

# THE AUDIOPHILE VOICE

"...by audiophiles, for audiophiles..."  
Volume 9, Issue 6; \$6.95 US; \$8.50 CAN

**Equipment Reviews:**  
Marantz Universal Digital Disc Player  
Art Audio Vinyl Reference Preamp  
Koss ESP-950 Headphones  
Floating Cameleon Speakers  
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**Muddy Waters:  
Classic Blues Set**

**Bob Dylan:  
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**Pablo Casals:  
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# C

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Pricing: From \$8,000 to \$20,000, depending on configuration.  
Data: [www.thetadigital.com](http://www.thetadigital.com)



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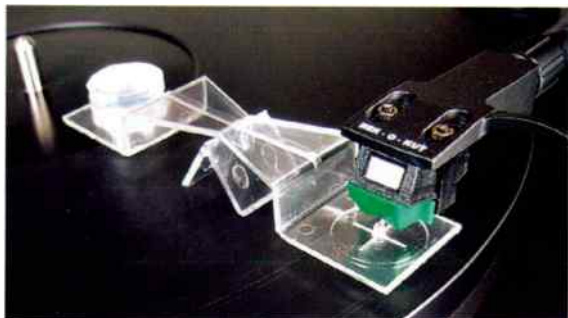
is perhaps the very most elegant solution for those with sufficient taste to appreciate the fact that new, custom-made audio furniture can both do its job and not look out of place next to period Stickley antiques. The Green S2 Audio Cabinet is truly made to fine furniture standards yet it solves the problem faced by many interior designers, lots of vertical space and insufficient horizontal area. This graceful design (and its companion S2 Media Armoire) offers convenient, removable back panels, wiring accommodation, six adjustable shelves (five shown), and is either vented or solid. The owner may choose either solid-wood frame-and-panel doors or rippled, water-textured glass doors. Related furniture includes loveseat, armchair, s2 coffee table, sofa, and étagères. Dimensions are 55.5 H by 30 W by 24 D.

Price: \$3,200.00 plus \$270 Fedex shipping.  
Data: [www.greendesigns.com](http://www.greendesigns.com) or 800/853/4234

## The Rek-O-Kut Stylus Force Gauge

from Esoteric Sound reproduces the highly accurate laboratory balance-type design of the well-known Rek-O-Kut stylus force gauge, which was very popular among high-end audiophiles during the 1950s and '60s. Stylus force gauges have all but disappeared along with turntables, and the few which remain are designed solely for use with audiophile records and turntables, and cannot measure the higher force requirements of DJs and vintage record collectors, let alone professional sound restorers and those involved with record reissues. The Rek-O-Kut stylus force gauge is made of sturdy plastic and is supplied in a plastic storage container with a set of weights for 0.25 to 5.75 gram measurements and instructions. Operation is simple and relies on the principle used in a basic laboratory balance. It is each to measure tracking forces for any audiophile, DJ, and vintage record requirement, and just as easy to upgrade to even greater force measurements.

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## L ETTERS



### Queen Anne?

Dear Editor:

Rather than reading complaints, I thought you might like to see "something completely different" for a change.

I had a pair of flat black, mundane and somewhat unattractive speakers which I had built at home. I have never owned a pair of factory-built speakers for my primary music system; I have been "rolling my own" for nearly 40 years. I have gotten pretty good at it, if I do say so. These speakers have slowly evolved into large, floor-standing, sand-damped box-in-box designs generally using Morel drivers, CFAC/Solen coils and caps, multi-amped, and have first-order 6-dB per octave rolloff, except at the 90-Hz bass point where I use a fourth-order (24-dB per octave) active crossover. The bass alignment is experimental, using, in each side, two Dayton Titanic woofers and a highly modified Earthquake passive radiator, but they are in nothing like the normal acoustic relationship. The sound is definitely "sealed box" (with all of the taut control and articulation expected with a sealed box, but the low-end extension is purely drone cone, but without such a design's normally floppy nature.

The current box was built in 1967, and has been going through constant updating since then. Each

driver now occupies its own optimally sized enclosure with a front surround little larger than the driver frame, which is chamfered back at 45 degrees to essentially eliminate a "baffle." Each side weighs about 420 pounds, and is, for all practical purposes, inert on the outer surface.

I promised my wife that I would make the enclosures into suitable furniture to blend with the family room. BUT 31 years ago, she decided that we needed a 14-room, three-story Queen Anne or Victorian-style house, the east parlor of which became the 18.5 X 18 X 12-foot listening/family room. So now the enclosures had to "fit into" this 100-year-old house style, rather than a 1960-ish ranch, quite a difference, but a promise is a promise, so I had to come up with a "Victorian" stereo system, something one does not see everyday.

Enclosed is the result of my efforts (which took a little less than five weeks, and over \$400 worth of moldings and wood appliqué. (I already had the finishing materials.) The center piece is an 1890-ish 8.5-foot high armoire (which we already had in an upstairs hallway), which holds all of the electronics, and is flanked on either side by a pair of combination "Renaissance Revival" Eastlake speaker systems, with a *faux* finish (marble panels on the sides and wood-graining everywhere else. I had never done either

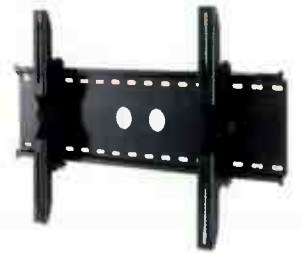


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(VTF-3) -Howard Ferstler, *The Audiophile Voice* (Vol. 8 #4)

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(VTF-3) -Robert Deutsch, *SGHT* (December 2002)

**"On a per-dollar basis...the best subwoofer known to me"**  
(VTF-2) -Peter Aczel, *Audio Critic Magazine* (2002)

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(VTF-2) -*Sound & Vision*

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before. Remember, I had to try to match both the color and the graining of the armoire, which I finished naturally with tungoil, as well as the woodwork and mantle of the room.

Look closely; this may be the only Queen Anne High End Sound System that you ever encounter during a lifetime. Prepare yourself.

Ed Heath  
Lexington, IN

### Calling Prof. Lirpa!

Dear Editor:

I was concerned when I read your review of a Lirpa 1 THX Thunderbolt power amplifier, a model which I had recently purchased for home theater application. You stated that the amp had not reproduced explosions realistically (stating the sound to be a bit on the "bright" side).

You should know that I am not the kind of person who ignores such comments. Years ago a similar publication suggested that my home audio system could not reproduce the cello accurately. I went through the trouble of arranging for a cellist to give a brief performance in my living room (Haydn's Concerto in C) and found that the system did, in fact, benefit from equalization in the lower bass range.

Testing your un-verified comments on the nature of explosions reproduced by my power-amplifier was more formidable, though not impossible. My home theater is above my garage and semi-detached from my home, allowing for some experimentation.

Dynamite is not as difficult to purchase as many people believe, though deciding the right amount is problematic. After careful viewing of the visual effects of explosions, as well as an analysis of the audio spectrum, I subjectively determined that the house explosion in *True Lies* should be rated as a seven-stick dynamite explosion, while the car bomb scene in *Patriot Games* could qualify for no more than a five-stick rating (incidentally, the film producers were not at all cooperative.)

After removing my equipment, I carefully placed the dynamite at the location of my screen and used wide range microphones where the speakers had been (in a 5.1 THX Dolby Digital configuration). Wires, utilizing a floating ground connection, were snaked to a specially dug hole just off my driveway and cov-

ered by a concrete slab which housed the tape recorder (a flat response Nakamichi Dragon cassette deck).

Things went mostly as planned, but due to unforeseen circumstances, I was unable to continue the project for another six weeks. Once I had completed rehabilitation and the prosthetic devices were removed, I was able to rebuild the room, replace my equipment and carefully audition the tape. Since the explosion cut the wires prematurely, I have recorded what I believe is the dynamic peak, but not the long-period decay of the sound.

It turns out you people at *The Audiophile Voice* don't know what you are talking about. "Too bright," my foot! Explosions have very significant amounts of upper spectrum sound!

I did, however, find that my subwoofer was inadequate for the task and no better than maybe a four-stick rating. This certainly gives fodder to those who make a case for two subwoofers in a system. I believe that two Hsu 15-inch subwoofers would suffice for as much as a 12-stick explosion, though I haven't gotten around to proving it. I do think that manufacturers of subwoofers and those THX standards people would do well to establish a "stick" rating in addition to providing us with dynamic range and impedance figures.

Adding a second subwoofer and increasing the 40-Hz frequency response in my system certainly fixed things and went a long way toward providing that "live sound," proving that the amp was not at fault at all! Overall, I am quite pleased with my re-equalized system. Unfortunately, a cello no longer sounds like cello, but that's a small price to pay for having a 12-stick system to demonstrate to the neighbors!

You-Know-Who@att.net  
via e-mail

### Gee, Thanks

Dear Editor:

Let it be known, your magazine is magnificent! I've been reading it for about a year, even though it is difficult to find on the newsstand. Enclosed, therefore, is a check for a subscription, and I look forward to what the future may bring.

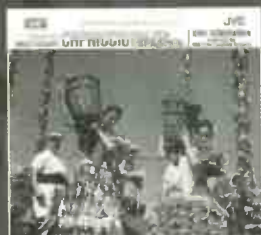
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## KHACHATURIAN MASQUERADE SUITE / KABALEVSKY THE COMEDIANS KONORASHIN / RCA VICTOR SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

JMXR-24014

In 1938 Kiril Kondrashin became the first Soviet conductor ever to come to America and is now considered by many as the greatest conductor the Soviet Union has ever produced. Here he conducts with splendor Khachaturian's delightful suite *Masquerade* and Kabalevsky's droll score *The Comedians*. Hear the brilliance of these works as recorded originally by RCA and mastered and manufactured by JVC using their special XRCD<sup>24</sup> process.



## ART PEPPER BESAME MUCHO

VICJ-61158

This is the second live Art Pepper album recorded in Tokyo in 1979 to be released on XRCD<sup>24</sup>. Recorded by JVC at the Shiba Yubin Chokin Hall, this album features the recognized talents of George Cables, Tony Dumas and Billy Higgins. Includes the Pepper standards: "The Shadow of Your Smile," "Mambo De La Pinta" and "Besame Mucho," a Pepper fan favorite. The incredible sound of this recording makes you feel like you are actually there! This is one release that is a must for any Art Pepper collection.



## SALENA JONES ROMANCE

VICJ-61157

Accompanied by Dave Grusin on vocals and piano as well as the talents of John Parricelli, Tom Gordon, and Derek Watkins, this album features Salena's vocal interpretations of 15 well-known Classical pieces. Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Chopin and Debussy are combined beautifully with lyrics of love and romance written by Salena Jones. Recorded in England at the Angle Studios in 1998, these stunning pieces were arranged by Alan Benec. Salena's sleek and sensitive vocal style never sounded better than on this XRCD<sup>24</sup>.



## HELEN MERRILL SINGS THE BEATLES

SVCD-1043

Often compared to Billie Holiday, Helen Merrill is considered one of the top jazz vocalists of her time. She has recorded over 40 albums, including her hit *What's New*, considered by many in Japan as the best jazz album in the last 50 years. Arranged by pianist Masahiko Satoh, *Helen Merrill Sings the Beatles* was recorded live in the studio in Japan in 1970 and includes such hits as "Let it be," "Lady Madonna," and "Here, There and Everywhere."

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**JVC**

# E DITORIAL

Gene Pitts

## Digital Doings

I HAVE SAID FOR SOME time that recording industry executives apparently think that they are in the “packaged goods” business, that the shiny discs they sell in those shrink-wrapped clam-shells they call “jewel boxes” actually **are** the music, and that the quality of the music makes little difference since album sales will go up if appropriate colors are used on the parts visible in the store rack. One of the more obvious types of packaged goods selling is laundry detergent, and I call your attention to the fluorescent colors used on such boxes. The brightness of the colors is often the only major difference between two brands in such a category. But I can always tell Yo-yo Ma from Springsteen; I suspect that you can too.

But “digital piracy,” that is the copying or downloading of digital content such as music from a CD or a movie from a DVD, needs a well-considered response, says a recently released report entitled “Promoting Innovation and Economic Growth: The Special Problem of Digital Intellectual Property.” “These problems, perfect copies of high-value digital works being transmitted instantly around the world at almost no cost, require clear, concentrated thinking, rather than quick legislative or regulatory action.”

This policy recommendation comes from the Committee for Economic Development (CED), which is a sort of business think-tank. The CED is more than 60 years old and describes itself as a “non-profit, non-partisan organization of more than 200 business leaders and university presidents.” A quick scan of their Research and Policy Committee shows quite a few outfits whose names I recognize, e.g. IBM, The Brookings Institution, TIAA-CREF, Duke Univ., BankAmerica, BellSouth, Diebold, General Electric, Korn/Ferry, Deloitte Touche, Verizon, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Northwestern Univ., Ford Motors, et al. I’m certain that my lack of recognition of the others has to do with my lack of knowledge in this area.

Charles Kolb, the group’s president, says they “are concerned about any roadblocks to innovation. Logical and fair solutions to the intellectual property rights challenges presented by the digital world are needed to ensure that this issue does not severely hamper economic growth.”

The report discusses the history of copyright law and says that industry adopted to and, in fact, was strengthened by the player piano, the phonograph, radio, and the VCR.” Those who have been around long enough will remember how vigorously the record companies resisted investment in manufacturing facilities for the



Compact Disc. They, in fact, resisted so hard that many wound up being sold to early investors in the new technology, that is foreign-based record firms. I well remember loud screams to the effect that there was no need to invest in such high-quality record-making because consumers wouldn’t pay more for the CD than they were paying for the LP. And some in the industry even claimed that consumers ought not have recordings of such quality, as they would only use them to make and sell copies, and never buy them or listen to them. I suspect that the record company guys don’t listen. And yet the CD and now the DVD are great success stories.

Jerry Del Colliano, Publisher and principal writer of his web-zine AudioRevolution.com, reports in his March 3rd edition, that the rock band Metallica is going to sell MP3s of each live show. His cited source is the band’s website, [www.livemetallica.com](http://www.livemetallica.com). Writes Jerry:

“No band has taken (or perhaps deserved) more fan criticism for their stance on peer-to-peer file sharing than Metallica. In a move starting in April and clearly designed to restore some of the band’s lost good faith with its most hardcore fans, Metallica will now record and sell live versions of each of their concerts for \$9.95 in MP3 formats and \$12.95 for FLAC files.

“The band’s outspoken drummer, Lars Ulrich, is quoted on LiveMetallica.com saying ‘This is the next logical step in a process that began back in 1991 when we first implemented the Taper Section at our shows, where our fans were encouraged to bring in their own gear to record the show, and then take home their very own bootleg of the concert they had just seen. This technology will enable our fans to get the best possible recording of the show, without having to hold a microphone in the air for the entire night!’

“The most serious fans can pre-order 34 shows before they are happen which allows the band a creative new way to make significant new revenues from their most enthusiastic fans each and every night of a tour. At the same time the band continues to try to outfox illegal bootleggers by taking their products directly to their customers.

“As a business, this move is likely to be a smash hit. Yet on another level, if the band wants to repair burnt bridges with more of their fans, they might find a way to record a studio album that is also a hit. Their St. Anger album, featuring their producer playing bass for much of the record, is considered to be one of rock’s worst studio records ever – up there with Van Halen III.”

I wonder if they are using those 320,000 names and e-mail addresses that they sued Napster for to prime this pump. Wouldn’t it be interesting if that had been their business plan all along?



# Obituary



## Peter James Walker Founder of the Quad loudspeaker firm

Acoustical Manufacturing Company, the corporate parent of the Quad loudspeakers and electronics, announced the death of Peter Walker, OBE and D. Sc. Although he had not been actively involved in running the company for several years, his work and philosophy remain an inspiration to everyone at Quad.

Geoffrey Horn, an industry professional, one time colleague and lifelong friend of Peter Walker, has written the following passage.

"Peter J Walker OBE DSc founder of the Acoustical Manufacturing Company – later better known as Quad, died peacefully at the age of 87 on Wednesday December 10<sup>th</sup>. Formed in 1936 as a one-man business specializing in amplification for public address, he was bombed out of his London works early in WW II and settled in Huntingdon. After the war, with a burgeoning public regard for music, he decided the time was right to diversify into what became known as high fidelity. Designing and producing a series of amplifiers and loudspeakers, he soon established his company as a leader in its field; his products were always notable for novelty of approach and economy of design.

"A long-held belief in the possibility of making a different type of loudspeaker based on electrostatic principles became his most important life's work, and he spent many periods of intensive research, spread over

the years, fighting the many hurdles the project threw up. This work led to the world's first full range electrostatic loudspeaker, which reached the market in 1957. Its successors are still very highly regarded to this day. Alongside, work on amplifiers was not neglected and his company secured the rare Queen's Award for Technological Achievement in 1978.

"Throughout his life he was also highly regarded as a man, greatly treasured by his staff and admired by the industry in general. In his early days he had played saxophone in a dance band and later in life took up the flute, performing in local orchestras. Music has always been his inspiration. Peter James Walker had been married twice, both his wives had predeceased him. He is succeeded by a daughter Victoria and a son Ross, but perhaps his real successors are the products of his brilliant mind, spread all over the world, which continue to give great joy to their owners." — Geoffrey Horn

The funeral was a private ceremony for family only. Those wishing to express their condolences are invited to write to the following address:

The Walker Family, c/o Quad Electroacoustics Ltd., IAG House, Sovereign Court, Ermine Business Park, Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, PE29 6XU, England

For further details, contact Julian Maddock at the address above, e-mail him at [jules@wharfedale.co.uk](mailto:jules@wharfedale.co.uk) or, if immediate conversion is desired, phone him at 44 (0)1480 447722; the fax number is +44 (0)1480 431767.





# Something Lost Something Gained

## Sharp's Different Approach To Digital Amplification

Dan Sweeney

**B**OTH THE SHARP SM-SX100 and the SM-SX1 integrated amplifiers are not the newest items from those "Sharp Minds," though I think they herald great market potential for the firm's new digital technology embodied in these products. Indeed, they have been reviewed elsewhere, generally favorably, but are not currently available in the broader U.S. market. (We'll take a look at their replacements later.) While I'll chance a few remarks about my own perceptions concerning the SM-SX1's sonic attributes, I am more concerned with the implications from these digital amplifiers with respect to the entire component amplifier category.

### A Momentous Change

Fifteen years ago in 1988, I wrote an article with Steve Mantz on solid-state amplifier design. The article was published in *Audio Magazine* and was much discussed at the time since it was then the only concise treatment of how the modern linear power amplifier had developed. In that piece, we noted a dearth of recent innovations in circuit design, and we predicted correctly that solid-state linear amplifiers would be fundamentally unchanged at the turn of the century from their state in the late eighties (since the year 2001 a couple of really innovative linear amps have reached the market, namely the Halcro and the new Ampzilla). We

also predicted, again correctly, that a thriving vacuum-tube market would persist into the new century. What we did not foresee was that pulse-parameter power amplifiers, primarily represented by Class D, would begin to establish themselves by the turn of the century.

I am now engaged in performing a market assessment of pulse-parameter amplification, and I see clear evidence that Class D and its kin will slowly become the norm, and that the traditional Class A/B amplifiers will lose ground across a wide range of markets including, at least to some extent, specialty audio. That this will occur within the present decade is the opinion of most large semiconductor manufacturers selling chip-based power amplifiers, and they should know. Specialty audio manufacturers of the sort that advertise in these pages will be slower to embrace Class D than the mainstream, and in fact many will never do so, but in the consumer mass market of A/V receivers and powered speakers, Class D will become utterly dominant.

The main reason for the change has to do with the fact that Class D offers higher efficiency, and thus less heat to get rid of for a given power output; the net result is smaller size and lower manufacturing costs. Measured performance, however, of Class D to date remains markedly inferior to that of the best-designed linear amps, but in the

mass market this is probably not a critical limitation. Some long-time industry watchers go so far as to question whether the poorer measurements actually result in anything audible.

The fate of the technology under consideration here, which lacks a class designation, by the way, is less clear. Sharp's bitstream amplifiers, which are definitely not Class D but are closer to that approach than to linear amplification, surpass the linearity of any true Class-D design I have seen, but do so at a cost, namely greatly reduced electrical efficiency. Whether the cost will be deemed acceptable by the marketplace remains to be determined, but already Sharp appears to have demonstrated that a quasi-digital amplifier can challenge a traditional design in both measured performance and sonics.

### Departing From D

Class-D amplifiers, often somewhat incorrectly termed digital amplifiers, utilize a technique called "pulse width modulation" to encode an audio input signal. In the classic form of the Class-D amplifier — which goes all the way back to 1947, by the way — the input signal modulates a triangle-wave carrier similar to the sync signal used in a CRT, and the resulting composite signal drives the output stage, whose operating parameters are set so that the devices turn either full



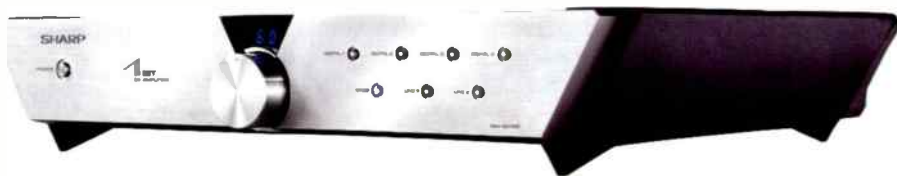
**One of Sharp's first uses of their new digital technology was in the SM-SX1 integrated amplifier.**

on or full off, with no intermediate stages. Essentially a set of switches, the output devices produce flat-topped pulses of varying width at a set frequency that is some multiple of the audio band — typically 200 kHz to 500 kHz. These pulses are then run through an analog output filter which integrates them into analog waveforms and reconstructs the input signal, albeit at *much* greater amplitude.

Why all this seeming complexity? The main reason is electrical efficiency. Because the switches are in the "off" position a good portion of the time, the output stage is not conducting any current during part of the wave cycle and therefore is not dissipating electrical energy as heat. Thus, where the efficiency of a conventional A/B amplifier is only about 50% best case, a Class-D design can exceed 90% efficiency. Such efficiency may not make much difference on one's utility bills, but since inefficiency results in high heat dissipation and the consequent need for large heat sinks, the Class-D design will tend to be considerably smaller, lighter, and less expensive to manufacture than a linear amp of equivalent output power. Indeed, in a multichannel design, the technology can support multiple 100-watt-plus channels on a *single* house circuit.

So how does "Class S" (Sharp's name for the particular technology) compare with both A/B and D?

**Sharp's SM-SX100 amp, a 100-watt unit using the new digital circuits, also appeared early on.**



First of all, the modulation technique is fundamentally different from either, though closer to Class D. Instead of the output stage producing pulses of varying width, it generates a series of identical pulses. What varies is the density of the pulses within a given time window, which in this case would be 10 microseconds, the time required to resolve a single 100-kHz tone — 100 kHz representing the limit of the amplifier's usable bandwidth.

Sharp calls the technique single-bit amplification, but the term "pulse density modulation" will probably do just as well. In fact, it is exactly analogous to the modulation used on SACDs, and the amplifiers may be considered large-power bit-stream DACs.

Seen from a distance, a graphic depiction of such a pulse train resembles an optical analog recording on film. It looks analog-like in a way that PWM does not. And yet the Sharp amplifiers are essentially digital. There is no analog modulation in the stages preceding the output. Instead, the input is immediately digitized in the case of analog line-level inputs, or simply passed through as a bitstream in the case of the digital output of Sharp's own SACD player.

Pulse density modulation is extremely spectrally inefficient, which means that the sampling rate must be *many* multiples of the audio bandwidth. The clock rate on the Sharp output stage runs at 2.8 MHz, an exceedingly high rate for devices that must switch 100 watts at full output. By utilizing such a high clock rate, Sharp has no difficulty filtering out the switching frequency itself, but each pulse contains a rich harmonic spectrum of noise spurious which extend down

into the audio band. Filtering requirements are not relaxed over those for Class D, and even with multi-pole filters, a good deal of noise is evident in the top octave. An oscilloscope trace at 20 kHz is quite fuzzy — not the smoothly undulating waveform one would encounter with a well-designed linear amplifier.

Distortion measurements are difficult to perform on these amplifiers due to the extremely high out-of-band noise which must be brick-wall filtered prior to taking distortion readings. I attempted measurements with old analog Hewlett Packard equipment and simply couldn't get a satisfactory reading, but I am informed by other reviewers who used suitably filtered Audio Precision automated test instruments that THD measures roughly 0.01% at 1 kHz — about average for a solid-state component amplifier today.

By contrast, a really low distortion design like a Boulder or the new Ampzilla will measure roughly 0.001% at the same frequency, or an order of magnitude better, while a typical tube amp will be at 0.1% or higher. So, in fact, will most Class-D amps.

So if distortion is only so-so, and noise is really bad, what is the advantage of bitstream aside from providing an all-digital signal path up to the output filter?

In purely technical sense, the advantages are pretty elusive, at least as revealed with conventional measuring tools, and in fact one can cite further disadvantages. The amplifier has zero headroom and has a hard limiter on the front end to prevent it from being overdriven, and it has limited current capabilities, producing no more output into 4 ohms than into 8 ohms. The amplifier also has a high output impedance and its frequency response is highly load-dependent, as is the case with all amplifiers having output filters. And since the Model SM-SX1 which I tried out goes for \$4,500 and its companion SM-SX100 integrated amp for 15 grand, what's there to justify the price aside from some interesting technology? Here, I'm afraid we must enter into the realm of subjectivity. It should be noted right here that these two models are no longer on the market, save perhaps in Japan, and are about to be replaced



**Sharp's SD-PX2 offers five channels  
at 35-watts each and can  
play both DVD-As and SACDs.**

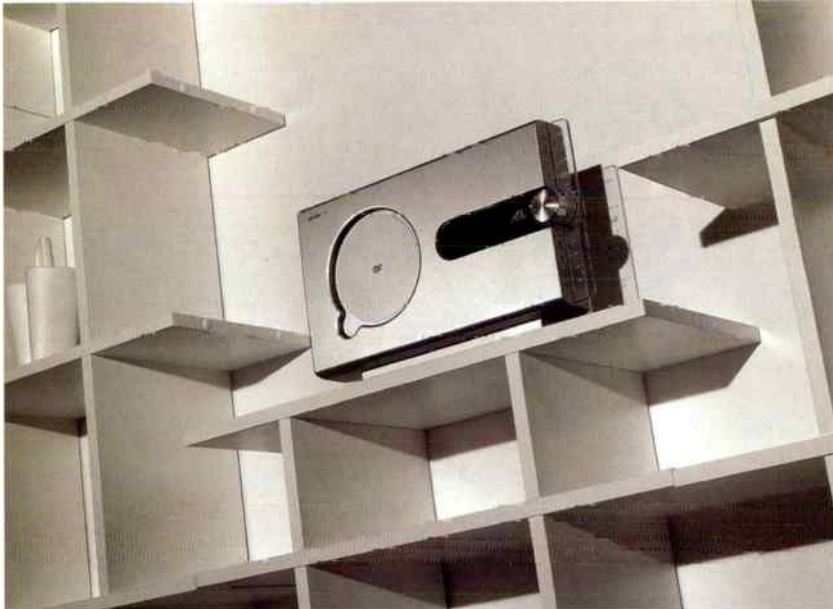
by Sharp's 5x100-watt SD-HX500 and 600 amps (the 600 adds video switching), both of which offer DVD/CD play, and the 5x35-watt SD-PX2 amp which can play both SACD and DVD-A format hi-res discs. The MSRPs of the units are: SD-HX600, \$1,499.95; SD-HX500, \$1,199.95, and SD-PX2, \$599.95

### Defying Expectations

Sharp sent me the 50-watt SM-SX1 only, not the larger 100-watt SM-SX100. Circuit design is essentially identical for both, but the SM-SX100 uses relatively exotic parts and has more extensive shielding and electrical isolation and a much larger power supply. I had on hand for comparison a pair of Wolcott Audio Presence monoblocks, which weigh in at 220 watts per channel; a Wolcott Audio Stereo Dual-120 with 120 watts per channel; the GamuT D200 (200 watts per channel); the Pathos Twin Towers (35 watts per channel of pure Class A), and the Dared DV-80 (30 watts per channel). The Wolcotts are low-distortion tube designs, the Pathos is a hybrid, the GamuT is sophisticated solid-state A/B amp, while the Dared is an ultralinear tube amp of traditional design.

I preferred the sound of the Sharp to that of any of the competing products, and, with the exception of the Dared, all these units cost considerably more. Not a trace of hardness or grain were audible, and indeed the prevailing impression was one of utter neutrality. The Sharp resembled neither the solid-state nor the vacuum tube art, having none of the colorations of either, and seemingly brought none of its own to the table. Especially notable was the reproduction of sharp transients from such instruments as piano, drums, and other percussion. The Sharp SM-SX1 evinced significantly greater realism in this regard and gave the impression of limitless dynamic range in spite of the fact that it is relatively low powered, has no dynamic headroom, and is in fact hard limited at input.

I am at an utter loss as to how to explain this inasmuch as measured performance is only average in some respects and poor in others,



though better in those cases than Class-D amplifiers perform.

### Inconclusive

Despite the sonic virtues of this design, it's hard to believe that it will ultimately prevail in the marketplace. Specialty audio is not Sharp's traditional market, and Sony, which also utilizes the technology, has confined it to the high-priced A/V DVD receiver market, a rather small niche at present.

Current implementations are both expensive and electrically inefficient, arguing against their inclusion in mass-market products, while

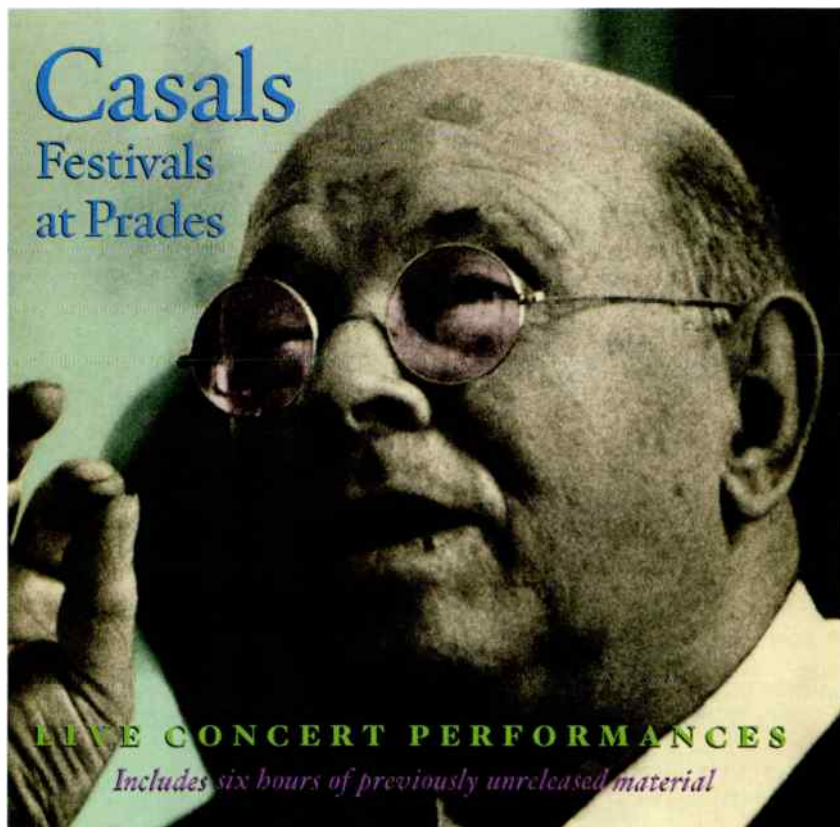
no one in the high end has yet embraced Class S, though Ed Meitner of EMM Labs has built prototypes utilizing this technology. If you can find a Sharp SM-SX1, it's definitely worth the money though; if you want to wait for the SD-PX2, the editor of this rag tells me that he's going to try to get a sample for early review and is planning to never send it back. The measurements may be only so-so, but its reproduction of music is first rate.

**The SD-HX600 adds advanced video switching to 5x100 watts.**



# Casals Collected

Benjamin Ivry



## Pablo Casals: The Prades Festival Recordings

Music & Arts CD-1113

AS A RECENT SLEW of reissues from Sony and Pearl have shown, the stature of cellist and conductor Pablo Casals (1876 – 1973) is greater than ever, and still increasing. Born in the Catalan region of Spain, Casals was more than just a mighty cellist who revived long-forgotten works like Bach's "Cello Suites," hitherto neglected. After all, the splendid pianist Artur Schnabel (1882 - 1948) performed a similar service for the overlooked Schubert piano sonatas, and yet his impact on the wider music scene was not like that of Casals. Because of his conducting and chamber music performances, the way Casals' powerful personality attracted musicians into his orbit was akin to the manner in which some of the world's greatest virtuosos took jobs in Arturo Toscanini's NBC Symphony

orchestra in order to work with the maestro. When a force of nature like Toscanini or Casals comes into view, it is a rare privilege to learn from them. Perhaps not entirely by coincidence, Casals and Toscanini were both famed anti-Fascists, although Casals paid a more direct price by retiring from his career, which began in 1891, as a protest to the overrunning of his native land by the dictator Francisco Franco. By contrast, Toscanini performed — and recorded — more than ever in his adoptive home of America, when he decided early on that Mussolini and Hitler were loathsome.

Casals, for his part, transformed a widely-ranging European career full of triumphs to become something of a recluse. As early as 1905 he formed the first touring star ensemble chamber trio with the elegant

French violinist Jacques Thibaud (1880 – 1953) and Alfred Cortot (1877 - 1962). As of 1919, he was also conducting his own ensemble, the Orquestra Pau Pablo Casals of Barcelona.

What is Pablo Casals' playing like? It is granitic, full of integrity, life, and credibility. One can compare it to the solid screen acting of Spencer Tracy, but Casals expresses a further element of spirituality, of craggy Old Testament truth that makes his performance simply truer and more impassioned-sounding than most other cellists. A work like Bruch's "Kol Nidrei," with its religious theme of a prayer for the dead, is performed by Casals (reissued on EMI and Pearl) with spiningling intensity and majesty. Just as pinpointing Toscanini's quality of nobility is elusive and only some-



what helpful to other musicians — how can we tell a young conductor to be nobler? Casals communicated his own personality, his intransigence and instinctive sense of what is right.

This sense extended to politics (again, as with Toscanini) and in 1939, he moved to the sunny but remote town of Prades in Southern France as a protest against Franco's torturing and assassinating political enemies as the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Admittedly, Casals seemed to express the possibility of retirement even when at the height of his virtuoso career. According to an often-published anecdote, during a mountain climbing excursion, a rock fell on his hand and his first reaction was, "Thank God, I won't have to play the cello again." The tyranny of an instrument over its virtuoso player, and the love-hate relationship which ensued, is something that we audiophiles generally do not have to know about, as we relax and enjoy musical results without worrying too much about the agonies that went into preparing the performance we are listening to.

However, even in exile Casals continued to attract visitors, like the wildly exuberant violinist and conductor Alexander Schneider, the splendid pianist Mieczyslaw Horszowski and others, who urged Casals to perform publicly again. At age 74 in 1950, he began to lead music festivals in Prades. In 1956 he moved to Puerto Rico, where another music festival was founded. He somehow found time in 1957 to marry a charming and very young woman, Martita Montañes, who was studying with him, in 1957. He continued to perform brilliantly on the cello into his late eighties and to conduct with passion into his late nineties, as the Marlboro Festival recordings reissued on Sony reveal so fascinatingly.

Given this context, it is possible to see why these 1950s public performance recordings from Prades is something like a Holy Grail for anyone who cares about chamber music. Part of the reason is the collaborative aspect inherent in chamber music itself. When we hear a quartet or other group, we expect cohesiveness and playing that reveals a common purpose. However, we do not expect the kind of effect that happens when a



team of great Shakespearian actors, let's say, combine their talents magically to produce an unforgettable "Hamlet." Outsized musical personalities, usually concerned with expressing their own visions, were so impressed by Casals that they became chastened in his presence. One unforgettable example of this is Isaac Stern's playing in the Sony release of Schubert's "Quintet" with Casals and a number of other musicians to be heard on this new release. Arguably, the Casals-Stern Schubert "Quintet" is one of the most expressive chamber music recordings ever made.

Amazingly, this sovereign level of achievement is often approached in this new 13-CD set of reissues from Music & Arts, an historic reissue company to watch (they have an upcoming set of previously overlooked performances by the Italian conductor Guido Cantelli which should knock audiophiles' socks off). Casals is joined by an amazing

all-star lineup which includes the violinists Yehudi Menuhin, Joseph Szigeti, Arthur Grumiaux, Szymon Goldberg, Jacob Krachmalnick, and Sandor Végh. Let's pause for moment to go over that list: Menuhin's serpentine expressivity, Szigeti's Hungarian fire, Grumiaux's laser-like purity, Goldberg's genius-level musical intensity, and Végh's Hungarian gusto have made them into musical legends all with extensive discographies that include some of the high points of recorded sound history. But who, the average audiophile might ask, who pray tell is Jacob Krachmalnick?

Part of the delight of these 13 CDs is finding top-level playing by performers who have not won the fame sweepstakes, even though in the music world, Krachmalnick was and is respected as a player in the Philadelphia Orchestra, and former concertmaster of the San Francisco Symphony. Among his rare recordings are Haydn concertos, and he

had a distinguished career as professor of violin at the University of Michigan. In short, Jacob Krachmalnick was one of America's most gifted musicians, and we can hear him alongside Casals in a 1953 performance of the Schubert "Quintet".

Another performer in that same Schubert "Quintet" is another of America's musical treasures who somehow never became a household word to most music lovers, violist Karen Tuttle, who today, some 50 years after the present recording, teaches at the Curtis Institute of Music and The Juilliard School. Tuttle studied with Pablo Casals and performed in seven of

his festivals, as well as studying with the mighty British violist William Primrose. During her long career, Tuttle was a member of the Schneider, Galimir, and Gotham String Quartets and performed at six Marlboro Festivals in Vermont under the direction of the pianist Rudolf Serkin. Tuttle's students have for generations been filling some of the most significant string playing positions in orchestras around the world. Yet most audiophiles will not have heard this magnificent musician because record companies often overlook majestic musicians, (a sad but well-known fact of life). But this Music & Arts reissue goes some way to redeem the injustice

by making it possible to appreciate Tuttle's warm tone in the Schubert, and also in a Mozart "Oboe Quartet" from 1953 that stars the immortal French oboist Marcel Tabuteau. Tuttle still goes around America teaching a "coordination" workshop. She gets into the nitty-gritty of playing, explaining how results come from a player's stance, balance, musical impulses, and emotional responses. She offers an intriguing way of arriving at a varied instrumental sound, by conceptualizing the "qualities of emotion" the player is striving for. Whereas most people just consider music as a non-verbal art, Tuttle, and her older colleagues heard here at the Casals

## *Pablo Casals Festivals at Prades Music & Arts CD-1113; 13 CDs*

Technical reconstruction of CDs 9 through 13 was by Maggi Payne and are previously unreleased. Contents of CDs 1 through 8 were previously released on Music & Arts CD sets 688 and 689.

CD# 1: Mozart: Piano Quartet No. 2 in E flat Mieczylaw Horszowski, Yehudi Menuhin, Rafael Wallfisch, Pablo Casals (1956); Schumann: Trio No. 3 in G, Op. 110 Sandor Végh, Rudolf Serkin, Pablo Casals (1956).

CD# 2: Beethoven: Trio In C, Op. 1 No. 3 Yehudi Menuhin, Hephzibah Menuhin, Pablo Casals (1959), and Trio No. 4 In D, Op. 70, No. 1 Szymon Goldberg, Rudolf Serkin, Pablo Casals (1954).

CD# 3: Brahms: Trio No. 3 In C, Op. 101 Yehudi Menuhin, Eugene Istomin, Pablo Casals (1955); Beethoven: Trio No. 5 in E-Flat, Op. 70 No. 2 Szymon Goldberg, Rudolf Serkin, Pablo Casals (1954).

CD# 4: J.S. Bach: Suite No. 3 In C, BWV 1009 Pablo Casals (Date Unknown), and Cello Sonata No. 5 In D, Op. 102 No. 2 Pablo Casals, Mieczylaw Horszowski (1953) and Trio No. 9 In G, "Kakadu," Op. 121a Szymon Goldberg, Rudolf Serkin, Pablo Casals (1954).

CD# 5: J.S. Bach: Sonata for Cello and Piano in G, BWV 1027 Pablo Casals, Mieczylaw Horszowski (1956); BRAHMS: Trio in B, Op. 8 Yehudi Menuhin, Eugene Istomin, Pablo Casals (1955) and Trio in A for Clarinet, Cello and Piano, Op. 114 David Oppenheim, Pablo Casals, Eugene Istomin (1955).

CD# 6: Schumann: Trio No. 2 in F, Op. 80 Yehudi Menuhin, Mieczylaw Horszowski, Pablo Casals (1956); Mozart: Piano Trio [sic!] No. 2 in E-Flat, K493 William Kapell, Arthur Grumiaux, Milton Thomas, Paul Tortelier (1953).

CD# 7: J.S. Bach: The Well Tempered Clavier, Book II: Selections. Mieczylaw Horszowski (1956); Beethoven: Sonata No. 1 In D, Op. 12 No. 1 Arthur Grumiaux, William Kapell (1953); Mozart: Oboe Quartet In F, K370 Marcel Tabuteau,

Orrea Pernel, Karen Tuttle, Paul Tortelier (1953) and Aria From Idomeneo, K 366 Victoria De Los Angeles, Collegium Musicum (London), Pablo Casals (conductor). (1959).

CD# 8: Brahms: Trio No. 2 In C, Op. 87 Yehudi Menuhin, Eugene Istomin, Pablo Casals (1955); Schumann: Trio No. 1 in D, Op. 63 Joseph Szigeti, Mieczylaw Horszowski, Rudolf von Tobel (1956).

CD# 9: Beethoven: Cello Sonata in F, Op. 5 No. 1 Pablo Casals, Rudolf Serkin (1954) and Cello Sonata in G, Op. 5 No. 2 Pablo Casals, Eugene Istomin (1954) and Horn Sonata in F, Op 17 Pablo Casals, Mieczylaw Horszowski (1958).

CD# 10: Beethoven: Cello Sonata In A, Op. 69, Pablo Casals, Cortot (1958) and Cello Sonata In C, Op. 102 No. 1 Pablo Casals, Rudolf Serkin (1953) and Cello Sonata In D, Op. 102 No. 2 Pablo Casals, Rudolf Serkin (1954).

CD# 11: Beethoven: Seven Variations On "Bei Männern..." Pablo Casals, Cortot (1958) and Sonata for Piano and Violin No. 6 in A, Op 30 No. 1 Mieczylaw Horszowski, Szymon Goldberg (1954) Mozart: Clarinet Quintet in A, K. 581 José Gonzales-Végh Quartet (1956).

CD#12: Schubert: Quintet In C, Op. 163 Jacob Krachmalnik, Orrea Pernel, Karen Tuttle, Madeleine Foley, Pablo Casals (1953); Mendelssohn: Piano Trio in D, Op. 49 Karl Engel, Sandor Végh, Pablo Casals (1960).

CD# 13: Schumann: Adagio and Allegro in A flat, Op. 70 Curzon, Pablo Casals. (1956) and String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 41 No. 1 Sandor Végh Quartet (1956) and Quintet for Piano, 2 Violins, Viola and Cello in E flat Major, Op. 44 Rudolf Serkin, Végh Quartet (1956).



concerts, brought a rich verbal and literary tradition to bear on the music they played. This cultural context, Tuttle seems to suggest, is not entirely lost today even if most conservatory students lack the time to read the classics, the way cultivated musicians of the past did. And so, she and her disciples suggest, that instead of just thinking "happy" or "sad" when playing music, different states of emotion like the following may bring variety and expressivity to the playing: "Longing, Flirtatious, Nostalgic, Languorous, Tender, Teasing, Coquettish, Passionate, Sentimental, Forthright, Noble, Majestic, etc."

In these performances of Bach, Mozart, Brahms, Schubert, and Schumann, the players managed to express all these emotions and many more, and Karen Tuttle has clearly spent her professional life in a solid effort to recreate the kind of noble majesty she experienced decades ago beside Casals. Not everything was noble at the festivals: In 1958 Casals' old colleague, the French pianist Alfred Cortot, turned up. But history had separated the two men irreparably. As is described to some extent in Jérôme Spycket's fine biography of the pianist Clara Haskil, Cortot was a particularly enthused collaborator with the German occupants of France during the Second World War. As head of music in Vichy France, Cortot energetically and pitilessly made sure that every last Jewish musician in France lost his or her job, and that no Jewish music was performed at concerts. As part of this movement, recordings by musicians of Jewish origin, like the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, were destroyed in the archives of French Columbia. By participating in this movement, Cortot won the lasting enmity of those who lived through the Occupation, and one can only imagine the emotions of his ex-friend Casals at seeing the ancient Cortot, whose intermittently brilliant keyboard technique had by 1958 declined with old age and infirmity.

Happily, the other pianists present offered no such musical and moral dilemmas. Famous names like Rudolf Serkin, Mieczyslaw Horszowski, William Kapell and Clifford Curzon all perform at their peak. In Mozart's "Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-Flat" (Which Music &

Arts amusingly mislabels a piano trio — one with four performers! — the fiery young American William Kapell is alongside the ultra-refined Belgian fiddler Arthur Grumiaux and emotionally near-hysterical French cellist Paul Tortelier, and this challenging meeting of personalities has wonderful results for Mozart and for the listener. Columbia engineers were present at the Prades festival, recording many of the works on the program with-

out the presence of an audience, and these recordings, many of them wonderful, have been recently reissued by Pearl. By contrast, these Music & Arts items, in honest AAD sound, include five CDs which have never been released in any form. For audiophiles who remember that these are archival items not in state-of-the-art sound quality, they are precious lessons in the humanity inherent in music-making and as such, are permanent treasures.

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# The Dylan SACD Box

Michael Tearson



COLUMBIA/LEGACY's rollout of 15 Bob Dylan catalog titles in SACD hybrid format (Super Audio Compact Disc sound plus a second stereo layer playable on all those many CD players not equipped to handle SACD playback) is the burgeoning SACD format's second great leap in the marketplace. Last year's reissue of ABKCO's London Records era Rolling Stone catalog was the first. Seven of these Dylan 15 also sport SACD 5.1 mixes, too, for surround sound.

After doing A/B listening comparisons to all 15 discs, I divided them into two groups: Those with marked improvement over the previous CD editions and those where SACD didn't make as much difference. Note that for *Blonde On Blonde*, I was using the mid-1990s remastered gold CD instead of an even earlier version.

Disclaimer: Not having a full-out surround system up and working at this time, I am reviewing here only the two-channel stereo mixes. I may be somewhat retro on this subject, but I truly prefer the two-channel stereo versions over five-channel surround which I feel plants you in place to listen to it in the way the engineer and producer intends. Feel free to disagree.

Before getting to impressions about individual albums, some general comments. Naturally with only 15 albums receiving the SACD upgrade some key items must wait for a second wave of Dylan SACDs which should emerge sometime in 2004. Heading that list are *The Times They Are A-Changin'* and *Time Out Of Mind*. Other key first round omissions include *The Basement Tapes*, the underrated *New Morning* and *Empire*

*Burlesque*. Looking at the omissions, the first round choices with the exception of the crucial *The Times They Are A-Changin'* are pretty spot on. Some might quibble with the inclusion of *Another Side*, but the explanation for that choice is compelling.

Note that no live albums are in this first wave. I have no problem with that. They can wait. The original studio recordings are far more important. On to the reissues.

## Marked Sonic Improvement

*Freewheeling* and *Another Side* are both bare-bones voice and guitar solo recordings. *Freewheeling* gains presence and subtleties. Incidental sounds during the recording emerge, sounds of pick on strings, small imperfections of voice and guitar.

*Another Side* received a full remix. This might seem surprising as one might wonder what a remix of such a simple recording could accomplish. Seems the original was a rush job on a one-day recording session which yielded the entire album; in retrospect nobody was very satisfied with the album's sound. The opportunity to rethink the whole album's sound vaulted it before *Times* in the choices for the initial SACDs. Indeed, *Another Side* does pick up a lot of improvement in presence, full-range response and other though lesser incidentals.

*Bringing It All Back Home* was also fully remixed for the SACD release but here the remix is nothing radical. It just freshens and livens up the sound. Listening to the reissue of this groundbreaking album, the first Dylan



album with electric instruments is almost a whole new listening experience. The sonic depth is much more vivid than ever before.

*Nashville Skyline*, with its preponderance of acoustic instruments, is another album that gains depth and definition in SACD.

*Blood On The Tracks*, also a mostly acoustic album, is one of the most improved albums of the lot. Again depth, definition and subtlety are remarkable. The original CD was one of the best sounding Dylan CDs, and the new SACD edition is instantly essential.

*Street-Legal* is probably the most improved album of all. By any standard, the sound on both the LP and the previous CD was poor, perhaps the muddiest, most frustrating sounding Dylan album of all. It cried out for a total rethink, and it got what it needed. It is still far from the best-engineered album around, but here for the first time the lyrics are accessible and the individual players in all the arrangements finally decipherable. Steve Douglas' sax and David Mansfield's violin and mandolin achieve some power that was previously lacking, and Jerry Scheff's bass receives its proper due here. This is how this album should have sounded all along.

The improvement on *Infidels* is subtle. The bass gets more punch and the album sounds closer. Daniel Lanois' atmospheric production on the underrated *Oh Mercy* becomes somewhat clearer and more persuasive.

### Less Substantial Improvement

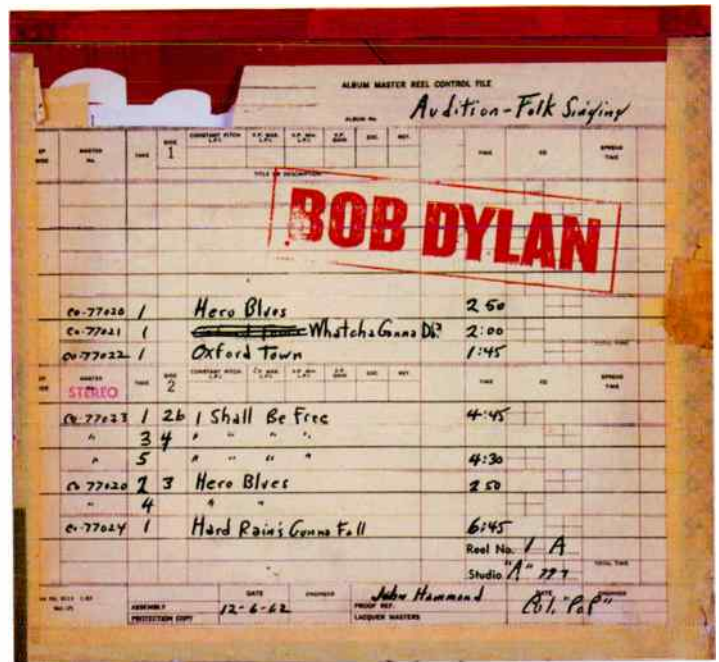
*Highway 61 Revisited* surprised me with how little changed its sound is in the SACD version. There is some added presence, plus some slightly better bass definition, but overall this brilliant landmark disc is relatively unchanged. It does sound terrific.

Perhaps because I am comparing the new SACD version of *Blonde On Blonde* to my recently remastered gold edition, this one, too, seems relatively unchanged. My research indicates the sonic polishing that was done for the gold edition, a substantial improvement at that time, was used pretty much intact for the SACD release. If you have an older *Blonde*, the SACD will likely seem to be much more of an improvement. For the SACD *Blonde*, the album has reverted to a two-CD pairing, thus restoring the double-album status of the original release. I guess this was an artistic decision by Dylan, since all of the tracks on the album can fit on a single CD quite nicely. Such a choice does make *Blonde* a bit more expensive in the making and the marketplace than any of the others.

*Planet Waves*, *Slow Train Coming*, *Desire* and *Love And Theft*, like *Highway 61*, improve slightly, but not by any great leap.

*Love And Theft* probably improves least of all, which is not surprising since it is still Dylan's most recent album of new songs. The original release sounded fresh and bright, and so does the SACD version. Certainly, it seems, the impetus to include this recording in this wave of reissues was the opportunity to execute a 5.1 mix.

Neither the Beatles nor anyone else withstanding, I will maintain Bob Dylan's catalog is the most important and influential in modern pop music. As Emmylou Harris recently wrote, "[Dylan] changed language and he changed songwriting. And therefore he changed the world. There is no artist working today that he didn't affect. Even people who don't think they were influ-



enced or claim they never listened to him, I guarantee you they were affected by someone else who was." Emmylou goes on to say that in her own songwriting when she hits a snag she refers to a little baby bracelet Gillian Welch and David Rawlings gave her. On beads the bracelet reads, "What would Bob do?" as a takeoff from the famous Southernism "What would Jesus do?"

Dylan is still the pre-eminent force behind most latter day songwriting. His songs and his albums still ring true, even when they are among the lesser achievements. (And I will hasten to note that there is great disagreement as to which, if any, are "lesser.") Having the chance to hear his recordings in a form much closer to what they must have sounded like in the studio is thrilling. I can't wait for the next wave to emerge.

By the way the next Dylan release will be a 1964 Philharmonic Hall New York City concert as *Bootleg Series, Volume 6*. It is due early in 2004, and it will appear with SACD sound.

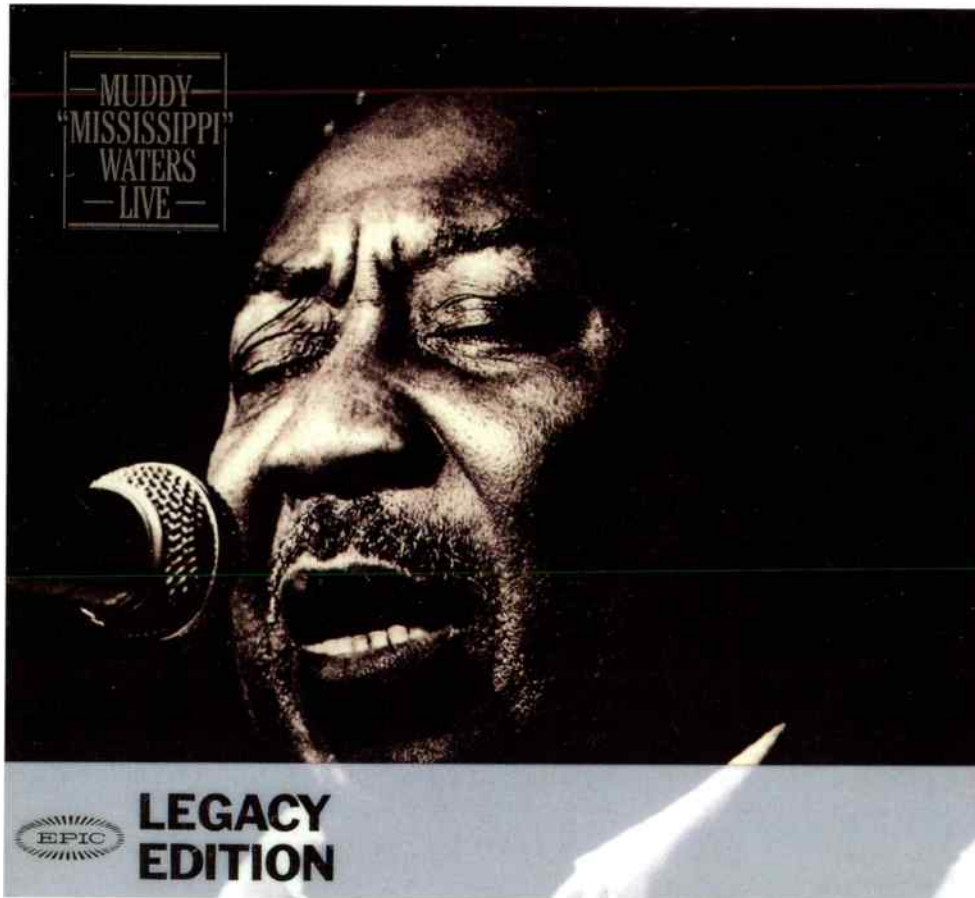
## NOTES

### SACD Stereo and SACD Surround Sound

*Another Side of Bob Dylan*, CH90327  
*Bringing It All Back Home*, CH90326  
*Blonde On Blonde*, CH90325  
*Planet Waves*, CH90339  
*Blood On The Tracks*, CH90323  
*Slow Train Coming*, CH90322  
*Love And Theft*, CH90340

### SACD Stereo

*The Freewheeling Bob Dylan*, CH90321  
*Highway 61 Revisited*, CH90324  
*John Wesley Harding*, CH90320  
*Nashville Skyline*, CH90319  
*Desire*, CH90318  
*Street-Legal*, CH90338  
*Infidels*, CH90317  
*Oh Mercy*, CH 90316



## Blues

Muddy Waters *Muddy "Mississippi" Waters Live*  
Epic/Legacy E2K 86559

**W**HEN CHESSE RECORDS let Muddy Waters go in 1975 after over 25 years there, Steve Paul's Blue Sky Records quickly signed him at the strong urging of Blue Sky artist and Paul management protégé Johnny Winter. Winter went on to produce three studio albums for Muddy: *Hard Again*, *I'm Ready* and Muddy's final studio release *King Bee*.

Blue Sky released the excellent *Muddy "Mississippi" Waters Live* just before *King Bee*. This one came

from two sets of tapes, one from a March, 1977 concert at Detroit's Masonic Auditorium with Winter joining the band and a pair of August, 1978, nights at Harry Hope's in Cary, IL, a club Muddy loved to play, one he considered a home away from home. The first disc here is the album as originally issued with running order intact and despite some reservations mentioned in the notes by Waters band guitarist Bob Margolin. Disc two is a dozen more performances from the

two nights at Harry Hope's, none of them available anywhere before this release. These extra performances make the reissue more than double the length of the original. They make the re-release a Muddy Waters fan's fondest dream. [Editor's Ear: I used to listen to Muddy at arm's length about 10 years earlier in a club named Big John's on Chicago's North Wells Street, and while I remember Muddy having more punch during the Sixties, so did I. Frankly, I think



these tracks from Hope's are about as accurate as any that are still around, so if you want to hear what the fuss around Chicago Blues is all about, go buy this excellent set. *Gene Pitts*

The annotation here does a lot to help fully appreciate the release. Robert Gordon, author of the superb *Can't Be Satisfied: The Life and Times of Muddy Waters*, wrote a biographical overview. Margolin's notes are cut-by-cut remembrances of the performances from the invaluable perspective of one who was playing on them and later got to co-produce the reissue. It would be hard for a fan to ask for better liner notes.

As for the albums, throughout Muddy is at peak form, in good health and totally at ease with his band. His own performance has the intensity of a Force 5 hurricane singing the blues. Especially on the Harry Hope's cuts, Muddy is as playful as I've ever heard him. The band has to pay full attention to stay with him. Seasoned pros as they are, they do their job admirably.

The program includes lots of Muddy Waters signature songs: "Mannish Boy" and "She's 19 Years

Old" plus Sonny Boy Williamson's "Nine Below Zero" and Big Joe Williams' "Baby Please Don't Go" on Disc 1, "Trouble No More," "Hoochie Coochie Man," "Corrina, Corrina" and a thunderous finale of "Got My Mojo Working" on Disc 2. The bonus disc also has such treasures as a rare Muddy take of T-Bone Walker's immortal "Stormy Monday Blues" complete with Muddy reminiscing about the then recently deceased Walker, Muddy's delightful and provocative "Champagne and Reefer," a sharp take of Lieber & Stoller's "Kansas City," and a smoking version of Little Walter's "Everything's Gonna Be All Right."

Throughout the sound is scrumptious. It captures the electricity of a live performance in a small club excellently. Just turn this sucker up and feel electric blues the way it was meant to be.

Margolin notes that when they discovered the extra Harry Hope's takes among recently resurfaced Blue Sky master tapes, and that several more live Muddy Waters shows were also found. These will be released down the road. Just just hope they are as good.

This release is one of three Legacy Editions releases inaugurating a fine new series, all taking important albums and expanding them to two CD sets with copious notation, too. The others are the Byrds' country rock landmark *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* (Columbia/Legacy C2K 87189) and Jeff Buckley's *Live at Sin-E* (Columbia C2K 89202). The Byrds set adds six tracks by the International Submarine Band, the outfit Gram Parsons left for the Byrds, plus 14 newly released outtakes. The Buckley set expands a four-song EP into a 20-song, two-CD set with lots of Buckley's ramblings between songs. It also adds a DVD with three live performances and an interview with the charismatic Buckley who perished way too young in a swimming accident.

Legacy, Sony Music's reissue arm, will continue this Legacy Edition series so very like the two-CD Deluxe Editions Universal Music has done. What else will be released remains to be announced, but the forthcoming sets better be really good, because these first three have set the bar at a very high level, indeed.

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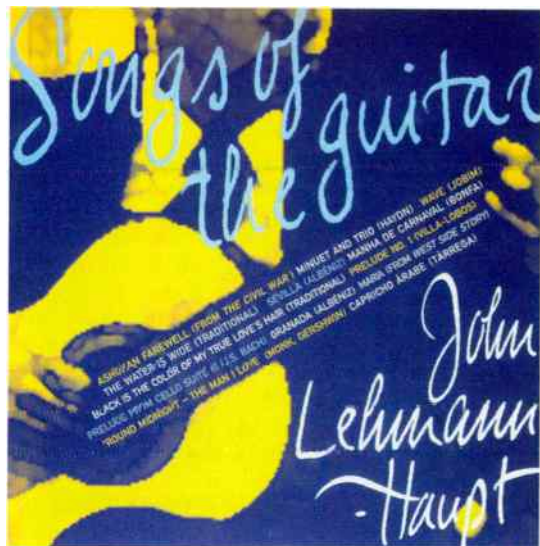


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## Guitar

John Lehmann-Haupt *Songs of the Guitar*  
JLH Records JLH 003

**A** **GA**INST QUACKS and snake-oil salesmen, we have trained physicians. Against musical frauds, shilling sonic garbage and noise, we possess talented and highly trained musicians. Why are they not heard more? Why do diligent, enormously practiced, and incredibly talented musicians get shoved aside, to be replaced by such blatantly easy, stupid, and ugly "Unmusic." We ought to term it the "Emperor's New Musik."

Quality musicians and real music are being drowned out by *Unmusic*, and I resent it. Don't you? I feel like some modern botanist traveling in an almost totally cut-down rain forest. (Here a rare species, there an undiscovered plant. Find them, catalogue them, save them quickly before they are lost!) But I have been lucky enough to stumble onto some rich treasures that might have gone unnoticed.

By accident, I heard John Lehmann-Haupt play a most unlikely place, an old, weather-blasted, post-and-beam dairy barn; I had been invited to a party at the once-working dairy farmhouse. The cows had long been magically transformed into various flavors of Jell-O or grades of wallets. Now new animals, a herd of Andean llamas paced outside in the fields. No possible explanation could clear up this bizarre setting. There Lehmann-Haupt was, up on the second floor surrounded by the wheels, rollers, and gears from the now defunct dairy. There I was wandering, near the barn, watching or traumatizing the llamas, which paced nervously. Then I heard from inside the barn, music soaring up to the beams, filling this massive building with Haydn, Bach, and Tarrega. I was stunned and listened with the delight only another guitarist could have, one who knows which passages are tough, which easy to play, and whether the result deserves praise. Then reality intruded, and I decided a review was in order.

Presented is an elegant classical guitar, one played with great technical skill. Mixed into the standard classical canon is some new repertoire including folk, ballad, modern, bossa nova, and jazz tunes, as well as the new items from Spanish guitar composers and their South American devotees or associates. The artist is John Lehmann-Haupt; his weapon of choice is a thin spruce-topped classical Rossner; and the songs selected are a tantalizing musical mix. Of variety, there is plenty.

Recording technique was simple. A frame of 2x4's was built so furniture-movers' quilts could be posi-

tioned around all four sides of the guitarist, as well as on the floor and ceiling. In this way reverberant sound is almost immediately damped or trapped. This provided the "dead room" sound Lehmann-Haupt wanted. Two microphones were used, both AKG omnis. One was aimed left at the guitar's treble strings, approximately two and one-half inches below them. The other was aimed down towards the bass strings at an angle to the sound board. A TASCAM DA-P1 DAT was used to record the raw material. Mastering and editing were done with the least manipulation possible, with the intent to achieve a high quality and sweet sounding air on the resulting CD. Equalization was set to relieve the dry sound of the raw material and there is no compression or limiting. Lehmann-Haupt's idea was to utilize the least possible electronic massaging. From my listening on both high-end and non-descript systems, the quality is laudable. The sound is clean and tonal properties correct, the signature transparent and pure. The open richness of a fine guitar is heard, while Lehmann-Haupt's speed and virtuosity are amply demonstrated.

A few technical guitar definitions might come in handy here. A *glissando* is a slide from one note to another (either up or down) in which the passing notes will be distinguished slightly. *Portamento* essentially removes the sound of the middle notes, hence the carried ("porta") designation. You clearly hear the first and last notes. The master of this technique was Segovia, himself the master of guitar masters! *Legato* is the hammering-on or pulling-off of a string. *Pizzicato*, which you will plainly hear in the Haydn, is the damped string effect obtained with the heel of the hand."

In my conversation with the artist, he spoke of different kinds of difficulties in the pieces. Bach, for example, is difficult because the guitar's dynamic flow has to be expressed over the musical control and dynamics of the individual line. The linear is elemental in Bach and the excitement of the piece is perceived via the energy shaping and graduations of this line. Even what remains silent, or just softer, becomes part of this expression.

In Haydn, we no longer have this linear arc and the short burst of the line illustrates a different kind of difficulty, more to do with precision and control in these truncated lines. And in the "Sevilla" of Albeniz, there is the difficulty of acceleration and control over the entire fingerboard, a true virtuoso piece



John Lehmann-Haupt attended Marlboro College in Vermont and studied with the doyen of Bach choral teachers, Blance Moyse. With her, he learned formal music theory, harmony, composition. Private guitar instructors included Julio Prol, Oscar Ghiglia, and Angel Romero. He played from 1981 to 1993 at the Windows on the World in the World Trade Center and performed widely in the metropolitan New York City area.

The instrument played here was built in Rochester by Heinz Rossner. Coincidentally a new German spruce top was put on in 1971 by a luthier named Lehmann (no relation); this, says John, improved the sound greatly.

In general, Lehmann-Haupt's vibrato is restrained and not overly theatrical. This recording is rich in many small artistic effects and offers a textured playing audiophiles should love. The clarity of the recording will be immediately evident; you can even faintly pick out finger noise on the strings.

"Ashokan Farewell" was written for PBS's Civil War special and sounds like it might have originally come right out of the Child's Ballads compendium of English folk songs. You'll think that you've heard this melody somewhere before. The hint of a seemingly "olde" subject played with radiant grace really does evoke those "ancient" days of the 1860s. Note the arrangement of the bass to contrast with the melodic line in the treble.

Haydn's "Minuet and Trio" follows immediately, a hint of how far afield we're going to wander. This showcases Lehmann-Haupt's speed, fingering technique, and touch. Listen for the contrast between soft and loud, as the dynamic range blooms everywhere. Here a soft harmonic, there a smooth glissando sliding from loud attack to infinitesimally quiet. Haydn's minuet rhythm is clearly one for dancing; the delicate muted-string line, dampened with the heel of the hand (*pizzicato*), has a percussive effect which enhances the rhythm of dance. There is wonderful movement across the full range of the strings, as well as multiple tricks up and down the fingerboard. Lehmann-Haupt demonstrates a proficiency on the fingerboard that can only come from hours and hours of practice toward achieving dexterous mechanical control.

"The Water is Wide" starts as a simple song played in a minor key, but then transitions into a beautiful modern version with the AABA pattern any steel-stringed folkie would recognize. But nary a folkie would be able to keep up to the bass variations in the B section, the slides and glissando, and the clear unpretentious and tasty harmonic end.

Bach's "Prelude from Cello Suite III" falls back to the ancient beginnings of modern music, and is a perfect piece to hear Lehmann-Haupt's fluid and sure fingering and the rich tonality he gets from constant work. This is not an easy piece but he covers the finger board with sure dexterity. His playing is far removed from the mechanical and soulless style of certain so-called "elite" music schools. Lehmann-Haupt delivers an agile and personal performance controlling not only speed but dynamics, concentrating *pianissimos* to break out with beautiful *fortes*. Again, this is a difficult piece to play

correctly as all the dynamic flow is concentrated in the line. In the hands of another guitarist, it could be just a bland student exercise, but here it is brilliant. Attention to detail radiates the proper feeling throughout, though the linear difficulties are formidable in Bach.

"Black is the Color of My True Love's Hair" lasts just over a minute, but Lehmann-Haupt's treatment is ethereal. Starting from a burst of straight chords, Lehmann-Haupt constructs a gorgeous base. Brevity pushes these evocative chordings to stand out in relief, as if a classic piece were just beginning. One can only wish for a longer version in the future, a new version including all of Lehmann-Haupt's potential development.

"Manha De Carnaval" is an infectious piece of Latin rhythm from a great movie, "The Black Orpheus." The movie tells the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in 1950's Brazil through the eyes of impoverished peasants preparing for Carnival. The music will be much more effective if you have recently seen the film. The rhythm pulls and tugs you along as if you become part of Carnival yourself. The seemingly simple piece of music becomes much more, with a clean

tempo "*bossa nova*" established and then used for a theme-and-variation form.

"Granada" is a true standard in the classical guitar repertoire. This and the following piece, "Sevilla," also by Albeniz, were immortalized by Segovia, who transformed the guitar for all time into a serious concert instrument period in part with these pieces. All serious modern classic guitarists are Segovia disciples or derivatives; opinions to the contrary are either delusional or wildly ignorant. Albeniz was a Spanish composer and pianist who, according to historians, heard his friend, Tarrega, playing a transcription of one of his piano pieces. Albeniz is said to have told Tarrega he thought the piece sounded better on the guitar. The familiar sound of Spanish music thus developed with the pen of Albeniz, who wrote many now well-known pieces named after cities, towns, and regions in Spanish. Included here are a pair, "Granada" and "Sevilla."

Lehmann-Haupt's playing is light and fast, requiring those modulations which recall the essence of Spanish music. The seemingly effortless shifts, as well as the bass to treble harmonics, and the *legato* precision are really quite difficult. Here, as in "Sevilla," there is no chance to hide any fumbling; delicate and quick touch reveals hours and hours of technical practice. These are true virtuoso performances. There are no *rasgueados* and loud histrionics, things which appear difficult and never fail to capture the public emotionally, are, in fact, rather facile and can easily hide weak skills and lack of virtuosity. Instead, listen here for not only for the speed in changes, but beautiful arpeggiation.

"Sevilla" is another rigorous masterwork by Albeniz. Full chords oppose the treble melodic line which is then brought to the mid-ranges. There are delicate repetitions and fast finger attacks. Sound effects build up through the piece- the middle section is liquid like as he moves incredibly fast; in this section, too, one is pulled into this luxurious piece. Bass percussive techniques achieved with damping, the rapidity of the scalar attacks, and the haunting final harmonic are impressive.

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**Quite aside from being truly pleasant, this CD shows a virtuoso at work.**

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"Round Midnight" and "The Man I Love," an unusual composite, has a beautiful introductory lead, in which I thought I heard some diminished and minor chords, a strange beginning. The lead modulates into the melodic line of "Round Midnight" with which Lehmann-Haupt then toys a bit and then finally teases out a beautiful theme-and-variation. He makes the guitar sing solo. Beautiful *glissandos* throughout, with jazz chording and legatos connect to "The Man I Love." With a series of four full chords, he drops right into the melody, embellishing it right up to the end. Some sustains here, audiophiles will love as the cleanness of the track. Once again you can hear the finger movement on the strings.

"Prelude Number One" is from Villa-Lobos, another Brazilian composer for the guitar, one of the highest rank, whose pieces for orchestra are both masterful and engaging. Opening this "Prelude" is a melancholy *glissando* with the engagement of the treble as full chords. The melody is kept in the bass and mid-range in opposition. Aggressive full-step modulations go up and down in opposition, climbing and falling alternately with force. Listen for the haunting full harmonic which drops down the scale and then furiously ascends. There are Flamenco-like accents in the piece with much repetition of thematic material. My way of counting hears the beginning A section used three times at the start with the harmonic descent repeated twice. The B section repeats four times using half-step modulations and Flamenco-like effects. In this transitional section, listen for rapid fingerings ending with a series of harmonics. This returns to the initial glissando. The final A section again repeats a full three times towards the ending. The variations in each repeat keep the melodic line pushing forward. The little half-step modulations and harmonic

decents accumulate in the final release to a simple major, gorgeous. Again, there is nowhere to hide.

"Maria" is the aria of "West Side Story." Lehmann-Haupt's transcription is neither syrupy nor saccharine, and grasps the haunting effects originally intended, even if you've heard this tune a million times before. Cleanly played without overdoing vibrato, Lehmann-Haupt captures the essence of the tune's true feeling and basic appeal. The bass lines provide a rich tonal quality. The single ending harmonic after a full chord is splendid.

"Capricho Arabe" from Tarrega begins with a soft harmonic and intricate set of finger runs repeated twice. Scorching fingers are preparatory to the introduction of an elegant theme with its alternating bass line complimented in the treble by liquid-like playing. You will hear this motif throughout. Lots of effects in this section. Listen for the subtlety of playing; what the guitar can do in the hands of a real musician-trained, talented, and practiced. There is modulation to a new section and melody with controlled development. The repeated bass motif then returns, modulates, and finally gallops upwards with a huge scalar run from the bass to meet the upper register. Masterful! More developmental material works within the theme and really does sound like something from the Magreb (North Africa) through Spanish ears. The melancholy beginning with all its speed and precision returns, and the resolve to a major is a beautiful finish.

In all tracks here Lehmann-Haupt's playing elegantly, without dodging, out front and exposed; there's no hiding behind a herd of instruments and electronics. To hear some of this CD before purchase go to [CDBaby.com/JLH](http://CDBaby.com/JLH) where there are five sample cuts. *Songs of the Guitar* can also be bought through [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

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Tommy Castro, Jimmy Hall, Lloyd Jones *Triple Trouble*  
Telarc CD 83585

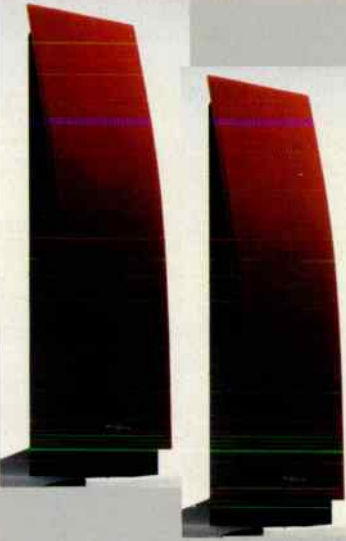
**L**ET'S GET THE SUSPENSE over with: I love this CD. You need to walk (run if you need some exercise), or get busy on-line, but go spend some hard-earned money. This record is good, and you'll feel better for buying it. Not to mention listening to it.

Randy Labbe put together three bona-fide blues-men, guys who can lead their own bands, and the Double Trouble rhythm section (which formerly worked with Stevie Ray Vaughan) to see what would come out: What came out was a rocker. The three are Tommy Castro, Jimmy Hall, and Lloyd Jones. They are backed by Reese Wynans on keyboard, Tommy Shannon's bass, and Chris Layton playing drums. This is, indeed, a fine Blues, Soul and R&B ensemble.


Tommy Castro is from the West Coast, but has performed nationally and internationally. He's toured with the "undisputed king of the blues, B.B. King," more than once, and claims BB is one of his major influences. "I actually learned to play my first licks from listening to his records," he told *Blues Revue*. *Blues Revue* readers voted Castro's *Right As Rain* as "one of the best blues records of all time."






Lloyd Jones was playing gigs at 13. He saw James Brown, B.B. King, and Buddy Guy live, all before he was out of high school. He has played with the legends: B.B. King, Albert Collins, Robert Cray, Taj Mahal, Dr. John, and others. Jones calls his music "storytelling with a Memphis groove". Just wait until






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you hear Mr. Jones do his version of *Help*.

Jimmy Hall brings his soulful harp and tenor sax to the session; I cannot imagine this CD without him. Jimmy is from Mobile, Alabama, and is working in Memphis. Hall co-founded Wet Willie in 1970, and is best known for his work with them. They toured with Aerosmith, Grand Funk Railroad, the Allman Brothers, and the Grateful Dead. There is a basic instinctive interplay among the three vocalists and the rhythm section, and they create some very heavy blues magic working together on the best songs.

The album provides different styles and different grooves. There are traditional form blues: *Be Careful With a Fool* (Tommy Castro, lead vocal), *Raised in the Country* (Lloyd Jones, lead) is a great tune which shows how much fun these guys are having making this record, and a hard Texas-style, 12-bar blues, *Mammer Jammer* (Tommy Castro, lead).

*Sometimes* (Lloyd Jones) is an up-tempo road-house rocker, while

Hall's *If That Ain't Love* moves with a heavy R&B backbeat, as does Castro's *Whole Lotta' Soul*. [The Editor thinks that by itself Hall's "If

done with a sense of humor and great musicianship.

—What can I say about *Help*? The first time I heard it I thought it was good, but with each listening, I liked it more and more. Lloyd Jones is magnificent, and with the B-3 in the background, laying down a triplet with deep feeling and a heavy back beat, the tune's just right. There is a gut-wrenching guitar solo, and the cymbal work by Chris Layton

is perfect. You will never think of this tune the same way again.

Telarc generally produces quite excellent recordings, and they've done their work on this one, too. The album is thoroughly integrated from soloist to rhythm section, offering clarity and a great deal of spatial depth. Bass is natural, without being emphasized, and the instruments are easily heard in layers. Guitars have just the right amount of edge on them.

Okay. Go back to the beginning of the review and take the advice I gave you up there. (No, not about the exercise, but about going and getting the CD.)

'Nuff said.

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## If you like your blues hot with a heavy beat, check out Triple Trouble. You'll thank me.

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*That Ain't Love* is worth the price of the CD.—Gene Pitts] Castro's *Whole Lotta' Soul* is a kicker of a song, and maybe my favorite on the album. It has a great R&B feel, with a punchy back-beat, and Jimmy Hall truly wails on tenor sax. The cover of James Brown's *Good, Good Loving* has a rollicking boogie bass line, and has all three leaders singing. Hall contributes a song in the "lost romance" tradition, *Midnight to Daylight*, plus a medium tempo piece of joy called *Love Will*, and there is a jam at the end of the record entitled *Cold Funk*. This is, for me, the only weak part of the record; maybe I just don't like jams. Even this one, however, is

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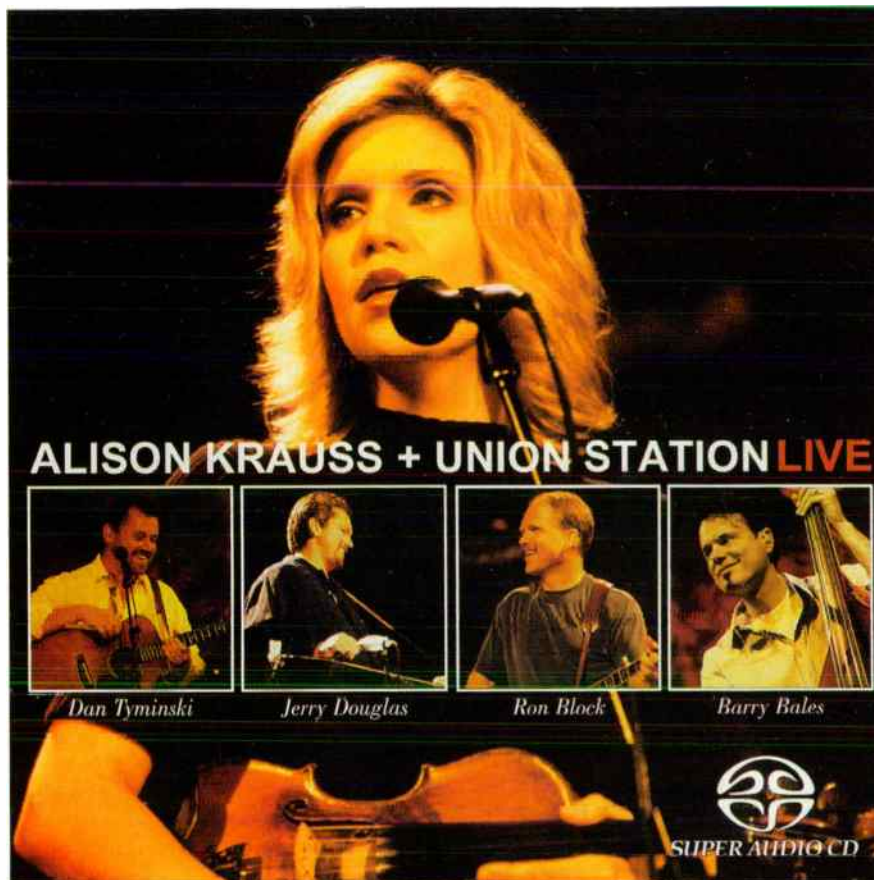
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## Mike Driscoll

# Bluegrass

Alison Krauss + Union Station Live  
Rounder 11661-0515-6

**A**LTHOUGH ALISON Krauss has recorded many albums in her career, both with and without her long-time collaborators, Union Station, this release on Rounder is the first one recorded live, and it's a surround sound SACD to boot. Recorded at the Louisville Palace, in Kentucky on April 29 and 30, 2002, the two disc set was produced by Alison Krauss + Union Station and mastered by Doug Sax.

I have two small problems with this set, so let me get them out of the way first. For one, the two discs are packaged one on top of the other on the same spindle, an arrangement that, it seems to me, would promote scratching of the top disc. When removing the top-most disc, it is almost impossible to avoid twisting it on the spindle. All it would take would be a tiny bit of grit on the label surface of the bot-

tom disc to carve a circumferential scratch (the worst kind) into the program surface of the top one. Although I have had this set for a couple of months and noticed no scratches, I suspect that we audiophiles are probably a little more careful than the average consumer. Gripe number two is with the close miking of the band. When one is listening to this set in surround mode, the group sounds up front and intimate, as if in a small club. The acoustics reveal a large hall, and a huge audience surrounds you, causing a sort of "cognitive dissonance." This sensation faded for me the more I listened to the set, it was at first, however, a bit odd sounding. Several friends who have listened to the discs say that they experienced no such thing, and think I'm weird, but they think I'm weird anyway. (*Editor's Note:* Why do you think

we hired you, Mike? I mean, aside from your great reviews .... But seriously, I would prefer a left-right jewel box over any other format for easy access to the second disc, though I am not quite as nervous about the scratching. The miking distance sounded about right, to me, for a position in the first 10 or 15 rows. I used this disc as a reference at the last CES in Las Vegas, and was surprised and pleased to be able to listen to two favorite tracks perhaps 10 times each on each of five days. *Gene Pitts*)

That out of the way, everything else I have to say regarding this two-disc set is good indeed. The 25 cuts represent the varied phases of Alison's career, both solo and with Union Station, from her crossover country-pop hits to pure bluegrass "breakdowns." There are three breakdowns or instrumentals here,

"Choctaw Hayride," "Cluck Old Hen," and "We Hide and Seek," showcasing Alison's proficiency on the fiddle, as well as the talents of her band mates. Jerry Douglas shows here why he is considered a master of the dobro. If Mozart had played the dobro, he would have been Jerry Douglas. (Jerry Amadeus Mozart? Amadeus Douglas?) An acquaintance of mine asked me about a year ago if I was aware that Alison had been a fiddle player (actually, a classical violinist,) before she became a vocalist. I told him that I was well aware of that fact, and that Alison plays fiddle on all her albums. My friend was, obviously, not a fan, rather he had heard a cut here and there, and simply assumed that she was a vocalist only. Anyone listening to the breakdowns on this set will come away with a real appreciation of Krauss' proficiency on her chosen instrument, and her ability to "play well with others" as they used to say in grade school. The group has a "rightness" to its sound, they are a tight-knit unit, each one of whom seems to communicate with the others via a sort of musical telepathy.

Alison's crossover country-pop hits are all here, of course, but in

versions that far outshine their studio counterparts. (Just yesterday I was doing some grocery shopping when I heard Alison singing "When You Say Nothing At All" through the Muzak system.) Particularly strong here are "Baby, Now That I've Found You" and "When You Say Nothing At All." Alison's "Grown Woman meets Little Girl" voice shows its range particularly well in that last one. Speaking of crossover, the fact that her band contains drums could tend to annoy some hard-core bluegrass fans, but Larry Atamanuik, the drummer, is used sparsely, generally only on those country crossover numbers where percussion is truly appropriate. Alison's voice isn't the only one heard here, either, as four of the cuts feature Dan Tyminski on vocals. One of these, of course, is "I Am A Man Of Constant Sorrow" from the film soundtrack of "O Brother Where Art Thou?" (You thought that was really George Clooney singing? Dan has a classic bluegrass/country voice, slightly nasal, and rich with country "soul." A musical acquaintance of mine, Amy Gallatin, once said, "bluegrass is music from the heart sung through the nose.")

For me, the standout cut on this set is "Down To The River To Pray" from the "O Brother" soundtrack, sung a cappella by Alison, Dan, Ron, and Barry Bales, who plays acoustic bass in Union Station. Everything in this cut is as near perfect as it can get; a soulful gospel number, sung with great feeling by great vocalists, and with wonderful acoustics extremely well recorded. Listening to this song on a revealing system is enough to drive a grown man to tears (Not a macho type like me, of course. And we'll have no snide comments, Pitts!) (Editor's Note: Having gotten my "snide comments" in above, Driscoll, let me just mention to you and the Gentle Readers that some place in all that Bob Dylan poetry, there's a line that "it takes a lot to laugh and it takes a train to cry." Only a true liar would deny that he's crying when there are tears coming out of his eyes. *Gene Pitts*)

The mastering is a typical Doug Sax job, that is to say, about as good as it gets, and the DSD recording is crisp and natural sounding. If you are already a fan of Alison Krauss + Union Station, this set is a must, and if you aren't yet a fan, this will make you one. Highly recommended!

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# Jazz

Ben Perowski Camp Songs  
Tzadik TZ7175

**T**HIS IS ONE of the many interesting titles to be recently released on the Tzadik label as part of John Zorn's Radical Jewish Culture series. This specific album explores, in a piano trio setting, various Jewish liturgies which drummer Perowski learned as a youth at summer camp.

An interesting intro is grafted onto "Yigdal," which pianist Uri Caine states over a swinging mid-tempo romp, with melodic flights and subtle harmonic slight of hand. Bassist Drew Gress' arco bass introduces the lovely "Adon Olam," with Caine jumping from tonally ambiguous clusters to bluesy vamps (he sneaks in a "High Society" quote). Gress has a rounded tone, and gets off a lovely, melodic solo as well. Perowski presents two originals, "Mess Hall" and "Ashen," the former being a free-jazz romp in minor with an insistent, Eastern-sounding theme (Perowski struts his stuff here, with facile rhythms rolling and shifting gently into each other). The latter tune is more menacing, with bells chiming along with the theme, and piano slithering, then erupting (Caine is a monster).

"Shema (Shaharit)" is one of Jewish liturgies' most important and haunting themes, being sung during morning and evening prayers (and reprised here in two analogous versions). It's handled here as an up-tempo swing number, with gospel interjections, and a Tynesque buildup. "Aleinu's" soft, stately melody is given

time to bloom over different backdrops, starting out "free," building to a barrel-house coda. The prayer of thanks after meals, "Birkat Hamozon," has a steady pulse, but the long, winding theme is allowed to wander across bar lines, creating a suspended-in-air feeling. Ethereal Hebrew vocals, again defining their own relationships to bar lines, enhance this mood. "Trop" is an interesting idea, based not on a particular melody, but rather on the building blocks of the chanted bible recitation at services. We end with a reprise of "Shema (Maariz)," the evening version, which is more reflective, contemplative, and serene.

JVC's K2 technology is credited in the notes, and sound is indeed fine, with rich tones, some (slight) stage extension beyond the speakers, and good depth. The piano is well focused though the drums spread at times.

This is a great CD, on a fascinating label. If you dig this, check out other Tzadik offerings, including the Masada discs by Zorn's fabulous quartet, Steve Bernstein's "Diaspora Soul" and "Diaspora Blues," Masada Guitars, Paul Shapiro's "Midnight Minyan," and the Masada chamber music series. Caine has his own interesting set of concept discs, on the Winter and Winter label, exploring early 20-th Century American pop music, Mahler, Beethoven, and the relationship of jazz, pop, and hip-hop to them. You don't have to be Jewish ....



## Jazz

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**T**HIS IS ANOTHER WINNING Mosaic reissue. This band was a monster. It built upon Mulligan's "West Coast" conception, with floating rhythm, interactive horn lines, and a light (piano-less) rhythm section, onto which was grafted the power and expanded palate offered by a big band. Influences such as Ellington, Gil Evans, George Russell, and Stan Kenton buoy and power Mulligan's floating solos and pieces. The band was led by the baritone saxophonist, but much of the nuts and bolts operation of the band (and a lot of fine playing and arranging) was handled by valve trombonist Bob Brookmeyer.

The first Compact Disc was from a studio date originally that was released by Verve as *Gerry Mulligan: The Concert Jazz Band*, features some great standards ("Sweet and Slow"; "You Took Advantage of Me" which features Brookmeyer's odd, before-its-time sounds; "Out of this World", "My Funny Valentine," and several great Mulligan pieces ("Bweebida Bobbida," and "I Know, Don't Know How." Mulligan is a fine, though under-appreciated composer of tunes that swing lightly yet deeply). Django Reinhardt's "Manor De Mes Reves (Django's Castle)" is an evocative, lovely ballad, and an especially strong showcase for Mulligan's feathery Hummer-doing-wheelies baritone.

The second disc is culled from three live performances, and was released as *Gerry Mulligan and the Concert Jazz Band On Tour: Guest Soloist Zoot Sims*. The opener, "Go Home," is a down and dirty blues, with earthy piano (by Brookmeyer), double-time bounce from Mulligan, and an inventive, crying tenor solo by Sims. (I hadn't thought of Zoot as a strong blues player previously, but rather as a light toned Lester Young disciple). "The Red Door," credited to Sims and Mulligan, has the two fleet-fingered saxophonists engaging in hot trading of 8's, then even-hotter simultaneous blowing (a favored Mulligan technique).

CD 3 again features the band live. "Blueport" gives trumpeter Clark Terry a chance to test his mettle trading stop-time breaks with Mulligan, and he's fine, indeed. Mulligan shines (sorry) on "Come Rain or Come Shine," playing a controlled yet passionate solo over an arrangement that manages to be lush, yet leave a lot of open space. George Russell's "All about Rosie," is a three-movement piece, the first an up-tempo, polytonal, complex piece that manages to swing madly. The second slow, blues-infused movement is pretty, while the third brings back the up-tempo groove and some themes from the first (altoist Gene Quill gets into some wild territory on his solo). "Chuggin'" features a spiky, Monk-

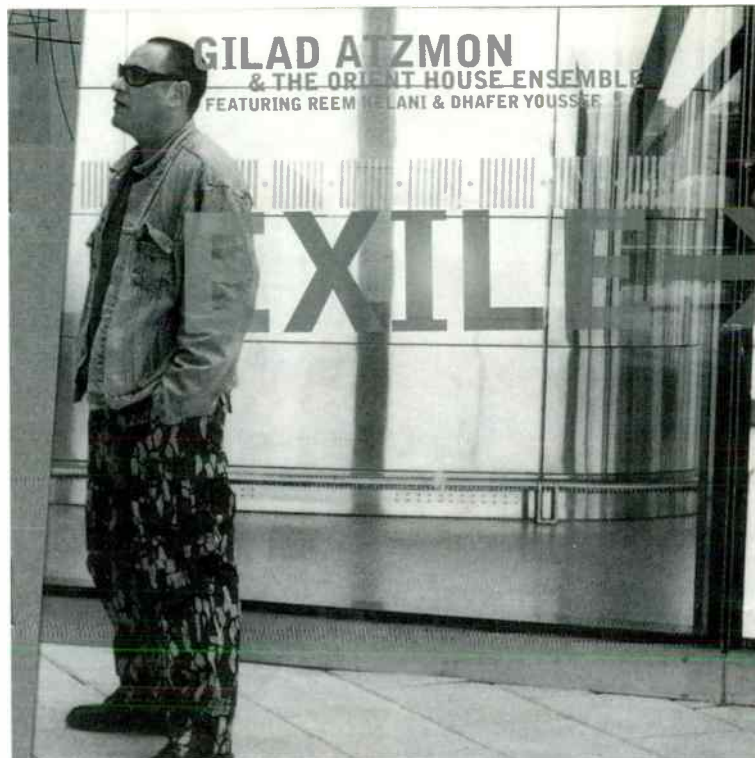
like Mulligan on piano, fine bass clarinet from Gene Allen, and some nice trombone by Brookmeyer, plus a powerful out-chorus by the band. "Israel," a tune made famous on Miles Davis' *The Birth of the Cool* (an album which can be said to have shaped much of Mulligan's output), is expanded here.

We're back to the studio for the last disc, and one of my favorite guitarists, Jim Hall, joins in, with Clark Terry returning. "Little Rock Getaway," a Joe Sullivan tune, is given a ferocious treatment, Hall showing more Charlie Christian influence than would be obvious later in his career (not a bad thing). Bob Brookmeyer contributes "Big City Life" and "Big City Blues," the former an evocative, impressionistic piece with some pretty piano by the composer, the latter, darker, featuring Mulligan on great Lester Young-style clarinet, with Ellington hovering over it all.

My notes wax ecstatic over the sound here. The stage is wide and deep, beyond the speakers; instruments have a creamy sound, yet the ensemble never loses bite when called for. Focus and air are first rate (you can walk through the stage). Mosaic gives you great sound to complement the fabulous music. You can order from their web site, [www.Mosaicrecords.com](http://www.Mosaicrecords.com) or phone or fax them at the numbers above.



## Jack Skowron



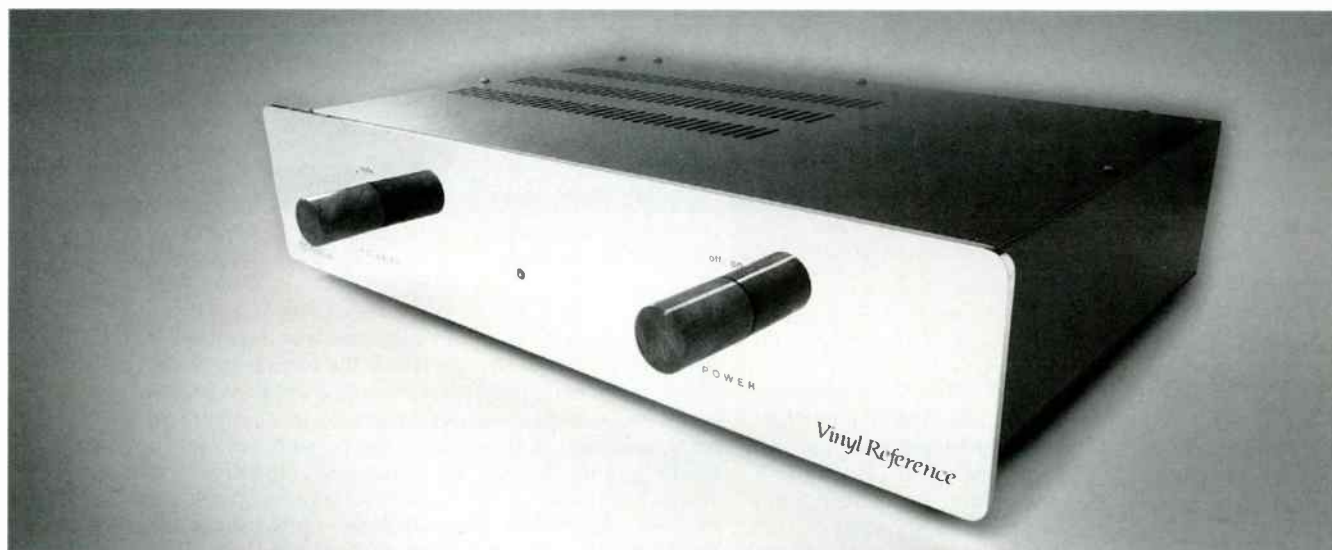
**T**HIS IS MY MOST SPUN DISC of late. The leader is an expatriate Israeli living in London, who despises Zionism and calls for the dismantling of the Jewish state. He has written a novel (setting: after the destruction of the Jewish state) and several articles, and has played with Paul McCartney and Ian Dury's Blockheads. You may or may not agree with his politics (for the record I do not), but he has synthesized a powerful mix of jazz and Middle Eastern music. The band, named for the Palestinian headquarters in East Jerusalem that was closed down by Israel, features an Israeli drummer, a Palestinian vocalist (Reem Kelani), an Ethiopian oud player and vocalist, two Englishmen, and a few others. He takes Israeli and Jewish tunes and adds Arabic lyrics written by Palestinians, changing the feel and then adding layers that are painful, ironic, subversive, but, above all, powerful.

"Dal'ouna On The Return" starts plaintively with an arco bass drone, emotive singing by Kelani (very non-Western, ululating, piercing). The rhythm jumps in with that bouncing Arabic beat and a catchy melody, and Atzmon starts off on clarinet, then flute. His Coltrane-inspired soprano sax opens "Al-Quds" playing legato, then introducing a theme based on an Israeli melody of 1967, "Jerusalem of Gold" with lyrics about the Palestinian longing to return to their land. In case you think it's all dry polemics, Atzmon's searing soprano sax solo should turn your head around (Kelani's unearthly singing is again featured as well). "Jenin," a pretty tune that doesn't sound particularly exotic, has its origins in an old Jewish ballad about a town destroyed in a pogrom, and Atzmon's soprano soars (the not-subtle allusion is clear). My favorite tune, "Ouz," has its origins in the theme of an old Israeli movie about the hard-

ships Jewish settlers from Arab countries faced when trying to build new lives in Israel. It's a multi-sectioned piece, with that jerky bounce and a great stop-time break. Atzmon uses "A Love Supreme" as a jumping off point, and soon is stratospheric; his passion, energy, virtuosity and intelligence are astounding. (English pianist Frank Harrison finds the place Horace Silver and McCoy Tyner meet). "Orient House" starts with Arabic sounding flute, then violin and clarinet (Atzmon) straight from the *shtetl*. Arabic melodies and rhythms enter, with hints of Brubeck and even Celtic music. Coltrane's spirit still hovers, though this time the searing solo is on clarinet. The jumps from musical genre to genre are dizzying. "Land of Canaan" is a pretty ballad, while the title track combines martial rhythms with a Hebraic prayer feeling (dig the bass and soprano sax's unearthly wails). Oud and accordian augment the band on the upbeat "La Cote Mediterranee," with oud player Dhafer Youssef's wordless vocals adding to the otherworldly quality here. Lastly, "Epilogue" has a demented cabaret feel, a sort of twisted tango, which morphs to a "Telstar" inspired bridge (the whistling effect also calls to mind Morricone). (This track is also viewable as a video on your computer; it features several shots of the band playing and hanging out but now that I've seen it, I will probably never have any great urge to see it again.)

Sonically speaking, we get rich instrumental sound, some depth, though nothing happening beyond the speakers. Musically speaking, we get a powerful brew, intoxicating, and slightly disturbing. Despite the fact that Atzmon and I probably couldn't have a civil conversation on politics, I find the disc compelling in the extreme.

# Art Audio Vinyl Reference Phono Preamplifier



**T**HOMAS WOLFE WAS WRONG. You can go home again. That is, I have found, if "home" means returning to an LP library assembled over decades of collecting, and if you use Art Audio's wonderful Vinyl Reference Phono Preamplifier as the chrome-plated vehicle of choice.

I suspect like many others, I'd unwittingly taken up primary residence in Digiland awhile back, enticed by convenience and nifty new technologies that, I confess, led to benign neglect of my friends in Vinylville. At the same time we were upgrading the digital hardware and software side of our system, we traded our long-term preamplifier-phono stage for a passive linestage. And while we've been routinely sitting for an hour or more at a clip, contentedly immersed in an

acoustic alphabet of BSM, XRCD, DSD, and SACD, analog preamplification was handled by the modest phono stage of an old Quad 34, long since relegated to supporting our video system. But then Art Audio sent their new \$3995, hybrid phono preamp for review.

My "transportation" for this journey home is named the Vinyl Reference, and is a solidly built, 21-pound unit, fed through a detachable power cord and sporting four Svetlana 6N1P dual triodes under its proverbial hood. Although valves are at the heart of this Art Audio, it's actually a hybrid design utilizing hard-to-get Japanese J-FETs at the input stage and MOS-FETs at the output stage. The 6N1P has a huge cathode and is known for its very high linearity. It shares the pin con-

figuration of other tubes including the 6DJ8, 6922, 7308, and ECC88; in some applications, it is interchangeable with them. However, because Art Audio delivers 600 milliamps of current to the 6N1P's heater, none of these others (which are designed for 365 mA) are options in the Vinyl Reference (unless you're looking to create an expensive fireworks display and void Art Audio's warranty). While compulsive tube rollers may bemoan the resulting dearth of options (viable alternatives are by and large limited to premium 6N1Ps such as the -EV, -EB, and -MPS versions), few audiophiles will find much to complain about with the 6N1P's low distortion and characteristically superb musicality and tonal balance.



Stock units provide inputs for both MM and MC cartridges, offering 43-dB and 63-dB gain, respectively, and other gain configurations can be had by special order. The rear panel has a selection of impedance loading alternatives, 47 kilohms or 47 kilohms in parallel with 220 pF for MM cartridges, while MC cartridges are provided 100-, 300-, 1000-, or 47,000-ohm options. The MC input is Lundahl transformer-coupled, as is the Vinyl Reference's output stage, which feeds RCA and XLR connectors. No global negative feedback is used, and RIAA equalization is achieved passively between stages.

The Vinyl Reference Phono Preamp is the result of Art Audio's collaboration with Kevin Carter, who now operates K&K Audio in North Carolina. Carter formerly worked at VAC, where he was responsible for the Renaissance series line stage. He has a long history as a equipment designer and builder, having as many as a half dozen high-end phono preamps to his credit before taking on the Vinyl Reference with Art Audio's Joe Fratus and David Gill. Kevin indicated that although his earlier designs were increasingly successful sonically, even his latest personal phono preamp occasionally suffered from inadequate power supply regulation and the consequent interference when heavy loads like air-conditioning compressors began tapping power. As a result, the Vinyl Reference was designed with a massive, shielded internal choke-regulated power supply as well as choke-regulated power supplies for each stage. Kevin reports that half of each 6N1P vacuum tube is a dedicated shunt regulator, with the other half carrying the audio signal. All of which regulation is intended to yield a sonic signature quite unlike the dry sound often associated with solid-state regulated supplies. (Indeed, other than faithfully reproducing Paul Desmond's famous "dry martini" alto sax sound, there was never a drop of "dry" served up by the Vinyl Reference.)

As with most gear sent to me for review, there were occasions when I was not as pleased with the sound via the Vinyl Reference as I was in other situations. However, in the end, this turned out to actually be

the unit's extraordinary resolving power that I'd tuned into. So, while these other pieces required multiple trial-and-error changes in orientation, cabling, proximity to other pieces, and so forth to perform their best, I soon learned that a quick twist of what I came to think of as the Vinyl Reference's "smile switch"

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### **Both "hot" and "cool" musical types are well handled by this preamp.**

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nearly always resolved the issue. What miracle was this switch performing? Reversal of signal polarity. Yes, something that simple sometimes made an enormous difference in the final sonic performance. To be sure, there were many times that a change in signal polarity yielded no discernible difference, but when I heard something amiss, a simple twist of this switch almost always put the issue to rest. Strings a mite congested? Twist. Smile. Insufficient depth? Twist. Smile. A little bloat in the bass? Twist. Smile. (I wish such results could be offered through a stand-alone device; I'd install one on my computer, car, putter, and newspaper delivery boy. Something's not pleasing me? Twist. Smile.) While some gear does enable you to control signal polarity, it's a capability infrequently available on phono preamps due to technical constraints with many approaches to low-level signal amplification. I consider it a very significant feature in the Vinyl Reference and am confident you will too.

This same three-position rotary "smile" switch includes a "Mute" function as its middle position, a thoughtful addition that can be a real speaker saver by precluding stylus cueing "pops" and other inadvertent signal spikes. The only other front panel control is a rotary "On-Off" switch. You can get knobs that match the Vinyl Reference's chrome face or wooden ones that, in addition to being quite attractive, aren't susceptible to static arcing when touched. Last of the front panel features is a blue indicator light that illuminates whenever power is applied to the unit, not just when

the delayed closure of the audio circuits is complete.

Upon my return home to Vinylville, I was greeted by Ethel Ennis, the Chambers Brothers, Osamu Kitajima, the Kronos Quartet, and many others with whom I have an exclusively analog relationship. I left the Vinyl

Reference heating for a couple of days and avoided serious listening to the two dozen or so LPs played during this period. On the third evening, I installed my reviewer's mindset and settled in with Zoot Sims' *Hawthorne Nights* (Pablo 2310-783). I have long liked

the clarity and midrange presence of the recordings done on the Pablo label during 1970s, and I consider this disc among the best of their musical offerings. Through the Vinyl Reference, Zoot's tenor was warm and natural, Monty Budwig's bass bold and beautiful, and the brass exquisitely edgy. Arranger Bill Holman's wide-ranging dynamics on such selections as "Dark Cloud" were handled effortlessly, while Zoot's vocal (!) was deeply resonant and the lyrics conveyed with great feeling.

Shifting gears, *Chiaroscuro* (Windham Hill WH-1043) was presented with all the power and delicacy, impact and nuance, that an electric-acoustic ensemble affords, and with hauntingly vivid harmonics ringing from Any Narell's steel drums. The Vinyl Reference was equally adept and satisfying in its handling such intimate music as Jimmy Guiffre's solo clarinet on "So Low" (*The Jimmy Guiffre Clarinet*, Atlantic Jazzlore 22) and the megascale pieces on Paul Winter's *Missa Gaia/Earth Mass* (Living Music LMR-2). The latter used the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and the Grand Canyon as recording venues; while I'm not going to tell you it seemed as if the Grand Canyon was in my tunes room, the Vinyl Reference did do a grand job of conveying the appropriate scale and perspective of each recording while the soundstage height was among the best I've heard.

"Hot" and "cool" musical genres were each handled with an extraordinary sense of ease. Typifying the former is Santana's self-titled first release (Columbia CS 9781), with excellent reproduction of Carlos'

multi-percussionist band and his wonderfully expressive guitar work (which was vastly underrated in those days). A similar set of pleasures was found on the *The Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East* (Capricorn SD2-802). Hear especially Santana's "Jingo" and Gregg Allman's "Whipping Post," and the way in which the Vinyl Reference enables full release of every rock 'em, sock 'em note, wail, and crash captured in the grooves. At the other end of the musical thermometer, you also get every detail and inflection on the *Getz/Gilberto* release (Verve V6-8545), a marvelous recording which, in addition to Stan and Joao, features Antonio Carlos Jobim and, perhaps most famously, Joao's wife Astrud on her first recording date ("Tall and tan and young and lovely ..."). This is gentle music with much subtlety, and the Vinyl Reference handles it deftly and, well, Art-fully. Such deftness is equally apparent on Michael Hedges' *Aerial Boundaries* (Windham Hill WH1032), on which the transients are lightning fast and the dynamic changes often dramatic. Courtesy of Art Audio, I took much new pleasure from Keith Johnson's 1950's recording of a live performance by the Red Norvo Quartet (*The Forward Look*, Reference Recordings RR-80) that now indeed sounded at times *live*. Among many of my test or reference records, all these caused me to wonder if it was merely coincidence that the Vinyl Reference and "virtual reality" technologies share the same acronym.

I find reviewing to be hard work and very time consuming. It's more natural for me to simply get lost in the music, almost regardless of the quality of reproduction, so I take copious notes and make repeated A-B comparisons, primarily to keep my head involved and to inform these reviews. My wife, on the other hand, has the uncanny ability to listen for a few moments — often

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## This phono preamp has a great big, warm, and musical sound.

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while reading a magazine — and reach the same judgment it can take me hours to formulate. In the midst of my typical reviewing cogitation with the Art Audio Vinyl Reference, she joined me on our listening love seat and soon proclaimed, "That's the best sound we've had from our system in quite some time. It's warm, pleasant, and, best yet, possible at modest volumes." I, as always, replied, "Yes, dear." (Editor's Note: Look out with such revelations, Dan, I may have to hire her to replace you. *Gene Pitts*) And this time I really meant it.

There's great stuff at work here, and we found the Vinyl Reference to bring out the best in ordinary and extraordinary recordings. Among many examples, I never before realized how much vigor remained in the grooves of such yard sale acquisitions as *The Marshall Tucker Band* (Capricorn CP 0112) and the Boston

Pops' Gershwin program (*Concerto in F, Cuban Overture, I Got Rhythm Variations*, RCA LSC-2586). Naturally, the Vinyl Reference will pass along with unfortunate accuracy whatever poor recordings have to offer, but there are no demerits due Art Audio for the shortcomings of source material.

CDs have generally supplemented rather than duplicated or (heaven forbid!) replaced selections in our LP record collection, but I happen to have both the original Pablo LP (2310 703) and JVC XRCD (0022-2) versions of *Duke's Big 4*. I really dig Ellington's infrequently heard small group work, and I picked up the digital version because it

conveyed more detail and life than the LP. Or, to be accurate, more than the LP did through previous phono stages/preamps in my system. Using the Vinyl Reference to amplify signals from my Grado TLZ moving-iron cartridge, Louis Bellson's cymbal work, whether stick or brush powered, provided little to differentiate digital and analog media; but there the similarity ended. The XRCD was cool and razor sharp, with the players keenly pinpointed across the soundstage. Musical and extra-musical details were impressive, as if illuminated by laser light, and I could *almost* see not just the musicians, but also the absorbent acoustical panels dividing them in the studio. On the other hand, the Vinyl Reference-amplified Pablo now delivered a similar level of detail, but with a slightly warm, incandescent aspect that's typical of 6N1Ps. Instruments were presented with more "bloom" surrounding the notes, and the XRCD's studio "players" morphed into the LP's jazz club "performers." Each presentation may have its place but, with no attempt here at digi-bashing, as much as I enjoy and admire what the XRCD can do, I'll take the Art Audio-aided Pablo for sheer musicality and long-term listening pleasure.

In order to put the Vinyl Reference's performance in a more current context than the phono stages we'd been using, the ever-gracious Joe Fratus also sent its Art Audio stable mate, the Vinyl One (\$1995 to \$2495, depending on options). While these may not be horses of different colors (a chrome faceplate is an option for the Vinyl

## N O T E S

**Art Audio Vinyl Reference Phono Preamplifier**, \$3,995.00. Art Audio, 34 Briarwood Rd., Cranston, RI 02920; phone 401/826-8286, fax 401/826-3903, website [www.artaudio.com](http://www.artaudio.com), e-mail [vze572mh@verizon.net](mailto:vze572mh@verizon.net).

### Associated Equipment

Immedia RPM turntable and arm, Grado TLZ cartridge, Sony DVP-S9000ES SACD/CD/DVD player, Placette Passive Linestage, Classé Twenty-five amp, Dunlavy SC-III A speakers, tonearm cable by Yamamura, Placette and Tara Decade interconnects, Meitner 25-2-24 speaker cable, Marigo Gen 3 power cord (on amp), and Monster HTS 2000 surge protector/RF filter.



One) or breed (both are well-constructed tube-based designs), they do differ in pedigree and feature set (MC amplification is optional on the Vinyl One, as is a potentiometer that can be switched from the input to output circuit, depending on your preamp and sonic preferences). Moreover, the Vinyl One uses the 12AX7 or one of its many relatives, so only your pocketbook limits the choice of alternate tubes to tweak sonic characteristics, while Vinyl Reference owners will have to select from among gradations of the 6N1P's great big, warm, musical sound.

I found the Vinyl One to be a terrific phono preamp. It consistently delivered clear, detailed, airy performances, especially when configured without the output/volume control. The bottom end was taut and ear-catching, and I particularly enjoyed the way the percussion on Santana's "Savor" establishes a great sense of anticipation by dissolving into the drums which open the next track, "Jingo." On repeated occasions over a few days I came to think "Man, this is great; the Vinyl One approaches the Vinyl Reference's performance, and it's only half the price!" But when I'd switch back to the Vinyl Reference, this notion would be instantly shattered. The Vinyl One frequently brought to the fore previously subtle details such as the zip of Michael Hedges' round wound strings, at first leading me to surmise it bested the Vinyl Reference in this regard. Returning the latter to service, however, I found that although a similar level of detail was being presented, it was much harder to focus on literal and figurative *zips* which were now integrated with, instead of standing out from, the music.

While the Vinyl One gets all the ingredients right, and I could live happily with its results, the Vinyl Reference assembles the musical elements in a far more involving way. Most notably, the Vinyl Reference delivers an extraordinary sense of dimensionality that I couldn't coax from the Vinyl One (fitted with Mazda 12AX7s in the phono stage) or that I'd experienced with any other phono stage/preamp. I'm not referring to soundstage size here, though that's certainly ample with both units, but, rather, the

Vinyl Reference's ability to reproduce music with a three-dimensional wholeness that's strikingly like what I hear in person (aided, no doubt, with the effectiveness with which the fourth dimension — time and pace — is handled). I believe both units to be excellent values at their price points.

In order to not put my Dutch-Uncle credentials at risk, allow me

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## Give your "old LP friends" a treat on Art Audio's Vinyl Reference preamp!

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to note a few quibbles. First, contrary to the industrial design mantra *form follows function*, the blue power indicator is needlessly bright in daylight and an outright irritant during darkened room listening. Second, regardless of the Decor Score you'd assign the chrome faceplate, it can make reading the control switch labels difficult, especially against the reflection of a dark shirt or blouse you happen to be wearing. (Although chrome is an option to standard black on the Vinyl One, it's "take it or leave it" on the Vinyl Reference.) Last, while I love the ability to reverse signal polarity, I hate having to interrupt my listening and trek across the room to do so. This terrific — some might say essential — feature needs to be remotely controlled to be fully useful.

Returning to aural issues, the Vinyl Reference delivered the musical goods, most especially throughout the midrange, on everything from old mono classical instrumentals to modern audiophile pop vocal releases. But while the Tokyo Philharmonic's direct-to-disc *Orchestrations Astromantic* (RCA RDCE-6) displayed the Art Audio's extension at the frequency extremes, it (among a few other recordings) also revealed a tendency to deliver a tad less *air* on top than I know to be present. However, this is also a sonic signature of the Grado TLZ cartridge, so I may have simply been hearing the un-allayed performance of the TLZ. I wish I had a handful of alternate cartridges, including a low-output moving-coil or two, to test this empirically but, as it stands, you're left to giving the Vinyl Reference a

careful audition before purchase. However, as an astute TAV reader, you wouldn't consider proceeding otherwise, would you? As always, trust thine own, not just mine, ears, for the final judgment.

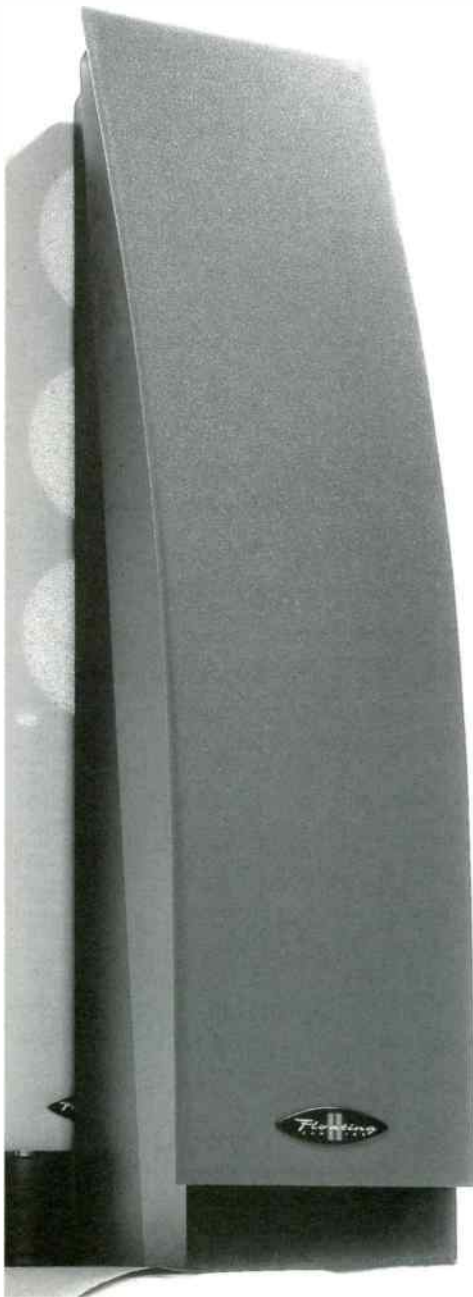
Although Art Audio's Vinyl Reference didn't often provide that "new details in familiar recordings" experience, it did sometimes enable us to more fully appreciate the music and the artist's message. I'd experienced this once before (in replacing our Dunlavy SC III speakers with their SC IIIA successors), so I wasn't completely surprised by the effect, but that did not make it any the less thrilling. Of multiple

examples, the most dramatic was Richard Morris' telling of Brahms' "Let Nothing Ever Grieve Thee" on Crystal Clear's *Sonic Fireworks* (CCS 7010). While I'm not generally fond of organ music, and typically don't find "fireworks" emotionally engaging, I've kept this direct-to-disc LP on hand primarily as test and demo item. But the Vinyl Reference changed all that in the drop of a stylus. Although I'd listened to this piece many times before, it turned out here that I'd never really *heard* it. Art Audio's Vinyl Reference reveals the piece to be a truly beautiful composition and performance, as pleasing and comforting as chamomile tea on a cold evening or, perhaps, a favorite pipe and old slippers. Or, like coming home to old friends.

While the Vinyl Reference ably dissects recordings into their constituent elements and lays them out for your appreciation, it always preserves the musical *gestalt*, delivering a sound that is cohesive and engaging. After going through much of our record collection, often during listening sessions that satisfyingly crept from late night into early morning, I found the Art Audio's presentation to be much more natural, at ease, and life-like than that of other phono sections or preamps I've heard. You might find a phono preamplifier more capable in some sonic aspect(s), but it's hard to imagine finding one with a more seamless, satisfying, musical presentation, let alone one more likely to be a long-term aural ally. Give yourself and your "old vinyl friends" a treat, and give Art Audio's Vinyl Reference a good trial.

# *Floating Systems Cameleon Queen Loudspeakers*

Alfred R. Fredel



**A**S A LOUDSPEAKER company, Floating Systems has had considerable longevity and is a well-respected manufacturer in Europe. The company, based in the Netherlands, has been part of the European audiophile community for over 20 years. Many audiophiles know the company for its Synthese loudspeaker, introduced in 1981, which still serves as the firm's flagship product.

Designer Ivan Schellekens aspires to offer faithful sound reproduction of live instruments, but was faced with the problem of limited transparency and placement that he felt was inherent in traditional cabinet design. He believed that the low tones should be physically separated from the middle and high tones in order to achieve his desired musical results. With this in mind, Schellekens equipped the Synthese loudspeakers with a U-shaped transmission line. He then created a specially designed rotating cabinet that was mounted in the center of an outer U-shaped cabinet that housed the bass drivers. This rotating cabinet, in essence a column within the U, housed the tweeters and midrange drivers and isolated the high and middle frequencies from the bass frequencies. For all intents and purposes, these drivers were "floating" within the cabinet suspended in the center of the speaker. He believed that this approach elimi-



nated any resonance created by the low frequencies.

Like the Synthese loudspeakers, the Cameleon loudspeaker line relies on the principle of driver separation. The company uses what it calls a floating tweeter, which essentially means that the tweeter is suspended in a rubber ring, thus avoiding mechanical contact between the tweeter and the front panel. According to Floating Systems, the design separates the front panel from the tweeter, which is always subject to heavy vibrations from a woofer that can interfere with the sound production of the higher frequencies. By isolating the tweeter, the company claims that it prevents material deformation and frequency contamination, which results in a freer and more dynamic reproduction of the sound with more detailed separation.

The Cameleon Queen is a three-way loudspeaker that utilizes this patented tweeter technology. It stands a mere 38 inches high and is 10 inches wide and 9 inches deep. While the dimensions are modest, each speaker weighs a hefty 37 pounds, making it difficult to transport these solid speakers when they are packaged together in their single box. Two light, aluminum, 14-cm drivers handle the low frequencies, while the midrange is reproduced by an additional 14-cm aluminum driver. Floating's patented-design tweeter is constructed of pre-coated fabric within a rubber ring.

The overall look of the speaker is sleek and modern, yet not as "art nouveau" looking as their Synthese loudspeakers. As is with all of the Cameleon line, the cabinet is sloped and finished in a black piano-grade lacquer with seven fabric colors to choose from for the front grill: beige, yellow, white, green, blue, red or black. One is sure to match your décor. Taking a glance at the rear of the loudspeaker, I couldn't help but notice the crossover (with its flashy copper coils) which may be seen through an acrylic panel on the back of each loudspeaker near the quality binding posts. I was a little unhappy, however, with the metal footplates which are supplied to support the speakers. Overall, I found the speakers to be a little unstable and would have preferred to see a set of points or some other sort of stability enhancing apparatus, perhaps one that is adjustable in

the event of an uneven rough floor or carpeted room. However, once I had gotten the loudspeakers in my listening room, it was time to see if they performed as well as they looked.

### Positioning, Positioning, Positioning

As excited as a schoolboy with a brand-new toy, I connected the Cameleon Queen loudspeakers to my gear. I was ready to put these loudspeakers through long listening sessions of some of my favorite musical selections that range from Afro-pop and Latin jazz to Mozart and Mahler. I had popped the popcorn, chilled the root beer and fluffed the pillows on my listening chair (a standard arrangement for long-term listening sessions), so I was ready to spend a few hours listening. All that was left to do was to position the speakers for optimum enjoyment.

Positioning the Queens turned out to be an afternoon affair, in spite of fairly meticulous instructions from Ye Placement-Persnickety Editor. I first placed the loudspeakers about a foot and a half away from each wall on the left and right sides, and kept about three feet between the rear wall and the Queens. I used very little toe-in since my listening room is relatively small, thus ignoring the suggested toe-in angle from the manufacturer.

I inserted Salif Keita's Moffou (Decca 440-016-906-2) into my CD player and began to listen to the first track "Yamore," a duet with Cesaria Evora. This track is a festival of lush harmonies and very strong percussion. During some of the percussion interludes, I noticed a heretofore

unnoticed resonance in the middle lower frequencies. I played the track again and, yes, it was definitely there. This is when I took the manufacturer's (and editor's) suggestion to heart and toed-in the speakers.

Like magic, the resonance (which is really a reinforcement "bounce" off the side walls) was almost gone when the speakers were toed-in about 40 degrees. I kept changing the placement of the Queens for the rest of the afternoon and finally the resonance was totally gone. They remained three feet from the back wall and were moved to about two feet from each side wall, with a 45-degree toe-in. With the loudspeakers finally positioned to my taste and the reinforcement gone, it was time for me to listen to some more challenging music.

### Commence the Listening!

The serious listening had commenced and after my initial three-hour audience with the Cameleon Queens, I was pleased with the high level of refinement exhibited by these loudspeakers. Their sonic performance was smooth and clean and even throughout all the regis-



## NOTES

**Cameleon Queen Loudspeakers**, \$3470, Floating Systems Inc. USA, 19109 W. Catawba Ave., Suite 200, Cornelius, N.C. 28031; vox 704/895-3916, fax 704/895-1359, website: [www.floating.nl](http://www.floating.nl); e-mail [hpeelen@msn.com](mailto:hpeelen@msn.com).

### Associated Equipment

Audio Refinement Complete CD, Audio Refinement Multi 2, Audio Experience MK3 valve line-stage preamp, Harmonic Technologies interconnects and speaker cables, Moth Alamo-X turntable, Grado cartridge, NAD PP-1 phono preamp, Magenta ADE-24 Analog Digital Enhancer, PS Audio Ultimate Outlet.

ters, no small feat for any relatively demure full-range model. I did adjust the placement one more time, but after this final "fiddly" positioning, I found the soundstage and imaging to be quite respectable. I listened to the Cameleon Queens with a single set of cables and then with a set of bi-wire cables. I noticed a quite significant improvement in separation and detail when I switched to the bi-wire cables. I would therefore strongly recommend that bi-wiring be used with these loudspeakers.

The most significant strength of the Cameleon Queen loudspeakers, as I suspect may be true of the other models in the Cameleon line, is the separation and detail offered to the listener. I was particularly impressed with the Queen's ability to accurately reproduce a full array of musical instruments. There was sparkle and detail that made me sit up and take notice during Bill Evan's classic tune "Waltz for Debbie" (Original Jazz Classics OJCCD 210-2) off of the same titled compact disc. I felt as if I was sitting in the recording venue with the piano clearly situated right in front

of me, while the other instruments were unmistakable and vibrant. I believe the credit for the realistic reproduction of these musical

enjoyed listening to one of my favorite Afro pop tunes "Batonga" from Angelique Kidjo's "Logozo" (Mango 162-539-918-2), which is a highly demanding track that showcases many elements of West African percussion. These speakers handled this tapestry of percussion, vocals and dense instrumentation with relative ease.

After such a favorable experience, it was time to pull out the Dedicated CD (Arista ARCD 8669) to see how gracefully our Queen could handle low sustained bass frequencies. In this album, Lyle Lovett performs an acoustic cover of "Friend of the Devil" where the double bass sinks into the lowest depths of its range. Again, these loudspeakers surprised me with refined, fairly rich reproduction of undistorted yet sustained bass and never tried to overcompensate for those lower frequencies that were simply beyond what this model could physically produce due to its modest volume.

## The Ultimate Challenge

After two weeks of listening to these "modernesque" beauties, it was time for what I feel is the ulti-

## These speakers are priced reasonably and will give refined musical pleasure.

instruments is due in part to the Floating Systems tweeter philosophy which seems to have delivered as promised. One minor side effect of having such detailed highs is that in some cases the tweeters tended to over-accentuate the sibilants of female vocalists, which I experienced particularly in "Never Got Off The Ground" from the album Forget About It (Rounder 11661-04652A) by Alison Krauss. Again, this is a minor blemish in an otherwise stunningly performing tweeter.

The bass reproduction in the Cameleon Queen loudspeakers is also quite respectable and accurate. They are actually quite punchy for their size, while exhibiting tight and clean lower frequency response. I

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mate test of a loudspeaker's abilities. I pulled out my favorite "wall of sound," one which contains strong dynamic contrasts, wide frequency ranges, dense musical instrumentation, and strong vocal performances. Yes, I admit that I am an opera lover and no true evaluation of a loudspeaker in my mind could be complete without tackling the last act of Die Walküre.

I own no fewer than four recordings of this opera and for this speaker test, I chose the Metropolitan Opera's recording (Deutsche Grammophon 423-389-2) under the baton of Maestro James Levine. I believe that this performance is sonically superior (in recording quality only) to many other recordings of the same work available today and features a fairly strong cast. Since I was actually at several live performances of this production by the same cast, I am very familiar with the performance and was anxious to hear how these loudspeakers would recreate this performance experience and bring it back to life in the confines of my listening room.

It was wonderful to hear again the level of separation and detail conveyed by the Cameleon Queen

loudspeakers even during the most extremely demanding and dynamic sections of this opera. The voice of James Morris, who performed the role of Woton, filled my listening room with his growling bass-baritone portrayal of an angry and saddened god who must part with his favorite daughter in "Woton's Farewell." The strings had a lush, vibrant and warm presence, while the brass section had significantly strong impact and pristine clarity. These speakers held together impressively well in portraying one of the opera world's biggest works with precision, detail and refined musicality.

### Conclusion

The good folks at Floating Systems have an excellent performer within the Cameleon series. The Queen loudspeakers are musical, detailed and well refined and are a listening pleasure. The highs are stunningly open and free. I do strongly recommend that you bi-wire these loudspeakers in order to achieve all of the remarkable detail and separation offered by the floating tweeters. As with many loudspeakers, there are a few positioning

quirks particular to the Cameleon Queen loudspeaker system, but once these are reconciled, the Cameleon Queen will give you many hours of listening pleasure.

At about \$3,500 dollars, the Cameleon Queen loudspeakers are reasonably priced for a small sized, high-end floor-standing loudspeaker with quite good build quality and performance. In addition, these loudspeakers are pleasant on the eye, achieving a very respectable "Decor Score," and the company has apparently made a very strong effort to manufacture a product that is well-suited for a good variety of décor styles. Everyone who walked into my listening room seemed to think that they looked attractive and were "fun"; this praise was more than I have heard regarding several other loudspeakers that have been connected to my gear in my listening room.

Audition these loudspeakers if you enjoy clean, refined sound with strong detail and clarity. I enjoyed my time with the Cameleon Queen Loudspeakers and found myself lost in the music for several hours at a time without any fatigue. This is a very good thing, is it not?

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Bernard Kingsley

# Koss ESP 950 Electrostatic Stereophones



**L**IKE HEADPHONES. Sure, most times I would rather crank up the speakers, but since I often listen late at nights and live with other people, headphones come in handy. And computer audio editing really requires headphones. Fact is, headphones CAN sound really good if you select them carefully; over the years I have formed some strong preferences on the subject.

Koss has been around for a long time, and at one time they made *THE* headphones to buy. Like a lot of my generation, I owned Koss headphones at one time. Over the

years, my preferences went to Grado and BeyerDynamics, but when my editor told me that he had a new set of Koss phones to review, I was eager to take another listen.

The Koss ESP 950 headphones are pricey. They represent the top of the line, and electrostatic headphones have always been on the expensive side. At \$1000 list (around \$800 at amazon.com), I expect a lot from headphones, and I'll tell you right now that I wasn't disappointed.

Electrostatics all use a thin Mylar diaphragm instead of the usual mag-

net and coil-type driver. They require a special amplifier to drive them (Koss calls it an "energizer") which limits portability since you have to haul around the phones *and* the energizer. To help out with portability, Koss included a number of features and components. The ESP 950s are supplied in a handy carry bag (similar to a camera case) with room for the headphones, the energizer, cables and adaptors. The ESPs are black except for a small red logo and detach from the yoke that normally holds them, making it easy to pack them.



At first look, I thought that the headphone cord (which is NOT a standard cord) simply wouldn't be long enough to reach across to my listening chair, but Koss thoughtfully included an extension cord as well as adaptors which will let you use the phones and energizer with most any music source.

The ESP 950s are large (over-the-ear) and weigh about 13 oz, though they didn't feel all that heavy when I had them on. In fact, they were quite comfortable to me even when I was wearing glasses and listening for extended periods of time. They use an open-air design, meaning others around you will hear some of the sound. This might be a consideration since these phones can play quite loudly.

The energizer is a small box which has a rocker switch for power, an indicator light, volume and balance control (clutched as one control), a mini-jack input and the output for the headphone cord. That may seem "busy," but it's laid out well. The rear has standard RCA phono inputs and an output for an a.c. adaptor; the unit can also be driven by a portable battery case, which is included.

Koss claims sensitivity of 104-dB SPL for these headphones and warns in its manual that noise and hum may be heard due to sensitivity of the phones and energizer. In practice, I never experienced a noise problem, even in situations which were ripe with noise potential (listening to an LP routed to a phono preamp attached to my computer soundcard, tone controls manipulated through software, and the output of the soundcard driving a Proton preamp which ultimately connected to the Koss energizer).

During most of my listening, the energizer was connected to the preamp's line outputs to allow use of the preamp's remote volume control. Connecting to the tape outputs works as well. I also connected the energizer directly to a portable MP3 player, a portable tuner, two CD players, and my computer's sound card. In all cases, things worked flawlessly.

Let me get a few minor complaints out of the way: The headphones separated too easily, and sometimes un-intentionally, from the yoke. Nothing was broken; it's just kind of a loose fit and can be annoying. Also, the "Left / Right"

indicators are small raised letters, black on black, and simply not visible in subdued light. The owner's manual isn't particularly comprehensive. The English language section consists of two pages and a list of specifications. I didn't see anything on how to best hook up different components and there was no indication as to which input (front or back) is the default. (It turns out the front input overrides the rear, which is logical enough.) To be fair, most owners will be audiophiles who will likely have no problem evaluating different connection options. On to the positive ...

I can't describe these phones as "dark" or "bright." The ESP 950s don't fit either description. They are flat, or true to the recording, with no clear emphasis on any part of the spectrum. At very first listening, I suspected them of rolling off bass and treble but found they simply didn't exaggerate the way some headphones do. The 950s did quite well when solid bass and clear treble was on the recording. They are also able to resolve detail without ever becoming annoying. In fact, the detail offered here is often *amazing* and yes, more than a few times, I really did hear more detail than I had previously heard on a few favorite albums.

The ESP 950s can play LOUD. When clipping finally occurs, it's quite gentle. In fact, I thought at times, that Koss may have included some kind of soft-clipping circuit in the energizer. Unlike other electrostatics I have heard, these never did

sound overly harsh even at very high level volume.

Extended listening sessions were comfortable despite the size and weight of the headphones, though the lady in my life demurred on even trying them when she saw them. (Editor's Note: Such phones have long been termed "Curler Crusher" in my part of the world, Bernard, but I think that's not accurate for your Sweet Lady, as she has short hair. *Gene Pitts*)

I listened to a wide range of music, but concentrated on some of my favorite recordings for critical evaluations. Actually, it's hard to really listen to these headphones; instead, just found myself just getting involved in the music. Nice.

Karen Kosowski's new album, which delivers a wide dynamic range and extended bass, made full use of the ESP 950's ability to reveal very low bass. Details, as fingers worked the guitars, simply come across better on the Koss 950s than on other headphones. Since I had recently heard Kosowski perform in the Boston area, I was still familiar with her voice, and these phones faithfully revealed every nuance.

Are these the best headphones I have ever heard? Probably. I do remember some fantastic Infinity Electrostatics in the early '80s. And the Stax headphones I had borrowed for too long were great. The only way to be certain of how high the ESP 950s rank is to go on listening. (Hey, Editor Gene, can I hang on to these for another six months or so and do a follow-up review?)

## NOTES

**Koss ESP 950 Electrostatic Headphones, \$1,000.00.** Koss Corporation, 4129 No. Port Washington Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53212; phone 414/964-5000, fax 414/964-8615, website [www.koss.com](http://www.koss.com), e-mail for information [jpitroski@koss.com](mailto:jpitroski@koss.com).

### Associated Equipment

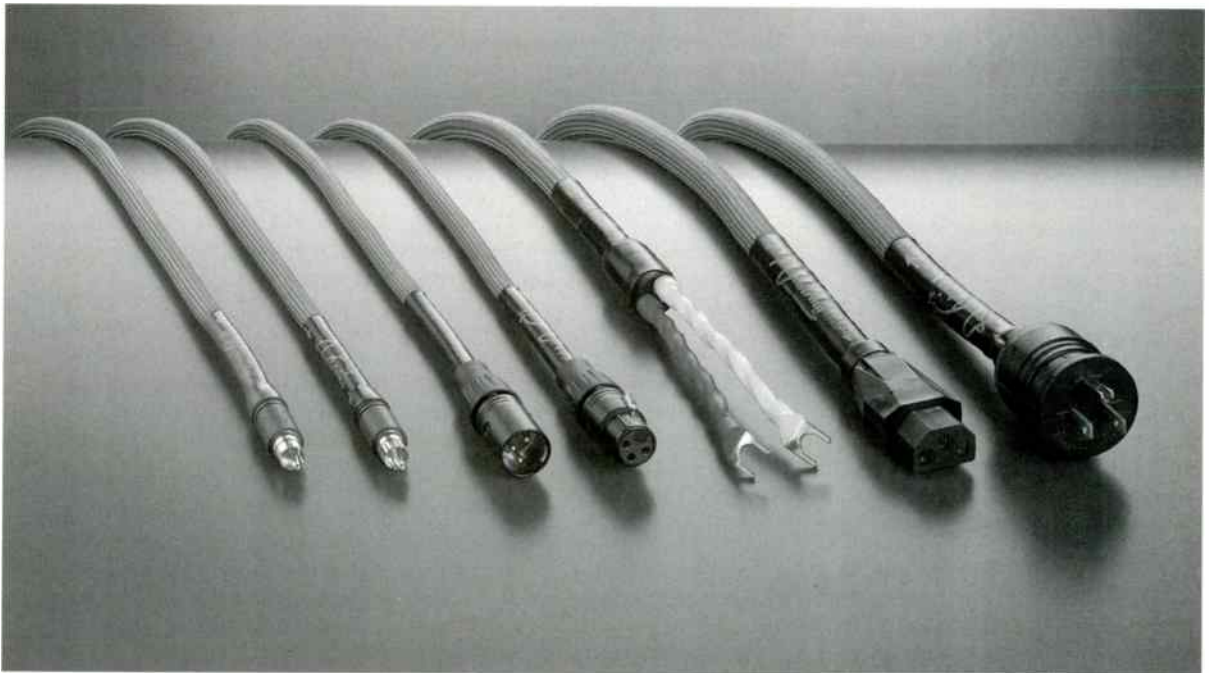
Proton AP 2000II preamp; Sony CDP 591 and Marantz CC3000 CD players; Panasonic SV-SD80 and Sangean DT110 portables; Technics SL1600 turntable with Stanton 681EEE cartridge, and CLEAN! phono preamp. Computer is AMD XP1900 with Turtle Beach Santa Cruz soundcard and LITE-On LTD 163 CD/DVD player.

### Recordings

Karen Kosowski, *Optimist Party*, CD, Wildly Moody Music KK03; Houston Person, *Lost & Found*, CD, 32 Jazz 32020; Joan Osborne, *Relis*, CD, Mercury 314-526-699-2.

Chuck Bruce

# Soundstring Interconnects and Power Cords



**B**EFORE WE CLOSELY examine the new Soundstring Technology cables I first encountered at the June 2003 Home Entertainment show in San Francisco, I ought to freely admit that for many years I had doubts about the performance enhancing effects of cabling in audio systems. Mostly, I complained about poor quality construction, low-quality terminations and the cheap samples included with new gear. Cables were just not on the list of audio accessories into which I was willing to sink my scarce funds. Further, I objected to the snake oil permeating these audio accessories. Like most audiophiles in the earlier days, I focused on the electronics, loudspeakers and other main items. I've not been easily seduced by wild-

eyed claims and arm-waving hoopla over cables. Having a good bit of electrical and electronics training and practical experience over many years, I have mainly focused on good quality conductors; low impedance, non-corroding and mechanically durable terminations; ease of use, and not very much else.

Curiosity finally got this cat when I heard improved audio performance from several brands. Thus, in my own good time, I began my personal quest for the ideal wiring (both interconnect and power). Ultimately I wound up owning or doing long auditioning sessions with some interesting performers from Audioquest, Harmonic Technology, Kimber, Luminous Audio, Nordost, Tara, Camelot, and many others.

I'm still cautious about cable, yet I am also willing to investigate. I also try to maintain an objective attitude in dealing with these often-costly accessories. We audiophiles still have to keep the craziness in check with such accessories.

One of the earliest speaker cable design pioneers was Bob Fulton, who was also famous for his recordings and loudspeakers. Not long after, a second wave of design pioneers brought out lines of speaker cables, guys with names like Ray Kimber, George Cardas, Bill Lowe, and David Salz. While mistakes were made and mismatches stumbled upon, the materials, geometries and connectors were refined and improved during this second period; progress in these areas continues



right up to the present day. Today, one can choose from wire products made by a host of manufacturers for most any particular application or desired sonic signature.

But let me stir the pot further, with a.c. power cords which are reputed to offer revolutionary advances in our listening experience. These cords actually make a lot of technical sense to me, because the benefits of shielding, conductor twist geometry, and grounding to subdue detrimental r.f. and e.m.i. effects are quite well known. These construction techniques are long applied in commercial and military electronics sectors, so why not in home audio?

So I discovered a new kid on the block, Soundstring Cable Technologies, which was launched at the June 2003 Home Entertainment show. Based on some quick listening, I just as quickly became inquisitive about this new participant in the cable wars. I really hadn't been looking for new cabling either, as I have plenty of fine cables at home to choose from. In any case, Soundstring offers a single model of both shielded and unshielded, balanced and RCA-type interconnects, as well as loudspeaker cables and power cords at price points which range from \$450 to \$575. Their items may be applied to line-level audio, home theater or phono applications. They are testing and evaluating 75-ohm editions for both digital and analog applications for early 2004 insertion into the product line. Soundstring is a business collaboration and brainchild of Jed Hacker (a veteran broadcast industry musical producer and director) and the design and manufacturing experience of Superior Insulated Wire and the Lion Cords Division of Astrophonic Corporation of America. Combining over 100 years of experience and based in Stony Point, NY and South Norwalk, CT, these businesses provide in-house design and OEM manufacturing for the commercial and consumer electronics industry, making a variety of cabling systems, molded plugs and accessories.

### The Listening

During the 2003 HE show, Soundstrings items were installed in several systems, some large and

some small, though all were powered with solid-state amplification and used CD sources. There was in each case an easily noticeable atmosphere of sweet smoothness throughout the audible band. One system which used Wisdom Audio's

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## If you're upgrading cables or interconnects, Soundstrings should be on your short list.

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highly revealing big 75-inch ribbon speaker system presented rock-solid bass response plus a nuance-filled soundstage that was as revealing as any I've ever experienced. The system offered all the subtle detail and dynamic contrasts necessary for a "you are in the hall" experience. I found myself spending a lot of time in these rooms just enjoying the music while spinning some of my favorite discs. The exhibitors, for their part, kept pointing to the cables as a key enhancement to their systems. Something interesting certainly was going on, so not long afterward, I asked the Soundstring guys for review samples.

My evaluation of these audio cables and power cords was never intended as a full-blown double-blind A-B "shoot-out" at this juncture. I only intended to offer a reasonable and fair assessment of a new product line based on a quick evaluation of their merits in a real-world high-end system, but I did mean to do some revealing listening tests with my own personal collection of recordings. I also believe I have a good baseline understanding of cable performance and interactions with the variety of solid-state and vacuum tube gear I either own or could access for the listening.

The Soundstring cables sounded remarkably good right out of the box, and their power cords also went right to work and were just as obviously good at allowing the full dynamics of my amplifiers, which I usually string with some of the best cabling available, items like my benchmark, Kimber's Palladian. If the Soundstring interconnects have a character, it is an engaging sweetness and harmonic richness throughout the audio spectrum.

These interconnects just don't seem to have any aberrations in the audio spectrum that stick out, no noticeable tilt in any direction. Matter of fact, I was taken aback by their uniformity when I inserted them in my own system. I especially enjoyed the balanced sets for their excellent noise rejection and easy "hot swapping" functionality. In my phono system (especially for the tonearm-to-preamp run, where signal preservation is paramount), the Soundstring cables preserved the sweet and detailed nuances of my vinyl treasures, and in this,

they compare very favorably with the best cabling I've used. The loudspeaker cables offered a sense of depth, bass authority and dynamics that again can only be compared to the best in the business, and at less cost to boot. Since Soundstring kindly provided a complete set of cables, running from source to loudspeaker (including power cords), I believe I was better able to assess their overall sonic influence over my system(s). Most all audio cables have some sonic signature that is either a benefit or distraction, often subtle but there nonetheless. Connected as a complete cabling system from source to loudspeaker, the Soundstrings exhibit a neutral to a forgiving character without any sacrifice in the top end. The non-fatiguing nature of Soundstrings just seems to pass the music through in full flower without getting in the way.

Many interconnects and to some degree loudspeaker cables behave as tone controls. From experience, these tone-contouring effects on audio signals are more or less apparent, depending on the particular equipment and its native impedance and load characteristics. A basic spec of say "50-kilohms input impedance" does not accurately tell the whole tale when it comes to interactions. How many times have we audiophiles searched for just the right interconnect or loudspeaker cable for a particular set of gear?

In particular, female vocals from such sopranos as Kathleen Battle and Barbara Bonney seemed especially well served by the Soundstrings. The character of Jascha Heifetz's violin was conveyed with authority in the most profound passages, yet its delicacy was preserved in lighter moments.

Joe Morello's drum "thwacks" on Dave Brubeck's *Take Five* were projected into my listening room with an unmistakable authority and accuracy. Even though the Soundstrings do not appear to require extensive break-in, they did seem to get sweeter with use and after a summer and fall of listening, I'm quite smitten by their performance. These cables really grew on me with their easy presentation. Just what I need in middle age. *Like a quiet evening and a good brandy with my sweetie by the fire ...*

As an aside, I'm convinced from experience that a lot of break-in really has to do with connector conductivity as much as the wire or dielectric itself. Effective voltage and current conduction across mechanical connectors is critical to top audio performance over the long term. Let's face it, when it comes to audio interconnects, we are talking about rather small magnitude a.c. voltages and currents here.

After sampling or owning a number of power cords, I find that a good power cable really will reveal more of the dynamics and the headroom possible from a top power amplifier. As an example, my 20-watt Art Audio JOTA vacuum-tube unit appears to gain at least 2 dB or more dynamic power when I use these low-impedance, large-gauge Soundstring cables for a direct feed from the a.c. panel. Appears these cords were up to this task — with

ease. I was really surprised by this in the Soundstrings, given their price point, since heretofore only the most expensive cords were able to exhibit such "added dynamics" with this revealing type of amplifier.

### Technical Summary

Much of Soundstring's applied technology is either already patented or has a patent pending, but a thorough discussion of it would occupy more space than the editor has for me. Suffice to say, if you're intrigued by such stuff, the manufacturer's brochures and detailed white papers give intimate detail of these items. There, you can immediately jump into such features as "Progressive Geometric Gauges and low impedance Tricormaxial-stranded rope-lay oxygen-free copper conductors." Interconnects feature "Octaphase" shielded construction and patented ultra low-mass, 24-karat gold-plated beryllium-copper RCA connectors. These non-locking RCA terminations feature a center pin with spring expanders (like mini-banana plugs) for positive contact and are encased in an attractive real wood outer shell to provide a good grip. All Soundstring conductors are said to use high-purity 99.99% oxygen-free copper of multiple progressive gauges. The Soundstring RCAs "seated" positively and firmly in my experience. Neutrix gold-pin XLRs were provided for balanced interconnects and seating provided me a reassuring

mechanical "click," which should warm any audiophile's heart. All of the Soundstring cables and cords proved durable and dependable during my many changes and in different systems, a most appealing attribute for a reviewer or incurable audiophile cable swapper.

A variety of design features are applied to loudspeaker and power cords as well. The flexible heavy-gauge loudspeaker cables are terminated with top-quality gold spades and feature multi-gauge stranded-copper conductors. All of this fancy design gives us a power cord in a 10.5-gauge that can handle 20 amps continuously at up to 300 volts. The power cords have robust commercial-grade plugs with heavy blades and ground. All cables are very flexible, easy to manipulate, and covered in a fine-mesh copper-colored nylon filament textile. Bulk reels of this cable are submitted to UL/NEC and CSA-Canadian for in-wall certification. In the end, we have finely crafted products that certainly appear built to last. Considering how often we tinkering and tweaking audiophiles move things around, durability is an asset; not all cables exhibit this flexibility of use. With all the fierce competition in the interconnect, cable and power cord business, it appears that these veterans did not enter this sector lightheartedly. They are obviously not inexperienced nor did they come with an uncritical eye towards development budgets.

## NOTES

**Soundstring Cable Products:** One-meter RCA interconnects, \$419 per pair; one-meter XLR, \$454 per pair, 6-foot speaker cable, \$575 per pair; 6-foot power cord, \$475 each. Longer lengths of all cables are available at additional cost. Soundstring Cable Technologies, P.O. Box 658, Stony Point, NY, 10980; phone 845/942-1433. website [www.soundstringcable.com](http://www.soundstringcable.com), email [amiller@soundstringcable.com](mailto:amiller@soundstringcable.com).

### Associated Equipment

Audio Research Ref-2 Mk-II line stage; Audio Research PH-3 SE phono stage; Art Audio JOTA 300 B-XLS, Cary V 12 'R', Pass Labs X-150, and McCormack DNA-1/SMc amplifiers; Pioneer Elite DV-47A universal player; Theta Pro Basic IIIa D/A converter; VPI HW-19 Mk-IV turntable with TNT kit, JMW 10.5 arm, and Benz-Micro 0.9 moving-coil cartridge; Von Schweikert VR-6 and Phase Technology PC-9.1 speakers; various cables and cords by Audioquest, Kimber, Harmonic Technology and Tara; TIFF a.c. power conditioner and filter, and Audioprism Quietline filters.

### Conclusion

You are not likely find cables at this price or higher that deliver a more refined and pleasant music presentation than do the Soundstrings. There is no etching of voices or instruments such as you find with some cables. CDs are rendered about as pleasant and non-fatiguing as you'll ever hear them. And the Soundstring power cords deliver the goods in quieting the input power to the point of challenging the throne of the finest I've heard. Congratulations to these new "kids" on the block. If you're looking to upgrade any wire product in your system, the Soundstrings brand should be on your short list. I definitely feel they are onto something good here, and offer both top quality and top performance at competitive price points. We have not likely heard the last from these folks .



# Marantz DV 8400 Universal Digital Disc Player

Ron Nagle



**I**T SEEMED LIKE IT RAINED and then it rained some more; all in all, it wasn't such a bad thing. If you're like me, you find that a rainy night is the perfect time to write, then it will ease my way, for this time there are a very lot of things to say.

This review is no small task; for the Marantz DV 8400 is able to do so many things that I hardly know where to begin. The user guide is 207 pages long and in English, French, and Spanish. The English portion alone comprises 69 pages, and there's still a daunting amount of information contained therein.

My one break in doing up this review is that *TAV's* editor has only

charged me with the audio performance of this device. Still, pleasing him has to include a discussion of the DVD Video (sound only) DVD-A Stereo, and 5.1-surround along with standard CD audio as well as Direct Stream Digital formats, SACD and SACD surround.

I have and used in my reference system 10 discs in a mix that covered all the digital formats this Universal Player might encounter. Of these 10, I chose two as my reference / demo discs; the first is a DVD format, while the other is a hybrid comprising CD, SACD, and SACD surround. The DVD is a state-of-the-art, two-sided, 24-bit/96-kHz

disc from Dr. Mark Waldrep of AIX Records. It is referred to as a "Tribrid" as it contains DVD Video, DVD Audio and DVD Surround Audio material (AIX 8008). The album is called *Nitty Gritty Surround*, and features John McEwen and Jimmy Ibbotson. On the DSD front, I use another hybrid disc, one chosen for its familiarity to all. This is the surround-sound remastering in SACD of *Dark Side Of The Moon*, Capital CDP- 72 4382136 21. I'll refer back to these recordings later on in this evaluation.

I used Marantz's 8400 at home in my reference system for three weeks; by the end of that time, I felt

I had a very good understanding of what its sonic signature was. My system was only the first of three different systems I auditioned the DV 8400 in during my investigation. I got pretty good at separating, I feel, what was intrinsic to the disc mastering from what this device was capable of reproducing. Significantly, in my home I did not hear any audible change in the sound over time; putting it another way, the 8400 seemed broken in right out the box. And last, but not least, the Marantz played everything I threw it with the sole exception of a DVD-R video disc a friend burned on his computer.

### The Hardware

"The first thing you notice as you unpack the Marantz 8400 is its weight, 17 pounds, 4 ounces. The reason it weighs this much becomes clear when you turn the unit over. The bottom is made of two layers of stamped cold-rolled sheet steel, and the inside panel is copper plated to shield radiated r.f.i. from the circuitry inside. The vertical portions of the chassis enclosure are fabricated of the same sheet steel, and — unusually these days — even the rear panel is steel. There are 16 gold-plated RCA analog and digital outputs for two-channel and 5.1 systems along with, one S-video, one Toslink, and two "D-type" computer connectors — one of them is a RS232C nine-pin interface used for pro setup. The other "D" connector is a 25-pin type and used for the new DVI-D video interface that is not enabled at the present time.

The front panel gives you your first hint of the multi-tasking ability of this device. There, arranged side by side, are the logos or badges for SACD/surround, DVD-A, Dolby Digital, DTS, THX Select, SRS Trusurround, and NSV-Precision Video. Removing the top cover, it is fairly easy to see where the designers spent most of their money. The main board holds three LSI (large scale integrated) DAC processors encapsulated in solid copper cans. I assume we all know by now just how much radiated r.f.i. digital devices can and do regularly produce. I think Marantz should have made the disc transport more rugged, I'm not a fan of plastic trays. Still, I can't fault the way this one

worked during my test. One additional personal nit to pick concerns the remote; the numbering should not be above or below the track buttons. It would be clearer and far more logical to me if the numbers were placed just to the left of the respective button; then you could

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## If I can be carried out of my little room to the performance, then I require little else.

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read the digits normally as you would read a sentence, from left to right. But all in all, the remote has good design, I'd say this looks like a component priced fairly at \$1,700.00.

### The G.U.I.

That's the "Graphical User Interface," pronounced *goo-we*, and you will need to be familiar with its use for on-screen video programming. This can get a bit complicated, but it is important that you read and understand this part of the users' guide book thoroughly. (In the process you will learn how the derogatory phrase "Drilling Down" through the G.U.I. came into being.)

The DV8400 comes from the factory with settings logical for two-channel audio systems, which is where I wanted it for a portion of this review. But, let's say you load a SACD Hybrid disc, the default will select the stereo two-channel SACD layer. To select one of the other formats, you need to press *Setup* on the remote, the video monitor will then display the on-screen programming menu. Under the top left tab labeled *Audio 1*, you use the *Down* arrow of the four arrow buttons on the remote control to scroll down to the line denoted *SACD Playback*. If you make this selection, a box opens to the right with the three choices stacked one above the other. From top to bottom they are 2-ch Area, Multi-ch Area, and CD Area; you then use the *Right* arrow button to move the cursor into this box. And finally, with the *Down* arrow, you move down to the last line and hit *Enter*. The drive reinitializes to read the CD's Table Of Contents (TOC) and the front panel display changes from the SACD

logo to the standard CD symbol. The 8400 is now ready to read the Red Book PCM-encoded 16/44.1 layer of the disc.

You will have to repeat this procedure to change back to another mode. If you delay making a selection more than 30 seconds the video display times out and goes blank, which can be annoying. Most of the programming functions cannot be accessed on the fly, the front panel display will instruct you to stop the disc, make your selection and then restart.

So far we haven't mentioned the *Audio Surround* set up, which can be broken down into three basic segments. The first step designates individual speaker size, either large or small. Step two enters speaker distance from listening position. Step three involves using a Radio Shack SPL meter at the listening position and pink noise from the DV 8400 to set all five speaker levels. (This last part, you understand, is done in conjunction with a pre-amp or a receiver, which is another part of a surround setup and is not a function of the DV 8400 by itself.)

There are more menus with many more choices; most of these deal with *Video*, which is not the subject of this article. [In fact, *Friend Ron*, I think I have warned you many times about even using the word *Video* more than once in a review. — Gene Pitts] The front panel display tells you what is loaded in the tray and what the unit is set to decode; it utilizes two warning symbols and plain English to tell you what is going on. Many of the *Video* prompts are mimicked by the front panel display, a helpful aid when programming. Outlining the individual steps necessary to reprogram just one function hopefully will give you a sense of the process you would need to follow. Understand that there are many selections that would be flat-out wrong and could effect what you hear, though they might not sound so very obvious. Having said that, you should pay especially close attention to the sections of the Guide concerning DVD two-channel audio output and switching from *Virtual* to *TruSurround* simulation. Also, it's a good idea to know when and what media is down-sampled using the digital outputs. The default is *Down*



*Sample Off*, but this does not override the process. Depending on the type of software you have loaded in the tray, it still may automatically be down-sampled. Not so incidentally, this type of processing is degrading and is a crude shotgun approach that's basically used for copy protection of digital sources. You audiophiles should understand that the only truly good way to listen to high-resolution audio from DVD-A or SACD sources is to use the analog-out connections. Routing the complete digital bit stream through the Marantz's on-board high-resolution DAC by-passes down sampling at the analog outputs.

## The Sound and the Jury

I'm on the executive committee of two audiophile societies, so I was able to use the Marantz DV 8400 as a subject for the Brooklyn Audio Society's monthly meeting. As you can imagine, by now I had some very definite ideas of what the 20 or so assembled audio society types were going to hear. Like me, most

of them had never done A/B comparisons of CD vs. same program SACD, or DVD to DVD-A. The only fly in this ointment was that our host did not have a Surround Sound system, so our listen-fest was a two-channels only evaluation. The 8400 was connected via its analog outputs, so what we listened to was full resolution audio.

Starting with the ordinary Red Book *Dark Side* CD layer, and then switching to the SACD layer, the difference was easy to hear and qualitatively agreed upon by all. Although our listening was not confined to just the *Dark Side* recording, this disc is what I will describe. Through the Marantz, the 16-bit/44-kHz layer is better than what you might expect from your average CD spinner. It may not be evident at first but versus another player, the Marantz's sound is quiet and a bit more refined with a nice sense of depth and ambiance.

Listening to the same performance from the SACD layer, what you hear is far more up-front and

powerful. The lower midrange and bass is driving straight at you, again with even greater detail but also layered upon a dead-black substrate of quiet. The opening heart-beat track is a dramatic example, arising from dead silence and slowly building to the opening crescendo; this is a great demo disc.

Additionally, there is something nobody seems to have written anything about. If you take an ordinary non-SACD disc and play it on a SACD player, generally speaking it sounds better than it would if played on a conventional CD player. The same thing happens if you put a SACD disc in a Red Book standard player, it sounds better than would a 16/44-kHz CD. So I think that the improvement in SACD sound quality is evidently a function of both the software and the hardware combined!

Moving the presentation along to the DVD side of things, I refer back to my reference disc, *Nitty Gritty Surround*. For our assembled audiophiles, I start with side one of this two-sided disc. It contains the DVD video, track 6, with Jennifer Warnes singing, "Somewhere Somebody." I love this cut, mostly because I'm a big fan of hers and the sound quality is exceptional. Everything you hear has an amazing "You are there!" quality which flows toward you with a natural liquidity. This is, of course, a video with a 24-bit, 48-kHz sound track (the standard format). Next up is the flip side of this disc, DVD-A same performance but now sampled at 24-bit/96-kHz. The first side seemed to be flawless but this version has all of those qualities seemingly magnified. You really have to do a quick A/B comparison to fully appreciate the expansion and depth of the sound stage, the added detail, and the natural decay of sound at 96 kHz. This last selection brought a smile to all, and we ended the meeting in anticipation of what was yet to be. Metaphorically, I believe this is a window allowing us a look ahead to the future. Concluding, I posed one last question, "Did any one have a preference for the sound quality of either the SACD or DVD-A?" As it turned out, no one could choose between the two, and it remained for the present an unanswered question. But now I ask you, isn't that what makes this audio thing of ours so damn interesting?

## NOTES

**Marantz DV 8400 Universal Digital Disc Player, \$1,700.00.** Marantz America, Inc., 1100 Maplewood Dr., Itasca, IL 60143; phone 630/741-0300, fax 630/741-0301, website [www.marantz.com](http://www.marantz.com), e-mail [info@marantz.com](mailto:info@marantz.com).

### Associated Equipment

Cambridge Audio Discmagic-1 compact disc transport, Cambridge Audio S-700 Isomagic D/A converter, ART DI/O upsampling A/D and D/A converter, Audio Research Classic 60 tube Power Amplifier for main speakers, Hafler 500 Mos-Fet power amplifier, Krell KAV 300 iL integrated amp, Gradient crossover, Audio Research SP-9 MK-3 Hybrid tube Mos-Fet preamp, QUAD ESL-63 speakers rebuilt and modified sitting upon dedicated Gradient Woofers, Onix Grandmaster speaker cables to QUAD panels, Esoteric Ultrapath cables to woofers. Surround System: Infinity Prelude speakers, Carver subwoofers, Coda Continuum 4.3.2 power amp. Sony preamp, home-made speaker and interconnect wiring, Echo Busters acoustic panels.

### Accessories

Sony Wega TV monitor (for programming); Islatrol 20-amp a.c. line conditioner; Islatrol one-amp line conditioner for digital components; ferrite filters on all interconnects and line cords; Room Tunes corner/ceiling panels; Argent Roomlens; Gryphon diffusion panels; VPI Magic Bricks; Monster, Nordost Red Dawn, Audio Research Litzline, Audiobahn, and Wireworld Eclipse-2 interconnect cables; Wireworld power cord; Radio Shack SPL meter, and a comfortable chair.

## Music in the Round

I trundled the DV 8400 over to my friend Brian's home, where he has an A/V surround system worthy of the Marantz's capabilities. It incorporates a first-rate wide screen TV, the top-of-the-line Infinity 5.1 surround speaker array, Carver subwoofers and much more, all carefully set to THX specs in a sound-proofed room. Again, I refer to my reference AIX DVD-A recording with Jennifer Warnes and, of course, *Darkside* in SACD surround.

First track 6, in surround, places you on stage facing Jennifer Warnes with only the microphone separating her from you. The music flows over a grainless quiet, overlaid by a seemingly unlimited natural dynamic space — the effect is spooky. This is the consummate reality check. There are no artificial surround effects; just you on stage, listening to an intake of breath and the breathing out of a song, wonderful.

Pink Floyd has a totally different concept which places you on a stage of Performance Art. It is you on stage, as the action swirls about you, the heart sound of track 1 builds louder on all sides. And for the first time, I can clearly make out the first muddled utterance coming

from the left speaker, containing the word "Fuck."

In track 3, "On The Run," loud footsteps cross in front of you, then run toward you from the right speaker. The panting breaths get louder and the footsteps build until they pass by your right ear and recede into the space behind your head. I can only smile as I imagine how this technology would have impacted 20 years ago in the days of roll your own. When de rigueur was cherry red eyeballs and grooving to the Technicolor sounds of the Dark Side. We have all waited interminably long for the promises of surround hi-fi. Are we are finally there?

## The Last Note

I can't say this is the best universal disc player on the market. I haven't done a direct comparison to any other high-end universal player out there. However, during this long auditioning process, neither I or anyone else could find any fault with the sound quality produced by the DV 8400. Rather, we one and all felt renewed appreciation for the promises of this new high-resolution audio technologies. And considering the feature filled A/V menus,

and all these units can do to enhance the video performance right along side of the audio, plus the fact that it will probably be the last digital disc spinner you will need to buy, \$1,700 is more than fair.

I have spent the last 30 years or so in pursuit of music that is real enough that it has the power to suspend my disbelief. I now feel we have spanned a void that separated us from our love of music, and we are ever closer.

Close your eyes and listen. "Are you a part of what you hear?" is the test and the promise. We know the wealth of nuance and detail high-resolution audio can add but that is only half of the story. In surround, now you can become a part of it, breaking down a barrier of time and space, no longer peeking through a hole in the fence.

For me, that's what it's all about. If I can be transported out of my little room and be carried believing into the performance, then I require little else.

I stand resolved not to give it back, to quote Mr. Heston "You will have to pry it from my...." oh, you know the rest.

After all, are we not Audiophiles?



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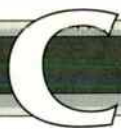


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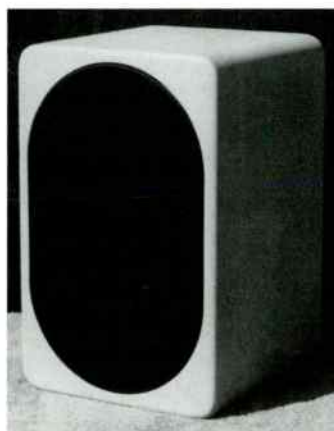
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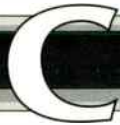
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### Obituary

**Thomas G. Stockham, Jr.**, 70, died January 6th in Salt Lake City. The M.I.T. electrical engineer was widely regarded as the leader in digital electronics upon whose work the CD and DVD became practical. While many firms had done work in this field for decades, Stockham's Soundstream digital recorder captured the industry's attention with their 1970 release on the RCA label of "Caruso: A Legendary Performer," which had been digitally remastered. Later that year, they made the first live digital recording with the Sante Fe Opera.



## Photos Never Lie!

### Why I Go to Las Vegas . . .

Yeah, I know it sounds silly, but I still love to play with toy robots, even though I am old enough to have grandchildren that play with Gundam and Pokémon toys. This one above is from the Consumer Electronics Show in the Las Vegas Convention Center this past January. It comes from Robotopia Productions in Orlando, Florida, which says its "Showbots" are the "next generation of carbon-based robots." It has a 15-inch LCD screen that will show movies, animations, still images and live video. The Showbot offers "250 watts & 360 degrees of high quality amplification, to deliver a punch from the digital music library or the digitized voice system.

Gene Pitts, Editor  
*The Audiophile Voice*

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