound is broader than the differences between the two.

GW: The design of my amps is quite successful. They have been slightly modified. The original tubes have been replaced by significantly better ones. Tubes vary in quality and they can make an enormous difference in the same amp design.

TAV: You are a performer as well as a composer. What about the education of a performer? Do you think that most pop and jazz musicians, as opposed to classical, play what their fingers allow them to play rather than what they hear in their head and want to play?

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GW: There are a number of considerations. First of all, there is a body of figurations, a body of clichés which anyone who plays jazz is familiar with. With these figurations are harmonies that every jazz instrumentalist knows. Secondly, jazz is an improvisatory medium. Jazz performers practice to cultivate their skills in retention of tunes and the acquisition of techniques associated

with their confrères. When I was teaching at Smith College, a jazz pianist, who performed nightly in a club, came to me for lessons. He practiced 40 to 50 songs every day, transposing them into every key. But he complained that his scales were not even.

TAV: So there is an interior part of the mind at work and not just what the fingers are playing.

GW: The fingers are merely adjuncts! Every instrumentalist has to have technique (although Miles Davis is obviously deficient in this respect). He has to have an intuitive sense of organization and the ability to shape the materials with which he is working.

TAV: Let's ask the Glenn Gould question. Was he right about recorded vs. live sound? Is there truth and/or beauty for you in a live performance with all the inherent problems—the coughing, the candy wrappers, the shaky hands, the fears of loss of memory—or can you only have a true re-creation of a performance

through the means of recording technic within a controlled environment?

GW: I think that Gould's contention is highly questionable. In making a recording, performers want to achieve a consistent level of technical control. But even when you feel you have done as well as you can, inevitably, after you have heard the playback, you think you would like to do something better or differently. Performances under any conditions are rarely completely definitive. The satisfaction derived from listening to one's own recording is invariably tempered. With a studio recording, one always is likely to be even more critical and analytical of details than one would be with a live performance in a hall. In a recording, one can be deluded into thinking that a certain amount of repetition will always make things better. Even if you are relatively satisfied with the performance, there is always the possibility that the sound quality isn't as good as you would like. Glenn Gould's most impressive recording, that of Bach's Goldberg Variations, is the earlier of two versions. The second version suffers by comparison musically and sonically reflects the quality of early digital sound. A live performance is ritualistic and establishes an expectancy and a bond between the artist and his audience that cannot be duplicated.

TAV: Inherent to live music performance is the factor of risk. And there are times those risks offer some of the most divine moments one will ever experience.

GW: Certainly you would like to feel both comfortable and assured in a performance. But that seldom happens. You are not comfortable in a recording session either. It's not an easy experience. Typically, if you play for a half hour, get up for 10 minutes and then come back to the same piece, the piano feels totally different.

TAV: Have all the great recordings made the live audience tougher for the performers? Have the standards for live performance crept up over the years?

GW: The recording medium is limited in many respects. You cannot get the dynamic range or the spaciousness of orchestral sound in a recording. You

can, however, capture a lot of the inflection that the person in the audience will fail to hear. His concentration will lapse periodically and his attention is easily diverted by what happens physically on stage and around him. The advantage of a recording is you can come back to it to listen for details that had not noticed been before. But how certain things are done cannot be solved by simply listening to recordings. The totality of Horowitz is greater in an auditorium than on the average hi-fi system.

TAV: Good point. Can we talk about the art of composition? You received this year's Pulitzer Prize for your composition "Lilacs." What was its genesis?

GW: I was approached by the Boston Symphony which subsequently commissioned me to compose a work for

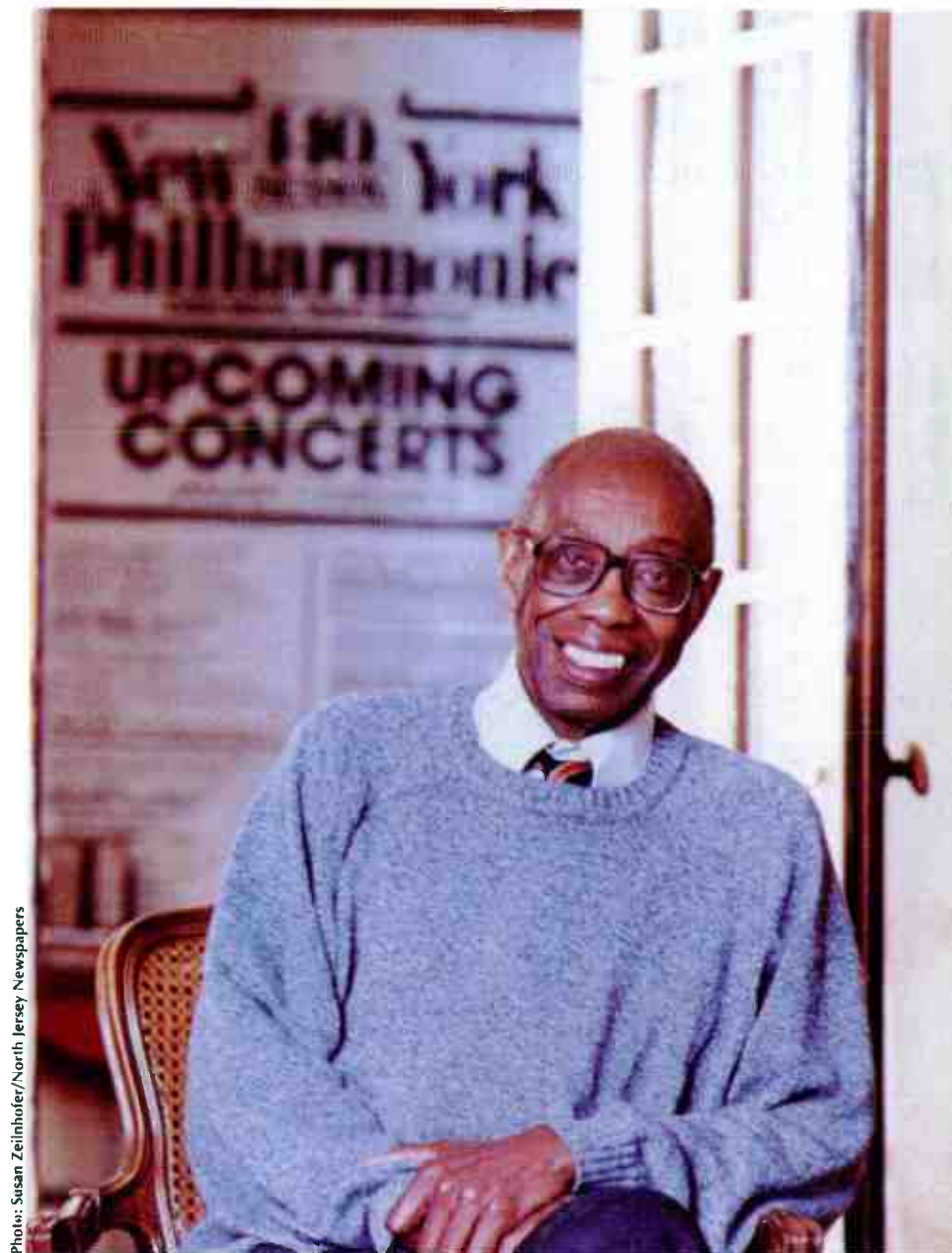


Photo: Susan Zeilhofer/North Jersey Newspapers

tenor and orchestra for several subscription concerts that were planned to honor the memory of Roland Hayes, the distinguished black classical artist who made his debut with the Boston Symphony. It was specified that the work should be eight to 10 minutes in duration. The choice of text was left to me, although it was suggested that it should be appropriate for the occasion. (As an aside, the tenor, Vinson Cole, found the work too difficult for him and a soprano, Faye Robinson, sang the part.) I would have the use of the full resources of the orchestra. However, when the score was submitted to the BSO, the artistic director telephoned me to ask if it was necessary to use the harpsichord. The piece requires the harpsichord in two places, one chord in each place.

TAV: And???

GW: I said "yes!" quite emphatically. The text that I finally chose resulted from the perusal of many anthologies and collections of poems. I was concerned about the length of the poem as well as its content. Making judgments about poetry is usually difficult for me. A poem can have too many stanzas. Perhaps you don't like every stanza, or you don't like one line of a stanza. I elected to use Walt Whitman's great poem "When Lilacs Last In The Dooryard Bloom'd" because I wanted the challenge of free verse once again. Previously, I had made a setting of T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," a work for soprano and chamber ensemble. The final result was most gratifying. So I decided to find a text that would offer similar demands. Many of my songs for voice and piano use metrical texts. I was very familiar with the first verses of the Whitman poem and with two well-known settings of the entire poem by Paul Hindemith and Roger Sessions. I was never convinced that their works captured the lyrical essence of the poem. Since I was limited to 10 minutes, although my setting was extended to 16 minutes, I had to decide which of the 16 stanzas I



would use. I chose the first three stanzas after beginning cautiously with the first stanza. The second stanza is quite different and more difficult to frame. But my confidence grew when I finished it. In writing for voice and orchestra, you always have to be concerned about the orchestration. "Is this too over-powering for the singer?" "How can I make this dramatic without covering the voice?" But I don't consider the orchestration of any work until after I've finished a piece. The third stanza went swimmingly. But I didn't think the three stanzas would be sufficient. I found that the thirteenth stanza makes reference to gray-brown bird. This impressed me because it suggests isolation and loneliness. I have always thought of the isolation of the artist, the voice crying in the wilderness, creating music, that

few hear, and many are oblivious of. Roland Hayes was this bird, a black classical artist who dared to sing European lieder, who dared to place spirituals on recitals of concert music.

Each of the stanzas begins with an introduction by the orchestra. Three symbols appear in the poem—the lilac, the star, the bird—and those words appear in most of the four stanzas that I chose. So in "Lilacs," the flowers are represented by a decorative figuration of an initial triplet that expands later with more extended flourishes. The star is not defined motivically because its presence is submerged by

the brooding ambiance of the subsequent verses in the stanza, a nether world out of which the star emerges.

TAV: Were you at rehearsals?

GW: Yes, but not at the first rehearsal. I arrived in Boston for the second rehearsal and I was pleased to see how thoroughly Ozawa worked with the orchestra. The orchestra had their parts perfectly prepared. Ozawa was most accommodating in repeating sections that the soprano requested.

TAV: Were you at the premier and, if so, were you pleased with the performance?

GW: Yes, I was there. AT&T, which funded the commission, gave a dinner for 300 persons before the premiere. The performance was wonderful and the two singers (Vinson Cole sang the first half of the program) and I received huge bouquets of flowers. I have never received more compliments after a performance.

TAV: As a composer and a performer, is there room for a different interpretation of your works by other artists?

GW: Initially, the performer must find the right tempo. As a composer, I determine what as accurately as possible with a metronomic marking. Terms such as "allegro" or "adagio" are too indefinite in contemporary music. But no indication is sacrosanct. Chopin Etudes have metronomic markings that in many instances are impossible to realize because they are too fast. Composers can miscalculate. The applies to Beethoven as well as Chopin. Sometimes a conductor will arbitrarily change a tempo with disastrous results. Gunther Schuller made the mistake of taking the ending of one of my works faster than I had intended. The poignancy of the conclusion of the work was lost.

For the past 3-1/2 years I've been working on revisions of my compositions, checking the metronomic indications and other markings. Tempos markings can change slightly in performances. However, if the basic tempo is not correct, this is a serious mistake. I once told a conductor after a performance of my "Lyric for Strings," "You took it too slowly because where it's indicated 'piu lento,' you couldn't go any slower!"

There are levels of intensity that are seldom achieved. I have heard performances in which the playing was accurate, but uninvolved because of tonal monotony or a lack of sensitive phrasing or a lack of dynamic contrast.

When I perform music from the standard repertoire, there are many musical considerations that I must make clear to the listener. But they must be well-defined in my mind first. I remember a conversation that took place several years ago with the writer and lecturer, Joseph Horowitz, and another pianist. Horowitz asked us if there was only one way to interpret a work, a silly question. The other pianist said "Yes. My way!"

TAV: How much liberty should musicians be permitted as interpreters?

GW: When I was a student, I made it an objective to religiously adhere to the composer's markings. The lay person will construe this to imply a certain literal-mindedness (some critics are equally naive). But the piano is not a typewriter. There are many gradations that can be suggested within a dynamic. The right

tempo, the right notes, the right rhythm, the awareness of phrase endings are the rudimentary aspects of the projection of a piece of music. Rhythmic distinctions that my teacher, Rudolf Serkin, pointed out to me are fundamental to playing accurately.

TAV: Often, musicians are used for their "expert" ear to judge hi-fi equipment, and inevitably we hi-fi folk find that the musicians have been listening to the performance—whether the right notes were played in the right tempo, rather than to the quality of the equipment. They have not been listening to speaker distortion or the amp clipping or problems with the turntable or tape deck. And yet we interviewers are stunned to see the hi-fi equipment in your system. You are one of the few performing artists that we've met who has such an *extraordinary* component system. Why aren't other musicians interested? Is their hearing that different?

What do you think is going on here?

GW: I think that musicians are primarily concerned with how well they have played. That's their focus. It is only when musicians are making a recording that they become aware of the aspects revealed by a recording that must be reconciled with the impres-

sions previously formed in their minds. The audiophile does not have the slightest idea of the mindset of great classical instrumentalists. As much satisfaction that one can have from an audio system, this is essentially a passive relationship. Different realities are manifested for the performer sitting in a hall with his instrument. The audiophile spends a lot of time listening to and rearranging his equipment. For the typical musician, distinguishing between one piece of equipment and another would not only be time consuming, but irrelevant to the pleasure and pain connected to studying, learning and playing music. This is an active involvement that demands far more adjustments than adjusting the cartridge's VTA.

I became interested in audio when I was living in an apartment in New York City. When I tried to practice, the lady in the adjoining apartment would turn up her radio. There were predictable complaints by her to the super. Since my practice was going to be limited, I decided that I would spend more time listening to music on my Zenith portable radio. It occurred to me that I should try to record any interesting contemporary works that I heard. I bought a Uher tape recorder. When I realized that the quality of the tape that I made was poor, I took my first entry level step and purchased a Sherwood receiver and a pair of Altec Lansing speakers. My principal fascination was the recording process. A year later, I bought my first professional Ampex recorder, a 350 series. It was not primarily the

A performer must play in the proper tempo.

idea of owning more and a more sophisticated professional equipment, but the pursuit of understanding the nature of sound. I approached the marketing of sound components by the less-than-knowledgeable high-end dealers with a more jaundiced eye than do audiophiles who are looking for an elusive sense of satisfaction.

I published an article on the reproduction of piano sound. The thrust of my comments made in the 1960s is applicable today even though we have passed from analog to digital. To record any instrument, especially the piano, there is a limit to how much sound can be absorbed in a tape before the tape becomes saturated. If you are recording a piano, you want to reproduce the loudest possible sound. But you have to compromise because when the meters in the recorder indicate that you are in the red zone or at 0 dB, you must avoid the inevitable distortion that will make the notes unrecognizable. Yet, it is amazing to me that one small diamond in a stylus can manage to trace a groove and reproduce tones that are undeniably close to the sound of real music.

TAV: How do you identify your involvement with the audio world and high-fidelity equipment? Is it a passion; it certainly seems to be looking at your system?

GW: It began as an accommodation to an unhealthy residential situation and a desire to find a way to continue my musical education by spending more time listening to music. At the same time, it provided a release of a certain amount of tension. It became a hobby--an expensive one, to be sure. I no longer have those tensions, but audio still allows me to shift my attention from composing and practicing to learn more about music by concentrated listening for brief periods when there is something of interest to be heard. Fortunately, my system represents the crowning achievement in my search for personal satisfaction. My Yankee speakers are, in my opinion, the finest available transducers. They have provided me with an accurate assessment of the CDs that I have made for Albany Records: *George Walker in Recital*;

George Walker, A Portrait, and *George Walker (Chamber Music)*. For this, I am eternally grateful.

**My hi-fi system
allows me to
shift my attention
from composing
to learn more
about music.**

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Stereophile, May 1996.
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- Robert Harley on the DIAC-2000 Ultra D-A Converter.
Stereophile, April 1996.
Vol. 19 No. 4

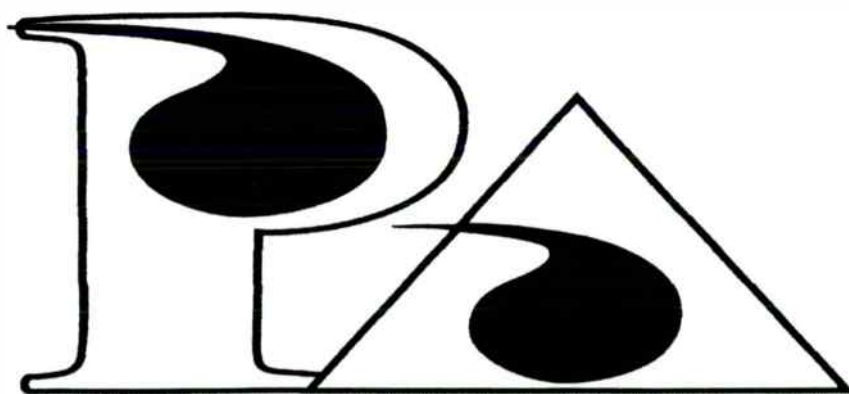
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There's only one way to do a show in the Big Apple, and that is BIG! And while you're at it, make it classy. Fortunately, that's exactly what Hi-Fi '96 was—huge and classy. To get the classy part right, the powers that be chose to do the show at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, a place oozing history and elegance. And big? Well, you simply had to be there.

I'd hate to have been a first-time attendee, because the choices were staggering: Lively seminars, live concerts, and countless truly exciting exhibits. The show covered 11 floors, occupied approximately 160 rooms, and had roughly 390 exhibitors participating. Having merely endured the '96 WCES in Las Vegas a few months earlier, Hi-Fi'96 was a marvelous breath of fresh air.

The exhibit rooms at the Waldorf-Astoria not only had solid walls to help the sound, but they were spread apart from each other on each floor to avoid interference with adjacent neighbors. While you might think that this made for long, difficult walks between rooms, the actual impression was of ease and accessibility.

There were some very elaborate displays by individual firms, but the icing on the cake was the high-quality sound reproduction in the cooperative exhibits. Good sound was the rule in the coop rooms, and not the exception, and while this has been more and more true over the last few years, it was never more evident than at Hi-Fi'96.

It should be common knowledge by now that the gigantic exhibits are seldom the work of a single manufacturer. Let's face it, these days few single firms are in a position to underwrite such a venture. Which is why a number of manufacturers go Dutch and the visitor is the beneficiary of some pretty exotic presentations.

But if you imagine that every co-op system presented was meticulously selected and tried out first, well, you are sadly mistaken. What really happens is that many displays are assembled over the telephone where such considerations as politics, store policies, and alliances play a bigger role

HI-FI '96: A BITE OF THE BIG APPLE

Arnis Balgalvis

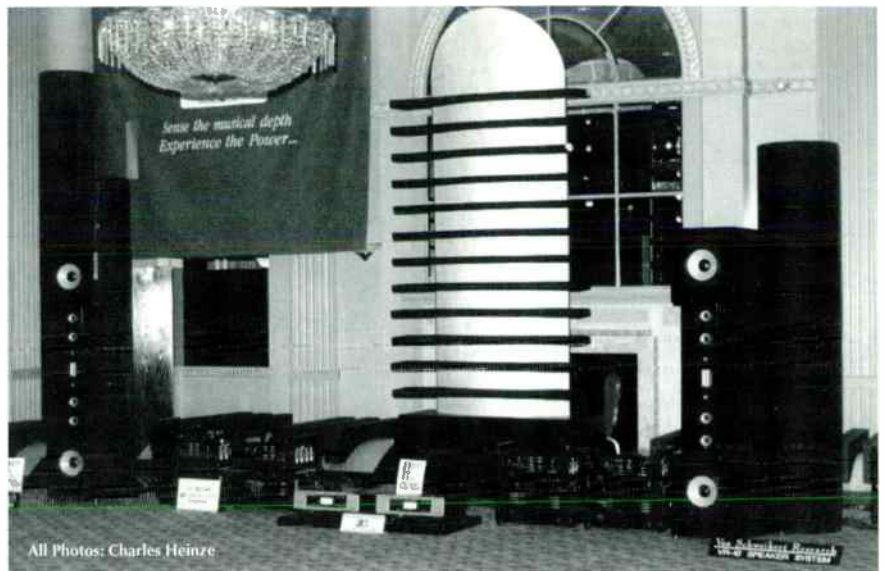
Perhaps the most elaborate presentation at Hi-Fi '96 was by ASC, C.E.C./Parasound, Tice, Von Schweikert, and VTL in Astor Salon.

than does optimum compatibility. Since the stakes are high and with money as the primary driving force here—remember, we're talking high-end here—this should not come as a surprise.

What I find far more disconcerting is that numerous system components are displayed fresh out of the box without having been burned in or broken in. How do I know? Because on the first day, and, of course, that's when the trade is making their rounds, too many excuses regarding the virgin nature of the product are heard. This is so simple to rectify and something that no member of the press wants to hear as a cop-out. At shows, the manufacturers get a chance to put their best foot forward, so just do the right thing, guys!

Out of a total of the four days I spent at the show, two of them were spent with fellow Audiophile Society member and friend Bill Brassington. Impeccably dressed, as usual, and commensurately quick witted about matters of sound reproduction, also as usual, Bill made my time at the show more enjoyable, and this report would not have been as complete without his help.

Without a doubt, the most elaborate presentation at Hi-Fi '96 was put on by the consortium of, in alphabetical order, ASC, C.E.C./Parasound, Tice, Von Schweikert, and VTL. And just how elaborate was this? Just picture a room roughly 40 feet wide, 100 feet long and 20 feet high, with alcoves and other spaces off to each side. For room treatment, strategically install the largest ASC panels ASC's Art Noxon has ever designed. Get Albert Von Schweikert to supply his flagship \$60,000 VR-10 speaker system, and use three pairs of Luke Manley's VTL Wotan monoblocks to supply a total of 7,500 watts of power. Connect everything with George Tice's TCP treated wires, cables, and power conditioning, and have Parasound throw in their wonderful C.E.C. belt-drive CD player along with their DAC. Last, but certainly not least, take care of visitors by providing them some 25 well-positioned seats. Now you're talking "elaborate," now you're talking "exhibit." It looked like this was a formula for success; every time I was there, the room was full of people having a good time. From there on, because of that gigantic room, almost everything appeared scaled down.



But even in rooms of smaller volume, there were some very serious exhibits. Wilson Audio with their X-1s teamed up with Conrad-Johnson electronics and the Well Tempered Reference in the Louis XVI room. Sound By Singer went all out and displayed in—get this—six rooms. A Wilson Watt was powered by Krell; B&W 802 and 805 with Elite by Pioneer; Sonus Faber was teamed with Krell and REL; a Klyne phono stage with SME 20 turntable, Sonus Faber Guarneri driven by a Krell 300, a Martin-Logan Aerius with Magnum Dynalab/OCM were a few of the systems one might find. In all the Singer exhibits, Transparent Ultra and Plus cables provided the connectors.

Then there was North Star Leading the Way with their Jadis electronics and their Eurithmie horn loudspeaker. Or the JMLab Grand Utopia loudspeakers; these beauties, checking in at a cool \$65,000, were gathering crowds when I was there.

Audio Note used this occasion to introduced their new preamp, the M10, which along with the Audio Note Baransu, a 9-wpc, single-ended triode power amp, were driving the Avant Garde Acoustic Trio compact horns. Mike Trei and Herb Reichert treated many to a very memorable sonic experience where the startling presence and dynamics headlined one of the more credible presentations.

Of all these large exhibits, the Avalon Osirus tickled my fancy the most. Here again, ASC, Avalon, MIT, and Spectral were united by Terry Menacker of Overture in Wilmington, Del., with Art Noxon, Neil Patel, Lucien Pichette, and Joe Abrams. It's a pity they did not have a wider room to let the speakers breathe, but in the room they did have, I was impressed by some spectacular feats of articulation and experienced some exceptional staging. Just how difficult was this room? All it took to tame the acoustics were 72 ASC tube traps and some sleepless nights to place them. The resulting delicacy,

focus, and rendition of harmonics were what they set out to accomplish: State-of-the-art. It's also something that will cost you dearly; the speakers alone are \$72,000.

Working under the RSA name in a much smaller room, Dick Sequerra showed off his latest efforts, the marvelous Signature MKII Loudspeaker System, the UA-1 power amps, and the PA-1 preamp. The retail prices are \$70,000, \$75,000, and \$8,000 respectively. The speaker system consists of two three-way main towers and two sub-woofers. The amplifiers are similarly elaborate with two amplifier blocks and two power supplies. Judging from the general comments, Dick appeared to have gained the attention of many good ears.

At this point let me come down to earth and plant my feet firmly on the ground. On an absolute basis, this dream stuff may very well be very exciting, but for me it's too titillating. I have a hard time relating to it because I know that stores and shows are the only places where I'll get near these Never-Never Land goodies. I want to be in reasonable financial proximity of being able to attain something and not be forever relegated to merely dreaming about it.

So let's look at some other really good sounding rooms of more moderate fiscal requirements. However, let me just tell you right now that I don't believe in a best sound of the show concept. There were quite a few displays that were superb, but each had something going for it that the next room did not. Consequently, I will point out a number of systems that were exceptional without singling out any one in particular. There was, however, one floor, the sixth, that should perhaps received the "best sounding floor of the show" award. Here, practically in every room, I found the sonics to be so universally rewarding that I felt very much at home and, as a result, had the most fun here. It gets my vote for the best-sounding floor.

Wadia's presentation, for starters, sure gave my goose-bumps a workout. This was by far their most thought-out and best-sounding exhibit ever. They had a large room treated with RPG diffusers; Jeff Rowland's Model 6 power amps with the optional battery power packs were driving one of my all-time favorite speak-

ers, the Avalon Eclipses, via Cardas Golden Cross cables. The occasion? The introduction of Wadia's Model 27 DAC or, as they call it, the Decoding Computer. Starting with a built-in, digital-domain volume control, this unit uses the latest Wadia technology, while incorporating the needed flexibility to be adapted to whatever the future may bring. In a word—upgradeability. Peter Bohacek fed many marvelous CDs into Wadia's Model 7 transport, and he easily demonstrated to his always-crowded room, that there's nothing like showing up prepared for getting excellent results.

A few doors down was John Ötvös and his Waveform Mach 17 speakers. A full-range, three-way design intended to be used with its dedicated electronic crossover, the system is sold on a factory-direct basis for \$6,000. John had (once again) a well-treated room, and he used a Sony CDP-707 CD player's variable output into a double set of Bryston 5B ST three-channel amplifiers per side to produce some very vivid staging, well-balanced and extended spectral response, and crisp transients, as well as extremely credible

timbral rendition. John was a very careful presenter, paying great attention to the demo material. His product left a lasting impression on me with its ability to convey a very convincing feeling of musicality.

A few more doors further on, N.E.W. and Diapason teamed up to produce exceptional results. N.E.W. provided their new pure Class-A Model DCA-66 power amp, selling for a very reasonable \$3,000, to drive the Diapason's Adamantes (\$3,995) placed on the Diapason stands. Luminous Audio had wired the system throughout with their new Synchestra Signature interconnects and the Renaissance speaker wire (\$9 per foot plus \$40 for terminations). I don't what secret the Italians know about making great sounding small speakers, but here's another room where I was completely taken by surprise. I mean, the Adamantes is small! But don't let that stand in the way! That's only appearance! The performance is the exact opposite. It's HUUUUGE! With a rock-solid image and a mosaic-like stage, this was one impressive demo. My notes at the time: "Seamless and



I don't want
to merely
dream about
great gear.

Rotel Report

3



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Jitter? The RDP-980's specially selected optical input modules and high speed, wide bandwidth coaxial amplifiers minimize it. Additional circuit stages precisely synchronize all digital inputs and outputs to the RDP-980's master clock to effectively eliminate it.

Delta/Sigma modulation with 64x oversampling and fifth order noise shaping follows a high resolution 8x digital filter. A voltage-reference switched-capacitor D/A then converts the high density data stream to a constant voltage analog signal.

The analog stage features high precision metal film resistors throughout. Close tolerance polypropylene foil and epoxy-dipped ceramic capacitors complement the FET-based operational amplifiers.

The result? A spacious, detailed, and totally non-fatiguing presentation of all your digital sources.

RDD-980 CD Transport

Rotel's RDD-980 CD Transport begins with Philips' highly regarded CDM-9 laser mechanism, long respected by critical audiophiles for precise tracking and immunity from external vibrations.

We didn't stop there. We suspended the mechanism in the center of the RDD-980's substantial chassis for even better damping of resonances that could cloud delicate musical information. We thoroughly isolated the motors, tracking servos, digital circuitry, and the information display with a multi-segment, dual transformer power supply. We minimized minute internal supply variations with precise voltage regulators, oversized heat sinks, and high grade capacitors. We included both coaxial and optical digital outputs, full remote control capabilities, and housed it all in well-shielded heavy gauge all-metal chassis.



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very deep soundstage, extremely coherent and vivid, powerful dynamics."

Moving right along, I ran into Charlie Gavaris of Melos. He pointed to their latest pride and joy, a 75-wpc, single-ended triode amp. I had no misgivings about the sound at all; rich, resonant, and extremely engaging. I'm sure the Vandersteen 3As had lot to with it. Melos sure made a point with me that SE designs are not relegated to the low-power regions. There is hope yet, thank you. And thank you, George Bishoff, for getting me the name of that wonderful new Hans Thiessink CD; after I heard it played in the Melos room, it was in the must-have category.

To me, press conferences are a hit or miss proposition. I know everybody has to pitch what they consider important, but some of the propaganda propagated at these gatherings is of limited use. That's the miss part.

But then there are organizations like Classic Records, who understand how valuable the time at shows is, and they proceed to conduct events that end up being in the highlight category. This was precisely the case of the conference that Classic's Mike Hobson conducted to make several announcements concerning a bigger and better reissue program. For example, he announced that Classic Records had remastered Jennifer Warnes' Famous Blue Raincoat and New World Records' Pulse, with both releases to appear in 180-gram vinyl and gold CD versions. Famous Blue Raincoat, believe it or not, has been around for 10 years now, and Classic is celebrating by going all out to give us great sonics on this audiophile classic. Capturing the essence of good recorded sound, Pulse is a demo fave as well, having been recorded in the famous RCA Studio A by Tony Salvatory.

To top it all off, Classic's press kit included these two goodies in both formats as well as a 45-rpm version of several renowned passages from the Classic Records catalog: "Temptation" by the Holly Cole Trio on side one and two cuts from the new Buddy Guy Live album The Real Deal. Very nice and very generous.

The crowning moment of the conference come when refinement lit up the stage during some exceptional

Mike introduced Jennifer Warnes to the audiophile press corps. After a few awkward moments, Jennifer took over and, before long, had the crowd mesmerized. I came away awed by her artistic commitment, her dedication to her work, and her open-mindedness about audiophile concerns.

Sony also had a very interesting presentation; the core of the matter was DVD. It was fascinating to see how the picture aspect ratios and dialogue language can be changed at the flick of a remote control button. Sony also addressed the sonic considerations of DVD. Without in any way implying finalized formats, Sony demonstrated a very viable discrete five-channel recording. From where I sat, the sonic presentation was very credible and acceptable, though the choice of music was another matter.

Sony also demonstrated the effect of increasing the digital word length from 16 to 20 bits while keeping the sampling frequency constant at 44.1kHz. To my ears, the 20-bit format had significantly less edginess, provided more transparency and air, and presented instruments and voices in a more credible manner.

Anthony Gallo knows what to do when he has a good thing going, make it better. So he now uses aluminum for his spherical enclosure to finesse the sonic side of things, and he has reworked the appearance to jazz up the aesthetics. The external capacitor, which tended to give the earlier system a work-in-progress look, has now been relocated to an out-of-sight and therefore out-of-mind position. With a Pass Aleph 0 amp doing the driving, the sonics were right at home on the exceptional-sounding sixth.

Also on the sixth floor was Totem. Their new Tabu model impressed me even more than it had at the WCES, as what Vincent Bruzzeze has done is to use a capacitor-less crossover for the tweeter, which means there is nothing in series with the signal to degrade it. The highs had a pristine quality with an extension and definition that was thrilling. Since Totem is well-known for their imaging prowess, this added

The Sony DVD presentation was very interesting.



Sounding good at Hi-Fi '96, the Wayform Mach 17 uses an electronic crossover.

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After a quarter century of hand building tube amplifiers for the world's top musicians, we are pleased to offer the Baron to the Audiophile Community. A true dual-mono design – offering up to 150 watts per channel – the 12 power tubes can be switched incrementally...from full Pentode authority to 1/3 Triode, through 2/3 Triode, and finally to all Triode richness...during the performance.

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"The Baron from Mesa Engineering is, quite simply, the coolest new hi-fi toy since the George Kaye Tube Checker. It has plenty of 'air', wonderful midband clarity and a clearly discernible three-dimensionality. The selectable tube mode, feedback and earthing are enough to make it (probably) the most accommodating high-end amp on the market, adaptable to just about any system you can imagine. For once we have a product which dazzled everyone at its hi-fi show launch and then actually delivered the goods in practice."

Audition the Baron's tunable soundstage at one of these fine audio establishments and experience for yourself what we like to call *The Spirit of Art in Technology*.

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"There's nothing left out, no optional extras. Everything you could possibly want in a 'fantasy' valve amp is there, including some features so generous, so kind, so thoughtful that the sadistic snobs in the traditional high-end sector wouldn't dream of giving them to you."

All quotes from Ken Kessler, HiFi News & Record Review, January 1996
World Radio History

MESA
ENGINEERING

Vacuum Tube Audio

soundfield exhibitions.

In the same room Victor Tiscareno, the designer of the AudioPrism tube electronics line, demonstrated his CD Black Light, a plastic disc said to help produce better CD sound. It's intended to be placed on top of a CD, but only after it's been charged to fluorescence by exposing it for a few seconds to any

light source, with direct sunlight and fluorescent bulbs recommended.

Guess where I heard some of the best bass at the show? The Aerial room. And the floor? Six! Yes,

Two Gershman speakers could be heard on different floors.

Michael Kelly had an all-out Mark Levinson electronics/CD playback system driving his exceptional Aerial 10Ts. To talk about the 10Ts in terms of bass only is total injustice. This is as complete a \$5,000 speaker as there is. It proved that point in spades without having to resort to any excuses about the room or anything else. As always, Michael was informative and hypeless. What a pleasure.

Gershman Acoustics could be heard in two rooms, 601 and 701. On the sixth floor, the Avant Gardes, driven by the great-looking Sim Audio Celeste electronics, were giving what by now is the expected good showing. Obviously, the Celeste Moon P-5 all-balanced, remote-controlled preamp (\$3,595) and 175-wpc Moon W-5 power amp (\$3,995) are great performers, and have stunning looks as a bonus. The Avant Gardes recently had a mid-range driver upgrade, going from a dome unit to carbon-fiber cone. Unfortunately,

this improvement, and a couple of realistic production cost considerations, have forced them to increase the price of this model to \$3,995. I am happy to report that the sound was exceptional; they sure appear to be on the right track.

O.K., O.K., I'll get off the sixth floor right now!

On 7, Eli Gershman and his wife Ofra, who in my dealings with her while setting up a meeting with The Audiophile Society, appeared as capable of running their business as she is attractive, were showing the Gershman GAP 520-X, their \$8,995, all-out flagship.

Some more sonic thrills were in store for me at the Balanced Audio Technology room. Now here's a company which is coming along very nicely, thank you. From being a total newcomer at the '95 WCES, they have gone to featuring two rooms at Hi-Fi'96. Going Dutch with Quintessence, where their Stealth speakers were featured in a very large room, BAT also had a little set-up in a smaller room, where I ended up being mesmerized by the VK-5 preamp feeding a VK-60 stereo power amp, which in turn powered a pair of Sonus Faber Amators. (No, they weren't on the sixth floor, but judging from their presentation I heard that's where they belonged.) Never at a loss for driving dynamics home, the sonics were detailed, endowed with harmonic richness, and imaged with the best of the lot. I shudder to think what the next display was like, what with all the wonderful goodies there, but the room was too crowded to give it a try.

Platinum Audio's presentation was as good as it got at the show. Phil Jones had brought his Reference 2 speakers and achieved spectacular results while driving them with Steve McCormick's Powerdrive DNA power amps and using Straight Wire cables. Having enjoyed the Solos in my listening room, and heard Mark Block's Duos and Bill Brassington's Reference Ones, my expectations at the Platinum room still managed to be surpassed. The sound was that good.

While in this room, I observed some of the woes of a new manufacturer. A number of people sort of poked their head in the room, murmured "Platinum?" and left. Sad to say, but these folks lost out. Not everybody is famous right away, and new products deserve a chance. Who knows where the next Krell or Vandersteen or Cardas is going to appear?

Speaking of new, there were two companies making first appearances at Hi-Fi'96 who impressed me to no end. Clayton Audio, a manufacturer of some pure Class-A solid-state power amplifiers, was one, and Probe Audio Labs, who are putting out a loudspeaker, was the other.

Clayton Audio, who also happened to be on floor 6—so how could I not like them?—displayed two models: A 40-wpc stereo unit (\$2,450) and a pair of 70-wpc

The GAP 520-X is Gershman's allout flagship model.



SYNERGY? LOCKING-IN? ENHANCEMENT? COMPENSATION?

Someone try to "sell" you one of these? They are just a few of the misguided and ineffective solutions bandied about as sure to "fix" your audio system.

Sorry to be so negative, but the truth can be brutal. Understanding how to improve a system requires first acknowledging that nothing positive ever happens. Sure, it's fabulously positive to get music out the other end, but the signal only gets a little worse each step along the way.

Inserting a superior piece of equipment anywhere in the signal path will improve the quality of the final sound. However, the signal will not have been improved ... it will have simply suffered less damage. Believing claims that a component can improve the signal can lead to expensive frustration.

When a better component is substituted for a lesser piece, we expect a positive improvement, something like $1 + 1 = 2$. However, when the improvement seems unexplainably large, somewhat like $1 + 1 = 3$, then terms like "synergy" and "locking-in" are often used to describe this apparently magical change. Whatever the terminology, the actual improvement will be better understood when viewed as a change from a minus three to a minus one. The same two points change, but on the other side of zero.

Just because a change is greater than expected or understood, that doesn't make it magical or incomprehensible ... logic has not been compromised. For example, if something is too far away to see, that doesn't mean the distance in-between is infinite.

The logic of a good system is very simple: Every component matters! The electronics, the speakers, the cables ... even every solder joint, they all cause damage. Each component is like one of the dirty panes of glass in this illustration, each one blocks a bit of the view. The quality of the final performance, or the clarity of the view, is the original minus the damage done by all the pieces in-between. Improving any one of the components will improve the sound. Cleaning any one of the glass panes will allow a clearer view.

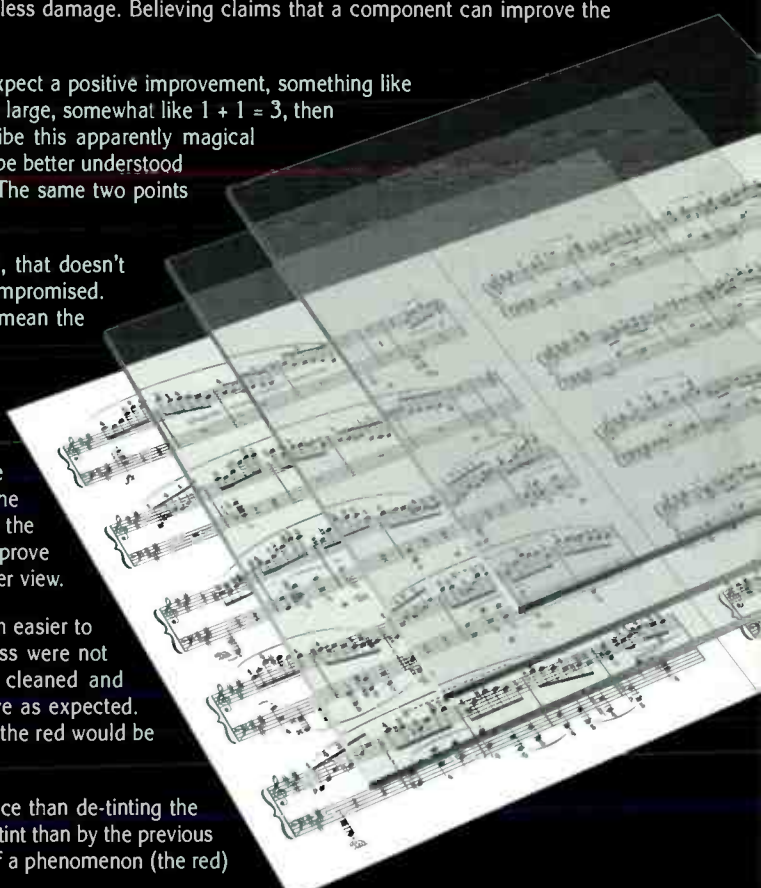
Recognizing the negative nature of our challenge makes it much easier to understand "unexplainable" improvements. If the panes of glass were not only dirty, but also had a red tint, then as each pane was cleaned and Murined (get the red out), the view of the music would improve as expected. However, it would only be after the last pane was de-tinted that the red would be completely gone.

De-tinting this last pane would seem to make more of a difference than de-tinting the others. We would be more impressed by the elimination of the red tint than by the previous changes in the density ... we are more sensitive to the presence of a phenomenon (the red) than to the quantity.

The "synergistic" aspect of this improvement would have been the same no matter which pane of glass happened to be the last one de-tinted. What was special about it was simply that it was last ... not much magic in that.

Assembling or upgrading a system to be sonically effective and cost-effective requires a broad perspective and a trustworthy evaluation methodology. Combined productively, these ingredients make the process predictable and enjoyable.

For more information about developing an effective evaluation methodology, please write/fax/call us to request our "Methodology" paper. Or you can borrow a "Get To Know Us" kit from one of our Center dealers ... the methodology discussion is included along with lots of different cables and accessories, and some great jazz and blues from AudioQuest Music.



monoblocks (\$4,000 per pair). Superbly executed, the amplifiers really sounded great with the Martin-Logan SR-3 hybrids. These amps, used in conjunction with the Krell KRC-3 preamp and the Linn Mimik CD player, exhibited a good balance of detail and exactness, without those dreaded cold and clinical artifacts. The sound was involving, harmonically rich, and very pleasing. And look at the price. Certainly a product of note.

Ditto for the Probe Audio Lab loudspeakers. I had met Rich Oddman, the designer, earlier at the WCES where he had introduced himself and previewed his future plans. Obviously, he's a man of his word because he does indeed have a product now, and furthermore, it's a product he can be proud to have designed. The sound of the Jayde model (\$3,995) was very extended and dynamic, and the speaker appeared to resolve intricate details very ably. What a pleasure to encounter new products of this caliber and nice, young designers making their mark.

I also came across another company that was as new as it was interesting. Silwaweld Audio Lab, Inc. from Korea displayed a line of tube products. While a pre-amp was available in addition to a 60-wpc (30-wpc triode) and a 15-watt SE (30-watts PP) amplifier, the 240-watt OTL mono amp looked very promising. The Silwaweld name is derived by combining "silver" and "welding." The silver refers to the metal used for the internal wiring, while welding is the method used to make the connections. These amps could be heard in two systems, the Silwaweld and the Gin Sound rooms. Both displays featured very elaborate and, I must add, very unusual-looking horn loudspeaker systems. Silwaweld had an assemblage of horn components placed somewhat precariously, while the other room featured a large three-way system that utilized horn loading for the lows and mids. In both cases, however, I found the sound not to be commensurate with the rest of the show and did not draw any conclusions about the sonics of the Silwaweld amps.

Leo Massey's display was another standout. Consisting of the Brentworth Sound Lab speakers,

together with a Wadia 16 directly feeding a VAIC power amp (sans preamp), this display remains a very positive memory. With a billowing soundscape enveloping the listener, the sound was open, transparent, and dynamic. Leo's audio acumen was very evident in how carefully his setup avoided the usual show display pitfalls.

Leo also has started an audio publication called the "Hy End Audio & Video." The Hy refers to our beloved Hy Kachalsky the founder of The Audiophile Society and The Audiophile Voice. It certainly was eerie to be handed this publication and see Hy's picture on the cover. On behalf of The Audiophile Society, thanks, Leo, for remembering Hy.

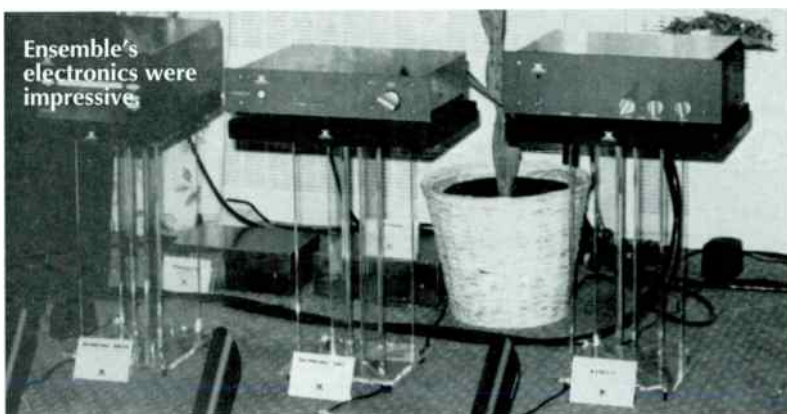
Epos introduced the ES-12 at \$995 a pair; this is a very carefully redesigned speaker with revisions too extensive to get into here. They were driven by the Creek CD-42 CD player (\$1,095) and the Creek 4240SE integrated amp (\$795), and produced sonics that had to be considered some of the best on a good sound-per-dollar basis.

Another good value could be found in the YBA and Mourdant-Short room. Which was one of those where you end up unexpectedly spending a lot of time because things are just so good. Using the YBA CD1 integrated amplifier (\$1,500) which has double power transformers and is rated at 50 wpc, the sound was not restricted at all. Very substantial SPL levels could be created without strain. Time well spent.

I'm sure the folks at mbl will remember Bill and me for quite some time. All we wanted to do was to see how loud the mbl 111 speakers (\$13,900) could play when driven by their incredibly huge power amplifier, the 9010 (\$19,790). The verdict: They can play VERY, VERY loud, and that's without falling apart or even approaching distortion. There is a very gratifying lack of coloration that a boxless design is capable of and, as Bill noticed, this is also one fast loudspeaker.

Even though Total Media Systems had just visited The Audiophile Society, and I had been significantly impressed with what Michael Levy had designed, I found it worthwhile to hear their Adibat 8.5 under different conditions. Bill, however, had not heard them, but he quickly became very enamored with their performance, which was no surprise to me. This is a product to watch.

Speaking of watching, while I did not get a chance hear them, I did get a good look at one of the Evett & Shaw SET Series loudspeakers where SET stands for Single-Ended Transducer. Boldly styled and extremely well made, the three models feature very high sensitivity of 95 dB SPL for 1 watt/1 meter. They have three models: Genoa, Firenze, and Milano, priced

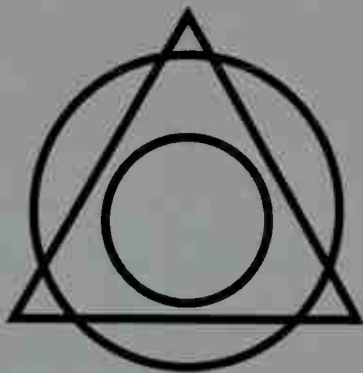


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\$5,950, \$11,900, and \$35,000 respectively. The speaker that caught my eye was the Genoa.

Something that I have been listening for a while to and have nothing but the highest praise are the new Decade series cables from TARA Labs. Of course, TARA has many number of other cable products below their Decade flagship line as I was able to learn in their display room. Karen Ford was as informative as ever as she outlined the creations of Matthew Bond. Being very familiar with the Series 1 and Series 2 upgrades in their Rectangular Solid Core lineup, I know that TARA Labs are at the forefront of producing state-of-the-art cable products.

All moaning and groaning about high prices came to screeching halt in the PSB suite. Here Paul Barton had a \$199/pair loudspeakers that were simply marvelous. Imaging like champs, these speakers went high and low well beyond any \$200 price tag expectations. Really great work.

And great was the manner in which Bill and I were received in the Monster Cable suite by none other than the Head Monster Noel Lee. With the '96 WCES B.B. King concert a recent memory, I had a chance to thank Noel for inviting The Audiophile Voice crew to this fascinating event in Vegas. At Hi-Fi'96 Monster Cable was introducing the M-series cables, their completely redesigned cable complement. Using a better dielectric and a copper mylar shield across the board and the Monster Network Terminator, Noel has refined his products to perform better yet. And what about the premier Monster line, the Sigma series? I was curious about progress there, having used the Sigma components in my system for many years. "That's the next project" was Noel's response.

No show report would be complete without a mention of the wonderful folks from Ensemble. As fond as I am of Urs Wagner and his charming wife Ann, I had total surprise in their room. Guy Lemcoe, an old buddy from my Stereophile days, happened to be doing some work for Ensemble and we had a great time recalling "the good old days." Urs proceeded to dazzle me with a few more extremely well-recorded CDs while he showed off his latest creation, the Profisa. Profisa? Well, you take the Profundo woofer module and combine it with the Elisa monitor and voila! the Profisia full-range loudspeaker. The effort was worth it. The sounds had the usual Ensemble trademarks of transparency, speed and space. Yes! I like it like that!

Apogee's Jason Bloom, now that they're under the a/d/s umbrella, had collaborated with Ed Meitner of Museatex and was showing for the first time the self-powered Ribbon Monitors and the new self-powered sub-woofer designed by Ed. Brassington and I have been very taken by this little wonder from Apogee but

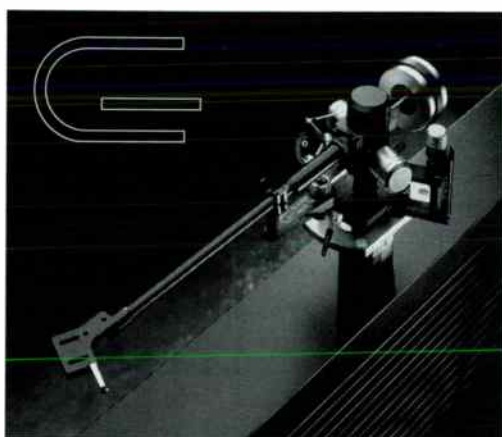
without the built-in amps. At the show, Jason featured DTS and Circle Surround multi-channel systems. I was very impressed by the very lively and dynamic nature of this very well-integrated combination. The woofer's tight and controlled performance mated splendidly with the coherent performance of the Apogee Ribbon Monitors. Lots of the software was supplied by none other than Tom Jung of dmp, a man who is once again pioneering the future. Tom has been recording Circle Surround encoded CDs for some time in anticipation of some form of multi-channel spec in the DVD format.

Then there were some very well known companies introducing new products. For example, both Basis and VPI introduced new turntables at Hi-Fi'96. A.J. Conti displayed a new model, the 2001 (\$3,000), to join the very well-received Debut and Ovation models. Using the Ovation bearing and motor assembly, the 2001 is derived from the tried and proven design principles of the previous Basis models. As can be expected, the 2001 had the great looks that A.J. is known for.

Great looking is also the only way to describe the new VPI Aeries turntable from Harry Weissfeld. Coupled with the JMW Memorial tonearm, this combination was stunning. The literature described it as a "mini-TNT with the performance of a TNT." Judging from Harry's track record, we can anticipate lots of sonic magic to be well on its way. I think it important to note that the JMW Memorial tonearm was used in a significant number of exhibits. It's a product that is making a name for itself very quickly. While on the subject of analog and vinyl, I must report having seen numerous exhibits featuring analog playback. The ASC, VTL, Tice show, Avalon/MIT/Spectral, Diapason/N.E.W., Acarian, Paragon/Jeff Rowland, Discovery Cable, SME/Klyne/Sonus-Faber, Audio Note and Sound by Singer are just a few of the rooms where analog was honored.

Shure must also be recognizing the special state of analog because they held a press conference at the Lyle Cartridge display to announce the reintroduction of the V15 Type V cartridge now called the V15VxMR. Boy, did that bring back memories! I remember Jim Kogan and Bernie Jakobs holding press conferences to announce the original V15 Type V cartridges and all the upgrades that followed. The V15 Type V has never been equaled in its ability to trace the information the groove flawlessly at the very reasonable tracking pressure of 1 gram. I have often wondered if the V15 actually tracked the groove very accurately but not to the liking of audiophiles who preferred the sound of low compliance, high tracking force moving-coil designs. Could it be that the resulting groove deformations during playback with MC designs produced colorations that beguiled the dreamers?

Hear It at Its Best



Graham Engineering 1.5t/c tonearm



Stereophile's ANALOG SOURCE of 1995

"The Graham tonearm was voted best by a two-to-one margin...superbly thought out and implemented...the last word in adjustability...among the simplest to successfully set up and calibrate...to see it is to covet it"
Stereophile, December 1995, Vol. 18 No. 12

Benz Glider Phono Cartridge

"This is a killer cartridge...the combination of detail, precision imaging, and yet a warm, full-bodied, non-fatiguing sound was most captivating...the Glider is 'way' recommended."

Lonnie Brownell, *Stereophile* August 1996, Vol. 19 No. 8



Aesthetix Benz Cartridge Demagnetizer

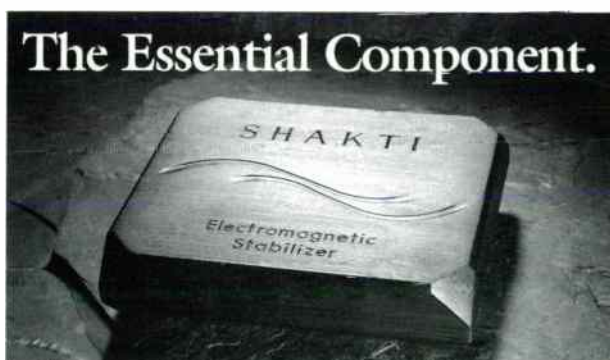
"Everyone who's into analog is sure to want one of the cute battery-powered cartridge demagnetizers from Aesthetix."

Las Vegas '96 WCES report by Richard J. Rosen and Lonnie Brownell
Stereophile, April 1996, Vol. 19 No. 4

SHAKTI

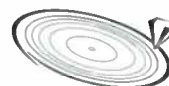
"I'll be damned if there wasn't a whole new level of depth and clarity to the presentation. Pretty amazing...I give the Shakti Electromagnetic Stabilizer a big "thumbs up."

Barry Willis, *Stereophile*, April 1996, Vol. 19 No. 4



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For the most part the V15VxMR will not be changed and it will do everything at least as well as the previous models according to Shure's Jim Lawson and Bob Kit. The new model will have a different body to "soften the brightness, resulting in a warmer, more musical sound." The V15VxMR will retail to the consumer at \$250. The previous practice of high discounting will not be continued.

As I wind down, my apologies to those I did not visit and to those I visited and did not find space to mention. In the words of Ed Sullivan: "This was a really big show" and Mark Block, Ross Wagner, and I can only do so much.

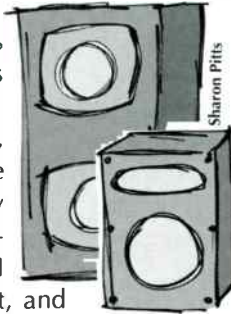
In closing, I have a confession to make. Yes, the show was exciting, and yes, there were more than enough exhibits that were truly thrilling. But despite that, something was missing. I don't think I'm jaded, nor do I think I have aged and turned cynical. Try as I might, and despite the fact that the sound quality heard at hi-fi shows today is far better on average than the very best sound heard only a decade ago, I can't but yearn for the excitement that the developments of years past created.

For example, there was total amazement at hearing Jon Dahlquist's DQ-10 at a N.Y. Hi-Fi show some 20 years ago. I couldn't believe what I heard and saw—here's this Quad ESL look-alike that had bass and could

play loud. Or the Jason Bloom Apogee Divas bowling everybody over at the very first Stereophile High End Show, again in NYC. And how about the ESL-63, the ARC SP-11, the Janis sub-woofer, the Krell KSA-100, and the Apogee Scintillas, the Well Tempered Arm and then their Turntable, the Wadia 2000 Decoding Computer? Now, those were exciting developments!

Is what we have now as good as it gets? Could it be we have peaked out? I sure hope so as far as some of the ridiculously high prices are concerned. I also hope makers do not take the buying public for fools and that they can snow them by introducing new models touting improvements, just to increase sales. Judging from the collapsing prices prevalent in the used gear market, the days of escalating prices are numbered. The masses are simply not willing to take it any more.

Magazines shouldn't pat themselves on the back and claim that because a publication is thriving, this translates into the industry as a whole doing well. Buying a copy of a magazine is much less expensive than buying a piece of equipment. It could be that people are confused and are desperately looking for answers. And are they really to be found? That's up to the whole industry to confront. See you at the next show.



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audio research

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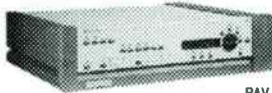


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A dealer I know, sounding vaguely like George Costanza on *Seinfeld*, said this to me the day before Hi-Fi '96 opened to the general public: "A thing like this needs a buzz. I didn't hear a buzz. Did you hear a buzz? I don't think there's a buzz." Indeed, there wuz no buzz. I unscientifically poled my clients, suppliers and cohorts from work—a sample that included ad agency people, film editors, videotape engineers, sound mixers, and computer graphics artists, all working within blocks of the show's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel location—and got a big zero. No one planned to go; no one had even heard of it.

The show overwhelmingly brought in *Stereophile* readers, and it seems there are enough of them to make these gigs successful: 11,000 people attended over the course of three "open days," (14,275 if you throw in the two extra press/trade days). But any expectation of "reaching out" to a broader public, at least in the New York City area, went unfulfilled. Anyway, I don't mean to bitch. The show was big (182 exhibitors showing 390 different brand names), varied (seminars and live music events

were going on constantly), and thoroughly professional. Hats off to the Show staff; they really made the trains run on time, Chicago machine style. ("Hizzonor" could be Archibald's middle name.)

One example: Looking out the windows of the airshaft at the Waldorf, one could see miles of thick electrical wiring running up the sides of the building and into the rooms. These wires, of course, were pressed into service to provide plenty of clean juice to the power-hungry high-end electronics on display—no brown outs and power failures, as we have all so often endured at past Consumer Electronics Shows. God knows what all this add on wiring cost—for the wire, the labor, and the pay-offs to NYC inspectors for looking the other way.

Almost every detail, sonic and otherwise, was attended to. For instance, the normal demo rooms were carefully spread out so that no two were next to each other. At the Sahara in Las Vegas, the acoustical leakage into

Mark Block

HI-FI '96:
NO BUZZ, CUZ...

adjacent rooms always muddled everyone's sound. Not so at the Waldorf.

On the second trade day (Thursday) the elevators were becoming ridiculously crowded. In fact, getting down to the lobby at the 7:00 p.m. close was next to impossible (the stairs ended at the third floor). My elevator went up from three to 23, then started down and became much too packed to take on any additional riders below the 17th floor but it stopped on every floor anyway. Finally at eight a woman tried to squeeze in; as she stepped on, the elevator dropped about 10 inches. She shrieked, yelled "No f***ing way!" and literally dove back out onto the floor. But the next day—public day one—the Waldorf had created an express elevator to and from the top floor of the show. There were no more elevator hassles.

Not only was this Show a big undertaking, it was nothing to sneeze at for manufacturers. One company told me that their two-room suite at the Waldorf cost \$15,000. Add several thousand for shipping, in-hotel carting and storage, another couple thousand for air fare, personal hotel rooms, meals and tips, and you have an investment of almost \$25,000. Although time will tell, I don't think there's any way that they'll make that money back through increased sales. Which makes me wonder about the long-term viability of two yearly shows. The summer CES is, of course, deader than a doornail; they're already calling it the Consumer Electronics No-Show.

I truly feel bad for small manufacturers who make a good product but can't quite "break out" with dealers and customers. Shows like this should help, but they rarely do. The consumers line up in droves at the big-name, big-budget demos, but never get around to exploring the rooms they're unfamiliar with. Krell, Wilson, Avalon, Audio Note, and others drew the crowds at Hi-Fi '96, while attendance in most rooms was modest. Look at it this way: What would you do at an auto show if standing in line for 20 minutes got you a 10-minute test drive in a Ferrari? Hearing a hundred thousand dollar system is the equivalent experience for an audiophile.

JVC's XRCD
gets my vote for
"Best Software
Sound."

somehow managed to skip many of the biggies and instead roamed the back hallways looking for anything newer, cheaper, better. I spent almost two full days at the Waldorf, went to three seminars and no press conferences, heard no live music, and unfortunately missed over a third of the exhibits. What I did hear, for the most part, was less than mind blowing. One fundamental problem was that the basic Waldorf rooms are close to cubical—very bad for standing waves. The rooms seemed to muddy up the sound, so a lot of equipment sounded "thicker" and less transparent than it should have. When I heard exceptions, I had to wonder whether

the good sound was due to unusually good set up or to lucky accidents in which the system and room had counterbalancing colorations. (I think, and hope, it was the former.)

Who sounded really good? Esoteric Speaker Products, for one. Sonus Faber, for another. These guys always sound good at shows, even when others have room trouble, because they are true set-up artists—in addition to having good products to set-up in the first place. In fact, Sumiko's John Hunter, distributor of Sonus Faber, conducted a Trade Day seminar on speaker set-up and optimization.

ESP garnered actual applause at the demos of their big Concert Grand speakers, first reviewed by Bill Wells in *The Audiophile Voice* (Vol. 1, Issue 3). Also on display, and sounding exceptionally good, was the smaller Bodhran (pronounced bow-ran), a three-way, six-driver "mini Grand" for \$6,000. ESP's Mike Roberts played for me a Leroy Vinnegar CD, *Walkin' the Bases*, and the hi-fi just plain disappeared. The music was as live and as transparent as I've ever heard from a stereo system.

Partnering the Bodhrans were an usual pair of amps from Transcendent Sound: 100-watt-per-channel honest-to-god OTL tube monoblocks, \$5,995/pair. Transcendent also makes a 35-watt stereo version for \$2,995. A low-bias, complementary output stage (direct coupled, of course) is said to provide stability, reliability, and long tube life. Transcendent claims a full 70 watts into four ohms for the monoblocks, so if your speakers are reasonably efficient and stay above three or four ohms impedance, you should definitely give these amps a listen.

Joe DePhillips of Discovery Cable is another one who always manages to get good sound no matter what the circumstances. As usual, he was using a CAT preamp and Clearaudio cartridge (with Clearaudio turntable and tonearm) in this analogue-only room. The speakers this time were Parsifals by Verity Audio. A

THE CUBICLES

Me? I'd be happy to test drive a Mazda RX-7 or even a Miata—cars I could actually afford to buy.

(Well, let's say afford to lease.) So just to be different, I

stacking subwoofer/satellite system for \$9,800, the Parsifal sub can be turned around for either front- or rear-firing bass, offering a measure of flexibility for room integration.

Another room that had people raving featured Sonogy electronics and Voce Divina speakers. Sonogy has been around for a few years, but their amps have been restyled—to dramatic effect. You get 175 solid-state watts per channel, with zero feedback and fully balanced circuitry, for only \$3,300. And great looks. The Voce Divina speakers are new, but definitely a contender in the state-of-the-art wars, so the \$12,000 price doesn't seem too outrageous. This is a BIG system, with large, separate subwoofer enclosures. A lot of air is moved when called for, but the Voce Divinas retain a midrange delicacy that is often lacking in other big, expensive speaker systems.

A speaker that can also move some serious air is the Waveform Mach 17, which at \$5,995 factory-direct, puts it in a price range that I start thinking about seriously. In a way, the Waveforms are a Canadian B&W 801, with a small, egg-shaped mid/tweeter head module that can rotate and tilt for easy tuning. An electronic crossover designed by Bryston comes standard. Other aspects of the design reflect solid engineering but nothing very high-tech: a pair of 12-inch paper cone woofers, plastic midrange, and a one-inch silk dome tweeter, connected with a 24 dB/octave Linkwitz-Reilly crossover. The system in the Waldorf used a pair of Bryston amps and a Sony CD player—nothing fancy—and the sound was sensational.

Priced even more affordably was the Jayde (pronounced jade) from Probe Audio Labs. I'd never heard of them (although Lyric is their NY dealer), so it was nice to hear something new sound so good. Looking at the speaker—another stacking mid/tweeter module on a large bass enclosure—I pegged the price as \$6,000/pair or higher. At \$3,995 retail, these speakers are a steal! Unusually, the head module uses a curved, open baffle to achieve a dipole radiation pattern. Like the open baffle Dahlquist DQ-10s of yore and the Acarian Alons of today, these Probe speakers have an electrostatic-like sense of openness along with punchy, dynamic bass.

Two other speaker companies also had exceptional products at that magic \$3,995 price point: Gershman and Gallo. I wrote about each at length in my Winter CES report last issue, so I won't rehash now. However, I must give credit to Anthony Gallo for persevering in the hostile high-end marketplace.

His cylindrical Nucleus/Bassball speaker had met stiff opposition from dealers and customers because of the odd-ball, "Lady Brunswick" appearance, yet he continued to chip away at the resistance

with several styling changes. Well, he's finally come up with something that looks great—a black anodized aluminum finish and an elegant stand arrangement—and audiophiles were absolutely cramming themselves into the Gallo room to get a look and a listen. Anthony said he had to play Black Sabbath to force people to move out and make room for the next group.

Dipping down a bit in price, the Legend speaker at \$3,495/pair is a WATT-looking thing that, like the WATT, has terrific resolution and soundstaging but limited bass. (Add a pair of stands and your back up to around four grand). Legend is another company that's new to me, and I was surprised to see that they also make a full line of tube electronics. Examples: 75-watt monoblock amps for \$3,495/pair and a line stage pre-amp for \$2,995.

One of the best small monitors I heard at the show was the Dynaudio Countour 1.3 at \$1,995/pair. Dynaudio speakers are, for the most part, horrendously expensive—how about \$7,999 for the small, two-way bass reflex Confidence 3 (stand included). You certainly need a fair chunk of self confidence to spend that kind of money on a little stand-mounted monitor, the superb quality of the famed Esotar tweeter notwithstanding. In that context, the Countour 1.3 is not simply a great speaker for the money, it's a great value.

Once again, there was very little happening with a very exciting technology, digital time domain and frequency response correction. SigTech, the leader in this field, was showing the TF 1100 "TimeField Acoustic Correction System." Although it can be had in a variety of configurations, the one at the show—with remote control and all the bells and whistles—goes for a hefty \$10,900. Less pricey consumer models are in the works. One of these days audiophiles will get hip to the fact that their listening rooms are coloring the sound much more than do cables, preamps and amps. With the price of computing power coming down like it was pushed off a cliff, somebody will eventually come up with a workable box for under four grand. Or perhaps it could be integrated into a CD processor or a digital speaker crossover. Whatever. We need it.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

"Lord Vader, the rebel forces have been routed." What rebels? Why the single-ended triode brigade, of course. (Unfortunately,

a "Return of the Jedi" move by SET amps at next year's WCES is probably inevitable.)

As you may know, I see the expensive little SE triodes

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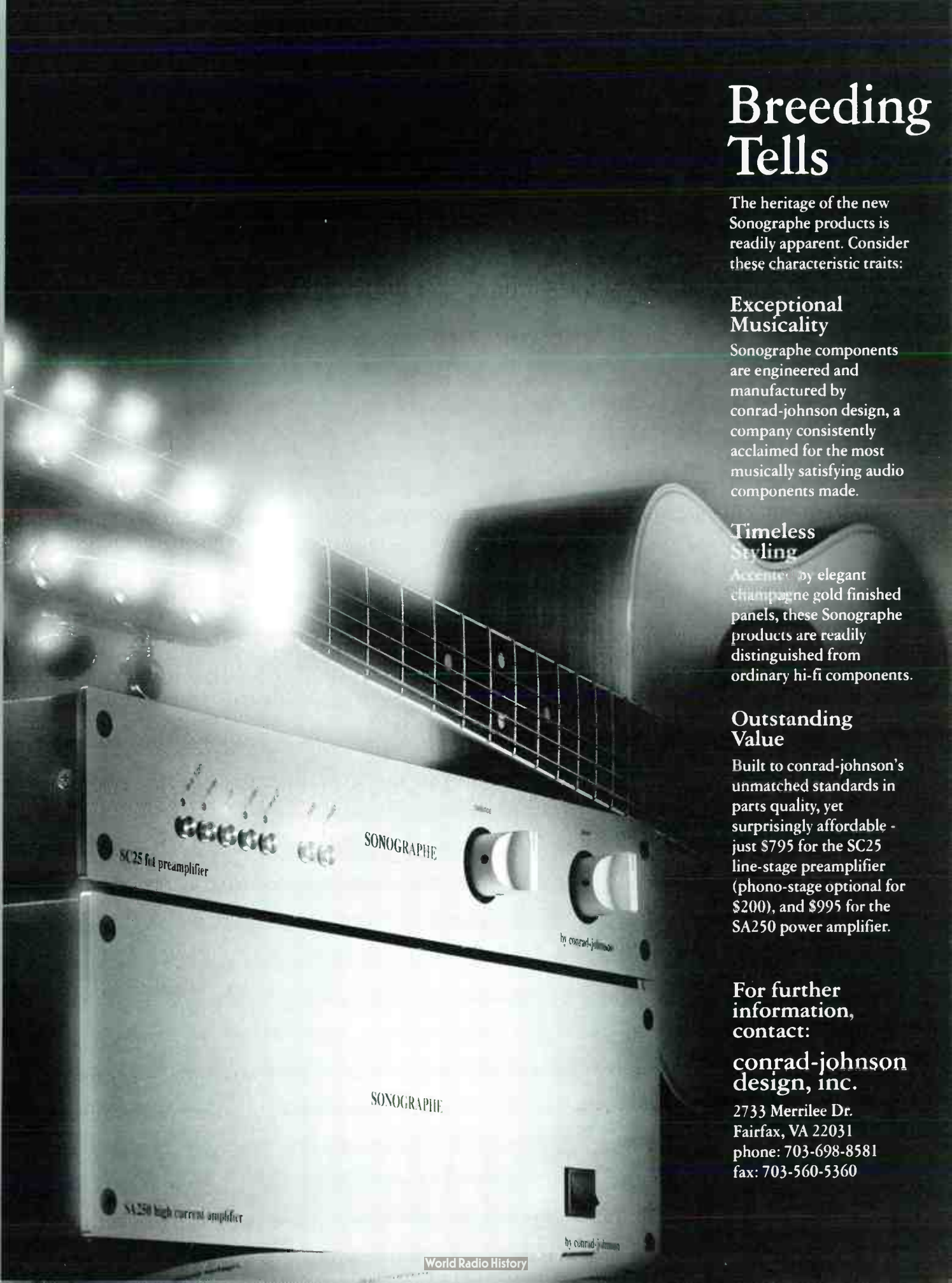
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not as a rebel force but as a scourge, so I was ecstatic to see that the SE triode plague seems to be abating—at least at the Hi-Fi '96 show. Manufacturers who showed at the Waldorf needed to have either marketing money or the support of a local dealer, and many SE triodes have neither, being essentially hand-cobbled cult items. The triode people who did make it—Audio Note, Audio Matiere, Cary, and Vaic—are legit, and certainly deserved to be heard.

There was one SE triode from a surprising source, Melos. George Bischoff and company created a relatively monstrous 75-watt job based on their 400-watt, push-pull mono amp (\$7795 per pair). George put on a CD of Pamela Warrick-Smith doing "Amazing Grace," and nobody in the room so much as breathed for the next four minutes.

Lamm Industries was another surprising entrant into the SE triode arena. Their ML2 is a 20.5-watt SE tube monoblock retailing for—hold your breath now—\$24,690 the pair. Not a good dollar/watt ratio, but at least Lamm promises that the unique low-impedance output stage and high-current power supply will drive real world speakers. A push/pull version, the ML1, generates 90 watts and sells for a slightly less expensive \$9,345 each.

I was happy to see that one of the "generals" of the SE triode rebellion, J. C. Morrison, was moving up to more interesting design work. He's now Dick Sequerra's partner, and together they are building a "statement" system—speakers and electronics—that is already impressive in prototype form, and should be awesome when ready for production. (By the way, J. C. and I came to an agreement on SE triodes: Don't blame bad sound on the circuit type; blame the execution and application.)

The Audible Illusions room was getting a lot of Audiophile Society votes for best sound at the show, but the speakers in there—Crosby Audio Works Quads with all the trimmings—just don't make me feel those sparks of musical fulfillment. (Sorry, I shouldn't use the word spark in connection with Quads.) The Audible Illusions gear, on the other hand, definitely sparked my interest. The classic Modulus 3A tube preamp now comes with a Swiss-made stepped

attenuator and a lighted position indicator to make setting channel balance easier. Also new at the show was the M-150 monoblock amplifier, \$4,795 a pair. This solid state powerhouse has a 1,000-watt, dual-toroid power supply and a full complementary, dual-differential circuit from input to output. It runs Class A up to three quarters of its rated 150-watt power, while the peak current capability is claimed to be in excess of 50 amps.

A tube guy gone semi solid-state, Victor Khomenko of Balanced Audio Technology, was eagerly displaying his huge VK-1000 monoblocks. Priced at a hefty \$6,000 each, this behemoth will deliver "1000 watts of purist, zero-feedback power into

demanding loads (2 ohms)." It employs 48 output devices rated at 30 amps each, and two 1-KVA transformers. Older VK-500 stereo amps can be factory upgraded to the VK-1000.

N.E.W., makers of great sounding tube products for budget-minded audiophiles, is also mixing up their line with some very interesting Class-A, solid-state gear. The A-60 (60 watts into 8 ohms) is a wallet friendly \$1,498. Even more interesting is the introduction of a battery powered amp and preamp, at typically great N.E.W. prices. Called the D.C. series, the DCA-33 amp (33 watts per channel, natch) sells for \$1,798. Take that Rowland. The D.C. combo was sounding anything but comical, doing super hero-like things through

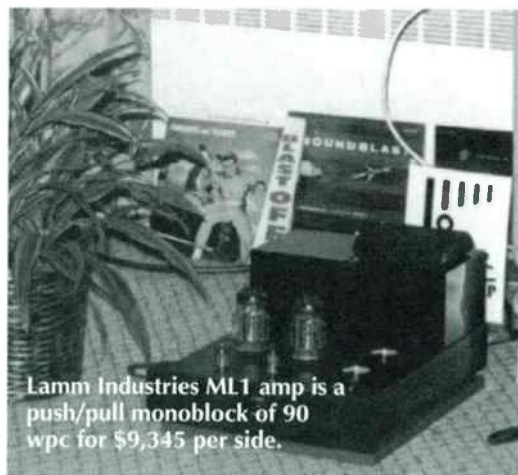
Diapason Adamante speakers (\$3,998/pair).

While N.E.W. prides itself on getting the sweetness of tubes out of its solid-state circuits, the Warner Imaging Company puts that philosophy right up there in the name of their amplifier line: Vacuum Tube Emulator. Their brochure promises the typical solid-state virtues of high voltage, high current, beefy power supply and low output impedance. However, a tube-like transfer function is created by what Warner calls a "magnetic wave coupler,"

which can withstand a large input-signal overdrive without audible clipping at the output. By using very utilitarian looking cases, the cost of the 300-watt monoblocks on display was kept to a reasonable \$4,200/pair.

Partnering the Vacuum Tube Emulators was a wild looking—but pricey at \$6,990—tube preamp from

**It was expensive
for manufactur-
ers, but Hi-Fi '96
drew BIG!**



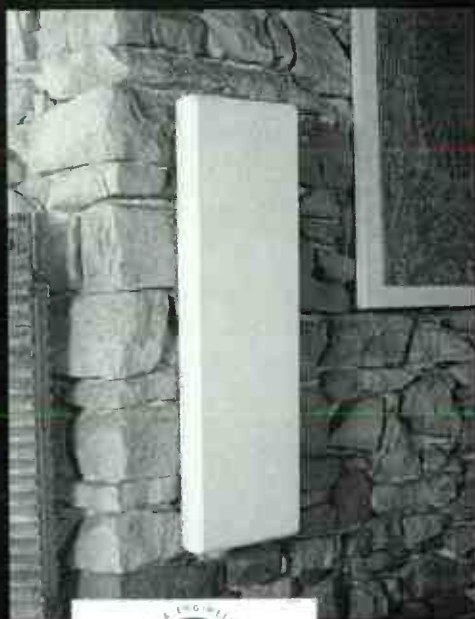
Lamm Industries ML1 amp is a push/pull monoblock of 90 wpc for \$9,345 per side.

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Thor Audio. Thor calls the chassis shape a "toroid design." Less charitably, one could say it looked like a big donut. In any event, the shape allows the tubes to be placed in the central donut hole, thus "operating in free air while being shielded on all sides from the rest of the components." Only the best passive components are used, and the chassis construction minimizes resonances and vibration. The printed circuit board "starts with bare copper" and is then put through an "electro-less plating process using no solder." I thought it looked pretty cool.

Vaic owners Eunice Joy and Riccardo Kron are always full of surprises, so they seemed to take immense delight in showing a prototype amplifier, the VT 460K, with a top-secret circuit design and absolutely no prospects for production in the near future. The Vaic engineering staff based the amp on Soviet military "frequency finders," the brochure stating that "the revolutionary power device . . . is not a tube nor a transistor. It does combine the advantages of both systems with none of the defects." They had both a two-channel and a three-channel version up and running with a claimed 150 watts of continuous power (1,000 peak), so the home theater market is a clear target for the Krons. Bombarded with questions, Eunice Joy was asked every couple of minutes what the new amplifiers might cost; she just kept repeating: "We have no idea."

Meanwhile, fast forwarding to the present, the styling on the Vaic VV 52B monoblocks (\$14,800/pair) and the 3696 stereo amp (a very attractive \$3,800) seems to have been finalized, and they look great. The 52B was also sounding great with Shahinian Hawk speakers (\$4,800), Fanfare preamp designed by Siltech, and Altis processor.

Fanfare imports a line of solid-state electronics from New Zealand, Plinius—very cool looking stuff. The SA-100, a 100-wpc, pure Class-A amp, retails for \$4,195, while their M12V preamp with phono stage is \$3,995.

The absolute coolest looking stuff at the Waldorf, however, was the Alchemist gear from London. Gold plated knobs on aluminum fascia, with wild heat sinks, heavy handlebars, and odd angles all over make the Alchemist components something to take home and exhibit as art. The prices are apparently pretty good, but I'm not certain, as my brochure lists them in British pounds (or not at all), and there's no indication of an American distributor. As an example, the Forseti ADP21/20A pre/power combination (the amp is 150

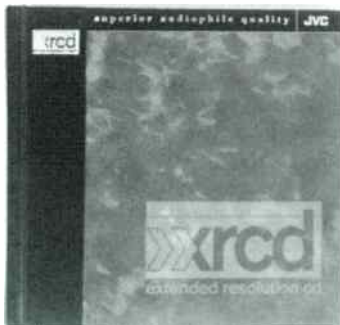
watts/channel) sells for £870/£1250 respectively in Great Britain. I hope they're available in the States.

SOFTWARE WARS

My nomination for best sound at the show? No question: The JVC "Extended Resolution" demo CD had great sound everywhere I played it. JVC's new XRCD mastering system is another scheme that tries to squeeze a 20-bit master tape onto a 16-bit CD, but judging by the awesome sonics, they may be onto something. Ideally, the process involves converting an analogue master tape to 20-bit digital and storing it on a magneto-optical disc. The JVC Yokohama mastering plant then converts it to 16 bits with their new Super Coding process. JVC says "The high-resolution 20-bit signal [is resolved] to 16 bits while retaining the integrity of the low-level information, which insures a true 16-bit dynamic range without noise shaping." An external word clock controls the proceedings, and a circuit that JVC calls their K2 Laser reshapes the signal at the final cutting stage. Time-based jitter is said to be eliminated. Will it give HDCD a run for its money? I'll stay out of that one.

Pacific Microsonics (the HDCD people) announced plans to introduce an 88.2-kHz, 24-bit HDCD processor. Perhaps "DVD-ready" will be the buzzword. Another interesting announcement on the "New Format" front came from DTS Technology (the Dolby nemesis in the surround sound movie world). First, DTS will compete directly with Dolby's AC-3 by licensing surround processors for home use. Many big names, including Theta, Wadia, Mondial, Rotel, Krell, EAD, Counterpoint, B&K, Eiger and H/K, have signed on.

Even more interesting is the announcement of a new software division, DTS Entertainment, which will license, produce and market DTS-encoded CDs. My all-time favorite album, the *Allman Brothers Live at Fillmore East*, is among the first releases. Alan Parsons' new album will be DTS surround encoded, and Tom Jung of dmp is forming a new company, Music As Software, to produce multi-channel discrete recordings using DTS's system. If this high-end surround stuff catches on—and I think it has a good chance—the DVD "audio only" format warriors will be forced to go with a multi-channel system rather than merely a higher resolution stereo scheme.



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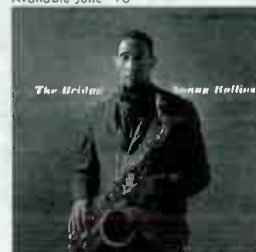


Mendelssohn: A Midsummer
Night's Dream - Maag, LSO
CSCD 6001



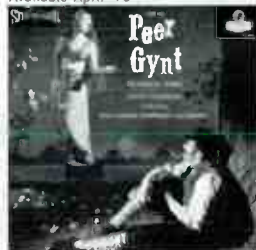
Bob and Ray:
A Stereo Spectacular
LSPCD 1773

Available June '96



The Bridge
Sanny Rollins
LSPCD 2527

Available April '96



Grieg: Peer Gynt
Fjeldstad, LSO
CSCD 6049

Available April '96



Harry Belafonte:
Belafonte at Carnegie Hall
LSOCD 6006

Available May '96

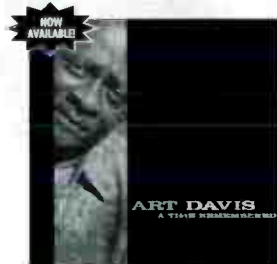


Dick Schary:
Music for Bang, Baaroom and Harp
LSPCD 1866

Available August '96

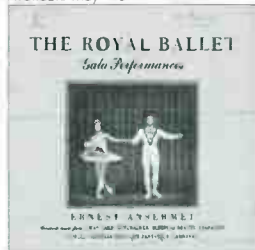


Desmand Blue
Paul Desmond
LSPCD 2438

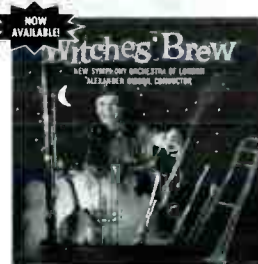


A Time Remembered
Art Davis
JPCD 5001

Available May '96



Royal Ballet Gala
Ansermet, ROHO
LDSCD 6065



Witches Brew
Gibson, NSOL
LSCCD 2225

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DVD LOVEFEEST

I mentioned earlier that I attended a few of the seminars;

I found the Joe Kane video seminar, "Image Quality in High-End Home Theater," particularly instructive (although Joe likes to make his points at least three times before moving on to the next one.) In addition to learning how to set up our TV monitors to video bars, we learned that Joe, through his Imaging Sciences Foundation, is encouraging Toshiba to put component video outputs on its upcoming DVD players and satellite dishes, and component inputs on its new video monitors. That should be a big step forward in picture quality. I'd buy it. (Get the message, Toshiba?)

There was great interest in the Toshiba and Sony DVD demos, but I think we're having a DVD honeymoon before the maidenhead has been messed with. An audio-only DVD system is at least three to five years away, yet it seems that people are already losing interest in high-end CD processors—as if the potentially higher quality medium was coming by Christmas. Some perspective is called for. Three years ago I decided not to buy a new TV set because High Def video was just around the corner. I finally bought a new TV last year, and High Def is still nowhere to be seen, at least commercially.

Video DVDs are coming soon; according to Sony, the only holdup is the issue of digital copies and pirating. Puh-lease; the software providers are once again greedily holding us all hostage with lame excuses about the "problem" of high-quality digital copies. And they're shooting themselves in the foot to boot. History has shown that the software industry (music labels, film studios—not to mention the artists) will make much more money in increased sales than they'll lose to piracy. In any event, quality, or lack thereof, has never stood in the way of piracy. It's a bogus issue. My thought: Enforce the laws we already have and give us the damn DVDs.

But now for my own schizo point/counterpoint: I think that the reality of DVD may not match the hype. At the Joe Kane seminar I mentioned that, contrary to what everyone was saying, I'd never seen an MPEG-2 picture (the digital compression scheme used for both DVD recording and DSS satellite broadcasts) look as good as a laser disc. For instance, the Toshiba room at the Waldorf had a DVD picture with noticeable compression artifacts (little block patterns and swimmy lines in the background of static scenes). At the Sony demo I was too far from the screen to tell much, except that the picture was horrible—very contrasty, with blown-out whites and no shadow detail. Laser discs played via my direct-view monitor at home look infinitely better.

My observation made Joe Kane a little nervous—as an advisor to Toshiba and a software provider himself (a DVD reference set-up disc)—he has a stake in the new medium's success. But he had a good explanation: Monitor set up can either make or break DVD. It seems that the contrast and brightness controls on almost all TV sets need to be adjusted to the bottom of their range or else gross distortions are generated. (Most people have their TVs adjusted to look bright and sharp in a brightly lit or even sunny family room environment. The TV sets even come from the factory that way, so



the picture can "pop" on the store's sales floor.) These distortions can magnify the otherwise imperceptible flaws in the DVD picture.

Furthermore, MPEG-2 is a variable bit-rate medium. Movies and TV shows can be encoded with more or less resolution; it's up to the discretion of the broadcasters (in the case of DSS) and the mastering engineers and producers (in the case of films). Joe Kane said he did a DVD mastering test using several different facilities and got wildly varying results. Basically, some poor schmuck has to digitize the material from video to computer, then visually check it and re-do sections that look unacceptable. Given commercial pressures, how often do you think it'll get done right?

Because of the variable bit rates, one DSS channel could look great, another lousy; one movie spectacular, another full of digital crap. (In fact, any film could look good in some scenes, bad in others.) My own view is MPEG-2 compression will mostly look like crap. But picture quality won't make or break DVD. Cost, convenience, and HYPE will determine its success, just like with the introduction of CDs. Build it and they will come; hype it and they will believe. And buy.

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The mountain would come to Mohammed this year. Instead of flying to Chicago or Vegas to drool at a major audio show, I easily amble across the Hudson to the Big Apple and take a big bite of audiophile pie at the May '96 Home Theater & Specialty Audio Show.

My car is swallowed in the maw of a nearby Kinney garage (\$35.00, thank you). I walk across fashionable Park Avenue, past the elaborately uniformed doormen, and into the lobby of the posh Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Moments later, name tag in place, I launch myself into the crowds of trade and press professionals who have exclusive run of the show for the first two days.

The show guide is thick with information. Eleven floors of the huge and solidly-built hotel are devoted to over 250 exhibitors. Maps of each floor help sort out the warren of rooms, east wing and west wing. I can't do it all. I determine to wander about, gather impressions, chat with friends and enjoy.

First on the agenda is a press conference. I look around the room. Familiar faces but unfamiliar clothes. Guys whom I always see wearing schlumpy chinos and faded

shirts are now wearing neatly pressed oxford-gray trousers, blue blazers, freshly-ironed shirts and ties. Thus is signaled the importance of this event in the Audiophile (and Videophile) world. The connections made here among manufacturers, dealers, the press and ultimately the consumer impact the course of business for months and years to come.

At the DTS Technology press conference, surround-sound cinema credentials are impressive... "Brave Heart," "Jurassic Park" et alia. Just how the company will secure and maintain a dominant position in the consumer market against Dolby's entrenched AC-3 is less clear. To all, who last through to the end of the schpiel, go press kits and garish "chrono" watches (made in China by the very folks who will probably pirate DTS-encoded video discs). Then to Marantz to gape at the gorgeous golden Project T-1 mono tube amps. Are they \$25,000 each, or \$25,000 the pair? Each, I believe. The rarified air at this

Ross Wagner

HI-FI '96:
A HEAD-TAPPER



Marantz's famous Model 9 mono power amp, left, and Model 7 preamp will be reissued.

price point clouds my mind. Everything goes blurry. Didn't hear them, and wouldn't be able to comment if I did. I wonder if they will become the stuff of legends, or high-priced doorstops? Tune in 10 years from now for the exciting outcome.

For nostalgia buffs, Marantz offers re-makes of several certified legends...the Marantz Model 7 pre-amp, the Model 8-B stereo amp and the Model 9 mono amps. Will they recreate the sweet magic of the old days or are they kit cars...XKE Jags on the outside, Ford Mustangs underneath? Certainly worth a careful listen.

Many big speaker systems to ogle: The usually imposing Von Schweikert D'Appolito-configured monoliths seem diminutive in the huge John Jacob Astor salon. Neither \$100,000 of the best VAC tube gear nor Tice Audio's best sorcery nor a forest of ASC room treatment bring the sound of this system under control. Formidable low-end energy develops, but not focused or well-defined. Such are the perils of quick set-ups performed too quickly in the unfamiliar and often very difficult space of a show environment.

By this time you're probably wondering how all this gear is powered. Normal hotel rooms have a few outlets at best, and barely enough current to power a small TV; the lights dim when an electric shaver is turned on. A glance out the courtyard windows tells the tale... thousands upon thousands of feet of virgin white Romex, dangling hundreds of feet to unseen power sources below, feed the power-thirsty amplifiers. Like so much freshly made plastic pasta hung out to dry.

Jadis electronics drive the \$37,000 Eurythmie II horns. Looking like out-sized high-school prom orchids, they are worthy of the paint-brush of Georgia O'Keefe. Visual aesthetics aside, they

don't amount to much sonically for me. I don't like horns, never did, and don't understand why they don't stay in movie theaters where they belong.

Avalon's oddly-shaped angular Osiris, a mega mega-bucks top-end speaker is carefully placed near the center of a darkened room, perhaps 16x30, rife with stalagmite-like tube traps. This could be Carlsbad Caverns. A softly-lit pool of flowers centered on the floor behind and between the speakers complete the decor. This room is an oasis of quiet, isolated from the bustle of the hotel. Music is acceptably reproduced here. Speakers seem to have potential but are very pricey indeed. For those bucks I want Nirvana. Worth more listening.

Joseph and Gershman speakers caught my attention.

Several less-costly speakers deserve mention: The handsome Joseph Audio Infinite Slope RM50si, at \$5,999, and designed by McIntosh-ex Rich Modafferi, and especially the beautifully-finished, modestly-priced Gershman Avant Garde RX-20s at \$3,995 the pair. These floor-standing pyramids, perhaps 36 inches tall, driven by Celeste electronics also of Canada, produce

some of the most refined sound of the show. Very precise, exquisitely detailed, and yet on the safe side of strident, they faithfully reproduce the space of the chorus, the instruments as well as the tenor voice of Jose Carreras in the first and second cuts of "Missa Criolla" (Philips 420 955-2). Note that the second cut of this disc is particularly challenging because the chorus is peaky. The Gershmans, powered by the Celeste electronics, sorted things out nicely. (I have since heard a pair of Gershmans fresh out of the box. I urge listeners





If your system is
—solid-state—
spring for the
“Tube Tapper”
anyway and use
it to strike the
left side of your
forehead.

to confine their listening to well-broken-in examples.)

The most musical sound I hear at the Waldorf is in the Melos room. Mark Porzilli's new 75-watt single-ended triodes (yes, 75 watt) are driving Vandersteens (real speakers). Except for a blurred bass drum, the sound is scrumptious. I see an otherwise tired and jaded audiophile friend in center-seat, fully absorbed into the music. Behind him, George Bischoff is spinning an AAD sampler from Everest (The Sound of Everest: 20 Bit Sampler. Everest 9050) of the classic 35mm recordings now transcribed onto CD. Worth looking for these decades-old Bert Whyte recordings. A unique recording perspective, very dynamic as well, and so nice to hear them without the unbearable surface noise that plagued the original vinyls. My local CD emporium can't find the label, let alone this album, on their antediluvian computer. Try the folks at musicdirect 800/449-8333 or call Vanguard/Omega, the distributors, at 212/769-3060.

This report is far from complete, nor is it even comprehensive. Yet I cannot put down the pen (shut down the laptop?) without commenting on a visit with the always-affable Tony Chiarella, who writes for just about everybody and additionally is one of the driving forces in the reincarnated Dynaco. As it was 40 years ago, Dynaco is dedicated to the old-fashioned idea that buying a high-quality music system need not require you to cancel the order for that new Bimmer. Tony eagerly shows off a surround-sound system that retails for about \$1,400, decoder and all. It's not discrete 5.1 digital (or discrete

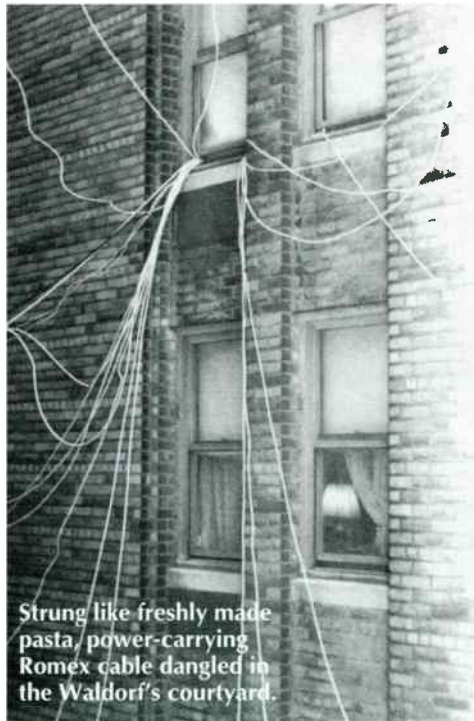
analog), but it does a decent job at low cost. Then, with a mischievous gleam in his eye, Tony presents for my inspection a curious object.—It appears to be a lead pencil, apparently conceived during a genetic foul-up of monstrous proportions, with no fewer than two eraser heads at the top of the shaft. It becomes clear that the “T”-shaped device is a miniature mallet...a “Tube Tapper.” Gently tap each tube in your system periodically to dislodge the nasties that otherwise form on the grids. Keeps the tubes youthful and sweet-sounding. If your system is solid-state, spring for the “Tube Tapper” anyway and use it to strike the left side of your forehead. You'll think more clearly and defer early onset of Alzheimers.

This report would not be complete without commenting on the pervasive impression of unease I sensed when the subject of the compatibility of music audio vs. theater audio was raised at the show. Manufacturers and dealers alike shifted from foot to foot. They were less likely to look you in the eye. Some shrugged. Some changed the subject. I see a basic contradiction between the requirements of music and theater sound. A musical event, a worthwhile one in any case, is something close to a real happening.

The challenge to the recording folks is to faithfully record the event. Theater sound, on the other hand, is a fabrication, a construction, however artfully done, and in the end is the product of the imagination of very talented technicians. Not much to do with reality. Consider a gun shot at some distance outdoors. In reality, barely more than a pop. On virtually all film soundtracks, however you'd think it was a howitzer that fired. With the exception, for example, of the opening scene of the great film “Breaker Morant,” where the rifle fire barely breaks the rural stillness of a South African night, movies simply overdo it. Reality is not their business. The film industry somehow feels the need to exaggerate reality in

order to entertain. Efforts by sales and marketing types to merge the various technologies will result in compromises and a disservice to both camps.

“Of course,” as comedian Dennis Miller intones each week on HBO at the end of his provocative monologues, “that is my opinion and I could be wrong.”



Strung like freshly made pasta, power-carrying Romex cable dangled in the Waldorf's courtyard.



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Jack Skowron

The current vinyl "renaissance" is gratifying (though in reality a very limited phenomenon) and companies like Classic Records, for their mining of the RCA vaults, deserve the accolades. However, one company, Mosaic, has supported vinyl since the firm's inception 12 years ago. There was a period when they strayed from the true path and used digital masters, but early and recent releases are all-analog and made from original master tapes. Newer releases, called Q-LPs, are from 180-gram vinyl (with a price increase to \$15 per LP, still a bargain in these days of \$20 to \$35 audiophile vinyl). While the Mingus/CBS sessions got great notices, many subse-

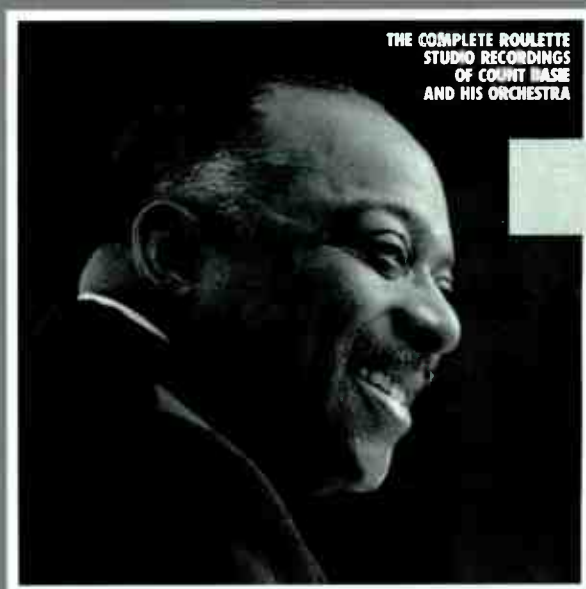
These sets from Mosaic are done to the very highest standards.

quent sets have not been accorded due attention. Jazz is generally neglected in America (at least since it stopped being pop music in the mid-40s). The classical world considers it to be a form of popular music (not serious, important, or worthy of support). To the average consumer, who these days buys either middle-class country music, amelodic beat-box rants, or warmed-over punk, jazz is too difficult an art music (Chuck Berry expressed it best in "Rock and Roll Music": "...you lose the beauty of the melody, until it sounds just like a symphony"). Mosaic, for over a dozen years, has been mining the catalogs of many great labels and artists successfully, releasing meticulously produced box sets with photos, full discographical

information, and historical notes and session analyses (most sets are also available on CD).

Mosaic caters to the serious jazz collector, releasing "complete recordings of..." compilations. These vary from small sets on a single artist to the 3-Box, 66-LP Complete Commodore Recordings, which included the entire output of that great label. The two I'm reviewing catch two jazz giants at important points in their careers. Since these total 21 LPs, I'll forgo the track-by-track analysis and try instead to convey their overall gestalt.

The tumultuous mid-sixties (musically and otherwise) find Jackie McLean trying to reconcile the



MQ 15-149	15 LPs
MD10-149	10 CDs

newer sounds of Trane, Ornette, and others with his hard-bop roots. Older jazz musicians denigrated the new music, while younger ones were at the vanguard, abandoning conventions of harmony and rhythm (the public, meanwhile, was deserting from jazz to rock). Some, like McLean, Freddy Hubbard,

and Jim Hall participated in some experimental sessions, but on their own dates favored bop, or gingerly dipped their toes into modal or dissonant waters without fully immersing (cynics might say they wouldn't abandon their hard-earned technique and tone). These sessions document McLean's attempts to reconcile these conflicting impulses, which yielded a wide variety of fine music.

McLean has a very distinctive tone, sharp, acerbic, biting, with an unremitting attack (in an interview McLean once commented that he, like Bird, deliberate-

ly played slightly sharp to increase drive and punch). This can initially strike some listeners (myself included) as harsh and unpleasant. More extensive listening has made clear what a fine musician he is. Only three of these albums were issued in the '60s, the rest were mysteriously rejected and left in the vaults until they were issued in the mid seventies as part of the "Blue Note Classics" series.

The range of styles covered is wide, including Hard Bop, Modal, Latin, free-blowing, and the occasional standard, with each album having its own flavor. Sidemen include such stellar players as Herbie Hancock, Lee Morgan, Bobby Hutchenson, Jack DeJohnette, Roy Haynes, Larry Willis, and others. The album *Consequence* is the most straight ahead, with McLean and Morgan both in top form individually and in tandem. *High Frequency* is a Coltrane-influenced modal affair; McLean damn near blows the roof off on this quartet date. All the rest is also great, both for the performances themselves and for the historical insight they provide.

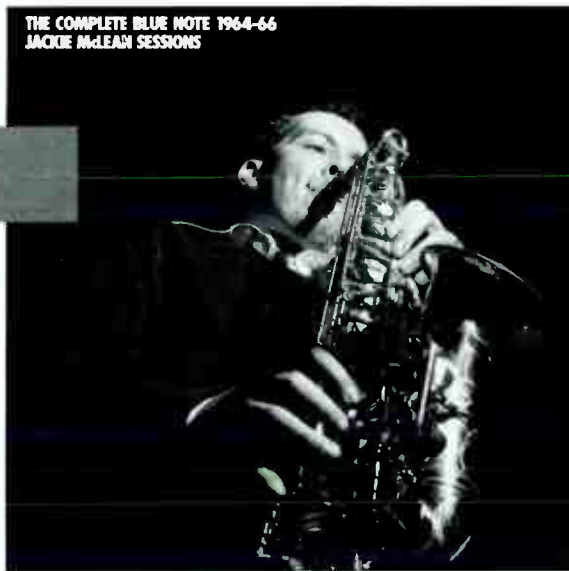
The sound is first rate, with McLean sounding full and tart, instruments well placed in space, and a good amount of "air" there. I only have one LP original, the mid-seventies release of

Consequence (a "Blue Note Classic") for a sound comparison (produced, as was this box, by Michael Cuscuna). It's a close call, the differences being small. The "Blue Note Classics" issue has slightly sharper transients, and slightly more "air" and transparency, making for better space. It is also slightly grainier, the Mosaic being slightly warmer. Again, these are small differences, and the Mosaic sounds fine indeed. Figuring in the \$50-\$100 cost of original Blue Notes, and the musical value, and this set is a worthwhile purchase.

Count Basie was at a very different stage in his career, and this set thus has a very different feel. After 30 years in music, the Count had no interest in experimentation—he knew exactly the sound he wanted. There had been one major change in the presentation in the fifties. The original "Old Testament" band was a

freewheeling aggregation of great soloists (such as Lester Young, Buck Clayton, Harry Edison, Jimmy Rushing, and many others) blowing over impromptu "head" arrangements, anchored by the All-American Rhythm Section, the smoothest, swingiest section of its time. (When the band expanded from nine pieces and debuted at Chicago's Grand Terrace, they had to borrow some arrangements from Fletcher Henderson.) For reasons musical and practical (a band dependent on star soloists could be held hostage to their whims and damaged if they left), the "New Testament" band, while still featuring fine soloists, now starred the band itself, with sophisticated compositions and arrangements, machine-like precision, and explosive dynamics. Despite having many different sources for material, both from within the band and outside, there's strong stylistic consistency to the music. Basie made sure of that, selecting and rejecting material to fit his vision of the band. For the casual listener, the music may all sound similar (the way blues sound to the uninitiated), and the 15 records could thus be too much of a good thing. For jazz lovers, however (particularly of Big

Band persuasion), the quality of contributions by Neal Hefti, Jimmy Mundy, Thad Jones, Benny Carter, Frank Wess, and Frank Foster is



Mosaic's Jackie McLean set offers, as usual, first-rate sound on wonderful LP surfaces.

awesome. Outstanding musicians like Thad Jones, Joe Newman, Frank Foster, Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, Frank Wess, Freddie Green

(a holdout from the original band), and vocalists Joe Williams and Irene Reid are featured. There are new compositions, remakes of R & B Classics, and much of the "Old Testament" band's repertoire is redone. Other highlights include a set of Benny Carter tunes, and many terrific Joe Williams' vocals ("Every Day I Have the Blues," their hit, is of course here). The Swing Era covers, while not replacing the definitive original versions, lets us hear "Lester Leaps in," "Topsy," "Jive at Five," "Jumpin' At the Woodside," and the rest in great stereo sound and sharp performances. The band purrs

along like a Porsche, going from 0 to 60 mph in an instant and without the slightest shudder due to the car's amazing precision and power reserves.

The sound in a word: Fabulous. This is music of great muscle and dynamic contrast (resembling orchestral music in this respect), and these records capture it. The sound stage is wide and deep, imaging is precise and layering of instruments is readily discernable. I again had very few (only two) older issues to compare with this set, having always focused my attention on the "Old Testament" band. One, Basie (known as the "Atomic Basie" due to the mushroom cloud jacket photo) on original Roulette. was an early release, with a bizarre stereo mix, with reeds and brass on one side and the rhythm section on the other. Mosaic chose to release the first 3 sessions (including this album) in mono, and from my comparison listening, this was a wise choice, the gimmicky early stereo effect being distracting to my ears. My only other earlier copy is a Mobile Fidelity half-speed mastered *Basie plays Hefti*. Here the call is close, with both sounding great. I won't pick nits here (other than to wonder why, since both purport to be from original

master tapes, Basie's piano appears in different parts of the stage?) since those small differences I can hear on these audiophile releases don't lead me to any strong preference (that is indeed praise for Mosaic, no?)

"So, should I buy this?" you may well wish to query me. Well, while I love this set, it's probably too much for the casual listener. Those whose interest I've piqued (you know who you are) should pick up their phones and order now. As an aside, neither box has any alternate takes, which will sadden the truly obsessed, but is easier on the ear to most.

Associated listening: For the early Jackie McLean, a Miles Davis set on Prestige (*The Complete Miles Davis on Prestige*) features two sessions with the young McLean (as well as many other historic Miles dates). McLean meets Ornette Coleman on *Old and New Gospel* (Blue Note 84262 on LP) with very interesting results. For the Count, the "Old Testament" band's greatest recordings are all on *Count Basie: The Complete Decca Recordings* (GRP GRD-3-611, 3 CDs).

Perhaps too much
for casual jazz lis-
teners, the Basie
Box is a fine addi-
tion to the library of
an advanced jazz
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JAZZ

Martin Milgrim

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ELISE WOOD *flute*
WALTER BOOKER *bass*
GUEST JACK WALRATH *trumpet*

Mapleshade is an audiophile label dedicated to recording musicians in a relaxed, pristine setting using custom-made equipment that exceeds commercial state of the art standards. The Mapleshade studio itself



is a very beautiful plantation house securely nestled in a wooded area of Maryland. Since its inception, the label has been steadily building a choice catalog of quality

all, standing out as the superb musician that he is. His solo version of Mingus' "Portraits" poignantly evokes the spirit of the great bassist-composer, prompting the singer, Shirley Horn, to state when she heard it, "Chile, Charlie was a fine writer, but he never wrote anything that sweet in his life." Lending tonal variation to the proceedings is ex-Mingus trumpeter Jack Walrath, who appears on two of the eleven tracks. As one might suspect, this music can function in the foreground as

Well-recorded,
this CD offers
jazz standards in
delicate shades.

This wonderfully recorded session presents a well-conceived program of standards (Gershwin, Ellington) and modern jazz ballads (Shorter, Mingus, Thad Jones, David Murray) performed in a delicate manner, but fortunately lacking the saccharine one fears when a flute is the lead horn. The basic flute-piano-bass instrumentation that dominates this session provides for absorbing interplay among the members, with Hicks, above

jazz and blues CDs.

well as provide romantic backdrop if called for. This CD is recommended for those who do not always have to have their jazz hot.



Jack Skowron

JAZZ

Johnny Frigo *Debut of a Legend*
Chesky TR119 (LP), JD119 (CD)



Violin, a dominant instrument in classical repertoire, has not been very popular in jazz. This may be due to the development of jazz from ragtime, blues and marching band traditions. In the '20s, Joe Venuti (with his Paul Whiteman band mate, guitarist Eddie Lang), was the first jazz violin star, and soon after Stuff Smith and Stephane Grapelli became prominent. Ray Nance (main axe: trumpet) doubled violin in Duke's orchestra in the LPOs. There is a dearth of violinists throughout the bop era, and not until the turbulent avant-garde years do they resurface: Billy Bangs, Leroy Jenkins; more recently, Jim Nolet and Mark Feldman are making a stir; Ornette Coleman has recorded on violin, and though I love Ornette's music, I have yet to determine

if he can play this instrument. While there may be an omission, the ease of listing major figures is telling (I know there's a "too much sax & violins" joke in here someplace). [Jack: I think it's a lot easier for me to to joke about bad puns.--Gene]

The liner notes proclaim "this is 77 year old Johnny Frigo's second album." While not a neophyte—he's been an active bassist for 40 years—only in the past 8 years has he featured violin. Chesky has

provided excellent back-up and stellar sound, releasing both an all-analog LP and a DDD CD.

The opener, "Get Happy" starts out sounding anything but, then breaks into a joyful swing. Fine solos from Gene Bertoncini and Bob Kindred move things along, and the out-chorus has hot unison riffing, Benny Goodman Quintet style. "I'm Old Fashioned" is similarly cleverly arranged, with contrasting "swing" and more formal "old-fashioned" sections. Mr. Frigo's jazz-waltz "Osaka Saki" wouldn't sound out of place on a David Grisman album—it has an irresistible melody and features fine bowing and use of pizzicato effects.

Other highlights include the ballads "Too Late Now/Street of Dreams" and "Nuages" (nice acoustic guitar), and "Jeanine" (CD only), a hip bop tune with fine solos from Kindred and Bertoncini. Overall, this makes for very pleasant listening and is recommended.

And, oh, the sound! It was recorded live-in-the-studio (no overdubs) with minimal miking and custom tube electronics—all the audiophile verities. While both CD and LP sound great, I'd give vinyl the nod (the fact that I have both for comparison makes me fear

Cheskey's stellar sound and Frigo's very pleasant jazz makes it easy to recommend.



incipient audio-nerd-itis). Both are spacious, with fine imaging and rendering of instrumental colors, but the LP is more luscious, open, and real sounding. Timbres are more fleshed out, palpable if you will, bringing one closer to the musicians. Even though the CD has three extra tracks (only one, "Jeanine," would I really miss) and is less expensive (\$15 vs. \$20 list), I'd go vinyl.

There are extra tracks on the CD, but I'd go for the vinyl.

Let me make a few recommendations of associated listening. Any Django Reinhardt/Stephane Grapelli/Quintet of the Hot Club of France recordings (for the truly obsessed there is *Djangology*, originally an eight-LP set on Affinity, then a recently deleted 10-CD set on EMI. At this writing, some sets could be had from True Blue/Mosaic, 35 Melrose Pl., Stamford, CT 06902.)

Stuff Smith is featured on the recently reissued two-CD set *Stuff Smith/Dizzy Gillespie/Oscar Peterson* (Verve 314521676-2), combining three LPs (all of which are fine, but the *S.S./D.G.* LP is fabulous). For avant garde fiddling, Billy Bang's *The Fire From Within* (Soul Note 1086 on LP) is recommended. New and Used's *Souvenir* (Knitting Factory Works KFWCD-125) and Jim Nolet's *With You* are fine CDs, representing NYC's current downtown scene (Mark Feldman plays violin on *Souvenir*). *Firestorm* (Victor CD 020) features the incendiary cello-bass duet of Diedre Murry and Fred Hopkins on a great, adventurous disc.

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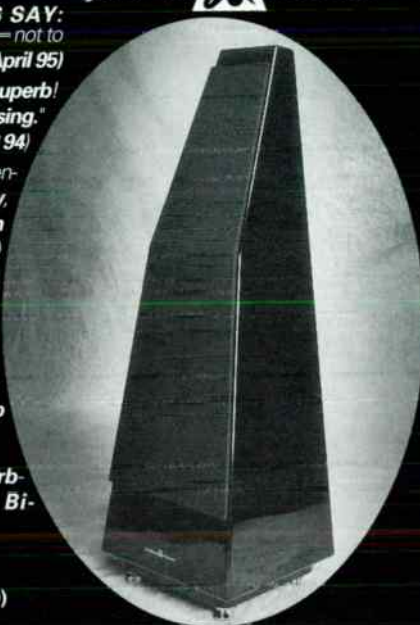
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Model Eighteen

R**ECORDINGS****RAPHÉ MALIK QUINTET**with **GLENN SPEARMAN****JAZZ**Raphé Malik Quintet *Sirens Sweet and Slow*
Mapleshade 01972**Bill Wells**

OK, I admit it. I am late as all get out with my reviews (both music and equipment). So, when a recent Friday night finally rolled around, I reluctantly resolved to get on with some of my overdue reviewing chores and decided to ease into this activity by starting out with some good music. My weekend strategy laid out, I went over to where I had an accumulation of recently received discs from the folks at Mapleshade. Based on my previous experiences with some of their other recordings, I just knew I was in for a treat. Right? Well, ah, sorta!

For this particular listening session, I decided to be a bit more adventurous than usual. I mean, after all, it was Friday evening. You know—hang time! So, instead of pulling out one of their mainstream jazz or blues CDs, I spotted a new recording by artists I was totally unfamiliar with. The CD selected to start my weekend of musical delight was on Mapleshade's new Outsounds label.

The promotional literature accompanying this CD stated that it was Mapleshade's first recording effort with "avant garde" music. For those of you unfamiliar with this type of music, all I can say is you must have an open mind and be prepared for something unconventional.

The opening track provided little warning of what was to come. In fact, early on the musical presentation had a rather loose, sporadic, warm-up feeling and style. These cats were really going to get it together, and when they did, it was going to be something. Well,

Outsounds

Sirens Sweet & Slow

after sitting through slightly more than 12 minutes of warm-up, my feelings were starting to shift a bit. Nevertheless I was determined to stick with my earlier plan.

As the next recorded tracks unfolded, it was obvious that instead of anything resembling lyrical or melodic jazz, this would be "free jazz." Quickly I could feel my Friday night moving in a direction unlike what I had hoped for. However, I also felt I had nothing to lose. Cautiously, I said to myself, "Hey, what the heck—nothing ventured, nothing gained." Sound interesting? If so, read on. If not, read on anyway.

My early exposure to this type of music occurred while sitting in on Saturday afternoon jam sessions where local artists would get together for some frolicking, free-spirited (and fun) playing. For me, this type of event works better in a live setting. Perhaps, by merely sitting in front of a stationary, inanimate audio system, it is more difficult to appreciate this type of free-flowing music; it's somewhat difficult to enjoy without the enhancement of a few direct visual cues. Absorbing and appreciating this style of music more likely occurs if you are a jazz aficionado with musical tastes that are open and free. Otherwise, the music may not be too accessible.

There were moments when the artists seemed to simply be flexing their technical abilities. When that

occurred my feeling was, "OK, guys, now just take that thought and expand on it." However that's not what happened. Instead they moved into some very busy and often swirling musical forays, which were seemingly disconnected to whatever themes had been discerned.

As I moved further into this recording, about midway into track four, the artists were demonstrating a true avant garde, strong, no-holds-barred adventuresome romp. Ironically, the title does not characterize the type of music on the CD. It's anything but Sweet & Slow. More like racy and rambunctious.

It may not be your cup of tea, but it is a rather interesting (and unusual) performance. The artists all sound accomplished in their own right. The compositions and arrangements are all quite interesting and very intriguing. As I said earlier, there were times when a brief musical passage caused me to want the artists to expand on that particular idea. However, their idea of expanding on a theme is quite different than mine. These gentlemen are true free spirits and on this recording they jam freely, intensely, and without reservation.

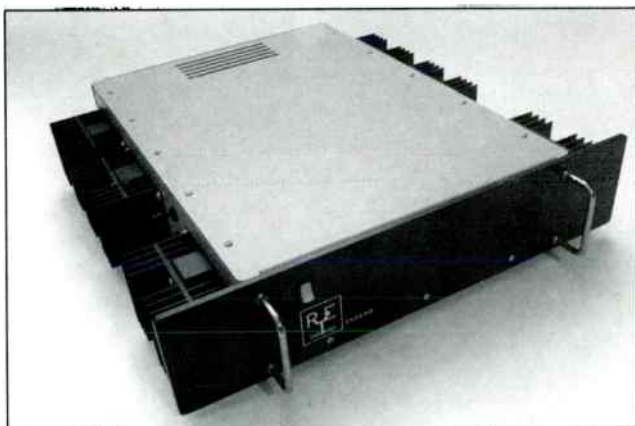


When it comes to sonics, Sprey has done it once again. I don't know exactly what he is doing in his recording studio, but whatever it is, he continues to create one of the most realistic portrayals of recorded music I have ever heard! Excellent tonal balance, an intimate and life-like acoustic, realistic soundstaging with incisive and pin-point imaging, natural musical timbres, are all in evidence.

Sirens Sweet & Slow is a significant departure from Mapleshade's earlier musical format. However, it truly fulfills their commitment to deliver unique, interesting, and high-quality sounds. Repeated listening to this CD has allowed me to better appreciate these musicians' artistic and unique style of delivery. Even though this recording took me on a different musical journey than I had in mind, the trip proved enlightening and worthwhile.

Congratulations to Mapleshade.

This debut recording on their new label, should prove to be an ear-opener for those familiar with their earlier projects. For those of you who have not yet ventured into Mapleshade's domain, perhaps this new label will be your ticket.



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Christopher Greenleaf

If the introduction of electrical recording can be viewed as the crucial primary step toward true audio fidelity, then one can say that the hotly debated process of inching toward elusive perfection has now lasted seven decades. Not all the elements of this singularly unanimous forward movement stem from purely electrical or mechanical advances. From the vantage of its classical producer and recording engineer, the overall education of public and performers to develop, trust, and insist upon high standards for acoustics and appropriate miking has to rank at least as high as technical fidelity—at least among the enlightened labels and radio entities! A case in point is the sheer excellence of many early music recordings from a few justly famed labels.

Harmonia Mundi/USA, an offshoot of HM/France, has recently begun augmenting its catalog with some particularly standards-defining albums. Musically, acoustically, and audio-technically, many of them are

at the very pinnacle of sound documentation of their time. Despite a regrettably large body of earlier recordings made in dead or uninteresting acoustics (such as virtually all the Philadelphia Baroque Orchestra releases, alas), HM/USA has begun issuing a small torrent of stunners of late. This third “King’s Noyse” album is one of these, and its sonics are a subtle challenge to what we’ve always considered to be “audiophile.”

The opulent acoustics of The Campion Center, in the ‘burbs just west of Boston’s inner beltway, are now better understood than when the first recordings made in the space appeared on various labels. The room, a high, vaulted chapel of plaster and solid masonry, has a bloom and sheen impossible to duplicate in less fortunate spaces, nor can even well-executed Lexicon digital reverb approach its allure.

The very simple and effective miking, which has the imaging hallmarks of well-done near-coincident arrays, is tonally true both to the instruments and to Ellen Hargis’ amazing voice. It establishes a more than credible placement of performers within the band and the ensemble within the room. That’s exceptionally hard to do even with the very best of equipment; engineer Brad Michel and producer Robina Young have again pulled off a technically and artistically first-rate recording.

The room’s great spatiality is always there, generously underpinning harmonies and linking the crucial pauses that are an element of all music making. It never overwhelms or blurs, yet it is a major element in the lovely halo and gentle decay cushioning final chords.

The composers were all born in the final quarter of the 16th century. They wrote when the richness of the Italian Renaissance was at its amazing peak. There was never a dividing line between the Renaissance and what succeeded it . . . all these forms and traits coexisted for many decades. Recycling and outright snatching from any good source were the rule of the day. These works were danced, sung, and just played—however whimsy and available performers determined. You may know the names of Gesualdo, Trabaci, Peri, Monteverdi, and



The King's Noyse Stravaganze
Harmonia Mundi USA 907159

Classical

Farina, and you may even know some of the actual music, for some of it is famous beyond the bounds of authentic performance. But you have not yet heard anything like *Stravaganze!*

The King's Noyse makes use of that "other" early instrument grouping, the violin family. "What's so special about early fiddles?" you may well ask—with barely concealed impatience. While original and copies violins, cellos, and (less often) violas commonly crop up in concert and recording, the violin band, as constituted by the King's Noyse, is a rarity. Such instruments were commonly built as matched consorts, as were "chests of viols." These particular instruments, after mid-16th-century Amati originals, were commissioned from Minnesota luthier Daniel Larson. They consist of large and small violins, ditto violas, and bass violin, a powerful cousin of the cello. The exceptionally quick, responsive bows, by Vermonter Harry Grubenstein, are patterned after those which once graced the busy hands of Renaissance dance musicians.

This is not the familiar string quintet! The timbral balance subtle favors the middle voices. The delicacy of early violin construction and the quick gut strings lend a gossamer sheen to ensemble sound while always preserving an amazing clarity between voices. An important addition is Andrew Lawrence-King's gut-strung Italian harp, the only Renaissance instrument other than the lute-theorbo family with a truly expres-

sive dynamic range and a stunning option for continuo or accompaniment. (That Andrew Lawrence-King happens to be the best living performer on his instrument and a leading continuo practitioner to boot is no small bonus.) The special magic that soprano Ellen Hargis evokes, once heard, is unforgettable. There are few singers who combine such overt intelligence with rhetorical expressivity.

If you doubt that music of this remote era can initially claim even your momentary attention, let alone hold it, you simply do not know how infectious its melodiousness can be, how inviting the endless variety is. The music dances, spins, unfolds languorously, declaims with great passion, is by turns contemplative and bumptious. At a total time of more than 78 minutes, the program is generous beyond even early music norms. (By the way, only the most primitive of early Reagan-era CD players and some cheap-o portables will hiccup when faced with disc lengths between 77 and 80 minutes.) This is neither scratchy, thin playing of out-of-tune instruments nor the arid audible result of museum exhumations. And if your audio signal patch and transducers are honest enough, you may have the unusual experience of adding a surprising new dimension to that familiar noun-adjective, audiophile. P.S.: The two previous King's Noyse Hargis albums on HM/USA, just as charmingly played and sung, were both recorded in the same elegant acoustics.

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Christopher Greenleaf

The modern orchestra uses instruments developed between the 16th and 20th centuries, though many of them began to find their final form only toward the close of Brahms' life. In certain metropolitan centers, the most modern version of each instrument was bid welcome in the orchestras within a decade of leaving the inventor's hands. Other places remained staunch bastions of musical conservatism past the middle of this century. By now, however, almost no traces of the long metamorphosis remain.

Valved horns and trumpets, Bohm-system woodwinds, fully adjustable tympani, large-bore trombones, and contrabass tuning extensions all took about a century to become standardized, but their way-stations and experimental stages lingered on in Eastern Europe and in scattered major Western cities well into the stereo age. You can hear late mono or early stereo recordings of glorious Czech or Hungarian ensembles with haunting wooden flutes, clarinets and oboes possessed of a woody earthiness, and enchantingly rich, mellow brass.

All this passed into history. In the memories of a surprisingly large segment of the music-loving population, though, and in the acoustic memories of professional musicians who had once worked with the older instruments, the indelible sonic traces of gut and wood remained. Two modern ensembles have once again

summoned for the enchantment of this more intimate sound in music nearly of our time. One, the New Queens hall Orchestra, is a full orchestra. They've already issued a stunning perusal of some of the best-known Vaughan Williams scores and an ear-catching Wagner album that presents two different readings of each work, all on early 20th-c. instruments.

In the U.S. Ken Slowick's Smithsonian Chamber Players have long grazed in Baroque and Classical meadows, nibbling their way over the Romantic crest of larger chamber scores how and again. They have come together here in their largest incarnation to date as an early 20th-c. string orchestra. They play gut-stringed instruments altered in the past 180 or so years to have a higher bridge and longer neck, with corresponding inner bracing changes. So, while these are in every other physical way the instruments used on stage today, they have either the fully gut strings (uppers) or metal-wound lower strings of turn-of-the-century orchestras. The modern bass and cello still use metal-over-composite strings, but an astonishing number of modern bass players (classical and jazz) have recently re-embraced wound gut lower strings for their tonal beauty. (Just whose guts are these anyway? Put aside horrifying visions of tail-coated wraiths with glinting eye and raised cleaver stalking the parlor kitty.... Most gut strings once went "ba-a-a-a." Okay?)

The music on this dhm CD is well-known, but it has not been heard in our time as it sounds here. Barber's celebrated Adagio for strings (1936, rev. 1938) may finally have its more memorable recording. It simply shimmers and keens. The gut sound is unbelievably rich, not as heavy as with all-metal strings, and unimaginably delicate. An intriguing tonal aspect is the color the bnk produces when playing very quietly—and gut can play much more pppissimo than stelling orchestras. This is a touching yet dry-eyed reading.

Two famous Elgar works, the three movement Serenade, Op. 20 (1892), and the 1909 Elegy, Op. 58, are dished up with a clarity and freshness not generally associated with how Romantic writing "is supposed to sound" today. Allowing for presumed differences between turn-of-the-century English players and 1990s Americans, this is arguably an approach the composer,

metamorphosis

ELGAR
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PLAYERS
KENNETH SLOWICK
CONDUCTOR



Elgar, Barber & Straus Metamorphosis
Deutsche Harmonia Mundi 0542-77343

Classical

who lived to make electrical recordings in London, would have been at home with.

The most difficult work for an interpreter to grapple with is the deeply tragic *Metamorphosen*, a "Study for 23 gut strings," written by Richard Strauss in 1944-45, when the bombing and burning of WW II had destroyed the places that meant the most to him, the music centers of Munich, Dresden, and Vienna. I have never heard this haunting work so transparently, so clearly brought forth, and yet with its great depth of feeling always preserved.

Following the six tracks of the main program of this disc are 19 musical examples from the Strauss work and one of its sources (the *Marcia funebre* from Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony). Notated thematic and harmonic examples are given in the back of the booklet and keyed to Ken Slowick's excellent notes and analytic remarks in the booklet. Some of the examples are presented by the orchestra, while others are on what sounds like a well-recorded Kurzweil piano synthesizer. Fascinating. And a useful entrance into a complex work.

The impetus for releases of this work came in the past out of a fascination for the early music of the past third of a century, but it is equally a logical revival of an approach that was familiar to recording teams and audiences until recently. While I doubt that recidivist ensembles will pop up worldwide to preach the gospel of gut, it is very likely that the Smithsonian Chamber Players (and the larger New Queens Hall Orchestra) will add greatly to our appreciation for what preceded the less intimate world of today's blander, more powerful instruments. I'd buy this album just for the polish and at times electrifying spirit with which the Smithsonian Chamber Players tackle these gorgeous works, but the ravishing string orchestral sound—superbly produced and recorded by Andreas Neubronner—is a powerful draw, as well.

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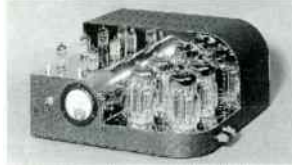
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Doug MacLeod

YOU CAN'T TAKE MY BLUES

ROCKDoug MacLeod *You Can't Take My Blues*

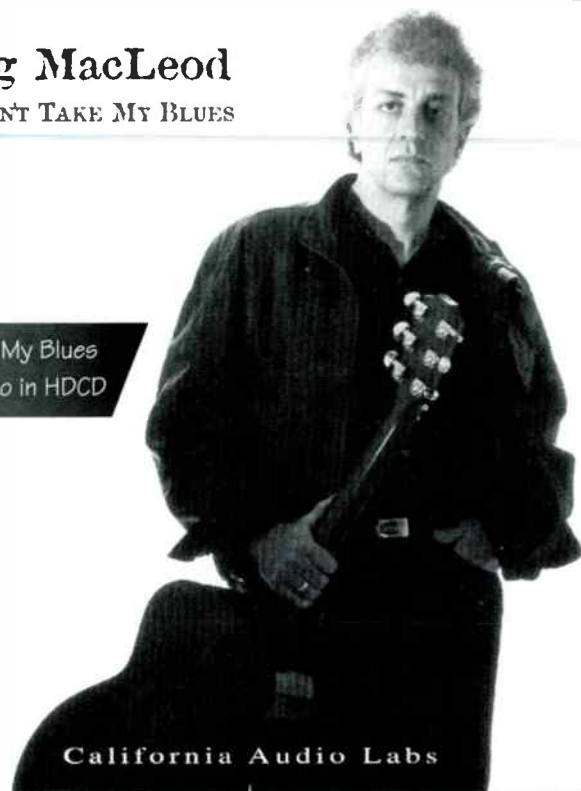
AudioQuest AQ-CD1041, also in HDCD

Rick Taylor

Ever get something that you just wanted to keep to yourself, at least for a little while, so you could keep it private and enjoy the heck out of it until the rest of the world found it? Now, this CD has that stuff! It's that good!

If you like original blues with a Piedmont flavoring, blues from the heart and not the head, then you're gonna find some of that stuff in one, two or all of the offerings by one of today's most highly respected singer-songwriter-guitarists in blues music, Doug MacLeod. All the songs are by MacLeod, except for two collaborations with other band members. Despite that, it's Doug's heart and soul on display here. The musicians on this session are extremely tight, like a band that has lived, played and worked together for many years. Whether the cut uses the same basic core or adds some other talented player (Carey Bell's extreme harmonica playing noted), the music still comes across as tight. This is a band that many other bands would love to have some little resemblance to. When it's time to let it out, it gets out; and when it needs to be a subtle attack, then the music sneaks up on you.

I could go into a long song-by-song review, but I think you should just go out and get this one because discovering the content by one's self should, at the same time, be a personal experience and also be everyone's adventure. Besides, there are too many moments on this CD just to make a list of what to listen for. Again, while I say this CD is a personal experience, play it for your friends, show it around, have fun, and see if you don't agree with me about *You can't Take My Blues*.



Let me tell you about how I got into this one. After initially browsing the CD on a very hurried day, I sat down at 8:00 a.m. the next morning for a listening session in earnest. And this was where my reality took a hike! AQ has really done a magnificent job of capturing Doug and the band, presenting their true essence of them being here with me. AQ truly reached a new level with this recording, particularly with the amount of AIR(!) they captured. Their current CDs have a lower noise floor than I believe anyone has achieved before. There is just so much information in the lows and highs, and the extensions of the bass instruments, together with shadings that don't cover each other, are just astounding. One can now hear cymbals, organ, harmonica, and all the other instruments, from lowest lows to highest highs, with true tonal qualities. Similarly, the solidity of imaging and focus on this CD is very, very good.

So, maybe I'm a bit too enthusiastic to be easily believed. OK, I'll leave you with a couple of quotes from friends I played MacLeod for: "Makes me happy and excited." "I want to jump up and run around the room." "The guitar guy seems like he's right here." The best one came from my 10-year-old son, "Wow!" This little guy still asks for "Doug!!!" Enough....

R ECORDINGS

Michael Tearson

William Brooks' best songs on his new CD, *karma dogs*, are the ones that are the most cinematic, his most visual. The title track in a lilting 6/8-time signature tells of infidelities. "Miracle" relates the Grateful Dead experience from the point of view of two young Deadheads. Mike Jaimes, whose guitar leads are one of the album's pleasures, plays here in Jerry Garcia's signature style and it is a swell tribute. "Isobel," with a hint of Latin rhythm, is a tale of a dark, smoldering yearning that can't be fulfilled. "Slacker Blues" tries to get under the skin of total boredom and disaffection, and does it with empathy and wit. The dreamy "Convertible Girls" paints a tableau of young girls who get too much too easily. Its refrain is a memorable "Objects in the mirror aren't as close as they appear."

William Brooks' band is made up of guitar, bass, drums and either a second guitar or keyboard; the playing is tight and polished. They've clearly been doing



Photo: Susan Lerner

some woodshedding and, as we go to press, I hear they have a gig at Tramps, a first-line music club in New York City. For the album, William augments them at strategic places with occasional use of either lap steel, violin, cello and extra keyboards, guitars or voices. Overall, the production is spare and tasty; the sound clear and full, with every part of the audio spectrum getting at least a little attention.

William's voice is clear and high. Brooks' manner often reminds me of Tim Buckley from whom he seems to borrow a few touches of Tim's inflection and phrasing, plus some of the jazziness of the classic happy yet sad album.

That Brooks has done his homework before recording is quite clear from the finished product. His songs have coherent structure and in them, he spins a fine narrative. With his dandy, little band and his smartly wrought songs, he emerges as an artist I'm looking to get to know better. Write to Brooks at Sawhorse Records, P.O. Box 2579, Times Square Station, New York, NY 10108 or call The Local Music Store at (800) 641-8995.

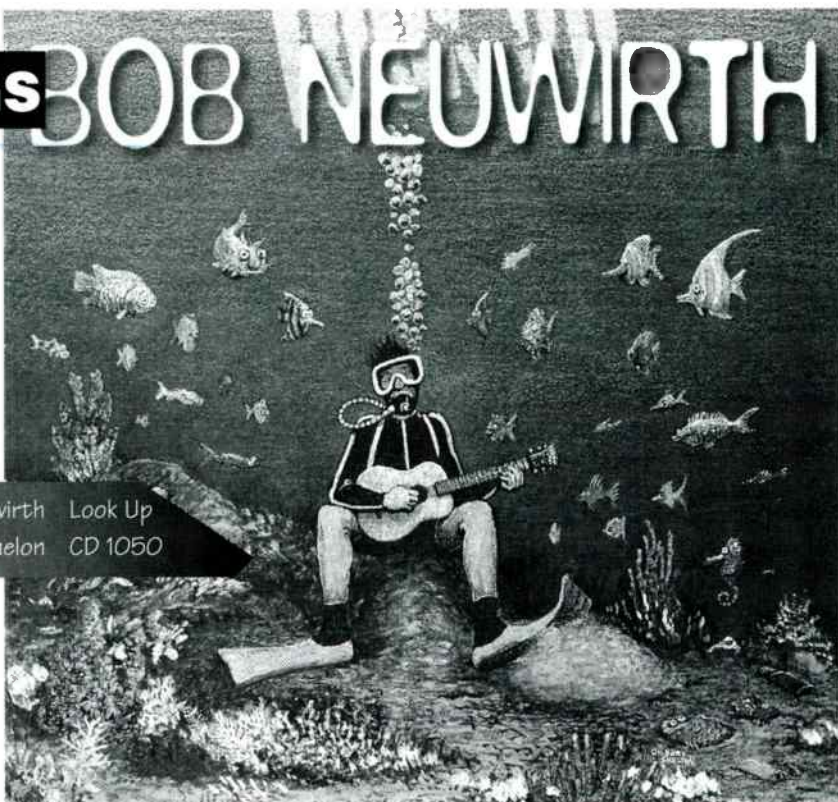
WILLIAM BROOKS



William Brooks karma dogs
Chesky CD4689

ROCK

karma dogs

R**RECORDINGS****BOB NEUWIRTH****Michael Tearson****ROCK**Bob Neuwirth *Look Up*
Watermelon CD 1050

Bob Neuwirth's new album could also be an advertisement for the effectiveness of modern home and mobile recording. He describes *Look Up* as "a modern day field trip to visit friends wherever they happened to be." Each selection was recorded either live direct to DAT on a two-track portable or on an eight-track home studio recorder "with minimal overdubbing."

This fine CD provides a good lesson on the use of minimal overdubbing.

Neuwirth probably is best known as a long-time friend and accomplice of Bob Dylan. Back in the '70s, Neuwirth was a prime figure in the infamous Rolling Thunder tour. His own songs are home-spun and honky-tonk. From the sadly wistful "I Don't Think of Her" and "Blue Detour" to the rocking "What's Our Love Comin' To," featuring a smoldering Rosie Flores' vocal, and a



saucy "Travelling Light" with Peter Case, the album's songs register truth, honesty, and wry wit.

The key co-conspirators are Steven Soles on bass and guitar and David Mansfield on fiddle, mandocello, bass and various guitars. Cameo performers include Bernie Leadon, Charlie Sexton, Mickey Raphael from Willie Nelson's band, Butch Hancock, Gurf Morlix, Elliott Murphey, Patti Smith, ex-Jayhawk Mark Olson, and Victoria Williams.

Neuwirth is best known as a long-time friend of Bob Dylan.

Look Up works as an album of intimate snapshots of friends making music in living rooms and garages. The quality is often startlingly good. Even those cuts that reveal the limitations of the equipment are resoundingly present and close. The spirit of camaraderie permeates and propels the album. It is not glossy. Heck, it is barely polished at all. It is what it tries to be. And that alone is very satisfying.



E

QUIPMENT

VAIC Valve High End Model VV52B Amplifier

Lewis Lanese

"For the times they are a-changin'."
—Bob Dylan



Just when you think you've heard nearly everything worthwhile in audio, along comes a revolutionary component that changes everything. This has happened only a few times in my life; some examples that come to mind are the Quad ESLs, Decca Head (stereo cartridge), and Futterman OTL amps. And now the Vaic Model 52B single-ended amplifier!

Describing them nearly fail me. They are so unique in design and execution that I can think of no other amplifier in the second half of the twentieth century, save perhaps the Futterman, that achieved so much. The Vaic (pronounced Vaisch) is not just an exceptional tube amplifier; it redefines the sonic qualities regardless of whether the amplifier is tube or transistor. Those singular qualities can be summarized as coherent, top-to-bottom dynamics, transparency and clarity, resolution, transients, tonal balance, freedom from distortion. The key term is "top-to-bottom"!

I have found one or another of these characteristics partially present in other fine amplifiers I have heard either in my system or those of friends. But it is the first time in my experience that all of these qualities can be encountered in one exceptional amplifier. The Vaic seems to embody all of the best in tube and transistor amplifiers without sounding like either.

It happened at the 1996 Winter CES show in Las Vegas. I was not anxious to go to begin with and the possibility of getting a reservation seemed unlikely. But at the very last minute reservations were available; I was off on a trip that in retrospect seems auspicious. I arrived at the Sahara Hotel, location for the audio manufacturers. Winding my way through the maze of High-End exhibitors, I casually wandered into the Vaic room. Within a few minutes I realized that the Vaic Valve 52B I was listening to would change everything I

ever thought about amplifiers, be they transistor, tube, hybrid, OTL or single-ended.

Yes, the 52B is a single-ended amplifier but in this case single-ended is almost a misnomer. "SE" conjures up an amplifier of insufficient power but for the most efficient speaker; an amplifier that perhaps may be excessively warm, euphonic, lacking in slam and frequency extremes. Forget "single-ended." Indeed, the Vaic does have a single triode, output tube, run Class A and with no feedback. But there the similarity ends.

PHYSICAL FEATURES

The Vaic 52B, manufactured in Italy, is somewhat imposing if not stunning physically. Each monoblock is approximately 20-1/2 inches W by 17 inches D by 10-1/2 inches H. The chassis is stainless steel with five rhodium covers over two power transformers, one output transformer, a bank of capacitors, and a choke. The sides are black lacquered wood. The front panel has two LEDs, red is for mute and green is for operate. The rear panel has two sets of very large (finger-tighten) speaker connectors, and a RCA jack with a gain control for the incoming signal. The gain control also enables the direct connection (albeit inconvenient) of a source such as CD. Impedance can be set for speakers of either 4-6 ohms or 6-8 ohms. The tube complement is four CV378 rectifiers, one ECC82 (12AU7) cathode follower, one 6CG7 driver, and one blue VV52B triode, output tube.

SPECS AND TECHNICAL BACKGROUND

Specifications, according to Riccardo Kron, the designer and manufacturer, are as follows: 24 watts RMS, no feedback, output measured statically; bandwidth: 5 Hz-65,000 Hz, 0 dB; 5Hz-100,000 Hz, -1dB, and dynamic peaks of 6 amps (600 watts) with musical input. The amplifier can drive speakers with sensitivity as low as 75 dB output for one watt at one meter. The proprietary output transformer is the result of 20 years of research tubes 18 months ago. Later they added the VV300B - an upgrade of the old 1930 device. Riccardo Kron provided the capital and formed Vaic Valve. The tubes are produced in a factory located in Prague. Unique to the Vaic valve are 32 cathodes using a ribbon filament, produced with near absolute vacuum and operating with both current and voltage. These design innovations provide the incredible power and dynamics: the VV30B, 17 watts; and the VV52B, 30 watts.

As Riccardo notes in a fax to me: "...it became apparent that practically no one knew how to apply these futuristic tubes to existing circuits.... For this reason, we decided to study and manufacture amplifiers that would reflect the acoustic superiority of our tubes." The result of that development is the VV52B Amplifier. The amplifier under review is the final off-line production version with the recent "blue" 52B tube said to be virtually distortionless. The 52B amplifier will soon be joined by VV30B monoblock amplifier and a stereo version of the 30B. Vaic unveiled another High End amplifier at the Hi-Fi '96 Show. Designed for Home Theater, it is based on a "revolutionary power device called the VT 460K" which is neither a tube nor transistor. A totally new amplifier will be introduced at the 1997 CES Show in which all the tubes will be manufactured by Vaic.

disc (LAB 21); Robert Schumann. Symphony #1. (Decca SXL 2223); and Anton Dvorak. Symphony #9. (Nimbus 45202, 45 rpm). In listening, I noted that:

Clarity and excellent transient response are caught in: the percussive sound of the piano hammers hitting the strings on the Ray Brown disc; violins that sound like massed strings on the Schumann recording; and the life-like symbols and sax reproduced with perfect character on the Makowicz vinyl.

The natural width and depth is flawlessly reproduced, particularly in the Schumann symphony and the Mokowicz discs. The Vaic makes the most of the exceptional stereo technique: coincident stereo mikes in the Schumann (Decca); and a single-point stereo microphone in the Mokowicz (Sheffield).

I have reserved detailed comments for the extraordinary reproduction of the Dvorak recording. The impact, dynamics and cohesiveness of the treble, mid-range and bass are unequalled by any other amplifier I have used. In fact, I have never heard this record reproduced with such authority. In the fortissimo at the end of the first movement, the combination of the wide sound stage (beyond the sides of the speakers), remarkable depth, and very wide dynamics, together with a non "hi-fi" presentation make for a spine-tingling experience. It is reproduction without stridency or clipping. No ordinary single-ended amp can match this level of reproduction!

Finally, listening to the Vaic Valve 52B amp will force you to re-evaluate your entire system. It will expose the best and the worst in your system. Once you hear the 52B, you will not be satisfied with anything else. In a glowing review of an audio component in *IAR*, Peter Moncrieff suggested you sell your Mercedes to purchase an outstanding component. Now, I know what he was talking about.

NOTES

Vaic Valve Hi-End VV52B Amplifier, about \$14,800.

MANUFACTURER
Vaic Valve, AG (KR Enterprises)
Aeulestrasse 5
FL-9490 Vaduz, Switzerland
Tel: (75) 237 34 34
Fax: (091) 22 73 05

IMPORTER--U.S. DISTRIBUTOR
Jay Bertrand
49 Fairview Ave.
Nashua, NH 03060
Phone & FAX: 603/883-1982

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Vaic High End Model 30B (SE) monoblock amplifiers; Altis Reference tube digital audio processor; Quartessence speaker system; Purist Audio Design MET 9 MK II ribbon loudspeaker; EAD CD-1000 Series III CD player; Croft OTL monoblock amplifiers; Croft dual-mono preamp; Linn-Sondek LP 12, Lingo, Itok tonearm (modified by Mod Squad); Lyra Clavis Da Capo MC cartridge; Krell CD-1 player; Revox B77, reel-to-reel tape recorder; Kenwood KT-917 stereo tuner; Nakamichi 582 stereo cassette deck; Purist Audio Design Maximus and HDI interconnects, Digital Link unnamed, new flat-design speaker cables; Discovery interconnects; various accessories.

THE SOUND

Let me begin with two comments about the peerless quality of the Vaic amp. Soprano voices in particular are reproduced with such purity that it leads me to believe that other amplifiers I have heard add some distortion artifacts. The lack of strain as well as distortion is almost surreal; it's as if I can hear into the music.

Following are some of the recordings I used during my listening sessions: Ray Brown Trio. Soular Energy. Concord Jazz (CJ-268); Adam Makowicz. The Name is Makowicz. Sheffield



PS Audio Ultralink II



Jim Dowd

PS Audio is a company that has time and again proved themselves capable of providing audiophiles with musical-sounding components at reasonable prices. This review is about the inclusion of the much-discussed Pacific Microsonics PMD 100 filter-decoder chip into PS Audio Ultralink II D/A processor. The PS Audio unit in this latest incarnation is called the Ultralink II, HDCD Version. The advent of this unit from PS Audio can well be considered a signpost of hope for audiophiles that music reproduced with digital playback components can be musically involving without doing major damage to one's bank account.

The main part of my review will be to make a direct comparison between the previously offered Ultralink II, which used the NPC 5803 decoder chip, and the most recent version of this D/A unit with the Pacific Microsonics chip. Two separate units were provided by PS Audio, and I thank them for the loan. Both units were equipped with the Ultra Analog AES 21 input receiver chip and the latest Ultra Analog D20400A D/A converter. According to my contact, there were no differences in these two units apart from the implementation of the Pacific PMD 100, so in a very strong sense, this is a review of any possible benefits to be gained by using the Pacific Microsonics chip.

Inside the current Ultralink II, the PMD 100 chip sits on a small p.c. board, about half the size of a postcard, which is mounted almost exactly where the NPC filter chip was. For proper implementation of the PMD 100, some small capacitors and other circuitry share real estate with this chip. These are new in this version, however, the two were otherwise exactly the same.

It should be noted that the price of the UltraLink II did not go up when the Pacific Microsonics chip was

added; it remains \$2,295. Also, owners of the older processors, units without the PMD 100 chip, can upgrade their processor for \$398 at their local dealer or by contacting PS Audio directly.

All digital inputs on the UltraLink II are standard and include RCA coaxial, AES-EBU, Toslink, and ST optical. Standard analog outputs are RCA and XLR-type balanced. All auditioning for this review was done open or non-blind, using the RCA outputs of the Ultralink II since the preamp I use, a Jadis JPL, is equipped with single-ended inputs only.

The rest of the system consisted of a PS Audio Lambda 1 transport feeding numbers to the two UltraLinks with either Tara Labs Luminary ST glass cable or the Generation 2 5000 Master AES-EBU digital cable, both in 1-1/2 meter lengths. Illuminati coaxial cable, distributed by Kimber, was used for the RCA connections. A two-meter length of RCA-type Discovery Signature cable connected the PS Audio processors to my Jadis JPL preamp.

For the most part, the speakers I used were the eminently musical Alon V Mark IIs, tri-wired with Acarian

System's Black Orpheus speaker cable, though I also listened through Linn Kabers bi-wired with Tara Labs Generation 2 speaker to a Jadis Defy 7 Mk. III for quite some time. All components were floated on an Arcici Levitation stand and plugged into a Tice Audio Power Block III. The amps, however, were placed on a Bright Start Audio Big Rock Titan isolation platform and plugged directly into a dedicated 20-amp wall output. They did not "float," take my word on this. Now, is the runway clear for takeoff?

Let me say at the outset, the HDCD version of the UltraLink II outperformed its predecessor in every area.

**This is an early
addition to the
ranks of D/A
units using the
HDCD chip.**

NOTES

PS Audio UltraLink II, HDCD Version, \$2,295.

PS Audio, Inc., 310 Cortez Circle
Camarillo, CA 93012
Tel. 805/383-2788
FAX 805/383-2794.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Alon V Mk. II and Linn Kaber LS-500 speakers; Krell KSA-300S and Jadis Defy 7 Mk. III amplifiers; Jadis JPL preamp; Krell KPS-20i/L CD player and PS Audio Lambda I transport; Tice Audio Power Block III; Acarian Systems Black Orpheus and Tara Labs Generation 2 Master 5000 speaker cables; Tara Labs Luminary ST glass and Generation 2 Master 5000 AES-EBU digital interconnect cables; Illuminati coaxial digital interconnect cable; Discovery Signature and Tara Labs Generation 2 Master 5000 RCA interconnects; Arcici Levitation stand; Bright Star Audio Big Rock Titan isolation platform, and Bright Star Little Rock Isolation Pod.

I'd like to reiterate that both units were identical, apart from the two decoding chips and the few items it took to implement them. So hats off to Pacific Microsonics and kudos to PS Audio for implementing the new chip without raising the cost of the UltraLink processor. What I find really significant here is that new filter/decoder chip improved the resulting sound with every standard CD I threw at it. If it had only provided improved sound using the Reference Recordings HDCDs, then I would not wax so enthusiastic. However, I feel that for every CD decoding, the PMD 100 is simply a better chip than the NPC 5803 which was previously utilized in this unit.

The older UltraLink II excelled at locating instruments in a smooth but somewhat forward manner, depending on the rest of the system and the speakers in particular. It seemed as if the mid to upper midrange, sounding slightly compressed, would jut forward occasionally to bite the listener a bit more than some recordings warranted. The UltraLink II, HDCD Version lifted that sense of "forward compression," as the whole soundstage opened up in a relaxed but confident manner. This process of the sound "opening up" almost immediately reminded me of the sonics of the most expensive processors, and this was a first impression, right out of the box. I felt that overall transparency improved after about 50 hours of break-in play and still more so after about 100 hours of play.

The earlier UltraLink II had always sounded clean, either with or without power conditioning. The HDCD-equipped unit sounded cleaner and more open, while presenting a deeper soundstage. Fine detail, particularly at the fringes of the back and sides of the soundstage, became clearly defined, as if the newer version afforded the music more space to breathe. The presentation of inner detail was improved in places where before it had only been hinted at. Similarly, depth presentation and focus snapped into perspective,

giving an excellent involvement to many non-HDCD classical CDs.

The sense of "hall" on my RCA Living Stereo and Mercury Living Presence CDs became more alluring with the new UltraLink, drawing me further into the recorded event. While loud transients and string arrangements could at times harden or congeal with the early unit, with the new one there was hardly any sense of this hardness except on the Mercurys, which tend to have a little of this hardness anyway. Similarly, any sense of confusion on the RCAs was greatly dissipated.

Whether listening to classical, blues, or jazz, overall timbre was improved with the new UltraLink, and one performance after another seemed easier to listen to. Another nice trait of this unit was that the apparent ease of listening was not limited to any one of the three outputs, be it RCA, AES-EBU or Coax. Neither was the use of custom-made power cords necessary to extract great performance from this unit; sound with the stock cord was just fine. (I also found this to be true with PS Audio's Lambda transport.) This company clearly has a knack for achieving musical and sonic excellence while keeping overhead costs down.

While the earlier unit was somewhat unconvincing in mid-bass presentation, sometimes sounding a little weakened in this area, the newer unit sounded fuller and better defined. Moreover, there was more low bass on the newer unit, which came as a pleasant and unexpected extra. While still not the last word in bass response (admittedly, I own the Krell KPS 20-i/l), the older version of the UltraLink sometimes left me with the feeling that the bass had been cut off just below the knees. The newer version subjectively never left me with a sense that I was missing anything. Bass-heavy recordings now sounded as such, and that was that. Rather than whacking the earlier version, I make these comments only to try to bring the two units into perspective. In my estimation, bass performance with the new version was very enjoyable and clearly improved.

The only gripe I had with the new version was with its rhythmic drive when listening to jazz or blues, even though dynamics seemed better. For me, there was a slight loss of the raw sense of immediacy that the older version provided with hard-driving music. While the new version got the nod when playing artists such as Aaron Neville or Patricia Barber, I preferred the older one with Archie Shepp or Luke and the Locomotives.

Regardless of what PS Audio told me about the similarities of the two test units, I sensed a lower output with the new version when switching from the old one. The result was that I had to keep lowering the volume pot with the older version during these comparisons. Robert Harley's review of the UltraLink II, HDCD

Version (*Stereophile*, Vol. 18, No. 12) notes that the maximum output level from the unbalanced jacks was a lowish 1.58 V and that the low output levels we're starting to see from digital processors are caused by the 6-dB attenuation required by the HDCD-equipped processors when decoding standard CDs. Harley goes on to say that this attenuation takes place in the digital domain with the UltraLink II, right at the PMD 100, rather than in the analog domain. This method was less costly to implement and thus keeps the price of the new unit down. This tells me that while the signal is being attenuated before the analog output stage of this processor, and even though the unit remains the same otherwise, I'm going to hear that drop. For me, the fastest solution would be to bring the preamp's volume up, but I never did like processors with low output since I always felt they lacked drive. Too polite for my tastes, as it were, but then that may just be me.

I tried out a Discovery Signature interconnect between the processor and preamp; this is a simply designed, two-wire, low-capacitance interconnect. I felt the resulting performance went over the top. The rhythmic drive and dynamics of the HDCD version of the UltraLink II was now further unleashed and confirms that the change of filter/decoder chip was an unqualified 100% success. Even the mid-range Discovery, which is a mid-priced, black-jacketed cable, was able to show this level of performance, and in some ways I liked this interconnect even more than the Signature. Any remaining sense of congestion all but completely disappeared, particularly when using the Signature version of this interconnect. I feel that Discovery cable is one of the best buys in the market today.



In my estimation, the strong point of the integration of the HDCD chip into PS Audio's UltraLink II is how the unit improves the decoding performance with standard CDs. The sense of "hall" on classical recordings is impressive by any standard, while depth, detail focus, and definition are first rate. Overall timbre and bass response have improved on this unit to very satisfying levels of performance, leaving the listener with the feeling that no trick has been missed.

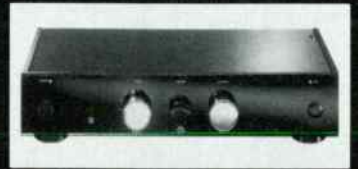
Owners of the earlier UltraLink II, without the PMD 100 filter-decoder chip, shouldn't hesitate to upgrade their units. At \$398, the performance improves so dramatically that I think a \$1,000 price tag could have been attached to this upgrade and no one who had gotten the work done would have blinked an eye about the cost.

While hard-driving jazz and blues recordings in standard CD format can sound more polite than I'd like, probably due to the 6-dB attenuation required, I felt that insertion of a low-capacitance cable like the Discovery interconnect helped polish the apple insofar as dynamics and rhythmic drive were concerned.

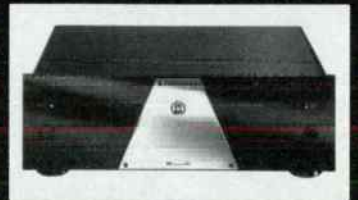
When you audition this unit at your dealer, you may think that the salesman may have mistakenly switched over to one of the \$4,000 processors sitting on the same rack. Don't believe it! The overall musical statement this unit makes is impressive and does not correlate with its price. As I said at the beginning, that's PS Audio's forte.

I'll leave you with a word of warning. You may find that this unit floats right out of the store with you, so that you'll gladly part with \$2,295. If you get any amps that float like that, let me know.

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audio research

The Audio Research LS2B MKII

Joel Shumer

I have had both the original LS2B and the later MKII version as my primary preamps since May of 1994.

As far as I'm concerned, there is no serious contest between them. All that has been written about the LS2B—and reviews have been most enthusiastic—does not begin to do justice to the MKII. Not only have the specific parameters of the sonic performance envelope been stretched toward the goal of lifelike reproduction, but the basic character of the preamp has been subtly changed as well. As a result, while the MKII retains the same configuration of inputs and outputs, functions and controls, its sonic qualities are significantly improved.

The seven Audio Research components which have resided at length in my system since 1986 share a certain familial sonic signature. Compared with other high quality amps and preamps, the ARC units are neutral,

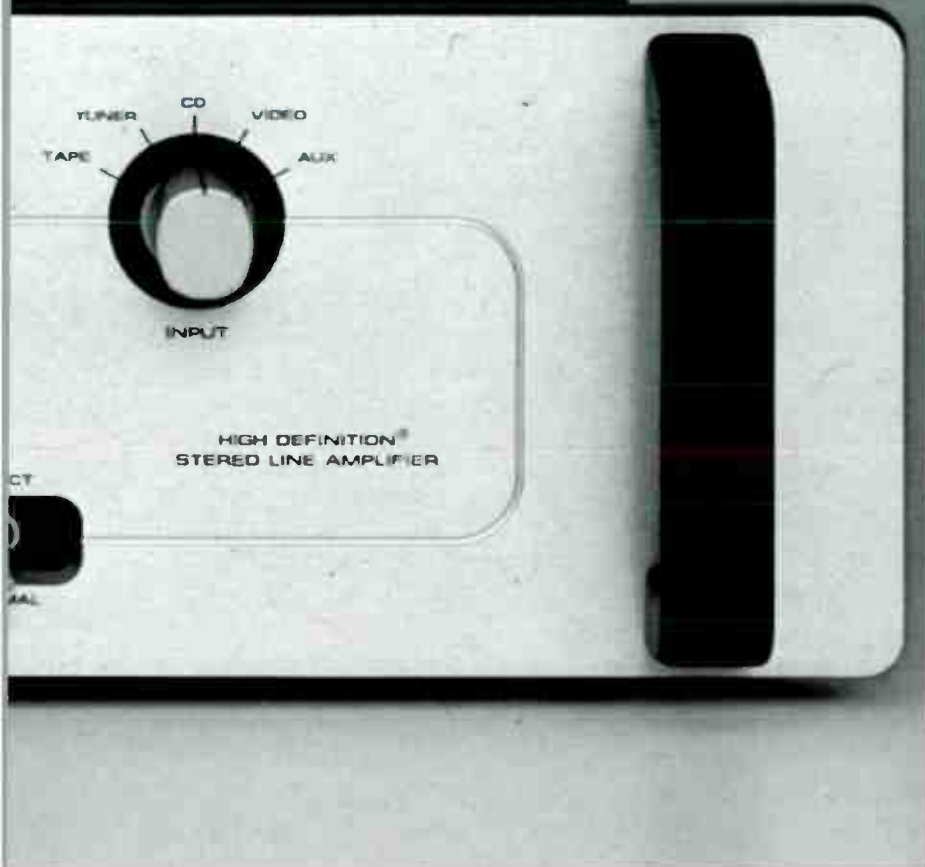
natural, resolve fine detail without becoming etched, and create a large, precise sound stage. But they can also sound slightly forward, reveal a midrange that is ever so slightly bleached white, and produce a less rounded upper bass.

Obviously, I like the sound of Audio Research equipment: I have voted for their products many times with my checkbook. But there have been occasions when I wished their circuitry would produce a little more sonic warmth, even if it were at the expense of accuracy.

The LS2B MKII fulfills my wish and does so without compromising accuracy. While improving on the sonic virtues for which the LS2 and LS2B have been widely praised, the MKII has moved slightly but noticeably toward those characteristics I value in the best tube gear. When directly compared with the original, the

This version of the LS2B gives the best of tube characteristics.

DESCRIPTION



The functions and controls of the LS2B MKII remain identical to those of its predecessor. The two familiar rotary knobs and four toggle switches protrude through cutouts in a handsome, brushed, aluminum 5.25 by 19 inch faceplate. The chassis proper occupies a 10 by 15 inch space, but requires an additional 3/4 inches for RCA jacks on the rear and another 1.5 inches for handles that extend forward from each side of the front panel. Total weight is just under fifteen pounds. Although only a single tube is used, the unit runs warm and should be given headroom of an inch or two for proper ventilation.

The rotary knob on the left is a gain control capable of smoothly attenuating the 24 dB of gain for the balanced outputs or 18 dB on the single-ended set. Most of my listening to speakers of 86/87 dB of sensitivity places this control in a 9:00 to 10:30 position. The other rotary knob, on the right, switches from among five high level, single-ended inputs.

The toggle switch on the far left turns the unit on after a forty-five second delay. To its right is a mute switch. A green LED glows dully when the preamp is muted or during the 45 second warm-up period, and brightens when the MKII is ready to operate. The next toggle switch is labeled "Defeat/Record." Switched to "Record," a signal selected by the rotary input control is routed to RCA record jacks on the rear. (The balanced line input cannot be sent to the record jacks.) Audio Research advises leaving this switch in the "Defeat" position if not recording. No signal is sent to the record jacks, and sonics are marginally improved. The toggle switch on the far right is labeled "Direct/Normal." In the "Normal" position, the rotary input selector determines the input source. Switched to "Direct," a balanced input is sent directly through the gain stage and is affected only by the setting of the gain control. This is about as close as an active preamp can functionally get to that ideal of a "straight wire with gain."

MKII is clearly less forward. The listener has been moved several rows back in the concert hall—say, from row G to row K. Upper mids are a bit less white and have gained in warmth and liquidity. Mid to upper bass is rounder and slightly fuller but with no sacrifice in rhythmic articulation.

The changes I have described above are primarily changes in design philosophy; I welcome the difference and hope that Audio Research will be encouraged to take additional incremental steps in this direction. When these differences in "personality" are combined with the MKII's very specific improvements in performance, the resulting sound is not what one would expect from an updated or revised component. Instead, auditioning the LS2B MKII has been more like listening to an entirely new product. I see the MKII as part of a new generation of preamps launched by Audio Research in their attempt to advance the company's position among the industry's leaders.

The rear of the chassis provides six sets of input connectors, one balanced and five single-ended. There are two sets of balanced outputs, a set of single-ended outputs and a set of record outputs. Single-ended connectors are RCAs, and XLR connectors are used for balanced circuits. A fuse holder and a hard-wired, nine foot, three wire AC power cord complete the rear panel.

CHANGES IN THE LS2B MKII

Externally, the only visual difference is a thicker faceplate sporting ARC's new macho heavyweight handles. To my eye, the elegance of the thinner handles Audio Research bestowed upon my SP 11 MKII are preferable. The single Chinese 6DJ8 has been replaced by a 6922 Russian tube, and even a casual glance shows that the layout of the major circuit board has been radically redesigned. In addition to the repositioning of parts, this permits placement of additional coaxial capacitors and a new "all discrete" feedback network.

The gain control on the MKII is now continuously variable; Audio Research discovered that by removing or replacing all of the control's ferrous materials there was a slight but audible improvement in performance. As an option, both the mute switch and a motorized gain control can be operated by a hand-held infrared remote. None of the other functions, controls and connectors have been changed.

Audio Research will update earlier LS2s and LS2Bs to include the MKII revision. LS2 owners can have the balanced line input upgrade, and even the remote gain and mute functions can be added. The cost of the basic MKII upgrade is \$695.

NOTES

The Audio Research LS2B MKII line level preamplifier, \$2,995 (\$2,650 with single-ended inputs only; add \$500 for remote control of volume and muting). Audio Research Corporation, 5740 Green Circle Drive, Minnetonka, Minnesota 55343-4424. Tel. 612/939-0600. Fax 612/939-0604.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog Source: Linn LP 12/Lingo turntable with Ekos arm; Koetsu Rosewood Signature cartridge. **Digital sources:** McIntosh MCD 7007 CD player, Audio Research CD 1 as transport and DAC 2; Linn Karik and Numerik. **Preamplifiers:** Audio Research SP 11 MKII and LS2B. **Amplifiers:** Quicksilver Silver 90s, Sonic Frontiers SFS80, Audio Research V70 and D240 MKII. **Speakers:** Rogers LS3/5a, Quad PRO 63/Gradient SW63, KEF 105, and Totem One. **Interconnect:** Linn, Audio Research, Straight Wire, M.I.T. Shotgun, Cardas Quadlink SC, Tara RSC Master Generation 2. **Other:** Tice Power Block, Bob Young Line Filters, ASC Tube Traps, Goldmund Cones, V.P.I. Bricks, Target Equipment Stands.

For two decades Keith O. Johnson has done the engineering for Reference Recordings, and his results have proven to be at the cutting edge of the best there is—and even the best there might be. *Pomp and Pipes*, RR58, with Frederick Fennell leading the Dallas Wind Symphony (woodwinds, brass, organ, and percussion), is just such an example. Keith Johnson's recording combines the spectacular with a sense of being in a natural acoustic environment. While listening to track one, "Praise the Lord with Drums and Cymbals" by Karg-Elert, first through the LS2B and then the MKII, I was reminded of those time-lapse films of flowers slowly opening. With the LS2B, everything seemed right, proper and in place. Switching to the MKII, however, the performance seemed to really unfold. The recording venue grew, surrounding and engulfing the listener with a rich palette of tone color. Florid? Perhaps, but the MKII does have the ability to heighten the emotional impact and draw the listener further into a recorded performance.

Using this CD to compare the two preamps, one can hear the MKII open and extend the upper octaves. The highs gain a spacious airiness with no shift toward the harsh brittleness that often accompanies an increase in upper extension.

Karg-Elert's organ bass line becomes both deeper and rounder with the MKII. There is a greater sense of appropriate fullness without any loss of clarity or articulation. Both the upper and lower ends of the sonic spectrum are reproduced with a clarity and naturalness not conveyed by the LS2B.

Rebecca Pidgeon's beautifully recorded "Grandmother" (Chesky JD 115) also produces a rounder, more extended bass with the MKII. One hears a bass line with improved articulation, which is ultimately more rhythmically satisfying. Pidgeon's voice gains a touch of liquidity and loses a pinch of bleached whiteness as well. Unlike the Reference Recording, the stage remains virtually unchanged in switching preamps, but the sense of hall ambience—of being there—is heightened with the MKII.

In November 1991, the newly appointed Music Director of the New York Philharmonic recorded a marvelous live performance of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* in Avery Fisher Hall (Teldec 73244.) The Philharmonic's ensemble playing on this CD is at its very best: the orchestra members seem to be seated on the edge of their chairs following Kurt Masur's every cue. Curious, but when switching from the LS2B to the MKII, there is a subjective impression that

the Philharmonic is playing with even greater concentration and energy. The dynamics are wider, the tympani are more assertive and, wonder of wonders, the strings have even more bite, more air, yet sound no harder.

After many years of being a New York Philharmonic subscriber, I have grown to accept a certain metallic coldness in the hall's acoustics. When listening to these two preamps side by side in quick succession, one hears Avery Fisher's dryness come through the LS2B, while the MKII provides a more forgiving, laid-back perspective on the hall. With the additional ambient information provided by the MKII, Avery Fisher becomes a less aggressive, more pleasant recording venue.

Throughout the symphony, Dvorak has provided ample opportunity for his audience to hear the work of soloists and small ensembles. Here is where the MKII demonstrates its ability to reproduce the tonal balance and timbre of each instrument with greater accuracy.

Much of the improvement in the balance and timbre comes from the MKII's ability to convey a heightened sense of open airiness in the upper octaves. In short, with the MKII version, instruments of the Philharmonic appear to sound more life-like and less like electronic recreations.

Audiophiles take note: Both the LS2B and the MKII sound better than no preamp at all. An experiment using the variable outputs of the McIntosh MCD 7007 CD player directly into ARC's D 240 MKII amplifier produced an orchestral sound of diminished bass, constrained dynamics and an airless top compared with running the same signal through either the LS2B or the MKII.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Listening to ARC's discontinued Classic 60 alongside the V70 that replaced it (The Audiophile Voice, Vol. 1, No. 4), I concluded that the sonic and design differences between these hybrid amplifiers were of such minor significance that the V70 should really have been designated as an updated Classic 60. In the case of these preamps, the reverse is true. The LS2B MKII includes a new circuit board, numerous component changes and, most importantly, there are some quite

substantial sonic improvements. One could easily make the case that the MKII deserves a badge or model designation of its own in the hierarchy of Audio Research products.

The MKII is an unusually successful revision for two main reasons. First, it improves on its past strengths: Openness, transparency, imaging, resolution, and rhythmic articulation; second, the revised preamp has also undergone a modest "personality" metamorphosis. The MKII version is a bit more forgiving, laid-back, rounder and easier going. Its bass is fuller. The upper mids of this unit are less aggressive and more relaxed. Most importantly, all of this has been accomplished without loss of the LS2B's extraordinary resolution and imaging abilities.

Despite its marvelous sonics, the LS2B MKII is probably not a good choice for some audiophiles. It's something of a limited, minimalist's preamp: a line level with attenuated gain; a single balanced input into a single direct path; five single-ended inputs with slightly compromised circuitry; no phono section, and no room for a phono section internally; no balance control; no mono or stereo reverse switching; no polarity inversion. One can't even record off the direct input. But is it possible that the LS2B MKII would sound as good as it does without its having been designed for the truehairshirt purist, the real hardcore hi-fi nut whose only criteria is in the accuracy of the sound? Probably not.

I cannot reasonably say to you that I have heard all of this preamp's competition in side by side comparisons. I do feel, however, that one could look up all of those old reviews of the LS2 and LS2B and, where comparisons are made, take the descriptive comments of the Audio Research preamp and move them up a notch or two on the reviewer's evaluation scale—that's how much improved the new MKII version is over its predecessor.

I have heard some few other preamplifiers with bass that is tighter, or a preamp or two with a midrange that is warmer, or transients that are crisper, but I have heard no preamp that is tonally as well balanced overall, and as neutral and as free of colorations. And finally I have heard no preamp that so effectively minimizes those many electronic barriers between performer and listener. The LS2B MKII has the extraordinary ability to reproduce music with an accuracy and emotional impact that is truly captivating. I really don't have any problem in recommending ARC's LS2B MKII with strong enthusiasm.

**This is a preamp
for a minimalist;
there are few
controls and
scarcely any
switching...but
it sounds great!**

Apogee Centaurus Ribbon Monitor Speaker

Bill Brassington

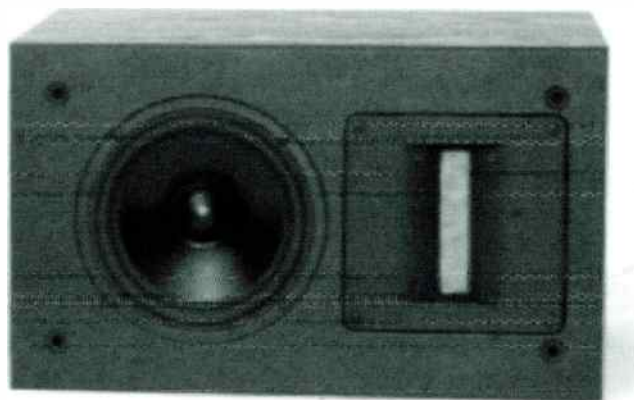
OK, so I like Jason Bloom. OK, so I've had his Stages and Divas. OK, so both consumers and reviewers have said the Apogeess are some of the best they have heard. OK, OK, but I've also had about every other brand of speaker available to me. Plus, I have a small edge on some reviewers 'cause I don't just get the newest speakers that are out there shipped to me at random. When I hear a speaker at the show that I feel has promise, I ask to review it. Apogee has won best sound at the show many, many times and for good reason. They sound good; it's that simple. So I must confess, this is not a hard speaker to review. In fact, in my estimation, it's a no-brainer. Musical, transparent, dynamic, non-fatiguing. There has always been an Apogee trademark. Jason Bloom, a music lover from A to Z, has always had the ability to pick some of the best sounding analog and digital recordings to show what

his speakers can do. The result has always captivated the audience. I've seen

this happen in person many times at shows. A professional setter-upper, tweaker and listener, he just gets it right all the time, the illusion of a live performance. Why not give credit where credit is due? The guy is an innovator in many respects to the wide world of speakers. Just when you hear Jason Bloom saying "I'm getting old" or "audio isn't what it used to be," bingo, he comes out with another winner, this time the Mini Ribbon Monitor. By the way, about that "old" part, Jason pushes the state-of-art of good physical health as well as of speakers. He is a very disciplined person in many respects and demands perfection in what ever he does (but in a nice way). This probably why his products do so well.

The Mini Monitors do not belong in any self-aggrandizing audiophile's home; they cost less than some interconnects. In fact, I'm embarrassed to have them in my home or tell any one who comes in to listen to them how much they cost. Funny thing, I really don't have to tell them how much, the guest tells me. \$3,000, \$4,500, six grand--of course, that's after they listen to them. The most-offered comment is: The soundstage belies their size. The second remark is:

How far out in the top end do these go? They are so sweet and



The tweeter ribbons utilize high-energy, strontium-ferrite ceramic magnets in a computer-optimized, shielded focused-magnet structure and a corrugated aluminum and kapton composite ribbon element. The fascia is carefully contoured to provide a smooth acoustic response and excellent horizontal dispersion. The woofers have long-throw voice coils with high-loss rubber surrounds on the cones for improved linearity and transient characteristics. They feature a progressive suspension that improves low frequency performance at high levels. The woofers also feature large, shielded magnet structures for increased dynamic capability and a large diameter motor structure to improve power handling. The woofer operates into a computer-optimized ported enclosure which is designed to extend bass response and improve low frequency dynamics. The enclosures are constructed using high-loss fiberboard and are heavily braced with Baltic birch composite wood to reduce wall limitations and tonal colorations.

DRIVERS

extended and there is no harshness. What kind of tweeter is it? (No, it's a ribbon.) It's a hybrid with a 6-1/2 inch long throw woofer. On first arrival of the speakers, Apogee explains in their manual they must be broken in for 20 hours. Boy, are they right. Then after two days, magic. Set up was easy; I did not take my time! I mounted them on my R6 Target stands, sat myself in the middle of the room, kept the grilles on, did not bi-wire them, and cranked them up. Not more than three minutes went by Verdi's *Requiem* reference record. Then I got up, ran to the bedroom and said, "Pat, I know your watching TV. I don't ever ask you to come in and listen anymore 'cause you think I'm crazy, but please listen to these new tiny little monitors." "OK, but only for three minutes; this is my favorite program." Half a hour latter, "OK, what do they cost?" Only \$1,200. Do you believe it? Yeah, sure Bill, have Jason put it in writing and I'll pay for them. She did not guess at the price. But she did say "Hogwash" to the \$1,200 and my wife doesn't say that too often. After weeks of listening and tweaking, I knew the verdict was "Gosh darn it, Apogee has done it again, a lay down winner. One year ago at the Las Vegas Hi Fi show, John Atkinson of *Stereophile* sat behind me and listened to the minis. I did not know he was there until after the demo. I got a tap on my shoulder. "What do you think, Bill?" At the time I remember saying they sound marvelous but they're probably very expensive. John said, "I think they're only asking \$1,200.

I'm sorry, but I just can't get into all the audiophile talking words about how it sounds. By now you already know these speakers are the sonic bargain of this century. Don't go out and listen to them at your local store. Just call the dealer up and say send me a pair. You will never, ever regret it. This is a speaker that after years of listening and you decide to put them away in the attic, and one day you take them out of your attic you will ask yourself, "Why did I ever put them away?" This is a Spica, LS-35B, KLH9, AR-3, Quad, Celestion kind of a classic

speaker. You'll never want to sell it for the money cause they just don't cost that much. So you'll have to keep them and that will bug the hell out of any audiophile. Put them under your bed or in your closet or behind the couch or below the sink and when your finished listening to twenty more pairs of speakers and you get tired--just pull out the old Apogee minis and listen to music. Does this sound like an ad? It's beginning to sound like one to me. I guess I'm overly excited.

My room is 14 feet wide by 24 feet long with 8-1/2 foot ceiling. The Apogees, to my surprise, fill up the room with sound. Side to side wall, front to back wall like you would not believe. I've never owned a speaker that when I was listening in the farfield, I thought I was in the near field. There was music coming from everywhere and for sure at times you would think there was a subwoofer working. "I know Bill but what about the imaging?" OK, there is a sweet spot like all speakers and it's in the middle of the apex. But what throws me and others is that it images from the side walls while listening and also the far field. Now that's the magic. The size of these speakers misleads you about the huge soundstage that it can produce. It is in my estimation the greatest thing since sliced toast. No matter what I play--jazz, classical, rock, vocal--I'm brought back into the music and the critical listening and behavior goes away. Kids, grown-ups, audiophiles and especially plain ol' vanilla-flavored music lovers, don't make the mistake of not auditioning these speakers. They are a classic before their time.

What will Apogee do next? Home theater, of course. And do it well from what I've heard about Las Vegas.

NOTES

Centaurus Ribbon Monitor Speaker Woofer, 6fi inches with 1/4-inch high-power voicecoil; Tweeter, Apogee 4-inch long corrugated ribbon; Cabinet, 16 inches high x 9fi inches wide x 11 inches deep; Weight, 26 pounds per speaker; Impedance, 8 ohms (6 ohm minimum); Recommended Amplifier Power, 25 to 200 watts per channel; Sensitivity, 88 dB SPL for one watt at one meter; Warantee, Three year limited; Prices, \$600 each in textured black ash, \$650 each in high gloss black, \$700 each in dark cherry or white ash veneers. Apogee Acoustics, One Progress Way, Wilmington, MA 01887, Tel: 508/988-0124, Fax: 508/658-8498.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Krell KPS-20-iL CD player; EAD CD1000 Series III CD player; Lamm Audio 200-watt mono hybrids; Adcom 5800 stereo amp; Purist Design ac. line conditioner; Purist Proteus interconnect and speaker cable; ASC Tube Traps; Townsend Audio Sisemic Sink; Power Wedge a.c. line conditioner; Purist Audio Design crossover; Purist Audio Design Quartessence speakers; Platinum Audio Reference I speakers; Linnaeum Optimus Mini speakers; Velodyne F1500R subwoofer; Marigo Bear Traps anti-resonance systems and platforms; Microscan anti-resonance systems and platforms; Custom Equipment Granite stand filled With lead and sand; VPI bricks, spikes, cones, etc.; Purist Audio Design power cords; Target R-6 speaker stands, lead filled.



Platinum Audio Duo Loudspeakers

Mark Block

In the mid '80s, back in Merry Olde you-know-where, Phil Jones introduced high-end audio to the concept of all-metal driver loudspeakers when he founded Acoustic Energy. Now living in the States—where us folks dig the kind of righteous, kick-ass bass his speakers routinely pump out—Phil has settled down to design a line of speakers with, you guessed it, all metal drivers.

If you remember Bill Brassington's review of the Platinum Reference-1 speakers (vol. 2, issue 2), you're already familiar, in a general way, with the entire line of Platinum speakers. They all use the same proprietary aluminum drivers and the same cabinet shape. The Platinum Solo is essentially a Ref-1 with a wood as opposed to Avonite/Corian cabinet, while the Duo is simply a taller version of the Solo with an extra 5-inch mid-woofer stacked above the tweeter in what is generally referred to as a D'Appolito configuration. The cast aluminum plate at the back—with its finned heatsinks, two flared ports and dual binding posts—is shared by the Solo, Duo, Ref-1 and Ref-2 (which is an Avonite/Corian version of the Duo). Also shared is the polished acrylic top and bottom plates. With the tweeter at the same height in all four speakers, the standard Platinum 24-inch PS-1 stand will work for any of Platinum's small monitors (sort of; more on that later).

You'd think that a taller wooden cabinet, a few additional crossover parts and an extra

mid/woofer would add—what?—\$500 to the cost. Maybe \$800? Wrong. The Solos cost about \$2500, but a pair of Duos will set you back \$3795 plus stands. Can they compete on a bang/buck scale with \$4000 floor standers? Are they that much better than the Solos? And if so, where does that leave the \$4700 Ref-1? (Hey, Phil, I bet you weren't expecting the Spanish Inquisition.)

The Solo is one of the leaders in a new generation of mini-monitor pushing the envelope of "bass per woofer inch," easily reaching down to the sub 40 Hz region. The two woofers on the Duo—which operate together below 250 Hz, with only the upper woofer continuing up to the 2.5 kHz tweeter crossover—extend and slightly fatten the bass response without

Platinum's Duo can give great bass—but it needs a good amp.

otherwise changing the characteristic Platinum sound. With the ports tuned to 40 Hz, the Duos put out the kind of bass we've come to expect from a floor standing speaker with an 8" woofer. And as two woofers are doing the job of the Solo's one, efficiency is improved slightly, up to a rated 86 dB for a 2.83 volt input (*Audio* measured 85 dB).

In any event, be warned that there is a price to be paid for great bass in a small speaker: the necessity of a big power amp capable of dealing with middling efficiency and a difficult load. The impedance of the Duo dips below 4 ohms at three points, and varies from a low of 2.8 ohms to a high of over 16, so most tube amps—and certainly

all SE triodes—need not apply. Fat speaker cables with low resistance and inductance, preferably bi-wired, are also recommended.

FINDING THE PLACE

Two amps traded center stage position between the Duos: The Mesa Baron (100 tube watts) and the Amherst A-2000 (150 solid state watts). The Mesa is Phil Jones' preferred amp, and it makes a good choice because it is very sensitive (0.5 volts for full output), so the Duo's mid to low sensitivity helps compensate, restoring a usable click stop or two to my Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamp. Meanwhile, the Amherst amp has a lean, tightly controlled bottom end and a smooth treble range; metal dome tweeters don't "phase" it (so to speak), and it tends to tame bass problems in my smallish listening room.

Prior to evaluating (then buying) the Duos, I experimented with a pair of Solos and found that they sounded best with a room set-up pioneered by Michael Green of Room Tunes: speakers halfway into the room, listening chair back near the wall. This gave the little Solos a big lift in the bass, and they sounded awesome. No subwoofer necessary. Note: Most audiophiles know that near-wall placement gives speakers a bass boost, but at the expense of imaging; most don't realize that putting the listening seat back near the wall gives you a similar bass boost, but without the sound-staging drawbacks. If you're able to arrange your room this way, you can get spectacular imaging and surprisingly good bass with a small speaker.

That same set up with the Duos, however, resulted in too much of a good thing; the bass was too huge, too overpowering. I eventually settled in to a tried and true "Rule of Thirds" configuration: speakers one third out from the back wall and my chair one third out from the other wall, with the speakers and chair forming an equilateral triangle. This provides the least amount of room lift in the bass—but trust me, in a small room the Duos don't need bass augmentation.

WHERE THE KIDS ARE HIP

My overriding impression of these speakers can be summed up in one word: transparency. With each CD I get the feeling I'm listening to a mic feed (or, in the case of rock recordings, lots of mics coming out of a

mixing board). This level of clarity is one I'd heard before—but rarely—in other people's (usually very expensive) systems. I'd never heard it in my own room until the Platins came along. The Duos have a sense of openness and detail—without harshness—along with the kind of bass power and dynamics that I've experienced in only one other speaker at a comparable price: the Paragon Regent. Some speakers can better it—the big Dunlavy's, the ESP Concert Grands, the Apogee Grands—but they cost . . . well, if you have to ask. . . .

The feeling that I'm really hearing what's on a recording (and it is just a subjective feeling, because no one, including recording engineers, can say what truly gets put down on master tapes) is very exciting. And yet the Duos are hardly "ruthlessly revealing." Many high resolution speakers render mediocre recordings intolerable, but I find that through the Duos many poorly engineered albums—Little Feat's *Ain't Had Enough Fun* (72445-11097-2), for example—sound remarkably enjoyable, because I'm able to hear nice things in bad mixes.

Two favorite recordings I use to test for system neutrality are Emmy Lou Harris' "Cowgirl's Prayer" (Asylum 9 61541-2) and Holly Cole's "Don't Smoke in Bed" (Manhattan CDP 0777 7 8198 2 1). Both recordings are bassy—in fact, too bassy on many systems—but on the best systems the bass never sounds over the top (or is that over the bottom?). These two recordings also

highlight upper midrange problems. Emmy Lou's voice should sound rough, but not hard or glassy. Likewise, Holly's voice creates a little mic sibilance at times, but good systems control it; bad systems exacerbate it. Needless to say, these recordings sound great through the Duos.

Where sibilance exists on a recording, the Duo's metal tweeter doesn't "paper" it over. Rather, it makes you aware that there are different kinds of sibilance: the sibilance exaggerated by added reverb; the sibilance of a "hot," close microphone; the sibilance of bad EQ; and the natural sibilance inherent in singers projecting "s" sounds. The Duos will decipher this kind of information and give it back to you without editorial filtering.

The last cut on *Cowgirl's Prayer* is a little brighter and hotter than the rest of the album. Some systems make it sound harsh, spitty, electronic and "processed;" others create artificial "musicality," but at the expense of transparency. The Duos seem to strike the right balance, giving me detail and transparency without harshness, letting me hear the engineering changes on this cut without making me hyper-aware of

Dialed in,
these speakers
can lead
to ecstasy.

the mix instead of the music. (Emmy Lou's more recent *Wrecking Ball* is another story; only a very colored SE triode/horn system could overwhelm and tame the monstrously bad sound on that album.)

The soundstage created by the Duos is wide and deep—too deep for some. David (the Obscure) Nemzer and David (the Fish) Fischbein came over to my house recently for a listen, taking turns sitting in my preferred nearfield listening chair (speakers about 7' apart, forming an equilateral triangle with the chair). The depth and size of the soundstage made them squirm. "Exaggerated," they opined nervously, sparking a lengthy debate on the nature of audio reality. During the debate, they moved to the couch a few feet farther away from the speakers, where they found the sound more hospitable. Suffice it to say, if you set the Duos up for maximum depth, they'll give it to you.

This concept of "unrealistic depth," of a system creating artificial depth rather than reproducing what is in the recording, has troubled me lately. I acknowledged it when I used Acoustat electrostatics—after all, half the sound was firing out the rear and bouncing off the back wall. But it's much tougher to make that case when you're sitting nearfield in front of a small dynamic monitor. What's the mechanism

there for exaggerating the soundstage?

I also noticed that on John Waters *Amused to Death* (Columbia CK 53196), both the dog on the right and particularly the "Bill Hubbard story" to the left are more "far out" spatially and less phasey through the Duos (nearfield position) than I'd heard them previously. So are the Duos exaggerating the QSound? No, they are letting it out of the box. Everything is less connected to the speakers with the Duos; they disappear, leaving—here's that word again—transparency.

What makes a speaker transparent? It's not phase linearity—the Duos ain't. It's not just flat frequency response—my Snell B-minors measured just as flat. Phil Jones says he designs for low spectral contamination and high dynamic capability. In other words, Platinum speakers add very little mechanical noise, and they don't compress peaks. Other than that, your guess is as good as mine.

Platinum speakers were creating such a buzz last year within The Audiophile Society that everyone and his mother was asking to borrow mine. (By the way, within the Society we have a Solo owner, a Reference-1 owner, and two Duo owners). Seeing as how it's always a good idea to try out components in a variety of systems, several friends got the chance to check out my Duos; it was educational for all.

When Herb Wolfe (distributor of the famed Wisa pump for air-bearing tone arms) tried them, he was blown away by their midrange resolution and sweetness, yet was bothered by a lack of "top end air." His solution: trotting out his old Sequerra ribbon super-tweeters from the closet and plopping them on top of the Duos. Suitably impressed, he loaned the Sequerras to me, and I had to admit that I liked the extra brightness, and also the extra image height, but overall I thought they were a one step forward, two steps back kind of progress. Eventually I discovered that the same effect could be had without resorting to add-on kludges.

TRICK #1

The Platinum drivers and crossover are not flat on axis; there is a presence region suck-out if you aim the speakers right at you, and likewise there is a high frequency roll-off if you aim them too far away from you. Although a phase plate on the tweeter helps improve dispersion, and the room-averaged response is nicely flat, if you sit at close range in an acoustically treated room (like me), there is a very narrow "window" about 15 degrees off-axis where the brightness range fills in and the speakers sound open and neutral. Finding the right toe-in is therefore critical: Use some pink noise from a test CD, and move your head from side to side while listening for the point at which the noise sounds brightest—that's the axis you want your ears on. Toe-in changes the sound of these speakers dramatically—much like an electrostatic. Of course, if your system/room already tends toward the bright and edgy, you can correct the situation with either more or less toe-in. Neat.

Needless to say, the same situation applies to the vertical axis: You must have your ears slightly above tweeter level. Low-slung chairs that put your ears dead even with the tweeters are a Duo no-no. However, the farther back you sit, the more the room dominates the sound, so all this becomes somewhat less significant.

TRICK #2

The Platinum speaker grille is a beautiful piece of industrial design: a rounded, perforated metal item covered with a thin, black fabric on the outside and lined with foam at key points on the inside (to isolate the tweeter from possible diffraction problems). They really give the speakers quite a glamorous look. Platinum says the grilles are not removable, which is not exactly true (they fit very snugly, but they will come off, particularly if the bottom plate of the speaker is removed first). Platinum further states that the grilles are integral to the design, and that performance will suffer if the grilles are pulled off, which is not exactly true either.

It is my sad duty to report that although the Duos look better clothed (like most people), their personality is more free and airy in the "full frontal naked" mode. I don't particularly like staring at all those nobby bits on the front baffle, but when I heard the sound sans cover, I got over the not-so-pretty visuals quickly. Not only did the top end "open up," but the soundstage grew in every dimension—particularly the vertical. This is the biggest, tallest image I've ever heard from a small speaker on a stand. You'll think you're sitting in front of a six foot tall electrostatic.

The one drawback here—aside from the obvious problem of the drivers being exposed to possible damage from fingers, paws, broom handles and what-not—is that protruding veneer at the left and right cabinet edges, along with the large, rounded lips of the top and bottom plates, are left exposed with the grille removed. Diffraction from these edges could possibly create some minor high frequency blips and imaging anomalies, although they weren't obvious to me. I haven't

tried a fix yet, but attaching some felt or foam to the baffle (Avalon style) would probably do the trick.

[Pardon the cliché, but STOP THE PRESSES! Platinum has started fitting a piece of foam around the tweeter to prevent diffraction and also to cure the slight treble roughness caused by the grille. Phil Jones explained that some high frequency sound was bouncing around between the grille and the baffle; the foam on the baffle now absorbs these reflections. (Phil also implied that the only reason to remove the grille is to compensate for a high frequency hearing loss. Guilty. That Mahavishnu Orchestra concert I went to killed off everything above 15 k years ago.) I tried the update and it works. The grille no longer stands between you and the best possible sound.]

TRICK #3

While you've got the grilles off, tighten up the Allen bolts holding the drivers to the baffle. It took me about 8 months of ownership to work up the courage to yank the grilles, and when I did I discovered that all the mounting bolts were very loose. Every speaker needs a good torking to every now and then, and the Platins are no exception. When the drivers are tight, a slight fuzz or smearing seems to disappear, and the bass gets tighter and more dynamic. Again, it's a change for the better in the direction of more resolution, more openness, more speed.

LAST BUT NOT LEAST TRICK

The Duos need better stands than Platinum provides. The Platinum PS-1 stand is probably adequate for the Solo, but its two circular support poles are not structurally rigid enough for the bigger, top-heavier Duo. The fact that the stands use four spiked feet instead of three only magnifies the stability problem. Let's be clear: Four feet with two cylindrical, closely spaced supports constitutes an acceptable arrangement for a stylish if wobbly table that could conceivably hold your demitasse in a coffee bar; it is not an acceptable scheme for supporting a heavy speaker in a high-end audio system. (Pet peeve time: four feet on any speaker or stand is just bad design. Period. I can't understand why it's not obvious to manufacturers.)

The solution for the Duos is not an easy one—at least until Phil Jones gets on the stick and comes up with a decent stand. See, the Duos, being fairly

NOTES

Platinum Audio Duo loudspeakers, \$3795 per pair in ebony or rosewood, PS-1 stands, \$499.

**Platinum Audio
10 Commerce Park North, Unit 12
Bedford, NH 03110
Phone 603-647-7586**

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Sonic Frontiers SFD-2 MKII digital processor; Sonic Frontiers SFT-1 and JD Transforms transports; Well-Tempered Turntable and arm, Marigo Labs arm clamp and mat, Monster Cable Sigma 2000 cartridge; Sumiko phono amp; Mesa Baron, Amherst A-2000 and Rotel RB-990BX amps; Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamp; Acoustat Spectra 22, Snell B-Minor and Platinum Audio Duo speakers; Cardas Hexlink V, Discovery Signature and Esoteric Audio Artus interconnects; Meitner, Discovery and Esoteric Audio speaker cables; Atlantis speaker stands; Bright Star Big Foot bases; ASC SuperTraps, tube traps, flat panels and RBG Skyline diffusors; Audio Quest, TDK and Radio Shack ferrite noise filters; Sims Navcom feet; AudioQuest UltraConnect cleaner; Nitty Gritty Model 2 record cleaner, DBX 14/10 analyzer.

deep, create a problem with most good 24-inch stands: I couldn't find one with a top plate big enough to accommodate the Duo's screw-in cones (the expensive, four-post Target stand barely makes it—but precariously). My solution was to buy a pair of four-post Atlantis stands and have the dealer drill two holes in the top plate exactly in line with the two mounting holes of Platinum's top plate. We then simply bolted the Platinum top plate to the Atlantis top plate, with a thin layer of Platinum's own damping material in between. I filled the Atlantis stands with half sand and half lead shot, screwed in the three spikes (yeah!), leveled them with the convenient bubble level built into the base, and sat back in awe.

The speakers were cleaner, faster, tighter, more dynamic and bigger sounding. This tweak is not free if you've already bought the Platinum stands, but it's a huge improvement for the money (about \$250 plus lead and sand).

If the speakers' stylish appearance is a major selling point for you, fine—use Platinum's matching stand. The Duos will sound great that way—I enjoyed them for many months blessedly ignorant of the better sound I was missing. But if you want to explore state-of-the-art sound with these speakers, my advice is to pull out your bag of tricks. If this review has convinced to “pull the trigger” and buy a Platinum speaker, try to get your dealer or Platinum to throw in for a nominal cost just the stand top plates, then modify a pair of Atlantis stand as I did.



A fascinating evaluation took place at the Brass Ear's apartment. We compared three Platinum speakers—Solos, Duos, and Reference Ones—to really hear how the Platinum speaker line sorts out in terms of sound for dollar. The Solos, at \$2,500 per pair, sounded “ab fab.” Remarkably full, bassy and warm for pip-squeak sized speakers, with only a 5-inch woofer, the Solos would definitely be on my short list if the budget had to be kept at around \$2,500 and my room was on the small side.

If the Solos sounded great, Bill's Ref-1s were a revelation. I had expected only a subtle difference—after all, the Solos and the Ref-1s are almost the same speaker, the cabinet materials and a few upgraded parts in the crossover being the only changes. But the improvement over the Solos really justified the almost 50% price penalty. Everything I had liked about the Platinum sound based on listening to Solos and Duos was there, but more so: More dynamic, more transparent, more detailed, more involving.

Next up came my Duos, and in comparison to the Ref Ones they were . . . well, disappointing. I had really expected to hear a substantial improvement in bass weight and authority, and yes, it was there, but at the expense of tightness, cleanness and midrange resolution. Against the Ref-1s, the Duos sounded a little warm and fuzzy. I would never have described them this way had I not experienced this during a direct showdown. I very seriously considered selling the Duos and trading up to a pair of Ref-1s.

But I didn't do the deal, mainly out of inertia—and besides I had the vague feeling that I was happy with the Duos. I instead decided to make some other improvements in the system before thinking about a newer pair of new speakers. I think I did the right thing. The listening at Bill's house was done before I had learned any of my Platinum tweaking tricks. The drivers were loose, the tweeter axis wasn't dialed in just so, and the foam hadn't been applied around the tweeter. I think I've squeezed out substantially better performance than what I heard at Bill's. But make no mistake, the Ref-1 is still probably the better speaker system, however on the downside, it does have less bass and it does cost more. If I was happy with the Duos before, I'm ecstatic now. Sometimes an audiophile has to keep repeating the mantra “Don't mess with success.” Soon, I'm gonna screw up and change something and have my system turn to crap. But right now, I ain't messin'.

THE RIGHT PLATINUM FOR YOU

My friend the Fish compared the Duos to his big Avalons, and was wild about the Platins' ability to unravel midrange detail. He also raved about the smoothness and extension of the tweeter, but ultimately felt that the bass lacked the weight of the Avalons in his large room. Fair enough. The Platinum Quattro (with four mid-woofers) might be just the ticket in a big room.

As an aside, this just shows you how pointless it is to subjectively describe a speaker's bass response in a review. In my own room (and at Platinum's WCES demo room), I've heard the Duos sound bass heavy, yet in Fish's room they were a tad lightweight. Room and placement are everything! (And remember, that includes listening chair placement.)

A Budget MBL System:

- 8004 Amp
- 4004 Preamp
- 323 Speakers

Ron Nagle



In the beginning . . .

There was a great void and in its midst a voice spake, "Go ye forth toward the light and seek ye fulfillment in that which issues from the hand of God!"

And So It Came To Pass.

As I sat stuffing my face with cold Szechuan sesame noodles—the traditional fare of audio reviewers—my beeper went off (rats!). Okay, okay . . . calm . . . chew some more . . . swallow . . . wipe chops . . . get up . . . drop quarter in restaurant pay phone. It was the voice from The Great On High, the (now ex-) editor. [Who's been promoted to writer!--E.P.]

Editor: Oh, hello, Ron, are you busy? I mean you're not working on anything right now are you?

Me (In slightly recalcitrant tone): Well, uh, no. I'm clear. What's up?

Editor: I'm getting in some stuff from MBL. How would you like to review a solid-state system consisting of two-way speakers, power amp, and preamp?

Me: Well, okay, I guess. How's this gonna happen?

Editor: I'll give the MBL rep your phone number and she'll call tomorrow to work out the details.

And so she did. Two days thereafter, on a sunny Sunday, the designer, Jurgen Reis, accompanied by his

New York dealer, rang my doorbell. They proceeded to push a dolly full of

boxes into my listening room—a pleasant sight indeed. What transpired next confounded my spouse, as it would most of the civilized world. The two men begin pounding on opposing walls with clenched fists. Next, they wandered aimlessly, circling my furniture, stomping their heels into my floor, all the while clapping their hands and muttering under their breath. My cat disappeared.

This is the manly rite of voicing a room—frightening to females who seldom witness the sacred, secret inner rituals of audiophilia. With tape measure in hand, they eventually found two points on my floor where the convergent harmonic spheres were at minimal (or is it maximal?) confluence.

Invoking the spirit of the sainted Julius Futterman, they each in turn pounded the spiked stands through my carpet and into the wooden subfloor, then pounded the speakers onto the stands. Now my wife disappeared. Without further ado, they took their leave and left me . . .

My first impression was visual: Sexy, mirror finish black glass acrylic panels front both the preamp and power amp, providing a background for polished brass knobs on the preamp and a large brass plate with logo on the power amp. Both front panels hold a left and right pair of red LEDs that glow in the dark, reminding me of a pair of glowing eyes. This is a far different esthetic, distinct from my usual diet of brushed aluminum facie. Ultimately, I am left with the impression that this is what audio jewelry for the ears looks like. I like it.

With three separate components each contributing its own personality to the Gestalt, I decide to become familiar with the total system just as it was set up in my listening room by the designer. Then, by a process of comparison and substitution, I would remove each element one at a time to factor out the solution to this complex equation. One further confusion gets tossed into the mix: As initially supplied, the owner's manuals were all (save the last page of specs) written in German, but *Ich nicht spreche Deutsch!* To supplement the manuals, the dealer left me an English translation of the company's full-line product brochure.

Now, I don't need to do my impression of Werner Klemperer auditioning for a part in "Hogan's Heros" to convince you that poor translation of German technical material can easily produce some rather stiff and unwieldy language. Suffice to say that MBL's new marketing and sales director, Marc Lawrence, who was appointed after I received the system, made it one of his early priorities to rework all their marketing materials. We're told by MBL that new manuals, in English, are now available and that they are considerably more readable. The new Editor, by the way, says he believes Lawrence on the point.

NUTS AND BOLTS

The three elements of this array—the 4004 preamplifier and 8004 power amplifier in combination with the 323 speakers—constitute the least expensive MBL component system.

Let's do this backwards for a change. I'll start with the speakers, then the power amplifier and end with the control preamplifier.

The optional high-gloss, lacquered pearwood cabinets of the review pair of speakers make quite a "statement" of German fit and finish. Think Mercedes dash. My sample had mirror-matched wood veneer on all surfaces, including the front baffle. The one-inch, soft-

fabric dome tweeter and six-inch mid/woof driver are truly placed in a jewel box of a setting. The speakers were supplied without a grille cloth—probably to show off the wood—but grilles do come standard.

Even on these, the least expensive MBL speakers, four large, knurled, gold-plated, five-way binding posts allow the user the option of bi-wiring or bi-amping. Another nice little touch is that the perforated metal cap protecting the tweeter can be lifted off, apparently to improve high frequency extension and smoothness. This is the way I listened to the speaker system for this evaluation.

Sitting atop a pair of Target S70 stands (29 inches high), the slightly trapezoidal, tapered front panel rises another 16 inches allowing the tweets to just skim the top of my seated noggin. Since initially there was no literature I could read which describes the speakers, most of what I relate will be empirical.

THE 8004 POWER AMPLIFIER

The description of the 8004 power amplifier (the Spruce Pounder) goes like this. Up front there are two push-button switches—one a mute, the other power on/off. The literature states that the amp is of dual mono construction, but a peek inside reveals a slightly different story. The first thing you see, strange but true, are the internal components bolted to the underside of the aluminum top cover, which doubles as a heat sink. A total of 16 power transistors are coupled directly to the stereo outputs by a set of eight, five-watt emitter resistors connected in parallel on each side of a single printed circuit board. The power supply is common to both channels and utilizes a large toroidal transformer and a pair of 47K microfarad supply capacitors to help to smooth things out.

The 8004 rear panel is not exactly what I'm accustomed to seeing in the U.S.A. In the back are four knurled, heavy-duty binding posts that can accept bare wire. These are off to the left side. Opposite this on the right are two toggle switches covered by insulating rubber boots. The first switches the amp from stereo (60 watts per channel) to mono (180 watts per channel). The other switch selects between the balanced and unbalanced inputs.

I was looking forward to using both the balanced and unbalanced stereo preamp outputs to make a direct comparison between the two interconnect methods. However, the power amp has but a single XLR input, so balanced operation can only be utilized with a pair of amps switched to mono! As the King of Siam used to say, "Tis a puzzlement."

The MBL 4004 preamp is way more interesting. The basic device comes as an active line stage, but you can customize it by slotting in different boards that adapt it to your system and needs. My sample was fitted with a moving-coil phono stage, but the moving-magnet and infrared remote control options were not included (rats!).

The mirror-finish black front panel has three control knobs: Oversized, polished brass knobs left and right, with a smaller, black-on-black knob (labeled record) in between. The design clearly conveys a designer's vision. The black rotary knob has click stop positions marked as: mt (monitor tuner), rec, md (monitor DAT) and rec off, all written in lower-case letters.

The rear panel, with a mix of balanced and unbalanced (XLR and RCA) connectors, holds the key to the switchable front panel functions, so let's take a walk around back and have a look.

All the input and output connectors are highlighted within white silk-screened rectangles. The section labeled "opt1" contains left/right RCA jacks for the (moving-coil) phono stage. The next area, labeled "opt2," has left/right XLR sockets. Next is a quartet of RCA connectors for the record/play tape loop.

The next grouping is an identical quartet of RCA connectors labeled "dat. rec." and "play." Within the borders of the next area we see RCA connector pairs for tuner and CD inputs. And (sorry about this) there is still more, two pairs of RCAs labeled "output one" and "output two." And last but not least are a block of two

XLR receptacles designated "sym out."

Okay now, let's take a walk back around to the front, 'cause now we can appreciate what the last big golden knobs do. The left knob moves clockwise from 9 o'clock to 2 o'clock to select between the six inputs: Tape, dat, tuner, CD, opt1, and opt2. The last large golden control knob adjusts volume. (Phew, that's it!.)

MOVING RIGHT ALONG

As you can see, there's a lot going on here. It's a very flexible component, and could easily serve as the remote control center for just about any audio or video system I can think of. But wait! There is still more German innovation if you take a peek inside.

Peeling back the heavy-gauge steel top plate you see a modular design. Functional sections are sub-assemblies separate from each other, making service and trouble-shooting much easier. Got a problem with one channel of your phono section? Just plug in a new board. The left and middle source selection knobs are bolted to the front panel, and pins on the rear of these switches are soldered directly to a small circuit board. From this, a ribbon cable runs to a plug-in connection on the main board.

Of the seven internal boards, the main board utilizes something I've never seen in a preamp. Each of the input and output signals passes through a miniature board-mounted relay. Those front-panel source-selection controls actually switch in the chosen rear panel connectors and, get this, switch out the unused ones. Okay, so what's the big deal? Just imagine: No possibility of source interference crosstalk, minimal r.f. contamination and minimized ground loops. And all of this is wrapped in a heavy-gauge steel and acrylic chassis. Way neat! I guess you can tell I'm impressed; it's my favorite part of this MBL system.

N O T E S

MBL 4004 Preamplifier, \$2,000; MBL 8004 Power amplifier, \$2,700; MBL 323 Speakers, \$1,400 (w/out stands).

**MBL of America
8730 East Via de la Luna, #13
Scottsdale, AZ 85258
Tel.: 602/991-8001
Fax: 602/991-8797**

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analogue front end: Sota Sapphire Mark II with electronic flywheel powered by high current custom power supply. Sumiko Blue Point Special and Monster Alpha One cartridges mounted on a Grado Signature tone arm with an Analogue Survival Kit arm wrap. Digital front end: Magnavox 624 CD player pushing digits through an Assemblage DAC-1 D/A converter, both weighted down. Audio Research SP-9 Mark III preamp up ahead of my Audio Research Classic 60 power amp, feeding Crosby modified Quad ESL 63 speakers perched on Arcici lead filled stands. Speaker cables: Audio Research Litz Line and XLO Type 6A. Interconnects: Monster M1000 Type II and XLO Type 1 and XLO Type 4 digital. Numerous accessories and tweaks: Mod Squad and German Acoustics spikes, VPI bricks, VPI 16.5 record cleaning machine, industrial 20 amp line filter, isolation transformer powering digital equipment, Radio Shack SPL meter, Stylast, Kontak cleaner, Last record treatments, and Syms CD stabilizers.

IS IT SOUP YET?

Following the designer's recommendation, I left the whole system to cook for a couple of days. I then used the Sheffield/XLO burn-in disc (track eight) until my wife started packing a bag for me. In a brilliant defensive counter attack, I took her out to dinner.

My first few hours of listening were sans note pad, just to touch on a few pet critical

requirements. As if approaching a painting in a gallery, I noted placement, depth, width, height, color, tonality, and overall Gestalt. After a time, I went looking for nuance and details, performance and perspective, and that's when I ran into a snag.

I became conscious of the speaker placement. Sound seemed to be firing directly at my shoulders. My position felt strange. Vaguely, I felt as if I were sitting looking into the wide end of a megaphone.

The image moved away like an artist's perspective illusion of depth, in that at the center was a point of infinite convergence. Toeing the speakers out a bit helped, but I was hoping to reshape my sonic painting into a large oblong, with corners I could peek into. The stage indeed became wider, but the center image lost a bit of specificity and the tweeters' extension seemed a tad down.

I continued to experiment with positioning until by chance I discovered a fragment of the twilight zone on an old mono pop disk. As Jimmy Beaumont rolled back the years by singing "Since I Don't Have You," I leaned toward my left and lost some high-frequency information. Still staring straight ahead, I slowly moved sideways and a few inches right of dead center, voila! The high end reappeared. As Pooh Bear would say, "Oh, bother."

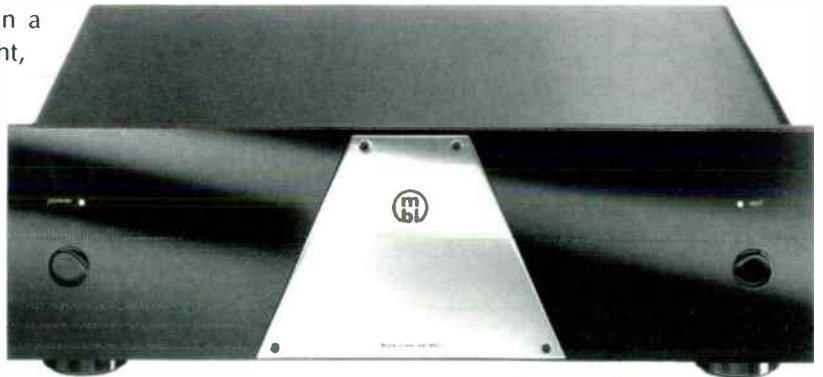
Assuming my lotus position, I pondered the unknown as the master had taught me, until finally I saw the light. Indeed, if I could see sound as I do light, then this must be a room interaction, possibly a sidewall reflection. Thence, what was once a small suspicion grew larger and now could not be ignored. I needed to alter the room's acoustics!

By explaining this anomaly to the NYC dealer, I arranged a loan of four panels of Gryphon "abfusers." And, at his suggestion, into the bag went a complete set of XLO interconnects: Digital Type 4, plus XLO Type 1 unshielded and Type 6A speaker cables. [MBL America later told us that designer Jurgen Reis recommends WireWorld Eclipse.]

TWEAKING

Part of a Sunday afternoon was spent fishing with a mirror to locate the side wall's point of first reflection. I placed one pair of abfusers there. I then located the second pair of abfusers in the rear corners behind the speakers. The effect was immediate and obvious.

The stage appeared with greater solidity, and from the tweets down into the mids I noted better specificity



and clearer tonal colors. Meanwhile, the XLO contribution was one of high-frequency extension and an overall impression of greater control, albeit with a concomitant loss of warmth and (apparent) bass extension.

As I hooked up the speaker lines, I noticed a little tag hanging off one end that talked about Teflon. It suggested that the user (me) use the cables for 80 (what?!) yes, 80 hours to burn them in. Rats once again! Well, did I? Yeah, kinda. I left the system on FM and went to London.

Two weeks later I returned and listened to a nice, calm, tonally tamer MBL system sans most of the sonic frizzies. But as the song asks, "Is that all there is?" I still wasn't satisfied with a view through a round window. I wanted to get my head out of the pipe.

Using the *Opus 3 Test Record #4* (Opus 9200), track 3, "Capriccio" by Mendelssohn, I looked at the accompanying photo and, moving the speakers incrementally, tried to recreate the sound of four guitarists sitting side by side. As a result, the toe-in changed from about 30 degrees to only 8 degrees. Finally I moved rearward about five inches closer to the wall to reinforce the bass.

ENTER THE CHALLENGER

It was at this position that the MBL 323s remained for the rest of this review—and first met their direct competitor, the Proac Studio One. Remember, there exists in this market slot many competent two-way designs. And the British seem to have an expertise that consistently places British two-way monitors at the forefront. Let's take a closer look at the MBL 323/Proac Studio One match-up.

The major difference between these contestants is the Proac's titanium dome tweeter versus the MBL soft fabric dome. Both cost \$1400, both are two-way, ported designs using the same size enclosure volumetrically. Additionally, the driver complement is similar, with a

one-inch dome tweeter and a 6-1/2 mid-woofer. Both sets of speakers are matched and mirror imaged.

For this phase, I added two additional pairs of audiophile ears; the only stipulation I imposed was that they bring along a recording that they use as a reference, and that we specify our impressions regarding overall balance of treble, midrange, and bass before we discussed things like imaging, tonality, etc.

We started with the 323 and we each in turn listened to our references until one and all agreed that they knew the MBL signature sound. Then we replayed the last selection, this time with the Studio Ones mounted on the stands at the exact same position. I enforced a strict "no comment" rule until everyone had taken the center seat and had an adequate go with their reference disc. Note pad in hand, I jotted down their impressions.

Now as I write this I have those notes in front of me, and sorting through them leaves me feeling perplexed: I don't completely agree with everyone else. The Proacs were the big vote getters with the listening panel, and yeah, the Proacs imaged better, sounded cleaner, were faster and more detailed. But that's what I expected from those metal dome tweeters. That is what I call the Proac sound. It's impressive. From the smallest to the largest speakers in the Proac line, they are fast and detailed. But take a Proac speaker and drive it with the wrong source, pumped through the wrong (transistor) electronics, and you can use them to shave with.

On the other hand, the MBL 323s over the long term are solidly in a class I'll call "even tempered" speakers. They are never offensive, never too warm or too bright. And while none of the following sound the same as the 323s, I'd put my old pair of LS3/5As and both old and new Quad Electrostatics firmly in the same camp. The MBL 323 speakers are well-balanced in that the psycho-acoustic impression is one of low-frequency extension balanced by an equal extension into the highest frequencies.

Reviewers (mad scientists, caps affixed to heads) try to peer between instruments and look at the back of

the speakers' soundstage. But John Q. Audiophile would rather just sit back and listen to tonally correct, realistically rendered music that is easy on the body neuro entire.

THE POWER AMP

While I still had a captive audience and before I let my audiophile brethren off the hook, I was determined to titillate their cochleas with coulombs from my Classic 60. The aforementioned speak boxes were indeed responsive. They clearly revealed the difference between the hybrid Audio Research Classic 60 and the solid-state MBL 8004. (The Classic 60 sold for \$3,500, and was replaced by the V70 at \$3,900, so understand that we're not comparing apples to apples here.) Now with a dash more respect for these speakers, I faced a moderately wide, moderately deep rear stage that, viewed from above, would be more or less or "D" shaped. It was what went on in that big "D" that pleased the soul.

After substituting the Classic 60 for the 8004, the lateral width and height remained the same but the listening position moved back about 10 rows, with greater depth into the corners behind the speakers. Images within the soundstage showed increased dimensionality by virtue of better lateral separation and increased delineation front to back.

The effect of deepening the curve of the stage could only partially explain the expansive sense. A larger part of it was derived psychoacoustically by greater individual image resolution and placement. Enhancing this clarity were subtleties of tonal shadings that I hadn't noticed before—the vocalist's breath sounds, the shimmer of cymbals, the warmth of the wooden instruments. With a sense of insight I decided all of this must be a function of decay.

Think about it: If images don't overlap, it's easier to separate a musical tone gradually lessening in strength, even in the presence of a stronger signal. You will be able to follow the natural decay of an instrument from onset to inaudibility within its own space.

At first hearing, one of my 'phile friends opined that the MBL 8004 controlled the bass better than the ARC 60, though it imaged better. He spoke the truth. With the 8004, the tonal epicenter seemed to shift downward from midrange to lower midrange, with a

The 8004 amp presents a fairly deep and wide soundstage.



more prominent bass. I welcomed the added sense of low end bloom because it existed without lessening any other portions of the musical envelope.

Before I move past the discussion of the power amp, I need to touch on a phenomenon that I began to call the "plateau effect." I must confess that I don't have a clear cut answer here. It works like this. It's kind of late and you don't want to disturb the neighbors, so you tool along at moderate SPLs. After awhile your eye flaps begin to sag and your brain drifts off to that woman you passed on the street. To jolt yourself back to business, you begin cranking the volume control and, lo and behold, somewhere past 9:30 on the dial something snaps in. Your tweets begin to tweet and your bass starts to rock 'n' roll. This, of course, is musical dynamics. [It's also the Fletcher-Munson effect—Mark] It's the stuff that imparts rhythm and drive and a sense of excitement. Why mention it here? Because through the MBL 8004 the plateau effect was more noticeable, possibly because with the ARC 60, my attention was still being captured by the many low-level musical events going on in the sound space that, even at reduced levels, held my attention.

THE PREAMP FOLLIES

The third and last phase is nigh, and again it's MBL and Audio Research. With the AR SP-9 MKIII replacing the MBL 4004 and the 8004 power amp powering the system, I went to my vinyl stash, reasoning that this is where the nuance resides.

First up, one of my long-standing reference discs, *Basia Time and Tide* (Epic FE 40767). On the cut "New Day For You," you can hear that Audio Research hybrid voicing once

again. It's as if someone standing behind your sweet spot seat says, "It's in the details, bunky." The switch over to ARC is very much like the power amp comparison, except now it's dealing with even smaller millivolt sized signals with a greater potential to either reveal or conceal.

First, I heard a deeper center stage. Sweeping across from left to right, there was increased separation, with individual elements in their own acoustical spaces. In a direct comparison with the MBL 4004, bass is larger, seemingly rendered with less control at the bottom. Bass chord changes are more in evidence. While the initial attack might favor transistors, once again it's the natural reverberant decay that speaks to the emotions, filling the back of the hall and cascading forward to wash over you. To use a tried and true old saw, what you get is dimensionality.

Finally, I tried a total ARC takeover with the Audio Research Classic 60 reintroduced downstream of the SP-9 MKIII. Running the system in this configuration gave me an opportunity to listen to the MBL 323 speakers sitting outside of their usual support group, and to reassess the sonic contribution of the MBL 8004 power amp. As you might expect, the ARC preamp plus the ARC power amp places a magnifying glass over the strengths of each, with the parameters of specificity and dimensionality enhanced.

Listening to the cut "Drive On" by Lori Lieberman, on the Pope Music Sampler (PM 2001-2), I'm aware of mouth sounds, an intake of breath, a throaty vibrato, a touch of sibilance, for the first time. Most of that sense of reduced dynamic nuance, the feeling that you want to get up and turn up the volume, is obviated by the ability to hear her phrasing (microdynamics).

The soundstage now has rear corners, albeit a trapezoidal instead of a rectangular shape—good depth, good width, but the images still are

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no wider than the outside edges of the speakers. After awhile, through many configurations, you begin to feel that the 323s are tightly controlled, or more accurately that they are controlling. They're missing an elusive quality that speaks to our emotions.

REDUX

Thinking back over the months I've auditioned this MBL system, it occurs to me that the longer the process took, the more I found a common thread running through the individual components comprising this system: I always thought it was holding something back. I consistently felt like I could fix it by changing something or rearranging something to get it to go that last mile—like toeing the speakers in and out or turning up the volume to breathe life into them.

I theorize that the primary contributor to the spatial and dynamic compression effect was the power amplifier. And I can't help but wonder what two of these things running in balanced dual mono would sound like. I regret not having a world-class solid-state amp to help me find an answer. Additionally, I must confess that in spite of the care I exercised, I don't think I completely exorcised all the speaker/room gremlins.

MBL's preamp remains my favorite component because of its flexibility, beauty and solid construction.

It too is an example of lab-quality transistor control, super clean and quiet. Its output mute in concert with the mute on the 8004 power amp, enabled this reviewer to do an up-to-temp, cable, interconnect and component swap in mid listen with no fear of damage. This is a worthwhile feature I would love to see proliferate.

I realize that I was listening to my own favorite hybrid amp, and this touches in part on that ancient tubes versus solid-state debate, which in the end must be decided according to your own musical tastes. I certainly don't want to leave the impression that nothing good happened during the course of this reviewing process. Not so! The attractive styling is matched by a reassuring sense of quality and dependability. Never did I hear a complaint from the MBL camp. The sound and the stage are rock-solid and clean. This system never offends. It is well-balanced and can be listened to for long stretches without aural fatigue.

So what kind of nuts did I pick? Just the kind of things an audiophile looking for the sonic Holy Grail might pick. And remember I ran it up against far more expensive equipment. Informative? Yes. But the guy who would audition this MBL system most likely would never run it against the equipment that I did. Unfair? For sure, but now your work begins. Get ye hence to your MBL dealer. Sit down with some of your choicest cuts and partake of that which issues from the hand of God. All shall be revealed unto you.

COUNTERPOINT

Mark Block

MBL is famous in the States as the maker of those super-expensive, super-sexy model 101 Radialstrahler speakers (also known as The Pods, or "those things Gindi has"), so the words budget and MBL would not normally go hand in hand . . . but here they are: We're reviewing a budget system from MBL! Of course, with the exchange rate and the costs of importing, the system isn't that cheap; at least it's not expensive. In Europe and Asia MBL markets a full line of equipment, and they're now trying to make inroads here. Because Ron wasn't certain he'd exorcised all the

acoustic devils in his listening room, I scarfed up the MBL stuff and gave it a quick listen to see if a different sound could be coaxed out of it in a new environment.

As Ron mentioned, the first impression is visual, and it's impressive. I showed the system to my wife and a woman friend of ours, expecting them to ooh and ahh.



The speakers did get two big thumbs up, but the gold-on-black electronics were deemed too . . . oh, what's *nouveau* in German? They aim at modern Euro elegance, but maybe they try too hard. The U.S. distributor tells us that the the gold-electroplated brass faceplate is standard, being very popular in the Far East, where most of their distribution is, while a black acrylic faceplate is available as an option at no extra cost.

I couldn't assess the amplifier on its own, as it appeared to create a bad impedance match with my Sonic Frontiers SFL-2 preamp. In fact, the match-up created a clamor so horribly thin and anemic that I assumed the amp was broken. Yet substituting the MBL preamp resulted in fine sound. Go figure. [MBL informs us that the input impedance of the amp is 5 kilohms—unusually low, and certainly a problem for most tube preamps.] Lesson: Don't split up this amp and preamp; they're a pair. Tonally, the combination is pretty smooth and forgiving, erring on the side of forgiveness, rather than ruthlessness. Highly musical, but not as quick or transparent as my normal Sonic Frontiers/Defy-7 system—and I wouldn't expect it to be, given the combined \$11,000 retail price of my tubed reference units. The only flaw in the otherwise exemplary musicality of the system was a bit of harshness that crept in on loud applause and massed strings, but that blemish was balanced by a full, well-controlled bass. Just keep the SPL levels down a bit and I believe that you'll be fine.

The speakers were, for me, the true gems of this German sonic jewelry. You won't find more beautiful cabinets for the money anywhere—although you will find more dead ones. The light weight of the cabinet walls manifests itself as a trace of upper bass warmth, but otherwise I didn't hear any major colorations or

imaging problems. Unlike Ron, I found the 323s to have quite good soundstaging abilities. My set-up differed from his in that I used the speakers primarily on 24-inch stands with the tweeter covers in place, and that may have made a difference. The warmish bass (like a very mild loudness control, à la the LS3/5a) is counterbalanced by a slight treble peak, lending the speakers, as Ron put it, a pleasing balance and even tempered personality. Sibilliance with the MBL speakers is more prominent than with my reference Platinum Duo speakers (about \$4,000/pair), but it was not in any way spitty or annoying.

One of the nice things about these speakers is that they sound remarkably full-range for their size. The roll-off is fairly rapid below 50 cycles, however the impression is that of power in abundance. What most impressed me was that the speakers sounded good almost anywhere I put them. I first tried a "Rule of Thirds" speaker/chair set-up (where my Snell B-minors and Platinum Duos sound best), and the sound was full yet fairly neutral. I then tried them in a mid-room arrangement with my listening chair near the back wall. Here the Duos and B-minors sound too bassy, while a pair a Platinum Solos sounded just right. Miraculously, the 323s sounded fine here too. (And the imaging was awesome.)

I say "miraculously," but it's not magic—just a very artful design combination by the project engineers: Enough mid bass to make the sound satisfyingly hefty when away from the walls, and a carefully arranged bass roll-off that managed to avoid exciting the standing waves in my 18-foot-long listening room. All in all, one of the most unfussy speakers I've ever encountered—hardly the last word in resolution, but an attractive and eminently safe choice for a music loving audiophile as opposed to a tweak.

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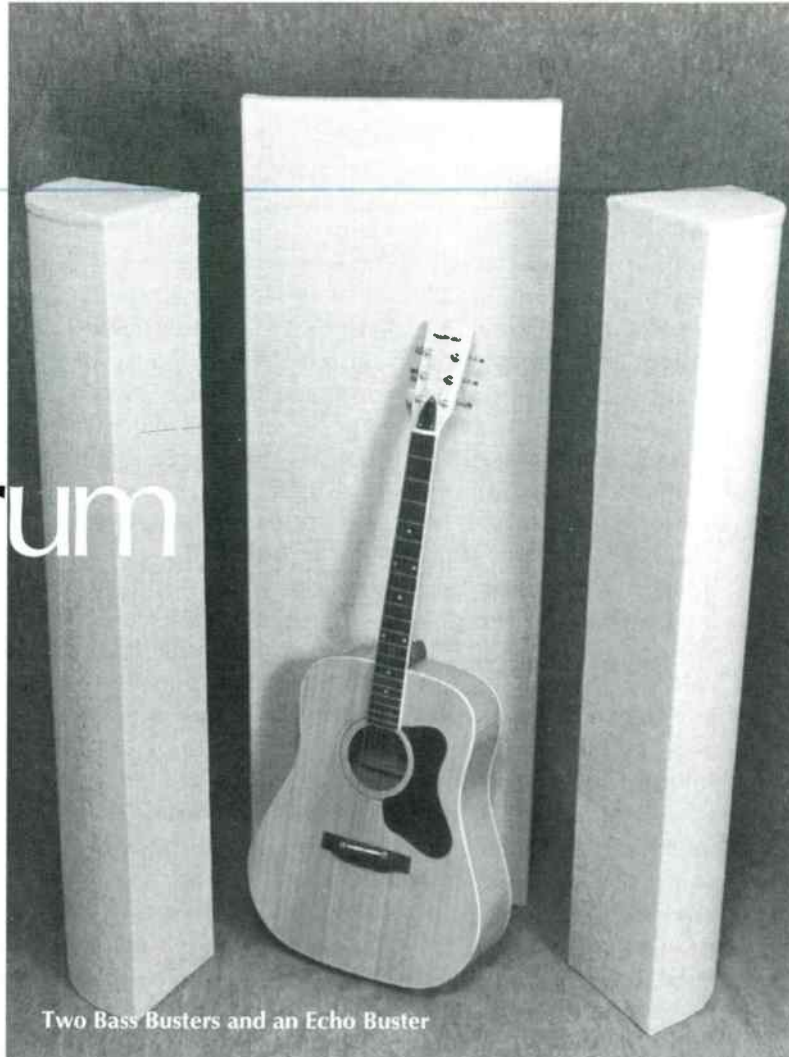
Absorption with Decorum

Ralph Glasgal

In the last issue of *The Audiophile Voice*, Mark Block wrote "I believe audiophiles must start wising up to the fact that room acoustics determine the quality of their hi-fi systems much more than the equipment itself." A more prevalent attitude among audio equipment reviewers was once expressed to me by Sam Tellig of *Stereophile* who was adamant that room treatment would never darken his listening room even if it were cheap. Most readers of this magazine have seen pictures of anechoic chambers, those windowless padded rooms with suspended floor and black foam undulations everywhere. Such pictures in our minds' eye have prejudiced many audio hobbyists against sound treatment of any kind on the basis that it will look terrible and their spouses will never stand for it. Some of the older materials, such as Sonex foam squares that resemble black ventilation grills without visible means of support, did fit this image. The more attractive absorption systems from RPG, ASC and Michael Green, among others, although better looking, were offered at price points, sizes and weights more suitable for auditoriums, studios or audio dealerships than home listening rooms.

Audio and home theater enthusiasts have also shied away from room treatment because treatment has largely been a do-it-yourself endeavor and most of us are not as handy with building materials as we are with electronic gadgets and wire. The high cost of room treatment has also been an inhibiting factor.

Well I am happy to report that in recent months, effective, attractive, inexpensive and easy-to-install products have been released by RPG, Acoustic Innovations, and particularly Echo Busters, whose



Two Bass Busters and an Echo Buster

products were shown for the first time at the recent Waldorf show and whose absorption products are reviewed here. The increased activity in this area could be because, with grown children leaving the baby boomers' nests in increasing numbers, rooms, that can be completely devoted to home music theater or surround sound, are becoming more available.

TECHNICAL MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ROOM TREATMENT

Several technical misunderstandings have also inhibited the widespread use of absorptive room treatment. The first is the idea that the coming generation of digital automatic electronic room equalizer will solve all room problems by correcting the loudspeaker and room frequency response at the listening position. However, the most important reason to treat a listening room is not to correct the frequency response or tame bass room modes, as laudable as those goals are, but rather to eliminate spurious early reflections and

reduce the listening room reverberation time to a value that is less than 20 percent or so of the typical recording venue value. In a normal sized listening room, a sound ray has to travel about 10 feet on average between reflections off one of the six surfaces of a room. If the room has the typical home reverberation time of 0.6 seconds, a given transient will ricochet about the room some 70 times before becoming essentially inaudible. Many of these trajectories are bound to pass through the listening position and active-digital-microphone-controlled equalizers can do nothing to suppress them and may even recirculate them.

Another common misconception is that the size of the room is an overwhelmingly important factor in sound reproduction. In actuality, the smaller the room, the less costly it is to treat and the easier it is to control. A smaller room does, however, require more attention to absorption at the lower frequencies if it has pronounced standing waves that are audible at the listening positions. Note that earphones or near-field loudspeakers, as in virtual reality applications, represent the smallest of listening rooms and seldom require treatment. Incidentally, almost any normally sized room can be sound tailored to have the same reverberation time as Carnegie Hall, but this wouldn't be suitable for solo guitar, organ or most chamber music. In other words it is the ambient signature of the recording or movie that should prevail and not that of the playback room.

Some manufacturers and reviewers hold that room treatment below 200 Hz is more important than treatment above this frequency or that if your room has audible low-frequency standing waves, high-frequency treatment is a waste of money. Apart from timbre coloration, low-frequency reflections or reverberation, particularly below 90 Hz, are very difficult to localize and do not spoil the sense of being there. Thus, at very low frequencies, it is better to treat the room for flat frequency response than to be fanatical in reducing the very-low-frequency reflections or reverberation time. Audiophiles also tend to be preoccupied with low-bass response, but the fact that most decorator and pocketbook-friendly sound treatment panels (including Echo Busters) are less effective below 250 Hz should not be used as an excuse to abjure room treatment entirely.

Finally, there is the belief that diffusion of sound is better than absorption where room treatment is involved. Indeed, if you can't absorb a nasty reflection,

it is better to divert it from the listening area and hope for the best. By splattering sound in all directions, diffusers can delay many reflections on their way to the listening position until they have declined in intensity, but today, diffusers are not an attractive or inexpensive way to tame an over reverberant room. Where surround sound is concerned, it certainly does not make sense to spray front-channel sound all around the room or make the side channels come randomly from the front or the rear.

A PRACTICAL GOAL FOR HOME TREATMENT

A typical concert hall has a reverberation time of about 1.25 seconds and a jazz recording studio about half that. The average untreated home listening room has a reverberation time of about 0.6 seconds at frequencies around 1,000 Hz. Since this home reverberation time is comparable to studios and concert halls, the listening room causes some image smearing and a loss in realism due to spurious early reflections and bogus reverberant tails. If the room can be adjusted to have a reverberation time of about 0.2 seconds or better, then these room effects will be no more noticeable at home than reflections off nearby seats are in an auditorium or movie theater. If surround sound is not an issue, some



listeners will be happier with longer home reverberation times for music, particularly if they listen mostly to small ensembles that could realistically fit into such a small space. One can treat a room gradually, putting in a few panels at a time, until no difference is detected when another couple of panels are added.

The unit of sound absorption is called the sabin. One sabin is simply the amount of sound absorbed by a panel one square foot in area that is absorbing all the sound that touches it. A typical untreated room with a volume of 2,400 cubic feet and a reverberation time at 1 kHz of 0.6 seconds must have 200 sabins of absorption due to furniture, drapes, rugs, etc. To get such a room down to 0.2 seconds, we would need another 600 sabins of sound absorption. If we use sound panels like the Echo Busters that have an absorption coefficient very close to one at the mid and high frequencies then we would need 600 square feet of panel to do the

job. This essentially means paneling all four walls of the average listening room and therefore implies that the room must be dedicated to this purpose, have little furniture, and that the cost of this much paneling is reasonable. (Nobody promised that an audiophile's lot would be an easy one.) A thick rug and acoustic ceiling tiles can be used to pick up a hundred sabins or so.

ECHO BUSTERS TO THE RESCUE

Echo Busters is a Bethpage, New York company that produces a range of sound absorbing products primarily targeted at home use. Their products are made using an advanced ester foam molded into egg crate hill and dale convolutions that trap lots of energy dissipating air. This material is then placed within wood frames of various sizes and covered with a grill cloth. The flat panel units are all 2.25 inches thick and 52 inches tall but can be 12, 18, or 24 inches wide. Custom sizes are available up to 3 feet by 6 feet. Fabric colors include white, quartz and gray or any color on special order.

The back of the frame is left open and normally goes against the wall. The setback of the ester foam and its relief insures that lots of air remains between the panel and the wall. Any sound that makes it through the foam to a wall will reflect from that wall and have to make it back through the foam. Not having the foam actually touch the wall means that no material is wasted trying to absorb energy at a point where the particle velocity is zero. But if a panel is to be used free standing, it is better to order two panels held together back to back with a stand that Echo Busters offers for this purpose. Since even the largest of the standard panels weighs less than six pounds, they are very easy to mount with ordinary nails, and even two of them together are easy to move around if you are chasing a nasty reflection. Of course, a free-standing panel can catch sound coming from all horizontal directions and so can be doubly effective at many room locations.

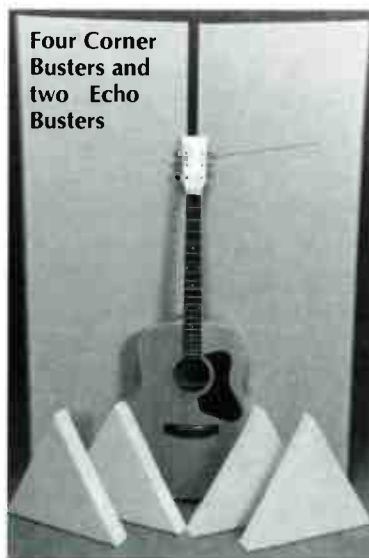
While it is difficult to make accurate absorption measurements in the absence of an anechoic chamber and very directional microphones, I was able to pretty much confirm the manufacturers claims for this material and I was also able to compare its performance with other panels I had on hand, including ones made of Fiberglas, Melamine and the original Sonex foam.

Using a pink-noise generator and a one-third-octave spectrum analyzer, the transmission loss through two Echo Buster panels (to simulate wall mounting) showed the absorption coefficient to be reasonably close to 1.0 from 1,000 Hz up, which declined to essentially no absorption at 250 Hz and below.

Using only my ears, the sound in the shadow of the panel was just about all lower midrange rumble. The Echo Busters outperformed all the other sound materials I had, however most of these are not as thick as the Echo Busters even though they cost more. A standard two-foot by about four-foot panel costs \$275 for a package of four. Thus, experimenting with four or eight isn't so painful and even a little treatment is better than none. If some 48 panels were needed to completely do the job, the cost would be \$3,300. This is a lot, but as Mark indicated, this expenditure is likely to produce better sound dividends than a like amount spent on other equipment.

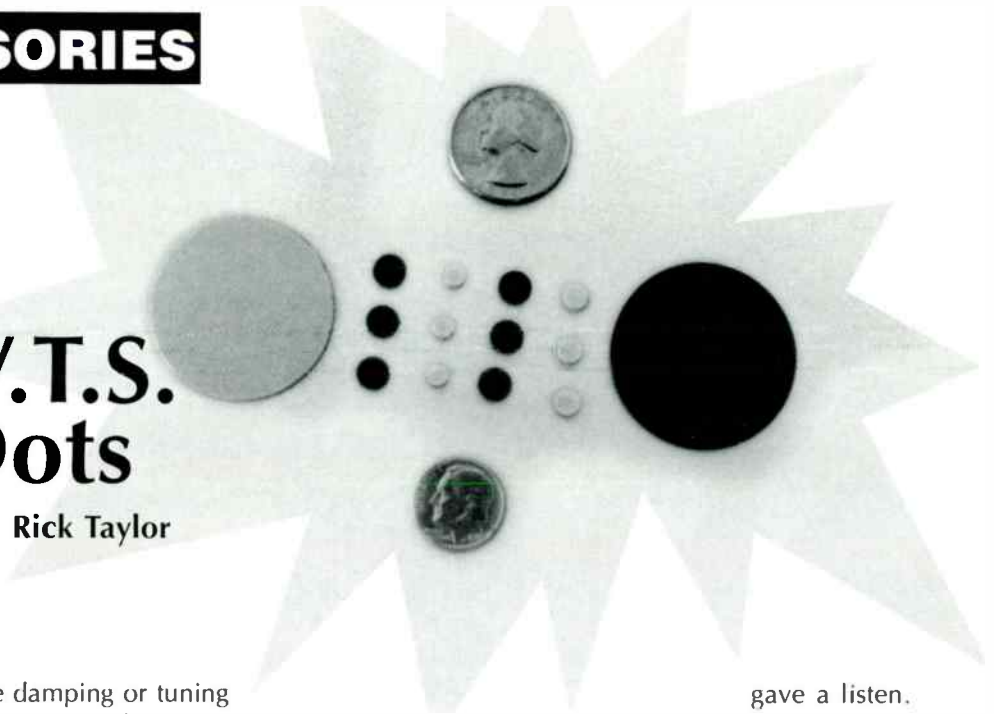
For those serious about bass response, there is the Bass Buster. I did not test these units, but they are said to work down as low as 25 Hz, and like most bass control devices, they are designed to fit in a corner and are broadly tuned lossy resonators. Bass Busters are 4-feet tall and sell for \$349 a pair in the decorator fabric color of your choice. Finally, for those who prefer strictly subjective product reviews, read on.

Since my normal listening room is already sound treated, I set up an improvised stereo system in a spare bedroom with very hard walls and normal rug. I only had six Echo Buster panels to play with, but by almost surrounding the listening position with them, I got maximum mileage out of them. They worked well, reducing glare and sibilance, cleaning treble to give greater definition and articulation, but also smoothing the midrange to give better depth and detail. The panels eliminated image confusion on complex musical passages, giving a cleaner and more controlled sound field. The sound stage opened out to give a wider, more open stage overall with better balance and less phasiness. The panels also helped clean up the midrange and treble splashiness which, combined with the better image focus, improved the immediacy of the stage and imbued it with an effortless sound quality. (I am indebted to Dominic Baker of *HI-FI World* for some of this language, that I just couldn't bear to write myself.)



Marigo V.T.S. Tuning Dots

Rick Taylor



I have tried many resonance damping or tuning devices, from the totally obscure to the most well-known, with varying degrees of success—everything from coupling cones to decoupling pucks, from bricks to window caulk. The devices came in all shapes and materials—rubber, metal, plastic, ceramic—with prices ranging from 5 cents to \$50 each. All did something, some good, some bad, but rarely what was promised or proposed! The Marigo V.T.S. Dots are, in that respect, exceptional. When applied correctly, they deliver the sonic goods.

The V.T.S. Dots (hereafter, I'll simply referred to them as "dots") are self-adhesive circles made from a proprietary damping material formulated by Marigo President Ron Hedrich. They come in various colors and sizes (2mm, 4mm, 6mm and 32mm), each designed for a specific application. Thorough instructions and guidance is available from Marigo or Marigo dealers.

Marigo Dots can be used on a wide variety of products.

THE GOODS

I've had a pair of KOSS Model 2 electrostatic loudspeakers that, even after quite extensive modification, still had something of a resonance problem in the 200- to 400-Hz region. I had been trying everything imaginable to alleviate this cursed problem, but I had had very little success. With a lot of skepticism, I applied four 32-mm black dots to the back of each speaker. With a panel of three clients in the room, we

gave a listen.

Their consensus: Smoother, more dynamic, and cleaner.

I immediately went about applying four more 32-mm black dots to the sides of the loudspeakers, and each time the response was uniform from my subjective listening panel. We felt we were definitely on to something.

The speakers now had an extension into the lowest octave that was defined and solid, while the high frequencies were more extended, airy, and clean! With all this going on, I won't have to spend pages upon pages describing the mids will I? The Koss speakers now had soul! But the speakers still had a mid-bass cabinet resonance, and, if anything, the problem was now even more exposed as everything else that was good had

become crystal clear. But by this time I was out of 32-mm black dots! (More of those puppies were ordered pronto.)

Next, I went about applying Marigo 3-mm white dots to the bottom of small tubes, and 4-mm green dots to the phenolic bases of my output tubes. All in attendance agreed there was a solid improvement. The music came to life—cleaner, more air, extension into the highs, lows never before realized, and dynamics with all the expletives. I could go on, but enough already; all ears in the room agreed that the system had moved to a new level.

As a quick test, I removed the 7308 dotted tubes from the Audio Matiere Paraphrase preamplifier and put identical undotted tubes back in the sockets. The

general reaction was, "WOW, WHERE'S THE MUSIC? IT'S GONE!" Yes, dot withdrawal already. The treated tubes were quickly reinstalled and the musical magic returned. These little resonance killers really work! I have since tested Marigo dots on a ton of tubes, and all have improved with the dots on board!

I applied the correct Marigo dots to cabinets, chassis, circuit boards, discrete parts (voltage regulators, IC chips, D/A chips, output transistors, electrolytic caps—even windows and stands—with great success.

The transformation of audio equipment with the dots is astonishing. With dots applied, there is a major lowering of the noise floor from each item being tuned, and a great amount of previously hidden information is revealed.

Remember the problem I had with my KOSS Electrostatic speakers? With the application of 2 more 32-mm black dots to the upper center area of the side panels on each speaker, the upper bass anomaly was vanquished. Now I had a pair of world-class speakers.

I've used the Marigo dots on virtually every kind of speaker: Electrostatics, ribbon, magnetic, and dynamic. Sound Labs to Sound Design. Maggies come to life. KEFs have a lowered noise floor. Applying dots directly to drivers heightens detail, imaging, and dynamics, while enhancing sweetness and musicality. And once a few Marigo white dots are applied to the flange around tweeter domes and a few green dots are affixed to the cones of woofers of dynamic speakers, a whole new world of performance is unveiled.

Preamplifiers, power amplifiers, CD players, transports and DACs all benefit from Marigo tuning. For example, I gave a customer's Audio Research LS2 preamp the following treatment:

NOTES

Marigo Audio Lab V.T.S. Tuning Dots: 2mm black—\$69 set of 28; 6mm black—\$69 set of 20; 32mm black—\$69 set of 8; 2mm green—\$69 set of 28; 3mm green—\$69 set of 26; 4mm green—\$69 set of 24; 3mm white—\$69 set of 26; 4mm white—\$69 set of 24; 40mm room dots—\$199 set of 20; V.T.S. Dynamic Driver Tuning Bands—\$39 set of 8. Marigo Audio Lab, 4926 West Howard St., Skokie, IL 60077. Phone: 708/674-1265; FAX: 708/674-1266.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Audio Matiere Equilibre Impulse tube amplifier; Audio Matiere Paraphase tube preamplifier; Timbre Tech D/A converter; Meridian 602 transport; Koss Model 2 electrostatic speakers; Apparition line conditioner; Marigo Reference cables throughout.

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A 3-mm Marigo white dot was placed on each of the 26 (yes, that's right, there are some 26 of these guys!) voltage regulators; a 4-mm white dot was placed at each corner of the circuit board; 2-mm green dots were used on all of the large electrolytic capacitors; 4-mm green dots were used on the chassis, bottom, and top plate; 2-mm black dots were placed on one very large heat sink and on four relay switches. A total of 56 Marigo dots, with a retail cost of approximately \$150, were used in performing a full treatment on the LS2 preamplifier. The Marigo-tuned LS2 now no longer had the cursed electronic signature my ears simply can't stand. The preamp, which previously had been thought to be totally dead quiet, was now truly quiet, and my ears felt lots better. . The LS2 showed its inner soul, exhibiting air, extension, detail into nirvana, and a warmth I never thought possible. Finally, a world-class preamp. When I asked the pre-amplifier's owner, he categorically stated the preamp now had to be worth at least a \$1,000 more; I wholeheartedly agreed with him.

With each use of the Marigo dots, equipment has moved to a new level of performance. With the noise

Rick Taylor is the owner of Final Note Audio, a small audio store in Lewiston, Maine, dedicated to the pursuit of audio perfection (207/784-3618). He has been involved in the sales, modification, and manufacture of audio equipment off and on for 25 years.

generated by or residing in the component removed by these little wonders, an abundance of information is released. One doesn't really notice the existence of the noise noise like this until it's gone.

My reason for writing this review of the Marigo Dots is not to line my pockets nor is it to make the Marigo folks rich. It is to lead you, the audiophile (who is all too often left in a world of diminishing returns, and you know if you are there), to an audio product that you simply must try. Application of the proper

size dot in the proper place takes some time and patience, but it is not that difficult and the rewards are almost too much to comprehend. I can't do a lot more to turn you on to these cost-effective tuning devices other than to tell you that nothing leaves my shop until a dotting demo has been done. Simply use the Marigo V.T.S. Dots and you will thank me in the morning.

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correctly,
these dots can
deliver.

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Mark Block

Several years ago, after I had purchased a few of the Marigo upgrades for my Well-Tempered turntable, Ron Hedrich asked me to try out a his tuning dots. Sure, why not? Ron sent me a few packets of dots in various colors, and I put them in my "things to get to" pile. I sincerely meant to try them, but it took me over a year to get around to it. (Sorry, Ron.) Every time I played my hi-fi, it seemed like there was something more important to do than experiment with stuff that, let's face it, had very little likelihood of working. I'm a skeptic at heart, and I detest all of those too-expensive placebos that masquerade as large, true scientific

breakthroughs in high-end audio. I have respected Ron Hedrich's work on turntable mods, but I didn't want to be let down by his dots. So every once in a while I picked them up, looked at them, then put them back down.

Eventually, some positive word of mouth comments about the dots reached a critical mass and lit a fire under me. I decided to give the dot treatment to my Snell B-minor speakers. I had noticed that the flange around the tweeter vibrated noticeably with music playing, so I started there. I put four dots on one flange only, then played some full-range pink noise through both loudspeakers. Touching each of the flanges light-

ly with my forefinger, it was apparent that the treated flange was not vibrating nearly as much as the untreated one. I went back and forth many times to confirm this surprising result. The dots actually did something! I breathed a sigh of relief: Ron really does know what he's doing.

The next thing I did involved something more traditional. I got out a screwdriver and tightened all the screws on all the drivers on both loudspeakers. Now, the differences between treated and untreated speakers were difficult to feel with my fingertips, but never mind. I knew the dots weren't

snake oil, so I treated all the cones on both Snell B-minors. The question became not "Will they make a difference?" but rather "Will they make a positive difference?"

The answer is yes. Bass got tighter and high frequencies seemed smoother, yet with more noticeable harmonic content. The one drawback was that, for some reason, image focus changed, and I had to alter the toe-in and speaker placement slightly in order to snap the soundstage back together. No big deal. Otherwise I concur with Taylor; the Marigo dots are worth checking out. Now, about dotting the tubes and circuit parts in my preamp ... I'll get around to it soon.

These Dots
actually do
some good.

A

CESSORIES

The Geneva Yellow Jacket CD Storage System



Gene Pitts, Jr.

Okay, so I'm only 15 years old but I probably know more than you do about computers and CDs and CD-ROMs, and I KNOW I listen to more CDs than you do. So, who would know more than I do about how CDs should be stored and easy ways to carry them to listen while moving? Maybe Geneva?

The zippered Yellow Jacket wallet holds a maximum of 36 CDs in the space of about six jewel cases in width, making it a great space saver, while a larger version also holds your CD player and small gear like headphones. There are also three CD racks, one holding a maximum of 150, another holds 96, and the last one 48 discs.

One of Yellow Jacket's main features is that you can transfer the CD carrier—what they call the Yellow Jacket—between CD wallets and home racks, just by pulling the Jacket. They have two C-shaped hooks that hold them onto pegs in each part of the system fairly well, but they pop off easily with a just twist. They have a polyester cushion inside that's used to keep the CDs clean and protect them. I haven't pulled on the wallet for 10 hours, but I think it will hold up fairly well. They will stay hooked a lot longer than jewel case ears will stay unbroken.

The line has three base organizers, refills, a portable wallet, and the index system. The wallets are made out of clean, black plastic I thought was leather at first. The wallet CD carrier has some nice features including a shoulder strap, belt loops,

and a small zippered opening for headphone wires. It has an initial capacity of 24 CDs and if you get a refill, it will take up to 36. The rack or base for home or office comes in either black plastic or wood, and the wood is either black or natural birch wood color. The smaller rack measures 5 inches wide by about a foot deep; the bigger one is about 10 by 8 inches. The smaller rack has feet that slide toward the other pair to conserve space and help keep the CDs upright. The index system includes a dozen index tabs with inserts with letters of the alphabet on them. There are also blank ones for you to write on and make your own categories. Little felt pads come with the racks and go on the feet to protect the surface of whatever you put it on.

All in all, I liked the Geneva Yellow Jacket system. Now, if I can just get my dad to give me my allowance instead of the wallet, but he says he's bribing me to clean up the CD-ROMs for the computer at home.



Photos courtesy of Geneva Co.

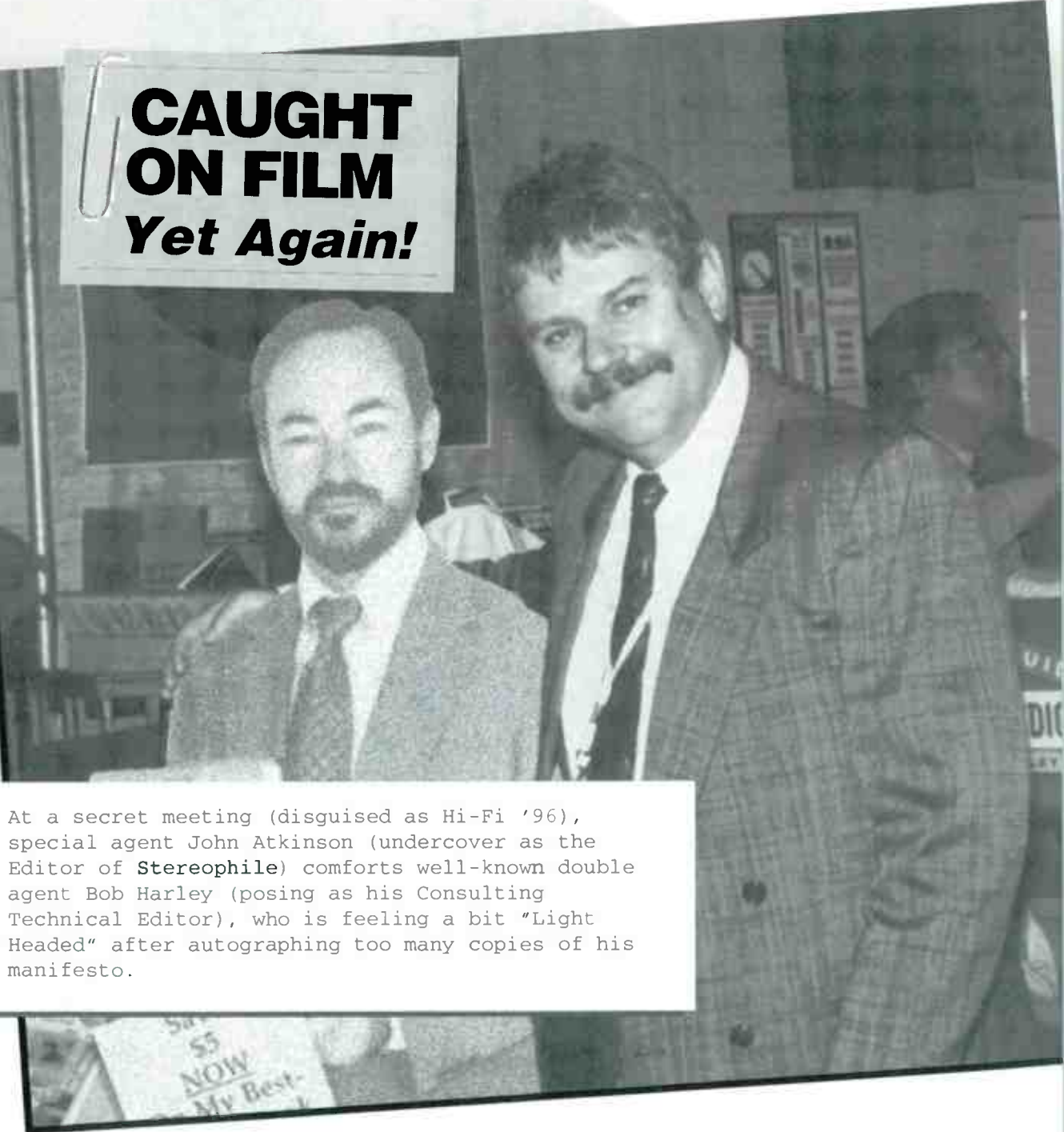
List Prices

150-disc wood organizer	ROM518	\$34.99
96-disc plastic organizer	ROM505	\$34.99
48-disc organizer	ROM500	\$17.99
24-disc wallet	ROM530	\$18.99
12 refill jackets	ROM512	\$7.99
24 refill jackets	ROM524	\$11.99

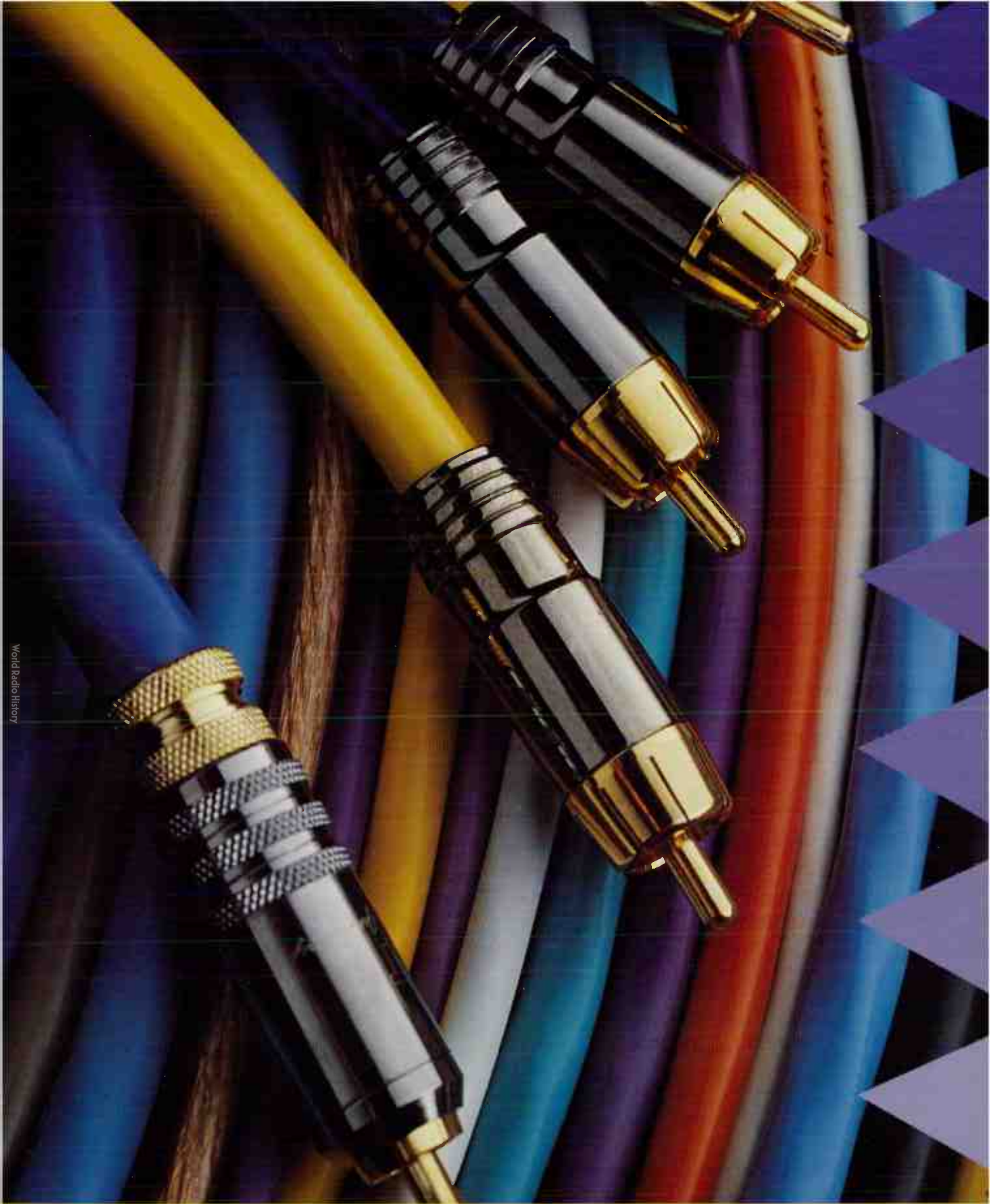
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At a secret meeting (disguised as Hi-Fi '96), special agent John Atkinson (undercover as the Editor of **Stereophile**) comforts well-known double agent Bob Harley (posing as his Consulting Technical Editor), who is feeling a bit "Light Headed" after autographing too many copies of his manifesto.



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