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Volume 4, Issue 1

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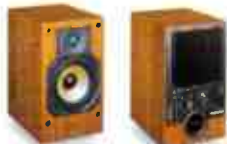
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Editor/Publisher Eugene Pitts, III  
Executive Editor Arnis Balgalvis  
Senior Editors Mark Block  
Paul Lupie  
Cover Artist George Angelini  
Additional Art Allison Mass  
Sharon Pitts  
Robert Rose

### CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Frank Alles, Bill Brassington, Ron Carlen, James Dowd, Howard Ferstler, Jim Frane, John Hellov, Ron Nagle, David Nemzer, Joel Schumer, Earle Stevens, Rick Taylor, Michael Tearson, Jon Tiven, Les Turoczi, Ross Wagner, Jerry Walsh, and Bill Wells.

### ADVERTISING DIRECTOR

Chris Noblet, 800/671-4030  
FAX, 9-5, PST: 310/375-8724

### THE AUDIOPHILE SOCIETY OFFICERS

Founder Hs Kachalsky  
President Arnis Balgalvis  
Vice President Bill Brassington  
Treasurer Mike Kates  
Recording Secretary David Nemzer

Inquiries regarding reviews should be made to the Editor at the production offices for the following review coordinators: **Equipment & Audiophile Recordings** Arnis Balgalvis, 214 Linden Ave., Glen Ridge, NJ 07028 973/748-7230. **Equipment & Pop/Rock Recordings** Mark Block, 86 Woodland Ave., Maplewood, NJ 07040, 973/763-3491.

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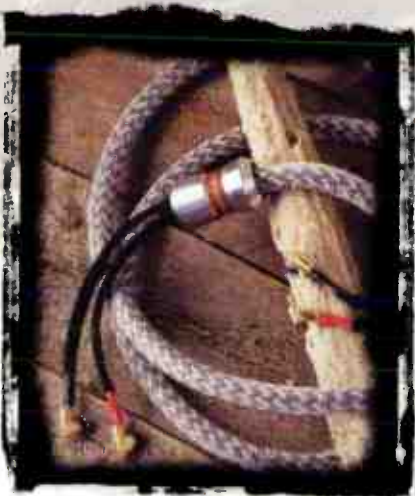
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Data: 310/204-2854.



## The Thiel CS2.3 Loudspeaker

is a floor-standing, three-way design with a newly designed coaxial tweeter and midrange unit where the two diaphragms share the same voice coil. The innovative design uses a mechanical crossover and no electrical crossover. Coaxial mounting of these two drivers results "in perfect time coherence regardless of listener position, improving imaging and transient fidelity," according to the designer, Jim Thiel. Other driver features include aluminum diaphragms and ultra-low distortion motor systems with short coils and long gaps. Rated frequency response is 37 Hz to 20 kHz, +/- 2 dB, and a sensitivity of 87 dB SPL for 2.8 V, 1 m. \$3,300.00 per pair.

Data: 606/254-9427; web: [www.thielaudio.com](http://www.thielaudio.com).



## The Ear Max Headphone Amplifier

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Data: 973/633-1151.



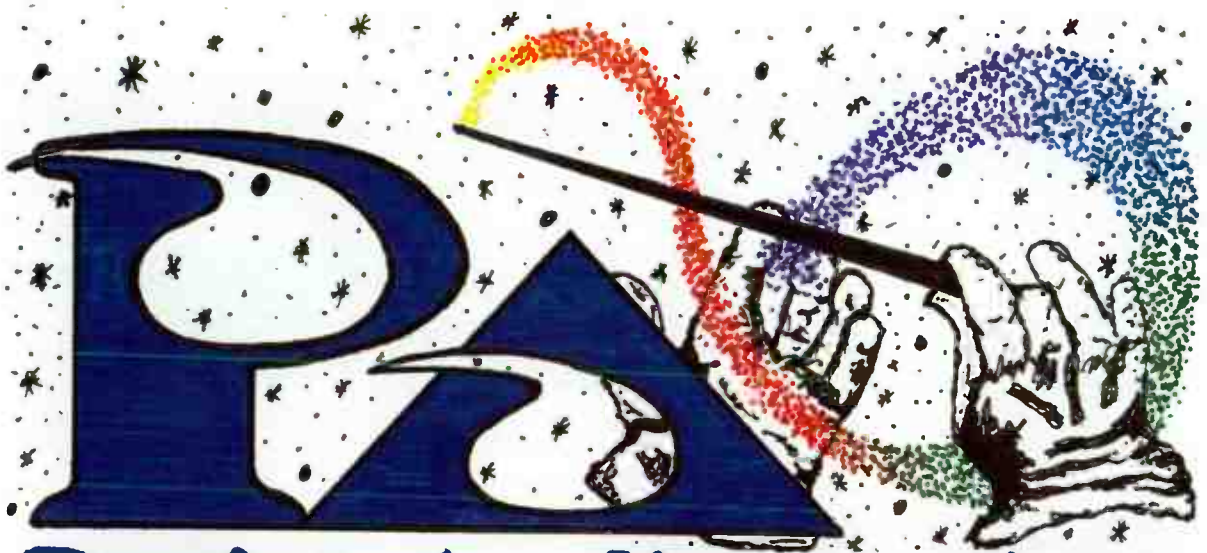
## The Boston Acoustics SoundBar Cinema System

is a high-performance home theater sound system without the complexity of conventional systems. The highly compact system consists of a SoundBar Module, a powered subwoofer, and a diffuse-field surround speaker; all three components are easily connected by three wires. The SoundBar Module sits atop the TV and houses left, center, and right front-channel speakers as well as the system's electronics. Also in this module are a Dolby Pro-Logic decoder; a multi-channel, actively-equalized power amp, and QSound image enhancement circuitry, which last gave markedly improved 3D imaging at the WCES, according to TAV Editor Gene Pitts. \$799.95.

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## The Kharma Exquisite Reference Loudspeaker

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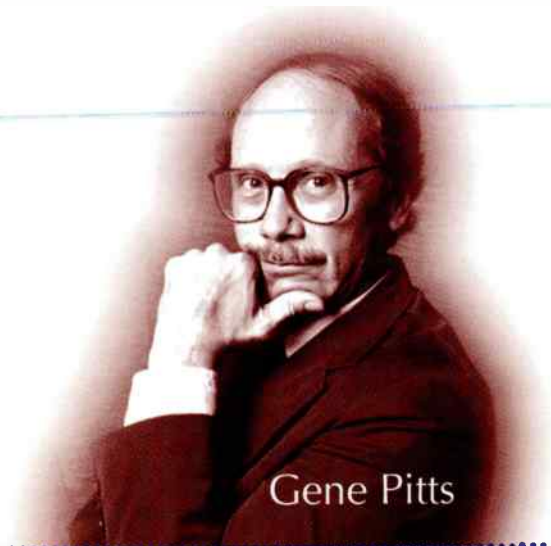
ate a *high-performance*, flexible system that can be optimized for both two-channel music and multichannel film and music reproduction.

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## Beat Feet

**T**HE WINTER CONSUMER ELECTRONICS SHOW ran from January 8th through the 11th in Las Vegas and appeared, to this weary editor, to be at least as positive and upbeat as any in recent memory. The WCES is pretty well the biggest pure electronics trade event in this country, if one says that computers are made out of straw. The CES is dwarfed by the German *Funkausstellung*, which is not a pure "trade show" since they let in consumers and also run the show far longer. The movement in the U.S. from pure stereo to home theater or custom install, both in firms and in products, continues, and I think there will be further "shaking out" of the pure-music ranks.

Some of the biggest audiophile news was about audio material recorded at 96-kHz in 24 bits on Digital Video Discs (right, DVDs!), but it came from the audiophile record companies, not the firms making DVD movies. Announcements came from Classic Records' Mike Hobson, Chesky Records' David Chesky, and Mobile Fidelity, where Herb Belkin has passed along the Presidency to Lori Beaudoin. These aren't whole catalogs of stuff, but a few discs as trial balloons.

The most recent issue of *Dolby News* (Vol. 9, No. 1, page 8) carried a full-page story entitled "Multichannel music on DVD now!" Featured in the article were A&M Records' *A&M Vision*, a Dolby Digital 5.1-channel music video sampler with performances by Sting, Suzanne Vega, and Bryan Adams among others; Delos' *DVD Spectacular*, which features Tchaikovsky's *1812* and Richard Rodney Bennett's solo piano *Barcarolle*. A sidebar listed 20 DVD music videos, including Fleetwood Mac's *The Dance* (WEA) and Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* (Warner Reprise Video), both of which appeared to be mandatory material in video-oriented rooms at the WCES. Just as I will

never watch *The Fugitive* after being subjected to the "train crashes prison bus" scene too many times at earlier shows, both the Fleet-Mac's and Eric The C are spoiled for me, I hope not forever.

For its part, the DVD Consortium's Working Group 4 finally got off the dime and revealed the types of audio they are at least considering possible in the format. While I think the music guys are too concerned about copyright issues, I do have to admit that the music does belong to the music firms and that they do have the right to insist that their copyrights be protected. What bothers me is that good new formats, promising better fidelity to audiophiles and new profit streams to record and equipment makers, are being held up in the name of completely halting relatively minor piracy and copyright violations. These firms don't agree with me that the present laws have enough teeth.

What Working Group 4 is considering may look broad to the point of vagueness, but let me go over a few possibilities. A two-channel program under the present draft could have any of several sampling frequencies, e.g. 176.4 kHz (four times the CD's) or 192 kHz (which is four times the DAT's). Word lengths can be anywhere up to 24 bits. They can do 64 minutes in a single-layer disc and up to 117 minutes in a dual-layer version.

For five-channels in 96 kHz and 20 bits, they can get 61 minutes in a single layer, but one of many other possibilities is 43 minutes of three channels in 96 kHz and 24 bits plus two channels of 48-kHz and 24-bit material.

### Best Sound?

Didn't get to enough rooms for this to be at all definitive, so wait for Arnie's and John's articles next issue, but I did like the Kharma Exquisite speakers driven by the Lamm Electronics amp and preamp. 'Mongst many, many others.

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# Skeptical Feedback

***How do we know whether we  
should believe our ears?  
They get old and drunk and,  
worst of all,  
they play favorites—  
by “hearing”  
what we want them to hear!***

Don Fostle

**Editor's Note:** Don Fostle is presently a Contributing Editor at Audio Magazine. I asked him to write something in response to Mark Block's "Notes of a Skeptic," and my comments, both in Vol. II, No. 5. Don's approach to the questions of how a serious reviewer-tester should do his work is what I would term "measurement or science oriented." By this, I mean that the techniques Don uses, and the answers he finds, are reproducible; you and I can do them if we will take enough time to be consistent.

However, the questions Don raises here have, I think, rarely been **(Continued on next page)**

**M**ark Block's *Notes of a Skeptic* and Gene Pitts' response illuminate some of the problems that infect "subjective reviews." There are many other factors that limit the utility of the "I listened to this box, and here is what I heard" review format.

To begin, I cannot recollect reading a single review that specified the sound pressure levels (SPL) used in making judgments of any gear. There are wide variations in preferred listening levels, not only among individuals but also by type of music. When a reviewer gushes about "outstandingly clear and articulate **(Continued on overleaf)**

## Editor's Note

(Continued from previous page) discussed in public. You readers should ask them of the reviewers in your favorite high-end magazines; the answers may surprise



and dismay you. So that we can get right down to it, I am putting down some of my personal answers, as I practiced and refined them at Audio Magazine, where I was Editor for more than 22 years.

I did use a consistent SPL to set up speakers; I was the principal person responsible for choosing which speakers got over the first hurdle and into the rest of the review process. Along with a Radio Shack sound-level meter, we used a Lohse speaker switching system that was accurate to 0.25 dB. I was always amazed how many differences went away when speakers were output matched. However, I never got over the feeling that we were setting up a "test-only area" with different operating conditions than you or I would use at home. I listened to these speakers at two different output levels.

I never drank during or before testing, even at home, and as I have long been afraid of presbycusis, I regularly take my vitamins, i.e. B complex and zinc, with occasional doses of nicotinic acid to flush out those little capillaries. I still hear 16 kHz off test CDs when the CD's 1-kHz tone is in the 85- to 90-dB SPL range.



As regards Don's "no cheap shots" and head trauma, I ran several articles while at Audio which examined the relationship between overly loud concerts and hearing loss, not only to paying customers but also to musicians. Hearing loss among musicians is not confined to those playing rock, by the way. But Don's point about the reader hearing the same thing as the reviewer is very subtle, and goes beyond the "can you hear 15 kHz?" question. Such things as whether you are right- or left-handed or whether you have had training with a musical instrument are related to how you perceive music. Yeah, I didn't believe it either, but go buy Diana Deutsch's demo CD (reviewed in Vol. III, No. 2) if you don't believe me.

I don't put very much into Don's observation about the relatively exotic level of systems high-end reviewers generally use, though I believe that there is an unfortunate and romantic tendency for high-enders to believe that if something is rare or new in the marketplace, and expensive as well, then it makes better sound. At least, too many reviewers pretend that if only they have a review sample, then the unit's sound is better—which is nonsense.

In my experience, most of the sonic differences one can buy for his system come from speakers, and most of the rest of the differences come from placing those speakers in the right room situation. This is NOT (repeat, NOT) to say that I don't hear some differences between, say, amps and that I don't buy accordingly. Frankly, readers should pay more attention to the reviewer's language, to see that he understands what the reviewer is saying (and maybe even

that the reviewer understands what he is saying). I'd regularly look at the reviewer's choice of recordings, and make certain that he liked the same discs I liked.

My real point here is that even if your system isn't one-for-one identical with the reviewers, that's okay because it's sure better



than any other game in town. However, it isn't the reviewer's pleasure that's important,

but rather the reader's. Magazines like TAV aren't for the purpose of reviewer or editor glorification, but rather for giving information to potential buyers. Much as we editors do not like the idea, magazines like this are hobby magazines, and we rise or fall on our ability to tell the truth about our hobby. So, then, if more people can understand one magazine's reviewer than they do the tester of another rag, doesn't the first publication tell more truth?

As I said when commenting on Mark Block's Guest Editorial, these questions are important, and you should think about them every time you look at a hi-fi magazine. The editors and reviewers who do not take them seriously are very likely, in my opinion, to be unable to tell you the truth, either by intent or by ignorance. If this kind of talk sounds harsh, well, yes, but it's better than fraud.—Gene Pitts





## Skeptical Feedback

(Continued from overleaf) vocal presentation," was he listening at 75 or 95 dB SPL? We



are never told, yet the non-linearity of human hearing at different loudness levels and frequencies has been

well-known since the days of Fletcher & Munson. [Editor's Note: Civilians call this "a loudness curve" and have a "loudness button" to correct it.]

Do individual reviewers use consistent sound pressure levels across the devices they examine? We'll never know that either, which implies that not only are different reviewers' reactions not comparable, but there is no known consistency for any specific reviewer over time.

Does the reviewer drink while reviewing a piece of gear? Even moderate amounts of alcohol alter the perception of time and create physiological changes in audition, generally resulting in a desire for increased SPL. This is why bar bands are louder near closing time. According to the Federal government, 57.4% of males age 12 or more drink alcoholic beverages in any given month, and the average adult American consumes 36.8 gallons per year, 68% of which is beer. I have yet to read a review that even acknowledges drinking during a listening session, much less controls for it.

Most significant, however, is the phenomenon of presbycusis. Not long ago I talked to a prestigious high-end manufacturer who was completely unaware of

this phenomenon, as are many persons interested in sound reproduction. Basically, presbycusis is the normal reduction in both hearing sensitivity and bandwidth that occurs with advancing age. It is somewhat more pronounced in males than females and does not require physical trauma or disease. Quite simply, our hearing diminishes, at least in industrialized nations, as we get older.

Variability in human hearing is so large as to render absurd the "20 Hz to 20 kHz:" bandwidth requirements of hi-fi dogma. One recent study of persons aged 60 to 79 found that the mean subject could not hear a 12 kHz tone until a level of 107 dB SPL was reached. Fully 95% could not hear 16 kHz at the 110 dB SPL maximum level of the audiometric test equipment. For many older persons nearly half the bandwidth that is so dear to audiophiles does not exist perceptually.

Those with knowledge of the energy versus frequency in musical events understand that little is lost with a sharp 10-kHz cutoff. Unfortunately, the nature of presbycusis is such that much larger portions of the band are

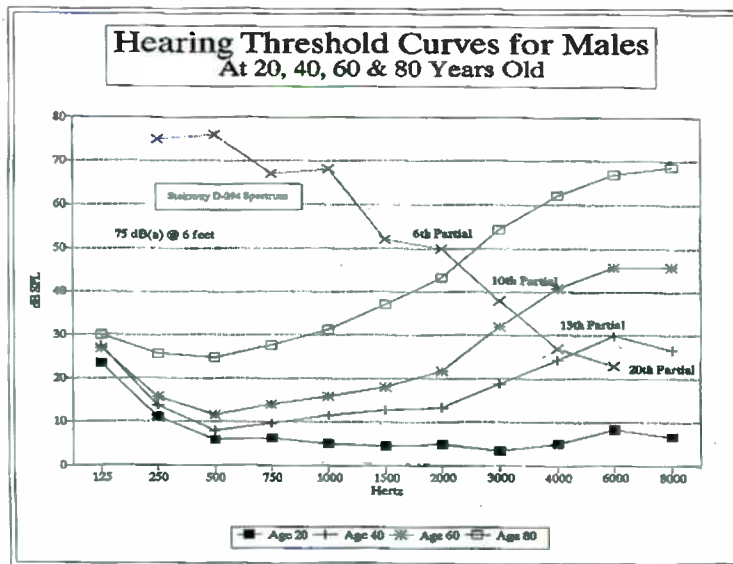
affected than the top octave. To see this, and to understand something of variation in auditory acuity, consult the graph.

The top line is a curve in dB SPL of a Steinway piano's output. The single note played is the D just above middle



C. The 75 dB(A) measurement is about equal to a mezzoforte, and the distance of six feet to the instrumentation microphone is similar to that of conventional mike placement for a classical solo piano recording.

As you will might know, the output of many musical instruments contains both the fundamental frequency—the musical "note"—and the energy in the partials. Partial, or "harmonics" as they used to be called, are multiples of the fundamental. In this case, 294 Hz is the fundamental while 588 Hz, 882 Hz, 1,175 Hz, etc. are the partials. The duration and relative strength of the partials determine an instrument's timbre. Note further that there is material musical energy up to the 20th partial



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at 5,880 Hz, or slightly less than 6 kHz: on this particular Steinway.

Now examine the lowest curve. This is the pure-tone hearing threshold for an “average” 20-year-old male with clin-

tion of the note would be subjectively shorter.

There are other points worth considering about all this. First, there are large variations among healthy individuals in any age group, but the typical 60-year-

please—it is impossible to estimate whether a reviewer might hear, e.g., physically detect, the same or similar phenomena perceptible to a reader. This cuts both ways, so a reader may not be able to physically detect that which the reviewer heard.

Compounding all this is the tendency of most “high-end” writers to insert devices for review into systems so exotic as to be virtually one of a kind. The canons also seem to include the use of vanishingly obscure recordings, many of which have the commercial lives of mayflies and are almost impossible to obtain.

Here is what is actually known after reading the typical subjective” hardware review: someone played some recordings you can’t find through a system you’ve never heard in a room where you’ve never been. He either liked what happened or he didn’t, although even that is not always clear.

Is he 23, recently arrived from a Tundra region where the loudest sounds were geese in flight, and possessed of the ears of a bat? Is he 50 and a veteran of three Vietnam tours during which he survived a few near-miss bomb blasts? Be assured that these two hypothetical reviewers will have very different hearing characteristics, both of which are normal for age and life experience. Did either of them drink during the review process? There are other many variables, and the ones I have cited here are merely the beginning of the story.

So while frequency response plots, SNR specs or graphs of THD and IM do not fully characterize a device, they can, when competently executed, at least be believed. More or less.

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ically “normal” hearing. Observe that the entire musical event is within the range of a 20-year-old’s perception. By age 40, typical male hearing has diminished to a point where six or seven of the highest partials are no longer audible. By age 60, normal thresholds have risen to a degree where the 10th partial at 2,940 Hz is on the fringe of audibility. By age 80 (we should all live so long), the seventh partial is still perceptible. Clearly, each of these “average” men hears a different version of the same physical event, a single note played on a piano. They do not perceive the same timbre, and, due to the higher thresholds of the older men, the dura-

old will have hearing almost 40 dB SPL less sensitive at 8 kHz than the typical 20-year-old. Expressed another way, and on a pure-tone basis, an 8-kHz stimulus will need to be 10,000 times (40 dB SPL) louder to be just heard by the average 60-year-old man compared to the 20-year-old. This is a spectacularly large difference and one that is plainly not recognized by subjective reviewers or their readers.

The notion that we all hear largely the same thing is contrary to physiological fact. Without knowing the age of the reviewer and some medical history such as incidence of head trauma—no cheap shots



## TERRY EVANS COME TO THE RIVER

"On this moving album from an enormously gifted singer, Terry Evans offers a vision of a river where healing, cleansing, salvation, and plenty of amazing music take place." -*Living Blues*

"You'll be swept away by Terry Evans." -*Billboard*

"Here is one blues singer who climbs the mountain, goes to the river, drowns and floats out to sea. Aod Cooder absolutely kills." -*LA Weekly*

AQ1044



## ROBERT LUCAS COMPLETELY BLUE

"Robert Lucas sounds as if he is on a one man mission to resurrect the vintage post war sound and make it relevant to contemporary music." -*Living Blues*

"Robert Lucas is a knock out. One of the best CDs of the year." -*Tom Cullen, WRTI, Philadelphia, PA*

"His voice remains a rich, grainy wonder, full of authority yet naturally playful and convincingly vulnerable." -*Los Angeles Times*

"Lucas plays the blues with deep conviction and from vast experience. Lucas' new album is *Completely Blue* and thoroughly captivating" -*Blues Print*

AQ1045



## Doug MacLeod *Unmarked Road*

"MacLeod is one of the vibrant voices that will keep this sound alive into the next century." -*Blues Revue*

Multiple Handy Award nominee Doug MacLeod's last album for AQM was named one of the ten best albums of 1996 by the managing editor of Pulse! magazine. Doug makes a breakthrough on this, his third AudioQuest Music release. The songs are deeply personal, the soulful observations of a man steeped in the blues but unafraid to cross boundaries of style. MacLeod is beautifully supported by a stellar group of players from the west coast blues scene as well as the gospel vocal group "Black Cherry".

AQ1046



## Bruce Katz Band *Mississippi Moan*

"I'm tellin' ya, he's down-home and uptown all at once and that's a winning combination." -*Boston Phoenix*

Keyboard wizard Bruce Katz has jaw dropping technique, and something else - a whole lotta soul! Following dues paying stints with Big Mama Thornton, Albert Washington and Mighty Sam McClain, Bruce Katz has been tearing it up and gathering widespread acclaim in recent years with Ronnie Earl and the Broadcasters. This is the blues drenched album Katz' fans have been waiting for. Features special guest vocals by Mighty Sam McClain.

AQ1047

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# Mailbag Feedback

*Readers regularly criticize writing and editing but rarely do editors review the readers.*

**A**S ANOTHER reviewer for *The Audiophile Voice*, I decided to add some "coal to the cookout" and respond with a few comments to reader Tim Gagnon's letter from "Down East" as it appeared in Vol. III, No. 3 of the magazine.

I'm not here to defend the subject (or target) Mark Block, as I don't feel he needs any defending.



Illustrations by Allison Mass

And, no, to answer the impending question, I'm not writing because I'm a friend of Mark's. We've never met, although we've exchanged a couple of letters and calls.

While I suspect more of us reviewers than not share a certain unexpressed fraternity due to our special calling or advanced disease of audiophilia—and you might accuse that of clouding my judgment—nevertheless in our limited passing conversations Mr. Block has certainly not impressed me as one to cut any corners.

Notice that on the magazine's masthead, Editor Gene Pitts graciously accords us with the title "Contributing Fditors" —in Mark's case, "Senior Editor."

Gene gives us quite a bit of latitude, quite a bit of "rope." With some of that rope, we can have some good ol' fun learnin' new kinds of knots and las-sooin'.

However, with that rope we can also hang ourselves!

What I'm getting at—and here I depart from directly addressing Mr. Gagnon—is a hunch that among more than just a few readers out there, lurks the green-eyed monster of envy, the "I put my pants on one leg at a time too and I can be a reviewer too" syndrome.

And, very likely, more than a handful of the readers could be reviewers; I'm sure Gene would like to discuss it with you, and I don't think I'm speaking out of school" on that one.

Fact is, though, I think there's a bit more to being reviewer Block or Taylor or Walsh or Editor Pitts than you may expect.

From here on, I'll just talk about myself, as that's all I'm

really qualified to do. Yet, I imagine my thoughts and soul-searching will prove more similar than dissimilar in comparison with any name on our masthead—or that of any magazine.

Again, keep in the back of your mind two things as we go along: First, magazines don't

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**Reviewers may get quite a bit of "leash rope" to stretch, but they may also hang themselves with that rope.**

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publish themselves from thin air and, second, the word "editor" granted to each of us, carries with it responsibility for some self-control and a basic level of ethics.

I can safely assume that anyone who lifts this magazine out of a news rack to thumb through it, and especially one who ultimately takes it to the cash register or subscribes, has an above average liking of music or the hardware which makes hearing it possible. So far, so good.

And, we've probably a) gone to a few live concerts, whether punk or Prokofiev. No one tossed overboard yet....

On top of that, wasn't it Andy "The Artist" Warhol who said we're all good for 15 minutes of fame?

But, just as you want your stereo gear to be cookin' every time you turn it on, so must you yourself be ready to produce, time and again, meeting column inch counts and deadlines, if you want to be a reviewer.

That amp and those speakers you're so boffo over weren't born in the box, but were the product of designers, and tight manufacturing tolerances of suppliers, then the distributors,

retailers, and so on. A team effort.

Likewise, this magazine. And the writers are only one part.

If you like baseball, you know that Cal Ripken is a star. Likewise Frank Thomas. But for many years before it, they were just average team stiffs working hard every pitch, every catch, every doggone day.

Even stars make errors, humanity has bred that in us and humaneness should allow forgiveness.

If reviewer Block abruptly ended the review, maybe it was a gaffe, or maybe just a stylistic "basket catch" that went a little funky, or maybe none of the above. I don't know, I wasn't there. But then, neither was the reader who was complaining about the review.

Really, I'm not here to say someone's right and someone's wrong, just to add a few lyrics to the song!

One of the things, I know, that does NOT make a reviewer is having a world-class stereo system. If reviewing is to do our readers any good—and I strongly support this—my basic system can't be any better than most of your systems. Or, at least not enough better that we start to have snobbery. This isn't a



country with a caste system, after all!

All I know is that more than half my lifetime ago, I took a train ride (didn't drive then) to the downtown of a major city, and headed, all excited, for a first trip to an audio "salon." You know, not a chain or a discount store, but a kind of jewelry store for circuits, with even a sort of "boutique" smell in the air, the type where once in while some of their sales people act like they're smelling something, too, when you walk in.

Anyway, I fell in love with one of those low-slung Bang & Olufsen Beomaster receivers. You remember those? FM only, analog dial scale (it WAS the early '0) silver front, and all those clear plastic, horizontal sliders on a gorgeous teak case.

To make a long story short, I've been in love with the exotic attainable (and unattainable) ever since.

And, I think God's been great to me. If I'd have fallen for women so widely and so intensely, I know I'd have been dead from disease or broke from alimony a decade ago.

So are you so wild in this passion?



Next question: Can you reign it in (the self-controlling editor part, I mean)? While certainly I don't think a reviewer who comes at it from the flat-earth perspective (that all electronics sound the same) deserves a glance, on the other hand, a legitimate journalist must be

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### **Reviewers may get perks but they are usually more trouble than they are worth and they MUST be accepted!**

---

careful not to develop pets. That is, your personal favorite recording artist could still get conked on the head and release a turkey. Or your personal favorite equipment manufacturer might change ownership or designers or suppliers or priorities or who knows what else and also release a cackling thing.

And, from your public columns, best no one knows those personal favorites—or similarly, any enemy list—because your choices in liking or loathing are really no more valid than those of the reader.

Are you prepared, for a two- or three-hour stretch, to listen to that extremely expensive audio component **CAREFULLY?**

Yes, big bold letters there, expanded and underscored.

It means, not party time. Not background music for paying the bills. Or necking. Or whatever else.

Then, are you willing to repeat this single-minded session at least four or five times, often more?

At some point before, during or after, you will have to read product literature, design papers, price sheets, etc.

You may need to call the manufacturer with questions to clarify points in your own mind or that you anticipate will be important to the magazine's audience.

During such call(s) you must neither express an opinion to the manufacturer nor allow him or her to engage in 11th-hour salesmanship.

The component under scrutiny must speak for itself.

Along those lines, can you be open to discerning a "diamond in the rough," that is, something that might look like a piece of S—, but don't flush that toilet!

Conversely, good cosmetics don't guarantee good sound.

Finally, you may feel all bubbly inside or even blue about the product, but the mag isn't distributed by clairvoyants so in the final analysis you must offer your final analysis, in writing.

Now, I'm not Shakespeare or Poe or King or Steinbeck or any of that, and such is not required. But, be ready to consult a dictionary or thesaurus once in awhile, because honorable components DO have shades of difference and subtleties of performance, and your written vocabulary has to be reliable enough to convey these to the consumer.

Are you prepared for all that, and prepared to sleep at night in the good conscience that, to the best of your ability and conviction, you have communicated the basic truth on the product, as YOU have found it?

OK, so reviewers DO get some perks, and I'm sure to pester Gene Pitts for mine.

Without exception, however, the "perks" in some way pertain to the reviewing process. No

chance of a set of golf clubs, for instance.

Generally, the "perk" is no more than the privilege to suggest a "short list" of components I might like to see on my doorstep for review in the future. Of course, Gene is the final editor and arbiter.

Some perceptive readers may think that reviewers can get discounts on equipment, and sometimes, they can.

Furthermore, most reviewers have a second source of income to say the least, and financial reality affects our discretionary outlay more than any "carrot" from a manufacturer.

Publishing any magazine, especially a fairly new and relatively small one in a luxury field such as audio, isn't for the faint of heart, and our owner isn't exactly a land baron off this thing, at least not yet!

process, and I've merely tried to clue you in on some of its gritty entrapments.

For me, the only real "fun" I feel entitled to comes only after I've wrapped up the entire review, if there's some time left before the carrier comes to pick up the gear.

Corny as it may sound, I do truly think our hobby would be better off if we all followed the "Golden Rule" of doing and saying unto others as we would have done unto ourselves.

Just as you need the audio dealer and the dealer needs you, just as everyone can't be a computer operator because someone has to be the customer, so life forms are needed at each end of the publishing process, on both "sides" of the page.

We writers need you readers. Or no sales. You readers need us writers. Or no reviews. And in some way, you surely are us and

we surely are you. Owing to a common love. In the name of right and reason, though, let's never wander into that dark and deluded territory, any of us, where the material spoils of the hobby become more important than our human selves.

It's a great journey toward the musical millennium. Let's stand with one another on the way....

Music is not the only truth by which ears are opened.



However, if you think it through and there's still no rational reason for a columnist to exaggerate the exaltation of a product, 'cause who would want to lay out ANY money or take up ANY space at home with a product that REALLY isn't very good?

Think about it for a little while. Even at the stereo stores, the better products are an easier sell.

All in all, after all of this, what the heck am I saying?

Just that, yep, writers can make mistakes or seem to. Readers can point it out or lean on it too much, sometimes forgetting this great interest we all have in common, on both sides of the page, and that writers need love too.

Being a reviewer is a kick, all right. But the real fun comes after faithfully fulfilling the





# QUAD MOD

Joel Shumer

## Tweaking, tickling and otherwise up-grading a classic speaker

**R**emember the girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her forehead? When she was good, she was very, very good, but when she was bad, she was horrid. The Quad ESL 63 electrostatic speakers are a bit that way. In 1987, I bought a new pair of Pro 63s, all but identical to the U.S.A. Monitors introduced a few months later. For the past decade, I have relied on these speakers both as a reference and for the sheer pleasure of enjoying music. String tone and the human voice, particularly women's voices, have natural balance and timbre that is remarkably free of colorations. The speakers can reproduce

sharp, clean transients and the subtle microdynamics which can give the breath of life to recorded music. Listening late at night, with low volume and subdued lighting to an old Joan Baez LP or the Kodaly String Quartet playing Haydn comes as close to transporting me to the "you are there" experience as I am able to get. Even the current Wilson WATT/Puppy v.1, which I own and have used in side-by-side comparisons, can not match the naturalness and sense of presence provided by my pre-modification Quads.

Like the girl with the curl, given the right recordings, the 63s can be very, very good; and

although they are never really horrid, if I play recordings which confront their limitations, they can behave quite badly for speakers costing \$6,000 per pair. Today one can buy speakers priced at less than a third of the cost of new Quads that can play louder, have superior macrodynamics, and push a lot more air at 40 Hz which is needed for that "bass in the gut" wallop.

Recently I heard Leonard Slatkin conduct the New York Philharmonic in Copland's Third Symphony. In the last movement, there is a series of loud percussive mini-explosions where the timpanist hits two ket-



tle drums in sync with another percussionist whacking a large bass drum. The auditory effect is electrifying! At home, listening to a Telarc (CD 80201) recording of the work conducted by Yoel Levi, much of that visceral experience can be reproduced with the WATT/Puppies. When I switch to the 63s, it just isn't there. The sound is clean and natural, but the Quads can't push enough air in that 30- to 50-Hz region to raise goose bumps. Accurate? Yes, but scaled down, and as a result, the music loses much of its emotional impact.

### **To Modify or Not To Modify: That Is The Question**

The point of the preceding paragraph is not to belittle the

Quad 63s. With what they do best, in an optimal set up, they are without peer. But if someone wants speakers that can play loud, have wide dynamics, deep bass, and mid bass with impact, then the 63s are a very poor choice. I know of no modifications other than adding a crossover and sub-woofer that address any of these shortcomings. But the 63s can be improved. And what they do best can be made to sound even better.

For a \$6,000.00 speaker, the manufacturer has taken a number of cost-saving shortcuts. Most of the Quad 63 modifications involve replacing poor-quality parts and the wire with high-quality audiophile-grade materials and reducing unwanted vibrations when the frames are rebuilt. Acoustical Manufacturing, the British maker of the Quads, has made a number of improvements as well since the 63s were introduced in 1981. If older loudspeakers are to be modified, then newer clamp boards, grilles, and speaker terminals can also be incorporated.

But back to the question, "Should one modify Quad 63s?" The answer is "no" if an owner of 63s hopes to transform them into loud, dynamic, big-bass speakers. But if one loves the 63s' see-through transparency and lack of coloration, and can accept the speakers' limitations, then the answer can be a "Yes."

The sonic virtues that make Quads unique can be further enhanced. The judicious modification and replacement of parts by a knowledgeable person, both technically skilled and with an appreciative ear for the aural nuances brought on by each little change in the speaker, is absolutely necessary. And I believe I've found just such a man.

### **Enter Nick Gowan**

Nick Gowan owns True Sound, a small company in Campbell, California where a major part of his work is repairing, rebuilding, and improving vintage audio components. Judging by his enthusiasm, which was readily apparent in our many phone conversations, Nick is a man who loves his work.

We talked about my 63s and how they could be made to sound better. What Nick really wanted was to get his hands on my speakers, give a listen and after partial disassembly come up with a list of suggested modifications.

I found him convincing and decided to take the next step. Nick was able to locate a pair of shipping cartons and have them sent to me. Despite the speakers' light weight and lack of foam inserts for the boxes, Nick assured me that the speakers would have adequate protection, and so I consigned my 63s to UPS for their transcontinental journey. A few days later the phone rang and Nick's cheery voice announced that the speakers had arrived without damage and sounded quite good. He would phone back in a day or two with recommendations. After he called again, I felt confident that he knew what he was doing, so I gave him a green

light to go ahead with his modification plan.

### Modifying The 63s

First Nick completely disassembled each speaker by removing the four electrostatic panels and dismantling the metal frames. The frames and separated bases were then reassembled but with added damping material in the joints to reduce resonances. Then the panels were securely refitted.

In the next stage, the original low-quality, single-conductor wire was replaced with 60 feet of multi-stranded 99.99997 percent (six nines with a plus) pure copper wire. He then wired the input posts to the circuit board and to the chassis with Audio Note AN-D. Nick fitted wire links, coupling the ends of the traces on the tweeter panels to each other, so there would be no electrical imbalances between them. Nick explains, "Quad originally made provision for this coupling but never implemented this procedure in production, probably because it was too labor-intensive and time-consuming."

The only original speaker inputs on my 63s were banana plugs and these had worked themselves loose. Nick replaced them with rugged five-way binding posts. With this modification, the signal path had now been completely rewired, all connections having been cleaned and resoldered with an audiophile-quality, silver-based solder.

Nick then added an additional 8-mF, audio-grade bypass capacitor to the input circuit, thus improving the accuracy of the high-frequency performance, as well as smoothing out the input impedance curve of the speaker. Improved clamping

boards from Quad were fitted to help prevent damage from overdriving the speakers with too high a signal.

My 63s have the newer, more open grilles, and so did not have to be replaced. Nick just grounded them and refitted them to the frames. However, he wrapped their edges with a black cloth tape to further reduce vibration. The tape also makes a neat visual frame for the grilles which can now be seen through a new sheer grill cloth that replaces the heavier material used by Quad.

Completely reassembled, Nick measured the response and output sensitivity on a spectrum analyzer. For his final listening test, he uses an Audio Note Soro Signature single-ended, integrated tube amplifier. Nick reports that even though the new wiring had not fully broken in, he was "extremely pleased with the way they sounded." Just a week later, the Quad speakers were back in my New Jersey home, and despite the reuse of these same flimsy cartons, they were unharmed by their three thousand mile return trip. Thanks, UPS!

### Listening

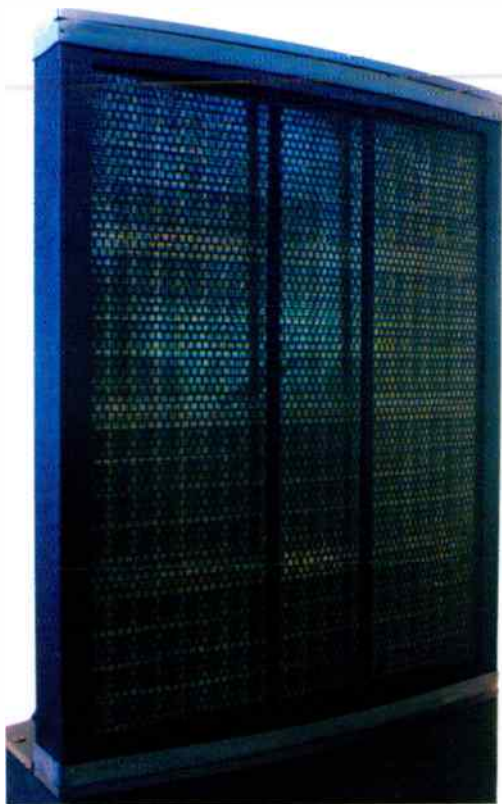
My newly modified Quad 63s did sound good. In fact, they sounded great! It was a joy to have them back in the system.

The WATT/Puppies can run metaphorical rings around the 63s in some areas, but where the Quads had always been superior, the modified Quad 63s widened that gap.

Listening critically, one of my early observations was that a slight tizzyness in the 1- to 3-kHz region had all but vanished. I've heard this slightly brightish, ringing glare that places a grainy halo on some high notes and overtones on some but not all other Quad 63s. Perhaps Nick's damping materials had provided the cure.



Recordings also seemed cleaner and clearer. It's as though there had been a bit of haze around each voice and instrument that was now wiped clean. There is more spatial information as well. I am more aware of the location of each performing artist, as well as of the space around and behind the performer.



High- and low-frequency extremes have also been extended, and the highs are more open. There is a greater sense of presence with absolutely no increase of the whitish glare that

often accompanies such extension. Compared with most dome tweeters, the modified 63s still sound slightly rounded on top, but then so do most concert hall performances. When sitting on-axis, the 63s now reproduce upper octaves with an accuracy that makes the naturalness of the reproduced sound much more dependent on recordings, components, and other accessories in the system than the speakers themselves.

Bass also seems more extended, supportive, and with a greater sense of solidity. It's hard to imagine why this should be so, but I had a similar sense of improved bass when I switched the power supply for my Linn LP 12 turntable from the Valhalla board to

Linn's much larger and costlier Lingo power supply.

Two other areas that have been slightly improved are the already excellent microdynamics and transients. As a result, piano recordings, if not played too loudly, do a better job of separating each note from the note or notes just heard, and well as from whatever else may be going on in the recording. It's as though each note were emerging from a black background with greater clarity and surrounded with less clutter.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The Quad ESL 63s, as modified by Nick Gowan, have been substantially improved. They are more reliable, safer, more pleasing to the eye, and have gained solidity in their reconstruction. Most importantly, they sound better. The purity, openness, and immediacy that have been Quad hallmarks have been further enhanced. Frequency extremes are extended. Microdynamics, transients, and spatial information have all been improved. Nick Gowan's modified 63s do what Quads do best, only more so.

At a cost of \$2,500.00, this is not an inexpensive series of modifications. The work is time-consuming, and Nick tells me that about two-thirds of the cost is his labor. For the person who cherishes the unique sound of the 63s and can live with their limitations, these modifications make a lot of sense. I've heard quite a few speakers and I know of no speaker with a more natural mid-range and upper octaves. Based on my experience, such speakers aren't being made, and improving the Quad 63s becomes a more logical

## NOTES

**Quad ESL 63 Modification**, approximately \$2,500.00 from Nick Gowan, True Sound, 136 Kennedy Ave., Campbell, CA 95008; phone 408/370-7578, FAX 408/370-7581, e-mail gowan@tsound.com.

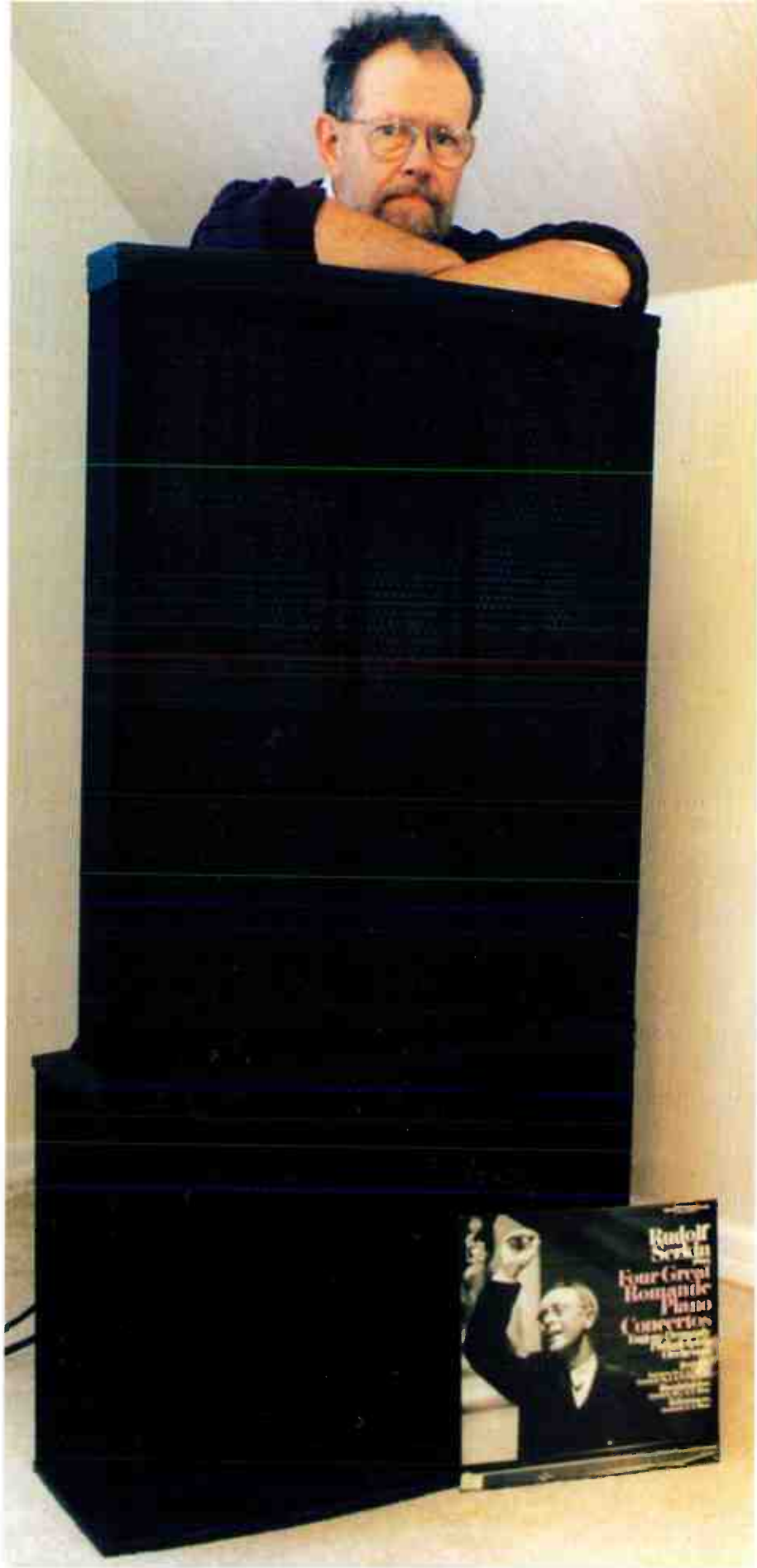
### Associated Equipment

Analog source: Linn LP 12/Lingo turntable with Ekos arm; Koetsu Rosewood signature cartridge; Digital Source: Linn Karik/Numerik CD player; Electronics: Audio Research SP-11 phono stage, Audio Research LS 15 preamplifier, Pass Laboratories Aleph 2 monoblocks and Audio Research VT 100 amplifiers; Speakers: Wilson Audio WATT/Puppy V.1; Interconnects: Daniels Audio, Audio Research; Speaker Cable: Tara RSC Master generation 2, and Accessories: Tice Power Block, Bob Young Line Filters, ASC Tube Traps, G. and G. Discoveries Pon-Tunes, Target equipment stands.

choice than buying new speakers.

For those who wish to pursue this further, I'd suggest giving Nick a call. He can give you a pretty good idea of what can be done with your Quads. Another possibility is to look for a good used pair of 63s which often sell for under \$2,000. Again, call Nick. Not only is he an authorized distributor of new Quad 63s but he can be quite helpful in describing what to look for in buying an older pair. The combined cost of buying and modifying second-hand speakers would be less than the cost of buying new ones and can result in speakers that are sonically superior.

In sum, the person who feels frustrated by the Quad 63s lack of dynamic punch and bass impact should forget the mods. Even with Nick Gowan's work, this person will probably remain frustrated. For those who can live with what the 63s don't do well, and love the Quad 63s for those areas where they excel, the modifications make a great deal of sense. Nick Gowan has shown that he is able to take one of the best sounding speakers in the world and with his expertise and skill make it into one that is even better.



# Organizing An Audio File

Robert A. Harris

**T**HEN (*Flip, flip, flip, flip.*)

"I know it's here somewhere. It's got amazing bass and the entire recording is very clean. Just let me look a minute more," I say to my friend who is over for a listen.

The LPs continue to make the flipping sound as I move down the line, vainly trying to find the recording I have described to my friend. At least there is some sound coming out of the LPs. Unfortunately, it's not the music that I have described to him.

*Flip, flip, flip, flip, flip, flip.*

Only 1,800 more albums to search. Frustration grows. The

LP is not going to be found today. There must be a better way.

(Now)

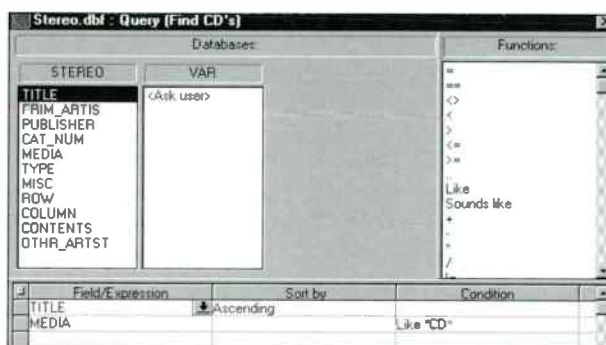
"Yeah, I think I have that. Let me push a few buttons on the computer here. Yep, I have the CD on the fourth shelf, third stack of CDs. I have the LP too. It's at divider number 32."

Ah! This is much better. So much music, so much more time to listen.

If you are an inveterate LP, CD, or even video collector, the first scenario probably describes too many of us. We have been collecting music and videos for years. At some point the collec-

tion has gotten out of hand. It may have been easy to find items when you only had several hundred pieces, but now that you have substantially more, things are a little more difficult. You may know that you have something but have no idea where it actually physically resides. Or you may have even forgotten that you bought something years ago.

At some point your collection may have been organized. Chances are that some of the best intentions to keep it organized have gone by the wayside. Maybe your kids have contributed to the lack of order now. Maybe they even put things back, but not where they



go. Maybe a few things were accidentally left over at a friend's house.

And what about all that shifting of material from one shelf to another when the first shelf could hold no more? That is really a pain when you have to reshelv a large collection. If the collection is big enough, it may never get done.

Have you ever wondered what your collection would look like if it were organized by type of music, and not by artist? Haven't you ever wanted to see what holes you have in your collection in the early rock 'n' roll category? But how could you go through the whole collection and find out? Life is too

short to have to go through all of those shelves of records.

Perhaps the answer lies in getting your media collection into a database and letting the computer do the dirty work for you. I have done just that in order to get control of a moderate sized CD, LP, LD, and VCR tape collection (about 4,000 pieces). I used a Windows programming tool that allows me to dice and slice the collection to my heart's content. The data can be arranged in any way I desire, all without touching or moving a single album or CD.

More importantly, I can look up an entry with a few key strokes. Once I have the entry on my computer screen, I know

exactly where to find it physically. No longer do I have to hunt and search for a CD or LP. A small label is fixed to the back of each album that tell me where the album goes when not in use. This information is also in the computer. Since it's now a snap to return the piece to its designated location, my significant other doesn't have to tell me to clean up after an extended listening or viewing session any more. We are both a lot happier.

Entering new items takes only a few seconds since I now have an extensive list of artists already built into the program. Each new artist is automatically added to the database and can be used the next time he is needed.

I also have a list of media types as well as type of music or video. Correct answers are suggested to me during item entry to keep my data entry time short and consistent. New media or type of music entries can be made if necessary, although after the first few hundred entries I haven't needed any

new ones. The data entry is now down to about 20 seconds per recording.

The software prints a report with the pertinent information regarding Artist, Title, Location, and Media type. This list can be sorted in any way I like. I now keep a list for insurance reasons to document what I actually

have in my music and video library.


Perhaps the best thing is that I can also make occasional entries for albums or CDs I want but haven't been able to get. I store the term "Need" in the Miscellaneous field of the database. Whenever I go shopping, I query the database for "Need" and print a list. It's also very easy to take a list of recordings to the store if I decide I want to sell some LPs or CDs. I don't have to lug the actual pieces around anymore. I can show the list to the store owner and see if he wants anything I have.

Finding duplicates is easy now. If I sort my database by title, I now know exactly what duplicates I have. I can cull out the dupes and sell or trade them.

Placing record or CD on the shelf is a total "no brainer" now. I don't care where things are physically located as I now let the computer do the dirty work. My next available physical location is where the next acquisition resides. The computer will put the item in its appropriate spot with regard to artist, title, media type, or even Music or Video type. Reorganizing the collection takes less than 15 seconds with all 4,000 entries.


Finally I can spend time doing what I really enjoy—listening to music or watching a movie. Finding the record, CD, or Video tape is now a snap.

Author's note: A copy of the software is available for \$10.00 to cover duplication and mailing costs. The program runs Window 3.1 or Windows 95 and requires at least 12 MB RAM; 16MB is better. A 486 CPU is adequate; a Pentium class computer is better. Send requests to: R.A. Harris, 9900 North Central, #225, Dallas, TX 75231.



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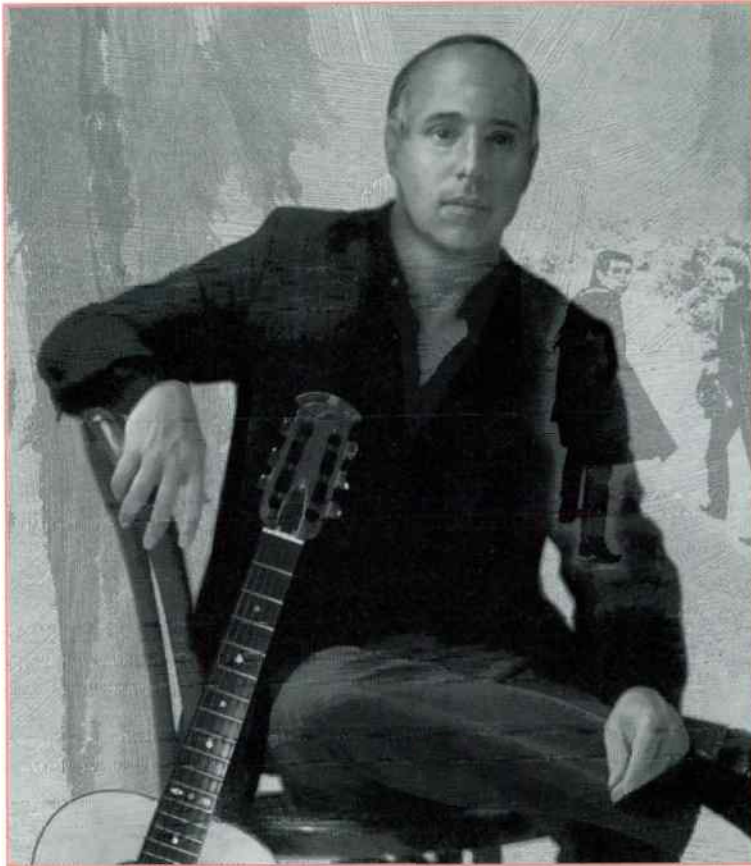
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# ROCK

Paul Simon  
Songs from the Capeman

Warner Bros.  
46814-2

**P**AUL SIMON sees his new Broadway musical "not as a new chapter, but as a kind of summation." In a *New York Times Sunday Magazine* interview, he adds that he may well be finished as a performer and recording artist: "I'm thinking of this show as a very big ending." When Simon, one of our most important songwriters, and a notorious perfectionist, insists that *The Capeman* is the summation of a career, attention must be paid.

But not too much attention, because Simon has proven to be an eccentric judge of his own work. At a recent taping for VH-1's *Storytellers* series, he once again ridiculed his old songs, and groaned "There's nothing of any value" in the latest Simon and Garfunkel boxed-set release. He must think his fans are idiots and, of course, the self-loathing is palpable. Simon may be rock's John McEnroe, holding everyone, himself included, to an impossible standard.

Ego and loathing, however, when not self-destructive, can be powerful artistic motivators, and they've now driven Paul Simon on a wild cab ride into the uncharted territory of Broadway. I'll let the theater critics decide the fate of the musical; this recording has a life of its own. It's emphatically *not* a cast recording (that will come also) but neither is it exactly a Paul Simon album.

So what is it? A little history is in order.

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About 10 years ago Simon ran into an old friend, Carlos Ortiz, who had just finished a documentary about Latin music in New York. Simon had an idea for a musical that would involve Latin themes, and Ortiz agreed to help him research it. The music itself was already vaguely familiar to Simon: "My father was a bandleader, and he'd play at Roseland Ballroom, and the other band that played there was a Latin band. So these are the sounds that are just at the edge of memory." Musically, it made an interesting transition from the Brazilian *The Rhythm of the Saints* (1990).

The story line for the play, also at the edge of memory, was that of Salvador Agron, a brutal juvenile murderer known as The Capeman (his gang called themselves the Vampires, and Agron wore a Dracula-style cape while committing the murders). His capture and trial became an ongoing sensation in the New York news media in 1959 and 1960. Ortiz and Simon traveled to Puerto Rico to interview Agron's mother, Esmeralda. Back in New York, Simon made contacts with local Latin musicians, and, as he did on *Graceland* and *Saints*, brought them into the studio to lay down rhythm tracks.

Simon knew he needed someone with theatrical experience to help him with the structure and forms of a play, so he turned to Derek Walcott, the Nobel Prize-winning poet who is also a respected playwright, director, and painter. As Walcott told Stephen J. Dubner of the *New York Times*, "I don't think I would have worked with anybody but Paul Simon." Both men found the story interesting

but troubling from a moral perspective. Simon's attraction was as much musical as political; "This is all about music. . . . I'm not a sociologist or even a playwright."

Walcott became more than simply an advisor, is credited as "co-author of lyrics," and his

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### **Both the songs and the story line should strike familiar chords in your memory.**

---

working relationship with Simon evolved over several years. According to Simon, "Derek would want to write a poem or lyric and set it to music, but I had to say: 'No, first comes the sound. So here are four examples of an aguinaldo. In your mind, which is the one you'd hear the character speaking in?' Then I'd take it, research it, come up with a form, then keep working on the lyric."

Clearly, we're not talking Brill Building bang-em-outs here, but ironically that is the other direction Simon headed in on his journey to Broadway. Simon wanted the sound to reflect the period, a period in which he came of age musically, so late 50s Doo-Wop became as important as Salsa to the final musical melange. Indeed, Phil Spector back in his heyday would have been happy to record some of these songs, right along with "Uptown" and "Spanish Harlem."

So much for background. For this album, Simon culled 13 songs from the play and recorded them as a Paul Simon album. Oscar Hernandez, bandleader and arranger for the Broadway show, and Roy Halee, Simon's

regular producer since *Bookends* in 1968, share associate producer credits. One track, "Can I Forgive Him," seems to be a demo with guitar and solo vocal recorded in Simon's home studio.

Many of the songs, including "Can I Forgive Him," are written in the voices of multiple characters, a good idea theatrically, but certain passages are rendered incomprehensible when Simon takes all the vocal parts. The CD's booklet includes a lyric sheet identifying which character sings which lines. Consider it indispensable. Just for inconsistency's sake, however, cast members Marc Anthony, Ruben Blades, and Ednita Nazario are allowed take solo turns on three cuts.

Marc Anthony, a huge Salsa star in his own right, plays Sal Agron as a young man, while Blades takes the character of the older, reformed Salvador, eventually released from prison. Their interplay on "Time Is an Ocean," speaking to each other across the void of past, present, and future, is quite stunning and powerful. One cannot hear the poetic refrain "Time is an ocean of endless tears" without feeling a bit shaken and haunted. If there is one clear masterpiece here, this is it.

Anthony, Blades and Nazario are so good on their three cuts, in fact, that one can't help but wonder if this album is really necessary. Thoughts drift to the acrimonious breakup of Simon & Garfunkel, to Simon's huge but easily bruised ego, to a great songwriter who couldn't deal with a mere singer, Art Garfunkel, getting all the adulation on "Bridge Over Troubled Water." Is this album an attempt

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to take a little extra credit for the songs even while others are getting the standing Os on Broadway? (I've slapped myself on the wrist for even thinking such things.)

One thought I will not abide, however, is the idiotic criticism that cropped up after both *Graceland* and *Saints*, and will inevitably bear its pointy teeth at *The Capeman*, that Simon steals his ideas from oppressed cultures who by rights should be able to popularize and profit from their musical forms without Simon playing the middleman. Pardon me, but my TAV-issued and -patented B.S. detector just went off! Simon has, to my mind, been more than generous in giving credit where credit was due. Furthermore, making connections between styles and genres is rightly considered, in any art form, innovation, not

theft. [Editor's Note: The fact is, too, that he did it, and did it great! While they, in the plenty of time since the events, haven't. So, isn't the moral: To the do-ers go the credit? *Gene Pitts*]

And in the case of Salsa, it's a "spitball" charge that cannot

---

**Paul Simon's perfectionism in album quality shows an audiophile's attitude toward sound.**

---

stick. Latin singers and musicians are immensely popular already, and for decades they have crossed over to a wider audience without needing or having Paul Simon's blessing. As to the issue of "musical purity," John Storm Roberts, musicologist, so-called "patriarch of World Music" and author of *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin-*

*American Music on the United States*, points out that "There's no such thing as 'authentic' Latin music. All music is mixed. All music could be said to be watered-down. You might find three guys playing nose flutes in the Amazon who have not been influenced by the next village, but I sincerely doubt it." [Editor's Additional Intrusion: Which reminds me about Leadbelly's comment on Folk Music, that all music was "Folk Music" since he'd never seen a cow playing a guitar! *Gene Pitts*]

*The Capeman* is much more than "Simon does Salsa." The exciting guajira rhythm He uses in "The Vampires" has been appropriated by others before him and will be instantly familiar to any rocker who's ever spun a Santana record. "Satin Summer Nights," with its complex, layered doo-wop chorus,

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actually has quite a lot in common with the Ladysmith Black Mambazo vocal style of "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes" from *Graceland*. The next cut, "Bernadette," starts with a repetitive guitar lead along with a light, shuffling rhythm; it sounds unmistakably South African, but the "Dom dom dom doo" vocal and tenor sax back-up put the song firmly back in an urban American setting.

The last song on the album, "Trailways Bus," musically could have been the first, in that it seems to take up a guitar riff where *Saints'* "Born at the Right Time" left off. Simon blends in his own folkish acoustic guitar, then inserts a heartbreakingly beautiful Spanish guitar solo by Arlen Roth and a spine-tingling Latin trumpet from Bill Holloman. Robby Turner's pedal steel in

the background gives the song an almost other-worldly quality. These kinds of musical connections make *Capeman* thrilling to listen to, but begging to differ with Mr. Simon's perfectionist self, no less thrilling than the old Simon and Garfunkel stuff. Play

---

**Ultimately, the best part of these songs is the music and, unhappily, not the lyrics.**

---

"Trailways Bus" alongside "America" and see what you think.

Simon's perfectionism has extended of late even to sound-quality issues. Oscar Hernandez says that Paul Simon "just doesn't settle." The *Times Sunday Magazine*, quoting an unnamed source, has Simon spending "half an hour moving the tambourine around the room to see

where it would sound the best." Aha, an audiophile! The recording is, I'm happy to report, of "audiophile quality." The vocals are a little too bright and "present" for my taste, but otherwise everything is perfect. Depth seems infinite, drums are perfectly balanced, every instrument and vocalist has a place on the soundstage. The effect is that we are listening to a live performance, with the lead vocalists subtly miked and amplified to stand out from the mix. Musically, whether an arrangement is simple or complex, nothing seems cluttered or unnecessary.

That this album is, on many levels, an artistic and musical success is something of which I'm fairly certain. I'm just not sure it's good. That is, I have a hard time separating what I'm fond of musically from what I disapprove of ethically. The fact

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**STEREO SOUND (Japan)**

December 1996

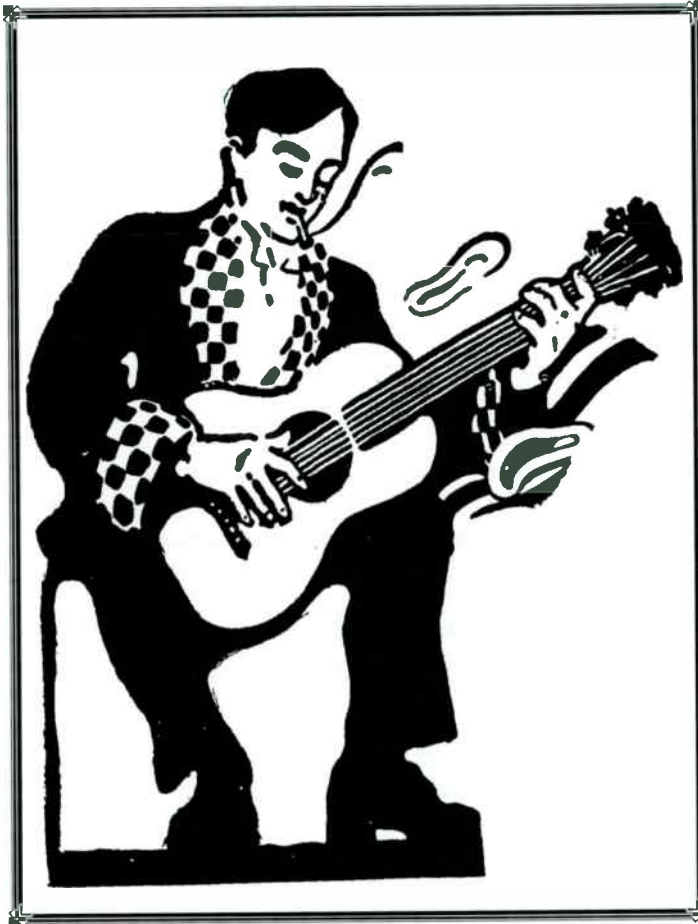
Playing Count Basie's "Lester Leaps In," the driving rhythm, horn solo and sound color of Basie's piano are very clear and transparent. The music never sounded lean; the energetic bass was firmly expressed. This is the Jazz only Shure can reproduce.--*Shinji Hosoya*

is, Simon and Walcott don't even come close to handling the political and moral challenges they both knew they faced.

Let's be clear. Salvador Agron murdered two innocent teenagers who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Agron's gang held the boys down while Agron and an accomplice stabbed them with a seven-inch dagger. Agron showed no remorse (until much later in life), and even bragged to the press, "I don't care if I burn. My mother could watch me." Liberal pundit Bob Herbert took up The Capeman's story last November 13 in a column titled "Redemption for a Killer." "Was it possible," asked Herbert, "for someone who had committed so foul a crime to redeem himself? Do we, as a society, have an obligation to assist in such a rehabilitative effort? And should we try to forgive?" Difficult questions. Worthy themes.

Herbert then quoted Simon at length about his intentions in bringing *The Capeman* story to a Broadway audience: "I don't mean to brush aside the victims, or to in any way suggest that the pain of their families is not immense and lifelong and that they do not have a very powerful case. In fact, I am going to express their case as articulately and as touchingly and as beauti-

fully as I can. Nevertheless, I want to bring your attention back to the possibility of redemption for this person. If, at the end of this play, a person comes out and says, 'I don't care, I still feel Salvador Agron was a worthless guy,' OK. But I insist upon—not that I can actu-



ally enforce this—but I insist upon an honest examination of the question. As unpopular as that is."

But an honest examination is precisely what we don't get here. (Whether the Broadway show does a better job is open to another debate.) From the very first song, "Adios Hermanos," sympathy for the victims and concern for balance is not even an afterthought: "A Spanish boy could be killed

every night of the week / But just let some white boy die / And the world goes crazy for blood / Latin blood." So the unfortunate casualties were just a couple of white boys (progeny of the imperialist oppressors) and the world is "crazy" for being outraged.

Sal adds a gospel-style lament: "Well, they shackled my hands / A heavy belt around my waist to restrain me." The music here is intensely moving and spiritual, but all the more repellent because of it. Note to Simon and Walcott: This is not a hymn to the Amistad slaves. The songwriters appear to be making a martyr of a brutal, vicious, remorseless killer. I say, You're damn right they shackled his hands; what would you have the police do? Sal sings that he's "Guilty by my dress / Guilty in the press / Let The Capeman burn for the murder."

Overlooked here is that Sal is *guilty in fact*. (Let's not let the truth cloud the issue.) Then Sal relays the verdict: "And now it was time for some f\*\*\*in' law and order / The electric chair / For the greasy pair / Said the judge to the court reporter."

The murderer is sanctified in song, while the judge is relegated to crude caricature, a racist buffoon. This is an out-of-date liberal cartoon, not an honest examination of troubling moral



and social questions. It's almost as if Walcott and Simon got so caught up in their research and the "rightness" of their viewpoint that they forgot about presenting the case to the audience. Walcott originally had a "big moral problem with this man." Did his problem just go away? They are preaching to me but I'm a very long way far from converted.

One song on the album is narrated by a prison guard, and the lyricists give him some interesting lines. "Virgil" complains that the law gives even Sal, a convicted murderer, the right to study for a college degree, while "I've got a wife, four grown children / I can't afford their education." Interesting point. But Simon sets Virgil's thoughts to a tune that is not so much a C&W song as a parody of one. Again, it's cartoonish and unworthy. Albert Einstein would sound like a stupid hick against this music.

The deck is stacked even against the mothers of the murdered boys. In a song in which they tell Esméralda Agron that they cannot forgive Sal, Simon and Walcott have one of the mothers say, "You Spanish people, you come to this country / Nothing here changes your lives / Ungrateful immigrants asking for pity / When all of your answers are knives." By making the woman seem callous and prejudiced, they undercut her as a character worthy of our sympathy.

In the penultimate song, "Killer Wants to Go to College II," Sal protests that "All I ever learned was fighting / But I'm not the only one to blame / The streets were dark with danger / I had to stand up for my friends / In a land where I'm a stranger / And the hatred never ends." This is quite simply a naked excuse for Sal's crime, and nothing on the album contradicts it. Read

those lyrics and then think about Simon's vow to express the case of the victims' families "as articulately and as touchingly and as beautifully as I can." Not good enough, Paul. Take a self-loathing songwriter and add some good-old liberal guilt and this is what you get.

We must give credit to Agron for reforming himself in prison, for seeking his own redemption. His case, and others like it, makes a powerful statement against the death penalty. It seems, however, that on Paul Simon's agenda it was more important to simply blame "Society" than to dig into Agron's character. Deeper questions of Good existing within Evil, of the infinite complexity of human nature, of the social value of punishment balanced against the almighty power of forgiveness, those examinations must await other songs than these.

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ROCK

Jethro Tull  
Living in the Past

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**F**IRST RELEASED in 1972, *Living in the Past* was the first retrospective plus rarities released by Jethro Tull. At the time, it was a double-LP album in a lavish package with booklet. Later Chrysalis reissued it in an abridged CD form. This Mobile Fidelity re-release not only restores the set to full length, necessitating a double-CD package, they have also included all the selections that appeared on the slightly varying U.S. and U.K. editions. The booklet in the slipcase revives the content of the original, which albeit smaller, is a handsome and appropriate touch. Thus, this is the fullest *Living in the Past* ever.

Selections include cuts from the first four Tull albums, a raft of early singles not on those albums

("Christmas Song," "Living in the Past," "Witches Promise," "Sweet Dream"), B-sides and rarities ("Driving Song," "Alive and Well and Living In," "Up The Pool," "Dr. Bogenbroom" among others), plus two lengthy 1970 live cuts ("By Kind Permission of" and "Dharma for One"). While certainly not as essential as the band's normal releases, *Living in the Past* fills in a lot of holes of otherwise unavailable great stuff and some nice if lesser tracks.

The big question about any gold CD reissue must be how the sound compared with earlier reissues, especially when the release in question is a pricey double set. And this is precisely what blew me away about Mobile Fidelity's *Living*. I used a radio studio to do

an A/B test of the new Ultradisc II and the earlier abridged CD. Results were astonishing, as the Mo-Fi release blew the Chrysalis CD clear out of the water. Mo-Fi's sound was quanta superior, with added clarity, depth, and especially clean nuances of acoustic instruments. The last characteristic is particularly crucial for a band like Tull, which relies heavily on acoustic guitars and flutes. The long opening fade-up on "Christmas Song" notably shows off the Ultradisc II's sonic superiority. The Mobile Fidelity *Living in the Past* is a slam-dunk success. It is a sonically brilliant record of a band that was just about to explode with the break-out success of *Aqualung*. It's a true feast for the ears.

# RECORDINGS

Frank J. Alles



## ROCK

The Moog Cookbook  
Ye Olde Space Bande Plays

Restless  
01877-72941-2

**T**HIS GROUP, The Moog Cookbook, is comprised primarily of two “synthesists,” Brian Kehew and Roger Manning who also provides “vocals,” such as they are. Manning was also a keyboardist/vocalist for the late band, Jellyfish, and he performs with the band, Imperial Drag.

I first heard The Cookbook’s version of “Hotel California” from this album while driving home from work on my local college radio station WRSU and decided it was something I had to check out more thoroughly. I

ordered the Compact Disc from the Music Boulevard site ([www.musicblvd.com](http://www.musicblvd.com)), and a few days later I found myself loading it into my transport for a test-spin. If you want just a sample, try them on the Web at [www.restless.com/moog.html](http://www.restless.com/moog.html).

This recording is clean, crisp, dynamic and effective. It is chock-full of sonic surprises and rife with borrowed riffs from many classic pop tunes. I wafted my way through the first two cuts (“Born To Be Wild” and “Cat Scratch Fever”) to The

Cookbook’s assimilation of “Sweet Home Alabama.” This cut looms large with a very BIG sounding drum kit (some of which are real drums!) at the rear of the soundstage. And there is the band’s innovative melodic styling and adroit blend of harmonies. But the best part, by far, was that I didn’t have to listen to those tired Skynyrd lyrics on this unique rendition.

Midway through Led Zep’s “Whole Lotta Love,” I found a bridge to the past that included phrasings from The Who’s

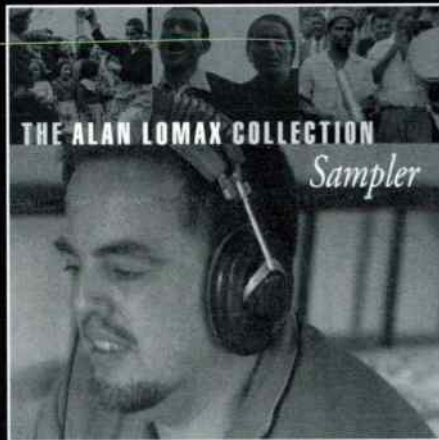
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*Who's Next* album and Edgar Winter's *Frankenstein*, resulting in a monstrous amalgam of rock nostalgia. While all of this may have been from a "different generation," it's still good to hear in the here and now.

Combining certain "out of context" concepts and then punctuating their effect with the power of the Moog, is the recipe for The Cookbook's brand of music with humor. The calliope effect on "Hotel California" is almost certainly funnier than seeing your "significant other" trip over a cow-pie (just an example). This "punctuation" is further accented by the wide contrasts in dynamics and the excellent rhythmic drive of the music. Speaking of rhythmic drive, try the opening bass line of "Rock And Roll All Night," which will put some deep slammin' bass in yer face!

One thing I must conclude about The Moog Cookbook is that they just can't let an ending alone. Certain cuts take an exceptional amount of time to wind down as the band flirts with phrase upon phrase from just about every popular/traditional song you could possibly remember or imagine. Some of this is in the name of good fun, but it would be totally justifiable to say that our boys get a mite carried away with this.

In spite of that, *Ye Olde Space Bande Plays The Classic Rock Hits* is one album I thoroughly enjoyed. In my opinion, The Moog Cookbook does in the '90s for classic rock what Wendy Carlos did for classic Bach back in the autumn of '68. Just in case you're wondering, I did intend that as a compliment and I highly recommend this album to anyone who's in the classic rockin' Moog . . . mode . . . er-uh, mood!

# RECORDINGS



Go-Go and Gumbo, Satchmo 'N' Soul  
Chuck Brown and Shaun Murphy

JAZZ

Wildchild!/Mapleshade  
MS 04772

**T**HE RESTLESS minds at Mapleshade have come up with a tangy melange that taps several Crescent City styles and then some. A La Carte Brass & Percussion emerged from the marriage of a New Orleans-style brass band with the percussion from a salsa big band. New-born "Go-Go and Gumbo, Satchmo 'N' Soul" follows in the the footsteps of Wildchild! #02452, the ensemble's first release.

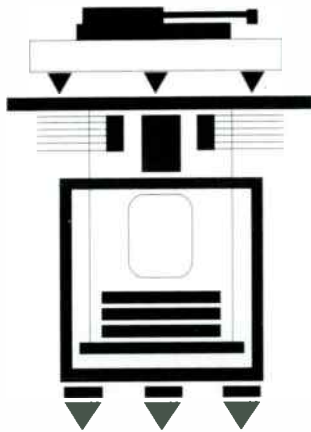
Bringing nine or 10 percussionists to a New Orleans brass band is a natural, given the importance of percussion to Africans in Diaspora, particularly in New Orleans where slaves were permitted to play drums on Sundays at Congo Square (African drumming was completely forbidden in the English colonies). Brass instruments could match drums in loudness and could project well out of doors, so brass bands came to

lead any funeral procession, and as the focus of every social club, became the distinctive voice of a neighborhood. A tradition grew as street celebrants grabbed up cowbells and tin cans to play as a "second line" behind the brass bands that that rocked a departed soul into that Gumbo Nirvana. And come Mardi Gras, friendly neighbors suddenly morphed into fierce Indians bedecked in feathered cloaks and headdresses, itching to fight their rivals, but willing to settle for competition in singing songs of braggadocio and insult. New Orleans had its own intensely rhythmic approach to popular music, often mixing a pianist's rocking triplets, borrowed from the bordellos, with mambo music by way of the Caribbean islands, Through it all, fervent but generally unnoticed by outsiders, is the church. These activities all still thrive.

Unified by Crescent City culture and a brass-rich ensemble including two saxes and a tuba (often doubled by baritone sax) for the bass, this robust collection is surprisingly varied. The A La Carte ensemble is no rag-tag street-band; these guys have charts and can play tight. The thing is, brass bands have staged a comeback and are not willing to settle for the sound of a polyphonic free-for-all; from the Dirty Dozen to the Nightcrawlers, younger members have injected bebop, funk, and now hip-hop into the traditional mix of spirituals and two-steps. Arrangements set up contrasts and structure the interplay between sections of the band. On this disc, tracks such as Freddie Hubbard's gentle *Sunflower* even take on a modernist coloration that recalls Gil Evans or Oliver Nelson. The distinctive Mapleshade sound,

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achieved with minimalist use of microphones, depicts a sound stage so deep and realistic as to convince the listener he has just dropped in on a band rehearsal in a large, almost empty social club. The for-real venue is a letter carrier's union hall in Washington, D.C., chosen for its "clean reverberation."

"Heh Pocky Way," a funky Mardi Gras/second-line anthem caught my eye. Known from versions by the Meters (recorded in 1974), Wild Tchoupatoulas (backed by the Meters), and The Neville Brothers (*live at Tipitina's*), its high-strutting rhythm and mambo syncopations seemed guaranteed to galvanize any (Funky) Meters' live audience of 20-year-olds. So I cued up track five first. With more of a loose swing than the familiar tightly sprung march beat, this instrumental arrangement, with tuba at the bottom and a plethora of percussion up top, creates an authentic second-line texture, but the mid-range is rather thin without exultant voices. Halfway through, trumpeter T. Klatka demonstrates impressive chops and a searing tone, yet the effect is more perfunctory than funky. Maybe one shouldn't compare a brass band and salsa percussion with electronic funk bands, but the next track, "Standing On The Verge" (by George Clinton of P-Funk) has a real rhythmic snap and a meatier arrangement which the band plays with verve. The rhythmic style here is more '90s, and main singer Chuck Brown, "the king of D.C. go-go," is in his element.

The cover boasts a label, "raw music ... no additives." The inside notes confirm that the sessions were "mastered live to two-track analog tape ... digitized on the Mapleshade custom

A/D converter ... (with) minimum miking and minimum-length cabling ... no mixing board, filtering, compression ... multitracking or overdubbing." The recording renders the slam-bang tuttis of trumpets and drums with open-throated ease and realism. Musicians are vividly depicted in relation to each other, and all the music has presence and immediacy in the smaller ensembles, though with some of the larger ensembles, instrumental texture and clarity suffers. Consider, "A Woman, A Love, and A Man," a highly charged secular gospel number. Six singers (hard-working Chuck Brown and Shaun Murphy along with the background quartet, Metafour) are relatively close to the mikes. But the horns and nine or 10 percussionists are now pushed far enough away from the mikes that their sounds take on an element of noise as they reverberate around the back of the big hall. With such a dense and busy texture, the consistently punchy articulation of the tuba and bari on the bottom make one fondly imagine the liquid tones of a Fender bass. The organ supplies some connective tissue, but seems to be barely emerging from behind closed doors. This track actually exploits the near-far phenomena, as did "Hey Pocky Way," where halfway through, a up-close cowbell suddenly appears to anchor the beat. Here, towards the end, instruments and voices are peeled away to reveal the lovers' up-close and personal come-ons.

The following track ("Too Many Lovers") sets up a loping voodoo groove reminiscent of Dr. John's early Gris-Gris albums. The back-up singers are better balanced here, and the

arrangement gives Murphy's voice a chance to dip down and be heard without strain.

As with most good R&B albums, there is stuff I've got to hear again soon, and that is certainly the case here. My three favorite tracks are "Saint James Infirmary Blues," "San Pedro," and "Lucky Old Sun," each quite different from the others.

"Saint James Infirmary Blues" starts with a gut-wrenching "uhg! ... ahh!" and settles into a mysteriously minor-keyed mambo. (This gets my wildchildren gleefully doing a curious faux-Egyptian sort of dance.) Peter Ostle's tuba here is just right, evoking the '20s and earlier versions of this terrifying tale. Best of all is Chuck Brown. His husky voice has a hint of vibrato that suggests he could have been a crooner, but this is no ordinary love song, and he gets the story across as if he's lived it himself. The trumpets have a Cuban richness and fire, and the trombone chorus is a high point.

"San Pedro," features only percussion and voice. Nelson Rodriguez and Rob White are credited as singers, but it sounds like essentially one singer, probably Rodriguez. His frayed, thoroughly untutored voice is the sound of a Caribbean Everyman singing a stream of consciousness in some equatorial town square. These vocalizations are like pure, improvised folk music. The leisurely pace and world-weary inflections, interwoven with calmly conversational drumming, are at once highly personal and universal. The beautifully recorded drums (here sounding closer to the mikes than the tracks with larger ensembles) suggest some complex force of nature, like light glancing off a forest stream. This unique showcase for voice and

drums allows the listener a peek into a timeless world where musicians with simple means listen and interact.

You may wonder why the ensemble, which until now has avoided any trace of electronics, suddenly on track 9 (J.J. Johnson's "Me Too"), has introduces a synthesizer. Well, it turns out those shimmering digital overtones are emanating from that ancient aboriginal instrument, the didgeridoo. This particular didgeridoo is either especially primitive or quite high-tech, depending on how you regard the fashioning of ancient instruments out of PVC sewer pipe. It sounds great! John Jensen's trombone work is superb, his occasional multiphonics bringing his horn into the blurry soundworld of the didgeridoo.

"Luck Old Sun" is a stately spiritual, resolute and hopeful. Trumpeter J. Howard nowhere strives to be modern, but holds our attention though flexible phrasing and steady purpose; his playing goes somewhere, gradually becoming more bluesy and urgent until this final piece fades away, leaving only the retreating sounds of the percussion's slow-drag march.

This disc has a warmth of spirit and a lots of rhythmic appeal, and I admire what Mapleshade is doing. The recording of every piece naturally evokes a soundstage of depth and dynamic range, yet one or two tracks lead me to question the premise of recording a large outdoor ensemble in such a resonant interior. I look forward to sharing faves with friends (eh...er... make that singular) but its so hard for such a crotchety critic to find a pal when guys only want to sit back and enjoy the good-time music.

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# RECORDINGS



**A** RECORDING DONE with "Binaural 20-bit High Resolution" using the Neumann KU 100 "Dummy Head" Microphone System?

The question is this: Do we need another recording of *The Rite of Spring*? Especially one recorded by a "Dummy Head"?

No, I'm not talking about Jorge Mester, conductor of the Pasadena Symphony, even though I've personally played for symphony conductors who accurately fit that description. And no, I'm not referring to nerdy recording engineers or even those weasel-like recording

executives either. But rest assured, this disc was most definitely recorded by, not just any dummy head mind you, but *the* Neumann KU 100 "Dummy Head" microphone system, the geeky audiophile do-dad that graces, sort-of, the cover of this curious disc.



The liner notes describe the "Dummy Head" as follows:

The KU-100 binaural microphone system is a replication of the human head equipped with microphones in the ears. Listening to recordings made with this system through headphones affords a sensory impression which dimensionally recreates the acoustical information present at the location during the acoustical event.

They also claim that through speakers this method produces sound impressions "almost identical" to typical stereo microphone recording techniques, increased sense of depth, blah blah, increased sound stage, blah blah, audiophile double-speak, blah blah. For this recording, the Dummy Head was placed 10 feet above and 20 feet behind the conductor,

and I'm sure that the Dummy Head would exactly recreate the "acoustical information" (sometimes referred to as "music") for you, yes you, the TAV reader, provided the following are true:

1) You regularly attend "acoustical events" (also known as "concerts") where your seat is suspended on a gurney 10 feet above and 20 feet behind the conductor like some kinda BIG DAMN BUG.

2) You are, in fact, a disembodied head, since one's body, just like any other artifact in a concert hall, must have some kind of acoustic signature, however infinitesimal. I guess it's back to the drawing board at Dummy Head Labs. (Note to self: Million-Dollar Idea No. 1: Start audiophile recording company with your own version of the Dummy Head, maybe two RadioShack PZM mikes inside a mannequin head covered by one of those rubber Newt

Gingrich masks. Or make recordings with acoustically accurate "Dummy Bodies" attached. Use exact replicas of the bodies of famous people, preferably long-dead ones to avoid any possible litigation. That way you, yes you, can hear music exactly as, say, Orson Welles, would have heard it, assuming Orson Welles would have attended an "acoustical event" suspended 10 feet above and 20 feet behind the conductor like some kinda really BIG DAMN BUG.)

3) You, like the Dummy Head, bear striking resemblance to "Gort" in the classic sci-fi flick, "The Day the Earth Stood Still".

4) *Klata barada nicto.* (If you don't get this joke, please go rent the movie. You'll thank me later.)

Let me go on the record right now to say that I cannot believe these folks actually have straight

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faces when they call this contraption the "Dummy Head," The very least they could have done was to paint it like a crash-test dummy instead of the dull, art-deco silver it is now. (Note to self: Million-Dollar Idea No 2: Start audiophile company using the Dummy Head/Body to give listening tests to car stereos during Dept. of Transportation crash tests. See how that Alpine gear sounds as the Civic in which it's been installed slams into a concrete revetment at 50 mph.) (Please note: I do not differentiate between ideas that would either make or cost me a million dollars).

All kidding aside, after listening to the disc, I've got to give the "Dummy Head" a hand. (Sorry, I'm so ashamed.) The sonics really are exceptional, very clear, very transparent, very immediate sounding. I've heard

some discs where the recording perspective presented was from way back in the gallery. I quite like this practically on-the-podium feel. This is the first *Rite of Spring* I've ever heard where you can hear the pitches of both tuba parts in the "Sacred Dance". The bite of the bow hair

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**Dummy Head recordings can be a lot of fun, so lend an ear!**

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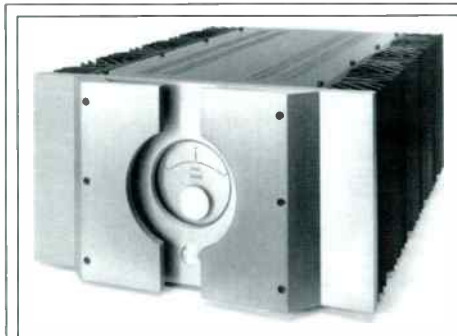
on the strings in "The Augurs of Spring", the ghostly harmonics in the "Introduction" of "The Sacrifice," and the percussive thud of the bass drum in the "Glorification of the Chosen One" are all, acoustically-speaking, in your face.

The orchestra? Who are they? Well, the Pasadena Symphony is

comprised of LA studio players and free-lancers who get together a few times a year to give concerts and, apparently, to record with the Dummy Head. As a musical calling card, the result is very impressive. The orchestra is clearly up to the challenge of this work and these works.

But it's worth asking yourself whether you should preferentially buy this recording over, say, a Philharmonic or CSO recording.

Although this orchestra is clearly very strong from top to bottom, it lacks two important ingredients, one obvious, the other more subtle. If you buy a recording of one of the established big orchestras, you'll get the playing of some of the industry superstars, like Bud Herseth and Dick Woodhams (principal trumpet in the CSO and principal oboe in Philly);



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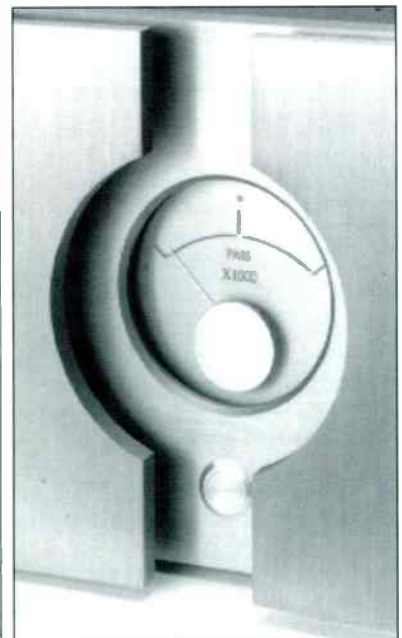
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this is practically the only thing that sets any of the top 15 orchestras in this country apart from one another these days. The Pasadena folks sound good, but I just don't hear any super-star performances.

Secondly, there is just no substitute for playing together all the time. This applies to music making, and not just to ensemble playing. There is, indeed, some fine music making on this disc, but that something which is special is missing. I'd recommend listening to this disc with a score in hand to anyone that wants to use this orchestra's sound playing and the disc's x-ray-like sonics to really hear-what the musical innards of this great masterpiece are. But in the end, I don't think you'll chuck your other recordings of this work after you've heard this one.

So, back to my question: Do we really need another *Rite of Spring*?

Sure, I say, why not? I can't say the same for Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*. This piece is well played and beautifully recorded, but does next to nothing for me. I know folks who are infatuated with this work; on this one, I side with Charles Ives, who regularly referred to Serge as "Rach-not-maninoff"

Kudos to the Newport Classic people for printing the orchestra personnel in the liner notes; I wish every label had the moxie to do that.

And I hope in the not-too-distant future to again have the pleasure of lending the Dummy Head an ear. I haven't laughed so much since 1992, when I heard Molly Ivins say that Pat Buchanan's notorious speech at the Republican Convention sounded, and I quote, "better in the original German."

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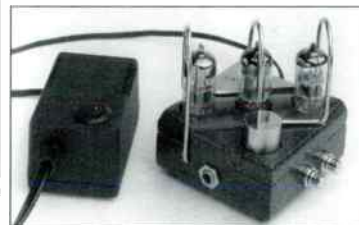
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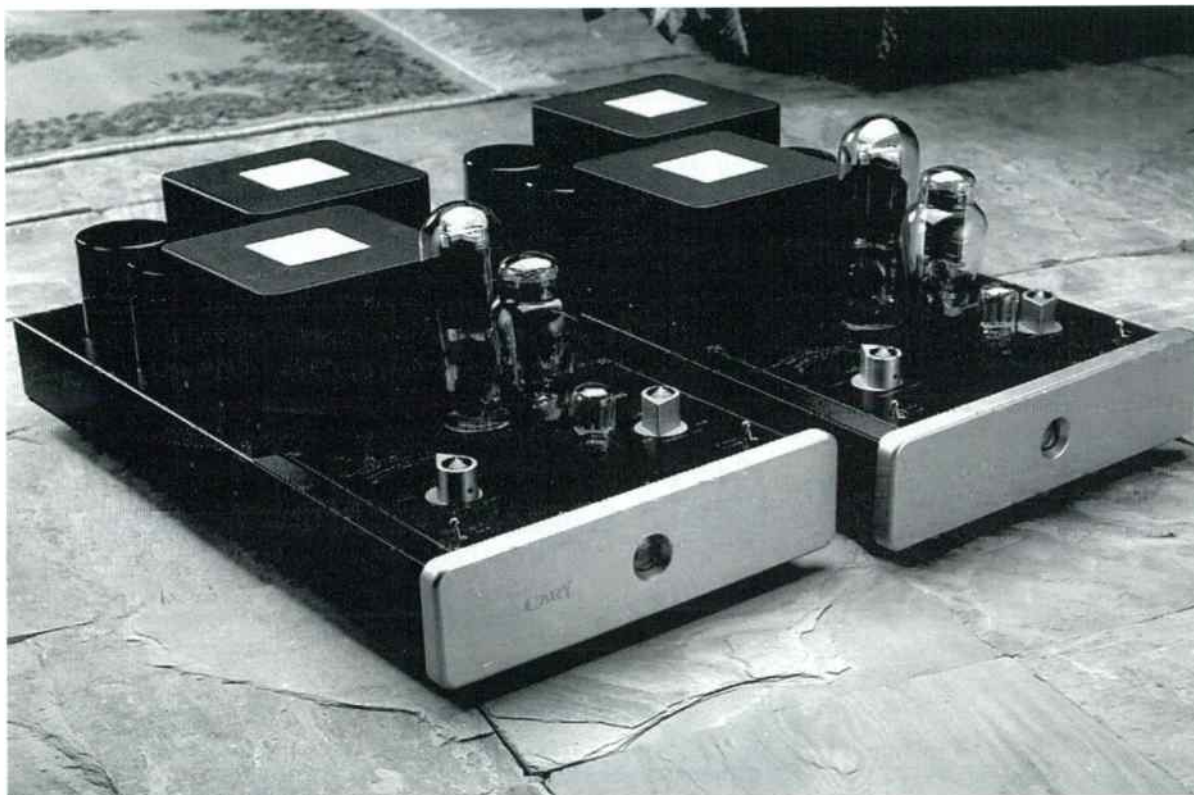
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# Two Paths to the Way

Peter Breuninger



## Cary 805-C

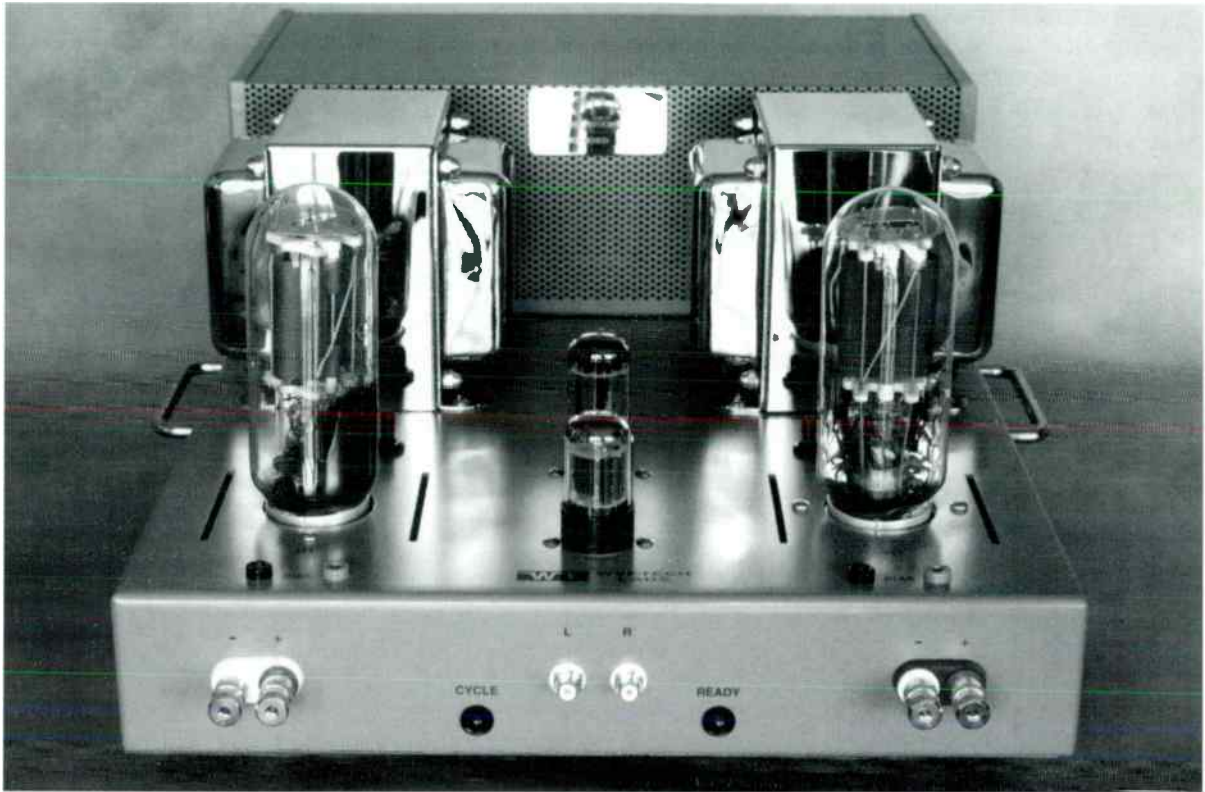
**M**EN OF GENIUS never error, their mistakes are the possibilities for discovery. We learn from imperfection, striving toward the ideal, gaining valuable insight as each revelation unfolds. The pathway to ideal has many roads, and with the case of the two strikingly different sounding, and looking, amplifiers at hand, a paradox visited many times before. One amplifier views the sunny side of the hill, steep in daylight contrast. The other, though miles from darkness, is basked in shade with a passive and pleasing character centered about a glorious midrange.

The hill concept of light was established by the ancient Chinese who attached the ideograms Yin (shady) and Yang (sunny) to mutually interdependent and potentially interchangeable forces. Despite the seeming polarity, each contains an embryonic essence of the other and is illustrated by the familiar Yin and Yang circle. The circle represents the Supreme Source, half Yin and half Yang, each with a dot of its opposite growing inside. The boundary of the two is S-shaped allowing that each is never fixed, with an ever-waxing and

ever-waning tug of influence: upon the other. So it is with ancient Taoist beliefs in mind that we visit the estimable Cary 805C and, new to the industry, Wyetech Topaz, two triode amplifiers, each capable of driving a wide variety of loudspeakers.

The ageless Chinese painting *The Vinegar Tasters* depicts three men standing about a vat of vinegar, each has dipped his finger into the fluid and has tasted it. The first, K'ung Fu-tse (Confucius) has a sour look on his face, the second, Buddha, wears a bitter expression. The

# *Of the Supreme Source*



## Wyetech Topaz

third man, Lao-tse, author of the oldest existing book on Taoism, is smiling; he believed that harmony naturally exists between heaven and earth from the beginning of time and can be found by anyone. If the painting included Cary's Dennis Had, you would not be surprised to see a man gleaming ear to ear with a smile of contentment. Mr. Had's philosophy of music reproduction is rooted deep in experiential pleasantness, far from the clinical beliefs many audiophiles embrace. His Cary 805 steps beyond words just as Lao-tse's belief in the Tao or

"the Way" teaches that the way of the universe can not be described in words and to try to do so would be insulting to its power and to the intelligence of humanity. I will though humbly invoke descriptions to explain the magic of the 805 and Topaz so that you can share my listening experiences and evaluations.

The Cary 805 is evolutionary and, not unlike the Supreme Source, contains elements of both Yin and Yang within an overwhelming Yin infrastructure. If life be best when soft and sweet, as when laying close to a lover, then the Cary will be your

choice and will embody all that is necessary for unceasing musical enjoyment. The 805 creates an endlessly deep and wide stage from which instruments spring softly into life with autofocus agility. The attack is not defined in Newtonian physics as ironclad sharp (I'm thinking here of solid-state low distortion and, at times, lifelessness) but rather as a linear evolution of each instrumental tonal transient expanding upon itself until the sonic signature is manifest. This growing or expanding of transient emanates from a living ocean of spacial texture that

appears to attach to instrumental tonal identifiers prior to full resonance.

Mozart's *Piano Concerto No.22* aptly demonstrates the Cary's ability to pre-define air space. Horns initiate the work with a rushing and rolling of air rising to tone and sustain as the flutes and oboe enter. Breaths appear vividly natural as the musicians lips blow across reeds and down columns of differing lengths. This air blowing sensation is, through the Cary, the best I've heard, and balances perfectly with the instrumental tonality blending to form the highest degree of reproduced realism. I cannot say this is first time I've experienced this other than live, but this amplifier exhibits this ability all the time; a most superior air-dynamics recapture ability. As instruments enter and leave or work in unison, the Cary softly outlines individual definitions much as you experience them in the concert hall.

High resolution audio systems often fail at emphasizing edge delivery, pulling you out of a music paradigm and seating you in a self-synthesized analytical environment. As a cutting edge audio reviewer, I know this location all too well and find that my directions and interests are becoming more and more based on the result, not the process, and the result has to be

happiness and enjoyment. I no longer enjoy the analytics of a Spectral-based Avalon system for this reason alone. I believe both are exceptional products and represent the state-of-the-resolution art, but if you want to enjoy the musical experience, I believe there are other paths to explore. This is why I focus on audio equipment that, in my

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**Both amps can drive speakers of 89 dB efficiency, but be careful of impedance matching.**

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opinion, delivers a more natural portrayal of life. If you happen to compare the Cary next to a state-of-the-art transistor behemoth and not focus on audiophilisms, you will prefer the Cary, that is if you like naturally produced music. I know many who are too over-schooled in the arts of high fidelity to enjoy the musical expressiveness of the Cary.

The 805, like most all single-ended designs, lacks the final and authoritative word in low frequency pitch definition, though there is bass, and it is not rolled off as many would have you believe. My current reference speaker, the Classic Audio Studio Standard II is 3 dB down at 28 Hz. When mated to the Cary, you attain this limit but the

leading edge is a little blurry when compared to, say, the new David Berning 80 watt (which has the best bass definition to date with an appallingly realistic low-fre-

quency tonality). The 805 has character, as do all amps, even those of which measure to infinity with abundant bandwidth (white comes to mind here). The Cary's character is sweet and musical and natural like a warm concert hall. Do not misunderstand, a character, such as it is, is not formed at the expense of detail retrieval, it just attaches to the instruments and becomes part of the timbre; realistic yes, clinical no.

The Cary, earlier said, is an evolution. It has been refitted to the 845 output tube (from the 211). Generally, a 211 output based amp offers greater transient reproduction and leading resonance impact, an 845 is not as sterile as a 211, nor does it offer the bass wallop and reach as its look-alike brother. The Wyetech Topaz, which mind you is named for its color, employs the 211 power triode, and herein lies the greatest difference between the two. The Topaz is clairvoyant and upfront in its imaging and tight below, while the Cary offers mid-to rear-hall presentation and is softer in the lows. Again, don't misjudge the Cary here, it has wonderful bass impact and one that mates with the whole.

The Topaz mates as well, but does it in a different and "Yang" or sunny way. I originally thought the Topaz too forward and bright but after a number of days, I made system and attitude adjustments and thought it the more fun of the two. With the Topaz in the system, I found myself playing many old-chestnut recordings, skipping from track to track, to feel the punch and get the audio fix. If the Cary had the Topaz's bass impact, it would come at an expense (I



assume) and would detract from the musical impact of the Cary's gestalt. My listening panel much preferred the Cary on an afternoon exploration, while I (wise to the ways of both amps), liked the Topaz for its strengths and on a ABX basis I became quite ambivalent. Longer term listening disallowed snap judgments and the Cary became my preference as well. It remains proven over and over that the attributes that are preferred during short-term analysis usually do not hold over extended periods of time.

The Yang-like Wyetech Topaz is a stereo amplifier (the Cary a mono block) and boy, is the Wyetech big and heavy. It uses Audionote transformers and has a massive power supply. It also sports the best low-frequency reproduction I've heard in a single-ended amp, though I should point out that I unassumingly became well-versed as a proponent and reviewer of such designs and have heard in my system more single-ended units than probably any other North American audio reviewer. The Topaz is 13 watts of triode amplification versus the Cary's 28. Both amps can drive big speakers with efficiencies as low as 89 dB. You have to be very careful with impedance matching, as with all amps of this genre, but due to the relatively high power outputs (at least for single-enders), I can recommend trying them on most any speaker, though I'm not going to offer a strong recommendation on matching either with the Quad ESL due to a disappointing match with the 845-based Komuro.

The Topaz is lavender in color, and yes, I've never seen anything quite as startling, but

after a while it grew on me. The Cary is champagne silk and industrial black and visually refined. The Topaz is a bold sounding and a brutally forceful beast that bespeaks its appearance. It offers greater tonal impact than the Cary and can be very vivid, if not a tad aggressive. The piano on Beethoven's

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**The Cary breaths life into a vastly deep soundstage, while the Topaz projects the stage.**

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"Sonata in C Major, Op. 102, No. 1" for cello and piano is a percussion showpiece through the Topaz.

The hammer strikes are clear and superior in definition to the reproduction through the Cary. I like the Topaz's decay as well. It seems to trail off each note and chord separately from the next. On close examination, the Topaz reproduces the sound of a piano better in timbral terms, while in spacial presentation the Cary is the superior. The Topaz appears less veiled, but offers a smaller acoustic environment between and around the instruments, and remember, it's upfront as well. The Topaz is grain-free (a statement the Cary can not agree to), and more precise in focal imaging, it unzips layered texture better than the Cary and, as mentioned, murders the North Carolina amp in the bass. Still, I prefer to listen to music through the Cary and

judge it one the best amplifiers, if not the best, for this purpose.

The Cary breaths life into the vastly deep soundstage it recreates, the Topaz projects it. Let me explain. The Cary sets the performance in an organic acoustic, while the Topaz presents the musicians in your listening environment. The Cary's spacial signature is identifiably warm, airy, and wooden, the stage being pre-set with natural acoustic presence. The Topaz is absent of predetermined air texture and totally dependent upon the recording where it

slightly abbreviates each instrumental signature (the leading spacial transient). The result of the Topaz's slight cropping of leading air produces an exceptional clarity and one, I believe, responsible for its excellence of instrumental timbre. The Topaz soundstage is forward and extends several feet in front of the loudspeakers, while the Cary's begins at the plane of the speakers and extends rearwards in tantalizingly endless depth. Not to say that every recording will follow these rules but that generally you can predetermine instrumental positioning by amplifier selection.

The Topaz will produce ample depth, but the recording must abound with it, as with the



# NOTES

**Wytech Labs Topaz, \$11,000.00.** Distributed by North Country Distributors, Cadence Building, Redwood, NY 13679-9612; phone 315/237-2852, FAX 315/237-2360.

**Cary 805 C, \$8,495.00 per pair.** Manufactured by Cary Audio Design, 111-A Woodwins Industrial Court, Cary, NC 27511, phone 919/481-4494, FAX 919/460-3823.

hauntingly beautiful Arvo Part recording of "De Profounds" by the Theatre of Living Voices on Harmonia Mundi. The choir, with either amplifier, is set distantly in the rear soundfield in a vast semicircle surrounded by a yet larger organ which pierces through the choir in the higher registers. The bass pedals are anchored tight to the back wall with both amplifiers, but what is interesting is the depth rendering of the choir. The Cary produces

more of a three-dimensional gathering of voices, while the Topaz packs them tighter together. I'm moved (on this recording) by the scale and majesty of the Topaz and wonder if its superior bass reproduction is the answer. I pause here thinking the Topaz has more "living presence" with the Part recording even though its overall presentation is ever so slightly two dimensional. I suspect I'm returning to the clarity factor discussed above. High-

frequency performance is objectively equal but distinctively different. The Cary extends farther up than the Topaz but is less crystalline as octaves increase. The Topaz is cleaner in the highs but ever so rolled at the tippy top. I believe there is a pinch of grain inherent to the City that begins in its upper midrange and blurring higher frequency extension, here the Topaz suffers none. Maybe the soft grain works as an added acoustic and is cause for the soundstaging differences as well. It never detracts from the Cary's listening pleasure and is only "there" while you're looking for it.

Warm-up times are substantially different between the two. The Cary gets to operational pleasure within minutes, the Topaz takes hours. I often leave the Topaz on overnight for

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morning listening sessions. This is a major inconvenience and even though you can pull cables during operation for quick comparisons, it still takes the Topaz well over an hour to come into its own upon reattachment. A great feature of single-ended amplifiers is the ability to run them unloaded, you can change cables, switch amps and speakers at will, too bad the Topaz is not more friendly here. Tube life with either amp should be several years and replacement cost is low so either amp is dirt cheap to tun, though dear to own. (A pair of Chinese 211s or 845s run as low as \$60 from New Sensor. There is a reliability issue with the Chinese tube that predicates owing a back-up pair. Quality control is low with failure rates as high 20 percent, though I've been informed that the following batches will be highly improved

The Chinese descriptive *feng-lui* translates as *flowing with the wind* or, perhaps better said, "to fly in the ace of convention." Both of these amplifiers under study represent the antithesis of those from the modern high-powered output, low-efficiency college. If we step back and ponder that both schools result in identical frequency amplification and visceral sensation, then what advantage is gained to choose? Well, this is complex, but let me suggest that the distortion levels of the single-ended units contain additional musical pleasure over the push-pull approach. Single-ended units have even harmonic distortions which attach to the signal within the transformer versus the push-pull process that strips the signal of any artifact of deviation (prior to the transformer by phase splitting and then summing again at the transformer in polar opposite with odd- and

even-harmonic distortion cancellation) leaving a scientifically "pure" signal. So we have a house with two floors; one clean and clear with neatly stacked text books of theorems and measurement techniques, the other, a hodgepodge of life, items here and there, with books of classical literature tossed about.

The Cary and the Topaz amplifiers both capture the culture of music. The Wyetech's path to the Supreme Source might be defined in a Yang Technicolor vibrancy, while the Cary's is more natural and casual, basking in the Yin-like shade of the Tao.

## The new Ohm Walsh 300 Mk-2s were reviewed by James T. Frane in the audiophile voice.

Here's what he said:

"Perhaps the most impressive characteristic of these speakers is that they produce very deep bass without boosting the mid- to upper-bass frequencies... I measured output at 25 Hz within 1 dB of the 1-kHz output in my room, with very little variation between!

"The 300s displayed excellent dynamics; a case in point was Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture"... cannon had a sonic impact with no apparent distortion although the amplifier meters were registering past the 400 watt/channel marks.

"The 300s recreated an extremely involving orchestral spread... The placement of the instrumental sections was correct and the balance of frequencies was very good. The 300s did not call attention to themselves as specific sound sources, but evenly distributed the sound across the space between them.

"The sound of 'I'm Confessin'" from *Jazz at the Pawnshop* (Prophone PRCD 7778) was as if I was looking through a wide doorway, defined by the width of the speakers, into the performance space. The ambience and the sense of the room size were marvelous. The vibes seemed just a few feet away. Janis Joplin's soulful voice and her marvelous back-up instruments and singers were only a few yards in front of me.

"They are a pleasure to listen to."

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# *Balanced Audio Technology VK-P10 Balanced Phono Stage*

**F**ROGS AND GRASSHOPPERS evolve over time, jewels tarnish with age and lyres go out of tune. Yes, and all those cartridges will eventually be replaced or upgraded. But with the versatile VK-P10 phono stage from Balanced Audio Technology in your system, you will have the potential to adjust the system's configuration to most any future cartridge design.

But why would anyone want to spend \$4,000 on a phono stage? Ultimately, that's a question you, the high-end consumer, will have to answer. For me, the question has been answered. Balanced Audio Technology has designed and manufactured some of the most coveted products, both tube and transistor, in high-end audio. All of them have received the recognition they deserve. I consider the VK-P10 among BAT's finest achievements.

Consider for a moment the place that analog reproduction has maintained in this technological era of digital. Those of us who still cherish black vinyl as the ultimate medium for sound are prepared to spend as much as \$1,000 to 5,000 for the

last word in cartridges, cartridges that have a very limited life. And there are manufacturers who continue to make significant advances in the development of cartridges, in both moving magnet and moving coil designs. Indeed, Grado's latest achievement is an example.

No, analog is not dead; it is flourishing. Observe the surfeit of turntables, tone arms and phono stages regularly introduced. Even some well-respected manufacturers of moderately priced products have returned to the fray. Thorens comes to mind in this regard. If you are going to continue to embrace analog as the sound reproduction of choice, then you owe it to yourself to consider what the P10 has to offer.

What makes the BAT phono stage so unique and so desirable is the length to which the manufacturer has gone to provide versatility that not only accommodates most of the present variety of cartridges, but promises to defy obsolescence in any future cartridge developments. Further, the unit has a top to bottom neutrality that places it in the ranks of a small handful of such products.

# EQUIPMENT



The VK-P10 could be described as a tube phono preamplifier without a volume control. To put it another way, but for the lack of a gain control, the P10 could be connected directly to an amplifier that has proper input sensitivity. Certainly, a passive line stage could provide the necessary control. In my view, a volume control on the P10 would provide the utmost in versatility. In fact, I made that suggestion to Steve Bednarski of BAT in a recent phone conversation. Steve went a step further, considering the possible use of a remote control similar to the volume control in BAT's line stage preamp. But Victor Khomenko, the designer, suggested that I not hold my breath waiting. Apparently they haven't had a lot of requests.

## The Versatile Phono Stage

Victor describes the VK-P10 as "...a three-stage zero-feedback phono preamplifier employing a passive differential network...that will work extremely well with virtually any phono cartridge with an output in the range of 0.1 to 5 mV." He

goes on to say, "There are three gain stages...high-current plate loaded...that provide the ultimately clear signal path with no buffers....The use of high-current gain stages represents the Balanced Audio Technology innovative approach to audio circuit design."

The VK-P10 phono preamplifier is an all-tube, balanced phono stage using four 6922s and one 6SN7 for each channel. Its functions can be summarized as having user-selectable gain (50 to 78 dB) from switchable step-up transformers for very low output phono cartridges, selectable cartridge loading for resistance and capacitance, and an absolute polarity reversal switch.

There are two sets of cartridge input connectors, RCA and XLR. Balanced XLR output connectors are standard with provision for XLR-to-RCA adaptors available from BAT for use with single-ended electronics. External switches are limited to a power switch (with soft start and mute circuits) and a phase switch with two positions, 0 and 180 degrees. All other switches are internal and require the removal of the top cover. The power

supply, similar to the one in the VK-51 preamplifier, has over 200 Joules of energy storage.

Under the top cover, dip switches provide multiple choices for resistive and capacitive loading. In the "off" position, a 47-kHz resistor is permanently connected to the cartridge input with no capacitive loading. The resistance can be varied with four switch positions: 100 ohms, 1kilohms; 10 kilohms; and "user-defined." Capacitance can be varied as well: two at 100 pF; 470 pF, and "user-defined." And, of course, additional parallel combinations are available in both these instances.

The input mode switches require a few minutes of study to understand their uses.

There are a pair of switches that allow the user to choose the cartridge connection "direct" to the input tubes or through step-up transformers for cartridges with very low output. These are followed by "Gain Switches" and "Tap Switches." The "Gain Switches" allow the user to choose between low gain and high gain in the "Direct" position and interact with the step-transformer's "Tap Switches" to allow for four different gain settings. The signal-to-noise ratio (A weighted and referenced to 1 mV) varies between 71 and 83 dB, depending on switch positions. The unit is admirably quiet, particularly when using step-up transformers (as one would expect). All of this has been accomplished in a design of excellent construction and high quality parts.

In a full function preamplifier the phono stage is usually the most complex part of the circuit design. Thus the major cost of the preamplifier is in the phono stage. The "no-holds-barred" design of the P10, as a stand-alone phono stage, is intended to provide the utmost in sonics as well as versatility and its cost reflects that. And does the VK-P10 meet its sonic objectives?

## The Sound

Using RCA interconnects throughout, nearly all of my listening was with the KR Enterprise, Model VT600 KS, integrated amplifier, the Verity Audio Parsifal speakers and the latest version of the Sunfire subwoofer. The VT600 KS is an amplifier with revolutionary vacuum transistor output devices in a single-ended (SE) configuration providing 100 watts per channel. The Lyra Clavis Da Capo, moving-coil cartridge, Mod Squad-modified

Itok tone arm, and the Linn LP12 Lingo turntable were the sole source. There was a brief listening session with the KR Enterprise Model 52BX SE amplifier and with the Sonus Faber Concerto speakers.

After considering the several options available with the input mode switch and after several listening sessions, I finally settled on the step-up transformers (the Clavis is a low output m-c cartridge) with the gain switch set for low gain and the tap switch set to 18 dB.

I have now been listening to the BAT phono stage for several months, going through some of my most prized LPs. Recently, I received three of Classic Records' Mercury reissues,

each an outstanding example of what were some of the best recordings of their day. Ravel's *Rhapsodie Espagnole* and *La Valse*, reissued from a Mercury Living Presence (SR90313) with Paul Paray conducting the Detroit Symphony, might well be the supreme example of the superiority of analog reproduction. All of the capabilities of your audio system will be brought to bear, and any limitations will be mercilessly exposed. What I already had concluded about the P10 after listening to so many different LPs over a period of time was revealed in the reproduction of this single disc.

I am at a complete loss to identify any limitations in the BAT unit! The Sony DVP S/7000 DVD player as transport and the Musetex Bidat processor constitute my CD system. I believe it competes with the best equipment out there. But now, for maximum enjoyment of music, I only want to listen to my LP collection!

The BAT P10's unbelievable dynamics, weight and bass extension give credence to what is an outstanding design. Tonal balance, definition and transparency are exemplary. Pace and rhythm were evident in record after record. I have read other reviewer's comments that the Clavis is slightly lean in the bass. There was no such indication with the BAT. Interesting the difference a substantial power supply can make.

A few LPs were chosen to determine what, if any, minor glitches might be present in the P10. Two cuts from Jennifer Warnes' *Famous Blue Raincoat* (Cypress 661 111-1) and the lead cut from Mary Black's *No Frontiers* were played to check for the presence of excessive sibilance. No such problem was identified. Germaine Mitchell,

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## The Balanced Audio VK-P10 is in the class of the best high-end gear.

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a friend who particularly enjoys female vocals, happened to be present during this listening session. Both of us agreed that the quality of the voices were as good as we have ever heard on these two recordings. Leonard Cohen, who joins Jennifer Warnes on the song "Joan of Arc," has a rather deep voice. The BAT rendered the range accurately without excessive bass in the lower register. In *No Frontiers*, I was struck by the delicacy with which the percussion instruments were reproduced, with no hint of hardness in the upper midrange. Mike Carson's *The Oxnard Sessions, Vol. 1* (Reference Recordings RR-37) is a record I have in both CD and LP format. As good as both are on this particular recording, there was no doubt that the reproduction on analog was superior, more musical and more satisfying. Also more notable was the imaging, depth and soundstaging. Finally, I listened to Bill Henderson's classic rendition of "Send in the Clowns" from a 20th anniversary commemorative 12-inch single released in 45 rpm and 33 1/3 rpm speeds (Jazz Planet JP 0779-12). Of course, it was the 45-rpm side I chose. Yes, it was the most impressive reproduction of Henderson's voice, but it was also the most lifelike applause at the end of the song that particularly struck me.

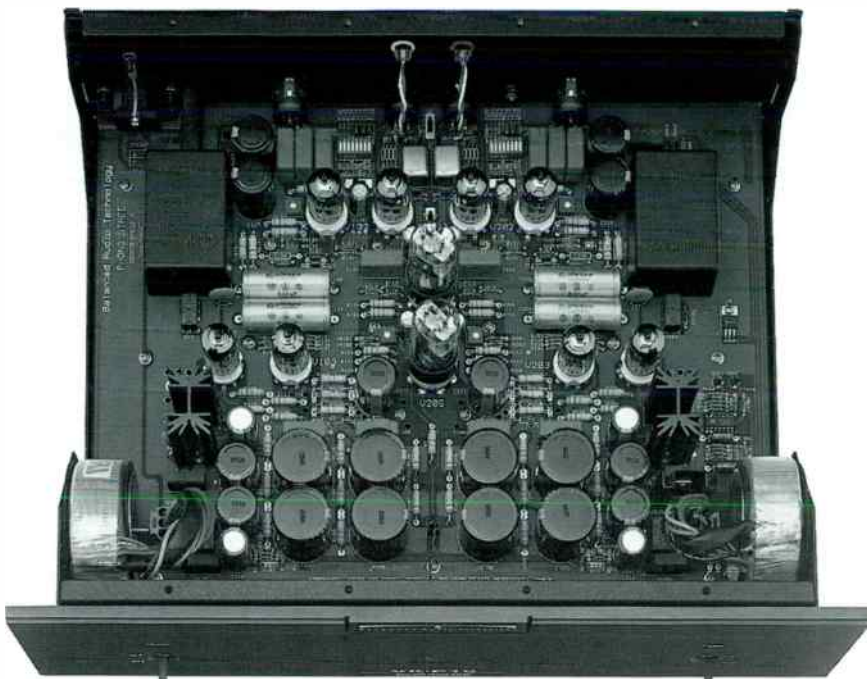
### Conclusion

There are several excellent phono stage preamplifiers now available, both tube and transistor, that range in price from \$900 to several thousand dollars. I have been fortunate to have heard three of them, and I could live quite happily with any one of these. But the decision on which one I would *most* like to own is an easy one.

The VK-P10 is not likely to be bettered in the areas in which I was most impressed: Top-to-bottom neutrality; outstanding sonics; versatility that defies obsolescence; an exceptionally low noise floor; and battleship construction using top quality parts.

Harry Pearson said in a recent article in *Fi* on the Classic Records' reissue of several Mercury LPs "... it was the nuance and subtlety and density of information on analog that justified, sonically, the best high-end gear".

The BAT VK-P10 is in the class of the best high-end gear.



## NOTES

**Balanced Audio Technology VK-P10 balanced phono stage**, \$4,000. Manufacturer: Balanced Audio Technology, 800 First State Blvd., Wilmington, DE 19804; phone 302/999-8855; fax 302/999-8818

### Associated Equipment

Musetex Bidat Digital Processor; Sony DVP S/7000 DVD player as transport; KR Enterprise VT 600 KS stereo integrated amplifier; KR Enterprise (Vaic) High End Model 52BX (SE) monoblock amplifiers; KR Enterprise (Vaic) High End Model 30B (SE) monoblock amplifiers; Verity Audio Parsifal speaker system; Sonus Faber Concerto Speaker System; Croft OTL monoblock amplifiers; Croft Dual-Mono preamp; Placette preamp; Linn-Sondek LP 12, Lingo, Itok tonearm (modified by Mod Squad); Lyra Clavis Da Capo moving-coil cartridge; Revox B77 reel-to-reel tape recorder; Kenwood KT-917 stereo tuner; Nakamichi 582 cassette; Purist Audio Design Maximus and HDI interconnects; Digital Link new unnamed flat-design speaker cables; Discovery interconnects; Black Diamond Racing Cones, and various other accessories.

## *R.E. Designs LNLSA-1 Preamplifier*



Bill Wells

**A**S THE SAYING GOES, good things come in small packages, and here I am referring to the relatively small and somewhat unassuming, yet very musically competent R.E. Designs solid-state line stage (pre)amplifier—the LNLSA-1.

Similar to this maker's designation for its highly regarded solid-state mono block amplifiers—the LNPA 150s (see Vol. 3, No. 1), the LN stands for low noise. Based on extensive, long-term listening to both the R.E. line stage and mono-block amps, this low noise sonic descriptor is most appropriate. In fact, as I have become more familiar with

R.E. Designs electronics, this characteristic is a definite attribute of all the firm's equipment.

Interestingly, despite my undying love for tubes (and the "musical" sound they produce), the overall sound quality provided by the solid-state LNLSA-1 has allowed me to thoroughly enjoy reproduced music without any noticeable withdrawal symptoms from not having tubes. In fact, the more I listened to the LNLSA, the more I liked it. Don't get me wrong, I still love tubes and partake of them on a regular basis. However, experiencing the R.E. Designs line stage, as a substitute

for my cherished reference all-tube unit was also quite musically pleasing and provided me with many hours of listening enjoyment.

In terms of cosmetics, the R.E. line stage is not going to win a contest against such sophisticated looking units as the Spectral, Rowland, Klyne or other much more costly units. Nor do I believe the firm intends to get into such an encounter. In particular, the front panel is straightforward, sporting three rotary knobs for controlling volume and source selection from two buffered and five non-buffered inputs. Additionally, there are toggle switches for on/off, a normal/low level quasi-muting feature, and stereo/mono.

Daniel Banquer, chief designer for R.E., has instead developed a superbly musical product, with minimalist cosmetics, at a moderate price-point for greater accessibility by the wider range of serious audiophiles not inclined to drop the big bucks. At \$1,200 (direct from the factory with a 30-day money-back guarantee), I imagine it would be hard for Dan to include much fancier and costlier face plate. More to the point, the R.E. Designs LNLSA-1 has its own visual character; let's call it quasi-industrial or utilitarian modern.

However, to me the overall fit, finish and appearance of this unit is quite OK—both inside and out. Visually, the basic black face plate (with white lettering—a la silk-screen), along with a soft gray finish on both the top and sides provides a pleasant, straightforward and functional appearance. The round, black control knobs and silver toggle switches go well with the overall appearance. Functional and unobtrusive. Also, their feel is solid and smooth without any chunking or tinniness. Beyond this, the large power-on indicator light glows with just the right intensity to let you know instantly when the unit is turned on.

Banquer seems to mainly focus his attention on the overall sonic performance of his products. In this regard, he is quite adamant regarding his approach to minimizing (or eliminating) noise artifacts. During phone conversations with him, it became clear he believes quite strongly that reproduced musical integrity and purity are often degraded in many high-end audio products where noise intrudes on the musical signals.

Although Banquer is the first to admit that there is no way known to him (or anyone else) to totally

eliminate all types of noise-inducing elements in his products, he is also a strong proponent of using any effective measure he can to minimize noise. Many of his overall design criteria and development methods are based on the fundamental belief that noise is one of high-end audio's worst problems. Certainly the motto printed on his literature, "Because music comes out of silence," is appropriate for the way reproduced music is delivered from his electronics.

Fortunately, Banquer has addressed other equally important areas of music reproduction. The LNLSA-1 also excels in preserving the overall integrity and purity of recorded music. In terms of staging, speed, frequen-

cy extension, harmonics, neutrality, transients and other sonic characteristics, this line stage is a very solid performer, and Banquer has accomplished much of what he set out to do musically and done that at a quite affordable price point. The unit does a very good job of minimizing any introduction of additional characteristics to recorded music. CDs I had played many times through different systems, sounded just fine with this unit. Yes, there were differences but not the kind that made me say, "Better switch to my reference."

Much to its designer's credit, the LNLSA-1 (despite its moderate size and weight) does not sound small or lightweight. In direct comparison to my reference B.A.T. VK5i line stage, the R.E. did not provide the same degree of fullness and weight in the lower octaves. [Editor's Note: Banquer feels that his design has reduced second-order distortion and thus presents less of an "illusory" strong transfer function in this area.] However, the R.E. Designs unit excelled in its ability to provide solid bass with very good punch, articulation, and pitch definition. With the LNLSA-1, there was certainly enough meat on the bone (musically speaking) to allow me to readily discern differences in overall character and timbre between instruments in these important foundation frequencies.

## Use and Listening

Anyone who has read my earlier reviews knows that I love the upright acoustic bass. Also, I love the way certain bass players bring forth their own particular sound. A couple of my favorite veteran players, Ron Carter, Charlie Haden, Ray Brown,

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### Using this line stage provided me with much musical satisfaction.

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and the new sensation Christian McBride, all keep me going back to the local record shops for more good sounds. Through the R.E. LNLSA-1, following each of these instrumentalists is a real treat due to the relative ease of clearly identifying the particular player, their distinctive style, and the sonic nuances of the performance.

Before I get too deeply into the overall musical presentation of this unit, I should provide a better discussion of what I call the "real" sound of the LNLSA-1. For the most part, the overall sonic character of the LNLSA-1 is clean and clear with excellent clarity, focus and openness. Also, "neutral" quickly comes to mind when I think about or listen to this unit. Based on extended listening, I have to say that the R.E. Designs line stage seems to pass musical information along with relatively little interference.

Fortunately, the neutral sound of the LNLSA-1 does not in any way make recorded music sound neutral. Actually, quite the contrary. In my reference system, not only did the LNLSA-1 provide a clear, see-through view of the music, it also allowed me to quickly observe differences when inserting other components into the system. Additionally, comparison of the LNLSA-1 to other line stages was relatively easy. In each instance, the LNLSA-1's neutrality and apparent lack of character allowed me to quickly and easily distinguish the difference(s) between it and the others.

Another key sonic characteristic of the R.E. Designs line stage is its overall quietness. To be honest, when I initially received this unit, I wondered how this "little" box was going to stack up, not only against other preamps and lines stages on hand, but against my standard of live music. Right from jump street, it did indeed sound very quiet, very clean and really darn good. Continued playing had the effect of smoothing it out a slight bit more, and before long, the unit settled in nicely and started to reveal its sonic merits more precisely. After this short burn-in period, the LNLSA-1 compared favorably to other units available.

Another significant in-use consideration was that I had no problem using the LNLSA-1 line stage with any of several amplifiers from other manufacturers. Generally, the LNLSA-1 seemed quite capable of interfacing well with amplifiers having rather different input impedances.

## Further Bass Sonics

As usual, my starting point is the bass. If you are in the slightest way familiar with the jazz bassists I mentioned previously, then you know their respective styles are anything but alike. Some like to play with pronounced articulation, while others pluck the strings for a softer, warmer sound. Other players seem to simply caress their instrument, with a kind of gentle bear hug to produce a full, round and very big sound.

With the LNLSA-1 in place, this bass work was very convincing and it allowed me to pick up the differences among these artists quite easily. When comparing the R.E. Designs to one of my earlier tube favorites, the

similarly priced Audio Research LS 7, the LNLSA-1 really stood out in terms of overall punch, attack, articulation, and cleanliness. Whether this is due to the fact that one unit is solid-state and the other tube, I'm not sure, but the differences were real and quite noticeable. (Note: According to Audio Research, the earlier LS 7 design has recently been replaced a newer model, the significantly improved LS 8, which carries about the same retail price.)

On Chet Baker's album *You Can't Go Home Again*, A&M Records CD0805, the R.E. Designs unit displayed all of bassist Ron Carter's marvelous skill. On the title cut, Carter provides many interesting twists and turns as he explores every register of his instrument. The LNLSA-1 seemed to capture and control Carter's bass playing to allow me to enjoy his sound and overall performance.

In comparison, the rendering of this selection through the LNLSA-1 was closer to that of the newer all-tube, fully balanced, and somewhat more expensive B.A.T. VK3i line stage than it was to the reproduction via the Audio Research unit. Both the R.E. Designs and B.A.T. units excelled in overall reproduction in the bass range. Both had good pitch definition, articulation and control. However, while the LNLSA was somewhat quieter, cleaner, and tighter, the VK3i presented a slightly different sense of harmonics. Interestingly, both these units displayed very good musical naturalness, but again in slightly different ways. I suspect that the differing circuit topology and different devices between the two units (i.e., tubes vs. solid state) account for this. Both units were excellent and offered me considerable listening delight.

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**I love acoustic bass!  
And I love how the  
R.E. Designs handled it.**

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This is not to suggest that either is at the same performance level as my reference B.A.T. VK 5i. However, it is important to keep in mind the relative price differential between each of these units before making any final judgments. From my observation, particularly when playing complex, highly modulated and dynamic orchestral or highly spirited jazz/fusion, the more-sophisticated (and much more-expensive) B.A.T. 5i line stage gave more overall weight and solidity of the mid and lower bass, and this was definitely more noticeable when using my reference full-range ESP Concert Grand loudspeakers. With other loudspeakers, in both my reference and second systems, this was not always the case.

Interestingly, I did find the R.E. Designs LNLSA-1 acquitted itself well with these same musical passages. Despite a slight lessening of weight and fullness, the LNLSA-1 offered a very solid, very tight and articulate rendering of these same passages and frequency regions. After a brief listening adjustment, I found myself often attracted to the LNLSA-1's overall performance. It did an excellent job of presenting musical details that had gone

unnoticed before, and it appears that lowering noise does indeed help. All in all, my conclusion is that the LNLSA-1 produces very accurate bass, both in terms of character (i.e., tonal balance and harmonic structure) and power.

The LNLSA-1 line stage generally seemed to be happiest when coupled to its stable mate—the outstanding LNPA 150 mono blocks. Which is not to say that it did not mate well to the other amps that I had on hand—because it did. However, I believe that there was a synergy between the R.E. Designs

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**With R.E. Design's LNLSA-1,  
I could easily pick up  
differences in other  
components in my system.**

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LNLSA-1 and LNPA 150 mono blocks which provided optimum performance. (I should also say that I also found the B.A.T. VK3i and VK5i line stages to similarly mate best with their companion amplifiers, i.e., either all tube VK60 stereo / VK60 mono blocks or solid-state VK500 stereo amp.) Both combinations of R.E. Designs and B.A.T. electronics differed in overall presentation but both were very musically pleasing.

Other things, then, needed to be factored into the equation so as to properly make an overall evaluation and assessment of either line stage. For

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example, it could be that the B.A.T.'s fully balanced operation provided slightly better acceptance of the CD sources I used throughout my evaluation inasmuch as both of them are optimized for balanced output operation.

With the LNLSA-1, I could easily pick up differences in components elsewhere in the system. In this regard, the differing sonic character of the ARC and Sonic Frontiers CD players was most interesting. Both players have received very high praise from quite a large number of different reviewers, and yet these two units sound quite different from one another.

With the ARC unit in place, I was able to clearly hear through the LNLSA-1 the ARC player's high degree of resolution, somewhat lighter sound, and its tight articulation throughout the frequency spectrum. On the other hand, with the Sonic Frontiers unit, the LNLSA allowed this unit's liquid, smooth (but also highly resolute) manner to shine though. Fortunately, neither CD player seemed to be degraded by running them in their alternate single-ended output configuration into the R.E. Designs unit.

In fact, the best qualities of both players were much in evidence through the LNLSA-1 line stage. On one particular CD titled *Rhythm Within* (Antilles label), featuring Steve Turre, the R.E. Designs LNLSA-1 was at its best with either player. This recording has Turre pulling off some of his wondrous percussive tricks with plenty of punch and slam. The LNLSA-1 was right at home with the type of complex and dynamic passages often found on this recording. With Turre going full bore, the LNLSA-1 was able to clearly separate individual instruments, and placed them in a clear, open sound field with a very quiet background. The rendered sense of detail and resolution were very impressive. What was also very impressive was the way in which this high degree of resolution was presented without any bright spotlighting. Furthermore, because of the LNLSA-1's quietness and clean, clear articulation, you could easily hear subtle musical nuances at differing perspectives within the sound field.

Another good example can be found on the Charlie Haden CD *Quartet West* featuring Ernie Watts on saxophone. On the opening cut, "Hermitage," along with Watt's wailing sax, there

are numerous delicate sounds emerging from different parts of the stage. As the cymbals get into full swing, they provide a wispy, shimmering open sound. The LNLSA-1 handles these passages very, very nicely by revealing the emergence and decay of notes within a proper sound field perspective.

When listening to instruments or voices in the middle registers, I found that the LNLSA-1 handled these critical frequencies very accurately as well. Often, I have heard audiophiles complain about the slightly lean character portrayed

through the middle registers by solid-state preamps. However, with the LNLSA-1, I did not find this to be evident.

Yes, the LNLSA-1 is solid-state; but, no, it does not sound particularly lean or thin. Instead, it is smooth and edge-free with proper fullness making the musical performance sound realistic.

Fortunately I have had the opportunity to live with this unit, as well as the superb LNPA 150 mono blocks for a fair amount of time (Okay, Dan, perhaps too long!). As a result, one thing I am sure of is that the LNLSA-1 has a fine ability to get out of the way and allow recorded music to pass through it with only minimal interference.

### Sound Staging

The stage perspective of this unit is neither particularly up-front nor laid back. More, it seems to reveal the recording pretty much in the way it was done. If the music is recorded through close-miking, that's essentially what you will get through the LNLSA-1. On the other hand, if the music was recorded with a more distant perspective, that too will be revealed in an accurate manner.

In terms of rendering images, the LNLSA-1 does not shrink nor exaggerate musical images. Basically, this unit reveals them much in the way they should sound. This unit locks in tightly on the performer yet it also gives each individual their own specific location on the stage, along with proper space, dimension, and character.

On many contemporary recordings, I've noticed that both voice and saxophone often seem to be blown out of proportion. Fortunately, with better acoustic jazz-oriented recordings, this problem seems somewhat lessened with the R.E. When using the LNLSA-1, these instruments are revealed quite accurately. While listening to one of my

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**One nice thing about this preamp is its ability to get out of the way and let the music pass through it.**

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favorite recordings, Diana Krall's *Only Trust Your Heart*, her voice is presented in a very natural manner through the LNLSA-1. Additionally, listening to Sarah Vaughn's wonderful voice on *Crazy and Mixed Up*, Pablo label, the LNLSA-1 presents many of the subtle nuances, both of the singer's voice and of the piano accompaniment, along with revealing many little recording anomalies (i.e., mikes and reverb system switching on and off). Another fine example of superb reproduction of female voice through the LNLSA-1 is jazz vocalist Mary Stallings on her Clarity Recordings album, *Fine & Mellow*.

Along with a superb rendering of Johnny Adam's outstanding baritone voice on Alvin "Red" Tyler's recording *Heritage* (on the Rounder Records label), the LNLSA-1 line stage also captures the wonderful expression of Tyler on his tenor saxophone. To its credit, the LNLSA-1 provides a very accurate display of these instruments as well as clearly revealing the recording venue's intimate, small scale. Again, the R.E. Designs line stage accurately passes along that which it receives.

Although my overall musical tastes lead me more to straight-ahead acoustic jazz, I did sample other recordings to get a sense of the LNLSA-1's capability with other types of music. I also had the

distinct privilege recently of being present with the recording folk from Reference Recordings during their taping of the Minnesota orchestra under the direction of Eije Oue for a future release. In addition to gaining a good sonic memory firsthand, I was also fortunate to receive several Reference Recording's latest CDs of this particular orchestra. Playing them back through the LNLSA-1, it was a treat to listen to these superb records while recalling actually being at the recording site. In large part due to the very quiet nature of the LNLSA-1, the hall acoustic was quickly revealed as I remembered. Nothing was out of proportion. Instead, the ambient cues I remembered seemed to be very accurately revealed. Please understand, I am not saying that my system was able to totally recreate that which I had experienced at the live recording event. However, the LNLSA-1 was able to give a large measure of what was captured on the recording of this particular orchestral performance at the very same recording venue. As a result, I found that listening with this unit in place to be as entertaining and enjoyable as I could image or hope for.

Further, these recordings helped me to get a better handle on the LNLSA-1's overall capability to accurately portray full-scale orchestral music. In a word, it did good. In fact, very good. From its



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ability to reveal layers of instrumentation to accurately portraying the recording space, the LNLSA-1 held true to the music. Neutral in its revelation and accurate in its portrayal of instrumental timbre, harmonics and tonal character of this music, the R.E. Designs unit allowed me to thoroughly enjoy these recordings.

One thing that I noticed with the LNLSA-1 was the manner in which classical strings were portrayed. They had the proper body, the right type of bite, and a sheen with delicate overtones. Additionally, soft delicate percussive bells and chimes were captured in a very realistic manner. Overall, in my reference system, playing the orchestral music I've just described, the LNLSA-1 sounded quite good and made itself a welcome member along side my reference electronic components.

### Summing Up

From my perspective, the LNLSA-1 is truly a serious piece of high-end gear worthy of putting on your short list for audition. The fact that the LNLSA-1 is available at the very affordable price of \$1,200.00 makes it a genuine bargain among high-end audio products. Also, based on the versatility of its performance, it is a product that is easy to recommend. If more audiophiles had exposure to this product, I believe they too would find its overall sonic capabilities much to their liking. In particular, with the 30-day, money-back guarantee offered by R.E. Designs, how can you lose?

Over the extended auditioning period, this unit (along with its companion mono-block amplifiers) have been essentially trouble-free. Only once did I encounter any slight problem, a blown a.c. line fuse in one of the mono-blocks. However, that is a benign condition and relatively simple to fix. After installing a new fuse, the unit went right back to its normal operating mode and has given me absolutely no trouble since.

So, can Banquer improve the overall sound of his products beyond what they have today? Well, sure, anything is possible. However, the question then becomes, would it be worth the extra cost to the consumer? According to Banquer, there are a few things that he could do to take the unit to the next level. However, he also cautions me that the overall cost-to-benefit ratio could easily put his unit in the "not so easily affordable" category. For the time being, Banquer is comfortable to present his product as it presently exists, fairly decent in its appearance, but quite excellent in its performance and with an extremely high bang for the buck rating.

My overall assessment is this: The LNLSA-1 is a very fine unit and well worth serious consideration by high-end audiophiles. Basically, it is a unit intended to provide both serious audiophiles and pure music lovers with accurate sound and do that at a price point hard to debate. As I have stated throughout this review, I have thoroughly enjoyed this unit in both my reference and secondary systems. Its overall performance was consistently good and provided many, many hours of listening enjoyment.

My final suggestion is to give Banquer a call direct and talk to him about this product. While you're at it, you may as well as inquire about his superb LNPA 150 mono block amplifiers also. If you're seriously looking for a very good value in high-end electronics, arranging an audition of the LNLSA-1 line stage in your very own system makes sense. You, too, may be as surprised and pleased as I was (but no longer am) about what high quality of sound is available at such a modest price.

Good luck and happy listening.

## NOTES

**R.E. Designs LNLSA-1 Linestage, \$1,200.00** factory direct (no retailers), 30-day money-back guarantee. Manufacturer: R.E. Designs, 43 Maple Ave., Swampscott, MA 01907; phone 617/592-7862.

### ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

ARC LS7 line stage and B.A.T. VK3i & 5i line stage preamplifiers; ARC D-130 solid-state stereo, B.A.T. VK60 tube stereo and mono block, B.A.T. VK 500 solid-state stereo, and R.E. Designs LNPA 150 mono block amplifiers; ARC CD-1 and Sonic Frontiers SFCD-1 CD players; Coincident Technologies Triumph, ESP Concert Grand, and Paragon Jubilee loudspeakers; NBS Pro interconnects, speaker & a.c. power cables, and miscellaneous accessories including Shakti Stones, VPI Bricks, and Bedini CD Clarifier.

# *Soliloquy 8.2 Loudspeaker*

*A Study in Eloquent Oration*



**M**Y FIRST AWARENESS of this new loudspeaker system came via the monthly mailer from The Audiophile Society announcing that Soliloquy representatives would be showing their flagship speaker system at our October '97 club meeting. The brief written description seemed interest-

ing enough and I made my usual three-hour trek from northeastern Pennsylvania to our regular meeting site in City Island, NY to check out this new product from the Soliloquy High Fidelity Loudspeaker Company of Raleigh, North Carolina. The fact that they named themselves a "High Fidelity" company felt good to me. My earliest audio purchases some 40 years ago were modest, but nonetheless, from makers who were "high fidelity" component manufacturers. The ongoing hobby and the ensuing enhanced love of music have served me well since those early days of monophonic high fidelity sound reproduction.

Sparing you the details of the evening, I can say that while some of us saw potential in the speaker, others were lukewarm about the sound, and a few were downright unimpressed. It must be said that the listening room in which we meet is a spacious living room/dining room combination, with one long wall composed entirely of glass. It can be, and usually is, sonically very challenging for any exhibitor to make a brief demo come off well there. In fact, for me there have only been two occasions, in the past four years of monthly meetings, when the sound was exemplary.

In all fairness, I can say that on rare occasions when I have heard the excellent "resident" stereo system perform, it delivers quite nicely and reflects the careful efforts of extended, meticulous set-up.

Well, in spite of the mixed bag of opinions about the sound performance that night, when editor Gene Pitts asked if I would be interested in evaluat-

ing this speaker, I agreed to undertake it. Bernie Byers, the present owner of Soliloquy is a real gentleman, and even though relatively new to audio manufacturing, he is a sincere, warm and enthusiastic individual, with a well established reputation as a businessman in the medical electronics/instrumentation arena. During the club meeting Bernie explained that

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**Any firm that says it is a "high fidelity company" is after my heart.**

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the original design of the speaker was about four years in the making, and that the designer, and original owner of Soliloquy, was none other than Dennis Had of Cary Audio. Apparently Dennis was trying to find a speaker system that effectively addressed the complexities of how amplifiers and loudspeakers interact with each other. The 8.2 was an outcome of that

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**Soliloquy is a new maker but seems to be off on the right track**

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odyssey and I hope to tell the ongoing story here.

### **Technical Attributes**

The 8.2 is a two way system built around an 8-inch rigid cone paper midrange/bass driver, plus a 1.5-inch silk dome tweeter, all housed in an unusual enclosure termed a "tuned pipe". This floor-standing tower, with dimensions of 44

inches high x 10 inches wide x 12 inches deep, sits on a base plinth with spikes, and was delivered to me in a beautiful light birdseye maple finish. Various other finishes are available and all come with removable black double-knit grill cloths on frames. Incidentally, all listening for this review was done with the grills removed. Interestingly, the 8-inch driver is positioned at the upper part of the enclosure front, with the tweeter just below. This reflects the design parameters Dennis incorporated in this "tuned pipe" approach, which is his way of blending transmission line and back-loaded horn concepts. There is a rectangular port at the lower face of the front panel, which is stuffed with a dense foam plug that can be removed, or inserted partially, depending on one's willingness to experiment with bass performance subtleties. The overall visual appearance is quite handsome as the photo shows.

The 8.2 has a sensitivity of 90-dB SPL (at 1 watt, 1m, 1 kHz), and is an 8-ohm nominal load. There is a sizable external, bi-wired, third-order crossover network that incorporates large, low-loss air inductors and metalized polypropylene capacitors.

A short umbilicus connects the spikeable crossover network to the back of each speaker enclosure through a Neutrik connector. The crossover frequency point is at 2.6 kHz. The interior of the enclosure uses 220 grams of polyfill for damping as well as other special deadening coatings meant to keep the one-inch thick enclosure walls and other surfaces from excessive excita-

tion.

Overall fit and finish are quite nice while the construction seems solid and carefully thought through. The spikes provided to me for the speaker enclosures work properly, although I have been told that newer versions are being contemplated for the near future.

A pair of Soliloquy 8.2 speakers have a list price of \$4,495.00.

### Room Set-Up

My own speakers, a satellite-subwoofer combination, the Nestorovic System 12 MkIIA, had been optimally sited in my 14-foot x 23-foot x 8-foot dedicated listening room as a result of many experiments over the years. The 8.2s were initially placed in the location that my stand-mounted satellites usually occupied. Initial impressions could be summed up as a smooth, mellow, easy and relaxed sound presentation. There was, however, a sense that articulation, detail and bass extension were suffering. After one night of listening, sequences of other placements were tried.

Moving the Soliloquys further back by about 4 inches first, and then another 4 inches thereafter proved useful, but the greatest improvements accrued when the towers were eventually toed-in to a much higher degree than had been best for my own satellites. The amount of final toeing could be estimated by noting that the view of the speakers from the listening seat shows only the front baffle, with none of the side walls visible. Careful spiking was utilized to achieve proper leveling in all axes and to assure a sturdy lock-down to the carpeted, concrete flooring. Now the timbral balance, imag-

ing, spaciousness and overall performance started to make sense.

This sound was dramatically better than what we heard at the club meeting two weeks earlier. In stating that comparison, it is only fair to note that my room has thick wall-to-wall carpet, more upholstered furniture, and is smaller in overall size and volume than the City Island site.

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### **My first impressions of the Soliloquys was that they had a smooth, mellow and relaxed sound.**

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I also had the not-insignificant benefit of a few days of playing around to maximize speaker positioning. I would be negligent not to mention the valuable assistance of my good friend Steve, who lent his help in jockeying around and tweaking the equipment, as well as lending his ears for listening sessions... thanks, good buddy.

The components in use for this evaluation included everything from my normal rig except for the Nestorovic speaker system, which had been moved to the garage. This arrangement represents my Audio Research Reference One Line Stage, Audio Research PH3 Phono Stage, Linn Sondek LP12 turntable (with Lingo power supply and all current mods)/Naim ARO arm/Spectral MC IIIb cartridge, Naim CD2 cd player, Nestorovic NA-1 tubed monoblock 150 watt amplifiers, plus a Magnum Dynalab Etude tuner and Nakamichi 700 ZXL cassette deck. I also own a pair of Eagle 400 monoblock solid-state amplifiers which are normally used to power the

Nestorovic subwoofers in my regular set up; they came into use during later trials with various amplifiers on the 8.2s. Speaker wires and interconnects were Cardas Hexlink 5 runs, for the most part. My listening room is equipped with dedicated heavy-gauge a.c. power circuits, separated for analog and digital feeds and they were employed here. The room does have some modest acoustic conditioning by way of wall coverings, wall-to-wall carpet, and a pair of Room Tunes. While many LPs were used over the evaluation process, a larger majority of time was spent listening to

CDs, and some of those that were particularly useful are listed here. (Yes, I do like both formats, with a clear thumbs-up for the vinyl, but due to the frequent repeated playings of discs during the evaluation steps, I felt that the convenience and freedom from wear damage offered by CDs, justified my emphasizing that approach.)

The list: Ella Fitzgerald's *Clap Hands Here Comes Charlie*, Cassandra Wilson's *New Moon Daughter*, Fennell's *Pomps and Pipes*, Eiji Oue's *Exotic Dances from the Opera* The ARC Gospel Choir's "Walk With Me" on the Mapleshade label, Joe Sample's "Old Places Old Faces", Jacky Terrasson's & Cassandra Wilson's *Rendezvous*, and finally, since this review cycle just preceded the holidays, an old MHS offering, from the Choir of St. John's College Cambridge, *Christmas Carols from St. John's*. I will not enumerate the various other discs of solo piano, string quartets, pipe organ, classic rock and big band jazz, etc., but they got their share of time on the speakers too. I tried to put

through as much variability from the software perspective as feasible, in order to judge the speakers on the widest level of sonic challenge. Incidentally, the ARC Gospel Choir disc, as well as the Terrason/Wilson disc will knock your socks off both musically and sonically, if you haven't already discovered that.

### The Sound

The Soliloquy 8.2 speakers are capable of musicality! They are especially adept at portraying the human voice in a sweet, clear, honest, and direct fashion. I know many of you recognize that the designer of this speaker is noted, among other feats, for creating highly respected single ended triode tube amplifiers. You don't need to be a genius to realize that voice fans, midrange fans, and s.e.t. fans often get along well with each other. Of course this spectral range is not exclusively owned by the s.e.t.-ers, but my experience so far shows a strong correlation between these shared relationships.

Regarding the frequency extremes, I do think the 8.2s can produce usable bass down to the mid-40 Hz region, but below that the drop off happens pretty quickly, at least in my room. Likewise, the upper frequencies are not extended in an overly dramatic way, but I'd guess its fair to say that things hold up well to around 17 kHz or so. I think this is nothing to

laugh at, but there are products today that will go down lower and up higher without much fuss. Those bean counters who need specs to reassure their audiophila may find my guesstimates as unflattering, but the smoothness and flatness with which the 8.2s cover the most critically important frequency band is a real plus.

What about music other than human voice? Small groups, whether jazz, rock or classical are all served well by the 8.2s.

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### The Soliloquy 8.2 speakers are especially adept in portraying the human voice.

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Intimacy, balance, and scale come across with detail and believability. Space and ambience are rendered well, although the sense of top frequency airiness delivered by ribbon tweeters, will outdo these silk domes. The one category of music that could be done better is large scale orchestral material, especially at crescendo and high volume levels. Not that things fall apart, it is more a matter of the sound just not quite staying open, articulate and effortless enough. The sound remains smooth and relaxed, but perhaps to a fault when the stress of shear volume is at power extremes either from the orchestra or your gain control.

Occasionally, I was bothered

by some mid-bass bloating, depending on the recording under audition. After thinking about this for a while, I decided to make use of the Microsonic Sound Absorbers, which have been added onto my Nestorovic cabinets for a few years. I was turned on to these devices some time ago by Lars Fredell, when visiting his home and seeing them sitting on his speakers of that era, a pair of Wilson Watt-Puppies. Their ability to quell cabinet resonances on something as already dead as Watts impressed me enough that I bought a set for my own speakers. The original version of these resonance controllers no longer exists, but you can buy current renditions from Tekna Sonics (442

Houser St., Suite E, Cotati, CA 94931; phone 707/794-1512, FAX 707/794-1513). Placing one atop each 8.2 worked and my reservations about enclosure resonances became a non-issue. I'd recommend looking into these items if you are concerned about similar problems with your existing speakers.

### Some Additional Twists

After listening for a long time with the tubed Nestorovic 150-watt monoblocks amplifying away, I decided to switch over to my Eagle 400s. Again, my normal application for these 400 watters is as subwoofer amps running from 75 Hz downward (via a Jeff Rowland electronic crossover, produced a long time ago for professional use). In this set-up, the sound became very tightly controlled in the lower octaves and the highs dried up to a fault. The extra power was somewhat noticeable, but the loss of richness and relaxed presentation was too much to bear,

## NOTES

**Soliloquy 8.2 Loudspeakers**, \$4,495.00 per pair. Manufacturer: Soliloquy Loudspeaker Co., 2613 Discovery Dr., Raleigh, NC 27616; phone 919/876-7554, FAX 919/876-2590.



so I decided to look elsewhere for some other amplifiers to sample.

We can occasionally be fortunate enough to borrow equipment for testing purposes from fellow audiophiles. Such was my luck and new opportunity came knocking on my door. A pair of Quicksilver Silver mono amps with KT88s was put into the system and things showed nice recovery from the Eagle 400 trial. Dynamics and a very present midrange flowed like there was no tomorrow. The sound was extended a bit at the bottom too, but the directness of the midrange was quite impressive. I don't know if it is fair to call this sound presentation of the "in your face" variety, but on vocals and rock it was a blast. I could see why R & R fans might like these amps!

An Audio Research D70 MkII, which had just been reborn with new Tesla KT88s and a few other touchups produced a wonderfully rich, expansive, and involving sound. While the midrange was not quite as dramatic as on the Quickies, it was supple and involving. Space and ambience came through in gangbuster amounts. This amp made it clear to me that it was finally time to retube the Nestorovic NA-1s, which were still sporting their 5+ year old tubes. That chore is currently under way and the 60-watt/channel ARC D70 is happily serving duty for a bit longer.

I conclude from these amp trials that the 8.2 speakers are able to resolve circuit differences quite readily, and yes, tube amps seem to get along real well with these transducers. Not having other solid-state amps handy has kept me from exploring possible good matches there, so I won't declare them

out of the question; my experience was limited and others can do that exploration.

### Final Thoughts

The Soliloquy 8.2 loudspeakers do well in conveying musical involvement in a sweet, smooth, well-mannered and effortless fashion. Midrange information is especially well-served, while the frequency extremes are treated in a reasonable, albeit unflashy way. If you are looking for a speaker that can provide musical escape from a hectic, noisy, bothersome day, the 8.2s will help convey you to a pleasurable, non-frantic place. Workmanship, clever design and user friendliness come through nicely in this product. I don't think the ultra-resolution, transparency fanatic will get excited over this product, but there are lots of speakers on the market to serve those specific needs and purposes.

Soliloquy also makes some other speakers, however, I have not been able to run those through my system. From what I can tell of Bernie Byers, I would think that similar care and attention are bestowed on those products as well. The scuttlebutt is that their smallest and newest entry, the 5.0 mini-monitor, is quite the item. For those on a tight budget, this should be worth exploring.

If your listening tastes coincide with the features described in this review, I would happily recommend including the Soliloquy 8.2s on your short list of things to audition. I look forward to seeing and hearing what this new company will be doing in the future...their flagship effort in the form of these 8.2s shows good reason to be optimistic. Happy listening!

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# B

## ACK PAGE



**W**E LIKE TUBEOSAURES REX, otherwise known as Dr. Harvey "Gizmo" Rosenberg, Harry is the Grand Mufti of The Thermionic Valve Religion and Grand Techno-Shaman of The Triode Guild.

Harry promotes unusual and sometimes unpopular ideas, often using Tee-shirts as his written record. See "Back Page" in Vol. III, No. 2.

We caught up with Harry just after he had discovered his first issue of *The Audiophile Voice*. His reaction? See above. Harry likes *The Voice* almost as well as he likes tubes.

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