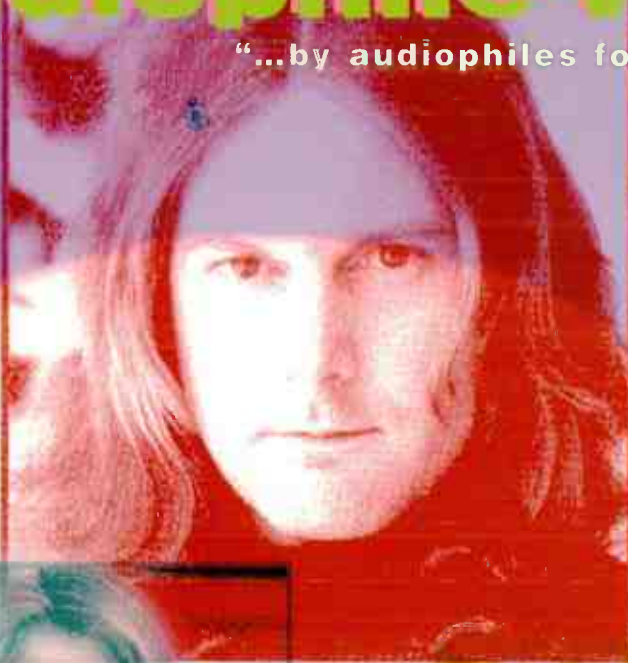


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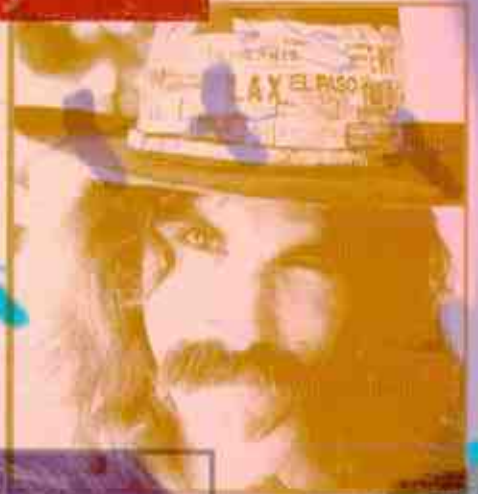
Volume 6, Issue 2

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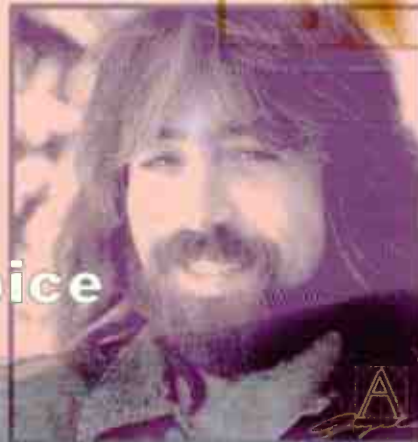


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Rated Power w/ch-4 ohms*	350	200	185	150
S/N Ratio	122dB	>100dB	95dB	110dB
VA Rating (Max.)	800	960	450	450
# of Output Devices/ch	8	6	4	4
Balanced Inputs (Standard)	Yes	No	Yes	No
Trigger On (5-24V signal)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Auto On (music signal)	Yes	No	No	No
Warranty ≥ 5 Years	Yes	No	Yes	No
Weight (lbs)	36	26	31	19
Dollars/Watt	\$3.50	\$5.44	\$5.58	\$6.99
Amplification Type	Solid State	Solid State	Solid State	Solid State
Retail Price (US\$)	\$699	\$680	\$698	\$699

The information contained in this chart has been sourced from manufacturer brochures, web pages, reviews and physical examinations. It is accurate to the best of our knowledge, as of September 1, 1999. Sonic Frontiers International makes no warranty, either expressed or implied, as to the accuracy of this chart. Manufacturer specifications are subject to change. Contact them directly to confirm. This illustration is for comparison purposes only. *Rated power achieved with a minimum of one channel driven. Note: The MCA 2 attains 190/270 w/ch (into 8 and 4 ohms respectively), both channels driven simultaneously, 20Hz to 20kHz, <1% THD.

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O N T E N T S

VOLUME VI
ISSUE 2

COLUMNS

- 4 Subscription Information
- 8 New Products
- 10 Dear Editor: Letters
- 63 Ad Index
- 64 Back Page - Humor

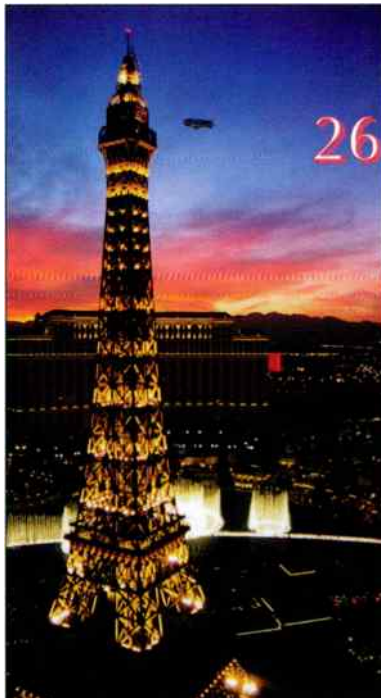
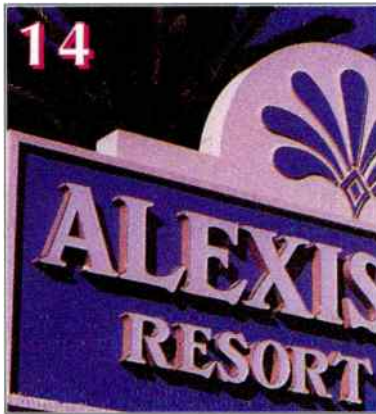
14 CES 2000: The News

Arnris Balgalvis

26 CES: The Road Show

Ross Wagner

Was this the biggest and brightest CES yet? Depends on whom you talk to. But *did you have fun?* We did!



RECORDINGS

The Byrds:
Legacy Reissues 30
Michael Tearson

Wilson Pickett:
It's Harder Now 34
Michael Tearson

Django Reinhardt:
*The Complete Swing/
HMV Sessions* 36
Jack Skowron

Matt Wilson: *Smile* 40
Jack Skowron

Ludwig von Beethoven:
Symphony No. 9 41
Benjamin Ivry

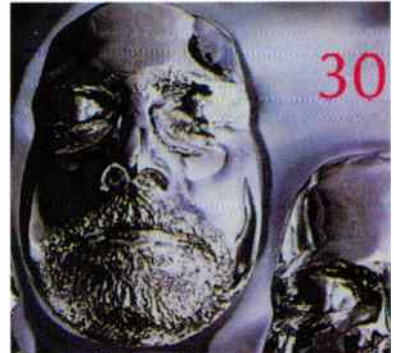
EQUIPMENT

Base Practices:
Vibrapod & Audio Spice 44
Vibration Dampers
Robert H. Perry

Atma-Sphere MA-1
Mk II Amplifiers 50
Ron Nagle

Phase Technology
Theatro 7.5 speaker 54
Chuck Bruce

Soliloquy SM-2A3
Speakers 60
Robert H. Perry





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--Art Dudley - Listener Spring '97

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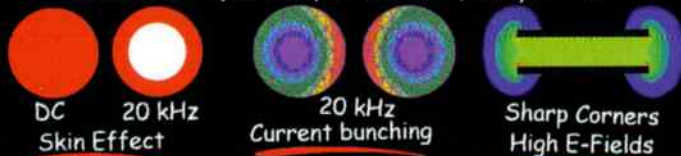
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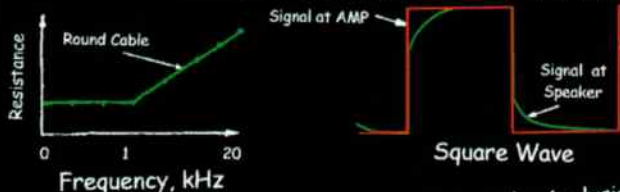
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A/V International, November 1999

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Lars Fredell
Ultimate Audio, Winter 2000

SCD-1: Reviewer's Choice Award.

Sound & Vision, December 1999

"I defy you to hear anything between you and the performers on this one. This is what SACD is all about!"

Ed Foster
Audio, November 1999

SCD-777ES: E-Gear 2000 All-Star.

E-Gear magazine, December 1999

"Rarely am I totally blown away by a product (SCD-777ES), preferring to take a more detached view. ...With SACD, I couldn't. The music was so emotionally involving and real, I could barely contain my enthusiasm."

Mike McGann
Home Theater, January 2000

"The Sony SCD-1 more than meets the promise of the next generation music carrier.

...The SACD format is without question a huge advance in sound quality over the CD. In fact, it exceeded my (high) expectations, sounding even better under extended auditioning with reference quality components than in short demonstrations."

Robert Harley
the absolute sound, Issue 120

Golden Ear Award.

"Buy the Sony piece as a reference. Because DSD over SCD-1 may be as good as it gets."

Dan Sweeney
the absolute sound, Issue 121



NTY

"Once you hear a Super Audio CD, you will never want to go back."

Joel Brinkley
The New York Times, December 9, 1999

"My own opinion of the (SACD) format? Sounds awesome..."

Daniel Greenberg
The Washington Post, November 5, 1999

1999 Component of the Year.

Ultimate Audio, Winter 2000

"So how did the SACDs sound? In a word, spectacular. Here, it seems, are the virtues of both analog and digital: one gets the smoothness, natural warmth and timbral accuracy of analog and the dynamics, bass power and quietness that CD promised. ...This may be the closest most of us will ever get to the sound of a master tape."

Andrew Quint
Fonfare, March / April 2000

**Innovations 2000 Award
SCD-1: Best in Specialty Audio.**

Consumer Electronics Association, January 2000

"The Sony SCD-1 is a landmark product. ...This is by far the biggest single step forward to advance the technology of sound reproduction in the home since the introduction of stereo. It's remarkable because the increase in what I will inadequately call fidelity, is absolutely staggering. ...an absolutely stunning piece of equipment."

Arnis Balgalvis
the audiophile voice, Volume 6, No. 1

"Sony's SCD-1 Super Audio Compact Disc player, the first product in the SACD format, is a milestone in High End audio."

Robert Harley
the absolute sound, Issue 121

"I took one of these machines (SCD-1) apart recently to examine its inner workings and I can assure you that it is a bargain at \$ 5,000."

Richard Hardesty
Widescreen Review, Issue 33

"I admit to being — well, stunned. ...The sense of musical flow was outstanding: a natural sounding progression from note to note, with a degree of dynamic nuance one virtually never hears outside of the real thing."

Art Dudley
Listener Magazine, December 1999

"...the SACD sound quality of this player is perhaps unsurpassed by any other digital disc player I've heard."

Ken Pohlmann
Sound & Vision, September 1999

"When I listened to a component with my eyes closed and I find that I've been transported to another time and place, then as far as I'm concerned, I'm listening to a pretty special piece. One of these pieces was certainly the Sony (SCD-1)."

Jonathan Scull
Stereophile, November 1999

"SACD: Mic feeds and master tapes for the masses!"

David Robinson
Positive Feedback, Volume 8, No. 2



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New Products

The Analysis Plus Silver Oval-In Interconnects

from are braided from pure silver, layered over a stabilizing strand of oxygen-free copper, combined with a computer-matched dielectric, and then surrounded by an open-braid shield. Based on their patented Hollow Oval cable design, these new interconnects are available with either Neutrik XLR connectors for balanced runs or WBT-0108 Topline RCA plug. The firm's computer simulations show much less change in current density with this interconnect geometry, and they say that "since current remains uniformly distributed across the audio band, the electrical characteristics of the interconnect change less with frequency. This lets complex musical passages be transferred without an effect from the interconnect." Special attention has been paid to the suppression of outside sources, e.m.i. and r.f.i., in that the Silver Oval-In's braided shield is augmented by the low inductance configuration of the signal leads for ultra-quiet, noise-free performance. Prices: \$455.00 for a 0.5-meter pair, \$630.00 for a 1-meter pair. Data: 888/579-0386 or www.analysis-plus.com.



The Krell KCT Preamplifier

is the firm's new flagship preamp and features their CAST technology, as well as being the first to incorporate the firm's Current Tunnel topology. CAST, the acronym for Current Audio Signal Transmission, is a proprietary Krell technology for connecting analog components to provide the most accurate signal transfer from one component to the next. The KCT is first Krell preamp to allow two-zone operation and provides independent source selection and volume control for the second zone. All forms of signal control are included: 12-volt triggers, Krell Link connection, and RS-232 control. The menu system allows the user to name each of the inputs, select volume trim levels and adjust balance levels for each input. A four-line, 24-character VF display provides complete operational information. Price: \$8,500.00. Data: 203/799-9954 or www.krellonline.com.



The Meridian 558 Amplifier

is a multi-channel design intended for maximum ease of installation into a multi-channel sound system or home theater system. The amp can be configured to produce five channels of 200 watts each (8-ohm loads) or two channels of 500 watts (bridged stereo) with one channel of 200 watts. There is also combination of features that offers unusually wide flexibility of use and installation: Remote power-down, rack mounting, switchable balanced and unbalanced inputs, four-way binding posts, soft-start and full thermal management. Price: \$5,995.00. Data: 404/344-7111.



The Samsung YEPP' MP3 Recorder

is ultra-compact, about the volume of a cell phone. The YP-E64 (\$249.95) has 64 MB of flash memory, while the YP-E32 (\$169.95) has 32 MB; each MB will store 1-1/2 minutes of music. Both offer support of SmartMedia cards and are CDDDB Enabled so that track titles and artists' name can be displayed using RealJukebox software. Because there are no moving parts, the YEPP' will not skip, change pitch or add distortion. Other features include a 7-mode graphic equalizer, voice recording and a 350-entry phone number directory.

Data: www.samsungyepp.com.



The Rotel RA0932 Integrated Amplifier

is a very affordable answer to those asking for great performance in that increasingly rare breed of stereo amp. A credit-card sized remote controls power on/off, volume, muting, and presets on the companion RT-955 tuner. Of moderate power at 35 watts per channel (8 ohms, 0.03% THD), the unit's high-current design delivers world-class sonic detail, as is habitual for the firm. Featured in the design are a low-noise toroidal transformer and extra-large Rubycon capacitors in the highly regulated, linear power supply. Price: \$349.00.

Data: www.rotel.com.



Experience...



L E T T E R S

Slow Mail From Bangkok

Dear Editor:

Thank you for your circular letter of June 1999 included with the copy of Vol. V, No. 3 of *The Audiophile Voice* magazine. I was shocked and disappointed to see *Fi* cease publication as of March 1999. I had been a subscriber for *Fi* for several years and had been most impressed with the quality of every aspect of the publication. The print quality was excellent, as were the layout and the tastefulness of all advertisements that appeared in the magazine. Their articles were pertinent and well-written, and there were a large number of pages to provide readers with copious amounts of quality information.

I realize the high-end audiophile industry in the States is in turmoil and that numerous industry players are in trouble, but *Fi* always seems to have strong advertising support and presumably enjoyed a high circulation. What a genuine loss to the industry and the audiophiles everywhere that they were "forced to the wall." However, in view of the fact that you have now picked up all the former subscribers to *Fi* magazine, I presume you will, overnight, increase your customer base substantially. This should present you with a unique opportunity to improve the presentation of your own publication, *The Audiophile Voice*.

Your magazine has excellent editorial quality as far as it goes. Your magazine is considerably smaller than *Fi*, at 64 pages to 112, and has rather limited coverage of equipment. You have a

much greater proportion of your editorial space dedicated to the reviewing of music than to equipment, as compared to other audiophile magazines. I personally would like to see more pages overall with a greater proportion dedicated to equipment reviews.

In closing, I wish you the best possible luck. I hope you are able to build up the number of pages in your publication and improve the quality of the layout, the printing, the photographs, and the advertisements you run. I hope also you will be able to substantially increase your circulation as you take over *Fi* subscribers and that you will, therefore, be able to invest in a more luxurious production which will still be economically feasible in these difficult times.

I hope these observations are seen as being constructive rather than critical. I really want you to take the place of *Fi* while retaining your publication's own personality, and I obviously want you to survive in the face of the severe contraction of the audiophile market in the U.S.

Simon Bonython
Bangkok, Thailand

The Editor Responds:

Thank you for your good wishes, and I hope you will remain a subscriber. There are several items in your letter that really cry out for comment. You should understand that the *Fi* management had all the benefit of the subscription monies, and that what remains for me is the *opportunity* to sell more advertising using the tool of the additional circulation. These days,

the total number of pages in a magazine *and* its continued life in a marketplace depend principally on ad revenue, not subscription dollars. If the people running a publication break established ad/edit and other financial ratios, then they will be forced inevitably toward the wall. Frankly, I think *TAV* has better printing and layout than did *Fi*, but the point is moot since they are no longer being published. Many who have spent more than my 35 years in publishing think that what you term "more luxurious production" is just waste of resources. I myself think it is more nearly a fair return to followers of the hobby.

Mo' Floor

Dear Editor:

I was reading in the letters column in *TAV* Vol.V, No. 5 some chatter about Jimi Hendrix's recordings of "Killing Floor." To raise the issue again, or put it to rest... In the 1998 Book "Jimi Hendrix: Experience the Music" published by Collectors Guide Publishing, Burlington, Canada, ISBN 1-896522-45-9, the authors cite

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Letters

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Include full name and address; only your home city will be used. Letters may be shorted for space reasons or edited for clarity. For back issues, visit our website: www.audiophilevoice.com

39 different CDs that have been produced with one of 11 different performances of "Killing Floor" recorded at various dates between 10/18/66 and 9/6/70 by either the Jimi Hendrix Experience or the Cry of Love band.

John Loveless
via the Internet

Editorial Foot-in-Mouth Disease

Dear Editor:

Thanks for the nice review of the CD release, Guy Klucevsek: Transylvanian Softwear, on Starkland (Vol. 5, Issue 6). However, I must point out that the title of the CD was misspelled in the Table of Contents (appears incorrectly as Software—my use of Softwear, is a deliberate, pun-intended misspelling); as was my family name (Klucvec), the label (Stankland), and the title (again Software) in the review itself. This is especially inexcusable because a photograph of the CD cover, with all the correct information, appears directly at the top of the review. Surely, it's not too much to ask that a writer or proofreader take a little more care with such basic information as the spellings of names and titles.

Guy Klucevsek
Via e-mail

The Editor responds:

Geez, Guy, we're sorry and sincerely apologize. It's not like we intended to do this, but walk a mile in our moccasins. A quick check of the Masthead will show we don't employ any proofreaders here. However much I'd like to, the economics of a start-up magazine don't allow that, yet. This is equivalent to you playing all the instruments at once, while running the studio's mixing board, and answering the phone at the studio, etc.

While our printing is good enough that one can read "Klucvsek" and "Softwear" from the printed page, the on-screen legibility of Quark Xpress, the page-making software, doesn't allow that. An even bigger difficulty right now is getting "made pages" to stay stable during make-up. For some reason, when I fix up pages from earlier issues, using (for example) a Table of Contents as a template, changed pages aren't "staying" when they are "saved." I also need to apologize to Peter Breuninger, who wrote the Legend amp and preamp review, instead of Bill Brassington who was listed on the Table of Contents.

E-mail Exchange

Dear Editor:

Your open letter and recent editorial regarding *Audio Magazine's* demise was extremely well done

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— congrats. God knows it came from the heart. I couldn't agree with you more: At this time, in all things audio and its subsets in home entertainment, there's just no reason for the media market to be shrinking. And I don't like having fewer choices, as an enthusiast/reader or as a manufacturer/advertiser.

For better or worse, your "guts and elbow grease" publishing company will continue to pay off. I sure hope your message was very well circulated—for all the right reasons, not just for TAV. Keep the faith!!

Jesse Rotman,
The Rooster Group
Deerfield, IL

*An open response
from the editor:*

Dear Jesse:

That letter was "from the heart," even though what I wrote wasn't all I'm feeling. I don't like having to admit to anger about that situation. But I didn't OWN that magazine, except in some fantasy sense because I was there a long time.

The essence of my message is that if the manufacturers, not to mention subscribers, don't support the publications, then the publications will go away. I can't do this JUST for the love of hi-fi and of making magazines; I can't buy groceries with good wishes. While a hobby magazine has to adjust to the conditions of the hobby, a hi-fi magazine can't just switch to any piece of gear that plugs in the wall and makes noise.


Can I put your e-mail and my response into the magazine, as a letter to the editor? We should note that The Rooster Group does ads and PR for Phase Technology, one of the advertisers in TAV.

Dear Gene:

Well, I never expected "in print" treatment for this, but yes, you may certainly run it as a letter to the editor. I'm mad, too, and not feeling real content about having only two large publishers control everything. That's why a voice like yours becomes even more important.

Dear Jesse:

Thanks for the permission. I hear they intend to keep the Annual Equipment Directory alive and they should do pretty well just from selling that issue on the stands. I'd buy two copies of the Big D to use as a resource tools, but who's going to proof it now?



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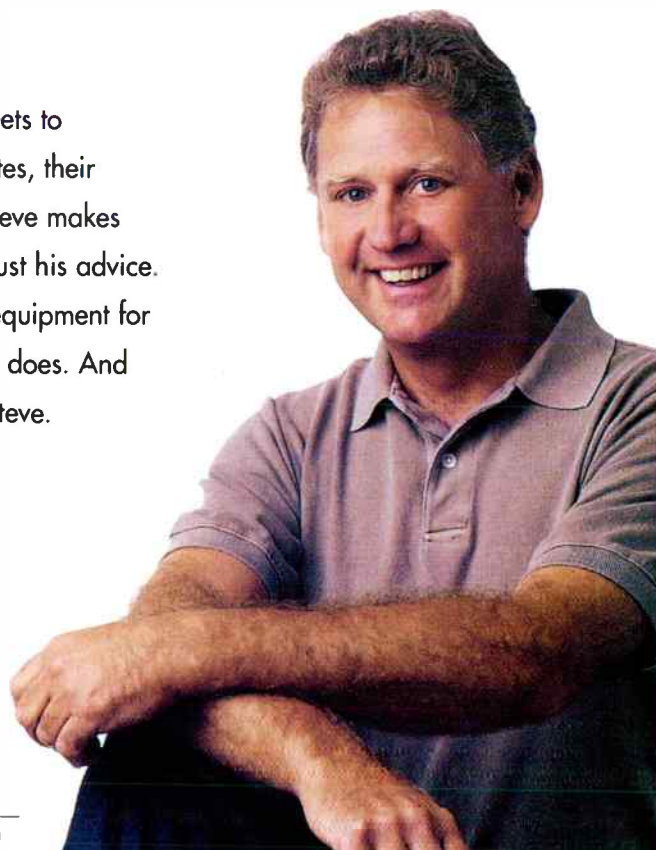
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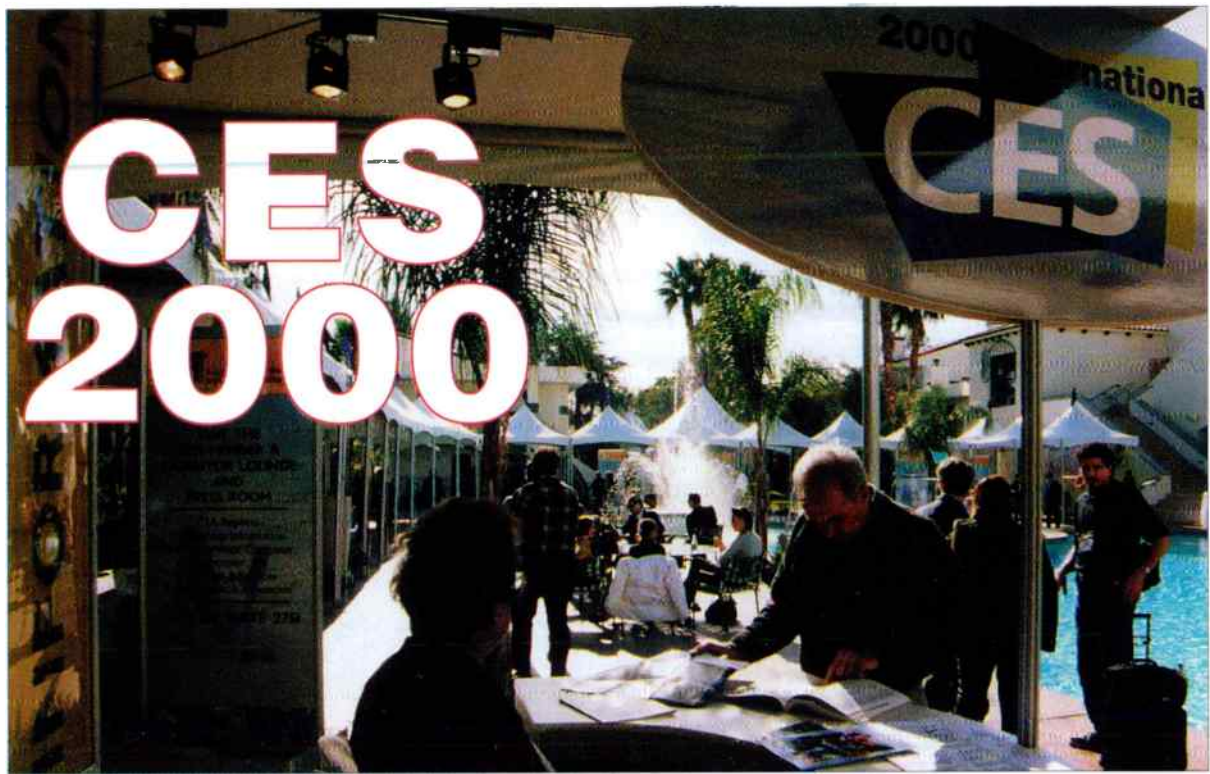
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Arnis Balgalvis

FUN, FUN, FUN! That's my take on this year's Consumer Electronics Spectacle. Though a little brisk at times, the weather on the whole was great. The numerous great indoor displays at the two major locations for the Specialty Audio exhibits did a great job of mimicking the sunny and bright skies that prevailed during the four days of the show. Attendee traffic everywhere also appeared to move at an ample clip. So when I heard that the CES statisticians announced the attendance numbers to be up this year significantly — not only for the show as a whole, but also for the Specialty Audio displays in particular — I was not the least bit surprised.

In keeping with my philosophy that it is impossible to come up with an overall winner to make a Best Sound at the Show pronouncement — what with the variability in room compati-

bility, the myriad combinations of equipment, inter-manufacturer politics, and so on — I am going to concentrate on the displays that were the most fun for me. In some cases it was an interesting experience, in others it was indeed the presentation of exceptional sound. And in several rare cases, a combination of the two.

For the second year in the row the Specialty Audio displays were at two major locations in rather significant concentrations. There's the official venue at the Alexis Park hotel and then there's the coming-on-stronger-than-ever T.H.E. Show at the St. Tropez located right next to Alexis Park. Exhibits could also be found at the Las Vegas Convention Center, the Hilton, and downtown at the Golden Nugget, where I did go, as well as at several other hotels. However, for me, a number of off-site places were simply too

inconvenient to visit if I were to obey my Hard-Hearted Editor's demand that I cover as many of the individual exhibits as inhumanly possible.

T.H.E. Show stands for The Home Entertainment Show and is run with exceedingly great results by Michael Maloney of Scientific Fidelity fame (yeah, that loudspeaker guy). This "unofficial portion" of the Specialty Audio exhibitors was a runaway success even surpassing last year in the buzz, and therefore traffic, that it created. This year T.H.E. Show had an increase in the number of displays with headliner Dave Wilson occupying a ton of prime exhibition space. I heard a number of manufacturers express their desire to relocate from the awkwardly laid-out Alexis Park to the mostly indoor, easily accessible, free-flowing floor plan of the St. Tropez. As far as I'm concerned, the more

exhibits the St.Tropez features, the better T.H.E. Show.

The Golden Nugget

As has been the case in the past, this year the tons-of-fun visit to the Golden Nugget was simply *deja vue* all over again, as the press winds up seeing essentially the same group of exhibitors, doing much the same kinds of things, usually in the same rooms as in each of the previous years. However, one new thing was done by the Golden Nugget group (Audio Research, Avalon Acoustics, Classé Audio, Magnepan, Spectral, Theta, and Adrenaline), which decided to make things really sociable by throwing a little party on the Friday night of the show. This event, put on for two years in a row now, has lots of good food and plenty of beverages, but more importantly is a great opportunity to mingle with a lot of interesting people in a very relaxed atmosphere. It is good for the visitors, the press and the manufacturers.

Avalon and **Classé** had put together a mammoth display consisting of the Classé Omega preamp and the Omegas power amplifiers to drive the top-of-the-line Avalon Sentinel Loudspeaker system. Two bridged Omegas were providing power to the full range portion of the Sentinels, while a custom-designed Classé power amplifier was feeding the sub-woofer section. Now that certainly has all the makings of a most impressive system.

The best part for me materialized on Sunday, the last day of the show, when I had the opportunity to hear a demo of 24/192 vs. DSD material directly off the hard disc. This music come to me courtesy of **Turtle Records**, a small recording company that is

turning out superbly recorded software that takes no prisoners. The dynamic performance and recovery of musical minutia was absolutely mind-blowing. Mind you, I'm saying all that about the 44.1/16 Turtle CDs.

That is why experiencing recorded material taken to the next level was so exhilarating. It did not hurt that the Avalon Sentinel/Classé system was the tool used to unravel these marvelous musical manipulations. The best part was that the demo was run by Bert van der Wolf, the balance engineer from Turtle records, who told me that dCS equipment had been used to record the material and a dCS DAC was used for playback. I simply want to tell you that this was one of my best audio experiences I have ever had.

But, you say, which was better: 24/192 or DSD? For me, in that environment, I heard DSD to have a touch more detailed dynamics, the air surrounding the instruments was more ample, and the harmonic structure appeared a mite more refined. When I told this to Bert, he said that my response lined up with the majority, but that for him 24/192 was closer to the sound he heard during the actual recording session in the studio. Can't argue with that, though I have to speculate about what the outcome might be had some other equipment been used.

The good stuff did not stop there. That was made abundantly clear during my visit to the **Spectral** exhibit. Here history repeated itself once again. I will never stop being amazed at the overwhelmingly superb sonic demonstrates that Keith Johnson manages to pull out of the hat each and every time he takes center stage in the Spectral suite.



The Adrenaline speaker system from Wisdom Audio were driven by Rowland amps.

Using a system comprised of the best that Spectral has to offer, i.e. the SDR-3000 transport, the SDR-2000 processor, the DMC-30 Reference preamp, and a pair of the DMA-360 Reference monoblock power amps, all wired up with the best interconnects and the new Oracle speaker interface from MIT, Keith treated me and a few other lucky visitors to an audiophile delight of unprecedented gratification. Last perhaps, but not least, the speakers this year were the Wilson Watt/Puppy 5 system.

The secret weapon Keith has in his demonstration is a simple one — his own recordings on the Reference Recordings label. He is, to my knowledge, the only design engineer who is also a recording engineer. This puts him in a position to pick selections from his own recorded material with an acuity that can't be matched by anyone else. I therefore urge you, do not ever, miss the opportunity to hear a Keith Johnson demo. The results are simply and purely spectacular. And, lo and behold, the results this year were just as impressive as ever, leaving me mumbling to myself that I should also have an all Spectral/MIT system since I

already have the Avalon Acoustics Eidolons to start things off right.

But that was not all. In the **Theta** exhibit, the person doing the impressing was Mary Cardas. By the time she was finished with her presentation I was one overwhelmed audiophile ready to go into home theater. Were it not for the vast amounts of money involved in doing that, I would be well on the way. Mary first demo-ed for me Theta's Dreadnought power amplifier, a beauty with absolutely out-of-this-world styling, which offers up to five channels of 200 watts, balanced all the way. Quite ingeniously, Theta's Dreadnought can automatically reconfigure to two channels for dedicated two-channel guys like me. Then there was the new DaViD DVD (how did you guess!) and CD player. Besides 24/96 capability, this unit can produce progressive video output, and here Theta does things a little better by going digital immediately from the disc right into the deinterlacer. Only then does the DaViD convert to the signal to

Yet another GREAT BIG AMP suitable for weightlifting exercises, the Theta Dreadnought.

analog. Earlier DaViDs can be upgraded for this capability for \$2,000.

For a finish with a flourish, Mary presented the Casa Blanca II processor which can support up to 12 channels for a grand total of four subs, five surrounds, one normal front-center, and one rear-center surround. And during the final drum-roll, she casually related to me that the Casa Blanca II allowed you to choose the crossover points, in 10 Hz increments, from 40 to 160 Hz, in addition to selecting Linkquist-Riley, Butterworth or phase-perfect crossovers, in addition to choosing a slope of 6, 12, 18 or 24 dB per octave. Whew! I'm out of breath here. Of course, one didn't really need to know all this information during the demo Mary put on using the progressive-scan output of the DaViD to feed a \$120,000 JVC projector. That the resulting picture and sound were astounding is a rather large understatement.

At a stop at **Magnepan** I discovered that Jim Winey has some new tricks up his sleeve. He unveiled the MG20.1 which introduced his brand-new "double-ended" quasi ribbon midrange. This design is now just like the woofer where

diaphragm now has magnets in front of it as well as behind it. Jim explains that significant gains in mid-range dynamics and accuracy have been achieved, in addition to providing a better transition from the midrange to bass. The MG20.1 will cost \$12,000. Do not expect to immediately run out and get yourself a pair because Magnepan is just now gearing up to go into production, but it does sound like something worth waiting for.

The Hilton and the Convention Center

Were it not for the particular people who exhibit here I must confess that I would not set foot in this arena of hustle and bustle, and long distances. Fortunately there were three great reasons to make the effort worthwhile.

Thanks to TAV's ordinarily mean ol' editor, I got to meet a genuine audio legend, none other than **Paul Klipsch** (see the "BackPage" column in the last issue). We found Paul conducting a mini autograph-signing and meet-the-press type session, despite being in an obviously weak physical state. Something not completely unexpected for someone celebrating his 96th birthday. Despite all that, his energy level was admirable and he still was able to express some strong opinions. The importance of the room in the listening experience being one of them, for example. I sure am glad to have had the opportunity to shake his hand.

I then located **Tara Labs** in the midst of all the activity. Part of my reason for going there was to be able to convey my best wishes to Matthew Bond and Karen Ford who are now husband and wife. After some



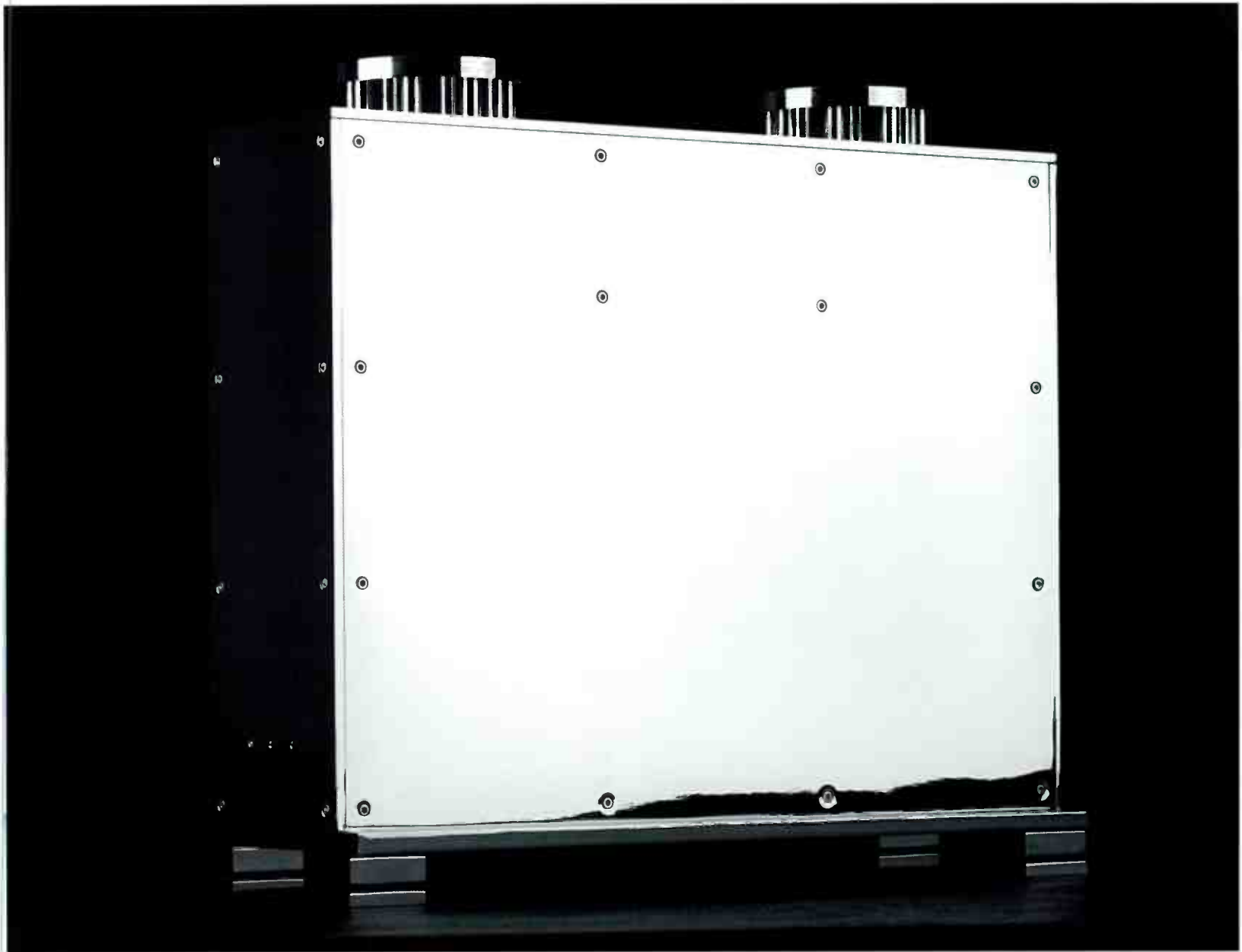


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The NBS/Shields Amplifier

pleasant socialization, Karen talked about the new RSC Reference bi-wire speaker cable TARA Labs introduced at the show. This consists of isolated high- and low-frequency runs in a single assembly for those who want high performance but yet want to keep things organized. The bass run is shielded to prevent its electromagnetic energy from coupling to the high frequency section and a specific conductor twist is used for best performance. The RSC Reference bi-wire cable is priced at \$1,895 for a 10-foot pair.

In addition to the AD-6 Power Screen, TARA Labs engineer Gary Lambert has created a more refined version in their new AD-10-B Power Screen. Both have a.c. outlets treated with their proprietary Ceralex ceramic materials which are frequency-tuned to remove r.f.i. and e.m.i. before it can enter components via a.c. power. Separate Ceralex components are used for each a.c. outlet, live, neutral, and ground, where typical line conditioners address only live and neutral lines. The AD-6 unit provides six a.c. outlets, with two being specifically tuned for digital output. The AD-10-D uses a balanced 600-VA transformer, has a 20-amp IEC socket for the a.c. input, and provides a total of 10 a.c. outlets, over-voltage protection, and an a.c. voltmeter, and retails for \$2,495.

TARA Labs has decided to reintroduce a much improved equipment isolation cone they dub the Vanishing Point. Using their recently added Resonance Control Rings, coupled resonance control takes place once at the surface, where the supported equipment meets the cone, and then again within the

Vanishing Point itself. A set of three is priced at \$89.95.

The last stop turned into one of the most satisfying visits of the show, meeting Phil Jones again and seeing and hearing for myself what he had been up these last few years. Some time earlier, Phil had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, which resulted in him ending up in China penniless and without a place to live. Fortunately, some friends helped him out. By not giving up and believing in his ability to design quality loudspeakers, Phil is once more back on his feet. Talk about not being able to keep a good man down!

Today, Phil heads up **American Acoustic Development**, or **aad**, which designs and manufactures high performance loudspeakers. And get this: In a very short span of time he has created a line of loudspeakers that consists of 16 models ranging in price from \$229 to \$3495 per pair. Considering that he started out with nothing about two years ago, this is a near-miraculous achievement. But no matter how amazing the accomplishment in sheer component count, it will astound you even more when you hear these products. To my ears, having sampled a couple of models, these are not merely outright bargains, but the best of them can stand being measured against all comers. What a heartwarming story! But there's more....

The Alexis Park

And at the Alexis Park, the Phil Jones story continued at the **Art Audio/aad** suite. Here Phil joined forces with Joe Fratus to create a truly musically involving display. Starting off, the David Gill D/A fed signal to Art Audio's Jota 30-wpc monoblock



Tara Labs RSC Reference Bi-wire speaker cable offers separate high- and low-frequency runs.

amplifiers which powered aad 2001 loudspeakers on ST-2000 stands. The **Gill Elise D/A**, marketed by Art Audio, features an all-tube analog stage with an optional volume control. This D/A has a tube rectifier, choke input filter and uses polypropylene and Havoline caps. It has four separate rectifiers and 11 regulators, using the Burr-Brown 1704 chip-set for the D/A work. The output section uses two 6DG8 and one 6FQ7 tubes. Great care has been used in the beautifully finished 65-pound chassis to minimize stray resonances. The David Gill D/A lists for \$6,000 with an additional \$300 for the optional volume control.

The aad Series 2000 speakers are absolute knock-outs, both sonically and aesthetically. It seemed obvious to me that nearly every design resource Phil could muster in this short time had been implemented in this series, which is obviously his pride and joy. For example, the tweeter features a machined molybdenum-chrome alloy horn, massive air-core inductors use the vent tube as the former, a non-resonant one-piece assembly supports the vent tube



Jim Thiel holding forth on his new Personal Coherent Source speaker system.

and the speaker binding posts, and a large-diameter long-throw midrange/woofer features a precision-forged metal-alloy diaphragm. The 2001 has a rated sensitivity of 86-dB SPL, while the 2002 and 2003 come in at 88-dB SPL. The whole speaker assembly, which weighs a serious 60 pounds per side, is housed in an absolutely exquisite monitor-sized cabinet available in rosewood or maple burl. And the price is an unbelievably low \$1795 a pair, with another \$695 for the stands. Let me tell you, this man is back and more effective than ever.

The wonderful sounds observed in this display were not possible had it not been for the superb Art Audio Jota monoblock single-ended triode amplifiers. Based on KR52 BX output tubes, this 30-watt-per-side power amp features hand-wound output transformers which can be custom tailored to any specific speaker. The price is \$13,000 for the pair.

Ayre showed off their exceptionally well-received integrated DVD player, the D-1. It can be yours for \$8000. It is a thing of beauty and produced exceptionally good sounds in combination with the Avalon Acoustics Eidolon. The rest of the Ayre

lineup included their own K-1 preamp and V-1 power amp. This was a most pleasant and satisfying visit. However, I can't but consider if my words would be the same had Ayre not had the usual ample supply of gummy bears in the room.

Thiel regularly gets a largish group of press corps members into one of the super suites at Alexis Park for a morning breakfast, and introduced four new products this year. First, Jim Thiel talked about the PCS speaker system, which stands for Personal Coherent Source. This is a three-way design, measuring 7¼ inches wide by 11½ inches deep by 19 high and weighing 30 pounds. Of note are the PCS's practical dimensions and weight, but more importantly, the fact that the design incorporates Thiel's phase- and time-correct Coherent Source coaxial tweeter/midrange array. The woofer section uses a 6.5-inch, long-excursion, metal-cone driver. The Thiel PCS lists at \$3000.

Next came the PowerPoint and the PowerPlane systems, which are intended for ceiling and in-wall applications, respectively. I found the PowerPoint design to be particularly flexible because its wedge-shaped design incorporates drivers angled relative to the mounting plane and thus permitting a wide variety of installation

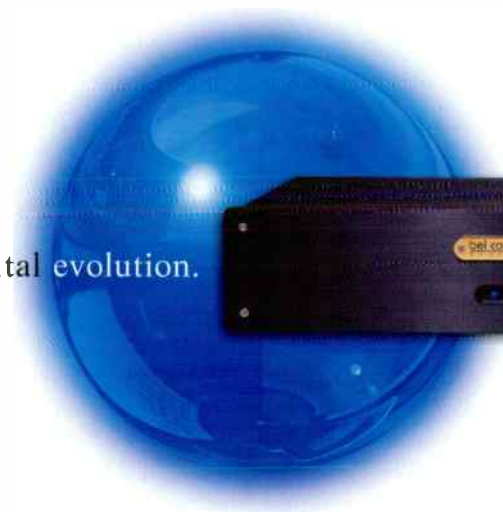
options. Placing the PowerPoint near a corner, for example, and using the ceiling-wall interface, provides wide coverage within a room. The PowerPoint lists for \$1,300 and the PowerPlane for \$1,200.

The last component to be covered was a first for Thiel, a subwoofer. The self-powered design features an innovative electronic controller interface that "can be set to automatically adjust for the characteristics of the main speakers" with Thiel or other makes of loudspeakers.

Dieter **Burmester** conducted a private showing for Ross Wagner and me of his new integrated system called the Rondo. The complete package consists of an integrated amplifier, a CD player, an FM tuner, and two multi-driver speakers. It's yours for \$22,000. Dieter told us that the first production run of the Rondo is sold out in Germany, but as soon as production catches up with the demand, this system will be available in the States.

NBS has gone well beyond their highly renowned cables and power cords, and introduced a set of components that will permit them to market a complete system. This consisted of a \$40,000 Monitor 1 loudspeaker, a \$60,000 100-watt NBS Shields monoblock power amplifier, and an integrated \$20,000 NBS CD player. As the prices indicate, these are very serious designs, and if the sonic presentation there was indicative of anything, they do not mean to take a back seat to anyone. The amplifier is a tube design while the loudspeaker is a full-range three-way system with a midrange that fires off the ceiling at an angle. The whole system sounded absolutely transparent and incredibly

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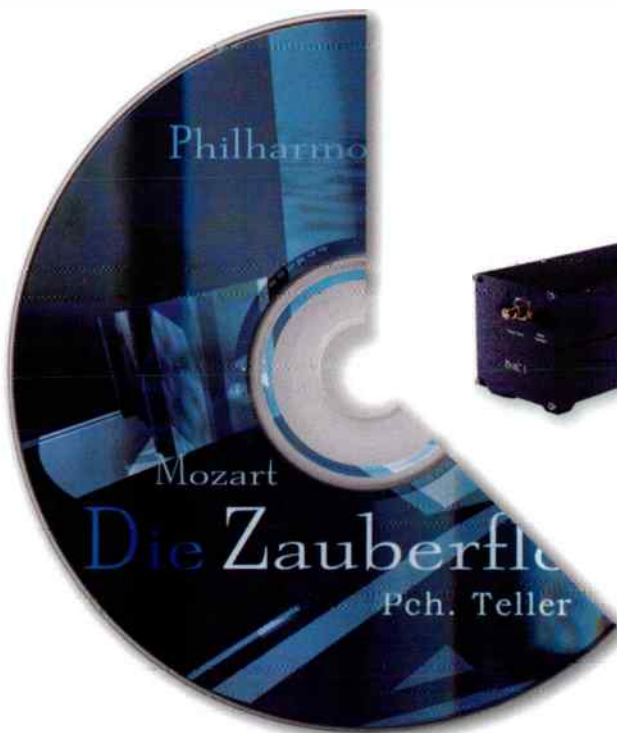


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detailed. From what I heard at this demo, it appears that NBS is off to a very serious and very good start in the component field.

Kevin Halverson of **Muse** impressed me to no end with his (of all things) video demonstration. Yes, dear two-channel aficionados, there is quite a bit more to be gained from the whole playback experience by including a good visual presentation along with a superb sonic portion. Kevin demonstrated that having a TV monitor between our revered two channels can be very effective if the picture has the very high quality possible with the progressive scan mode he used. The whole effect was wonderful. Doing all the magic was Kevin's new integrated Model 9 DVD player, which is also CD and 24/96 capable. Obviously, his demo has me doing a good deal of thinking about the advantages that a high-quality display can bring to the aural experience.

Bryston introduced a very serious stereo power amplifier the 14B-ST. How serious? Well, try dual 600 watters in a chassis measuring 19 inches wide, by 7 inches tall, and 18 deep but weighing just 85 lbs. That's about the size of their older 7-ST, which is a 500 watter. Again, that's 600 wpc into 8 ohms and 1,200 wpc into 4 ohms. With Bryston's usual 20-year warranty and with an expected price to be below \$6,000, I believe this to be a very strong upping of the ante in power amp development.

A visit to the **Soliloquy** suite left me very impressed. It sure looks like they hit one over the fence with their Model 6.3. Standing 44 inches tall, 9 inches wide and 13 deep, this speaker was simply a stunner what with

the protruding metallic supports for the adjustable spikes at the sides and all. And guess what — the 6.3 sounded just great also. Constructed of two-inch MDF on all six sides and finished in a gorgeous cherrywood, it weighs a very respectable 110 pounds. A silk dome tweeter — one that is found throughout the Soliloquy line — sits between two vertically aligned, 6.5-inch, spun-polymer drivers. The speaker sports two pairs of 24-carat gold-plated binding posts to allow bi-wiring if desired. I have no idea how they can sell this beauty for a mere \$2,995. This is a steal.

Bruce Van Allen conducted a tour of the two new products introduced by **Boulder Amplifiers**. And before I knew it both of these goodies had managed to capture my attention. How do I know? The amount of time I spent with Bruce told the tale. A couple of shows ago Boulder introduced their definitive 2050 stereo power amplifier. This design introduced, among other innovations, a dynamic bias-current adjustment that was proportional to the amplifier's current delivered to the load. But the stunning part was the mechanical design that featured machined interlocking chassis parts intended to maintain a high degree of rigidity. It was all topped off with a heat sink design that was every bit like a modern sculpture. Of course, I am still impressed to no end, but since it sports a price tag of \$59,000, I will have to just file it away under "Unattainable."

This year, however, Boulder introduced the 1060 Stereo Power Amplifier which, by all appearances, could pass for the earlier model. Dimensionally, it sacrifices some depth, but otherwise it looks as serious as its big-

ger brother. The good news is that the 1060 lists for \$18,500. While still very pricey, it is not nearly as unattainable as the earlier design. While the elegant biasing scheme is not included, the two-stage, wide-bandwidth signal path used in the 2050 is implemented. And it has the same amazing heat sinks along with a truly user-friendly rear panel configuration. I defy anyone with an ounce of taste to see this thing and go away without any thoughts of wanting it. It is drop-dead gorgeous.

As if that was not enough, Boulder also unveiled their 1012 DAC preamplifier, which they claim combines the key features of the Boulder 2010 Preamplifier and the 2020 DAC in a single machined chassis. Using an in-house technique, the corners are pressure-fitted into one continuous metal seam, assuring a remarkably vibration-free assembly. The latest DSP technology implements Boulder's proprietary algorithms, with sources oversampled up to 192 kHz. All processing is performed at 24 bits since they lay claim to rejecting all imaging in the pass-band by at least 144 dB. Guarding against inflexibility is the modular construction allowing the user to upgrade to improved future versions of circuitry. The price is \$15,000 for this dual-purpose component. And yes, remote control facilities are included.

Peter Noerbaek was reconfiguring the walls of the **PBN Audio** suite with the usually high playback levels and with the same unusually low distortion that I have come to expect from him. Driven by the Sierra Audio Denali Monoblocks, the sonic deed was done by a pair of his Montana XP speakers. I reluctantly returned a set of XPs



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to PBN just recently after a most satisfying review experience. The source material was via a Wadia 270 transport/27i DAC combo feeding a Sierra K2 differential battery-powered pre-amplifier. In addition to clean sonics, this demo revealed the outstanding imaging and excellent transient response capabilities right along the lines that I had also enjoyed in my listening room.

Steve McCormack is back where he wants to be, at **McCormack Audio**, and this after many trials and tribulations, both in his personal and professional lives. At CES he introduced three power amps featuring a number of refinements. Steve's DNA-225 walked away with the CEA's Design and Engineering Award for his innovative Distributed Node Amplifier circuit topology. DNA locates local energy reservoirs right next to the power output transistors resulting in a decreased power supply impedance at high frequencies. Three McCormack power amplifiers were unveiled, implementing DNA in each case: DNA-225 at 225 wpc (\$2,795), DNA-125 at

125 wpc (\$1,695), and the DNA-HT3, a three-channel power amp at 125 wpc (\$2295). Also making its debut was the RLD-1, a remote-controlled line-stage preamp l i f i e r (\$1,695).

Chris English's invitation to the **Nova Audio, Inc.** display was very rewarding since I finally had a chance to do "an up close and personal" view of their speakers. Of course, the stunner was the Rendition, which is finished in rosewood and proudly demonstrated by designer Kevin Lee. The great press that precedes this company's products is by all appearances more than justified judging by the fine sound of their Applause S loudspeaker (\$4,990). This two-way design, featuring a 1-inch soft-dome tweeter and a pair of 7-inch carbon fiber composite woofers, delivered a wonderfully balanced and transparent presentation during my all-too-abbreviated stay.

T.H.E. Show

As is their custom, **Sony** and **Philips** went the extra mile to put on a show within T.H.E. Show. The heart of the system was the much-awaited Philips six-channel DSD player. If you have found the SACD releases to be scarce, finding six-channel DSD material is in the miracle category. But "miracle" here has a dual connotation — the other being the presentation. Fortunately for the public, Sony / Philips just happened to have a

few demo discs on hand, and put on a demonstration that proceeded to take me and everyone else in the room to another planet. Just like at their New York AES demo, this exhibit should be mandatory for everyone who thinks that they've heard everything that it is possible to hear. All I can tell you is that while a presentation like this is not only a very humbling experience, it is also very rejuvenating. I came away with the realization that so much more is still possible, that we need not fall back to merely dreaming about it, but rather attempt to make it a reality today. I felt thankful for having had this opportunity to glimpse what DSD is able to deliver.

Mention Oracle and only one company comes to mind — **Oracle Audio Technologies**. That's because from its very beginnings as a leading maker of great analog turntables, it has consistently championed the cause of elegant looking equipment. Their turntables have unquestionably dominated the styling department in the analog sector to this day and the Oracle CD transport continues that tradition into the digital sector as well. Now with the introduction of Oracle's new integrated amplifier — watch out! For me, their ability to please the eye has been carried on in electronics componentry with resounding success. Jeff Rowland, Spectral, and Boulder are among a small group of North American audio firms that design "to die for" looks into their gear; now the Oracle Model 1.5Si integrated amplifier joins that very select group. In addition to stunning styling, their attention to detail is shown in a highly refined circuit topology. Their integrated amp uses a far wider-than-normal bandwidth, as they moved the



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-3 dB point of the preamp section all the way out to 2 MHz. Dual mono throughout, the unit's impeccable flexibility is topped off by some quite rugged, yet utterly functional speaker terminals, ones which are proprietary to them. This move by the Oracle folk into electronics is auspicious.

I want to publically congratulate Tom Maker, President of **Edge Electronics**, for being forthright and open, and not resorting to snake-oil to grease his innovative product description. His laser-induced gain module could have been a perfect candidate to have the label "Proprietary" slapped on it. Instead he explained to all comers, that the substrate of the driver transistor in their power amplifier design is directly driven by a laser light source. In addition to decoupling the bias source, this method of control-

ling the transistor gain results in a two-fold advantage. For one thing, the response is at the

The Audio Physic room had the best sound of the entire show for me.

speed of light and, for another, this technique quadruples the gain of their device.

Edge manufactures this part in their factory by modifying existing commercial components to meet their special needs. The laser light source and the transistor substrate are one assembly which is implemented in a series of Edge Electronics power amplifiers. They range in price from \$33,000 for their monoblocks to the \$9,500 for their stereo models.

On the last day, very fortunately for me, I ended up in the Audio Physic room where I was

rewarded with some of the most remarkable sound of the show. (That's right, not just T.H.E.

Show, but *the* show.) Their Caldera (\$20,995) loudspeakers did the dazzling, while driven by a GamuT Audio D200 dual-mono power amps (\$5,000), with signal supplied by a Herron VTPH-1MC phono (\$3,250) and VTST-1 line-stage (\$3,650), an RPM turntable and arm (\$12,895 for both) sporting a Lyra Clavis Evolve '99 cartridge (\$2,000), along with a Bow Technologies ZZ-Eight CD Player (\$6,100).

How fortunate was I? Well, right after the demo for me they proceeded to dismantle this wonderful rig never to beguile another listener under these same show conditions.

All good things, I guess, must end. Given that inevitability, this show was about as good as it gets.

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A photograph of a swimming pool at dusk. The pool is in the foreground, reflecting the sky and the surrounding environment. In the background, there are several tall palm trees and a building with a red-tiled roof. A white canopy is visible on the left side of the pool. The overall scene is illuminated by the warm light of the setting sun.

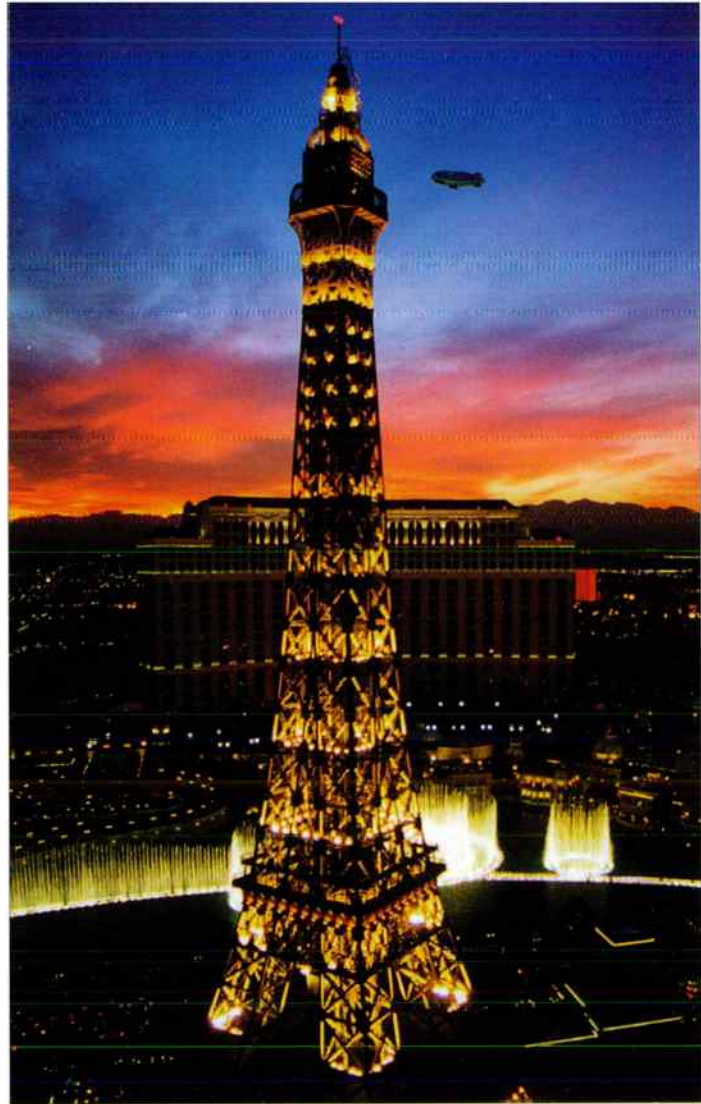
CES 2000

Ross Wagner: Story & Photos



John Horan of *Sensible Sound* magazine, Ric Mancuso working the Reference Recordings booth, and John Curl, *circuit designer extraordinaire*.

The Paris Hotel's Eiffel Tower.



LIKE 126,818 SMART BOMBS, CES conventioners from around the world homed in on Las Vegas as the year 2000 got underway in January. Assessment is not complete at this writing, but it is safe to say that many direct hits were recorded, with exhibitors reporting good attendance, lively dealer interest and sales.

The high-end audio segment of the Consumer Electronics Show is centered around the Alexis Park Resort, with rival T.H.E. (The High End) Show holding forth next door at St. Tropez. At both resorts, clusters of luxurious motel units are spread over a groomed landscape dotted with turquoise pools and lush shrubs and palm trees.

The illusion of semi-tropical tranquility is short-lived. As one roams from room to room, the sound of jets overhead conflicts with music from a multitude of audio systems. Both resorts lie directly under the flight path of busy McCarran Airport with commercial planes and the private jets of the high-rollers roaring by every minute. Hey, no problem, exhibitors simply raise the gain a few notches. But with doors opening frequently to welcome visitors (and competing noise), don't expect to be listening to lullabies. Anyway, nuance is a rare commodity at audio shows.

Regardless, sound at this CES was surprisingly good to very good, considering that most exhibitors contract for simple motel rooms and had to cram ambitious systems into spaces that were far too small, forcing speakers too close to

side and back walls. No amount of room treatment could optimize the sound. Depth was the first sacrifice. Systems capable of generating substantial bass were choked by the small cubic space in the rooms. Whatever bass survived was generally boomy.

If exhibitors ponied up substantial extra bucks to get larger rooms, they were able to realize more of the potential of their equipment. A few manufacturers including Spectral, Magnepan, Classé, Theta, and Avalon took space downtown at the Golden Nugget. Time-consuming to thread your way through five miles of Strip traffic to reach their site downtown, but well worth it because rooms there are huge, solidly built, and showed off the fine gear more nearly as it deserves to be heard.

On the other hand, Wadia, a Golden Nugget regular for many years, decided to switch to the Alexis Park this year to gain exposure to the larger crowds that bustle through that resort. Dan D'Agostino of Krell chose to entertain his dealers and prospects privately, leaving only echoes of

the stunning sound he regularly achieved at Caesar's-Palace. (Krell, we understand, will be back in the "big time" next year.) Revel defected from T.H.E. Show to the convention center. They emphasized home theatre in their exhibit (that's where the money is these days, folks) and were better placed at the convention center for that reason.

No sign of Halcro, whose promising low-distortion Australian amplifiers debuted last year. Likewise Melos, suffering from a financial blight, was unable to show; Classic Audio of Las Vegas has taken over for Melos and, with help volunteered by Mark Porzilli, is catching up on unfilled prepaid orders as well as repairs. (Additionally, updates for most Melos products will be available, according to Peter Plarre of Classic Audio.)

Several prototypes were very promising. Sony / Philips demoed a six-channel version of their SACD, albeit with only two recordings in that format. The Tom Jung (dmp Records) effort was impressive indeed. David Kawakami of Sony put his arm around Dr. D. A. Demery of Philips and posed for my camera in front of a spaghetti of interconnects splaying from the new six-channel device. The two collaborators look the picture of confidence and commitment to the SACD project.

Yet, Mike Hobson and his Classic Records seem fully committed to the competing 24/96 DVD-A family of formats. Speaking informally, but not confidentially, Mike expressed doubt that Sony/Philips will follow through with the SACD project. He cited the difficulty and

expense of producing a two-layer disc and the narrow appeal of expensive hardware that has no video capability.

Meanwhile the DVD-A standard is on hold while lawyers, big-money guys, agents and assorted other interested parties seek a foolproof way to protect the intellectual property so carefully coded into the tiny pits on the disc. The delay, it seems to me, offers Sony/Philips a chance

One almost needs a personal helicopter to get between hotels.

to grab the market for premium CDs, an opportunity they seem willing to let pass, by allowing only a trickle of software to reach the market.

Two enthusiastic guys from Escondido, California, Richard Smith and Roger Shekler, set up their Au24 Modular Line Array prototype speaker with multiple 100-watt amplifiers mounted at the rear of the cabinet for each small group of nearly full-range drivers. Ergo, no midrange-to-tweeter crossovers, and very short speaker leads. A heavily modified Sun sub-woofer completed what is obviously an early prototype speaker system with very open and convincing sound. Hope these guys can bring this baby to market. (No surprise that I was drawn to the AU24 sound; I am listening to Pipe Dreams speakers now, another line-source design, and find much to commend them.) A review of the "Pipes" is in process.

The trend towards highly styled electronics continues. With sound compromised in a show setting, then — no ques-

tion — the visual is enhanced. Pinpoint halogens spotlight stunning equipment designs in almost every room. (Designers of these new-generation electronics seem to be aiming for museum space next to the Movado watch at the MOMA.) Gone are the days of the drab, thick-black-slab-of-anodized-aluminum face plate. Likewise, stock heat sinks, with their sharp edges and propensity to ring, are being phased out. Burnished and polished chrome chassis, sculpted shapes and machined controls which move silently and sensually are the new standard. Check out Oracle, Rowland, Classé, Theta, Boulder and Pathos — you'll get the idea. In big speakers, the exotic mbl's from Germany still set the standard for radical design. (Is that a chrysalis in the cage, or what?).

Press Events

Cerwin Vega wins the gold for the most restrained press event. Early arrivals at the CES were rewarded Wednesday night with a tip-top finger food and vintage (yes, vintage) wine reception at Smith and Wolensky's fine Las Vegas restaurant. Press kits were tucked away, out of sight, and available on special request only. Not a loudspeaker in sight. Great ambiance and a fine occasion to catch up on gossip (no shortage of that commodity) and renew old acquaintances.

Missing this year was *Stereophile's* annual Saturday night bash where one could count on meeting dealers, manufacturers, designers and audiophile press figures, all in one ample ballroom with simple refreshments and a cash bar. It has been the central event of the

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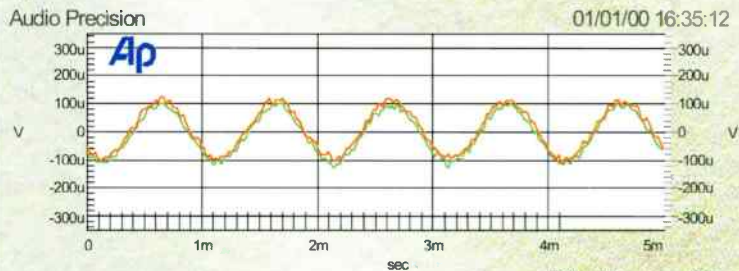
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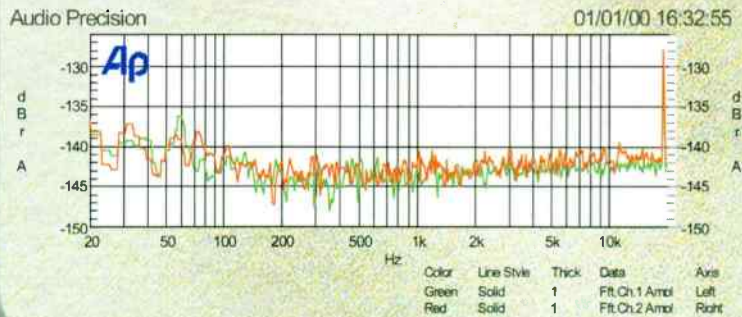
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World Radio History





Dr. D.A. Demery of Philips and Sony's David Kawakami who work on SACD.

CES for many, and was sorely missed.

Noel Lee, however, maintained the tradition of the Monster Cable party. It was a biggie featuring Ray Charles, live. (More about that in a moment.) Considerable energy and time were first devoted to the presentation of sales awards to dealers. The theme of the patter was consistent: Monster Cable products are profitable. As each dealer's sales were trumpeted, I entertained myself by toting up Monster's gross sales. Probably just a bit south of a hundred million bucks, I reckoned. Would all that wire be enough to reach to the moon?

Back to earth, time for the headliner to appear: Ray Charles, a mere speck of a figure (the press section in the Venetian's ballroom was many wavelengths distant from the stage) wrapped in multi-colored spotlights, was led to a grand piano set before a 40-piece orchestra.

"Un-oh." Sound blared from less-than-high-end speakers, and we were abruptly reminded that this is not a musical event. We have seen Charles (I think) alive. The sound was, well

Unlikely to change, the Monster Cable party is, after all, a business happening. Noel Lee (Head Monster) picks up the tab. Ergo it is his right to promote in

any way he wishes, an audio product which has enjoyed widespread commercial acceptance. The Monster Cable party is part of Mr. Lee's superb marketing plan, and who among us would argue with his success?

As the show neared closing, I wandered into the Genesis room. Arnie Nudell had just put on one of his favorite CDs, Mahler's Third Symphony with the LA Philharmonic, Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting (Sony S2K 60250). There was the legendary speaker-builder slouched in a lounge chair, his legs stretched onto a hassock, his right foot beating the rhythm, a local surrogate for Salonen's baton. Sounded great on the \$32,500 Genesis 350 Special Edition speakers, good extension and nice sound stage. Six of us were able, without interruption, to listen to the entire first movement of the symphony. A lovely interlude and a special musical experience for all of us.

For me, the CES show is as much about Las Vegas as it is about the High-End of Audio. This remarkable neon-lit oasis in the desert is the fastest growing city in the USA. And I'm embarrassed to say that my prediction of two years ago that the ambitious building of a half dozen huge resort/casinos, adding over 25,000 hotel rooms, might glut the market and force prices down, was very wrong. These monster pleasure palaces are built to a standard of quality and luxury not seen before at Las Vegas, or anywhere, with the possible exception of the Taj Mahal (the real one in Agra, India) or Versailles (France). And the people have come! Tourism in Las Vegas has nearly doubled in the last two years. The new hotels are often near filled to capacity, so room rates tend to

be firm, but reasonable when compared to comparable accommodations elsewhere.

Construction continues. Now underway, another biggie resort-casino — the new Aladdin, adjacent to Paris and across from Bellagio. Each of the new casino's slots, I'm told, when rubbed in just the right way, will disgorge a generous jackpot presented by a genie who will immediately offer three wishes. Start making your list now. (But be careful what you wish for.)

On the food front, there is good news. In a town known for buffets, where guests fill their plates with mountains of dried-out steam-table food and return to the feeding trough often, challenging their stomachs to hold just one more plateful of lifeless roast beef and over-mayo-ed pasta salads, the quality (and price) of food has grown. Sure, the old cheap buffets still hold forth, but the new guys in town have big names and operate as gourmet restaurants: Spano, Emeril Lagasse, Wolfgang Puck — to name a few.

But the most welcome surprise was the food at the Paris Resort/Casino. Therein thrive 12 high-quality restaurants at all price levels, including a magnificent buffet where none of the clichés about buffet food apply. Sure, the bon jour's and bon appétit's layered with all manner of accent, the result of a cram training course for the staff no doubt, do wear thin after a while. But when you savor a bite of a blueberry crêpe with raspberry sauce, made to order before your bleary eyes at breakfast, topped off with a dollop of the smoothest of crème fraîche, the mutilated French is quickly forgotten. This food is good in any language. Bon appétit and good listening.



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ECORDINGS OF THE MONTH



Rock

The Byrds
(untitled) Legacy C2K 65847
Byrdsmaxiax Legacy CK 65848
Farther Along Legacy CK 65849
Live at the Fillmore Legacy CK 65910

WITH THESE FOUR releases Columbia/Legacy's reissuing and rehabilitation of the catalog of The Byrds, the pioneer folk rock band, is complete. Better still, one of these discs is a dazzling new entry.

Originally, *(untitled)* was a double album, half live and half studio, and would fit easily onto a single CD, probably with room to spare. However, since the Legacy archivists wanted to add bonus tracks to the CDs they were redoing for this series, they found enough good Byrds material to make an extra CD. So there is now easily enough room for the selected tracks, all 14 of them! Six of these are studio tracks including, as highlights, a studio version of "Lover of the Bayou" which shows why the live version was the one that was released. As the song got more road testing, its background atmosphere just got

more and more ominous as the band got more comfortable with it and more committed to it. The comparison between the two lends quite an insight into the creative process.

"Kathleen's Song" is an early try at a song that did appear on the next album. There is a cover of Lowell George's "Willin'" sung by drummer Gene Parsons. "White's Lightning, Pt. 2" is an instrumental showcase for the phenomenally talented and innovative Clarence White.

The other eight are from the same shows taped for the live half of the original album. These include such intriguing titles as "Old Blue," "Ballad of Easy Rider," "Jesus Is Just Alright" and no fewer than four Dylan songs. Among these we find a terrific "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" which is otherwise unavailable. Terrific stuff that is delivered with great spirit.

But the wheels fell off the wagon for *Byrdsmaxiax*. Roger McGuinn was feeling the heat from the other Byrds to make the band more democratic, and he went along with their desires. At the time, however, the album was regarded as a disaster. Through the softening gauze of time, the album doesn't sound quite so bad, though it still is top heavy with poor and excessive production choices, not all of them the band's own doing. A few—"Glory, Glory," "Pale Blue," and "Jamaica Say You Will"—are as fine as anything on any Byrds recording. "Kathleen's Song" is a sweetie, and "I Wanna Grow Up To Be a Politician" is a funny, wry song that has extra resonance in this election year.

The three bonus tracks include very fine versions of Dylan's "Just Like a Woman," charter Byrd Gene Clark's

"Think I'm Gonna Feel Better" and an early stripped down demo of the gentle "Pale Blue."

Farther Along, the band's last gasp, is pretty spotty, but the title song and "Buglar" both sung by Clarence White are the best. Gene Parsons' "America's Great National Pastime" is a rollicking, funny, satirical number. "Bristol Steam Convention Blues" is a bluegrass breakdown that lets Clarence White do what he did the best. He was the quintessential bluegrass boy, and anything you might find by his great bluegrass band, The Kentucky Colonels, is worth digging into. Bonus cuts here are "Lost My Drivin' Wheel" and early takes of "Born to Rock and Roll" and "Bag Full of Money." All three eventually appeared on subsequent McGuinn solo albums in re-recorded form.

The new one is *Live at the Fillmore*—February 1969, a 16-song set, which in effect was

recorded as a trial run for the guys in the sound truck who were there to record the next set which later was issued as a live *Super Session*. That recording came about half a year before the (untitled) live recordings.

This is an eclectic set, but the biggest chunk is country music with songs recorded for the *Sweethearts of the Rodeo* and *Dr. Byrds and Mr. Hyde* albums plus their versions of country standards "Close Up The Honky Tonks" and "Sing Me Back Home" plus the Buck Owens instrumental "Buckaroo." Other strong selections include a medley of hits, "This Wheel's On Fire," "He Was a Friend of Mine" and "Chimes of Freedom." It is real odd hearing Roger McGuinn sing Chris Hillman's "Time Between" from *Younger Than Yesterday*.

The band is in fine form, and the recording is much better than I expected. The boys really

sound like they were having fun. That they were not the headliners left them in an unpressured position, and they responded with a relaxed, fun set. *Live At The Fillmore* is a wonderful find, a truly valuable addition to the legacy of this groundbreaking, historic band.

It really is exciting that the archivists at Legacy have been plumbing the Columbia/Epic vaults for gems like this live Byrds album and the *Winterland '68* live set by Big Brother and the Holding Company featuring a young and hungry Janis Joplin. These are things that music fans could only have fantasized about. And here they are again, finally released for our pleasure and entertainment.

This sort of thing has been done for ages in the jazz world, but not much like this has been done in the rock arena. If it turns out to be a trend, all I can say is bring it on!

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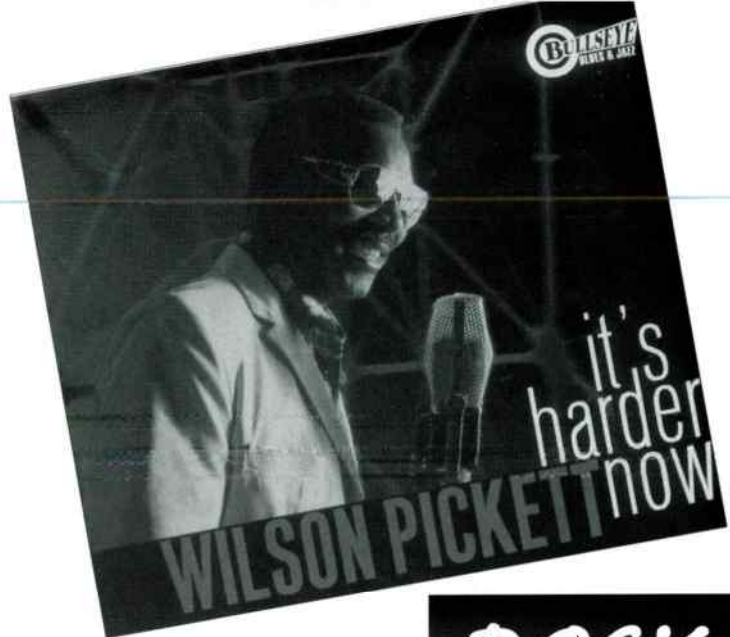


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Michael Tearson

ROCK

Wilson Pickett
It's Harder Now

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THIS NEW Wilson Pickett, his first recording in well over a decade, sounds like it could have been outtakes from Pickett's hitmaking heyday in 1965-69. Only they are better recorded.

The instrumentation and feel of the performances are throwbacks to that golden age of soul. In fact, the album contains the following disclaimer, "Certified Organic: This album contains no samples, loops or digital instruments. All the music herein was performed by actual musicians in real time without click tracks."

Letting Wilson Pickett loose into his favorite territory was a veritable master stroke. What albums he has done since leaving Atlantic have not been very good, and Wilson kept appearing the square peg getting forced into a mis-sized triangular hole. The sounds were more modern,

but Pickett was not comfortable. He just didn't fit.

Here he does. And with ease, and sounds rejuvenated.

The album was produced by my long-time colleague-in-print Jon Tiven. Jon also played a *whole* lot of guitar, some keys and co-wrote every song. His collaborators include his wife Sally, Charlie Feldman, keyboard player Sky Williams and such soul greats as Dan Penn, Don Covay, Donnie Fritts, and Mr. Pickett himself.

The Wicked Wilson Pickett is and always was the real deal. Here he shows conclusively that he has lost nothing to time. That signature sandpaper voice is still magical. It can still thrill you virtually at will, and with a sound behind him, constructed on the Memphis/Muscle Shoals model of his great run of hits, *It's Harder Now* is a can't miss proposition.

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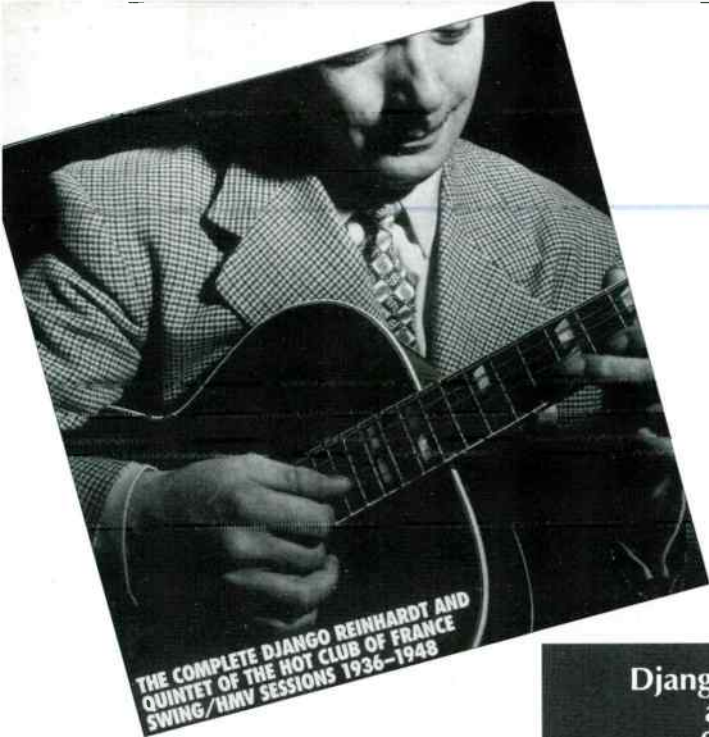
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Jazz

Django Reinhardt: The Complete Django Reinhardt and Quintet of the Hot Club of France Swing/HMV Sessions Mosaic MD6-190

THIS SIX CD SET focuses on the renowned Gypsy guitarist in his most famous setting, the Quintet of the Hot Club of France (QHCF). As usual with a Mosaic compilation, packaging and sound are first rate, though for the first time vinyl aficionados do not have the option of LPs. Mosaic's Q-LPs were of spectacular quality, and even though they tended to be considerably more expensive than the CD sets, often seemed to sell out first. Those to whom this matters should write, phone or e-mail the Mosaic people.

Django's story is a tale of overcoming what for most people (let alone a guitarist) would be a career-ending tragedy. He grew up living in a gypsy caravan and taught himself banjo and violin as a child. At the age of 18 a fire in his wooden trailer burned him severely, including his left (fretting) hand, on which the fourth and fifth fingers could no longer be used for anything but simple chords. By virtue of hard work and will power, he retaught himself to play without

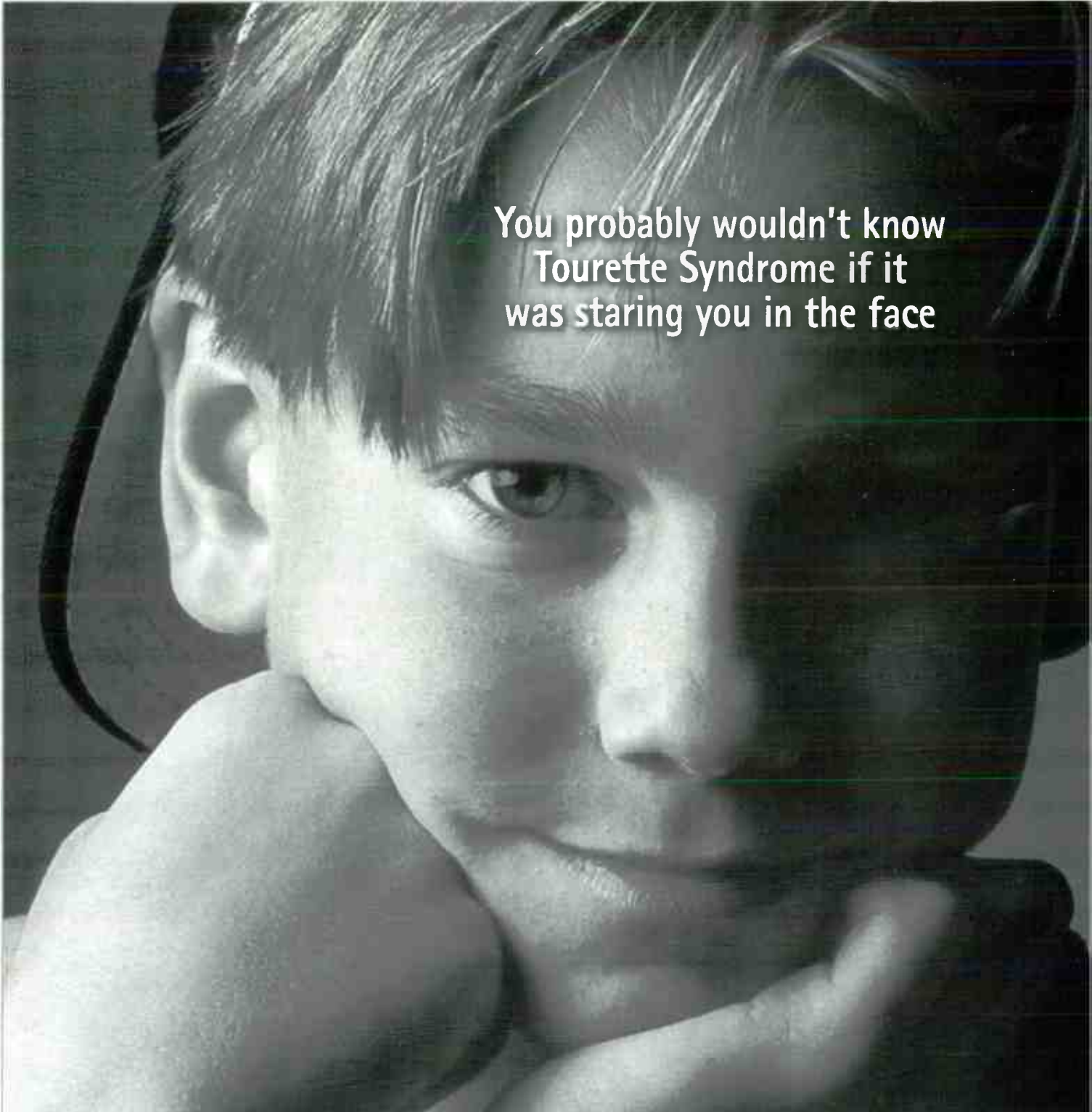
use of them, creating his own unique technique, and not only compensated, but truly flourished, playing music the average guitarist would kill to be able to copy. He was certainly the first influential European jazz musician.

The original (and most famous) QHCF was a string band, featured violinist Stephane Grappelli and an unusual (for jazz) rhythm section of bass and two guitars. The sound was a strange hybrid of swing and pre-swing styles, with the bass playing two to the measure (like the old tubas used to), the guitars playing 4/4 but with a wack-a-doo or chunka-chunka feel, the antithesis of the sleek style of, say, the Basie band. Grappelli was a fine violinist, though he had a somewhat thin tone, and a tendency to slightly exaggerate his swing into a sing-songy lilt (this changed over his career, to the point that when I saw him in the '80s—still going strong—he featured a lush tone with a wide vibrato).

A master of rhythm and dynamics, Django's soloing and

comping elevated any proceedings to another level. He could rip off arpeggios at lightning speed, detonate a volley of notes that would explode like a package of firecrackers or play a ballad with a wide vibrato and a heavy dose of romantic schmaltz from Gypsy, Iberian or French sources.

This six-CD set is too large for an exhaustive track-by-track analysis (the set's booklet does just that). Some highlights include "After You've Gone," with Django spitting out quivering, darting lines and Grappelli finishing off with flags waving (plus a nice vocal from American expatriate Freddie Taylor). "Limehouse Blues" takes it up yet another notch with a tempo so fast it's hard even to tap a toe to. This is child's play to Django, who plays two choruses full of surprising runs, octaves, inhumanly fast connecting phrases, and yet makes it all hang together in a musically compelling way. "Exactly Like You" allows Reinhardt to display his humor,



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using a seesawing musical statement. The ballad "Body and Soul" finds Django in a more romantic vein, but irrepressible as he is, he's soon zipping all over the fretboard, while "When Day Is Done", another ballad, opens with a stunning Spanish-sounding intro.

There are some interesting unaccompanied Django outings ("Improvisation" and "Improvisation No. 3" are my favorites), as well as some trio sessions that give Django more room to stretch out, and duets with Grappelli that feature him as only an accompanist. He also produced a body of memorable compositions: "Minor Swing," "Nuages," "Swing 41," and dozens of others.

Suddenly in 1939 Grappelli left France for England where he thrived musically until the end of the war, forcing Django to

form a new band, which bore little resemblance to the original QHCF. This consisted of clarinet, drums, bass, and one or two rhythm guitars, sounding

presence assures things never get dull.

Great tracks by this configuration include the above mentioned "Nuages" and "Swing 41," along with the frenetic, manic "Rhythm Futur." "Dark Eyes" features long, winding asymmetric lines, very melodic, with a low string riff that wouldn't sound out of place on a country record. One of

Reissues don't come any better than this essential collection of master guitarist, Django Reinhardt.

somewhat like a "strung-out" Benny Goodman Quintet. Django was the uncontested leader of this aggregation, none of the other musicians even coming close to his talent. (Django, like Janis Joplin later, did most of his playing and recording with lesser musicians, due to the dearth of jazz talent in Europe at the time.) The fourth and fifth CDs mostly feature this aggregation, and while it's not the QHCF sound most are accustomed to, Django's

my favorite recordings by this aggregation is "Belleville," a bouncy medium-tempo swinger with an attractive melody. Django plays lines of varying length, varying tambour, and riffs against bell-like harmonics. Hubert Rostaing's clarinet is convincing in a Goodman style, and the drummer even does a short Krupa. The out chorus is a killer. "Manor De Mes Reves" is a haunting ballad (by Reinhardt) whose melody is made up of sustained notes which float

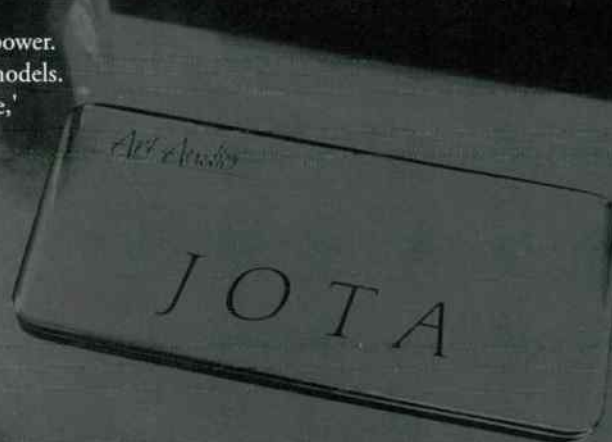
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Srajan Ebaen, "Soundstage", September 1999

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above the lovely chord progression. The guitar solo soars and dives, intensely milking all the emotion of the piece.

Fine as this music is, the first notes of the tracks that herald the post-war return of Grapelli and the original QHCF sound are exhilarating, even carrying along as suspect a concept as a jazz "Echoes of France (La Marseillaise)". Grappelli by this time has mostly (not completely) smoothed out his timing and developed a richer tone. Django, too, has changed somewhat, with bebop coloring his sound and his composing. "Mike" and "Festival 48" are particularly bop-influenced, and while Django could always handle any tempo, he incorporated the phrasing of bop and the use of altered scalar notes. He even hints at "Salt Peanuts" on "Lady Be Good."

Of course, any set that is "complete" risks some duds,

though they are quite rare. Three tracks featuring a big band made up of Europe's finest at the time make for mostly uninteresting (or worse) listening. The particular focus of this set on Django with his European comrades also omits some of the most exciting music Django (or anyone else for that matter) recorded when American musicians came to Europe. Fabulous dates with Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, Stuff Smith, and others are omitted. (Maybe held over for a future *Django and the American Jazz Giants* project?)

Sonics are superb. Of course, it's all mono, but instruments have presence. Sidemen, particularly bass and drums, are easier to follow. I pulled out the eight-LP "Djangology" box on Affinity for comparison, but there's really no comparison—this one kills the old LP set sonically. Inner City also released a series of Django LPs, but these

didn't fare any better relative to the Mosaic.

Packaging is up to Mosaic's usual high standards. Extensive notes on the times and the music are provided in the LP-sized booklet, along with many photos. I found the historical material very interesting and helpful in supplying a context for the music. The track-by-track analysis was less satisfying, though, providing little insight. I generally find reading detailed descriptions of what I'm hearing to be a distraction, though it was an invaluable resource when I first started listening to jazz.

What can I say—this is a great sounding collection by one of the greats.

(Mosaic records are available by mail order; their street address is 35 Melrose Place, Stamford, Connecticut 06902; phone 203/327-7111, fax 203/323-3526; website is www.mosaicrecords.com.)



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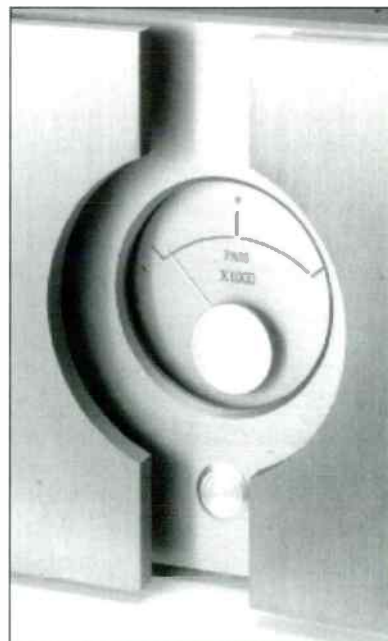
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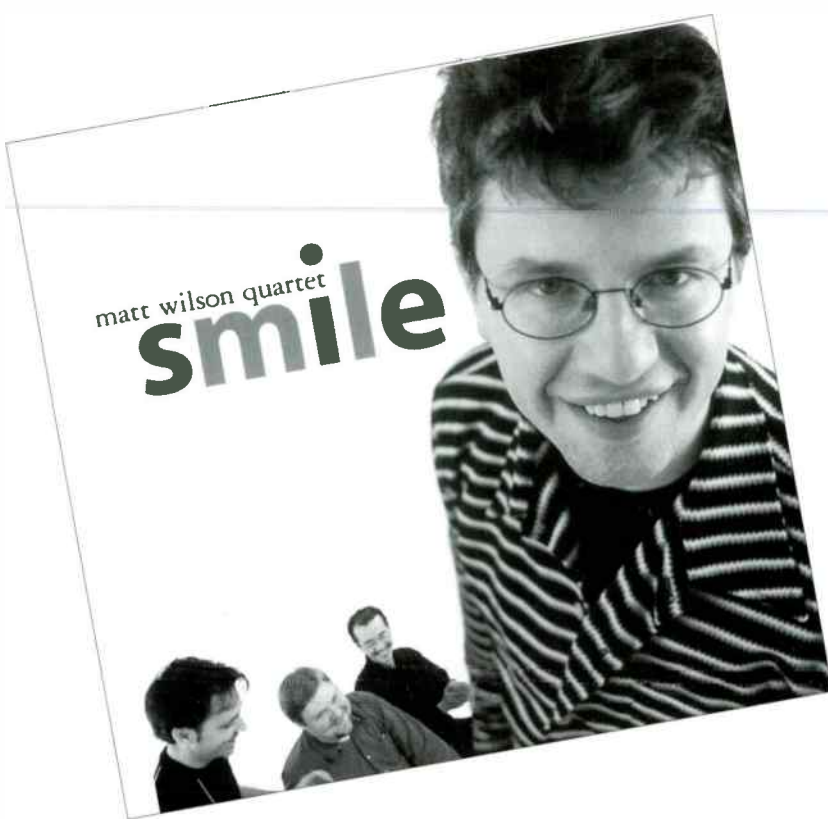
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Jazz

Matt Wilson *Smile*
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MATT WILSON is a drummer from the Midwest, who, after a stint in Boston (playing with the Either/Orchestra), came to The Apple, playing with a Who's Who of the best of It's Jazz artists (notably Dewey Redmond's band). He has released three albums, the first of which, *As Wave Follows Wave*, garnered much critical praise. This recording has him with his working band (Andrew D'Angelo, alto sax and bass clarinet; Joel Frahm, tenor and soprano sax, and Yosuke Inoue, acoustic and electric bass), in an engaging outing.

"Wooden Eye" starts things off in a loping, Redmond-inspired bluesy strut, framed by wild staccato riffing. Monk's "Boo Boo's Birthday" begins with the main theme played as a round. The hornmen pull out their higher pitched instruments, Frahm's soprano tonally reminiscent of Steve Lacy. His fine solo is followed by a frenzied game of tag around the theme. "A

Dusting Of Snow" is a drum solo framed by a plaintive melody, during which Wilson's brushes swish and pit-pat, evoke a lonely, silent plain as in the title.

D'Angelo's "Big Butt" has a snaking theme over a funky backbeat, and features the composer's Dolphy-esque bass clarinet. Much has been made of Wilson's Midwestern sense of irony, which is evident in the song titles (and how the pieces reflect them). It also can be seen in his next cover choice, a free-time, very cool version of one of the most uncool tunes of all time, "Strangers in the Night". The horns (bass clarinet and tenor) caress the melody, winding around each other in harmony or counterpoint, and bringing it to a climax by track's end. And speaking of climaxes, D'Angelo's "Making Babies" comes on intensely, with an up and down motion (and a count-off) that's truly ribald, and D'Angelo's solos in heat, spitting

out rapid volleys of howling notes. "Go Team Go", by Wilson, trots out sports cliches and detonates them in a free jazz inferno that's truly fun. The finale, "I Found A New Baby", has Fraum's soprano sax and Wilson playing this '20s chestnut very idiomatically (Fraum does a nice Bechet, Wilson a nice Krupa) while Inoue's electric bass and D'Angelo's bass Clarinet are definitely '90s.

The musicianship throughout is first rate, and the band interacts as only a working band can, with horns frequently commenting on or encouraging each other, often even finishing off the other's ideas. (Frahm is more grounded, D'Angelo prone to atonal flights). It was recorded "Direct to Two Track", apparently sans mixer, but it captures this interaction terrifically.

I should issue a Free Jazz Alert: Some sounds here may be difficult for delicate ears, though the net effect is fun rather than artsy or demanding.



Benjamin Ivry

Classical

Beethoven *Symphony No. 9*

Melanie Diener (soprano), Petra Lang (alto), Endrik Wottrich (tenor), Dietrich Henschel (bass), La Chapelle Royale, Collegium Vocale, Orchestre des Champs Elysees, Philippe Herreweghe (conductor)

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FOR MANY YEARS, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony has been considered as much an education in the humanities as a piece of music. Mighty interpretations like those of Arturo Toscanini and Wilhelm Furtwangler have made this piece of music transcend the symphonic domain, just as its choral finale gives it specific political and social resonances. In his excellent Cambridge Music Handbook on the symphony, Nicholas Cook points out that the symphony has become "one of the great symbols of world unity," and is sung annually in sing-along stadiums in Japan and elsewhere in Asia. Yet in this quest for international significance, the basic requirements of performance are sometimes ignored. At a recent televised Olympics, viewers saw

the ludicrous spectacle of the ever publicity-hungry Seiji Ozawa trying to conduct various international choirs simultaneously by satellite in the "Ode to Joy." A South African choir, obliged to sing the words by Schiller phonetically, made one wonder whether forcing people to sing German was really such a triumph of international unity. In fact, like all art, Beethoven's Ninth is specific to the time and place it was created, whatever its later repercussions, and so performances that respect its original context are necessarily the most valuable.

The Belgian-born conductor Philippe Herreweghe has long been regarded as one of the most philosophically evolved maestros; his recordings, whether of Bach, Monteverdi or

Schumann, reveal a spiritual temperament and thoughtful approach that is at once musically dynamic but also impregnated with other forms of culture, from literature to the visual arts. When I lived in central Paris, I would see Herreweghe bicycle along the streets with his companion, the maroon-haired cellist Ageet Zweitstra, who plays in his hand-picked ensemble Orchestre des Champs Elysees, a group that is so responsive and sensitive, it does not sound at all like a French orchestra, almost all of which are famously bad. Despite Zweitstra's slightly punk image and Herreweghe's look of an absent-minded theology professor, each nevertheless has unexpected originality. I once asked Herreweghe what singers he



that has been distended to monstrous lengths as in a famous Leonard Bernstein version on CD that took 78 minutes. Herreweghe's takes just 62½ minutes, but duration is not the point. Herreweghe's *Beethoven: Ninth* adopts a bel canto approach, for a symphony written plum in the middle of the bel-canto era. Indeed, in the symphony's first British performance, the choral part was even sung in Italian, bizarrely enough, so accustomed were performers to identify the act of singing with the Italian language. Beethoven himself of course battled this trend, and when his choristers complained that their parts were unsingable, which indeed they are, he replied heatedly that voices should be able to sing like instruments, and that bel canto had ruined singers. However, the real emotional moment for Beethoven came after the sym-

admired and his response, the old coloratura songbird Amelita Galli-Curci, was—to say the least—surprising. And yet Herreweghe, for all his Northern

braininess, is never ponderous, and in his way is also an advocate of bel canto.

This is entirely appropriate for Beethoven's Ninth, a symphony



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Bill Brassington, *THE AUDIOPHILE VOICE*, 1999



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phony's premiere, when he was presented with the ticket receipts for the concert and fainted away from disappointment at how little money he had earned.

Herreweghe captures some of this irony and drama in his fleet performance. His orchestra contains such great virtuosos as the oboist Marcel Ponsele, whose solos with singers are entirely admirable: Not since the days of Toscanini's NBC

Symphony oboist Robert Bloom have we heard such playing alongside the human voice. Herreweghe's solo singers are young, but not lacking in verve or personality. Indeed, tenor Endrich Wottrich is appropriately a bit rough-voiced for his military-style solo, which Herreweghe conducts faster than anyone I can remember, to avoid the usual flatulently plop-

ping tempos. Nicholas Cook reminds us that Beethoven was both "earnest and ironical," and Philippe Herreweghe possesses both the high seriousness and sense of humor to encompass these aspects. Indeed,

Chalk up another victory to this remarkable conductor Herreweghe.

Beethoven's listeners have often been at a loss to tell when the "meister" was pulling their leg. One early waggish critic referred to the theme of freedom in the symphony in the context of the sung phrase, "whoever has taken a loving wife, let him join our celebration," suggesting that freedom in the case of marriage could only mean divorce: "The Ode to Joy," a hymn to divorce.

Ha ! ha ! Think about that. It's rich. A new idea, an altogether original interpretation."

Whatever the claims of the original instrument movement, we can say with some confidence that this Herreweghe version is better than the premiere performance of the work, when the orchestra was composed of "dilettantes," the choir unsatisfactory and overstressed, and the conductor, old deaf Ludwig himself, who led the musicians so badly

that they had to follow cues from the first violinist. Chalk up another victory to that remarkable conductor Philippe Herreweghe, whose new CD joins his other outstanding interpretations, like his *Mozart: Requiem* (on HMC 901620), his *Schumann: "Scenes from Faust"* (on HMC 901661.62), and his *Beethoven: Missa Solemnis* (on HMC 901557) as delights to the ear.

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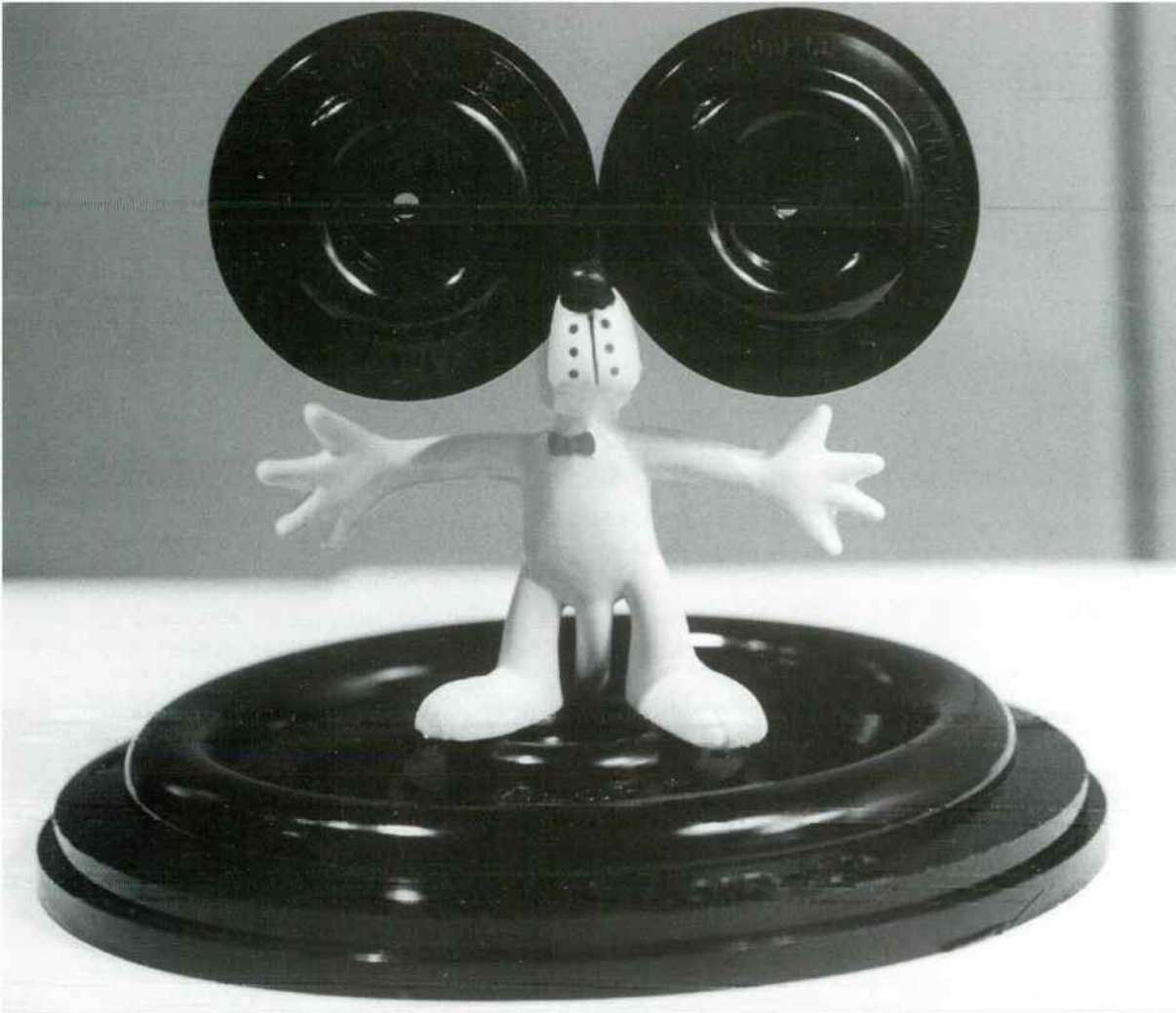


Photo: Jeff Hack of Hawthorne Stereo

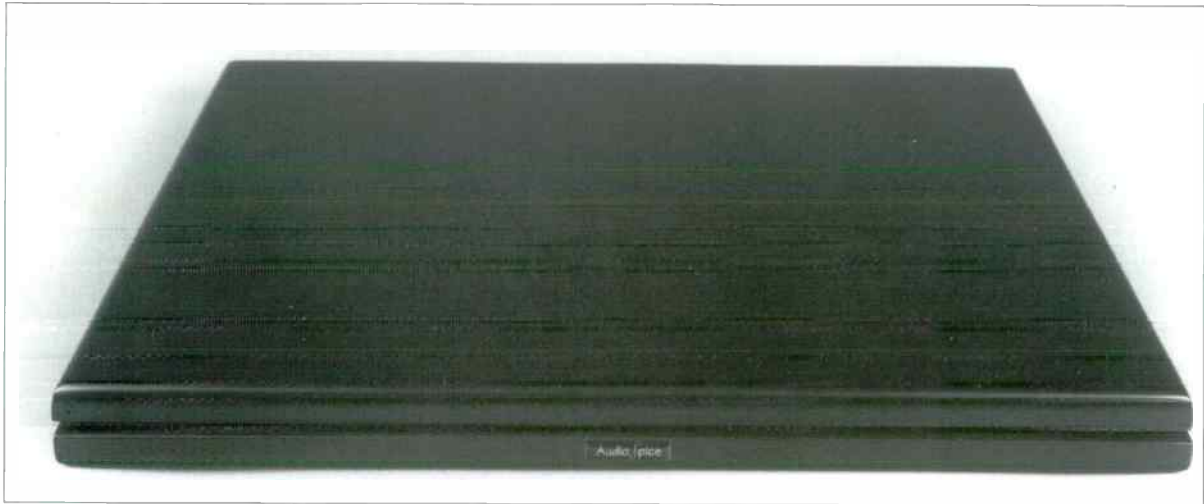
Robert Perry

Base Practices: The Vibrapod & The Audio Spice Component Comforter — Two Vibration Dampers

I LOVE MY Linn LP12. Most of the time. Except when it bounces and causes the tonearm to skip. My size 14 feet are a far cry from those “little cat feet” found in the poem. I have experimented with finding the best location for the turntable in the room and have found that the current corner location is the most inert

spot. Still, when someone walks through the room, the chances of getting the arm to bounce are high. My wife hates having to tip-toe through the living/listening room. I have developed a “stealth walk” that on most occasions enables me to actually approach the table while it is playing. The relationship I have

with my LP12 borders on the love-hate type, and I would do very nearly anything to stabilize my table, short of wall mounting it. That would require some major surgery to my rack system. That day may yet come but till then, I perform exotic experiments with base vibration isolation devices.




My system is an LP12 with Valhalla, a modified Rega RB300 arm with Lyra Clavis deCappo moving-coil cartridge. the rest of my system is NAIM NAP 250 amp, NAC 82 preamp with Hi-Cap, and KEF Reference Model 2 speakers. I use a NAIM CDX for a digital source. I try not to intellectualize the difference between CiDs and vinyl. I know that some COs sound bet-

ter than some LPs and vice versa. What I do know is that after a day at work, when I sit down to relax and listen to music, my ears ask for vinyl. I gladly comply.

Follow The Footsteps

Armed with the Audio Spice Component Comforter anti-vibration base and a popping fresh box of black vinyl

Vibrapods, I set about to evaluate the effects these after-market accessories might have on the performance of my turntable. My accomplice in this exercise was Tim Kernan, my design associate from work. We took a long lunch break and spent an hour and a half with the effort. Perhaps a month with each variation would be better and give me the chance to "live with



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TUNING UP

Editor's Aside: For the "numerically inclined," it turns out that the frequency at which the "turntable, tonearm, cartridge, rack, and floor" system most easily act as a floppy spring—i.e. how many times per minute all that stuff "bounces"—can be measured. This is usually at a frequency of 4 to 12 Hz, which is easily stimulated by trampoline floors like Mr. Perry's, and is not that far away from once-around wow in an LP system. While the Vibrapods can be tuned to this frequency range, by use of the proper number and size of them relative to the particular component's weight, the Comonnet Comforter is "tuned" to clear up a higher frequency range, one where clarity of midrange can seem muddy without its use.

each effect and commit it to memory better. But I like the A-B style of testing.

The test was set up as follows: Using a musician's metronome I chose two settings, 104 beats per minute and 96 beats per minute to simulate natural walking tempos. I borrowed some of my wife's yarn and laid out a track on the floor to insure the exact same path was taken each time. I chose the path that had always caused the biggest bounce problem. I used a Waylon Jennings record as the test EP. (As long as I was going

to intentionally try to bounce the arm, I thought a sacrificial LP was in order.) The idea was to have Tim count the bounces on five different trips through the room for each set-up configuration. We had to turn the volume on the record down a little because it was tough walking to a set metronome rhythm with a contrasting rhythm on the

music. The tendency was to walk in time to the music.

I should tell you that I have been using Vibrapods under all my components (excluding my speakers and turntable) for three months previous to the test. My turntable has been sounding so good that I have been very reluctant to do anything with it at all.

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NOTES

Do the Vibrapods help? Well, I felt like they might be helping. Initially, I was convinced that I was hearing far better bottom-end definition. But I took the `pods out after two months and I was less convinced. I did put all the `pods back in after a couple of days. I like the idea of vibration isolation and I like the design of the pods. They just feel right. They come in five different models for different loads. The firm has also made a giant "Vibrapie," some seven inches in diameter which is not for human consumption. They took some to the 1999 CES and the 1999 Stereophile Show and intend them as curiosities or publicity give-aways for dealers.

Playing the Linn LP12 without any base treatment, we got about four bounces at the "104" metronome setting and six bounces at the "96" metronome setting. Adding just the Audio Spice Component Comforter, we

Audio Spice Component Comforter, \$299.95. Size: 18 1/2 by 14 1/4 by 11 1/2 inches. Distributed by Quest America, Inc., 120 Woodbridge Pl., Leonia, NJ 07650, phone 201/947-1098, fax 201/947-1185.

Vibrapods, \$6.00 each. Five models available. Model 1, 2 to 3 lbs. capacity each; Model 2, 4 to 8 lbs. each; Model 3, 8 to 12 lbs. each, and Model 4, 14 to 18 lbs each, Model 5, 22 to 28 lbs. each. Manufactured by Kennard Industries, Inc., 623 Hanley Industrial Ct., St. Louis, MO 63144, phone 877/645-2900, fax 877/645- 6700, e-mail sam@vibrapod.com.

Associated Equipment

Naim Nap 250 power amplifier, Naim NAC 82 preamplifier with two Hi-Cap power supplies, Naim CDX CD player, Naim Slack Snake interconnect, Linn LP1 2 turntable with Valhalla modification and modified Rega RB300 tonearm, Lyra Clavis de Cappo moving-coil phono cartridge, and KEF Reference Model Two loudspeakers.

got four bounces at the "104" setting and six bounces at the "96" setting. Granted, there may be a discrepancy in the way my

feet hit the floor, i.e. heel hard first or heel soft, but I did do my best to use the same walk each time. It seemed apparent that the



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Audio Spice board did not do enough by itself to result in a reduction of this type of bounce.

Then we added eight No. 3 Vibrapods in two lines, front to back, down the sides under the Audio Spice Component Comforter. We used a tuna can to support the rack while we positioned the pods. While the can of "Rubinstein's Fancy, Longline, Albacore in oil, solid white tuna" was in place, Tim and I asked ourselves, "Why not do a test series with the LP12 resting on a can?" This didn't work at all with my turntable, although it did help make a great tuna fish sandwich later. The table bounced like crazy. Six bounces at both metronome settings. Who'd a thunk-it?

With the pods replaced, we did the series of test walks at both metronome settings. The results were dramatic: One bounce at each walking tempo. Clearly the pods helped.

During these tests, I did identify a particular two square feet of hyper-sensitive floor area that almost predictably gave us a bounce. It may be that I can reinforce this area from the basement and solve much of my problem.

No More Objectives

So much for the "numbers" side of the trials. To test sonic differences, I chose Steely Dan's Aja album using the "Black Cow" track. Tim's ears are only 30 years old while mine are 52 years old. I have faith in my own level of accurate hearing but I like to backup my observations with a second opinion from Tim.

We went back and forth with the different base configurations and could not come to any definitive conclusion. I "feel" for now that the addition of base layers diminishes or dries up the bass, making it leaner and

tighter. The LP12 without any additional bass seems to sound lush and fuller. I prefer the sound of the turntable with no additional suspension devices. However, I'm not convinced.

The bottom line is that the Audio Spice Component Comforter with Vibrapods reduces tonearm bounce and that's a pragmatic improvement that I can appreciate. If there is any difference or degradation in sound, it's too miniscule to offset the advantage gained with the additional isolation layers. I also found that the addition of the Audio Spice Component Comforter and Vibrapods raised the level of my table up about 2.77 inches from its original position and ergonomically this level worked better for manual operation. At least for me.

I'm going to leave both the Audio Spice board and the Vibrapods under my LP12. I want to live with this setup for a



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month or two. Maybe then I'll have a better idea of what the sonic effect is. For now I'll just enjoy the reduction in bounce.

Addendum

I was sitting in my chair last night listening very carefully to a pair of Soliloquy SM-2A3 speakers when it occurred to me that I had totally forgotten about having placed my turntable on the Audio Spice Component Comforter and a covey of Vibrapods. Then it hit me like a lightning bolt. Sure, I had forgotten about them because my turntable has mysteriously become amazingly stable. It just does not bounce like it used to. I just can't remember the last time it bounced.

I've had my current vibration isolation system installed for about three months and there is little doubt that the performance of these two components (rack and pods) has improved over time.

There're two possible explanations for this improvement. My family and my 55-pound dog have finally learned not to go leaping and bounding through my listening (their living) room. This makes sense in terms of physics but little sense in terms of the family's sensitivity to my quirky needs. The other explanation is that the Vibrapods and Audio Spice board have somehow "settled" and distributed the load of my LP12 in such a way that it is no longer affected by floor bounces.

I thought about this a lot and I can't offer a scientific explanation beyond that. The ambient temperature of my room is fairly constant in mild Seattle so I dis-

count any alteration of the wooden construction due to changes in temperature and humidity over this amount of time. Still, it's a possibility

Whatever I do know that both these components will stay in my system. I also think that the slight "dryness" I noticed when I installed the Audio Spice Component Comforter and Vibrapods is gone. My sound now is luscious and deep, punchy and dynamic.

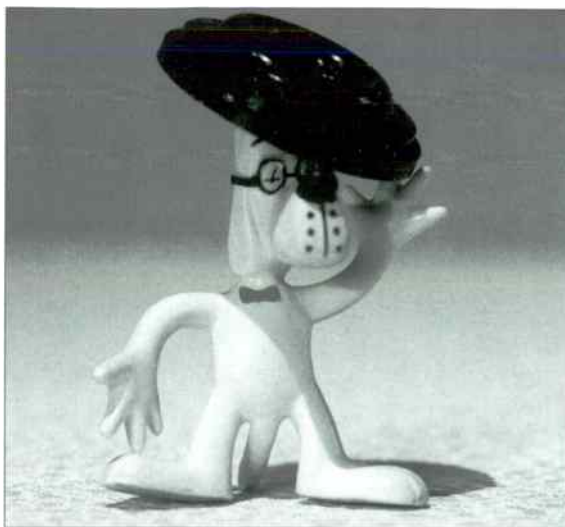


Photo: Jeff Hack of Hawthorne Stereo

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The advertisement features a photograph of two Soliloquy speakers. On the left is a tall, dark-colored floorstanding loudspeaker. On the right is a smaller, silver-colored monitor loudspeaker mounted on a custom-made stand. In the background, a faint silhouette of a dog is visible. The Soliloquy logo, which consists of a stylized 'S' inside a circle, is located in the bottom right corner of the advertisement.

Atma-Sphere MA-1 Mk II Monoblock Amplifiers



Ron Nagle

NOT ALL THAT LONG ago I sat around a table in the press room in Chicago's Palmer House sipping coffee with members of the audiophile press attending Hi-Fi '99. Listening to these guys, I got the strong impression that there really wasn't anything new to see or hear. Of course, the digital format wars were raging between the DVD and DSD camps, and not to name names, most critics were coming down on the Sony-Philips side of the debate about sound quality. DSD, now on the market as Super Audio Compact Disc or SACD, would have a difficult doubtful future ahead of it, they said. That was my assessment as well, but I chose to wait it out and let the chips fall where they may. That became background noise for my Chicago adventure with its boundless possibilities. There is so much to discover in the high-end, solid state or vacuum tube, digital or analogue, coming from all corners of the

globe, that the permutations are more than enough for one lifetime. These changes present myriad shifting colors, enough to paint a musical masterpiece. My quest for the new and improved swept me down near-countless corridors, past doorways alive with music. And if I paused, it was inevitably to be warmed by the sound of tubes. Now, dear reader, let me introduce you to Atma-Sphere.

Who would have thought that what was once old, could now be new. I remember the words of the master: "You must follow the light, Grasshopper, for there is yet joy to be found in the spiral path." Happy I am to report that the knowledge of the ancients is not lost. In the distant heartlands, in a town named after a saint from the early Christian era, St. Paul; in a state called Minnesota, which is not to be confused with Minnehaha, even though one might grin at the antics of their Governor

Jesse Ventura, a refuge from professional wrestling, there is company called Atma-Sphere where the alchemy survives.

The Objet d'art.....icle

The Atma-Sphere MA-1 MKII Monoblocks are rarest among tube amplifiers. Generating 140 watts per side of output transformerless (O.T.L.) Class-A power, they inhabit a niche companioned by perhaps only two or three other but dissimilar OTL designs. The designer Ralph Karsten reminds those inclined to listen that his amplifiers are not variations of Julius Futterman's earlier OTL designs, but a patented innovation that he describes with his see-saw analogy. He explains that his design combines two separate single-ended triode amplifiers within each chassis, each 180 degrees out of phase with the other. Thus, you can liken the result to an amp on each end of a see-saw, where one amp is

driving up (the positive part of the signal) and the other is going down (driving the negative half).

The result is a differential topology, fully balanced from input to output, with ultra fast reflexes (slew rate) and does not need feedback correction. Atop a polished stainless base, measuring 11 inches wide, 23 deep and 7½ high, is a very impressive gathering of tubes. At the front, the inputs go to eight 6SN7 driver tubes, four per monoblock, while the speakers are driven by 28 Sovtek 6AS76G dual triodes, 14 per chassis.

On the rear chassis skirt, you will find along (with the copper binding posts) three power supply fuses. Up front, the skirt holds the functional controls, four toggle switches; there are two large toggle switches, one for plate and the other for heater power, and two smaller toggle switches (each with a corresponding potentiometer), one for d.c. offset adjustment and the other for setting output tube bias to 750 milliamps. There are also two input connectors, a balanced XLR style and unbalanced RCA jacks. Last but not least are two large jewel-style lamps, one amber for filament power, and a red one for plate (operating) power.

In the dim light of my listening room, with all the tubes in place and powered up, the sight of 36 vacuum tubes reminds me of the glow of sanctuary candles. I remember another time another place. I recall the words of the master: "Grasshopper, the path to enlightenment begins as a journey from within."

Within the twin retro-look chrome-and-black chassis I find so appealing, reside neatly laid-out, mirror-image twin circuits

that must be highly labor-intensive to produce because of their hand soldering. At the rear, the Cardas solid-copper binding posts are connected to the output by custom wire made exclusively for Atma-Sphere, every-

Happy I am to report that the knowledge of the ancients is not lost.

thing routed and secured by nylon tie wraps. The black crinkle-finished upper cover houses power supply transformers and two massive computer-grade electrolytic capacitors. Wired into the chassis below are Roderstein metal-film resistors and Rel-Cap polystyrene capacitors, which are very competent, far better than average, but perhaps short of the very best obtainable.

According to designer Ralph Karsten, there are three upgrades available. The first uses exotic and expensive Teflon coupling capacitors from Rel-Cap to replace the stock coupling capacitors. The second and far more extensive modification involves replacing all the resistors with top-quality custom Caddock precision metal-film types. And finally, special custom filter capacitors can be used in the power supply. As you might imagine, ideally the upgraded amps should be ordered and made at the factory with these components, rather than having them retro fitted at some later date. Not incidentally, my review samples were completely stock and evaluated in my system with unbalanced RCA-style interconnects.

The Set Up

My whole reference system has evolved and upgraded since my last review. It now is biamped and additionally woof'ed. In addition to a fortuitous addition of a troika of Argent Room Lenses, there is a modified Hafler Mosfet 500 amp which provides 250 watts a side to power the Gradient woofers upon which my Quad ESL 63s main speakers sit.

Now I have many more choices to make in doing this review. I can run the MA-1 amps full range, or if I chose, only listen to them from 120 Hz on up to their high frequency limits. After I position the Atma-Spheres side by side on the floor in front of my equipment rack, I toggled on the heater supply and watched the friendly glow grow. About five minutes later I actuated the second toggle switch to apply the plate voltage and electronic life coursed through the amps' veins.

After approximately five minutes more, the amps should have settled in enough to adjust the d.c. offset voltage and bias. Using the first of the two smaller toggle switches, you first actuate one and adjust the front panel potentiometer to zero the meter. You then hold down both spring-loaded switches and set the operating bias at 750 milliamps with the second potentiometer. All that's needed at this point is the application of a music lover's ears.

Near the end of the MA-1 evaluation, I lost the ability to position the meters pointers exactly on zero which resulted in my inability to adjust the d.c. offset. The potentiometers used for this purpose simply had no effect. The error was small,

maybe half an increment of the dial scale, but still it impacted my perfectionistic instincts. It did not seem to affect my ability to adjust tube bias farther upscale at 750 milliamps, and I could detect no sonic penalty because of this but obviously it shouldn't have happened.

A phone call to the designer Ralph Karsten in Minnesota informed me that the manufacturer had over tightened the meter pivots and a simple adjustment by Atma-Sphere would resolve the problem.

The Aural Aspect

First impressions are something I value in my own reviews and those of other critics. For me, they provide a basis for all the subsequent trials and permutations that follow and a portion of them usually endure even as my last word is written. However, what follows are quotes culled and condensed from many pages of notes. As I began, I remembered the old one's advice, "Learn to listen, Grasshopper, for the unknown."

Full range with the MA-1 amps driving the Quads: "The overall tonal balance shifts, bass now more prominent and extended. The effect is to warm the music even to the extent that high frequencies seem limited." Over a span of listening time and aided by careful system tuning, this turns out not to be the case.

Subsequent to these first notes, I pulled my Quads as far as possible out into the room. "The sonic stage shifted, more depth of image, heightened and supplemented by better lateral image separation. Example, Basia Time and Tide, Epic EK 40767, track 6, "New Day": The

envelope of music fills the far end of my room. There is an ability to isolate individual elements within a separate but contiguous sound stage which reaches out to involve me."

This amp has an uncanny ability to unravel complex harmonic structure.

As I have learned to do, I walked about, notepad in hand, side to side, speaker to speaker, first back, then forward again. "Ideally, but rarely, the effect is that you can look into the sound stage and see it from different sides. The Atma-Sphere MA-1 has that ability. It's not just that your perspective shifts, but that every element is bolted to the floor and you can move, not the sound stage." In delicate symphonic works such as Grieg's "Morning" from his Peer Gynt, "a harmonious envelope surrounds but separates instruments across the breadth of the stage, the piano possessing and delivering every nuance of tonality. There is a delicate natural mix of harmonic overtones that in some way escapes my _____," a well-respected tube reference amp.

That quality remained as I listened to track 3, Games People Play, "The Best of the Alan Parsons Project," Arista ARC D8193. (I quickly wrote . . . "depth, heightened and supplemented by lateral image separation".) About two minutes into that cut, some background voices emerge and grow with an ambience that seems to fill the spaces in the near field. I went back several times to confirm the effect of that significant 60

seconds. It was subtle but it was there. Imagine that the instruments in front of the soundstage hold the threads of the composition and that they remain in position as the voices move forward and join an ambient envelope, enwrapping the whole sound field.

I could go on and on, but if I haven't as yet convinced you of the amp's uncanny ability to unravel complex harmonic structure and place it on an expansive and realistic stage, then you will need to hear it for yourself.

Conclusions

This past summer I was fortunate enough to attend many live performances. I think the highlight was at Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood. The violinist Kyung-Wha Chung played "Meditation from Thais" by Massenet for her encore. At the conclusion, after the chills and goose bumps passed, I was somehow transformed. I sat second row center, looking up at the performers and thinking this did not sound like a typical stereo system.

"O.K., Ronnie," you're saying, "Duh! It wasn't a stereo system." But the point I am trying to make is that the high-end has moved too far toward ultra resolution, following some insane Pied Piper who plays tunes of DVD and SACD technology. Live, as at Tanglewood, I do not hear razor sharp transients, there are no overlapping, intermodulating harmonic envelopes, and no pants-flapping bass as comes from subwoofers bigger than refrigerators.

Very recently I sat listening to a wonderful \$100,000 system comprising two eight-foot lowers and eight 18-inch sub-

woofers. The piano I listened to on this system did not sound like my fond recollections of the piano which accompanied Kyung-Wha Chung at Tanglewood. I believe, that without realizing it, all listening to that expensive system were unconsciously just sitting there and listening around the imperfections and filling in the blanks. To be fair, this highly dynamic, ultra-revealing system was just passing along all the digi-bits that were on the disc, the majority of which had no soul. The Atma-Sphere MA-1 amplifiers are not in that camp. As a matter of fact, they don't sound exactly like S.E.T. amps or my three other amps which are a vintage tube ultra linear, a tube-Mosfet hybrid, and a muscular Mosfet power pumper. Ralph Karsten's OTL amps seem to me to have a unique sound of their own. I think you will agree.

All of this only serves to remind me of the thin line we all walk in our search to fill our souls with music. Straight out of the box, you could not take the measure of how musical these instruments from Atma-Sphere are. As a matter of fact, even after some fairly extended listening, an audiophile seasoned in the ways of things might pass them by. So at the very beginning, it will surely take the care of a tube lover's touch to appreciate their virtues. For these are not beginners' toys. You will most probably need to reimagine your system and try various speaker cable and interconnect combinations. Integrating the bass portion will be the most problematic part. Using the Argent Room Lenses room correctors made the process a lot simpler for me.

Of course, if you have a room larger than my 12 by 23-foot

rectangle, then things could well get a lot easier for you. Strange but true, in my system, I got satisfactory results crossing the bass over at 120 Hz to biamp the low end with a Hafler 500 Mosfet amplifier. Or I could cut it off entirely. Oddly, doing either of these two things only serves to increase your appreciation for the midrange and treble purity. The bottom line, at \$8,000, these amps are not cheap. However, truth does not come cheap, so you value musical verity, you truly need not look further.

If you find in tubes the subtle overtones of music, if you value an effortless presentation of voicing, pitch, timbre and timing kept separate on an expansive sound stage, if like me you heed the advice of the Zen master that "The path to enlightenment is defined by minute changes in the sonic fabric," if recorded

music occasionally slips the bonds of artifact and seems real and appears before you, then you already know the MA-1.

If not, then you know you have strayed from the path.

Epilogue

Finally, the long upward climb brings me back once again to the cool darkened interior of the monastery. The old one, although blind, has long since known of my return, having heard my footsteps from afar. Wordlessly, I sit facing him and wait.

Finally, in a faint whisper he asks, "So, Grasshopper, what have you learned?"

"Master, I have found music to be an ephemeral fabric layered over a pool of silence. Its existence is fragile. It exists in our hearts or not at all."

Imperceptibly he nods and whispers, "It is well."

NOTES

Atma-Sphere MA-1 MKII Monoblock Amplifiers, \$7,995.00 per pair. Atma-Sphere Music Systems, Inc., 160 So. Wheeler, St. Paul, MN 55105; phone 651/690-2246, fax 651/699-1175, e-mail Ralph@atma-sphere.com, website www.atma-sphere.com.

Associated Equipment

SOTA Sapphire II with electronics flywheel and custom high-current power supply; Grado Signature tonearm; Sumiko Bluepoint Special and Monster Alpha One moving-coil cartridges; SOTA clamp and acrylic mat; Adcom GFT-1A tuner; BIC fm antenna; Magnavox CDB-624 CD player (digital output); Sonic Frontiers Ultra Jitterbug; Assemblage DAC-2 processor; Audio Research SP-9 Mk III preamp; Audio Research Classic 60, Hafler 500, and Heathkit WM-5power amplifiers; Quad ESL-63 speakers with Crosby grilles and Gradient SW-63 subwoofers; Arcici Deadhead turntable stand with Airhead isolation platform; VPI 16.5 record cleaner; Radio Shack SPL meter; Esoteric Ultra Path cables; Monster M1000 II and Audio Research Litzline interconnects; Islatrol a.c. line filter, VPI bricks, and Argent Room Lenses.

Phase Technology Teatro 7.5 Loudspeaker

Chuck Bruce

THERE'S SOMETHING FUN and rewarding about rooting around in the audio landscape, discovering that unexpected golden nugget among a minefield of audio products, and then sharing the "discovery" with fellow music lovers, especially when the sharing nudges audiophiles and non-audiophiles alike into better sound without costing them a second mortgage. It's always such a coup when a non-audiophile, one of those guys who claims he "can't hear the difference," suddenly perks up wide-eyed and exclaims: "How do I get this sound in my crib?" Ah, yes! This event will garner high-fives from seasoned listeners, those enthusiastic to share the experience with others. Another victory for persnickety ol' audiophiles and their beloved, little-known, much misunderstood, and too-often under-appreciated hobby.

Although the Teatro 7.5 has been in production since the summer of 1999 (preceded by the Model "7T"), this particular floor-standing, two-way loudspeaker was new to me, even though I'd already heard positive things about Phase Technology from several trusted, gifted-eared audiophiles. These audio-friends had told me interesting things about the firm's long business history which dates from the 1950s, their truly innovative and ground-breaking patents, and the positive reviews of their speaker systems over the years. Sometimes, these friends told me, the reviews were of United Speaker-made systems that wore badges of other brands, sometimes very famous ones. So, the stage was set for a new adventure for me, one that evolved well beyond what I had expected from such a compact tower package.

The Teatro 7.5 is one of many models from the venerable United Speaker Systems and its better-known subsidiary, Phase Technology, both of Jacksonville, Florida. The genial founder, chief designer and chairman of these firms is the genial Bill Hecht, whose strongest claim to fame is that he is father of the soft-dome tweeter. "Phase Tech" was launched in 1981 as a subsidiary of Hecht's United Speaker Systems, which itself was founded in 1955. United and Phase Technology have garnered numerous awards and accolades over these 45 years, particularly when price-performance issues are addressed.



One gets the idea that after their long and successful history, the Phase Tech folks are not trying to get rich overnight by selling a handful of stratospherically priced products in hopes of retiring early to Aspen.

Much of the parent company's production past and present is devoted to OEM components for many well-known companies world-wide. In the early days these included Fisher Radio, Electro-Voice, McIntosh, Pioneer, Dynaco, Fried, et al.

Mr. Hecht is most famous for his widely used and often copied soft-dome tweeter (Patent #3328537) from the 1960s. Long out of patent, the design is now nearly ubiquitous in loudspeaker applications world-wide. This innovative driver with its follow-on metal and silk derivatives has probably moved the quality of music listening forward as much as any other single loudspeaker compo-

nent. President and co-designer Ken Hecht says that close attention is paid to absolute electrical and acoustic phase in the crossover design to maintain coherency between woofer and tweeter. This produces a substantially symmetrical power response in both time and frequency domains.

The Jacksonville Jaguars football team may not have made it to the Superbowl this past January, but the Teatro 7.5 loudspeaker from Jacksonville's Phase Tech is indeed a winner.

Bill's son Ken Hecht is on the list of corporate officers as president and co-designer, and he cooks up some pretty impressive designs himself. These days, father and son work as a collaborative team, with Bill serving as the accomplished and seasoned evaluative listener, while Ken conducts computer-based measurements. Listening panels are also utilized to further refine the

final design and "voicing." When the father and son tandem meet to apply their respective tweaks, Phase Tech gets a product that both sounds good and measures well.

To The Listening Room


I fed the Teatro 7.5 source material from an eclectic mix of gear, the variety of gear that is often found in real-world audiophile systems. It's not one of those sets of glamorous, reference-only components, out of reach for mere mortals. The elements comprise vacuum-tube and solid-state electronics, were assembled over a moderate length of time, and are both vintage and fairly new components, some costly and some not so damaging to the wallet. I attempted to conduct this review in a "real world" setting to provide a measure of what many music-loving audio buffs will actually encounter in one another's

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er's homes. I used a variety of both LP- and CD-based material, discs I felt were able to reveal the full dynamic and capabilities of this loudspeaker.

For technical openers, the Teatro 7.5 is a finely finished mini-tower, of modest height at 36 inches with a small footprint. The two-way, rear-ported design features a one-inch fabric dome tweeter and seven-inch long-throw mid/woofer. This box is beautifully finished in rosewood laminate over ¾-inch medium-density fiberboard (MDF). Black ash laminate is also offered. The loudspeaker and all of its major components are produced in-house at their very substantial Jacksonville factory. The cabinet's front corners are nicely beveled and the sexy, sculptured integral spikes anchor the 7.5 effectively to the floor, with the expectation of tightening the bass.

The Teatro 7.5's sensitivity is said to product 90-dB SPL for one watt at one meter, which

makes it a good candidate for use with low-power amps, especially single-ended tubes, which I shall highlight. The system is also magnetically shielded for home theater applications, and is designated as part of the firm's value-oriented offerings. Phase Tech has, however, other more-costly offerings including some fairly pricey premium models. But priced at \$600 per pair, the Teatro 7.5 is a definite value.

The people from Phase Tech's national distributors, Stewart Greenberg and Eric Bernstein of Assured Systems, delivered the Teatro 7.5s to my home some time past and asked me where they should set up the speakers. As a starting place, I pointed to a location well out into my ample listening room. The Assured folks rolled their eyes, and they said, "Are you sure?" When I answered in the affirmative, they appeared to start mumbling to each other, "Oh boy, here we go! How much bass will we not get in this position?" However,

from my point of view, I was initially curious about how these speakers would perform without a nearby wall or corner to work against for reinforcement.

Not to worry, gentlemen from Assured, right out of the box, these modestly dimensioned loudspeakers appeared up to the task of producing sufficient bass in my big listening room. No, we didn't get bass that flapped your pants legs, but what we did get, and what I continue to get, is a tight and in many cases palpable bass that's solidly down to and beyond its specified -3 dB rolloff point of 38 Hz. (That's just below the open E note on a bass guitar, and well below anyone's vocal range.) The realization here, even in a large room, is the 7.5's bass output coupled with its 90-dB sensitivity (efficiency in layman terms) produced some remarkable bass, even at low volume levels. There's something reassuring about good bass. Confirming that the world will go on, the stock market will rise again and your kid will get a scholarship.

An ear and soul stirring low-frequency *whoosh* . . . was heard and felt with regularity during my testing of the 7.5s. Even though the woofer rolls off at a 24 dB per octave slope below 38 Hz, the slope typical for bass-reflex designs, there is still ample low-frequency energy available into the next lower octave or down to about 25 Hz or so. It's that low end of the audio spectrum where we appreciate those low organ pedals, low string basses, big kettle drums, and the far left-hand keys on the piano; that's where much of music's rich heart and foundation lives. (As reference, the acoustics of my listening room are considered either medium-live or neutral with a short delay

NOTES

Phase Technology Teatro 7.5 loudspeaker, \$600.00 per. pair. Phase Technology Corporation, 6400 Youngerman Circle, Jacksonville, FL 32244; phone 888/742-7385, fax 904/771-7793, website www.phasetech.com.

Associated Equipment

McCormack ALD-1 balanced preamp with phono; SMC stereo power amp (originally McCormack DNA-1, re-engineered and re-configured by Steve McCormack to full balanced); McCormack Signature edition CD player as transport; Parasound 1100HD D/A; Audio Research Reference 1 preamp; Audio Electronic Supply AE-One P preamp; Audio Electronic Supply SE-1 Signature power amp; Sonographe SG-3 (conrad-johnson) turntable with Sumiko MMT arm and Benz-Micro M 0.9 MC cartridge; Harmonic Technology, Esoteric Audio and Kimber cabling; Black Diamond Racing shelving; Torumat record-cleaning fluid; Torumat contact cleaner, and IDOS power line filter.

time. Physically, it is a rather generic, yet ample rectangular (16 feet wide x 28 feet long x 8 feet high) residential space featuring heavy carpeted floors over concrete, reflective laminated wood-panel walls, an acoustical tile ceiling, and a wall behind the equipment end that's 50 per cent glass. Seating is mostly leather. This live and damped materials mix offers pleasing acoustics and I have not found the need for extra sound treatment (which pleases my bride to no end), not even in the corners at this time. Loudspeaker placement is typically in front of the short wall, a third of the way into the room. I mention this as we often share our "real world" listening spaces with families or significant others, and our acoustic treatment and set-up configuration options may be limited.

The Teatro's midrange is accurate and dynamic as befits

the material, yet largely uncolored, rendering piano and vocals, especially females, dead-on. On the top end, the 1-inch soft dome performed as expected, smooth, extended and without strident artifacts or ringing. This characteristic is what makes fabric domes lovable. The overall presentation was extremely smooth with excellent driver integration, drawing little attention to itself or the 2-kHz crossover point. Nor is there any distracting cabinet coloration. Whether classical, blues or jazz, rock or pop, or opera alike, the Teatro 7.5 addresses them all with equal vigor, and left me wanting to play more and listen more. Indeed, this is a most remarkable loudspeaker, one to which I've become quite attached. And it was a big and pleasant surprise, as things turned out, to find that I could own a pair without breaking the bank.

The attributes of two-way designs are well known and the Teatro 7.5 admirably continues the tradition. The advantage in this particular design is its larger cabinet relative to the usual volume we often find in stand-mounted, bookshelf-sized two-ways in this price class. The larger cabinet gives the designer the choice of some combination of lower bass or greater output. The 7.5 has an overall fuller, more robust "mid-field" presentation, neither in your face or too laid back. A spacious and deep soundstage is another salient attribute if you play better recordings. You get first-rate off-axis listening and a real sense of space and air if your records were done in great orchestra halls. The better and more natural the recording (and electronics), the more sense of space is conveyed. The 7.5 plays well the signals it's presented. You may not get as

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much soundstage height as with taller reproducers that have greater radiating areas, yet the lateral soundstage is about as good as it gets.

An overall presentation that does not demand a subwoofer. Matter of fact, I eschewed use of a sub with the 7.5 because I wanted to hear all of the music

in as natural a form as possible. I'm not against subwoofers when done right, just in this case I was seeking sonic purity from an obviously well-implemented two-way design. There's lots to be said for simplicity and a good cognac by the fire.

A lot of fun was had via LP and my little 7-watt-per-chan-

nel, Western Electric 300B tubed Audio Electronics SE-1 Signature kit-built power amp. Vinyl was spun by a vintage, yet still capable Sonographe (from conrad-johnson) turntable with a Sumiko MMT arm combo, sporting the remarkable Benz Micro M 0.9 moving-coil cartridge. Audiophiles are most always amazed by the musical performance of little low-parts-count amps like the Audio Electronics and non-audiophiles are thrown aback with the fact you can fill a large room with music with so little power. Teatro 7.5's 90-dB SPL sensitivity is a big help here. On the other hand, when you drive a revealing loudspeaker like this with copious amounts of rock-solid power such as you might get from Steve McCormack's SMc./DNA-1 stereo power amplifier, you will further appreciate the power and dynamics possible with this loudspeaker.

What really counts is how this loudspeaker made me feel. Did it capture my imagination and transport me to places far and wide, past and present? Did it make me want to play many of the favorites in my CD and LP collection, not just showpieces? I've always thought the music listening experience should be fun, invoking a genuine emotional response. Yes, indeed, these little rascals did the job and then some.

I most always invite both golden-eared and layman listeners in for extended sessions to gather their unbiased opinions, which are oft peppered with candor. I must say that with the modest, yet attractive Teatro 7.5s, I had numerous folks requesting return visits, during which they brought in their favorite reference LPs and CDs. The LP bringers were the most

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fun, with one exclaiming, "I just didn't remember how good this LP sounded." Since the speaker is the final window into the music, that's high praise, indeed.

The Teatro 7.5 positions instruments and performers on stages both large and small with a high level of realism and perspective. This is equaled by only a few loudspeakers in any price class, let alone this class, and it's topped off by an honest, relaxed nature, not an in-your-face attitude. This draws the listener into the music, rather than keeping him thinking about the mechanics involved.

In the past I've encountered very remarkable and cost-effective loudspeakers from noted manufacturers such as Sound Dynamics, NHT, Paradigm / AudioStream, Spica, and Fried, and here I've encountered what seems to be a better price/performance ratio. Now, part of this may simply be the advances in materials available to designers, but I think that for its price class, the Teatro 7.5 moves the price-performance standard forward and then some. A truly engaging loudspeaker, visually, electro-mechanically and musically.

Why so much copy for a speaker that is only \$600? Because this speaker is so good sonically, and yet hits this very tough budget target. If a firm has a \$6,000 price in mind, a designer can get a little wild, design-wise, but not at this price point. Incidentally, I hear there is a new 7.5 VDT coming along soon, which will have a vapor-deposited titanium woofer, but cost just \$50 more per pair.

Give the Teatro 7.5 an audition; it may just be your Tropical Island favorite. And have some change left over to get there, while never looking back to the mainland.

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Soliloquy SM-2A3 Loudspeakers

Robert H. Perry



I WAS SURPRISED when the editor faxed me and said I was going to receive some speakers and amps for review. He didn't ask if I was interested in this type of assignment but he didn't have to. For me this was a dream come true, the chance to play with new, exotic gear in the comfort of my own listening room. The editor's basic directive for my mission was, despite the fact that the Soliloquy SM-2A3 speakers and Cary 2A3 monoblocks were designed as a "system," that I was to also evaluate the speakers separately by plugging the SM-2A3's into my own all Naim solid-state system.

Any audiophile could understand the excitement I felt when UPS delivered the big boxes to my office. This was my first chance to review some serious gear. Lunchtime came and I went home with my helper Tim and we installed the Soliloquy SM-2A3 speakers. I was directed by Bernie Byers of Soliloquy to put at least 50 hours on the speakers before any "serious" listening. I began logging speaker hours in my notebook.

The manufacturer was adamant that I only listen to these speakers with the Cary 2A3 monoblocks since the speakers were designed to compliment these amps as "a system." But I persisted with Bernie and it was determined that my Naim NAP 250 would not be too powerful for these delicate drivers at the SPLs I anticipated listening, i.e. 75 to 92 decibels. I was warned that applying too much power to the tweeter could cause it to "fly across the room in several pieces." But I had the speakers and I didn't have the tube gear, so I did the natural thing and followed my editor's directive. Into my NAIM system went the SM-2A3s, replacing my large floor-standing KEF Reference 2s.

The SM-2A3s are a very attractive, monitor-sized, two-way speakers, finished in deep rosewood veneer. Build quality is first rate and they looked very handsome in my room. I want furniture-quality joiner work in my speakers, which the Soliloquys deliver. There is no provision for bi-wiring. The appearance of these speakers is enhanced by the stout and nicely finished and proportioned stands with matching rosewood plinth mounted above the metal base plate. The spikes are big and business-like and very easy to adjust and lock. I thought the reduction in speaker bulk enhanced the look of my room. Aesthetics do count.

The first weeks I had the speakers I played them for my audio pals and noticed it took only seconds of listening for

each listener to break into a big smile.

Consistently, the listener's perceived value/price of the speakers was considerably more than the actual retail price. It was three weeks before I learned the price of the speakers and I too had estimated the cost of them at nearly double the retail price. When we learned that these speakers cost \$1,995 with stands, the reaction was again a consistent "Wow!"

Mated with my NAIM gear, the sonic nature of these speakers is—in two words—"detailed and dynamic." They reveal a lot of the music without being overly dry. The high-end crispness they show is very musical. These speakers are outstanding in their ability to image. These boxes totally disappear. Instruments and voices are layered in a deep soundstage and the imaging is pinpoint in its focus. My room has the speakers flanking my fireplace and at times voices and instruments appear to flow from the depths of the fireplace. One non-audiophile friend asked seriously, "Do you have a speaker in the fireplace?" I understand that imaging may be an artifact of the stereo process, and not the actual live performance, but it is still fun to experience and definitely adds to the tangible pleasure of listening.

It has also been amazing to me how these speakers image off-axis. I noticed this when I walked over to my preamp, 10 feet from the listening chair and about 50 degrees off axis. Yet there was still a tangible image, diminished but certainly there. Sitting on the couch, about 30 degrees off-axis, the image is quite satisfying.

This imaging ability has led me to ponder the effects of sharp edges on speaker cabinets. I understand the B&W Nautilus approach where there essentially is no frame beyond the perimeter of the driver, but the edges of the SM-2A3 boxes are almost sharp. In sailboat design

These attractive two-way speakers consistently won smiles from my audio pals.

(my livelihood), if we are trying to shed a flow vortex in the water, we will use a sharp edge, preferably a knife edge. Rounded and radiused edges tend to pull waves around corners and result in bigger, uncontrolled vortexes. In worst-case situations we get what we call a "collapsing vortex phenomenon" where the wrapping flow collapses and begins lapping back onto itself, creating oscillating harmonic flow havoc. If there has to be an edge to the box for pragmatic fabrication reasons, perhaps this sharp edge works best. Maybe I'll take a

carpenter's plane to one of the SM-2A3s and see what happens with the edge beveled!

I played around with placement for the first two weeks before adding 25 pounds of "audio-grade" sand to each stand. I found that 7.5 feet, center to center, with a 10 to 12 degree toe-in worked best. There's enough top end to these speakers that being this far off the tweeter's central axis does not result in noticeable loss of high frequencies. The design of the stands allows you to swivel the speakers to adjust toe in during positioning experiments without fussing with the spiked base placement. I have them 20 inches out from the back wall as suggested and 8 feet from the side walls.

Adding the sand has helped the bass, but this is the one area of performance of this small speaker that I feel might disappoint over time. I'm wrestling with it. On some recordings, there's no deep bass and very little mid-bass. Still, the overall character of the speakers at doing what they do well is so

N O T E S

Soliloquy SM-2A3 Loudspeakers, \$1,995.00 per pair with stands. Soliloquy Loudspeaker Co., 2613 Discovery Ave., Bldg. A, Raleigh, NC 27616; phone 919/876-7554, fax 919/876-2590, e-mail info@solspeak.com, website www.solspeak.com.

Associated Equipment

Naim Nap 250 power amplifier, Naim NAC 82 preamplifier with two HiCap power supplies, Naim CDX CD player, Naim Black Snake and Kimber interconnects, Linn LP12 turntable with Valhalla and modified Rega RB300 tonearm, Lyra Clavis de Capo moving-coil phono cartridge, and KEF Reference Model Two loudspeakers, with Analysis Plus Silver Oval and Naim standard speaker cables.

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enjoyable that it has become very easy to overlook the frequent lack of bottom. However, on other recordings there seems to all the bass you could want. There's times when I am moving around doing housework that I think I might prefer the KEFs with their big bottom end. But when I take the time to sit down and really listen to the Soliloquys, I end up with that silly grin again.

(After three months I bought a Hsu subwoofer and added it to the system. The effect was astounding. After a large amount of level and crossover fiddling, I achieved a near-seamless marriage of the Soliloquys and the Hsu. I ended up with the sub tucked behind a large, leather couch! An audio friend listened for half an hour before I told him there was a sub in the system. This is certainly a sound I can comfortably live with long term. I sometimes look at the little SM-2A3s and ask myself "Are you sure you want small speakers?" but then I close my eyes and listen and answer myself, "Yes".)

One downside of the detailed presentation is that it brings out the worst in less than audiophile-quality sources. I try to like CDs. God knows I have enough money invested in them and my NAIM CDX does a creditable job with them but they can sound so . . . "constipated" I think is the word. On CDs that feature vocals with minimal instrumentation the sound is fine. Wrecking Ball, Pilgrim, Alison Krauss' So Long So Wrong sound great as do solo piano pieces. The Art Pepper CD The Art of the Ballad sounds particularly good, with all the bottom you could want. The dynamics through the bottom end on this recording are very impressive. Large orchestral

works get congested. I'm not sure how they get an entire symphony orchestra squeezed down to sound like a piano accordion but they do on the Mahler 2nd Symphony with Leonard Bernstein conducting on a Sony CD.

Regarding volume levels: I have three basic volume levels in my house. The lowest is the "can you turn that down?" level that accommodates my wife. The second level is the level at which I prefer to listen and that's around 75 to 85 decibels. The loudest level is the "washing the car" level (hey! I want music while I wash my car.) This level approaches the 92 decibel reading. The SM-2A3s sound great at all levels and have never given any indication of self destruct mode at the upper level. They sound very strong.

I now have over 50 hours on the SM-2A3s. Time to start serious listening.

Last night I pried my mind open and tried the Mahler symphony again. I picked up my new Acoustic Sounds catalog to browse while I listened. It was soon apparent that the music had become an annoying noise that I was blocking out. It was interfering with my reading. I put on some vinyl, Ben Webster's Soulville on Verve. This lasted about two minutes. Herb Ellis's guitar playing is wonderful, but his old tube amp sporadically distorted sound gets on my nerves. I can appreciate controlled distorted guitar, but in the otherwise clean delivery of a small jazz combo, it just irritates me. I took that LP off.

Next I tried a Barney Kessel LP Spontaneous Combustion, originally a Verve record and re-released by Contemporary Records. I never read anyone talking about this LP but it is truly a great LP. The music is

head-noddin', toe-tappin' good and the sound is near perfect. "Hey! I'm talking to you!" the LP seemed to say, and I had to put down my reading material. Spike, my 18-ear-ld son came into the room. "That sounds good." I relinquished the chair. He sat with eyes closed for a while. He is always a valuable and unbiased litmus test for gear. "There's plenty of bass in this recording," he volunteered. His own speakers are Nestorovics and I assure you they have bottom to burn. "This is good music, he volunteered. This comes from a kid who usually prefers The Chemical Brothers. It makes me feel good to see musical doors open to Spike, and I have to believe the hinges of those doors are greased by high-quality music reproduction. We sat there together, heads noddin', toes tappin', enjoying one of those precious moments of audio-glued bonding.

The SM-2A3s do a great job with the textures of different instruments. It's that detail thing again. The attack on a finger-picked guitar is vivid. You can almost tell how the guitar player's fingernails are clipped. Double basses are such wonderful instruments when it comes to covering wide textural ranges. I can't imagine the bass sounding better than it does on the Barney Kessel recording on this particular system. You have to take this into careful consideration when it's offset by the initial feeling of a weak bottom end.

I wanted to try a stretch and put on the reissue of Roy Orbison's All Time Greatest Hits on DCC Compact Classics. Roy was the dominant voice of my junior high years. His sincerity and serious delivery gave credibility and nobility to the emo-

tions of a 15 year old. How can little hearts hurt so bad? Roy's voice in those days lacked the power and control of his later years. In the early days, his voice was all delicate nuance. I've heard just about all the re-recorded versions of Roy's songs but that night, listening on vinyl to the frugal original sessions, I was transfixed with the joy of listening to that voice from my past reproduced in such intimate detail that I could almost smell the interior of my '55 Olds. (I wonder if they make an aroma therapy candle that smells like that?) Again the textural contrast of the out front, edgy "Dum dum dum dumbey do waas" was layered and juxtaposed against the silky smooth Orbison vocal lead. In this area the SM-2A3s rule. I think I'm getting addicted.

I've had the SM-2A3s for over three months now. If they can sound better with the Cary amps than they do with the NAIM gear, I will be very impressed. I have decided, after switching them in and out of my reference system, trading them with my KEFs, that I will buy these samples. I've made the switch about four times, each time leaving the Soliloquy speakers in for about a week. I came home one night and my system, with KEFs in place, was just not sounding "right." The sound was muddy and dull. You know that feeling. After musing on the cause for a few moments, I brought the Soliloquys back in and removed the KEFs. "Eureka." They just do too much too well. Mated with the Hsu subwoofer, I have all the bass I want. I've grown to expect the degree of detail I am hearing with the SM-2A3s. I'm very anxious to hear them mated with the Cary tube gear.

Is that the UPS truck?

Ad Index

Alpha-Core	Cover IV
Analysis Plus	4
Anthem	1
Argent	42
Art Audio	38
Atma-Sphere	4
Audio Connection	55
Audio Line Source	24
AudioStream	1
Bel Canto	19
Clayton	43
Custom House	35
Delve	59,63
Hi-Fi Farm	13
Hsu Research	59
Hy-End	34
Induction Dynamics	9,11
Kimber	Cover II
Legend Audio	47
Lehmann	34
May Audio	46
NBS	3,insert
OS Services	48
PBN	57
Pass	39
Perpetual Technology	29
Phase Technology	21
Placete	45
Purist	23
Rogue Audio	12
Sennheiser	25
Sim Audio	33
Sony	5,6,7
Sound Station/PBN	57
Sunfire	Cover III
Totem Acoustic	58
Wright Sound	59
XLO	31,62

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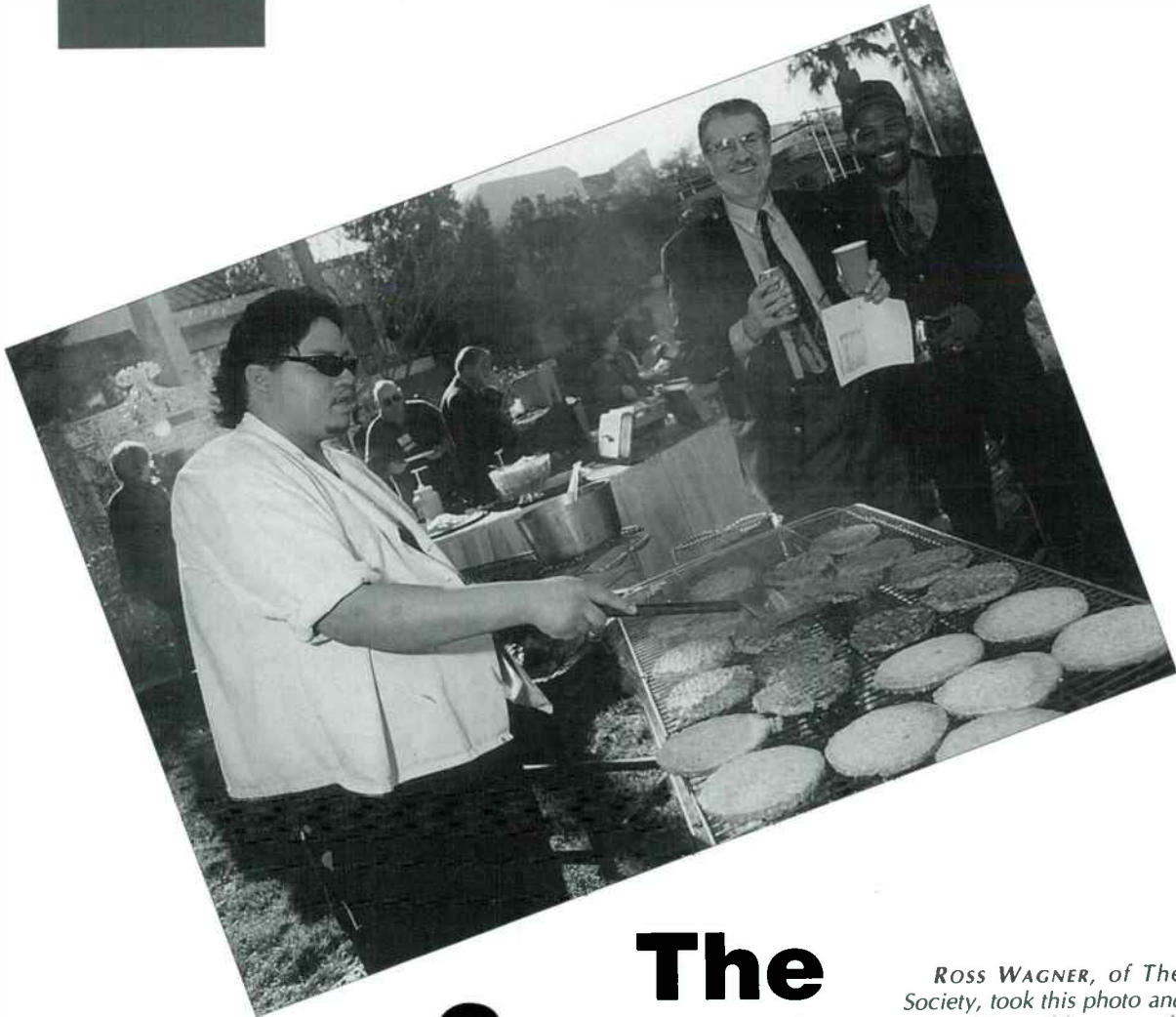
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WHO SAYS there's no such thing as free lunch? I say that's all these two members of TAV's editorial posse, Arnis Balgalvis and Clement Perry, go to Las Vegas for—the free lunches at the Winter Consumer Electronics Show. This one was provided *al fresco* at the St. Tropez Hotel, courtesy of T.H.E. Show's Mike Maloney, Todd Brown, and Brian Wolf. Wish I had the name of the cook; his burgers were great!



The Camera Never Lies!

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Editorial Conflict Notification: *Despite doing T.H.E. Show's directory as free-lance work, the Editor still thinks this photo is curious and funny enough to be published.*

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The Sensible Sound, Issue # 60

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Stereo Review, Dec. 96



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