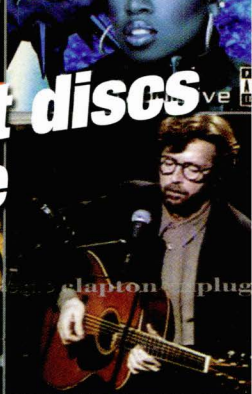
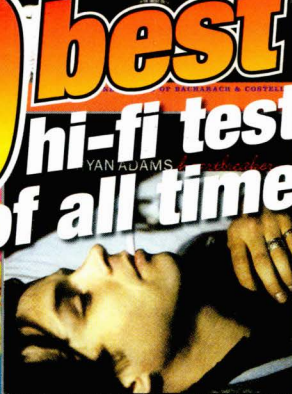
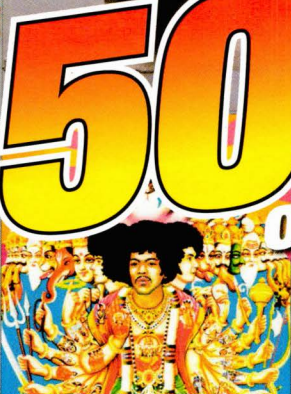
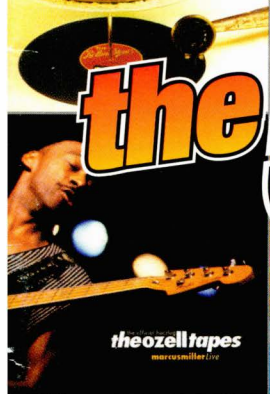
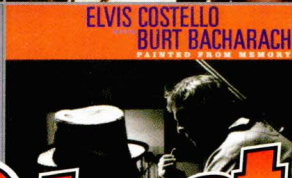
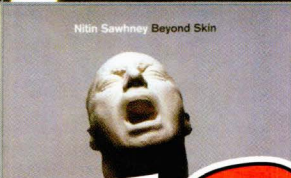
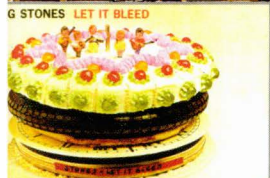
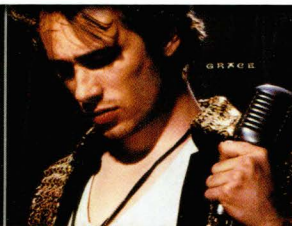
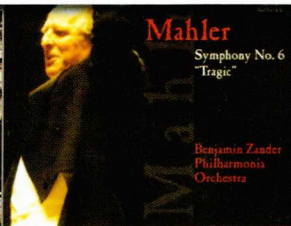
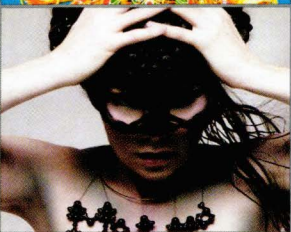
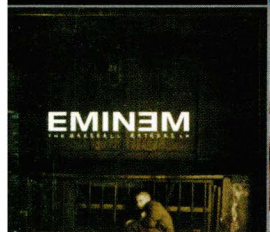


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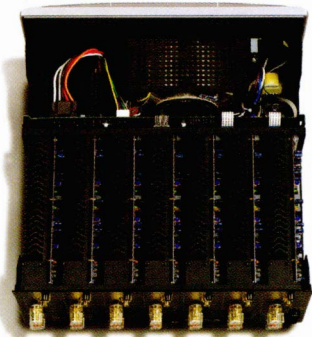
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Hi-fi is made for just one purpose: to play back music in the most convincing and believable fashion; in other words, to make it sound 'real'. Scientific measuring of the kind that forms part of the *HFC* test regime is of great use in explaining why an audio component sounds as it does, but the ultimate test for any potential purchaser always comes back to the music.

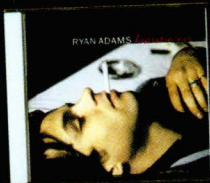
The key when auditioning any hi-fi product is to take a variety of favourite discs with you, the sort your system will have to handle in order to bring you musical pleasure. And it always helps to have a few extremes – discs that will thoroughly test certain parameters of a component's overall performance.

To that end, here are our top 50 recommendations for hi-fi auditions, as nominated by a selection of our reviewers and other industry experts. These are the tools of our trade, and regular readers will recognise many titles from their frequent use within our reviews. But while each has been picked because it makes an excellent test disc, there is another common factor that binds them all together: they all contain great music. And, when your drive units start to shudder, that's what really counts.

Just one last thing, before you peruse our recommendations. If you flick to p30 of this supplement, you'll find a voting form for our first ever Music Awards. This gives you the chance to nominate your favourite music across various categories, so you can have your say too. So what are you waiting for... get to it!

Tim Bower Editor

Contributing writers: Richard Black, Tim Bower, Dan George, Andy Giles, Alvin Gold, Jimmy Hughes, Jason Kennedy, Shaun Marin, Paul Messenger, Dave Oliver, Mark Prendergast, Alan Sircom, David Vivian



RYAN ADAMS

Heartbreaker

Cooking Vinyl (featured format: CD)

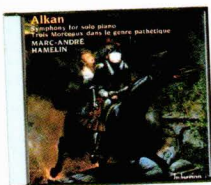
This is the tousle-haired troubadour's break-up album, following the disintegration of affairs both musical and of the heart. Released in 2000, it was Adams' first solo record and a more introspective collection

than *Gold*, the commercial breakthrough disc which followed in 2001.

Adam's guitar strings bleed all over this record – a country-tinged rip at the heartstrings, loaded, uplifting and shattering. Max the effect at 3am with a bottle of red wine clutched to your breast... it's the voice of an angel falling from grace, a band with whisky sours in their hearts and honey dripping from their fingertips. Breaking up never sounded so sweet. **TB**

Listen out for

If your heart was ever broken, the moment 1:22 into Come Pick Me Up when the chorus first kicks in will tug at your soul as Adams tugs at his strings, and the bass drum thuds home.



CHARLES-VALENTIN ALKAN

Symphony For Solo Piano

Marc-André Hamelin

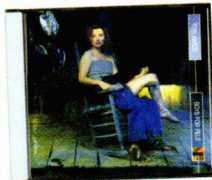
Hyperion CDA67218 (featured format: CD)

Alkan was a contemporary of Wagner, a friend of Chopin and, apparently, the only pianist in front of whom Liszt was afraid to play. His compositions vary from charmingly simple miniatures to behemoths that strike terror into

the heart of most virtuosos: the *Symphony* is definitely in the latter category. For the listener, however, it is a gripping and thrilling investigation of the world of colour that the piano can create, especially under the hands of a master like Hamelin. It's extraordinary that this incredible music was composed less than a decade after Beethoven's death. The playing is near-superhuman and the recording, by Tony Faulkner, is clear and detailed, bringing the piano close but never oppressively so. **RB**

Listen out for

In the symphony's first movement, the grand peroration occurs around seven minutes, a sweeping moment guaranteed to make those neck hairs stand up ramrod-straight.



TORI AMOS

Boys For Pele

Atlantic (featured format: CD)

These eighteen songs of painfully honest, heart-wrenching music chronicle Tori's split with her producer-boyfriend of eight years, Eric Rosse.

It's easily one of her best efforts – a beautifully open and diverse collection, described by the lass

herself as "a journey searching for fire and womanhood". Her Bösendorfer piano chimes magically as if strung by Gandalf the Grey, the whole sounding more scrumptious than ever, with a noticeably more advanced production than her two previous albums. The many sparse vocal-led tracks augmented only by Tori twinkling the ivories will test how natural a system can sound. *DG*

Listen out for

Caught A Lite Sneeze *is an ideal test track – prominent kick drum for bass extension and speed, delicious harpsichord for midrange detail and transparency, and breathy vocals for mid/treble coherence.*



LAURIE ANDERSON

Life On A String

Nonesuch (featured format: CD)

Back in 1989 Laurie Anderson's *Strange Angels* established a new benchmark for CD sound quality that has seldom been bettered since. *Life On A String*, from 2001, not only represents a return to form musically, it's also a

sonic extravaganza that comfortably betters its predecessor in bass extension and dynamic range. Anderson herself is an astonishingly versatile artist, composing thought-provoking songs with poetic lyrics, and notably varied and creative musical arrangements. Most of the music starts out with acoustic instruments – keyboards, violins and other strings predominate – but a variety of electronic processing is widely and creatively used to spice up many of the tracks. *PM*

Listen out for

Skuli Sverrisson's programmed percussion on My Compensation has bass figures as deep, fast and complex as anything you'll hear.





CAPTAIN BEEFHEART

Clear Spot

Reprise (featured format: CD)

Now packaged alongside *The Spotlight Kid* on a single 'budget' CD, *Clear Spot* is probably the good Captain's funkiest album, and one of the more commercial and accessible too, when the Magic Band at the height of its powers.

From 1972, the recording quality lapses into 'ping-pong' stereo occasionally, though it's decent enough for its era. Sadly, means it can be a bit scrappy at high frequencies, too. But the music and musicianship remains remarkably fresh, is full of variety, and peppered with interesting cross-rhythms and time-signatures. From sensitive ballads to driving rock 'n' roll tracks, the interplay between Zoot Horn Rollo, Rockette Morton, Ed Marimba and Oréjon is wonderfully inventive and consistently surprising. *PM*

Listen out for

This music is all about timing, and Big-Eyed Beans From Venus should build up an unstoppable accelerating momentum.



JS BACH

Mass In B Minor

The Sixteen, Harry Christophers (cond)

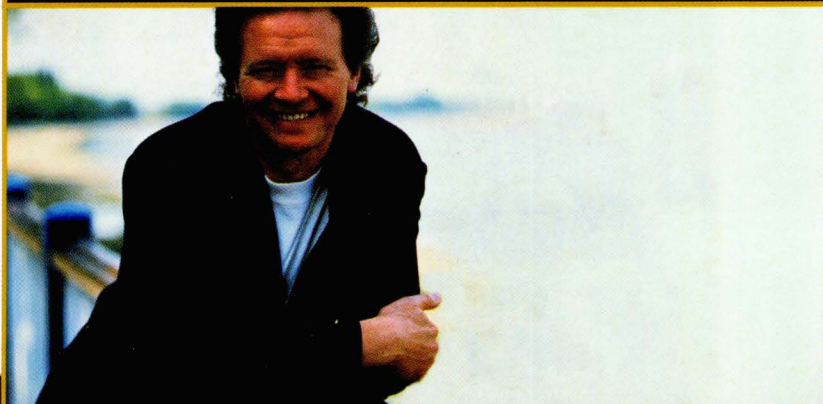
Collins Digital 70332 (featured format: CD)

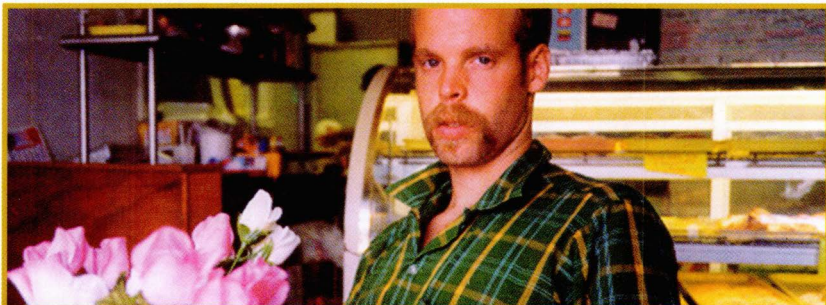
Ask any classically trained musician and they will all say (probably at some length) just how much modern music owes to Johann Sebastian Bach. Our modern tempered instrumentalist

sound – whether a polite string quartet or death metal band on the rampage – was first defined by Bach with the 48 preludes and fugues of his *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In a secular world, it could be easy to overlook the *Mass In B Minor* as devotional music. But the *Mass In B Minor* – played with enough fire and passion – could even make hard-bitten atheists reconsider... and The Sixteen play Bach with fire in their bellies. *AS*

Listen out for

The Kyrie begins with the choir, then silence and finally the orchestra. During the silence, two minutes in, you can hear birds twittering on only the best hi-fi.





BONNIE 'PRINCE' BILLY

I See A Darkness

Domino (featured format: CD)

Will Oldham has recorded under an startling variety of monikers – Palace, Palace Music, Palace Brothers, Will Oldham – but it's in his dark folk lord, Bonnie 'Prince' Billy guise that he's managed to catch most people's attention.

Don't let the name fool you, there's little that's bonnie about this album, and it's not some commercial sell-out. It's unrelenting stuff, and tracks such as *I See A Darkness* and *Today I Was An Evil One* are delivered without a hint of irony. What it does have going for it is a rather unusual sound quality, which really positions the protagonists solidly on the sound stage, while the lead vocal is disturbingly clear. *SM*

Listen out for

A minute into Today I Was An Evil One, the moment the backing vocals appear like a spectral voice alongside Oldham's casual delivery is breathtaking – and the song just gets better from there.



LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

The Late String Quartets

Quartetto Italiano

Philips 426 050-2 (featured format: CD)

These magnificent compositions are among the very last Beethoven wrote and were completed at a time when the composer's deafness must have had a profound influence over his work. If that is the case then the world can be strangely grateful

as *The Late String Quartets* are some of the most profound works in music, embracing all of human life in both its conflict and joy. Apparently Beethoven scored the late quartets as symphonies in miniature form, perhaps to expose the quartet to defects of pitch that would be more easily hidden in a truly symphonic rendering. It is this expansive sweep within a small canvas that is particularly awesome and this celebrated Philips collection fully captures this. *AGo*

Listen out for

The sublime content is matched by an incomparable performance from Quartetto Italiano. You should hear the four instruments separately but seamlessly, with the cello fragments clearly defined.



BJÖRK

Medulla

One Little Indian (featured format: CD)

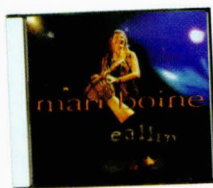
Not the most accessible Björk by a long chalk, but quite possibly her most striking and memorable, *Medulla* uses no conventional instruments. Instead, it relies on the multi-tracked voice of Björk herself, plus donations

from vocal stylists such as English national treasure Robert Wyatt, Inuit throat singer Tagaq, human beatbox Rahzel and others.

The dynamics are exceptionally broad, ranging from deep, resonant bass on the beatbox effects through to overdubbed choral interludes, swooping, elongated vocal expressions and sharp, percussive oral effects. Melodies are obscure, rhythms often fractured, but it's a uniquely powerful work. *DO*

Listen out for

The choral overture of The Pleasure Is All Mine. Tagaq's isolated gasps should be distinct from Björk's massed "ooo's" and sound as though they're right there in the room with you.



MARI BOINE EALLIN

Eallin

Antilles (featured format: CD)

This music defies attempts at categorisation. Mari belongs to the Sami people, from the north of Finland, so don't expect to make a great deal of the lyrics on this disc, though Mari has a

basic instrumentation is substantially acoustic. But much of it could pass for jazz, or even rock, and plenty of electronic processing is tastefully used to heighten the effects.

There's huge contrast between the moods of the different tracks, sometimes driving along with high impetus and energy, sometimes pausing for a delicate and atmospheric flute solo. This 1996 recording is to an exceptionally high standard, despite the fact that most of the album was recorded live. *PM*

Listen out for

Track seven is a particular favourite for subwoofer testing - 50 seconds in, the bass comes in with a

beautiful voice with an immense range. The music's roots are certainly ethnic, just as the

vengeance, genuinely deep but with great rhythmic thrust and significant tonality too.



BUFFALO TOM

Let Me Come Over

Situation Two (featured format: LP)

Rock's great vistas have thrown up a throbbing glut of testing times for a hi-fi component's bass, dynamics, rhythm and timing, but this impassioned roar from 1991 by a lesser-known US indie outfit is an album that rocks harder than

99 per cent of the current crop of overwrought, over-vexed and over here pretenders.

Yet hard rock this isn't. It's simple, melodic guitar-fired pop – songs of love and loss, played with a raw energy that transcends studio tricks and fake postures. It's real and engaging – flared guitars struck with finger-bleeding fervour. A thrilling and exhausting listen. *TB*

Listen out for

Every single second of the beautiful Taillights Fade. *It starts with solitary guitar – which should sound alive and resonant on the right system – then bass and drums kick in and a swaggering, staggering power ballad is effortlessly born.*



JEFF BUCKLEY

Grace

Columbia (featured format: CD)

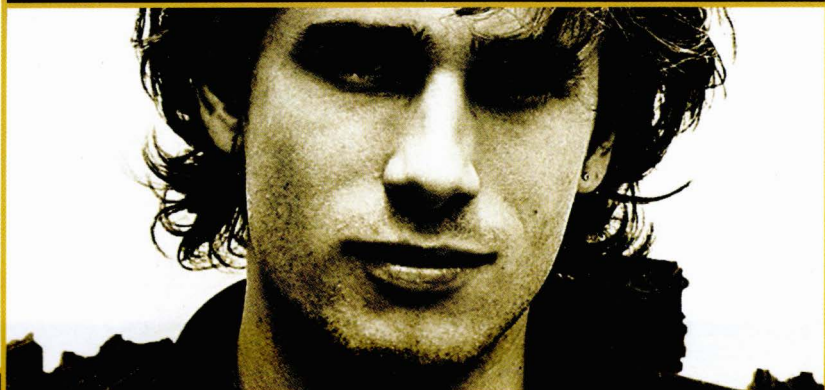
Before accidentally drowning in the Mississippi, Jeff Buckley recorded one of the best rock albums of the nineties, if not one of the best albums, period. From the opening angelic vocal of *Mojo Pin* to the equally

powerful closer *Dream Brother*, this album is brimming with great rock tunes – with some powerful drumming and dynamic vocals – interspersed with moving ballads of failed love.

He fought against comparisons with father Tim his whole career, and though there are very clear similarities in the vocal elasticity, *Grace* probably surpasses anything Buckley Senior recorded – it's just a shame his son couldn't buck the family trend of dying young. *SM*

Listen out for

It's ironic that the perfect moment on this album from a man who drowned is a single intake of breath, but the one at the beginning of Hallelujah is this album's defining moment.



THE 50 BEST HI-FI TEST DISCS OF ALL TIME



TRACY CHAPMAN

Tracy Chapman

Elektra (featured format: CD)

Every reviewer's toolkit needs a female vocal recording, and Tracy Chapman's eponymous debut album is an excellent example. The voice is rich, pungent and pure, the intonation perfect, while the songs are striking and direct.

The accompaniments are sparse but complete; and in one track, *Behind The Wall*, she sings unaccompanied. Some of the songs are crude polemics, but others are more subtle – hit single *Fast Car* for instance – and they all have a personal feel. The spacious recording captures it all beautifully and with great immediacy. This is one popular recording that doesn't sound as though it happened in the mixing desk – you probably won't notice the engineering at all, surely the mark of the best kind of recording. *AGo*

Listen out for

Mountains O' Things *with its odd, lop-sided keyboard and percussion, which should never be swamped by the razor-sharp vocal.*



ERIC CLAPTON AND FRIENDS

Unplugged

Reprise (featured format: CD)

Clapton's 1992 effort for MTV's *Unplugged* is great for showing tempo/timing differences, and demonstrating the benefits that a good subwoofer can bring to the musical party. Because it's live, your system needs to recreate

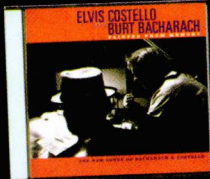
a sense of 'being there' to make the music and performances come alive.

On a good system, it sounds holographic and detailed – even in plain stereo there's a palpable sense of depth and space, with good instrument separation. But also pay attention to quiet backing vocals and instruments such as the piano – notice how clearly they can be heard. Above all, listen to the timing and how much of a swing the beat has. If the music's flat and rhythmically lifeless there's something wrong. *JH*

Listen out for

See if you can spot the piano playing slightly off the beat and rhythmically across bar lines 2:16 into Layla.





ELVIS COSTELLO AND BURT BACHARACH

Painted From Memory

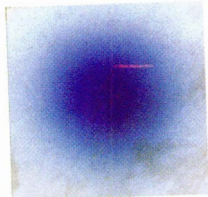
Mercury Records (featured format: CD)

Bit of a sob-fest this bitter-sweet collaboration. If it's a quick mood-lift you're after, best give it a miss. Some of it is frankly almost unbearably vein-opening to listen to.

But then the pain is exquisitely done and the combination of Costello's raw, rasping vocals and uncle Burt's achingly beautiful tunes and arrangements is massively compelling. Especially as it's all so lovingly produced. It's not over produced either. EC's remarkable voice cuts through the mix like a rusty machete, often sounding raw and edgy, but so emotionally powerful you'll be transfixed if your hi-fi is doing the business. *DO*

Listen out for

Lisa Taylor's solo on My Thief – just her voice and massed strings. If the hairs on the back of your neck don't stand up, you need a better system.



CORNELIUS

Point (From Nakameguro To Everywhere)

Matador (featured format: LP)

Japanese artist Cornelius's second album has much oriental madness but also some excellent tunes and a breadth of styles that is rare. It's a more refined and relaxed affair, but it's also a diverse one, too. One track sounds like thrash metal (Hate, Hate, Hate) while another reveals a

piquant melody. He likes rapid changes and unusual counterpoint, blending disparate elements to create highly engaging music.

Although it employs water sounds to great effect, Point was largely made using 'proper' instruments played by talented musicians. There's little of the sampling that characterised his earlier work, but that background informs this material. He's happy to chop things up and come up with unlikely but effective mixes with an element of Beck at his best. *JK*

Listen out for

Speed is the issue here, the transitions are rapid and you need a nimble system to highlight the space between the rapid stops and starts. This is microdynamic range, writ large.



LARS DANIELSSON

Libera Me

ACT (featured format: CD)

Primarily a bass player, Danielsson also plays cello, piano and guitar, as well as being a jazz composer and arranger. His is a particularly lyrical style of playing, which consistently avoids the clichés of noodly jazz bassdom, but

instead fully integrates his instrument into a shifting palette of expressive aural colours, augmenting the rhythm, underpinning string arrangements and occasionally taking the lead role without undue fuss or grandstanding. The album possesses a depth of melodic development and originality that puts it a cut firmly above the rank and file of hi-fi show test discs or 'dinner party' jazz. *DO*

Listen out for

The solo on a cover of Joni Mitchell's Both Sides Now. Danielsson's acoustic bass should be sonorous but clearly defined and expressive, with each touch of the fingerboard so involving that you can almost feel the wood yourself.



SOPHIE-CARMEN ECKHARDT-GRAMATTÉ

Piano Sonatas

Marc-André Hamelin

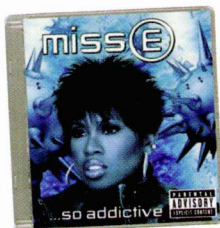
Altarus AIR-CD-9052 (featured format: CD)

Russian-born, French-educated, later resident in several European countries before finally winding up in Canada, Mrs Gramatté composed six piano

sonatas which receive their only recording here in the more than capable hands of the most extraordinary pianist currently on the world stage. He plays a Fazioli piano, an exceptionally fine instrument in a clear acoustic, recorded by a label which has for two decades taken great pains to record pianos as accurately and naturally as possible. The result is a captivating tour – by turns whirlwind and pastoral – through a musical landscape which is never entirely unfamiliar but never in danger of being derivative either. *RB*

Listen out for

The breathtakingly rapid fingerwork in track nine, which can trip up a replay system as easily as it would most pianists, and the beautifully balanced chords in track 11.



MISSY ELLIOTT

Miss E... So Addictive

The Gold Mind (featured format: DVD-Audio)

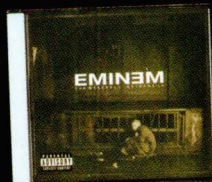
Missy Elliott's third album is arguably her best and this multichannel DVD-A rendition is nothing short of stonking – there's no escaping the phenomenal grooves and heavyweight vox. Elliott works with her long-time producer Timbaland to

lay down some of the juiciest funk this side of the seventies. Combine this with Jimmy Douglas's highly inventive processing for the 5.1 channel mix and you have one of the finest contemporary discs around for exercising a high-res multichannel surround system.

The hit track *Get Ur Freak On*, while pretty good, is hardly the best on offer. If you prefer something tougher try *Lick Shots*, *Whatcha Gon' Do* or the sublime *Slap! Slap! Slap!* JK

Listen out for

See if you can figure out precisely what guest Da Brat is saying on Slap! x3 – she kicks in at 1:46 and around 2:02 mentions the brand of shoes she bought. If your system's good, you'll know!



EMINEM

The Marshall Mathers LP

Aftermath Ent./Interscope Records (featured format: CD)

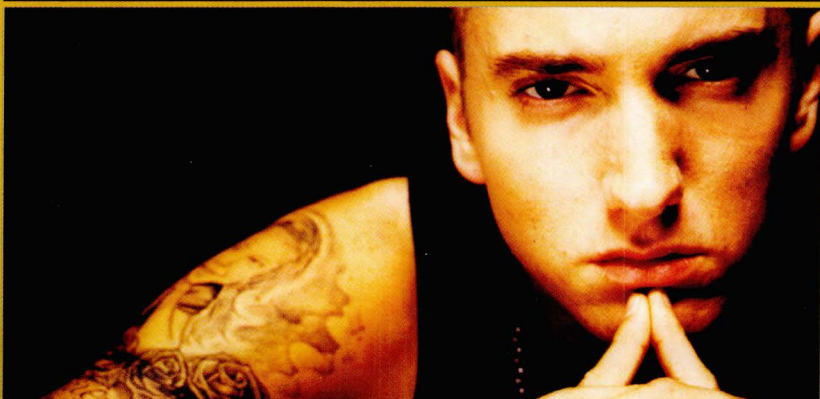
While Marshall 'Eminem' Mathers is clearly not a very nice person he is not the first great musician to be that way – anyone remember James Brown? What's important is the quality of the material. Eminem is a white rapper who

is richer than Croesus thanks to three phenomenally successful albums. His talent lies in his clever use of scansion, the metrical analysis of verse. Few rappers come close when it comes to timing and fluidity. What's more, he manages to bung in some highly entertaining, even original lines to boot.

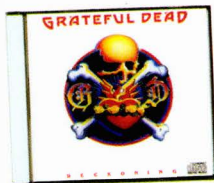
The album features other MCs alongside the little peroxide one who are very impressive but effectively serve to reveal that there is only one *Real Slim Shady*. JK

Listen out for

The bell sounds on Kill You should sound tuneful and varied in pitch. They also have plenty of ring on them which should be clear.



THE 50 BEST HI-FI TEST DISCS OF ALL TIME



GRATEFUL DEAD

Reckoning

Arista (featured format: CD, originally 2x vinyl)

The original 'unplugged' album (long before MTVs), *Reckoning* was taped live in 1980 and released in 1981, when the band was settling into middle age. The Grateful Dead is/was always a live performance experience, and they

have released many live albums, often of dubious sound quality. Not so this gorgeous sounding and beautifully transparent acoustic set, which, despite the odd bum note, makes its gentle, lyrical way through some of the most tuneful tracks from their mature years.

The virtual absence of electric instruments keeps the Dead's traditional self-indulgence under control, but the stand-out feature is Phil Lesh's beautifully delicate, light yet purposeful bass playing. *PM*

Listen out for

Check out the bass picking on Jack-a-Roe, which will show up any shortfalls in bass agility or timing.



GRAINGER

Piano Music

Marc-André Hamelin

Hyperion CDA66884 (featured format: CD)

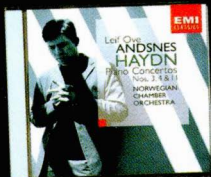
It's taken a long time for Grainger to be accepted as a serious figure in 20th-century music, but this disc has certainly helped him along the way.

Hamelin, an astonishing pianist in any repertoire, evidently feels very much at home here, from the haunting *Colonial Song* to bracing folk-song arrangement *In Dahomey*. Tony Faulkner's recording makes the most of the solid but subtle piano tone with terrific bass impact and particularly fine dynamics. A good piano recording can reveal a lot about a hi-fi system, not least whether it rattles on energetic transients, and is revealing of resonances and smearing of detail. *RB*

Listen out for

In Dahomey has some hair-raisingly deft fingerwork, captured in the utmost detail. If you can hear all the notes, your system's okay!





HAYDN

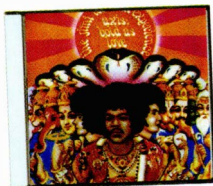
Piano Concertos Nos. 3, 4 & 11
Norwegian Chamber Orchestra directed
from the keyboard by Leif Ove Andnes
EMI Classics 7243 5 56960 2 1 (featured format: CD)

Hardly at the top of the pianistic fame tree, Leif Ove Andnes turns out to be more than just an accomplished pianist. His personality

shines through these performances of works that in other hands are often understandably overlooked. The mood seems to have been infectious too: directing from the keyboard, the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra clearly relishes the music as much as the soloist does, and the result is a recording that is much more than the sum of its parts. It is also a great disc for stretching systems, not because it is particularly difficult to reproduce, but because when done right it all sounds so easy and natural. *AGO*

Listen out for

On balance you should perhaps start with number 11, the final work on the disc, which is the most substantial musically.



JIMI HENDRIX

Axis: Bold As Love
MCA (featured format: CD)

Hendrix's second and finest album introduced the world to the full Technicolor widescreen dream of Hendrix's sonic imagination as he explored stereo phasing, fuzz-toned guitars, minor modes, harmonic shifts, mellifluous backwards guitar solos and varying time signatures:

Among a feast of highlights the icing on an already extremely rich cake has to be the incredible title track which perfected stereo phasing for the first time in history. Incredibly, Hendrix even lost the first side master tapes one night and returned to Olympic studios to remix them in one day! He got sterling support from Mitch Mitchell (whose rotary jazz-inflected drum rolls on *Little Wing* and *Bold As Love* are exceptional stand-out moments) and Noel Redding who debuted his new Hagstrom eight-string bass on this album. *MP*

Listen out for

Hendrix's awesome backwards guitar on Castles Made Of Sand (1:31) should drip from your speakers like honeyed cream.



LAMBCHOP

Is A Woman

City Slang (featured format: LP)

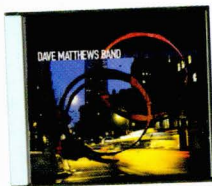
More a collective than a band, Lambchop's sound is not as relaxed as a casual hearing might suggest. This is the dark underbelly of contemporary Americana and it's a disquieting place to be. The weirdly broken up lyrics don't

tell half the story, it's the haunting phrases and far away rumblings which evoke the myriad dangers in the home of the brave.

Kurt Wagner's bunch of not so merry men do however weave a magical spell over anyone who is prepared to listen closely, and there are some powerful emotional currents running through this album's muted palette of guitars, piano and even drums. *JK*

Listen out for

A sense of perspective and image depth from tracks like Caterpillar, which can really open up and stretch the boundaries of sonic space – most of those sounds come from real instruments and thus should sound that way!



DAVE MATTHEWS BAND

Before These Crowded Streets

RCA (featured format: CD)

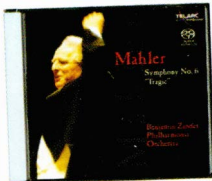
Some of Virginia's best jazz-trained musicians joined South African-born singer/guitarist Dave Matthews when he decided to put his songs on to tape back in 1991 to give his ideas "more depth." He clearly got more than he bargained for: skilled group including David Harrington on

violin, saxophonist Leroi Moore and quite possibly the tightest drummer/percussionist the state could offer in Carter Beauford.

The heavily jazz-influenced fusion that resulted is no chart-topping bag of hooks and tricks. Instead it's a complete music lover's armchair workout – with its compulsory air drumming, earthquake-inducing, foot-stomping allure and magical percussion. If your hi-fi is more slow lane than Autobahn, the power and majesty of this album will be wasted on you. *DG*

Listen out for

From the top of Rapunzel, guitars, violin, bass, and drums align with a vice-like grip which will fully test your system's musicality, transient speed and dynamics.



MAHLER

Symphony No. 6 in A Minor

Philharmonia Orchestra, Benjamin Zander

Telarc 60586-B (featured format: SACD)

Mahler's music was always a better fit with compact disc than with vinyl LP, and the new high-resolution multichannel formats add a new dimension. Mahler's most coruscating and

embittered score famously includes the three hammer blows that appear to presage his fate: the death of his daughter, his anti-semitic sacking from the directorship of the Vienna Philharmonic and the diagnosis of his fatal heart condition. Although in some ways the most forward-looking of all his symphonies, the *Sixth Symphony* is also the least accessible of them all, and this blazing performance is a good choice for those unfamiliar with the work. *AGo*

Listen out for

From its measured, doom-laden opening to the final shriek that presages its denouement, the finale is profoundly impressive, virtually a symphony within a symphony.



LED ZEPPELIN

Physical Graffiti

Swan Song 2-200 (featured format: CD)

There are lesser university degree subjects than that of Led Zeppelin. The band that strode the world with a swaggering blend of blues, folk and hard rock throughout the first half of the 1970s, Zeppelin were rightly adjudged to be

the masters of their genre, with many imitators but few rivals. This sprawling 1975 double released during Zeppelin's zenith, exemplified the group's range and versatility with tracks like the jaunty *Down By The Seaside* rubbing shoulders with awesome rock gems such as *Trampled Under Foot*. *Physical Graffiti* was Zeppelin's *Sgt Pepper*, *Pet Sounds*, *Exile On Main Street* or *Dark Side Of The Moon* yet of all those great milestones Zep's is the only one where every track still bears close scrutiny. *AGi*

Listen out for

The staggering drums of John Bonham. You should be hearing real skins and cymbals, particularly on the epic In My Time of Dying.



THE 50 BEST HI-FI TEST DISCS OF ALL TIME



CURTIS MAYFIELD

There's No Place Like America Today

Curton (featured format: CD)

Known for his generally upful, righteous calls to *Move On Up*, Curtis Mayfield delivered one of his darkest, least pop-conscious and most brilliant albums in post-Nixon 1975. Lyrically it deals with hard times in the ghetto, and musically it's sparse

and bare, yet the arrangements are actually quite lush, with strings, horns and congas augmenting Curtis's group. The secret seems to be that nothing is over-used, brought in to make a point without over-staying its welcome. It's a masterclass in the oft-used dictum of 'less is more' – no flim-flam, no excess, no fat, just lean meat on bone. A naked, raw, quietly impassioned message to the powers that be, to his people, to the world at large, about the way things are... with only a glimmer of hope. *DO*

Listen out for

Mayfield's barely-there guitar touches underscoring Billy Jack are a beautiful thing, which not all systems appreciate fully.



MARCUS MILLER

Official Bootleg: The Ozell Tapes, Marcus Miller Live

Dreyfus Jazz (featured format: CD)

Since most funk is bass and rhythm driven, it's a good test of basic muscularity, control and agility. This two-disc set – recorded direct from the back of sound engineer Dennis

Thompson's mixing desk to a Sharp 702 MiniDisc bootleg style on Miller's 2002 tour – doesn't strictly adhere to the genre but the energy created by his incomparable bass playing and Poojie Bell's drumming is as funky as it gets.

There are no post-production enhancements, just the live performance. Sound quality has an analogue-like warmth and fatness that's immediately appealing and with amazing dynamics considering the MD recorder. *DV*

Listen out for

The super-low bass-synth pad that kicks in at 00:31 in Lonnie's Lament on Disc 1 is a real test of bass extension with control.





CHARLES MINGUS

The Black Saint And The Sinner Lady

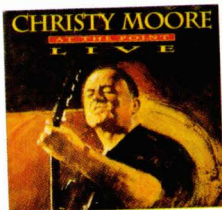
Impulse (featured format: CD)

Frustrated at what he increasingly saw as the musical limitations of jazz in 1963, Charles Mingus (never Charlie, he hated it) wrote a ballet for dancers and a jazz band, with a musically notated score, albeit one that left

plenty of room for improvisation. In doing so he created his most intricate, involving and affecting work. It's a fantastically rich and varied brew, with a full range of dynamics – ensemble horn parts give way to solo flute, classical-style piano (played by Mingus when the hired piano player couldn't understand what he was after), flamenco guitar and a world of overlapping drum rhythms. *DO*

Listen out for

The horn ensemble two minutes into Duet Solo Dancers with contrabass trombone, building into a densely overlapping conversation between alto, tenor and baritone saxes and muted trumpet.



CHRISTY MOORE

At The Point: Live

Grapevine (featured format: LP)

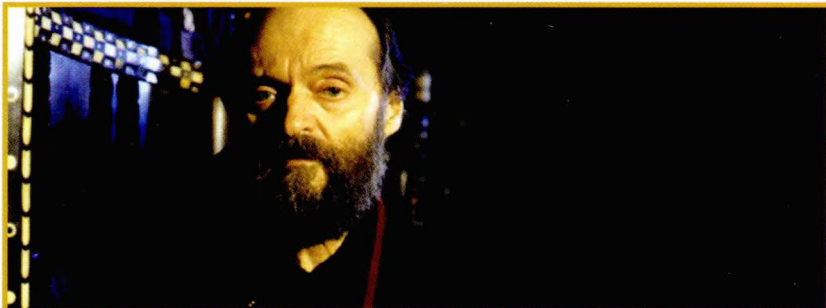
Irish folk minstrel Christy Moore's career stretches back over three decades, and this experience comes through in his brilliant stagecraft and the relaxed way in which he works – and works with – a live audience. He's a great performer, but an even better songwriter, combining some

wonderfully lyrical moments with a ferociously sharp and barbed wit. Some of the repartee can get a bit tiresome when you've heard it a hundred times, but plenty of the songs here will stand up for years to come. He knows how to spin a yarn too, with an Irishness that makes you want to head for Dublin.

At The Point: Live is exceptionally well recorded, perhaps tending a little bit towards the dry side, but with the lovely atmosphere and tension of the very best live recordings. *PM*

Listen out for

The vocal dexterity on Welcome To The Cabaret is a tough test for any hi-fi component, with Christy's clever use of microphone technique, and dynamic acoustic guitar work.



ARVO PÄRT

Lamentate

The Hilliard Ensemble, Alexei Lubumov (piano)

ECM 1930 (featured format: CD)

ECM, best known for their recordings of Keith Jarrett and other jazz artists, is also a small scale but significant refuge for some eclectic recordings of contemporary classical repertoire,

of which Arvo Pärt stands out. The main work on this disc is the large-scale *Lamentate*, a plea for peace that was first performed close to the outbreak of the second Gulf War. It is an ambitious 40-minute work for large orchestra and piano which benefits enormously from a superb, tactile recording, which is one of those which can communicate grippingly, even at a distance. *AGo*

Listen out for

Da Pacem Domine, which opens this album, is a short, meditative piece performed a capella by the Hilliard Ensemble, and is subtle and expressive, demanding real transparency and dynamic range from the replay system.



PINK FLOYD

Wish You Were Here

EMI (featured format: CD)

The ultimate ambient rock album and a major inspiration behind the ambient techno movement of the 1990s (Dave Gilmour's spacious opening four-note guitar chime graces The Orb's *Loving You*). Mostly instrumental, *Wish You Were Here* is a showcase of dazzling keyboard skills by Rick

Wright on MiniMoog synth, Fender Rhodes and electric organ. Gilmour also ascends to a pinnacle of musical greatness with a guitar technique which defines the physical space all around it. You can hear the throb of the VCS3 on Roger Waters' *Welcome To The Machine* and the acoustic title track has become a must-play for fans and buskers alike. A UK/US number one in 1975, *Wish...* is peerless 1970s ambience. *MP*

Listen out for

The first four and a half minutes will test any system. If it cannot pick up the synth drip six seconds in, deal with the incremental drone volume or separate the ambience around the tinkling glasses and Gilmour's heavenly chime (4:07) give your system an early bath.



PAUL RIEDO, DALLAS WIND SYMPHONY

Pomp And Pipes

Reference Recordings (featured format: CD)

Got a big system? Really want to test it to destruction? Then you need a copy of *Pomp And Pipes*. Featuring a huge pipe organ pitted against massed wind instruments, brass, and percussion,

this CD defines the outer limits of dynamic extremes and frequency range.

Yet balances and perspectives are natural and unexaggerated. Bass is incredibly deep – even if you had a monster death wave-inducing subwoofer, this CD (or the two-disc vinyl version for that matter) would push it. It's bass you feel rather than hear, a disc to shake floors and rattle windows – just make sure the neighbours are out before you crank up the volume! *JH*

Listen out for

The Vikings by Arthur Wills starts with quiet menacing brass and percussion, then the organ comes in and it's no turning back – shake rattle and roll time...



STEVE REICH

Music For 18 Musicians

ECM (featured format: CD)

American minimalist Reich's most famous piece from 1978, it combines his love of exotic Balinese percussion with more familiar Western classical instruments, xylophones, female voices and bass clarinet.

18 Musicians found Reich a new audience away from the avant garde ghetto and among young hipsters already familiar with the tonal ambience of Floyd's *Moon*. Those intimidated by Reich's precise minimalism will be relieved by his statement that "there is more harmonic movement in the first five minutes than in any other complete work of mine up to then". *MP*

Listen out for

Those incredible stuttered bass clarinets at the beginning, middle and end. If you cannot separate the high percussion instruments and voices from the clarinets at 00:20, 21:40 and 51:45, try a different set of speakers.



THE 50 BEST HI-FI TEST DISCS OF ALL TIME



THE ROLLING STONES

Let It Bleed

ABKCO (featured format: SACD)

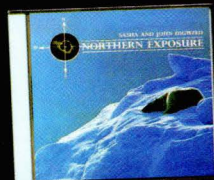
Everyone knows the Rolling Stones, or thinks they do, and this is the classic album from the band's most fertile late sixties country-meets-rock-via-the-medium-of-heroin period. Some of the Stones' finest moments are here – *Love In Vain*, *Midnight*

Rambler, *Gimme Shelter*, *Country Honk* and *You Can't Always Get What You Want*. Better still, this new SACD hybrid remaster by audiophile record label ABKCO goes back to the original tapes to make a CD that sounds better than the original record and an SACD that's so good, only those in the studio at the time heard a better sound.

Let It Bleed is the Stones album for people who don't like the Stones – and those that love them. It still appears disturbingly fresh (unlike the band) despite being well into its 30s. *AS*

Listen out for

Midnight Rambler shifts up a gear after 2:15 as Jagger picks up a harmonica. Can your system cope with the changes in rhythm?



SASHA AND JOHN DIGWEED

Northern Exposure series

Ministry Of Sound (featured format: CD)

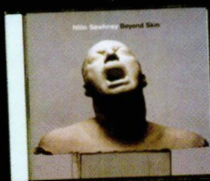
Sasha and Digweed have blazed the intelligent house/trance trail for well over a decade. In 1997 they created the first *Northern Exposure* – a series that took the superstar DJ mix album to new and blissful shores. Here's the difference:

unlike the majority of mix compilations you can actually *listen* to these discs without being off your face on disco biscuits. A warm, pervasive pulse underscores layered and quietly euphoric electronic vistas – not bangin' or 'avin' it, just intelligent ebb and flow. Though the series wasn't a best seller and S&D later switched to harder, more fashionable territories, these three double albums (*NE 1*, *NE 2* and *NE Expeditions*) deserve their cult status as intelligent jewels amid the dumb, humdrum dross. *TB*

Listen out for

The mixing is inspired: listen how Doi-Oing's Blue glides into Spooky's Little Bullet – a good hi-fi will highlight where tracks begin and fade.





NITIN SAWHNEY

Beyond Skin

Outcaste (featured format: CD)

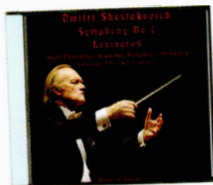
For his fourth solo album in 1999, multi-instrumentalist and composer Nitin Sawhney produced his most seamless and perfectly realised blend of classical (both Western and Indian), drum and bass, jazz and hip-hop to

date. Its gently undulating tone can work perfectly well as background beats, but the detail is there if you look for it, and its gently insistent plea for understanding, peace and tolerance has a cumulative effect, building up in alternating layers of reason and passion.

With an eclectic mix of styles and an army of collaborators, Sawhney concocts a blend of images, moods and themes that warns, cajoles, reminds and instigates with music that excites both the head and the heart. *DO*

Listen out for

The percussive vocals on Serpents build with drums, flute and electronic effects into a dizzying swirl of rhythm and melody.



SHOSTAKOVICH

Symphony No. 7

Saint Petersburg Academic Symphony Orchestra, Alexander Dmitriev

Water Lily Acoustics WLA-WS-77-CD (featured format: CD)

Presumably few if any of the orchestra in this 2003 live recording can remember the siege of their home city which the symphony commemorates, but there is plenty of intensity to

the playing together with precision of both individual playing and ensemble. If the performance is still arguably surpassed by Mravinsky's, the sound is not only better than anything from USSR days (not hard!) but better than practically anything else around, period. The use of a lone pair of microphones and a determinedly purist recording chain yields supremely natural dynamics, tonal purity and imaging which simply redefines what one expects from recordings. Stunning. *RB*

Listen out for

The military march in the middle of the first movement is an extraordinary test for hi-fi. By around the 12-minute mark, it has built to a terrifying structure of great complexity.



SPARKLEHORSE

Good Morning Spider

Capitol (featured format: CD)

Mark Linkous's Sparklehorse project has two faces. One is noisy indie rockers with a hefty Neil Young influence, but it's the more interesting moody and experimental pieces which hold greater sway on this album.

Written in the wake of his near-fatal collapse from a prescribed drugs overdose in 1996 which left him partially crippled, it's introspective, dark and fearful but never morbid. Quiet, slow, never hurried, his deeply personal stories of emotional conflict inhabit a parallel universe mid-way between waking and dreaming, with spacious arrangements that cry out for an open system to pick up the myriad lovingly placed details. *DO*

Listen out for

Saint Mary's delicate slivers of acoustic guitar, piano, cello and barely articulated vocals offer as poignant a picture of an analgesic-numbed near-death experience as you're likely to hear.



RICHARD STRAUSS

Four Last Songs

Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, RSO Berlin/London SO, George Szell

EMI 566 908 2 (featured format: CD)

Schwarzkopf has always had her detractors – but when you think about it, what singer with an element of distinction hasn't? Musically, this is beautiful music beautifully performed, and it's

also nice to hear some of Strauss's less well-known songs beside the familiar ones.

From a technical point of view, it's arguable that the voice is just slightly too prominent (producer Walter Legge clearly wasn't trying to imitate a concert balance, which is fair enough, but perhaps loyalty to his wife took him half a pace too far), but the recording of the orchestra is extremely good throughout and a fitting match to Szell's noted skill in achieving orchestral sonorities. *RB*

Listen out for

The portrayal of stereo image depth is truly excellent, and the beginning of track three shows this up nicely as the opening motif moves up through the strings.



TAKEMITSU

Quotation Of Dreams

London Sinfonietta, Oliver Knussen (conductor)

DGG 453495-2 (featured format: CD)

A near-perfect introduction to contemporary classical music, *Quotation Of Dreams* consists of a series of relatively short, intricately scored pieces composed in the final decade of Takemitsu's life –

he died in 1996. The music consists of episodic, swirling, dream-like fragments of sound, producing extraordinary colours and textures which are a constant surprise and delight. It's not exactly hummable, but the musical language is in a direct line of descent from Debussy and Messiaen, with bits of John Cage, but it is direct enough to get under the skin. The disc is beautifully performed, and the recording is one of the best, with every detail audible in an easily identifiable acoustic context. *AGC*

Listen out for

How *Slow The Wind* is an exquisite gem, an exotically scored miniature masterpiece which will test the resolving ability of any system.



JAMES TAYLOR

October Road

Columbia (featured format: CD)

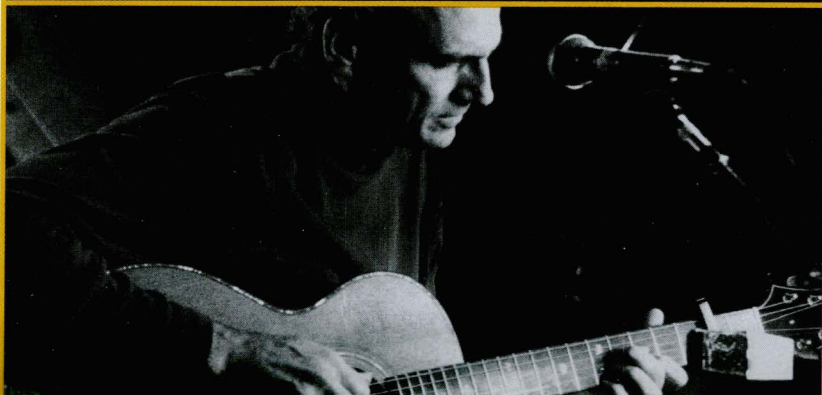
You just can't go wrong with JT. Hugely likeable voice, lovely songs, lyrics that are intelligent, amusing and wry. And, lest we forget, impeccable production values. If you merely want to demonstrate to a sceptical

friend what good sound and hi-fi are all about, you'll be hard pressed to do better than this.

With the exception of the overly schmaltzy *Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas*, every track's a gem and it's doubtful if Taylor has ever been in finer voice. Sound quality is superbly natural and unforced, so much so that this CD is guaranteed to make almost any system sound more expensive than it is. And a good system sound a million dollars. *DV*

Listen out for

The unusual combination of synth bagpipes, penny whistle, French horn and massed female chorus on the melancholy Belfast To Boston. If the bagpipes sound real you've got a problem!





STAN TRACEY

Jazz Suite Inspired by
Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*
Stan Tracey Quartet

Trios Records TR564 (featured format: CD)

The former Ronnie Scott house pianist's album has become one of the most renowned works by a British jazz artist. The score is marvellous, from

the self confidence of the opening *Cockle Row*, the striking, feather-texture of Bobby Wellins's tenor saxophone in *Penpals*, and the collection's beautiful masterwork, *Starless And Bible Black*, which, with its gorgeously menacing piano introduction and lonely, enquiring tenor solo, is utterly numbing. All is played impeccably and despite the album's age – it was originally recorded in 1965, with this edition being remastered for CD – it holds up well against any of its peers. If, indeed, it has any. *AGI*

Listen out for

If the magnificently haunting Starless And Bible Black doesn't chill your blood then you need to re-examine your system. Not to mention your soul.



VARIOUS ARTISTS

Headz

Mo' Wax (featured format: LP)

Compilation albums make notoriously poor test discs. There are however, a few exceptions, and this triple vinyl set is a prime example of collections that buck the trend. This excellent selection of tracks from the early years of

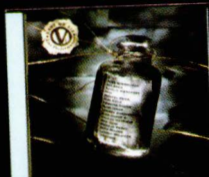
James Lavelle's Mo' Wax label brings together some of the most experimental tunes the world of hip-hop had to offer at the time. It veers from jazzy vibes to downbeat chillout to heavy beats without catching a breath.

It's the latter style of tracks that stand out from the test disc perspective. Tricky drumbeats are laid down and then messed up until only systems with perfect timing have a chance of conveying them as they were intended. Vinyl or CD, you're in for a treat. *SM*

Listen out for

DJ Shadow's Lost And Found is the album's killer track. The strident drumbeat of U2's Sunday Bloody Sunday never sounded so good.





VARIOUS ARTISTS

Rare On Air Vol One

Mammoth (featured format: CD)

This album is a collection of KRCW's *Morning Becomes Eclectic* programme broadcast out of Santa Monica. Each track was recorded live, direct to a two-track DAT recorder and the musicians were playing together in one room

and, aside from one track, there were no overdubs. So, you get to hear doors banging, bum notes, creaking chairs and the rest, but you also get some of the most exciting direct recordings of artists like Tori Amos, Beck, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds and Natalie Merchant. Our favourite, though, is Evan Dando and Juliana Hatfield singing *My Drug Buddy* – two voices, one guitar, and nothing less than audiophile heaven! **AS**

Listen out for

My Drug Buddy. *You want a three-dimensional acoustic? You want full dynamic range? You want acres of detail? You want all this and a track you can enjoy? Look no further!*



BUGGE WESSELTOFT

Moving

Jazzland (featured format: LP)

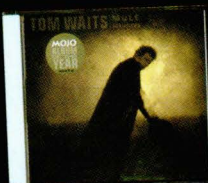
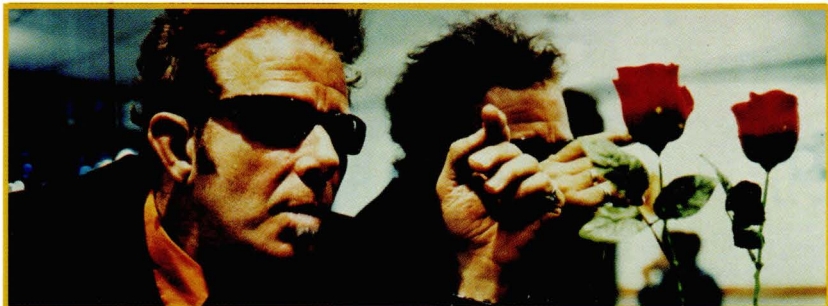
Bugge Wesseltoft's third album is, so far (another one's due very soon) his best yet. Some would call it jazz, others electro, but whatever it is, it certainly ain't Miles, Mingus or Monk! The only stuff you'll find that's vaguely similar is Keith Jarrett in his funkier moments, but it sounds a

whole lot more up to date than that. Most of it centres around keyboard-led grooves with a strong rhythmic drive provided by drums, bass and percussion, with many of the tracks sporting a tendency to start out quiet and build incrementally into a sonic maelstrom.

There are a couple of ballads, to use the term loosely, where Bugge shows his reflective side, but for the most part this is danceable music which also has enough going on to entertain the contemplative listener. **JK**

Listen out for

You know your system is working well if you can hear the percussion sounds – particularly the electronic shaker sound on Heim – travelling around the room QSound style.



TOM WAITS

Mule Variations

Anti/Epitaph (featured format: CD)

Although *Mule Variations* (1998) does not stray too far from the epicentre of Tom Waits' musical stomping grounds, it is a tour de force of volcanic music making which is at once raw and unpolished, often indulgent and

occasionally obsessive (*What's He Building?*), though there are also tender, ironic ballads (*Pony, Georgia Lee, Take It With Me*). *Mule* is notable for an abrasive vocal style, a refreshing disdain for normal production values and an audacious use of percussion to bludgeon the listener, rather than just underpin the rhythm. Business as usual in fact, but this disc trumps most of his recent output, with consistently excellent songwriting, and extraordinary sound quality to match. *AGo*

Listen out for

Played LOUD, Big In Japan, with its classic dustbin lid percussion accompaniment, will blow the cobwebs out of any system.



WILCO

Yankee Hotel Foxtrot

Nonesuch (featured format: CD)

Some called this Wilco's *Kid A*, but while there are similarities between this and Radiohead's 'difficult' fourth album – in places the music is injected with ambient warblings, the general mood is subdued and the melodic structure occasionally melts into something more atonal

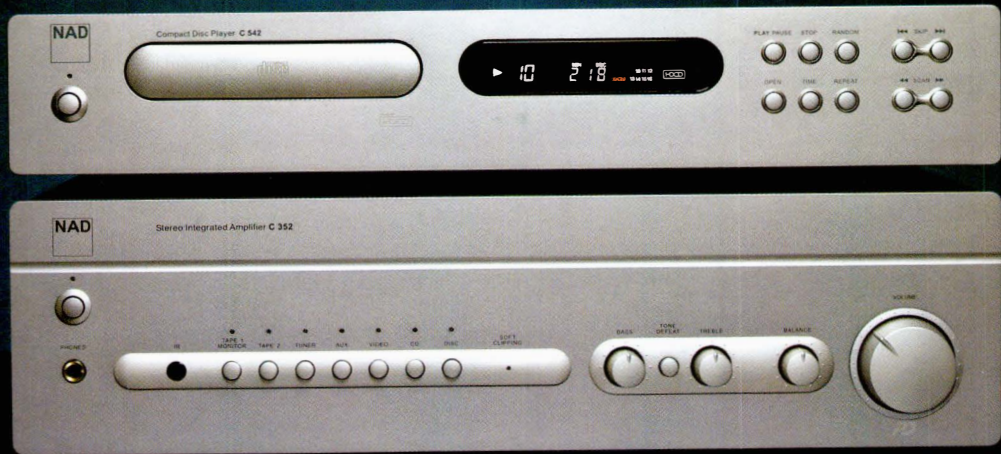
and freeform – overall the tone is less chilly, the textures and tunes much warmer.

For kindred spirits think *All Shook Down*-era Replacements, The Church circa *Starfish*, Eels at their most laconic and caustic. This is rock that's both subtle and poignant, bleak yet beautiful – a stiff whisky washed down with a smooth, oaky red. Slothful, soulful Americana at its best. *TB*

Listen out for

Hi-fi components should clearly resolve background instruments brought into the mix, like the strings at 1:08 and slide guitar at 1:58 in Jesus, etc. And when the band clicks up a gear in a track like Pot Kettle Black your system should too, clearly defining guitar, bass, drums and cymbals instead of a splashy, homogenous mess.

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Have you got a passion for Pink Floyd? Or maybe you're just mad about Mozart? Whatever your musical poison, we're giving you the chance to vote for your favourite artists, albums, recordings and more... And, if you get your votes in by 14 December 2005, you'll be entered into a draw to win one of three HMV vouchers worth £50 each!

To take part, fill in the form below and send it to: **Hi-Fi Choice Music Awards, Future Publishing, 99 Baker Street, London W1U 6FP. Or simply visit: www.hifichoice.co.uk.** You don't need to fill in every category – just the ones relevant to you. The results will be published in the April 2006 edition of *Hi-Fi Choice* (on sale 9 February 2006).

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1. Best Album of the Year _____
2. Best New Artist/Band of the Year _____
3. Best Classical Recording of the Year _____
4. Best Live Act of the Year _____
5. Best Music Retailer of the Year _____
6. Best Internet Download Service of the Year _____

PART 2 – BEST OF ALL TIME

1. Best Rock/Pop Band of All Time _____
2. Best Dance Act of All Time _____
3. Best Male Vocalist of All Time _____
4. Best Female Vocalist of All Time _____
5. Best Classical Composer of All Time _____
6. Best Album of All Time _____
7. Best Classical Recording of All Time _____
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PART 3 – ABOUT YOU

- Name: _____
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- Email Address: _____
- Age: Under 20 20-30 30-40 40-50 50+
- Favourite music type: Rock Pop Dance Jazz/Acoustic Classical
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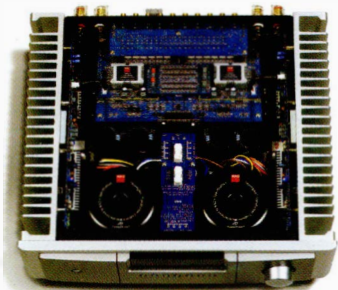
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