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# 'arc angels'



**"THE SOUND WAS SO MAGICAL  
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AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE 3 VACUUM TUBE PRE AMPLIFIER



**"THE SOUND OF THE PH7 IS WHAT COUNTS AND  
IT'S A STUNNER"**

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AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE PH7 VACUUM TUBE PRE- PRE AMPLIFIER



**"IT JUST SOUNDS LIKE YOU ALWAYS HOPED  
CD COULD SOUND, IF CD WAS DONE RIGHT"**

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AUDIO RESEARCH REFERENCE CD7 VACUUM TUBE CD PLAYER

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60 Issues down and I'd like to say it seems like only yesterday – but actually it has taken a huge amount of very hard work by a lot of people to bring *Hi-Fi+* this far. A few have been ever present – writers like CT, JMH and PM and not forgetting the designers at Creative Byte. But one person more than any other single individual has given the magazine its distinctive and instantly recognisable identity – our photographer Simon Marsh. Something of an unsung hero given his low profile, Simon brings both the skills of a perfectionist and the discerning eye of the hi-fi enthusiast to his work – and it shows. The other ever present in the history of the magazine has been the constant praise and appreciation of the pictures that grace our pages. In recognition of that fact – and the incontrovertible truth that you can't make a great magazine without having great equipment to work with – we have decided to mark the 2008 Product Of The Year Awards with an A3 calendar featuring a dozen of the best pieces we've reviewed, beautifully presented in Simon's images, giving you a chance to enjoy them both larger and longer for just £10 including postage and packing (£8 if you pick it up from our stand at the London show). You can find further details on page 106. And talking of the show, if you are there on Friday, you might even persuade the elusive Mr Marsh to autograph his work. When I told him that readers might like a signed copy he just laughed – but then he doesn't get to read all the letters and hear all the comments at shows from people who really enjoy his work. So, let the girls on the stand know if you'd like a signed copy and we'll tie him to a chair for the last hour...



Ry Gregory

"..I have loved listening with these cables;  
their ability to lift the musical performance  
free of the system is exactly what Hifi should  
be about..." / Roy Gregory, Hifi+ magazine



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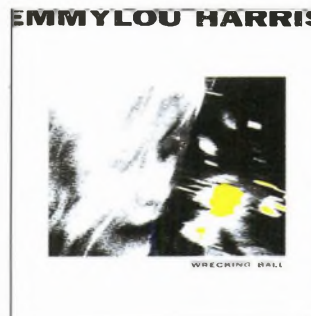
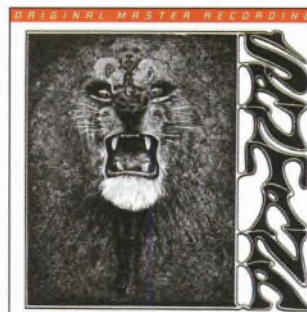
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# BACK TO THE FUTURE...

by Anthony H. Cordesman

The high end sometimes seems caught in a kind of stasis where the search for a kind of sonic purity is becoming increasingly unrelated to music, if not actively amusical. The end result may be more and more sonic “detail,” but far too often this it comes at the expense of realistic timbre, imaging, and sound stage perspective.

Worse, even when that detail does not add to the hardness or music, or make it unnaturally bright, it does not occur in live listening and is either musically irrelevant or about as meaningful as moving to the front of the concert hall. The good news is that music will survive today's high end. The bad news is that the high end risks becoming an aesthetic dead end for a steadily declining number of rich hobbyists.

## Where the High End Must Go to Survive

The irony is that more and more opportunities exist to make the kind of basic changes to high-end systems that could offer vastly more access to the best sound quality. There are four major areas where technological advances offer opportunities that can make those changes and where the high-end must evolve if it is to survive:

- One is to combine all of the advances in digital technology to the point where recordings are made from the initial A to D output of the microphone, all the way to home playback, at a minimum of 24-bit/96kHz resolution.
- A second is reliable downloading, indexing and playback using servers with equally high sampling rates, and where an entire collection as well as downloadable libraries can be fully displayed on a remote control with at least the same amount of information as on a record jacket, allowing us to mix permanent storage with the availability of thousands of performances on demand.
- A third is taking full advantage of the potential of surround music.
- And finally, addressing the real-world problems of making music realistic and natural in the home.

The future of these changes is easy to predict because most are already taking place in the mid-fi, video, and portable music worlds. Good as analogue, CD, stereo and a home library of discs can be, the world is changing in ways that will either force the high-end to change radically

during the next decade or make it a dying hobby for aging, rich males.

Higher sampling rates are coming through video, Blu Ray, and the better receivers. The marriage of Blu Ray with advanced Dolby, DTS, and PCM surround sound has virtually got to change the way people listen to (and watch music). We may still be a long, long way from being able to buy and hear the best in digital sound, but the shifts in processing and storage technology are beginning to make excellence so cheap that there eventually will be no reason for anything less.

Computer literate music lovers have already shifted to servers although the end result is still generally limited in sampling rate and an awkward ergonomic kluge. Receivers also offer a wide range of choices in surround music, although Lexicon and Meridian have shown the high end is capable of making advances on its own.

## Room Correction: The Digital Approach

The most important area of change, however, lies in solving the problems caused by the interaction between the speaker and the room. As Roy Allison pointed out in the 1950s, these interactions lead to a mountain range of peaks and valleys in bass response below 250 Hz. Better speaker placement and the use of various sound traps can help, but never eliminate, at least several major bass peaks and suck outs.

Moreover, the perfect location for the best bass response is rarely – if ever – the ideal location for the best midrange, treble, and sound stage performance. Moreover, room reflections in the midrange and treble can produce problems of their own, and the level of upper octave energy a speaker delivers in a given room can be sharply affected by its size and reflective surfaces. Again, room treatment can help, but only to a limited degree and usually at the cost of making a living room look like hell at the visual level or forcing an audiophile to have a dedicated listening room at a time when video, surround sound, and computers compete for attention.

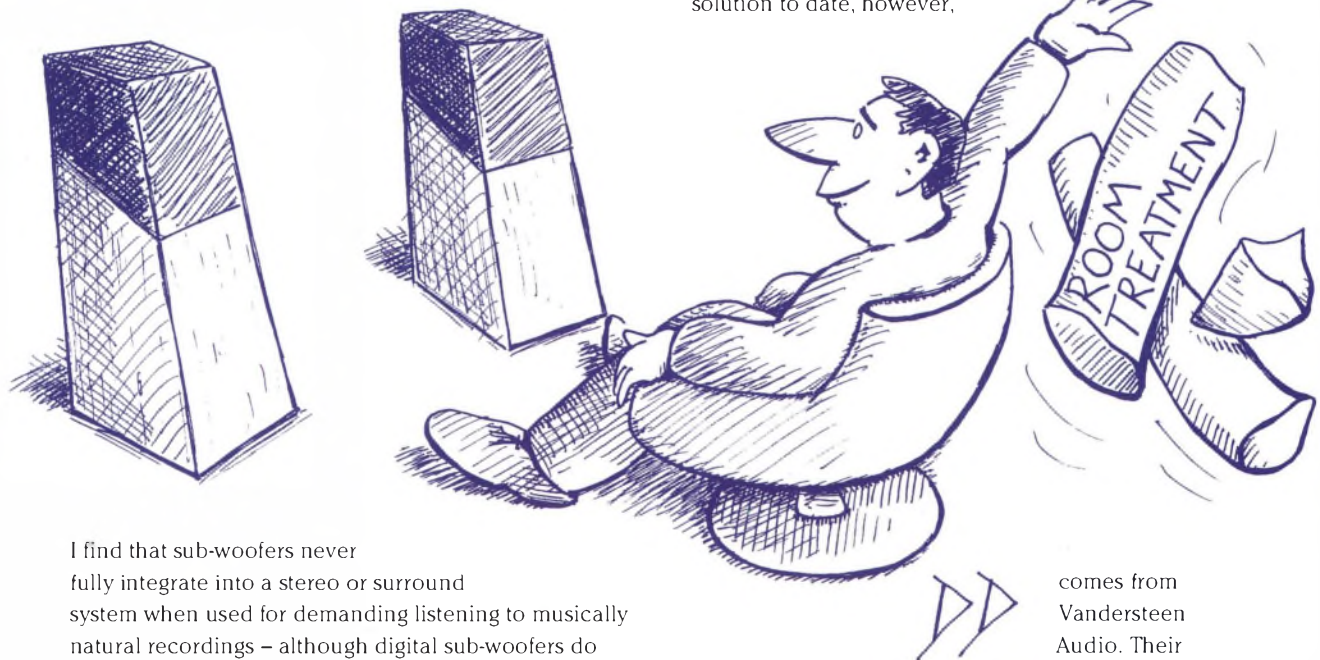
The ultimate solution may prove to be digital. A wide range of receivers already offer automatic room correction, although the sound quality and the accuracy of such feature can be uncertain to say the least. More practically, high end firms like Audestry, Lexicon, Lyngdorf, Meridian, and Tact are finding



► steadily better solutions to removing the digital edge from parametric equalization and loudness control, and to providing automated digital room correction.

So are some speaker manufacturers. Velodyne pioneered digital correction of sub-woofer frequency response; and other firms have followed. B&O, for example, sells the full range BeoLab 5, although it has mediocre sound for the money.

Even the high-end products, however, currently have limits. The conversion of analogue to digital and digital back to analogue is never as clean and musically natural as a pure analogue circuit. In general,



I find that sub-woofers never fully integrate into a stereo or surround system when used for demanding listening to musically natural recordings – although digital sub-woofers do seem to do better in many set ups than uncorrected sub-woofers.

I have never been able to get the best results out of any form of digital correction whose impact on speaker response is not displayed in detail and where the level of correction cannot be manually adjusted. (The Tact and Velodyne permit this.) I also find that the precise choice of mike location and test tone volume – averaged or not – makes tremendous audible and measurable differences at a given listening position.

I suspect that we may be years away from getting optimal high-end sound quality from digital solutions to room correction. Even now, however, you can get very good sound quality from digital processors that can do far more to correct the problems in real-world rooms than any mix of damping materials, filters, “traps”, etc. If you have a problem room, products from Audestry, Lexicon, Lyngdorf, Meridian and Tact can make all the difference in the world.

### Room Correction: The Analogue Approach

The alternative to digital processing is to use analogue solutions to the problem of room correction. Simply using a single analogue filter to eliminate the worst peak in bass response from room/speaker interaction can make a difference. In the past, both Infinity and Snell sold speakers that had built in sub-woofers with such filters. They showed that even simple, tunable room compensation could produce much more natural and extended bass from instruments with large amounts of energy below 100 Hz.

The most impressive analogue solution to date, however,

comes from Vandersteen Audio. Their flagship model, the

Vandersteen 5A integrates a true high-end, musically natural, sub-woofer into one of the best full-range loudspeakers on the market. More than that, it provides a full-range equalizer that has the sophistication and range to address the major problems in low-frequency speaker/room interaction. Along with its less expensive sibling, the Quattro, it offers a remarkably flexible, real-world approach to increased musical realism. They may not have the claimed versatility and high tech “glamour” of digital correction, but they provide an analogue path to the future that has received far too little attention from both reviewers and the industry. Having set the scene, I’ll describe the 5A in much greater detail in my next installment, but ponder in the meantime the fact that the best sub-woofer and equalization package in the world can’t produce a musical silk purse if the rest of the range is reproduced by a sonic sow’s ear...







## POINTS OF REFERENCE...



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# REFERENCE



# PLAYING THE SYSTEM

by Roy Gregory

So, how did “tweak” become a dirty word?

It’s an increasingly common complaint from the established manufacturers and one I hear more and more often; let’s keep it sensible, let’s look like a real industry producing real products. Of course, that translates in turn into suggestions that small companies with cottage industry designs and DIY production values shouldn’t be allowed to exhibit at shows, or that magazines shouldn’t write about or review “weird products that nobody can buy”.

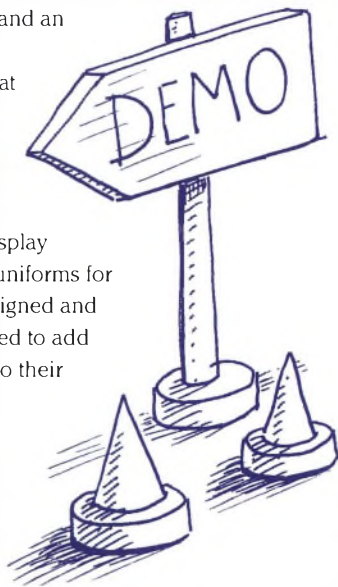
It’s an understandable concern, especially if you are an international manufacturer with an extensive range and the overheads and responsibilities that go with it – not least the jobs that depend on producing and selling those products. The last thing you want to see as you wander the corridors at a hi-fi show is cables suspended from bits of string and products perched precariously on piles of cones or some other device. After all, what would the man in the street think? One look and an entire industry dismissed as loonies is the short answer – at least if you subscribe to the establishment view.

That would be the same establishment who invest time and money in proper display panels, corporate branding, uniforms for their staff and beautifully designed and printed brochures, all intended to add a sense of value and quality to their products. Indeed, neither the products themselves nor the manner in which we present them has ever been better or more professional. In short, we’ve never looked so good. Except that at least one respected and extremely successful manufacturer has suggested a worrying correlation when it comes to rooms at shows; the better they look, the worse they sound.

Okay, so it’s a generalization, but it’s not without some truth. Doesn’t this reflect the fact that we’re in danger of losing the plot? At the end of the day, this industry is about the sound we produce, not about how pretty the products are. In turn, shows are about demonstrating to people that they can hear a difference – and that that difference

matters. After all, if all products sound pretty much the same, customers will choose on the basis of looks, colour and price – anything in fact, other than sound quality, yet isn’t quality what this is supposed to be about?

Yet how many manufacturers do more than simply set up a system and play some music? They don’t demonstrate their products against the competition. They don’t demonstrate their products against alternative approaches that cost the same, two-channel against 5.1 or basic separates against an iPod



dock. The best you can expect is a demonstration of the benefits of moving from one product in their range to another – and that’s rare enough. “It’s too much trouble”, or “you’ll just upset people”, or “you can’t expect to hear anything under show conditions”. Those are the standard responses. Well, sorry, they’re all complete BS. We go to shows. We run complex and intricate demonstrations of what should be extremely subtle differences and we make sure that people hear them. In the last few years we’ve demonstrated the effects of adding super-tweeters to systems, with and without sub-woofers; we’ve shown the musical benefits of properly conducted ►

# “The finest speaker on the planet”

– Ken Kessler, *Hi-Fi News*

“I have to say that this is the finest speaker  
on the planet”

– Ken Kessler, *Hi-Fi News*

“By the highest standards, the 2905s get  
everything right to a degree that had me  
shaking my head in awe”

– Noel Keywood, *Hi-Fi World*

“I know of no other speaker I’d rather  
own, regardless of price”

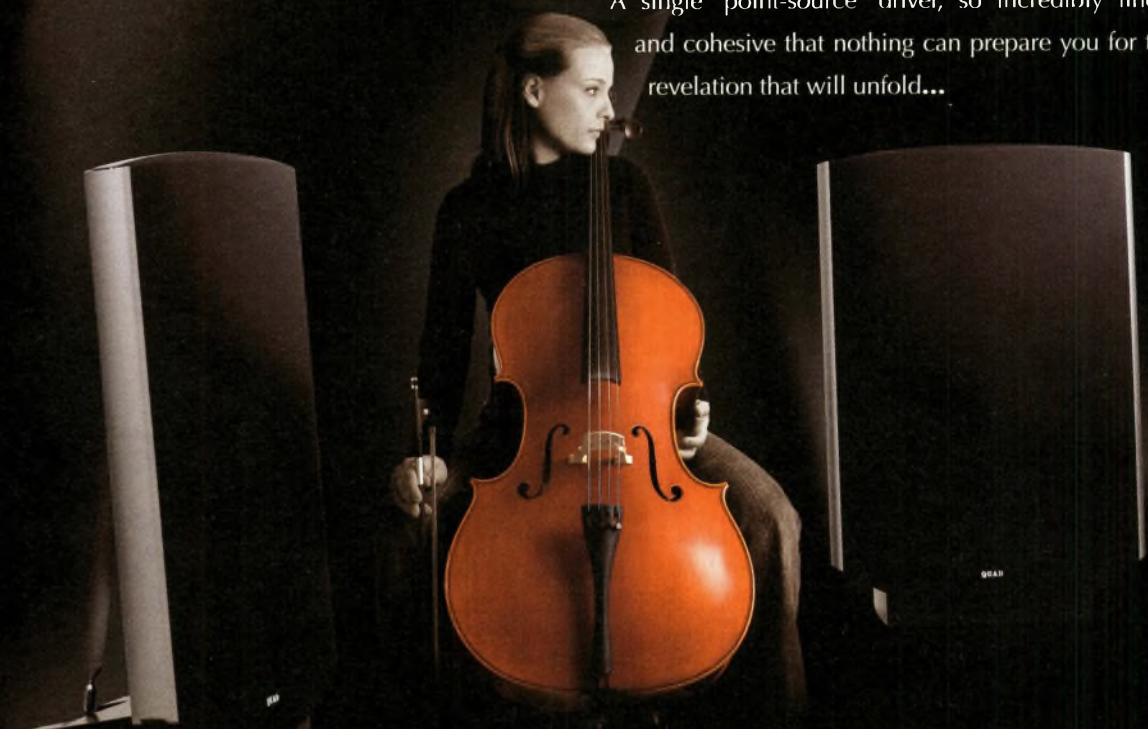
– Sam Tellig, *Stereophile magazine*

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– *What Hi-Fi? Sound and Vision*

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# QUAD

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And just look at the sales and success achieved by companies who’ve actually gone to the time and effort of running regular, comparative demonstrations. Perhaps the most obvious example is Nordost, but how about adding Quadraspire, Vertex AQ and of course Naim Audio to that list, all companies that are thriving amidst the general air of doom and gloom.

Which brings us back to tweaks. Currently high on the Plus agenda, both Stillpoints and Vertex AQ bring their own approach to microphony and resonance control within the system. But they amount to amelioration after the fact. What about products from the likes of Zanden and 47Labs that tackle these issues at source, whose construction and performance challenge both our preconceptions and our audio priorities. By establishing a different approach they achieve results that can astonish and thrill us, so why are we so slow to learn the lessons, so disbelieving of the value of sophisticated isolation products like the Vertex and Stillpoints. After all, what right thinking manufacturer neglects to spike his speakers, or use some form of dedicated audio rack? What about bi-wiring or mains polarity? These days, only the die-hards hold out against the fact that cables, yes – even mains cables – make a difference. Yet all these and countless others started out as tweaks, yesterday’s lunacy become today’s accepted wisdom.

So, if sound quality matters – and if you are genuinely trying to demonstrate audible differences then you’d better believe that it does – so too will tweaks. You’d better use a decent rack, a coherent cable loom and mains leads too, you’d better take the requisite care with set up and positioning, otherwise you will fall flat on your face. And as to the more outlandish

practices, will a few wacky rooms frighten the punters or add to the entertainment? I think that depends on how good a show the rest of the exhibitors are putting on. After all, the message we don’t want to send is that you can only get good sound if you go to those extremes – but that’s exactly what we risk if we don’t show up and put up.

The same applies to hi-fi dealers. You stand and fall by the results you can demonstrate, so rather than wondering why a magazine like ours reviews products you’ve never heard of, make the effort to listen to them and maybe learn a thing or two – or not. But the key here is simple; approach things with an open mind. Sometimes you’ll be disappointed, sometimes they’ll simply confirm what you already thought. But sometimes, just sometimes, you’ll discover something that challenges what you know and how you think things are. That’s when you stand on the brink of discovery, facing a choice – give it some thought and risk upsetting all your cozy preconceptions, or ignore it and hope it will go away. Unfortunately, collectively we’ve all been doing a little too much of the latter – and then we wonder why the industry, the products and the market isn’t going anywhere?

So, if you share the view that hi-fi shows are a disappointment compared to years past, here’s a thought or two to consider. If you are a visitor, as you enter each room ask the exhibitor what it is they’re trying to demonstrate and judge them on the results. If you are an exhibitor remember that it’s called a “show” not because people come to see things but because that’s what we as an industry are supposed to be putting on! It’s all a question of mind-set and expectation, because one thing’s for sure – all those manufacturers wringing their hands and wondering how to get in touch with generation iPod should take a little time and put some effort into entertaining and interesting those existing customers who are still taking the time to turn up and listen. Who knows, if the show’s good enough maybe they’ll bring the kids... 

## Department Of Correction

It’s jankers all round at Plus Towers, but that’s good news as far as the public’s concerned. Not because you love to see us suffer – well, not all of you – but because a pricing error slipped into the magazine. But at least in this case the adjustment is negative, or rather, positive, if you are thinking of purchasing the product in question.

The Revolver Cygnis loudspeaker received a deservedly warm welcome – but that was when we thought a pair would set you back £8000. In fact, the correct price is actually £5999, making this ambitious project even better value! To learn more about it, contact Revolver on 0870 047 0047 or [www.revolveraudio.co.uk](http://www.revolveraudio.co.uk)





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# WHAT'S ON AT THE RENAISSANCE

Going to the London Show? Don't forget to pick up a ticket from our stand and cross the road to the Renaissance Hotel (or the Penta to the older generations) where *Hi-Fi+* will be demonstrating the surprising degree to which set up can influence system performance. Using three identical systems, at least as far as the electronics and speakers are concerned, we will investigate just how big a difference items like racks, mains and signal cabling can make – and questioning traditional system priorities in the process. Hopefully we'll give you some serious food for thought – and if not you can always amuse yourself with the spectacle of a magazine editor parading the Emperor's new clothes.

You'll discover us in the Friendship Suite, but remember, it's strictly tickets only. The systems used will



include electronics from Electrocompaniet and speakers from KEF, along with cabling and support products from Stillpoints, Vertex AQ, finite-elemente, The Chord Co and Quantum QRT.

But as well as the *Hi-Fi+* demonstration, there will be plenty of other fascinating systems to see and hear. The Audiofreaks Unplugged event includes systems from the host but also dealers Blade Audio and The Audio Works and is free to all.

Audiofreaks will be demonstrating two systems. In the Lancaster Suite you'll have a rare opportunity to hear the mighty Avalon Isis, driven by the Karan Acoustics KA M 1200 power amps. Sources will include the Kuzma Stabi XL4 turntable and 4POINT tonearm, the Zanden four-box CD player and Magnum Dynalab MD106T tuner, whilst the pre-amp will consist of the conrad-johnson ACT2 Series 2 line-stage paired with the TEA-1bc phono-stage. Their second system will include the Zanden Model 2500S, featured on the cover of this issue, and well worth a listen.

In the Harrier Suite, Blade Audio will be presenting the dCS Puccini with matching External Clock, the Karan Acoustics KA L line-stage and KA S 270 power amplifier, Avalon Ascendant loudspeakers and Stillpoints supports.

The Audio Works can be found in the Nimrod Suite, along with a system including the dCS Scarlatti CD Player, Spectral pre and power amplifier, Avalon Indra loudspeakers and their own Quadraspire and MusicWorks supports.

*Hi-Fi News* will also be in attendance, occupying the Caravelle Suite with a demonstration of their own and a chance to meet the staff and writers. All in all, there should be plenty to be experienced and enjoyed in what is a rather more relaxed and calming environment than the average hi-fi show. We look forward to seeing you there. ▶+

# SME

*Model 20/12  
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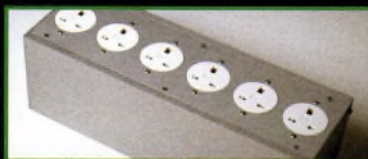
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# CARVING A SPACE...

ROY GREGORY TALKS PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT AND GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT WITH CHARLIE BRENNAN AND GEOFF MEADS OF ARCAM, AND INDUSTRIAL DESIGNER ADRIAN STOKES OF ASA.

In the increasingly congested and complex market facing hi-fi manufacturers, brand identity has never been more important. Sounding good is no longer enough, with products having to incorporate a multitude of formats and interface standards, connectivity issues and practical considerations as they collide with fashion and the computer world. How do companies appeal to the present market and plan for future developments? I started by asking Adrian Stokes how much freedom he's allowed by Arcam and how seriously they take his input.

**AS.** They (Arcam) probably pay more attention to industrial design than almost anyone. Perhaps Linn are the exception, although not so much these days, and whilst I've got contemporaries who work for Naim and so on, I can't think of any other company that matches the attitude within Arcam – certainly since Charlie's arrival – that gives it equal billing, the realization that people buy with their eyes and want to be reassured by what they see. It's our job to do justice to the fantastic insides that these guys create. I think appearance is a hugely important factor these days and certainly, when we first started working with Arcam the products seemed to have taken a bit of a wrong path...

**RG.** That was polite...

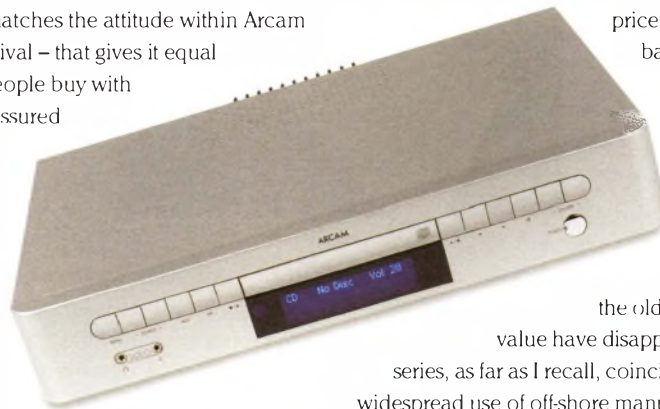
**AS.** An injection molded wrong path!

**RG.** What was the first range you did for Arcam?

**AS.** That was FMJ – a chance to get things back on the right track. I wasn't a buyer of contemporary high-quality audio; I had an original Quad system and I admired that for its design, even now its early '60's aesthetic...

**RG.** Which ironically they've just gone back to...

**AS.** Well, precisely – and about time! I owned that, not to listen to but just to have, as a fantastic example of a product whose design really spoke to its customers, irrespective almost of what was going on inside it. It was a slight embarrassment to admit to Arcam that with hi-fi, there's that moment that you switch it on and for the first time you really hear the music that you love, and I'd never heard that until we did some work with Naim Audio and I went to Infidelity in Kingston, into their listening room and heard it – and that was a life changing moment. So, when Charlie came calling – he called on a few people actually – it was one of those jobs, one of those clients you just really wanted to secure.



**RG.** Once upon a time you could price a product pretty accurately based on its outsides: did it have a half-inch front-panel and big handles? But the Chinese have turned that on its head and suddenly you can buy products that look like they cost \$10000 for nearer \$600. All the old visual rules about associated value have disappeared completely. The FMJ series, as far as I recall, coincided with the first really widespread use of off-shore manufacturing in the industry. Does that change the equation when it comes to the design and manufacturing of product?

**AS.** But then everybody was doing it.

**CB.** In FMJ there was no foreign manufacturing at that stage. We were more interested in producing a range that we could sell in design conscious markets like Scandinavia, Japan and so on, who when they looked at the old Alpha range appreciated that they sounded pretty damned good for the money but felt that there was nothing else desirable about them. They took this step in the wrong direction and ended up not knowing what they were. They looked like Panasonic video recorders. But what was inside was worthy, so FMJ – Full Metal Jacket – ►

▶ started out by asking if we could design an aesthetic that was visually quiet enough but of sufficient quality to stand the test of time. And it has. Ten years on it still looks contemporary and very clean, it can fit into modern homes or traditional ones without shouting.

**RG.** It started out very much as a premium line, at the top of the Arcam range. But now it has extended all the way down, embracing even Solo. In fact, the original Solo design is one of the most attractive and impressive pieces of industrial design I've ever seen, irrespective of field. The match between form and function is absolutely spot on.

**AS.** When I look back on that project, which Charlie was obviously very closely involved with, as he is with all the projects we do together, that's the piece I'm most proud of. It broke away from the familiar hi-fi formula of planting on some form of fascia. It tried to involve the rest of the product in the equation.

**CB.** It was the first time that we had a product that was a clean sheet of paper from every perspective, even the engineers. With previous models we were taking existing products that had to be re-engineered and adding a few new ones, but we were constrained. We've been desperate to make a product like that at Arcam for many years. That whole concept of better sound for more people has to be packaged in a way that it can still perform as well as entry level separates.

**RG.** Solo was launched three years ago? It still looks just as clean and fresh today.

**CB.** 2004, but that's exactly what we're trying to do – make products that last.

**AS.** From FMJ onwards that's exactly the message of all the products – of good design in general – just like the Quad system, it should be timeless, you can come back to it.

**RG.** Does a more informed approach to the physical design of the product deliver performance benefits as well?

**CB.** Yes, I believe it does. There are a lot of things we've done in terms of mechanical design that haven't been appreciated. Things like microphony, which is a huge issue in everyone's

electronics. Everything from isolation feet to the kind of materials you use – we continue to use aluminium in all our lids, although it's more expensive, because it sounds better.

**GM.** I think a lot of high-end equipment flies in the face of our understanding of microphony, simply because it employs big, heavy components and casework, and once you energize those they go on ringing for a lot longer. Damped, lightweight aluminium panels actually offer far better performance.

**AS.** One of the big changes with Solo was to challenge some of the audiophile preconceptions; taking the volume knob off of the front, instead of having separate buttons combining things. We had a lot of debate about that, both from a marketing and an ergonomic point of view. The audiophile community does rather cling on to things, but hopefully Solo proves that there's life after knobs.

**GM.** I come across this all the time; people who feel there's a power to the knob, that get gratification from the act of turning it up. Yet the most used gadget in the UK has to be the TV, and they haven't had knobs for years.

**AS.** We did that with FMJ, spent a lot of time on the feel of the volume knob, but I never touch it. If I want to listen to the hi-fi I just pick up the remote...

**RG.** I wanted to ask you about that, the issue of exporting control functionality to the remote, because it often strikes me that whilst people have spent hours on the appearance and functionality of their products, they've expended zero time on the remote. 96 identical buttons and text so small you can't read it without a microscope; surely, the multi-button generic remote has a limited future?

**AS.** It's an ongoing conversation we've been having, to find an Arcam badged remote that gets you where you want to go as quickly and clearly as possible. Like everyone else I have a house full of remotes and it takes you six months to learn where the right buttons are in the dark, which is frustrating.

**RG.** With the advent of soft screen technology on mobile phones, doesn't that offer a solution that also gets over the necessity to connect equipment to a TV just to access its menu functionality?

**CB.** Things like the iPhone and WiFi connectivity offer opportunities that we keep looking at, but we're not working ▶



▶ on anything specific. The difficulty with the whole ergonomic interface argument is that although there are a couple of companies that have done it really well, like Sooloos, those are product specific and not that flexible. When you start trying to tie in the likes of DAB and iPod control, then to design the thing from scratch and build in that versatility, you are talking about huge budgets, huge. Or you can wait until there's sufficient demand to create a critical mass so that someone develops a universal interface, and then you simply download the commands for your Arcam units from our website. Once you have a universal system you reach the point where it actually becomes cheaper to supply say, an iPod Touch (physically speaking, an iPhone without the phone but retaining the touch screen interface), than to put a remote in the box with the product. The cost of touch screen displays would be astronomical if you bought them in the sort of numbers we could use.

**RG.** The appearance of products seems to be getting simpler, yet functionally speaking they are getting ever more complex with more and more layers of interfacing and compatibility issues to deal with.

**AS.** Well, most of those things are simplified for us (as industrial designers) by Arcam, who define precisely which of those layers we need to address.

**GM.** Actually, it's a bit like the volume control question. You need to decide which bits you are going to leave out and which you leave in. About six years ago I had a remarkable discussion with a US (multi-room/AV) installer who didn't just want to lock people out of changing the settings, he wanted to deny them access to the menus completely. People will get into control menus and fiddle, and risk upsetting the balance or operation of the whole system. Once that happens, many systems are so complex that the dealer then has to revisit the customer to restore order.

**CB.** The complexity of even fairly basic AV receivers has spawned a whole industry in itself, with the likes of Crestron and AMX panels, which are designed and programmed to be idiot-proof. Some people do a really good job where the various settings, live sports, kids movies etc. are automatically updated, but when you look at the cost of buying the panels and programming them, we regularly see installations where people are spending more on control than they are on the system itself. If you can take that amount of power and build it into devices like the Touch then the cost of the unit itself plus a bit of free software makes it outstanding in terms of value

for money and control flexibility. Design it intelligently and each user can have their own preferred settings incorporated automatically into one unit that's a system controller, a portable music player, a PDA and a phone.

**RG.** Of course, the upside of moving controllability onto remote handsets frees the unit itself from the tyranny of constraint imposed on its size and shape by the need to accommodate front-panel switches and knobs. Does that present an aesthetic opportunity or will hi-fi always have to be a square box?

**AS.** Well, hi-fis are seldom square boxes, and in fact, square boxes, beautifully executed can have exactly the timeless and refined appeal we are looking for. As the controls disappear from the front of Arcam products, we still need to maintain a family identity, but what we did with Solo Mini, which is a much smaller product, demonstrates how we can stretch those boundaries. The controls are far simpler, at least in appearance.



**RG.** Do you think buyers are still suspicious when it comes to the quality of smaller products?

**AS.** I listen to Geoff and Charlie talk about their products and it's almost like a foreign language to me. Yet I think I'm probably more typical of a Solo or Solo Mini buyer than they are. I listen to and watch and play music a lot; it's a big part of my life. But I'm not particularly impressed by the process itself; I just want to get to my music as quickly as possible.

**CB.** With Solo we have had a significant response from female buyers who want the quality but don't want the hassle of separates. We could be starting to penetrate quite a big market of people who are just as interested, in some cases more interested in music, yet find it intimidating to pick their way through the minefield that is a specialist hi-fi shop.

**RG.** Is part of the gap between established separates buyers and the portable music generation product conceptual? Is it down to the difference in presentation, facilities and practicality between a portable phone or iPod and established hi-fi products? ▶

► **AS.** The sound quality possible from quite small devices is much, much better than it ever used to be, but for those people who don't want to walk about with earphones in all day, they're starting to find products that meet their expectations and they aren't necessarily separates. In that regard, Solo Mini is the first of its kind, to really deliver separates quality sound from such a tiny package.

**CB.** We deliberately pitched the Mini to be as good as the entry level separates from any of the competition, and actually, when you dem it against other well known brands it beats them, in many cases by a wide margin.

**GM.** It's funny in the reviews, you can feel the writer almost daring himself to say it's better than separates. It's interesting that those people who are into portable music, the younger generation, there's clearly no waning in their interest in music. Quite the opposite; live music is much more popular than it was and if you can give those people something that enhances their enjoyment of music, they're going to be interested. The problem is reaching them when there is so much technology – phones, iPods, computers, games – all fighting for their attention. As an industry we have to figure out our route to that customer. Music is the medium but we need the right products to deliver it.

**AS.** But it's also industrial design isn't it. Apple products are so popular because they're beautifully made and technically elegant.

**RG.** But what I'm really getting at is whether or not, by responding to the expectations of one group are we alienating another, simply through the physical presentation of products?

**CB.** Phenomenally successful companies like Bose have traded on invisibility; the more unobtrusive a product the more appeal it has to the general public. People don't want to have huge loudspeakers, wires trailing everywhere – but if you take that too far you end up with very stylish systems that don't actually deliver a sufficient level of performance. My view is that anybody who hears a good sound will emotionally respond to it. But as an industry we've failed to shake off the socially disadvantaged anorak image – no friends, huddled at home listening to our one Pink Floyd album, sat right between the speakers. Lots of people out there, sophisticated members of society with a good level

of education have still never heard what I'd call a decent quality sound. And I'm not talking ultra high quality – just something good.

My view is that, far from being a barrier, industrial design is a way of reaching out to those people in a language that's more familiar to them. The Solo was the first product where we thought, "this is going to give us a chance to talk to new people". Then we thought, there's a lot of people out there with big, high-end systems who just want something for their study, or kitchen or bedroom. That's where Solo Mini comes in. We've all been living with table radios of one sort or another, and they vary in quality but most of them are shite. When you have a higher quality system in that situation you really notice the difference. And not only is the radio better

quality, using an iPod gives you access to a really wide range of material, not just music, but pod-casts, lectures, all manner of things. So it's more than just a sound quality argument, it's about access to information where and when I want it. So maybe I pick up on some unplugged session with Echo and the Bunnymen, live in Seattle, downloaded as a pod-cast. It might not be great quality, but it's still a musical treat. The Luddites will tell you that the iPod is killing

music; I think we should embrace it with a bit more enthusiasm and use it to our own ends. Storage is getting so cheap that high definition and lossless recordings are going to become more and more available. It's up to us how we store them.



Good industrial design has no value in isolation. There are plenty of beautifully designed products with terrible sound. You have to buy in to an ethos that embraces performance, materials, manufacturing and design – different people in the team bring different skills and you have to work on the basis that you can achieve more together than you can individually. I've worked with other industrial designers here in the UK and abroad, and often success is down to making a connection with one individual. You know what drew Adrian to my attention? I bought the Carlton vanity case for my daughter, part of a luggage range that he designed. I took one look at it and the design input was so obviously great – that's why I bought it – and the rest is history. That's how I want people to feel about our products. And 30 years from now, walking round some car boot sale, I still want them to feel that way.



# DEFINITIVE AUDIO



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



1. CEC TLOX Belt Drive CD Transport
2. Living Voice OBX-RW Loudspeaker in Ebony
3. KSL Kondo DAC
4. KSL Kondo Neuro Integrated Amplifier

5. SME 2012A turntable with KSL Kondo iOJ Cartridge
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# The Arcam C31 Stereo Pre-Amplifier and P38 Power Amplifier

by Ian Harris



While Arcam have been an undeniably potent force in British hi-fi for many, many years, their integrated amplifiers have always had a higher profile than their pre-power combinations. However, notwithstanding the rise and rise of the "high-end integrated", the Cambridge company clearly believe that there is still a market for the pre-power approach, their FMJ series offering the C31 pre along with both stereo and mono power amp options, in the shape of the P38 and the P1 respectively.

OK, the FMJ components may not be the most obviously styled on the market, but their classically simple design themes look as fresh today as they did when the series was first launched, and will probably continue to age a lot better than their more outre contemporaries. In terms of construction, they might not offer the sheer bling factor of some of the Far-Eastern competition, but finish is admirable, and the casework feels solid and well-damped for their price point (which certainly makes a nice change from half-inch thick facias fronting folded steel casework of gong-like resonance).

If styling is understated, the C31's feature count is anything but. Connectivity includes no less than seven single-ended inputs (including two tape loops); one balanced and two single-ended pre-outs (one buffered for long cable runs, one direct); headphone output plus an optional MM/MC phono stage (£110). Functionality includes balance, individual trimming of inputs plus three switchable levels of volume resolution. In fact, the only hint of hair shirt is the lack of a tone control, which will be many buyer's preference anyway. While there is some duplication of function between the facia's two ranks of buttons, the labeling and purpose of all controls is highly intuitive. So intuitive, in fact, that the C31 is that rarest of beasts, a feature-rich component which can be quickly and easily set up without even a cursory glance at a manual. All functionality can be managed via the on-unit controls or the comprehensive ►

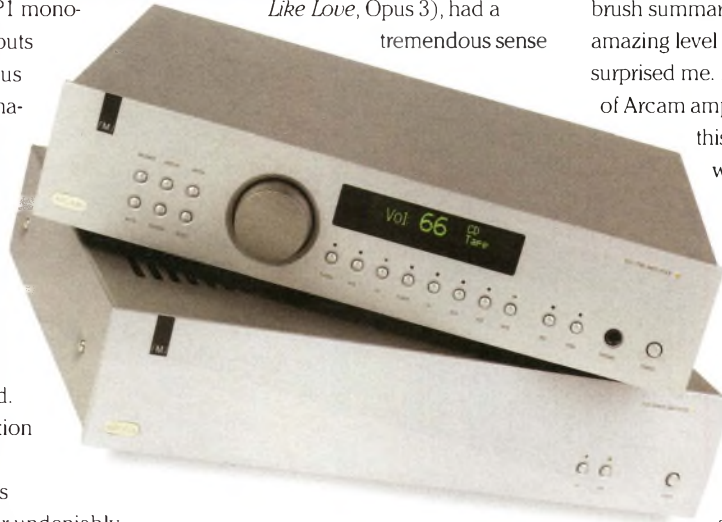
▶ remote handset (which, happily, is almost as intuitive as the unit itself).

Visually, the P38 is minimalism personified, with only Arcam and FMJ logos plus power-on and speaker select buttons adorning the fascia. Connection-wise, there are single-ended inputs only (the C31's balanced output being aimed at the suitably equipped P1 monoblocs). Single-ended pre-outs for bi-amping purposes plus two sets of Arcam's banana-friendly binding posts complete the rear panel furniture, while claimed power output is a none-too-shabby 105 Watts per channel.

First impression of the combination was of a "polite" and refined sound. If that sounds like damnation with faint praise, it would be doing the pair a serious injustice. Underneath their undeniably cultured presentation, the Arcams were providing a beautifully balanced performance, with no little excitement where appropriate. Mid/high frequency reproduction seemed to lack nothing in terms of transient impact or detail, yet was totally immune to any sense of brittleness or edge, even when dynamic and frequency peaks coincided. At times, the production of Eva Cassidy's *Time After Time* (Hot Records) treads a fine line between clarity and brightness, but the C31 and P38 navigated the challenge with a refined grace which presented Eva's vocal dynamics in a wonderfully fatigue-free manner. While logic suggested that such smooth presentation must be filtering out some degree of detail, my ears told me that the Arcams were actually digging out considerably more nuance and atmosphere than many more overtly up-front and apparently detailed components.

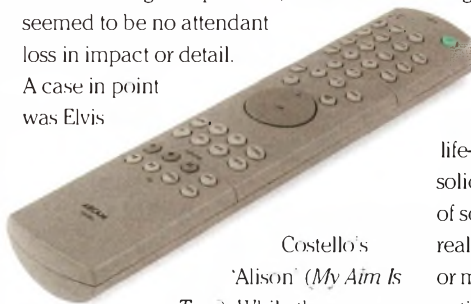
At the opposite end of the frequency spectrum, bass character was a little tougher to call. While it was undoubtedly

both rhythmically tight and gratifyingly detailed, the overriding feeling was of virtuous neutrality. What I can say with confidence is that there was sufficient grip to make my Focal Micro Utopias sound considerably larger than they have any right to. The numbling sousaphone in Eric Bibb's 'Get It While It's Hot' (*Just Like Love*, Opus 3), had a tremendous sense



of multi-layered resonance, and presented a weightily impressive presence in the room, which belied the speakers' lone 165mm mid-bass drivers.

Joining the two extremes, the mid-range displayed just a hint of warmth but, as with the high-frequencies, there seemed to be no attendant loss in impact or detail. A case in point was Elvis



Costello's 'Alison' (*My Aim Is True*). While there was definitely a beguiling hint of richness to the overall presentation, every nuance of that multi-faceted buzz-saw of a vocal was faithfully reproduced. A slightly more mellow test was supplied by 'The Way We Were', where the utter precision of Barbra Streisand's voice was vividly highlighted. The Arcam casting a vivid spotlight on the last lingering phrases of the song, where I could clearly

hear the gentle ebb and flow of the last held note as it gently faded away. More impressive still was the fact that the residual breath remained audible long after the note finally died, impressively demonstrating the singer's almost supernatural levels of vocal control.

Drilling a little deeper than a broad-brush summary by frequency, it was this amazing level of transparency that really surprised me. If my previous experience of Arcam amplification has been that this aspect of performance was good rather than outstanding, the C31 and P38 were definitely reversing that view, at their price point, really something quite special. Initially, the fine levels of transparency were most apparent some way back in the mix, with backing instruments and vocals, at times displaying quite staggering levels of timbral discrimination.

Happily, there was never a sense of background musical themes being unduly emphasized; rather, they kept their proper place in the mix, just with a greater sense of realism and life than I would normally expect at this price level. In terms of primary vocals and instruments, the main beneficiary was a terrific sense of life-like presence, which provided very solid and atmospheric imaging. In terms of sound-staging, size and precision were realistic rather than being cavernous or millimetrically precise, but this was entirely in keeping with the units' overall character – subtle rather than in-your-face but, particularly with intimate material, all the better for it.

Upping the tempo a little with AC/DC's 'Hell Ain't A Bad Place To Be' (*Let There Be Rock*) there was a definite spring in the Arcam pairings' step. While I have heard this guitar driven maste piece reproduced with a touch more weight and impact, there was a tremendous

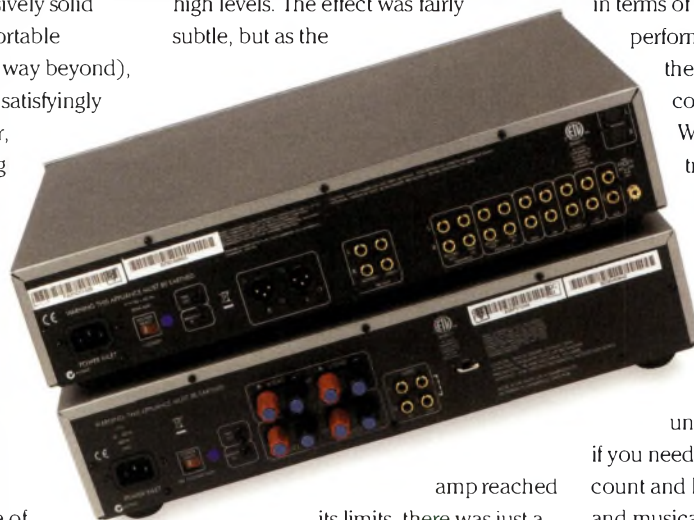
▶ sense of musical energy. Once again, levels of detail were surprising with Malcolm and Angus Young's loosely synchronised guitars displaying myriad variations in instrumental timbre and technique while Bon Scott's characteristically, erm, enthusiastic vocal provided an impressively solid central image. At all comfortable listening levels (and some way beyond), musical themes remained satisfyingly independent of each other, meaning quite exhilarating volume was possible without the sound becoming oppressive.

Sticking with AC/DC material, Hayseed Dixie's wonderfully manic "rockgrass" interpretation of 'A Whole Lotta Rosie' (*Let There Be Rockgrass*, Cooking Vinyl) repeated the themes of a vivid sense of musical energy combined with well-drawn and highly detailed vocal and instrumental images. Reproduction of the fastest fiddle passages confirmed that the Arcams' deal with rapid tempo with both clarity and poise. However, they did not reach the absolute pinnacle of fluidity, with just the last iota of temporal detail being glossed over.

Overall, the units' performance with Rock material was highly enjoyable, with a premium being placed on detail and verve, perhaps at the expense of ultimate weight and impact. Of course, the relatively small two-way Micro Utopias are never going to reproduce infrasonic frequencies, but the C31 and P38 are not components which are likely to beat you around the head with the frequency extremes. To my ears, their performance was extremely well balanced, but an audition with the partnering speakers-to-be should, of course, be part of the buying process.

Inevitably, the Arcam combo did concede a little ground to higher priced kit in certain aspects of their performance. One such area would be

grace under (extreme) pressure. While at no time could I provoke the P38 into any harsh clipping behavior, the amp lost just a little of its grace and refinement when confronted with the triple whammy of dynamically challenging and musically congested material, played at genuinely high levels. The effect was fairly subtle, but as the



amp reached its limits, there was just a little less control of individual musical themes than that provided by the real solid-state powerhouses. That said, for listeners with typical European-sized listening rooms (particularly those of us who suffer the tyranny of party walls), the P38's output and speaker control would be wholly adequate for the vast majority of the time. If four-figure output behemoths (with price tags to match) have the genuine capability to recreate musical events at life-like volumes, the Arcam is more about providing a modulated version, at sound-pressure levels more appropriate to domestic locations. By this criterion, it retained its composure well up to the onset of serious "party" volumes. At which levels, a mild case of musical congestion within the most challenging material is forgivable and, perhaps, almost inevitable with sensibly priced and sized amplifiers.

The C31/P38 pairing definitely leans towards the musical end of the spectrum, as opposed to the overtly hi-fi. While they are undoubtedly talented all-rounders, my feeling is that they are marginally better matched to the mellow amongst

us rather than the manic. However, I should stress that this statement is more a reflection of their lightness of touch than an indication that they are lacking in either power or drive.

If Arcam set out to create a pairing that would be more than competitive in terms of both build-quality and performance, then they have hit the bull's-eye – despite the congested market place. With their beguiling mix of transparency and musicality, the C31 and P38 are fine ambassadors for the pre-power approach, and worthy figure heads for the FMJ stereo range. While there are numerous talented alternatives, at the units' combined cost of \$2,050, if you need the Arcams' high feature count and longevity allied to a refined and musical sound, they will be hard to beat at the price. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

<b>C31 Pre-Amp</b>	
Type:	Full facilities remote control stereo pre amplifier
Inputs:	7x line-level (optional MM/MC phono)
Outputs:	1x single-ended 1x balanced 2x tape
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 110 x 370mm
Weight:	9.3kg
Price:	£1250
<b>P38 Power Amp</b>	
Type:	Solid-state stereo power amplifier
Inputs:	1x single ended
Outputs:	1x single-ended pre-out 2x speaker
Output power:	105 Watts/8 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	430 x 110 x 370mm
Weight:	9.3kg
Price:	£800
<b>Manufacturer:</b> Arcam Ltd Tel. (44)(0)1223 203203 Net. www.arcam.co.uk	



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# Loud and Proud...

## The Magico V3 Loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

There's a move by our nanny state to rid us of all the things we use to relax after a long day in the office/boardroom/bedroom/inventing a country or two. Wind down with a nice cigar? Think of the carcinogens. Chill out to glass of Chablis? Make sure you check your alcohol intake. How about a fine meal? Watch out for bad cholesterol and free radicals. Our Gordon and his un-merry men seem to want us to be in a state of constant upset. Sod 'em... the Magico V3 is the cure. Stick on a pair of these masterpieces at the end of the day and musical passion will soon take over, washing away any politically correctness in the process.

This is a new and titanic floorstanding design, that at first inspection looks chunky and well constructed, but thoroughly conventional. That is, unless you happened to try and move them. A speaker standing just over 1m tall and 38cm deep shouldn't weigh 72kg. I mean, that's nigh on 11st 6lbs; roughly equivalent to a fight-ready Chris Eubank per channel, without the cane and monocle. Worse, there's not even a large port to act as grab handle – the Magico V3 is a big deadweight, despite being the Company's lowest priced product!

That weight comes from the extensive use of aluminium. Normally praised for its lightweight characteristics, in fact what's really appealing about aluminium is its rigidity. So when the front baffle is made from



an inch thick billet of aluminium, CNC milled and anodised (not painted... Magico laughs in the face of paint and tweaks the nose of piano

gloss), and then held to the rear panel with tensioning rods, you are looking at something that makes conventional baffles seem as stiff as wet paper. It could also double up

as spare armour for an Abrams tank in a pinch.

Those tensioning rods hold in place the inch thick sheets of ply that form the top and sides of the cabinet. Unusually, the ply is set side on, forming the almost zebra-stripe patterning on the sides of the cabinet. It's a faintly old school look, reminiscent of bold 1950s furniture, but a successful one at that. OK, so it might not be the hi-fi equivalent of the Eames chair, but it's got the makings of a timeless design, all the same.

Disregarding the tweeter, which is 'merely' a 25mm ScanSpeak ring radiator, the 150mm midrange and the pair of 180mm bass units are all in-house designs. The tweeter and midrange are mounted at the top of the design, the pair of bass drivers toward the bottom. The drive units feature a hefty neodymium magnet coupled to a titanium voice coil. More interestingly, the cones themselves are made of Rohacell (the stuff helicopter rotor blades are made from) coated with a layer of carbon nano-tubes. The ▶

▶ resultant material – Magico calls it Nano-Tec – is disturbingly stiff for its mass (you could easily load a cone with 1.6 standard Eubanks standing on it without stress). So, it's as near a perfect piston as you'll find in a set of speakers.

All four drivers are set into the inch-thick aluminium front baffle; the ScanSpeak tweeter is mounted conventionally, but the Magico units are clamped to the rear of the front baffle. This gives the speaker two advantages over normally mounted drivers; it reduces diffraction problems resulting from the speaker's frame and provides a more consistent junction between driver and baffle (as well as minimizing the likelihood of the drivers' screws working loose over time).

Naturally, the crossover has its own 'first' to its name too. It's the first to feature the company's own Elliptical Symmetry Crossover (ESXO) design, but no-one seems to know what this means (asking the proprietor Alon Wolf is not much help; he does understand what ESXO means, but attempts to disseminate the idea to this puny human were met with a blank, open mouthed expression) but I'm sure it's very, very clever. It is also – as you might expect – packed with audioyummy components. In fact, Magico claims the components cost in the crossover alone is greater than the cost parts of whole speakers from some competitors.

Okay, so by now you'll have

deduced that Magico are not averse to blowing their own trumpet. Other companies have bolted or clamped speakers to the back of the baffle – some have even mounted the drive units to the rear of the cabinet. Magico is not the first company to have used aluminium and chunks of real tree in place of veneer. It's not the first brand to sport drive units with cones featuring state-of-the-art materials science (while carbon nanotubes are hardly news) and using extremely high-grade components in the crossover is not patented by Magico. Indeed,

the Eben C1 reviewed on page 32 takes many of these ideas just as far and in some cases further.

But speakers like the C1 and Magico's V3 are definitely exceptions to the rule, exhibiting a thoroughness in their design and construction that genuinely sets them apart from the crowd. Magico might well be accused of sounding their own fanfare, but then at least they've got something to shout about.

It would be interesting to see the Magico team

at work; there's a perfectionism that borders on obsessive-compulsive disorder here. Not the OCD that causes people to wash their hands 32,000 times a day, but the benign, engineering superhero kind of OCD that keeps a designer awake night after night wondering whether the crossover board should be moved half an angstrom to the left. Nothing whatsoever is left to chance.

Including, of course, the sound quality.

Naturally, when you are putting together a system with a pair of ultimately perfectionist speakers on the shouty end, the rest of the chain needs to

be beyond the pale too.

We used a Metronome Technologies Kalista Reference CD transport and C2A converter, a Krell Evolution 202 pre-amp and a DarTzeel NHB-108B power amp, with similarly take-no-prisoners ancillaries. Heady stuff indeed. Briefly swapping out the Metronome four-boxer for a Mimetism 20.1 CD player showed how good the Magico's are at resolving the differences between players, and how good the Metronome really is, but the basic magic of the Magico remained untamished. However, choose your system carefully remains the key phrase here and well-chosen systems will return a stunning performance. There's a sense of 'active relaxation' here, that you will struggle to find elsewhere in audio. No, really... most speakers at this level stress the 'active' or the 'relaxation' side, producing a sound that is laid back ▶



► or monitor-like. Not that there's anything wrong with either accent, but the Magico adds a new set of instructions to the audiophile's guide to life.

It's a strange thing; these speakers bypass all those intellectual bits and grab you by the music gland. You'll mostly notice this when you switch off a track, if you can. There's a sense of loss, real loss if you have to pull yourself away from the music. If you are playing a piece of music and decide to change tracks mid-way through, everyone in the room (including you yourself) will moan at you like a sullen teenager. Even on your own, switching off a piece of music while it's playing seems like an act of musical debasement.

Moreover, you'll find it impossible to listen to one piece of music, or one genre, one track simply leading to another. On came Leslie Feist, which through some strange intrarogation of the anterior musicmix organ, led oh so naturally to the late, great Jeff Healey playing 'Jambalaya', which begat Jerry Lee Lewis playing the same thing, and that brought us round to Ray Lamontagne and that begat... and so on through protracted listening sessions that went through the collection sideways, backwards, up, down then flipped back for another go at sideways again.

This speaker makes the sort of deep-noodle modern jazz that I sometimes listen to palatable to non-jazzers. Well, sort of... at the very least, it makes it less vexatious. There's a stopwatch test with hardcore jazz; on mere mortal hi-fi, it can take a minute or less before people start looking round, checking watches, shuffling feet and asking polite questions. Occasionally, you might get a couple of minutes before the shoe-gazing kicks in. Here, the inability to pull away from the music made even the likes of The Blessing get well into a whole track before anyone begin to twitch.

Now this really is rare stuff. The very, very live Popa Chubby rendition of 'Red House' via the V3s is remarkable on so many levels. First, there's the fact that they can handle it at almost gig sound pressures. Then there's the fact that they can define all the information (and there's one heck of a lot of that, everything from Chubby's Pro Reverb amp straining to live through the night, to the sheer intensity of solos setting off the snare drums's spring, plus all the hiss and crowd noise) but do so in a way that makes you just wish you were there, watching the fat boy spank that Strat. But, perhaps more than that, it's the way you can get to hear the way the drummer works his way around the cymbals so cleanly and clearly. You know when he hits the crash, and it sounds clearly different from the splash.

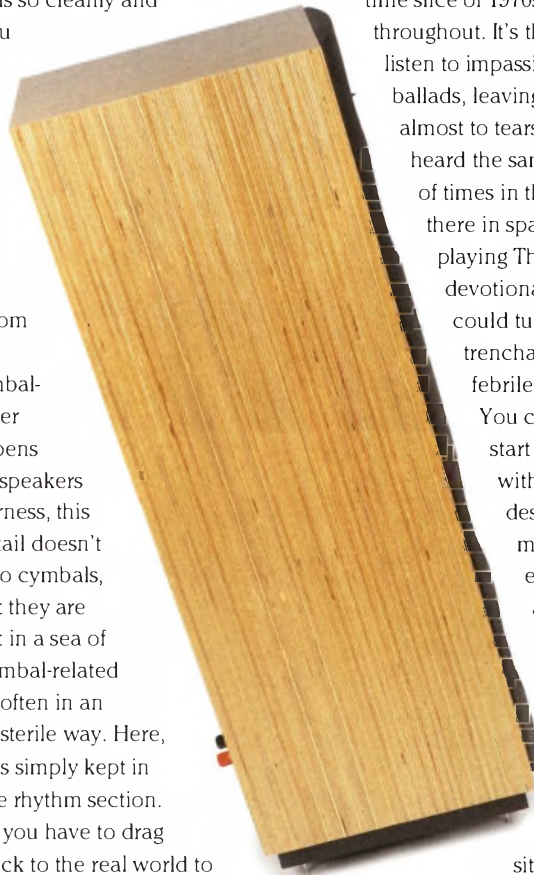
This cymbal-related inner detail happens with other speakers (and in fairness, this level of detail doesn't just apply to cymbals, it's just that they are usually lost in a sea of vaguely cymbal-related noise) but often in an analytical, sterile way. Here, the music is simply kept in pace by the rhythm section.

You feel you have to drag yourself back to the real world to even begin to talk in audiophile terms, and it almost feels an affront to the sound of the speaker to do so. It is supremely detailed, masterfully so. It presents an image as good as you'll find in audio, it's coherent,

articulate, keenly dynamic, precise and temporally spot on. It does all the things you want to hear in audio and then some. From a hi-fi buff perspective, it has all its ducks in a row.

It just has more ducks.

Those audiophile sensibilities add up to a fraction of what this speaker does. There's a level of musical communication that fails to make it into word-form; an atavistic hairs-on-the-back of the neck experience that we get when we listen to music on some level far beyond the cerebral. This is music – whatever music – at its most fundamental, moving us on levels that only occasionally stir in hi-fi. It's not just foot-tapping on some common time slice of 1970s rock; it's there throughout. It's there when you listen to impassioned folkie ballads, leaving you moved almost to tears despite having heard the same track dozens of times in the past. It's there in spade-loads when playing Thomas Tallis devotional music, which could turn the most trenchant atheist into a febrile God-botherer. You couldn't even start to play Wagner without the desire to sweep majestically eastward and annexe something. Consider this a warning. Do not, under any circumstance, sit down to listen to a piece of music through the Magicos if you are hungry, tired, thirsty, in need of a comfort break or have some work to do. Because if you do, you'll sit in rapt discomfort unable to drag yourself away from the music ►



# Good practice makes perfect...



## Because the how and the why are just as important as the what when it comes to cables

While the design of audio and video cables is considered by many as something of a 'black art', there is one company that employs proprietary design and manufacturing technologies developed for critical applications such as the space program and the field of medical science. That company is Nordost, makers of the original Flatline® Cable. Today, Nordost's renowned Valhalla and state-of-the-art Odin cables are acclaimed by audio manufacturers – and audio critics - the world over as simply the most accurate and musically transparent cables that money can buy.

In striving to preserve the tiniest nuances of musical information and picture detail during power and signal transmission between various AV components, Nordost rigorously selects its materials. Then it employs unique production processes, executed to exact tolerances in its Massachusetts-based factory in order to produce

what can rightly be claimed 'the best cables in the world'. Needless to say Nordost's extensive R&D has resulted in countless awards and accolades during the company's ten year history of precision cable design and manufacturing.

Nevertheless it's Nordost's Balanced Design Concept that truly sets the company's products apart. By employing consistent materials throughout the range, and thanks to a deep understanding of the issues and problems surrounding signal transfer, Nordost designs functionally specific cables that enable audiophiles and home theatre enthusiasts to create a 'coherent cable loom' throughout their systems. The results are astonishing, delivering a level of overall musical balance and coherence that places you closer to the original performers than ever before - even when using modestly-priced separate components and loudspeakers.

## MAKING TRICKLE-DOWN A TORRENT

Applying lessons learnt during the development of its flagship designs, Nordost has created a complete new range of cables called Wyrewizard. And the great news for enthusiasts not fortunate enough to be able to afford the very best cables in the world is that many of Nordost's carefully selected materials and unique manufacturing processes have trickled down to the company's most affordable range yet. Better still, the Wyrewizard range employs the same Balanced Design Concept that is core to Nordost's design philosophy in order that your system will perform to the very best of its ability and deliver a directness of communication and musical expression that simply has to be experienced to be believed.

## REAL FAMILY VALUES

So today even Nordost's most affordable cables – the Wyrewizard range – share common design DNA with its flagship cables such as the legendary Odin and Valhalla products. A few of the key features found in the Wyrewizard range include:

- The use of aerospace grade dielectric materials – and even patented Micro Mono-filament construction in key applications
- Consistency of design together with common choice of materials and construction - such as silver-plated solid core conductors and proprietary FEP insulation
- Low mass – utilising very high quality, lightweight cable terminations and minimalist construction for superior sound
- Coherent cable loom – functionally specific designs ensuring a lead for every need in all types of stereo audio and multi-channel AV systems
- All analogue and digital audio cables precision-manufactured and custom-terminated in Nordost's factory in the US



# NORDOST

MAKING THE CONNECTION

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Cable your complete system with Wyrewizard and you'll inject new life into your separate components, ensuring that they work as a whole and enabling them to deliver a spellbinding degree of emotional involvement.

**Nordost – because you need good science to get great sound**



► for as long as the music is playing. This is no small point; I listened to the whole of the *Isle of the Dead* with a painfully three-coffee full bladder, absolutely unable to back away from the musical experience. Those were simultaneously the longest and shortest 20 minutes I've encountered in a very long time.

No speaker is without flaw, and that includes the Magico V3. Here, given the size, weight and driver configuration, you might be forgiven for expecting a bit more extension down at the subterranean end of things.

It's not bass light by any stretch of the imagination, but at the price of admission, many rivals deliver a few key cycles per second lower than this speaker. But here's the thing; in most cases it won't matter one iota to the

listener. Instead we get a speaker that has the same ethos, the same character from where it starts doling out the frequencies until it stops; no little lifts or dips, no covering its tracks or trying to hide (this is so profound, many will mistake the speaker for sounding relaxed in the mid-band,

looking to that bit below 32Hz and cannot get past that point, it means one of two things – either you are a fan of dub reggae versions of Leftfield tracks played on church organs, or you've reached the point where you confuse the medium with the message.

The rest of us will be too busy playing music on the V3 to notice.

If there's a major criticism of the speaker, it's that it is the most expensive speaker you will ever buy, because it will end up costing you a fortune in polycarbonate. And it will affect your friends similarly.

Here's how; you invite a friend over, they hear your CDs and have to buy about half your collection. Then they come over with a suitcase full of ►



where really they are too used to speakers sounding mid-forward). If anything, the bass acts as the Magico graduate exam, but for the listener, not the speaker; if you find yourself

### In his own words...

People say dog owners start to look like their pets. In this case, Alon Wolf of Magico is very like his loudspeakers; outspoken, self-assured and – just maybe – right. I asked him how Magico came into being and what processes go into making a truly world-class loudspeaker...

**AS:** Why did you begin to design loudspeakers?

**AW:** The process started from frustration. I've been buying loudspeakers for almost 30 years now and I've always taken them apart and tried to improve on them. About 15 years ago, some people heard what I'd been doing and liked it enough to ask if I could build loudspeakers for them. Every time I built someone something, I learned a little



more in the process and improved the speakers. Five years ago, a distributor in Hong Kong asked me to build the ultimate two-way. So, I built the Mini, which because it was built properly, threw people off – no one had heard a two-way standmount design that has more extension than a lot of big speakers, and more resolution than anything else that was out there. The guy in HK backed down thinking it was too expensive, but others started buying it, then the Absolute Sound heard it, and the rest is history.

**AS:** The V3 cabinets are extremely heavy. How and why?


**AW:** You want your bass driver to be mounted in a stiff enclosure so that the resonant frequency of the structure will not interfere with the band pass of the bass driver. You want to damp the midrange, because you want the resonant frequency to be outside that driver's



► their own CDs, half of which you will end up having to buy as well. Your friend brings a friend... Pretty soon, Amazon will set aside a delivery van especially for you. If there had been ten pairs of these speakers dotted around the country a couple of years ago, Fopp would still be doing a brisk trade buying up old Our Price sites. A hundred pairs of these around the country and we could put the music industry back on its feet.

In short, the V3 is a speaker that has lofted the brand into the company of the very, very best that audio has to offer. To some, that might seem cocky and arrogant of the Magico people; a brand should spend decades working its way up to hanging out with the best. But if so, it's the cocky arrogance of one who knows they have something to be cocky and arrogant about. It's the swagger of a 100m Olympic Gold medallist, the confidence of the

Formula One winner, the surety of a mathematician, knowing they've just submitted a prize-winning thesis.

For the rest of us, those not possessed of such precocious talents, that's a humbling thing to be around, and that's what most comes with the Magico V3. It's not one of those speaker systems that will be forgotten; it's not a speaker system that lets you do that. It's also the breathlessly rare sort of speaker that flattens any of those inverted snobbery arguments about 'the law of diminishing returns'. This is one of the best, and that shines through whatever the price, and whatever you think about the price. 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way sealed box loudspeaker
Driver Complement:	25mm ScanSpeak Ring Radiator tweeter 150mm Nano-Tec midrange 2x 180mm Nano-Tec woofers
Bandwidth:	32Hz-40kHz $\pm$ 3dB
Sensitivity:	89 db
Impedance:	4 ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	300 x 1050 x 380mm
Weight:	72kg ea.
Price:	£24,900 per pair

#### UK Distributor:

Absolute Sounds  
Tel. (44)(0)20 8971 3909  
Net. [www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com)

#### Manufacturer:

Magico LLC.  
Net. [www.magico.net](http://www.magico.net)

range. And you want mass, so that the tweeter will not excite the structure. An MDF box is damped – and can be massy if you make it heavy enough – but it hasn't got the stiffness. Aluminium is a very good material to build a loudspeaker box from, but you need to make it big to get the mass. The energy you lose to the box is minimal. With models like the V3 and the Mini, we mount the drivers on thick aluminium plates for the stiffness then couple it to the birch ply for the damping. And that makes a massy cabinet.

**AS:** How much research went into designing the drive units?

**AW:** We have a museum with just about every driver that was ever made, that's how we figured out what we could use. That's part of the reason Magico doesn't use beryllium tweeters or diamond tweeters, or ribbons – no matter how good they are, they stand out. We don't necessarily do everything in house – a helicopter rotor blade manufacturer makes the Nano-Tec cone material for example – but everything other than the tweeter (a ScanSpeak Ring Radiator) is our proprietary design.

**AS:** You mentioned Nano-Tec just now. What's the technology behind the material?

**AW:** The Nano-Tec sandwich cone is made of an asymmetrical carbon nano-tube polymer composite. If you put it upside down on the floor and stand on it – with someone on your shoulders – it will not buckle. It's only seven grams! It's the stiffest composite that I know of. So you can build cones that stay pistonic throughout the entire audible range.

**AS:** Why do you mount the bass drivers to the rear of the baffle?

**AW:** Everything that we do is coupled to metal, the coupling is almost perfect and it will stay that way, because it's coupling metal on metal. There's no hardware that sees wood at any moment in that speaker. This is because when you bolt the driver to an MDF baffle, you cannot go past three Newton-pounds torque without damaging it, but on our aluminium cabinets, we go up to 11!



# Small Wonder...

## The Eben Ayra C1 Loudspeaker

by Chris Thomas

There's no getting away from it, I have been on a great run recently. Since earlier in the year I have been spoiled rotten with the quality of the equipment that has passed through my hands. It has also been an instructive experience as I took active steps to rebuild my home system from the base up after several lengthy conversations with the editor. His notion that conventional system-building wisdom was somewhat skewed had intrigued me for some time but as ever, it was only when we found ourselves in the same room, at the same time and with all the required hardware that I fully understood the musical reality of what he had been getting at. Someone can tell you something a thousand times, but they only have to show you once and you either get it or you don't. Audio, like life, is about learning and I've learned a lot this year.

This brings me to the Eben C1. This is a small, beautifully proportioned and finished loudspeaker, designed literally from the ground up. I often ask myself why any loudspeaker manufacturer would make a stand-mounted speaker without designing the stand as well? They all know that you can kill performance by using the wrong support and any company that leaves the choice of stand to the dealer or customer is gambling with variable consistency and performance. The C1 comes with its own stand, one that is cleverly conceived yet apparently breaks quite a few "rules" along the way. We are talking about resonance control again and these stands incorporate several interesting

ideas. The top and base sections are of MDF while the arched support is formed from plywood and the bracing strut is a hollow aluminium shaft. The base contains four loosely coupled, radiused rod and cup feet, while the speaker is decoupled from the top of the stand by small felt topped discs supported on captive ball bearings.

The stands are very light and you could easily hold them both in one hand. They also allow the speakers to sway back and forth – alarmingly so if you adhere to the high-mass, high-rigidity school of thought. But Eben believe in low-mass, lightweight designs with low stored energy that won't sap dynamics. They point out that no matter how hard you try, the speakers will always move, so controlling critical resonance is actually more important. That way you don't rob energy from distinct bands within the musical spectrum – or even worse, feed it back

in after some delay. So much for the theory, in practice the result is a sense of speed and solidity that seems quite at odds with the speakers' flexible

perch – more so than even the heaviest stands provide. As always, reconciling what you see with what you are hearing is never less than fascinating and quite often mind-blowing as yet another audio taboo bites the dust.

The cabinet is small but exquisitely finished with a tapering boat-back and a smoothly flared, rear facing port.

The two-piece baffle is made from 20mm aluminium, with each driver assembled directly onto its rear face, eliminating the conventional spider and its fixings.

The top, back and sides are of MDF. The mechanics and diaphragm of the ribbon tweeter are the same as those found in other Eben designs, only here the shallow recess that loads the driver is precision machined into the baffle face. It is designed as a sealed unit, constrained around its edge and offers remarkable clarity and bandwidth with none of the associated beaming problems often found in ribbons. ▶



► The bass/mid unit is fascinating, also completely designed and built in-house. Having spent several months with the C1 I have to say that I believe it to be one of

the world's great drivers. Again this is built straight onto the baffle and is a low-mass design that finds the magnet transformed from a single ring at the rear of the cone to an array of

Neodymium rod magnets separated from the chassis by soft-iron sections and placed in front of and behind the voice coil in a patented, push/pull arrangement. The rear of the driver is left completely open and this means that there is no reflection back into the cone and far less mechanical or thermal compression. The whole driver has been stripped back to the bare essentials, the cage replaced by stand-offs in the effort to further eliminate reflective surfaces.

The cone itself starts life as aluminium alloy but undergoes plasma electrolysis to create a ceramic/aluminium sandwich in which fully two-thirds of the material has been converted to ceramic. This (again) patented approach helps to preserve the integrity of the cone shape, always difficult with all-ceramic cones due to problems inherent in the cooling process. Eben were looking for a true pistonic driver with minimal reflection and resonance from the surrounding superstructure, and it doesn't take an awful lot of listening to realize that this is exactly what they've achieved – or just how important it is.

Two-way stand-mount designs of this size can often be impressive and the best are extremely articulate and

tight. With no real low frequency extension to trouble them they should be explicit and detailed as well as delivering a sharp sense of focus.

Many will have a fair amount of mid/bass driver compression, giving them a punchy character and their small cabinets will minimize enclosure effects and resonance, leaving them somewhat dry sounding but always fast and fun.

The best will leave you with the impression that they defy the laws of physics with both their low frequency abilities and their sense of scale.

But the C1 is a new breed of small loudspeaker, in that it doesn't require you to make any allowances for its size. A lack of very low bass is the only obvious limitation, because in all other areas this Eben is a totally world-class performer worthy of comparison with other designs at just about any price. At the heart of its powers you will find a balance, integration and musical coherence that is stunning. There is no sense of any discontinuity through the crossover area, or of the tweeter being an individual unit. The weird looking, slab-like crossover components – all hand-built and hardwired with

Nordost cable – keep the music whole and focussed, but with a sense of instrumental continuity, separation and dynamic independence that is mesmerizing. Eben speakers have always excelled in the fine resolution of micro-dynamics and the C1 has taken this to a completely new level, making it the most revealing speaker of pure musicianship I have heard. Phrasing is at the heart of so much that makes a great player. You can teach a novice how to play a six-note sequence, but understanding how that line can be shaped and phrased can take years. For a master musician, fine changes can be channelled through the instrument to

project your feelings and convert them to lyrical expression.

Resolving the subtleties of phrasing is one major area that separates great systems from good systems.

These realisations are certainly not the sole responsibility of the speaker, and you'll also need the right electronics and installation if you want to explore this aspect of music, but few designs are as sensitive to the subtleties of these shifts as this Eben. This is due, in part, to the speaker's uncanny quietness. Low noise floors are usually applied to electronics but the C1 has an inky black quality to its backgrounds that leave the music sounding even more vivid and colourful. There is no other speaker of this size, in my experience, that comes close to being able to show tonal colour with anything like this complexity and texture. Resolution is tremendous too, right across the impressive bandwidth and from





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▶ front to back, where the C1 opens deep, wide soundstages, completely out of the box and rock solid.

The lack of compression is at the heart of so much that they do. Large scale instruments, mixes and orchestral works never present a problem to that driver, and even when you give it a lot of work to do it always seems to have reserves in hand and the uncanny ability to allow complex pieces of music, brimming with dynamic detail and tonal variety, ample headroom and freedom. I can't tell you how many times I have looked at the size of that unit and wondered how it can cope. Although, to some extent it lives in the shadow of the remarkable mid/bass driver, the ribbon tweeter is the unsung hero of the design. As well as phenomenal articulation and a total absence of harshness it has remarkable high frequency extension and never draws attention to itself for a moment. I much prefer this shallow baffle loading to the deeper, horn-type that I have heard on other Ebens. Here it has real freedom to breathe and while it may lack the sheer air and obvious sparkle of Focal's Beryllium tweeter, it has a very natural feel to it and is equally dynamic and textural. Then there is the amazing integration that Eben have achieved in this speaker – and that elevates it to another level completely.

The bass is nothing less than astonishing, both in extension and quality. It is fast and dynamic yet tremendously stable and again, focussed. Its sense of pitch and colour are extraordinary for a speaker of

this size and are better than many speakers I have heard with far greater internal volumes. Even if you are into the wildest slapped bass funk you won't feel let down. In the bass, as throughout the bandwidth, the C1 is endlessly detailed and it can punch hard or be extremely close and intimate, full of the most delicate musical nuance and flavour. But, like all speakers, they are a slave and an open window to the system. This is a truly exceptional design of brilliant potential, but like other great audio components it is the easiest thing in the world to make it sound bad. Stick it on the end of an inappropriate, poorly thought out system and you will certainly wonder what all the fuss it about.

I love listening to music with these Ebens and have used them with several amplifiers without ever feeling short-changed by their limitations. They were masters of time with the rhythmic suppleness of the Vitus SS-010 integrated and exhilarating with the Lyra Connoisseur and the Ayre MXR mono-blocs but they were something else again with the David

Berning amplifiers reviewed elsewhere in this issue and able to translate their brilliance into some of the most intense and beautiful listening sessions I and any who dropped by to listen had experienced.

Just don't expect them to tolerate poor amplification.

These are superb loudspeakers that set a new benchmark for two-way stand mounts.



But their abilities go far beyond that and they should be heard by anyone who loves music and has a system good enough. I have always been slightly uncomfortable with the idea of the single product review. When I read them, there all too often seems to be a subtext that suggests, "This is the new reference product; buy it and all your audio problems will be solved". While I can see the attraction of such reviews and the promise they hold, I have always been acutely aware that we listen to systems and not individual components. Good amplifiers don't always make beautiful music, even when paired with good speakers. But what the Eben C1 does more clearly than any other speaker I've used is let you hear what your system and the musicians are doing. And when the news is good, it's very, very good indeed. ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Stand-mount two-way speaker Rear reflex loaded
Drive Units:	1 x sealed ribbon tweeter 1 x 115mm ceramic mid/bass driver
Nominal Impedance:	6 Ohms.
Sensitivity:	88dB
Dimensions (WxHxD):	200 x 370 x 360mm
Weight:	12.5 kg ea.
Finishes:	Burr walnut or piano black.
Price:	£7995 inc. stands.

#### UK Distributor:

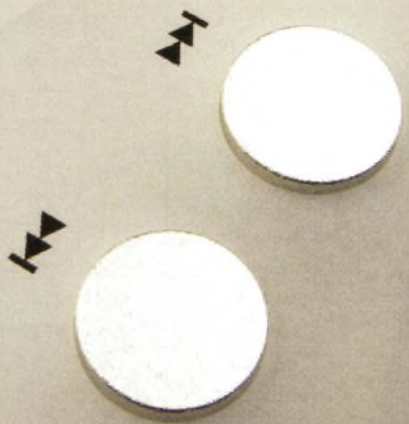
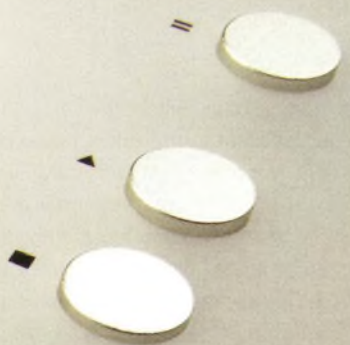
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#### Manufacturer:

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Zanden  
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# One Of A Kind...

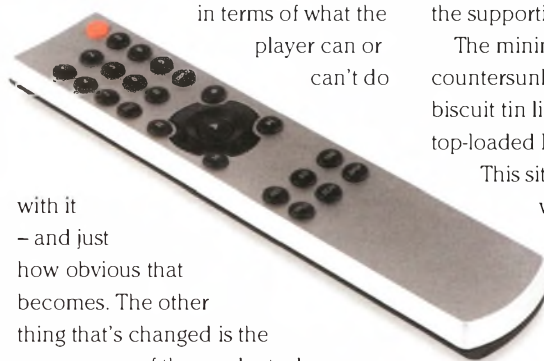
## The Zanden Model 2500S CD Player

by Roy Gregory

It's no great secret that I'm a huge fan of Zanden's four-box CD transport and DAC. It is the best balanced, most accomplished, most engaging and most musically satisfying player I've ever spent time with. It is also pretty much the most expensive, teetering on the brink of £38K! Even so, the amount of time spent debating (along with an extremely enthusiastic Mrs. Ed.) the practicality of committing the necessary funds to make it a permanent addition to the household should give you some idea of just how deep an impression this machine made. In the end we decided that it was a (financial) step too far and we needed a purpose built listening room rather more – but a key consideration in that choice was the knowledge of a one-box player just over the horizon. If only we'd known quite how far away that horizon was... Well, three years down the road and a couple of false starts later, the Model 2500S CD Player is finally upon us. The question is, was it worth the wait?

Now, if the world was a simple place I could simply write the word, yes, add the specs and that would be that, job done. Indeed, in one sense, things really are that simple because there's no doubting that this is a very special player indeed. The problem is that it's also very different – at least different to the four-box anyway. If it was simply a case of 90% of the performance for 50% of the price then everything would be in its place and the world would be a happy place too. Unfortunately (but somewhat reassuringly), what makes the four-box machine so special just can't be replicated at a lower

price level and within the constraints of a single chassis. Where the tonality, resolution and coherence of the four-box player makes it unfailingly and effortlessly natural in its musical delivery, allowing it to make more sense of the signal, more of the time, it soon became apparent that the 2500 needed to adopt a more studied approach – combined with a little sonic sleight of hand. There really is such a thing as "too much information", not in terms of detail itself – more in terms of what the player can or can't do



with it – and just how obvious that becomes. The other thing that's changed is the appearance of the product; always exquisitely presented and produced, the new single-chassis design sets new standards even for Zanden. This is without doubt one of the most elegant and attractive products I've ever dealt with. And for once my approval seems to be in step with the general public. Every single person who has seen this player has spontaneously commented on its appealing looks, a combination of beautiful execution and timeless simplicity.

Actually, referring to the 2500S as a one-box machine is slightly misleading, as the chassis actually comes in two parts; the frosted acrylic top box encloses a chromed steel case which drops around 15mm below the Perspex

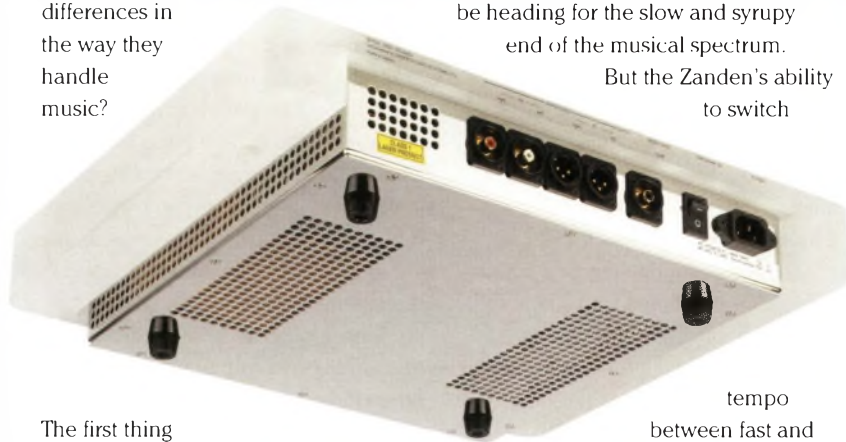
shroud. It even has feet on its underside and can be used in this form. But you also get a heavy, aluminium plate frame in the Company's trademark champagne finish, which lifts the player clear of the supporting surface thanks to its four cylindrical feet with their soft rubber interfaces. Be warned; these feet are so sticky that they'll easily lift a loose shelf along with the player, grabbing it just long enough to drop it (edge first of course) on to your unprotected feet. When moving the 2500S, free it from the supporting surface first!

The minimalist chassis offers just six countersunk controls and the familiar biscuit tin lid for the customized and top-loaded Philips CDM PRO2 transport.

This sits in the superbly finished well, machined from a block of 25mm thick aluminium, the disc held in place by the lid's integral clamp. The DAC is Philips' legendary TDA1541A S1 Crown chip-set, fed with an I<sup>2</sup>S feed from the transport and employed in Zanden's standard mode, devoid of filtering. The analogue output stage employs a single 6922 tube and provides both balanced and single-ended RCA outputs. There's also an S/PDIF digital output from a BNC socket (an RCA adaptor is included). Don't be fooled by its slightly ethereal appearance, the 2500S uses the same multi material sandwich approach to mechanical isolation and dissipation as the other Zanden products and at 13kg this is definitely no lightweight. The paucity of controls is made up for by the provision of a slim-line remote that adds direct track access, skip

▶ and repeat modes and somewhat bizarrely, a shuffle facility. Don't get excited by the display, disc, up or down buttons – they don't do anything.

So much for the obvious mechanical and constructional similarities between this and Zanden's flagship player; how about the slightly less obvious differences in the way they handle music?



The first thing that will strike you about the sound of the Model 2500S is its composed, relaxed quality, so reminiscent of the utterly unforced delivery I associate with the Audio Research Ref 3 line-stage. And just like the ARC, that unflustered, unhurried control is based on the complete confidence of the player – and the resulting confidence it instills in the listener. The calm confidence with which the music is delivered in turn allows you to relax, safe in the knowledge that the player and system aren't constantly teetering on the brink. It's all down to the 2500S's sense of musical flow, its ability to encompass both the dynamic and rhythmic demands of the signal. The result is a fluid, almost sinuous presentation that invites the listener in and holds you there, enthralled.

Listen longer (which is no hardship

in this instance) and you start to pick up on a smoothness that washes through proceedings, a subtle rounding to leading edges that eases the transition between and into notes, the passage through a phrase. Combine that with a rich and complex harmonic balance that gives those notes their true colour and length and you could be heading for the slow and syrupy end of the musical spectrum.

But the Zanden's ability to switch

tempo between fast and slow, the jaunty quickstep of Eliza Gilkyson's 'Borderline' and the measured, almost hymnal solemnity of the next track, 'Paradise Hotel', underlines the player's effortless grasp of pace and just how wide the gap between "unforced" and "slow" really is – and conversely, just how musically



destructive driven, clipped tempi are to musical expression. Instead, the Model 2500S builds its complex and beautifully layered harmonic structures on

### What's in an "S"?

Cast around on the internet and you'll likely find reference to both the Model 2500 and the 2500S – or Signature version. What's more, the straight 2500 stands to save you a bit of coin – so what's the significance of the suffix? The S version is defined by its use of that S1 Crown grade, selected chip-set – a rare electronic commodity of near mythical status in certain quarters and one that is increasingly hard to source. The standard version of the Model 2500 reverts to stock TDA 1541A chips; hence the slight saving in cost. Whilst Zanden are constantly seeking new supplies of the premium grade DACs, these can't be guaranteed so the S version will exist only as long as stocks last. Having compared the two different versions, the 2500S more than justified its price premium over the standard unit and I can understand Audiofreaks decision to offer only this version until stocks are exhausted, whereupon they'll revert to the standard machine. In the meantime you can special order a straight 2500 if you so desire.

the superior temporal coherence common to filterless players. Notes and phrases are perfectly placed and weighted, bringing the performers and music both presence and substance, an innate sense of pace and the confidence to breathe.

But shaping notes is a risky business and no one ever gets off Scott free.

The gentle rounding of leading edges that so aids the music's easy ebb and flow is paid for not in the pace of progress but in the range of dramatic contrast available, the softening of sudden shifts in level or density, the music's ability to startle or shock. Yet despite this, when it comes to musical expression, the Model 2500S retains the ability to hold your attention and surprise you too. My acid test when it comes to infusing a performance ▶

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▶ with dramatic tension is Barbirolli's *Tallis Fantasia*. In the wrong hands (or on the wrong system) this music can be rendered twee – even quaint, but Sir John grabs it, the orchestra and the audience by the throat, with a reading redolent with menace and drama, stark contrasts and raw emotional power. Play it on the Zanden and you can't miss the smoothness that takes the edge from some of the more dramatic shifts, but there's also no missing the tension and menace either. The sense of presence is helped by the mid-hall perspective and a more tangible acoustic space than most players manage from this disc; setting the orchestra back behind the plane of the speakers is totally in keeping with the natural warmth of the Zanden's balance. The *pizzicato* phrases from the basses, perched on a central riser are beautifully weighted and poised in space, the texture of the massed strings sustaining the tension which might be robbed by the diminished sense of immediacy that comes with increased distance. The startling swoop that presages the first theme loses impact, but the vibrant instrumental colours and associated emotive sweep carry the day. What you lose in drama you gain in emotional intensity, built on the layered harmonics and colours of the instruments. It's a different reading to the one you'll hear from the likes of Wadia or indeed, the four-box Zanden, but it's no less powerful and has a subtly shaded beauty all of its own.

Other standard discs are handled with equal aplomb, the off-beat staccato chords that open the Count's 'Beaver Junction' might lose a little of their stark, jagged asymmetry, but

that's soon forgotten by the infectious swing of the brass, the easy, loping beauty of the piano solo, the way the parts just fall into place. There's a natural grace and shape to music from this machine that belies the mechanical/electronic complex that produces it. But I'm not using "natural" in



the sense of "indivisible from nature".

Instead I'm referring to the instantly familiar patterns, pace and emphasis that gives the music shape, that fits the phrases together so perfectly, the way in which they overlap and follow one another. It's a structural clarity, an effortless organization that makes the music easy to read. Zanden's four-box player delivers that message on a note-by-note basis, its overall temporal and dynamic mastery creating a place for everything and keeping everything in its place. The 2500S reaches the same goal by a different route; one that involves less transparency, immediacy and micro-dynamic insight – but then you'd want something extra for your \$38K wouldn't you.

Take the Model 2500S's lucid structural clarity and combine that with its rich, vibrant colours and the almost dismissive ease with which it grasps rhythmic variation and vocabulary, and you've got a smart weapon that's targeted on the sheer wonder that's within great music. If this

player has a weakness then perhaps it's an inability to plumb the deeper depths of the musical dark side, an editorial influence that might lead you away from Messiaen, Cohen or the bleaker Shostakovich symphonies. But then, even old Leonard cracked the odd smile and deep inside I'm still an optimist at heart. If you want music to reach out and wrap you in

the magic of its inner beauty then this player does a better job with CDs than anything else I've used, the message easily transcending the medium. It's both infectious and beguiling and has an addictive quality, a bit like sugar – and just like sugar, the experience is oh so sweet...



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Three-way reflex loaded
Type:	Single-box CD player
Transport:	Philips CDM PRO2
DAC:	Philips TDA 1541A S1 Crown
Sampling Rate:	16 bit/44.1kHz
Valve Complement:	1x 6922
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA/phono 1pr balanced XLR 1x BNC S/PDIF digital
Output Level:	2.5V
Dimensions (WxHxD):	428 x 101 x 349mm
Weight:	13kg
Prices –	
Model 2500S:	£17490
Model 2500:	£16750

#### UK Distributor:

Audiofreaks  
Tel. (44)(0)208 948 4153  
Net. [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

#### Manufacturer:

Zanden Audio Systems Ltd.  
Net. [www.zandenaudio.com](http://www.zandenaudio.com)

Quadrature 2



# Stretching Your Horizons...

## The David Berning Quadrature Z Mono Power Amplifiers

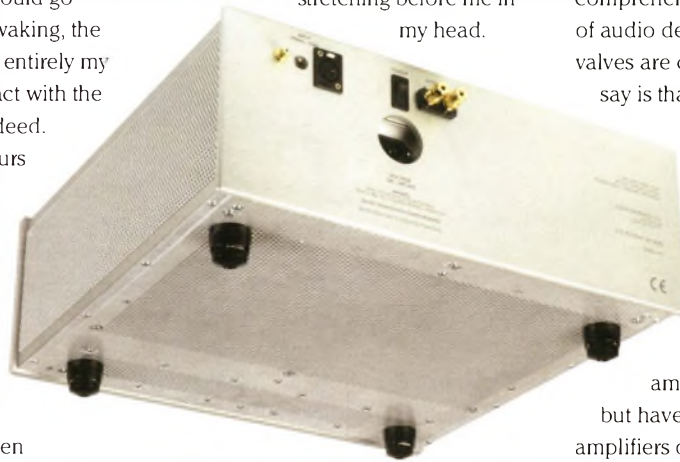
by Chris Thomas

I think the Beatles said it best when they sang, "Oh that magic feeling, nowhere to go". And it is true, for me anyway, that having absolutely nothing to do and nowhere to go is indeed magical. I have never been able to understand those people who are always going on about how they just HAVE to be doing something or they would go mad. The idea that, upon waking, the day stretches before me, is entirely my own and requires no contact with the outside world is blissful indeed. Sometimes I can spend hours with my guitars or effects pedals, simply playing the day away.

But recently things have changed. Whereas I would normally begin my listening sometime during the early afternoon, increasingly often I have found myself perched on the sofa as early as 8.30 AM intrigued by some musical fascination. And of late I have often stayed there for hours on end, rising only to change the music or make tea. I have begun to realise that, somewhere deep within my previous appalling slovenliness, there was a kind of routine. An order of things that is probably linked to a kind of deeply anal Virgoan fastidiousness that is completely out of my control (although RG would say it's because I am just a recluse at heart). Fortunately I will not have to seek help for my present condition. It will pass quite naturally, for I have realized who is responsible; I point the finger across

the Atlantic at David Berning of Maryland in the USA, as it is his mono-bloc amplifiers that have had me totally hooked and continually capture my musical fascination in a way that so few products ever have.

For days before sitting down to write any review I try to format the task stretching before me in my head.



What am I going to say and how will I say it? But, every now and again, when an absolutely brilliant piece of audio hardware comes along I can't help fantasising about submitting a piece that has the name of the component and just a few words beneath which say something like "Totally amazing amplifier, if you have the system for it and can afford it, then buy it". It's succinct, to the point and encapsulates how I feel, but it doesn't give you the

full story does it? In fact it will be very difficult for me to give you anything other than a very partial glimpse of the technology behind these amplifiers and the steps that David Berning has taken to address the well-known limitations associated with OTL amplifiers. I am no amplifier designer and have little comprehension of the finer points of audio design and even less where valves are concerned. But what I will say is that as humans, we like to

compartmentalize and as audio and music lovers we also have a strong tendency to fit various types of component into neat little slots.

Hence the widely held belief that solid-state

amplifiers are fast, a little lean but have grip and control. Valve amplifiers on the other hand, are warm and more colourful, but slow and a bit soft. If you are even a general subscriber to these stereotypes (no pun intended) then time spent with David Berning's amplifiers will be the audio equivalent of a cattle-prod in the nether regions because, despite being an all-valve design, and OTL to boot, the Quadrature Z amplifiers will shake your preconceptions to the core\*. They'll open your ears to the sheer beauty of music. Experience them and you'll not give a hoot whether they ►

\*Technologically speaking these are like no amplifier you've ever seen (or heard). There is so much unique thinking in the circuit and its execution that it is a) beyond the understanding of most mere mortals, and b) well beyond the scope of this review. We do have an interview with David Berning which we will hopefully publish in due course, but in the meantime, those looking for technological insight should look at the Berning website.

► are valve, solid-state or made from recycled washing machines. With these amplifiers the music is the message and the method of delivery is awesome.

The absence of output transformers and the fact that they eschew battleship build too, makes these amplifiers deceptively light in weight; no "hewn from solid billet" casework here. The fascia is a simple alloy plate with extensive grilles to cover the innards. So if you judge by appearance alone you might well wonder just where all the money went. Internally though, the amplifiers are superbly constructed and point-to-point wired. You just know that this is no mass produced component. As I mentioned before, the solutions arrived at have eliminated the problems usually associated with OTL.

designs, yet have preserved all those things that commend them, such as their astonishing openness and transparency. And valve life is very impressive too, at a projected 20,000 hours.

The Quadrature Z amplifiers utilize embedded Stillpoints resonance control devices in each of their four feet, but you can take this a stage further by bolting a four-legged Stillpoints Component Stand to each amp in place of Mini Inverse Riser feet to give a total of eight resonance control devices for each mono amplifier – a very smart move indeed. The same importer deals with both products and I strongly suggest that you factor in the cost of this installation when taking delivery (\$1590pr.). There are also other requirements that simply

must be met if you are really going to hear what these amplifiers are capable of. These begin at the mains socket on the wall and include everything from the equipment supports to the hardware. Finding a pre-amplifier of sufficient quality is not going to be easy and you can probably count the candidates on the fingers of one hand. Fortunately the Lyra Connoisseur 4.2L SE works absolutely superbly with the Bernings. Your source too needs to be impeccable, as does the cable loom. I used the Naim CD 555 and the

the speakers used, but it is extremely easy to hear the differences between each position. Switch the amps on and the status LED glows red while they self-bias, and after a minute or so switches to green. They don't take long to warm up either. The first time I fired them up I was not expecting too much for the first hour or so and expected to leave them gently cooking on CD repeat while I did other things. But they hooked me from the first few bars of music and that's when I realized that I was dealing with something quite

different and very special.

At the heart of their brilliance lies quite astonishing sensitivity of response, coupled with great speed. When you listen to some amplifiers

you cannot help but notice the sheer blistering pace of the music. Notes have a leading-edge compression blister and instantaneous impact with a "now you see it, now you don't" quality and this gives an impression of control and grip that many people describe as great timing. Their beat-to-beat sense of impact and drama inevitably leads toward these conclusions and on any music in straight 4/4 time they appear tremendously concise and to the point. But I have always believed that true command of time and space runs far, far deeper than being able to tap your feet to an even tempo. There is no better amplifier to illustrate this than the Quadrature Z, which has the distinction of being not only the fastest power amplifier I have ever heard but also the amplifier that makes no show of the fact by over accentuating the leading edge of the note or the percussive element that marks the beat. These amplifiers are one of the very, very few products whose performance is completely ►



Burmester CD 001, while the cabling was Nordost Odin for both interconnects and speaker cables, with Valhalla, Quantum and Thor for the mains.

Everything was isolated on the Stillpoints ESS rack. For speakers I used both the JMLabs Micro Utopia Be and the exceptional Eben C1 (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). I would have enjoyed using them in a wider bandwidth system, but fear not, RG will be doing that in the next issue.

Externally at least, the Berning amps are simplicity itself. On the back panel there are inputs for RCA/phono and balanced XLR connection and a single pair of binding posts. The IEC input sits in a machined well that allows you to fit even the largest mains leads. The front-panel offers only a status indicator and a three-position feedback switch. Which setting you prefer will depend on



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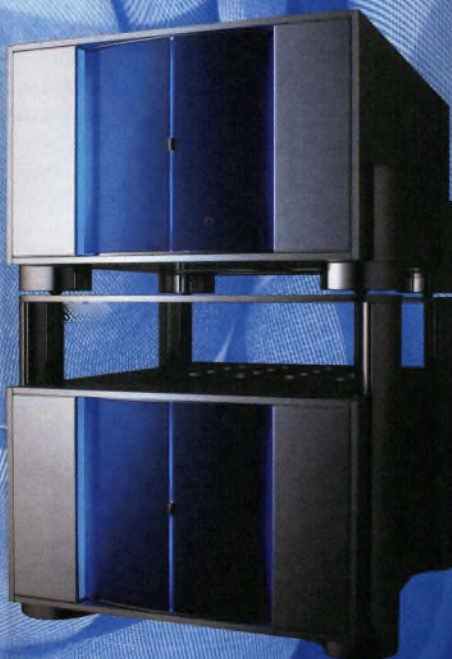
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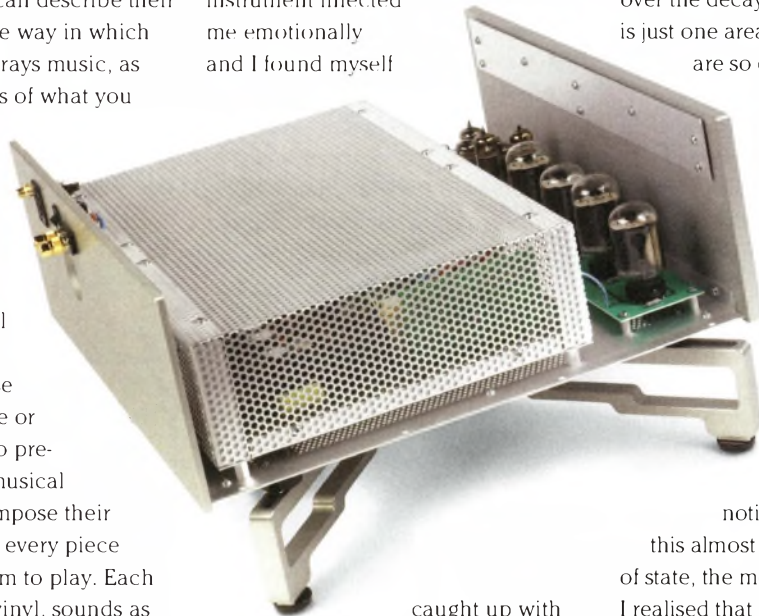
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► music-led, making it very difficult to describe in hi-fi terms. You might ask the standard questions. Is it fast? Is it tight in the bass? Is it well controlled in the treble? Does it image? But the answer is that it can be all these things, but only as and when the music demands. In my experience, this in itself is rare, as most electronics have a distinct flavour and a recurring picture of the music that lies deep within their own design. So when you think about most amplifier manufacturers, you can describe their in-house sound or the way in which their equipment portrays music, as it does this regardless of what you play through it.

The Bernings are utterly articulate when dealing with music and as fast as they need to be for any given musical situation. You will never, ever hear these amplifiers smear time or tempo. They bring no pre-formed view of the musical picture and do not impose their view of the world on every piece of music you ask them to play. Each disc, be it digital or vinyl, sounds as different as the musicians, producer and engineers who made it, the studio or venue where it was recorded.

These amplifiers can demystify complexity as well as illuminate it. Their stunning transparency allows you to see from the front to the back of the soundstage, pausing to examine the bond between space, time and every musical detail along the way. Listening becomes an event to look forward to and I found that, throughout my time with them, there was a certain mystique to the experience. Not based in mystery itself, but a voyage of discovery through music, sound and beyond, sometimes ending up in that magical space where the world falls away

and you become at one with the music: and there are very, very few components that have ever taken me there. Perhaps you are with me here and perhaps not, but I had many listening hours with these amplifiers that bordered on the spiritual. When I listened to the title track from Vicente Amigo's latest collection, *Un Momento En El Sonido* I felt myself move beyond being a distant observer. The intimacy and tonal warmth that he caresses from that instrument infected me emotionally and I found myself



caught up with each note and the explosive power of every one of his trademark rasquedos; it left me breathless and hanging on each tiny rhythmic paraphrase. This is where great hi-fi should take you.

Yet trying to explain just how the DB amplifiers manage this level of connection is elusive. They are the most completely textured and delicately shaded of amplifiers for sure, brimming with impossibly fine resolution and responsive to the tiniest of dynamic inflections. If you want to understand just what makes a great musician and how physical command of the instrument is so visceral then listen to Vicente Amigo through a pair of Quadrature Z amplifiers. If you are

interested in the vast spectrum of tonal colour and character of instrument or voice, then listen some more and the superlatives will flow. The more time you spend with them, the more insight you gain, but one of the things that kept ramming itself home when I was trying to get to the bottom of why they are so special is the moments of transition between notes – and I don't limit this to just the way that leading edges are dealt with. That special moment of birth as a new note grows over the decay of what went before is just one area where the Bernings are so compelling and so real.

Take a really close listen to the way that most hi-fi systems deal with this. There is a kind of on/off mechanical crudeness that is only really highlighted by the alternate beauty of the Berning amplifiers.

As I began to understand this notion of musical flow, this almost legato-esque change of state, the more it intrigued me and I realised that it was linked to their speed. It was so very evident on the Vicente album as Flamenco players of his stature strive for years to perfect the way the notes roll from the fingers through the complexity of two hands addressing the strings.


Let's elaborate further with *The Joni Letters*, a Herbie Hancock album that features some of the world's great musicians and some of the most beautiful playing I have heard for a while. It also has a very passable recording of a piano, if you have a system well sorted enough to realize it. The opening track is a magical construct of Joni Mitchell's song 'Court And Spark'. Norah Jones sings and Hancock, Dave Holland, Wayne Shorter and ►

► Vinnie Coliauto create an ever-shifting web of a backing track that ebbs and flows in and out of the original chord framework. During the instrumental middle section, three of them wander off and do their own thing. There is harmonic connection but it is gradually deconstructed, then re-joined. This passage just passes you by on most systems as a short interlude between verses but the Berning amplifiers never lose focus or a single strand for a moment. The music just draws you further and further in. Hancock's piano is confident and wonderful as he shows us what real touch sensitivity is. There is a stillness at the heart of his playing, as if he is feeling out and shaping each note. Every small change in pressure, every carefully crafted tonal colour is an extension of his sensitivity – and the piano, with its ten billion possibilities, is his instrument of expression. The Bernings take you there, right to his fingertips, to the hammer on the string and to the colourful harmonic signature of the piano as a whole. They are marvellously commanding and confident in the way that they allow the instruments to breathe the fundamentals and harmonics with no trace of system artifice to get in the way and have a clarity against a background of silence that is, in my experience, unique. The track 'Solitude' also highlights the DB amplifiers' formidable abilities with textural contrasts and their wondrous realization of space and transparency as they bring an almost surreal feeling of atmosphere, delicacy and scale to the piece. Piano, drums and string bass, each so different in colour and shape yet combined here in a delicious recipe of ripe expressions. You think you have heard uncompressed, colourful texture coupled with serious power? And do you know how far reaching

the term resolution can really be? I thought I had a pretty good idea of these things, but the Quadrature Z has redefined my notion of what a power amplifier can do. To speak of it in terms of grip, bass weight, bandwidth and detail is meaningless and if you judge equipment at this level by those yardsticks then you will find that you (like me) need to rethink a whole new vocabulary to describe these amplifiers.

Regardless of what level of performance you are used to you will be amazed at the purity of musical energy available. At two hundred watts per channel the DB amplifiers have power in abundance, but this is no Tsunami of sheer volume, as they employ it with discretion and quite breathtaking vitality at whatever level you require. I have never heard a soundstage so animated and alive with dynamic movement. The music appears in the room with a freedom that really needs to be experienced to be appreciated. It certainly makes so much other high-end amplification sound over-damped, electronically reconstructed and it has to be said, contrived. I actually found myself listening at lower levels than usual for much of the time as the Quadrature Z maintains its stellar performance and uncanny stability regardless.

As you have probably guessed by now, these are certainly the best amps I have heard. I feel privileged to have spent time with them and they have redefined my concept of what power amplifiers can bring to a system. They are masters of time and space. Remember though that to hear what the Bernings can do you are going to need a serious system that is thoroughly sorted. I doubt I would have enjoyed such a memorable time without the contributions of the Stillpoints ESS rack, the Quantum QX4 and Nordost's Thor and cabling, to say nothing of the accompanying electronics themselves, because,

in a system of this potential, every detail matters. I have had so many great listening experiences with these amps that it is going to be a terrible wrench to see them go and I may get quite broody for a while. These are extremely special and important products that represent the culmination and apex of a whole year of audio discovery for me, almost like a musical mystery tour. I am not even going to try and justify the high cost of these amplifiers except to say that the only downside I could find is that I can't afford them. If I could, I would buy them tomorrow because a love and involvement with music can be a lifelong spiritual journey. Give yourself up to it. It's amazing where it will take you. 

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	OTL valve mono-bloc amplifiers.
Input Impedance:	35-50kOhms (depending on feedback)
Inputs:	1x single-ended RCA/ phono 1x balanced XLR
Outputs:	1pr binding posts/ch
Output stage:	Triode
Rated Output:	200 watts-8 ohms, 270 watts-4 ohms.
Feedback:	3x user adjustable settings
Dimensions (WxHxD):	480 x 200 x 480mm
Weight:	15kg ea.
Finish:	Silver or black fascia, grey top and sides
Price:	£22500 pr.

#### UK Distributor:

Blade Audio  
Tel. (44)(0)1252 737374  
Net. [www.lyngdorfaudio.co.uk/blade/](http://www.lyngdorfaudio.co.uk/blade/)

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# The Wadia 581se CD/SACD Player

by Roy Gregory

Wadia's 861, and latterly the 861se, CD player has been pretty much a permanent feature around these parts, not least because the only player I've heard that seriously surpassed its performance cost five times as much, while few others even got close. Until recently, that is. The arrival of the Audio Research CD7 marked the first machine to equal both the price and musical merits of the Wadia, whilst the arrival of SACD, and more recently the D3 versions of the Esoteric machines to play them on, has offered up another challenge.

With that in mind, and somewhat frustrated by the lack of developments from the parent company, our 861se made a long (and extremely fruitful) trip to the Great Northern Sound Co, for their seriously extensive modification programme. Ex-Wadia engineers, they do a fantastic job that I'll be reporting on in Issue 62, but in the meantime, what should happen along but the latest offering from Wadia themselves.

Dubbed somewhat archly the 581se, the new machine is visually almost identical to the old, further adding to the confusion. It uses the same monolithic construction, digital volume control and offers the same digital input and switching options\*, indicated by an i suffix and £500 premium over the £9950 cost

of the standard version. But look a little closer and you'll see differences that whilst subtle, hint at important changes. Not least are the slots cut in the side and bottom panels, to improve cooling. Then there's the fact that the display actually sits in the middle of its window, while the remote is half the size and ten times as useful (bear in mind that the original was



the biggest and most useless remote ever, requiring you to stand right in front of the machine to get it to respond, and having so many identical buttons that spotlighting was a prerequisite for operation).

But these changes are much more than skin deep, internally embracing four key areas of system performance.

\*These are even more relevant today, especially given Wadia's outreach strategy based on the 170 iTransport, a neat little dock that extracts a digital signal from your iPod.

I'll sketch over these fairly quickly, due to the limitations of space, but it will give you some idea:

**1.** The power supply section has been totally revised, now featuring six separate and independent supplies for different sections of the circuitry, and upwards of 30 local regulation stages. These include a sophisticated new switch-mode architecture developed to provide individual supplies for the transport, display and digital sections.

As before, there is also extensive internal mechanical isolation, while extensive inductive filtering on the charging caps, as well as careful shielding and positioning ensure that the switching supply has no deleterious effects, either internally or externally. The complete power supply arrangement delivers a noticeably cleaner ground plane.

**2.** A new, patent pending clock circuit has been implemented, that includes its own voltage regulation built right beside it on the board. Wadia's research showed that jitter performance was significantly influenced by fluctuations in oscillator temperature and voltage. By attacking both variables with heavy regulation and thermal compensation, accuracy has been improved to the point where it is measured in single parts per million.

**3.** Not content with simply including DSD decoding, Wadia



► further developed the format, creating a parallel processing algorithm operating at 64bits and 2.8 MHz, that corrects deficiencies in the rise time of the original encoding, delivering improvements in phase accuracy and a 124dB S/N ratio.

4. The new SwiftCurrent 3 output topology moves from an i/c based implementation in the 861, to a discrete Class A circuit in the 581se. That's why it needs all those slots! In order to avoid loading the DAC's output, resulting in non-linearities, the circuit itself is a decoupled current mirror design. The new layout also provides three separate paths per channel, meaning that the positive and negative legs required for the balanced outputs are distinct from the single-ended path, allowing Wadia to ensure that both balanced and single-ended outputs deliver identical levels without resorting to an extra gain stage before the RCA sockets.

Okay, so it reads like a wishlist of audio upgrades to the existing circuit, but that's exactly what it is, helping to explain why it took so long to arrive. The end results are both sonically and operationally impressive.

In use, the 581se certainly runs noticeably hotter than its predecessor, while it also seems more sensitive to support, the Stillpoints component stand delivering an even greater benefit than it did with the 861; that discrete output stage perhaps? I'll mention again the remote control, which is now sensibly sized, nicely laid out and operates flawlessly from distance. In fact, the only (unavoidable) step backwards is the sluggish disc handling imposed by the inclusion of SACD. The transport and optics are derived from a Sanyo model with extensive

modifications, whilst decoding is carried out by a monolithic Sony chip, in combination with Wadia's proprietary Digimaster 2.5 algorithm. As well as the digital volume control, you also get balance and a choice of three decoding profiles, each offering subtly different levels of extension and focus. I generally preferred the meat, substance and sense of flow that came with Algorithm A, but it's worth following Wadia's clear instructions as regards comparing the three, as you will have your own preference and there are also instances in which an alternative setting offers better results. In addition, it's worth noting that (as with the 861) you can adjust the 581's maximum output level to match the overall gain of your system. This is important in any situation, but especially so if you are using the player as a



digital pre-amp, ensuring that you run the volume control near the top of its range and don't risk losing resolution. Finally, and in its own way most welcome of all, the 581 doesn't suffer the protracted warm-up of its predecessor, sounding far less leaden from switch-on and achieving near full performance overnight; a blessing for reviewers and the eco-sensitive alike.

In fact, the easier, livelier tread that's immediately obvious on switch on is a key indicator to the improvements

in the player's performance. The 861's bass extension, definition and texture were always exceptional, but even when warmed-up and on song (about 10-days in) it was a little reticent, reluctant to kick up its heels. Well no more; the 581 is a quicker and far livelier sounding player. It's ability to time notes, define when they start, when they stop and the interval in between, makes music as a whole much more free-flowing, lucid, expressive and really allows a performance to breathe. This has a lot to do with the low-frequencies but that should come as no surprise; so much of music flows from their foundation. But it involves other factors too, not least the blacker background that lets you hear the notes more clearly. Listening to Eliza Gilkyson's 'Beauty Way' the bass has more shape and colour, whether it's the bottom string counterpoint of the acoustic opening or the insistent impact and easy lope of the drum and bass fill that picks up the track and pushes it forward. Just like the 861, the 581 tracks the even steps of the bass guitar melody, giving each note its distinct pitch, but now they have much more of a groove, a sense of purpose rather than simply filling the space.

Listening to live acoustic recordings, everything from the Du Pre Elgar from Moscow or the Gorecki *3rd Symphony* to Jackson Browne and the Wadia makes the volume and boundaries of the venue much more apparent. Audience noise, especially the shouted interjections on JB's *Acoustic Solo Volume 2*, have a much more obvious sense of position and distance, while the repetitive strains of the Gorecki's opening bass phrases have space around and below them, the notes floating properly on their acoustic ►





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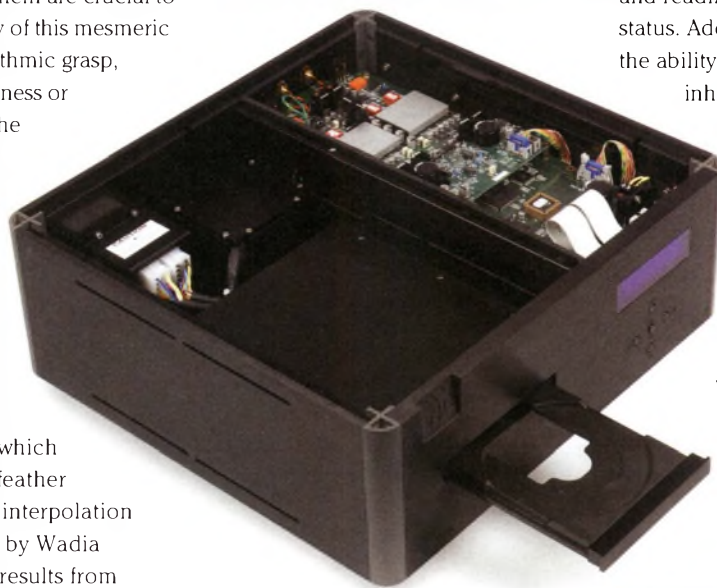
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► cushion, the texture of the bowing and the complexity of the stacked harmonics drawing you in. It may seem obtuse to talk about pace when it comes to a symphony with four slow movements, yet the gradual evolution of each, the subtle textural and stylistic differences between them are crucial to the captivating quality of this mesmeric piece. Any lack of rhythmic grasp, any ham-fisted clumsiness or tightness of grip and the illusion collapses. The 581 pulls you in and keeps you there, testament to the natural accuracy of its low-frequency tonality, flow and weight.

Of course, the Gorecki is an SACD, which brings us to another feather in the 581's cap. The interpolation algorithm developed by Wadia delivers exceptional results from the high-definition discs. SACD isn't a silver bullet. Just like any other medium, there are good and bad examples. But more discs sound better on the Wadia than any other machine I've used. It seems to make the most of their detail and transparency, without ever tipping over into the slightly spotlight, detached quality that can make some of them sound ethereal and unreal. Instead, the tonal and harmonic accuracy of SACD are wed to a sense of purpose, substance and structure that broadens the gap between it and even the best Red Book discs to embarrassing proportions. Direct comparison of discs available on both formats leaves you wondering that there was ever any debate about SACD's benefits. Eleanor McEvoy's 'Love Must Be Tough' has so much more space, separation and detail on the high-definition format that you wonder if it's the same recording. But it is the added subtlety and

shape to the vocal, those familiar tones render so much more naturally and intimately that makes the song more natural and emotive. There's greater dynamic range, but greater emotional range too and it's the latter that's really important. Meanwhile,



an album like The Pixies' *Doolittle* which never made a comfortable crossing from LP to silver disc is transformed when the Wadia delivers the SACD. Gone is the CD's glare and spatial compression, the manic jumble of instruments and screaming vocals. Instead there's the space and carefully layered production, the energy and controlled edge that made the record so impressive way back when. If SACD has passed you by until now, buying a 581 won't just open that door, it'll have it off its hinges. As good as the Wadia is with CD – and it's very, very good – give it a decent disc and it's SACD performance is in another league entirely.

But irrespective of format, the this latest Wadia delivers a significant step forward from the already excellent standards of its predecessors. With its effortless dynamics, transparency and smooth high-frequency extension, the expressive ebb and flow it brings

to musical performances allows it to stand alongside the latest record players without feeling second best. The 861 was the first CD player that made me want to play silver discs. The 581 has kept pace with the impressive evolution of high-end analogue replay and readily reclaims its benchmark status. Add in the functional flexibility, the ability to play SACD, the potential inherent in the 170i transport

and the existence of an enhanced and upgraded version in the shape of the 781 and Wadia are back with a bang. The face might be familiar, but the performance – that's been elevated to whole new level. Why do I get the feeling that this is only the first chapter of this particular tale? ►+

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS	
Type:	One-box CD/SACD player
Decoding Software:	Wadia Digimaster 2.5
Sample Rate:	1.4112 MHz
Outputs:	1pr single-ended RCA 1pr balanced XLR
Output Level:	Variable
Maximum Output Level:	Internally adjustable between 0.3 and 4.25V
Output Impedance:	51 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 184 x 420mm
Weight:	5kg
Finishes:	Black or silver
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# A New Dawn...

## The Kuzma 4POINT Tonearm

by Roy Gregory

NIH; the acronym that stands for "Not Invented Here" might better be expressed as "Never Invented Here" when it comes to hi-fi. For every company that rejects out of hand any idea that they didn't come up with, sheltering behind entrenched dogma, there must be at least a dozen that have never come up with anything original. They sit back, wait and see which way the wind's blowing, keeping a weather eye open for any passing band wagon and ready to execute a philosophical U-tum with the alacrity of a London cabbie (and just about as much consideration for others).

But real progress depends on the combination of all available information and thinking, with a few novel twists added for good measure. The resulting steps are often significant, either extending the notion of what is possible or bringing new levels of performance down to much lower prices. And because they so often build on existing thinking you can also often trace their "family trees". So, one might think of the Zeta which spawned the Kuzma Stogi, Mission Mechanic, SME 5 and ultimately the Rega RB300 (et al). Then there's the line that stretches back from the Phantom, through the other Graham arms to the Michell Focus One. But the lineage that concerns us here starts with the Tri-Planar, evolves through the VPI JMW designs and emerges in the form of the Kuzma 4POINT.

It was the Tri-Planar that established the tandem benefits of an out-rigger (or offset) mounting for the main-bearing, coupled to a vernier type VTA tower that allows for record-by-record adjustment.

It also established the practicality of mounting a longer, 10.5" tonearm within the compact dimensions of the decks then currently fashionable. The fact that a refined but otherwise virtually identical design is just as popular now, some 25-years later, speaks volumes. No surprise then, that when Harry Weisfeld at VPI wanted to create his own tonearm, he adopted those ground-breaking ideas himself, adding interchangeable arm-tops sitting on a damped uni-pivot bearing into the mix, allowing users to change cartridges on a record-by-record basis too. For the first time, a cartridge and tonearm could be removed from a deck in a matter of moments, with all critical settings preserved intact. And while he was about it, Harry raised the stakes in the cable game too, offering a purpose built Nordost Valhalla internal wiring option.

Which brings us to Franc Kuzma's latest design, a tonearm that takes cues from his previous models and combines them all with the developmental path established by the Tri-Planar and VPI. And furthering the tradition, he has introduced a third bearing configuration, but one that's unlike anything that's gone before, in this or any other family tree! But before we get to that, let's look at the major structural features of this new arm.

Starting at the front end of the arm, we find the compact and heavily triangulated headshell first seen on the AirLine. However, even this has undergone a series of refinements: the shell itself is mounted on a stub

extension with hexagonal profiles at each end and an allen grub screw through its shaft. Slide the headshell into the end of the arm tube and the hex sections achieve a positive mate, while a small hole in the top of the tube allows the grub screw to be nipped up to lock the assembly firmly in place. Note that the arm cabling exits the tube behind the headshell junction; this is not a removable headshell in the true sense of the word and if you want to swap cartridges you will need to disconnect and

reconnect their pins – but that beats the hell out of setting up from scratch. More importantly, the arrangement allows users to mount cartridges directly to the headshell, which eases the process considerably. There is also a threaded rod that can be screwed into the right hand shoulder of the shell, providing a finger lift or cueing aid.

The arm tube itself employs Kuzma's familiar two-piece tapered ▶



► construction, allowing incredibly precise adjustment of azimuth, although in this case the effective length is actually 11". This mates to a massive and incredibly deep bearing yoke, from the rear of which extend two threaded rods to carry the counterweights. The lower, thicker of these carries the composite balance weight, constructed from a single large "drum", a set of five discs of different weights and interleaving hard plastic locators to help damp the assembly. This mix and match approach ensures that the main mass can sit as close to the pivot as possible. The thinner, top rod carries the long, narrow, locking downforce weight, familiar from the AirLine. The internal cabling exits



from the inner side of the yoke, a short flexible section linking to a delrin cylinder that supports the arm-cable proper. Permanently attached to the arm tube, a small stub on the yoke allows the cable to be safely "parked", the aluminium termination cylinder being clamped in place by a small grub screw. Finally, a small but deep well on the side of the yoke allows fluid damping of the arm tube's vertical motion.

The integration of the arm tube and tonearm cable means that the cueing platform and VTA tower arrive as a separate assembly. This mounts using a simple post and collar arrangement which is compatible in terms of fixing and geometry, with the Linn three-bolt arrangement used by the Ittok, Ekos and others, albeit with a 40mm (not 30mm) central hole. That means that in theory the 4POINT can be mounted

on any deck capable of supporting a Linn tonearm – providing it can also support the Kuzma's not inconsiderable weight. And if no armboard exists, the manufacturer supplies both a mounting template and positioning jig, as well as a comprehensive toolkit and hardware for the arm. In fact, every aspect of this arm, from the superbly clear and comprehensive instructions through the fit and finish to the packaging elevates this product into the very highest echelon.

Once the collar and post have been used to set the arm's basic height, this can be preserved using a separate locking ring. Above the mounting post is positioned the VTA tower. First seen on the Airline and since adopted for the 313 and this design, this elegant arrangement employs a large, graduated knob to alter arm height and thus VTA in a continuous and repeatable manner, on a record by record basis

if so desired. Once set, the VTA is locked by a cam linked to a cueing-style lever behind the tower. It is a precise and beautifully damped set-up that's easy and intuitive to use. My one complaint is that I'd like finer graduations on the knob, making repeatable adjustments easier, but apart from that this remains the best-executed VTA adjustment I've used. The VTA tower carries the outrigger arrangement that supports the cueing device, falling-weight bias and horizontal bearing (and associated damping trough).

Which brings us to that bearing; the separate arm tube and bearing post might suggest a uni-pivot but this is a far more complex design than that. The bearing "post" is in fact an external sleeve that does sit on a vertical point (a la uni-pivot), but a second, horizontal point engages a polished trough on the front face of the post proper, preventing any fore and aft or sideways movement and thus stabilizing the sleeve. A horizontal plate is attached to the bottom of the bearing sleeve and it's this that carries the attachment for the bias thread and also the outrigger that dips into the horizontal damping trough. But on the rear of that plate is a pair of bearing cups, angled slightly back from vertical (take a look at the pictures – in this case they truly are worth a thousand words). Drop the yoke on the arm tube over the bearing sleeve and two forward angled points sit in those cups, allowing free vertical movement (and justifying the 4POINT moniker). The four pivots employed combined with the arm's massive construction should provide a combination of negligible friction and excellent stability, while an outrigger added to the top of the bearing sleeve engages the trough on the side of the yoke to complete the independent horizontal and vertical damping layout. A small stub on the rear face of the outrigger supports the arm cable, the short flexible section allowing the arm unimpeded movement.

Clearly, the separate arm tube construction means that entire tubes can be swapped, although not as easily or quickly as on the VPI arms. If you employ the vertical damping, that will need to be disengaged and then the arm cable will need to be unshipped from the outrigger and "parked" back on the bearing yoke. The arm tube can then be lifted clear, although it's still carrying the arm cable and connected via that to the phono-stage. In part, that reflects that interchangeability was never one of the design goals, although in practice, many of those looking to profit from ►

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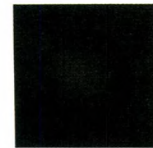
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► the opportunity on offer will have two separate phono inputs (one mono or configurable, one straight RIAA), which would ease things considerably.

Finally (as if that wasn't enough) there's one more little wrinkle up the 4POINT's sleeve. You'll notice a termination box, a foot or so down the arm cable. Look a lot closer and you'll see that each cartridge tag is connected to a pair of wires coming from the arm tube. In fact, the arm is double wired, one set running from the tags in an uninterrupted run to the Silver Bullet plugs (an advantage over the breaks in the Lemo plug and phono sockets set-up used by the VPI; the price paid for that arm's peerless convenience). The other set connects to the phono sockets on the termination box. The cabling used is Crystal Cable throughout, but the provision of the termination box allows users to employ a different arm-cable from that point onwards should they so choose.

The physical description should have underlined just how easy it is to set up the 4POINT, especially as the Linn geometry and mounting has to be the most common pre-cut armboard. Kuzma even provides an under-board fixing collar to provide even clamping to unthreaded armboards. But before you reach for your LP12 or Pink Triangle, make sure the Kuzma's (off-set) mass isn't going to upset the suspension, while the arm-cable is sufficiently stiff to impede free movement too. But assuming your 'table is appropriate, then the stage by stage nature of the set-up, even down to the detachable headshell makes the process extremely straightforward, while the range of repeatable adjustments on offer means that there's no excuse for anything other

than optimum geometrical precision. Like its forebears, the Tri-Planar and the VPI (as well as earlier Kuzma designs) clever engineering ensures that you needn't compromise any aspect of proper set-up on the altar of mechanical integrity

This easily attainable geometrical precision is reflected in the quality and consistency of the sound, each cartridge used sounding more like itself than is usually the case. I ran both the Lyra Skaia and Titan i, along with the vdH Condor, each with excellent results, although the differences between these three transducers, and especially the resolution gap between the two Lyras, has never more obvious. Ultimately, it was the Titan with which I did the majority of my listening, its transparency and dynamic resolution a perfect foil

for the 4POINT's presence, life and energy. The arm was mounted on a fixed height Stabi XL4 tower, although I'm keen to try it with other decks too – especially the VPI TNT and Kuzma's

own Stabi Reference, a combination which I suspect could be the audio equivalent of Floyd Mayweather Jr – just without the mouth.

The first thing that strikes you about this arm is its sheer vivacity – quickly followed by its astonishing transparency, especially at low frequencies. I've never heard a pivoted arm that can image like this – and I've never heard any arm that does bass the way the 4POINT does.

The clarity and precision of



deep notes, their timing, duration, the space between them and the air around them – but most of all the energy that propels them is in a class of its own. The normally grubby thuds of upright bass that underpin so many 60's jazz tracks are taken in hand, given shape and pace, pitch and placement. They're also given independence, never swamped by even the most frenetic big band tutti. So the wonderfully undulating bass line that underpins 'Way Out Basie' (from *Farmers Market Barbeque*) takes on a sinuous vitality, an up-beat swing that breathes new life into the track's underpinnings, leading naturally into the shockingly sudden brass stabs, tying the meandering solos into the fabric, keeping things constantly on the move – an ever present influence, shaping and guiding the music. Which is, of course, exactly how it should be – and so often isn't. So many arms soften the bass notes and lose track of them altogether once the going gets tough that it's something of a surprise to hear them rendered with the same audible clarity and easy independence that you experience live.

That low frequency transparency contributes directly to the palpable acoustics conjured by the 4POINT. That and the arm's phenomenal stability; images simply don't



▶ wander or shimmer the way they do with other arms – effects that we are so used to that you only notice them once they're banished – a trick achieved by the Grand Prix Audio Monaco, another primo candidate to partner the Kuzma. This arm produces sound as solid as it looks, which given that it's probably the most substantial yet handsome arm I've ever used, means pretty darned solid.



That stability gives images and instruments a real presence that underpins the explosive dynamic potential of the 4POINT. Brass rips the air and drum rolls cascade in a tumble of energy. But this energy is harnessed and concentrated, tied to the instruments producing it and the music it serves; nothing escapes, not one shred is overlooked or wasted. The result, when required, is a drive and momentum that is almost physically propulsive, a vitality that is exciting and bursting with a natural sense of life.

But this isn't just about big and bold, brash and ballsy. The Kuzma is all those things when it needs to be, but it is poised, delicate and controlled too. The really impressive thing is the way it exerts those qualities at the *fff* end of the scale as easily as it does at the other extreme – and the ease with which it allows them to coexist or transits between the two. The Ricci *Carmen Fantasie* on Decca is the perfect test in this regard, Bizet's orchestral bombastics contrasting with the solo violin, the studied technique and precise measures

of the *Habanera* a world away from the pell-mell flurries of the faster passages. The dramatic sweep and stark shadings delivered by the 4POINT produce a vivid, torrid performance from the opening passages, one that leaves the listener almost breathless with the excitement

and virtuosity it reveals. Yet the transition to the slow central passage is effortlessly natural, the delicate beauty and muted shadings cherished with a poise and dignity that seems almost beyond the scope of the same arm that generated those musical pyrotechnics that opened the piece. But just follow Ricci as he builds into the finale (and you will, because you won't want to take the music off) and marvel at the way he bridges through the pizzicato sections to the lightening runs and

phrases with which the piece concludes. This is a record I know intimately, one that I've played on literally dozens of decks and probably hundreds of systems. But it left me open-mouthed and grinning inanely at Ricci's astonishing range, his ability to conjure and encompass such emotional contrasts and carry you from one to another so naturally that you don't even notice his part in doing it. Of course, what I should have been impressed by was the fact that for the first time the 4POINT had allowed the music to transcend mere technique, the unfettered dynamics, lucid phrasing, wide yet coherent bandwidth and absence of grain or edge finally allowing

the performance to escape the grooves.

In some ways this arm mirrors its lineage, combining the precise vitality and quickness of the Tri-Planar with the easy flow and rich harmonics of the VPI JMW, all built on the stability and presence of the Stogi Reference. But the 4POINT is more, so much more than the sum of those parts. The Airline challenges it in terms of delineating depth and positional precision, and the pivoted arm can't match the sheer fluidity, the grace through a phrase of the parallel tracker. But many a listener really won't care, simply blown away by the life, energy, explosive dynamics, transparency and easy control of the 4POINT; And that's before they experience its absolute delicacy, micro dynamics and preservation of the smallest musical nuance. And if you are still not convinced, just try a vocal. The big Kuzma passes that most acid of tests with the same grace and charm it tackles everything else. Just don't get spooked when you realize that Ella really IS in the room!



#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Pivoted tonearm
Bearing:	Kuzma 4POINT
Damping:	Independent horizontal and vertical
Mounting Geometry:	Linn compatible
Effective Length:	280mm
Effective Mass:	13g
Pivot To Spindle:	264mm
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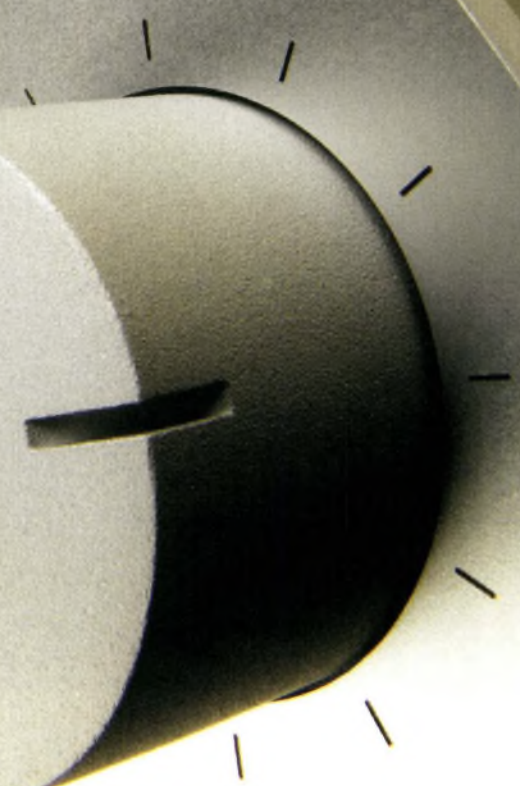
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# Vacuum State SVP-2 Pre-amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Take a quick look at the SVP-2 pre-amp and you'll probably conclude that it's not much to look at, both a physical and an aesthetic judgment. Factor in the cost of ownership and your next conclusion will be that it's over-priced too. Indeed, this simple, lightweight box seems almost old fashioned in these days of CNC'd casework on even the most affordable products, touch screen controls and multi-functional versatility.

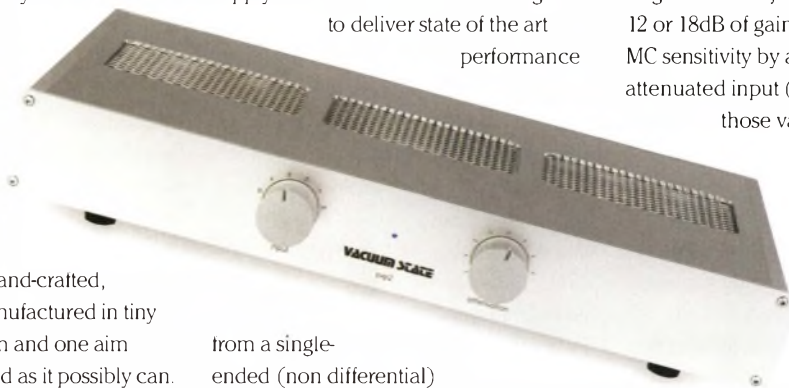
But that's because it is.

The Vacuum State designs represent a category, a type of product that has all but disappeared from hi-fi shops these days. This is a carefully honed and hand-crafted, purpose built unit, manufactured in tiny quantities with one aim and one aim alone; to sound as good as it possibly can. Of course, there are many that make such claims, and "hand-crafted" is an imprecise term. But in the case of Vacuum State we don't just have to take the manufacturer's word for it. In fact, we have words on words, extensive documentary evidence of the thinking and philosophy behind the SVP-2, published in the shape of designer Allen Wright's Tube Pre-amp Cookbook, a mix of theory, schematics and kits for advanced DIY projects. And just like his cables (reviewed on page XX) he encourages an enquiring and experimental mindset and the free exchange of information. The SVP-2 is a commercial product, but it wears its purist credentials well and truly on its sleeve.

So what has all this effort wrought?

Here we have a beautifully executed, minimalist circuit constructed from components selected, item by item, with an almost obsessive zeal. Nor is this just a regurgitation of established practice, gilded with a few little tweaks – just witness the company's differential 300B mono-blocs if you want to see a novel circuit! Likewise the heavily shunt regulated, current sourced power supply used here. The SVP-2 is designed

to deliver state of the art performance



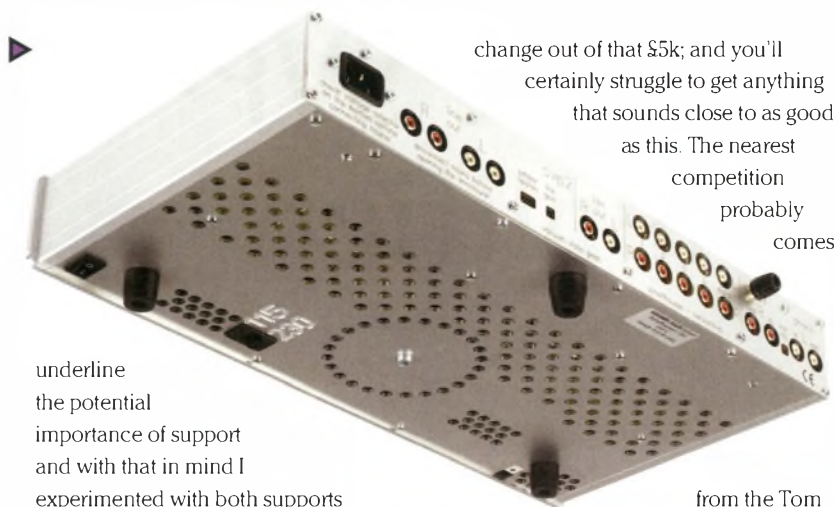
from a single-ended (non differential) topology, employing a hybrid J-fet/6922 valve MC phono-stage along with an all-tube line section. The phono-sockets might look low-rent but have been selected specifically for their superior sonic performance, while you also have a choice of a variable resistor or stepped attenuator volume control. Components within the circuit are matched to exacting standards, particularly in the RIAA equalization, where any imbalance will be magnified dramatically.

But the design also recognizes that optimum performance depends on more than just the circuit and the components in it. System interfacing is critical to achieving the best possible sound, so the SVP-2 offers a range of

adjustment that's unusual except in the most sophisticated valve pre-amps these days. The phono-stage can be configured for MC (65dB of gain) or MM (50dB of gain) sensitivity, with parallel loading plugs to optimize input impedance. The standard value for both settings is 47kOhms, with 1 kOhm and 100 Ohm loading plugs supplied. Specific values are also available if necessary. The line stage can be adjusted to provide either 12 or 18dB of gain (raising both MM and MC sensitivity by a further 6dB), while an attenuated input (labeled D) reduces all

those values by 12dB. All these settings are available on the rear panel, and in combination, they allow you to configure the gain profile of the unit to ideally match your system.

Whilst Vacuum State suggest that they've done everything they can to extract performance from the circuit, short of spending vastly more money, they also point out that external factors will affect performance, and are keen for users to try decent cables (including their own), power cords and equipment supports. Naturally, I wholeheartedly agree, but especially when it comes to isolation. The SVP-2's casework is far from the most substantial I've come across. When cold, switching the input or volume control made the top-plate of the review sample ring, a reaction that's reduced but not eliminated as the unit warms up. Whilst I'm assured that this isn't typical, it does ►



underline the potential importance of support and with that in mind I experimented with both supports and damping the lid, ending up with a combination of a finite-element Resonator on the front edge of the top-plate and either Stillpoints or a Vertex kinibalu underneath. Of the supports, the most cost effective solution proved to be a trio of Stillpoints cones and risers, whose separation, dynamic definition and clarity of purpose really raised the SVP-2's game.

Without the attention paid to support first impressions of the Vacuum State pre-amp can come across as a shade blurred and indistinct. But listen a little closer and the degree of instrumental texture and the tactile quality to the playing suggests otherwise. Sure enough, once you go to work on the casework, the dividends in transparency, focus and clarity are pretty dramatic. Always intimate and immediate, its rich and vivid mid-band underpinned by weighty, emphatic low frequencies, the Stillpoints rip away a haze between players, adding depth to the soundstage and focus to images, a lively crispness to dynamics that puts a spring in the music's step, a sense of forward momentum when required, restraint when needed.

Now, around £5k might seem like a lot for a unit that demands this level of remedial care, but let's not forget that this is a full facilities pre-amp aimed squarely at audiophile end-users with a heavy penchant for vinyl replay. Go looking for a serious phono-stage and line-stage combination and you won't get much

change out of that £5k; and you'll certainly struggle to get anything that sounds close to as good as this. The nearest competition probably comes

from the Tom Evans Groove and Vibe combination, a similarly hair-shirt pairing but one that sounds very different indeed.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about the SVP-2 is just how quiet – actually, make that near silent – the phono-stage is. With the volume wicked right up all that emerges from the speakers is a very low hum, audible only with your ear pressed against the baffle, and no hiss at all. Gain is perfectly sufficient to accommodate cartridges as diverse as the Lyra Skala and vdH Condor that I used,

although I might want to increase the internal gain if venturing below the realms of 0.3mV – something that can be accomplished by the factory or a trained technician. Even loading the cartridges down to 100 Ohms failed to rob the sound

of life and energy, leaving the system with ample headroom and dynamic range, even with the 18 Watt Vacuum State mono-blocs driving the Martin Logan CLXs. In fact, this combination proved so

successful that it dominated the listening, although the SVP-2 proved equally at home with the solid-state Belles MB-200s.

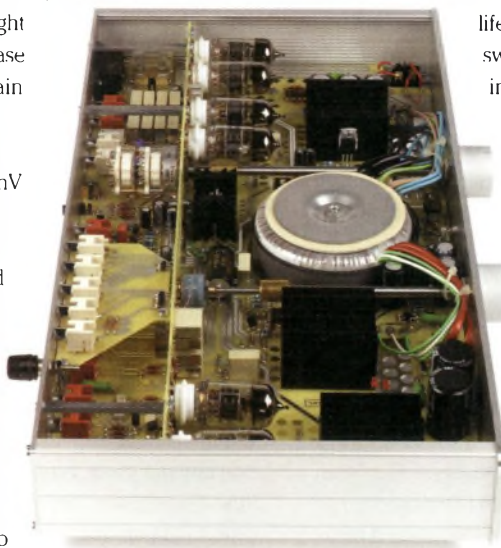
How does it sound? This pre-amp will breathe a gust of fresh air into just about every system it comes across. Majoring on immediacy and presence, it is musically direct and bubbling with energy. Whereas most pre-amps seem to variously constrict or sit on the sound, the Vacuum State propels it into your listening room on a wave of sheer enthusiasm. And it's not a case of "never mind the quality" either... The SVP-2 is plenty careful with its musical Ps and Qs – it just doesn't let them get in the way. So, if you play the Cisco re-issue of the Heifetz *Kreutzer* recording, you'll hear the subtle slips in technique, the atonality as he accidentally brushes a second string on the sustained note at the end of his first, fast phrase. But, it's the pace of the bowing, the rich harmonics, the power of the instrument that will capture your attention, along with the poised stability and sonority of the carefully weighted piano part. The musical balance is superb in this performance; the SVP-2

conjures it vividly to life, capturing the swagger of Heifetz in his pomp.

Swap to my favourite Martzy performance on *Coup D'Archet* and the music speaks with a clearer voice as the egos take a back seat. But the really impressive thing is how this pre-amp highlights the

contrast betwixt and between without belittling either.

At the opposite end of the intellectual scale, the B52s' 'Dance This Mess Around' is a riotously over the top slab of high-



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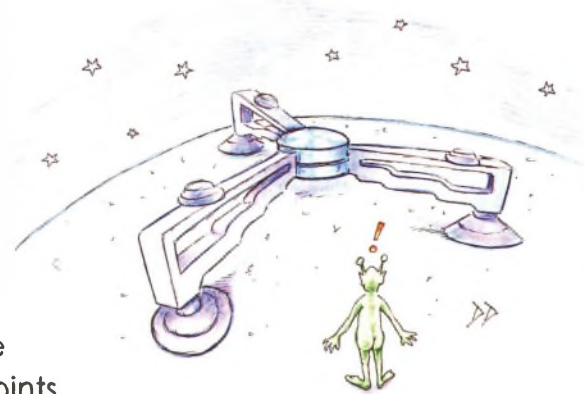
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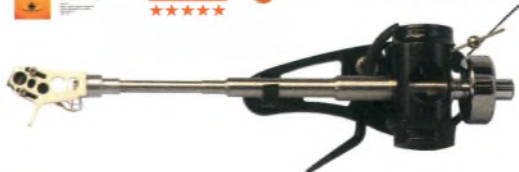
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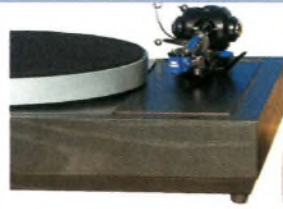
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▶ energy rock. Yet the SVP-2 never loses its grip on the beautifully tactile bottom end, never diminishes the instrumental and vocal contrasts that make this track so engaging – and so difficult to reproduce. Instead it gives it to you full-bore, with dramatically impressive results. When Kate Pierson states that, "I'm just askin'..." there's no doubting the disdain.

Looking for shortcomings you'll need to compare the SVP-2 to the very best (and most expensive) units out there. Do that and you'll find it lacks a degree of rhythmic dexterity; changes of pace it handles beautifully, but the shorter duration hesitations and stutters that punctuate musical phrases and demarcate a player's sentences are less distinct, glossed over by the feeling of fluid momentum. So, the staccato, off-beat piano chords that set up the easy smooch of the Count's 'Beaver Junction' lack that sense of hesitant anticipation – although that dirty, dirty groove makes it perfectly clear that we're not talking amphibians here.

Likewise, absolute levels of resolution and transparency are lacking, especially when compared to the more etched presentation of something like The Groove, which picks the tiniest details out of the mix that much more readily. It also means that images rest more on the performers, less than the overarching acoustic space. But this is where taste comes in. You want detail uber alles or ultimate dimensionality, look elsewhere; you want that elusive sense of flow and musical expression then look no further. Ohh... You want them both? Be prepared to spend Connoisseur type money – or rather more than three times the price of the SVP-2 for the line-stage alone.

Of course, there are plenty of (far more impressive looking) valve pre-amps out there, boasting lusciously warm tonal colours and thunderous dynamics. But the SVP-2 is in a class apart from the majority of them. Essentially neutral, it achieves a

## Singing a different tune...

Whilst genuinely new valve topologies might be thin on the ground, the different building blocks can be stacked in many different ways, as demonstrated by the SVP-2. Developed after extensive listening and technical research into most of the 'known' configurations, the result is an interesting combination of topologies. The output stage consists of an 'enhanced' cathode follower, where two further triodes are used to provide a current source and cascode operation, improving performance with high capacitance or longer cables. I suspect it also ameliorates the slightly vague, hazy presentation that often accompanies standard cathode follower outputs.

The power supply has undergone a similar degree of refinement; having analysed the shortcomings of series type regulation the designer has opted for a 'shunt' based circuit augmented by a constant current source. This provides a fast, clean supply with more effective absorption of stored energy that could otherwise be reflected back into the amplifier via the signal cable.

But by far the most radical product in the Vacuum State range has to be the dpa300B mono-bloc, a fully differential 300B based circuit delivering 18 of the sturdiest Watts this side of the Lamm ML2.1. These amps belie their modest power rating with an ability to drive and control speakers with an astonishing combination of authority and subtlety that places them firmly in the front rank – where they clearly need to be given their elevated price. "But what sort of speaker can you drive with 18 Watts?" I hear you scoff. You might be surprised – you might be very surprised...



remarkable level of balance and musical coherence. Its sense of flow and expressive range rests on its timbral and textural continuity, its overall control of the musical bandwidth as a whole. That's what allows it to go slow as well as fast, to give performers a physical presence without resorting to cranking up the second order harmonics – and slugging the dynamics and immediacy as a result. This coherence and innate sense of stability also allow the Vacuum State to make the most of differences between formats; SACD's superiority over red-book discs is manifest, but vinyl still rules the roost.

Above all, playing music through the SVP-2 allows it to breathe, allows it to move. That rumbling bass intro on the Gorecki 3rd is beautifully floated and never lags, cranking up the musical tension with each stacked phrase. The power and energy of a good rock

recording will have more than just your feet tapping and orchestral tuttis will have you conducting with gusto. As the inimitable Ms. Pierson might say, "Hippy, hippy forward, hippy, hippy, hippy shake!"



### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Full facilities valve pre-amp
Valve Complement:	6x 6DJ8/6922
Inputs:	1x phono (MM/MC) 4x line 1x attenuated
Outputs:	2 pr main out 1 pr tape
Output Impedance:	100 kOhms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	442 x 74 x 270mm
Weight:	4.3kg
Prices -	
Potentiometer volume	£4995
Stepped attenuator	£5450

**Manufacturer:**  
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# The Belles Labs MB-200 Mono-blocs

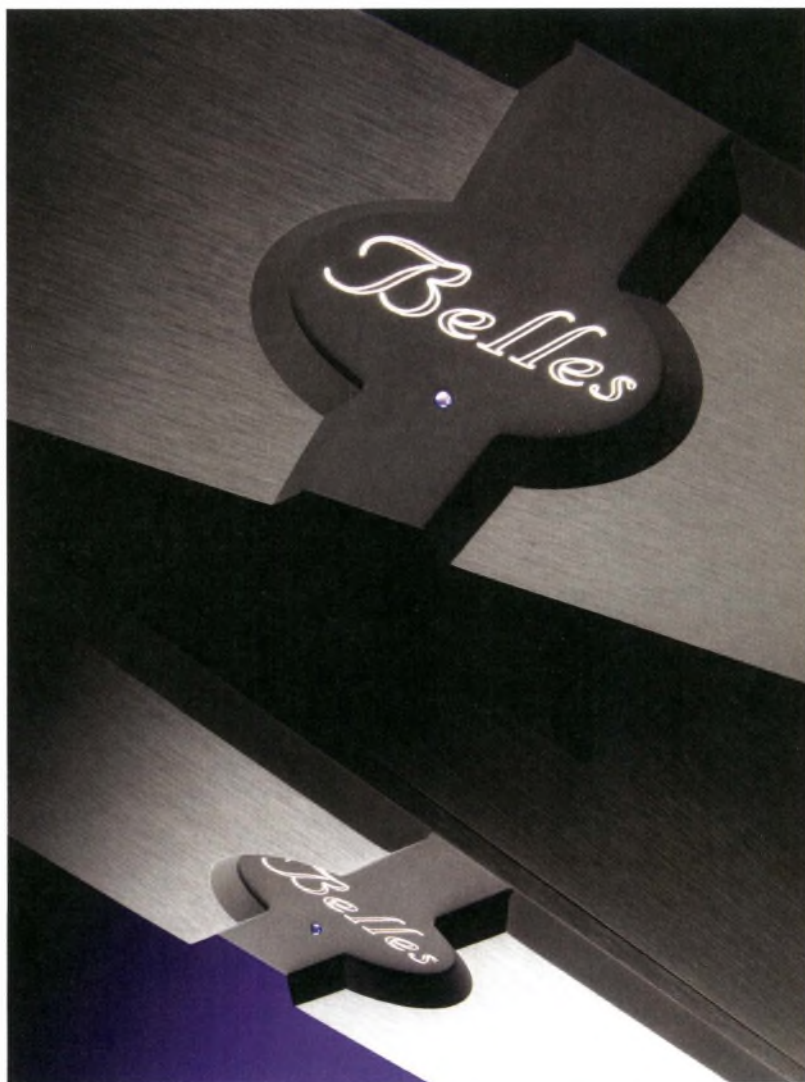
by Roy Gregory

Reviewing power amps can present a particular problem. After all, accumulating material to fill the pages of our august journal isn't exactly helped by a feature count that could be listed on the back of a Bryant & May box. Of course, you can usually rely on the presence of some enormous, ex-Soviet transmitting valve, smuggled off of Russian spy trawlers, or a transformer hand wound by a castaway, who developed his design whilst wiling away the long years on some misbegotten island, and who is now so inured to isolation that he won't return to society. What any journalist hopes for, searches for, a few even pray for – is a story; something, anything on which to hang his piece.

The Belles MB-200s are resolutely, almost bloody-mindedly devoid of artifice or embellishment, feature or frippery. They are neat, basic, compact and conventional. They are nicely put together, but no more than that. They are solidly built but a world away from the sort of immovable behemoths that cross my threshold with lumbar-threatening regularity. They offer the bare minimum of connections – and those are far from flash. They aren't ugly; they aren't even plain. In fact, to all appearances they're just plain ordinary. The only characteristic they have that sets them apart is the preponderance of plain common sense that's informed every aspect of their construction – and that's hardly a story.

"So why," you might well demand, "are you bothering to review them?" And I'll thank you for asking – for that, now, that's a story, because the thing with these amps is nothing more, nothing less than their musical performance. There's no other reason to buy them, but believe me, it is reason enough.

Actually, I might have overstated their sheer ordinariness just a little: Class AB; differential circuit topology, eight pairs of Mosfets per channel delivering 200 watts into 8 Ohms and 400 into 4. It's all pretty text-book stuff, even if it has been



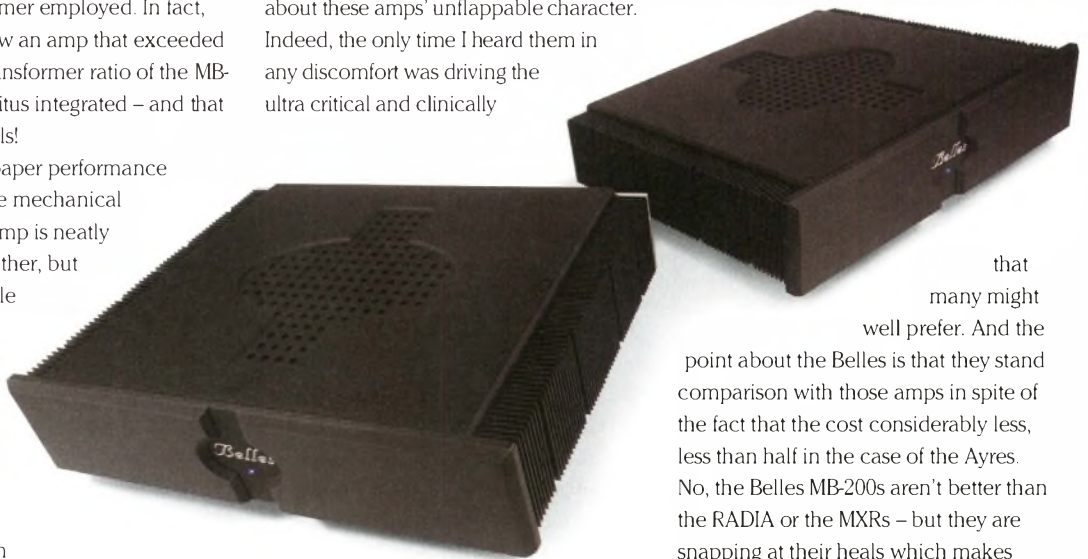
▶ executed with an exacting eye for detail and a mind that weighs equally the paper performance of an amplifier and the more, shall we say “subjective?” aspects of the job. Indeed, textbook is as good a term as any to describe the performance specs of the MB-200. Conservatively rated (and I really do mean that), it will deliver a peak current of 64Amps and has a damping factor greater than 2000. It's also flat from 0.2Hz to 125kHz. All from a package about the size of an Audiolab and which weighs around 14kg – most of which is down to the ridiculously large toroidal transformer employed. In fact, the last time I saw an amp that exceeded the chassis to transformer ratio of the MB-200, it was the Vitus integrated – and that had two channels!

But that tidy paper performance is reflected in the mechanical detail too. The amp is neatly enough put together, but there's also ample evidence of an enquiring approach to wider issues. So the aluminium chassis is constructed from

plates of three different thicknesses to help reduce dominant resonance, while the surprisingly solid result is perched on four Stillpoints feet, to deal with both the vibrational energy generated by that huge transformer (not to mention the associated power supply components and all those output devices) and also to help isolate the circuitry from external interference. The socketry is simplicity itself, with only one single-ended RCA input (despite the differential circuit) and one pair of speaker binding posts – although at least those come from Cardas. Letting the overpowering sense of Puritanism drop for just a moment, you can have the amps in a choice of black or silver finish, but that's it as far as luxuries are concerned.

Yet, as soon as you fire the MB-200s up

you realise that there's something special going on. There's an instantaneous and lucid clarity that revels in instrumental detail without obstructing the musical flow: They're clean and quick and clear, bold without being brash and crisp without being overstated. They're also rather more powerful than the 200 Watt tag suggests, and I used them with a host of different speakers, ranging from the Goldmund Logos 1 and Spendor SA1 to the Eben Ayra C1, the Usher 6371 and Gershman Sonogram. The sheer variety on show there should tell you something about these amps' unflappable character. Indeed, the only time I heard them in any discomfort was driving the ultra critical and clinically



revealing MartinLogan CLX full-range electrostatics, a combination that sounded uncharacteristically threadbare and strained through the upper registers. Neither product exhibits such tendencies in other company, making me wonder whether the Belles are more at home with more conventional loads than that presented by the big 'stats. Certainly, none of the dynamic speakers presented the amp with any problems and those requiring a tight grip on an extended bottom (yes Gershman, you know who you are) or a little extra welly to wake them up occasionally (yes, yes Logos, that would be you) received exactly what was required – and more besides. Indeed, while they've been in residence the Belles have become something akin to the “go-to

guys” in my current amp stable, simply because they seem to fit effortlessly into so many system situations.

How do they stand up against the competition? Well, they might lack the sublime tonal delicacy and dynamic dexterity of the Hovland RADIA - but they deliver considerably more power and generally handle awkward loads with consummate ease. Likewise, they lack the absolute stability, substance and top to bottom continuity and presence of the Ayre MXRs – but they deliver a quicker and more obviously transparent sound

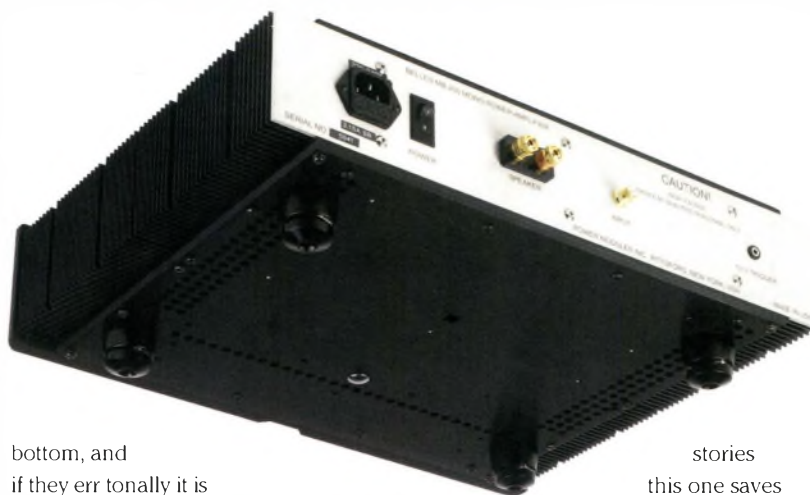
that many might well prefer. And the point about the Belles is that they stand comparison with those amps in spite of the fact that the cost considerably less, less than half in the case of the Ayres. No, the Belles MB-200s aren't better than the RADIA or the MXRs – but they are snapping at their heels which makes them an absolute bargain in monetary terms. Besides which, they also bring their own special quality to proceedings.

All those adjectives I've used up to know might just sum up a classically controlled yet ultimately, musically sterile solid-state powerhouse. But the Belles have that necessary ability of any really good amp – invisibility. They are so devoid of grain and dynamic constraint that music flows from the soundstage completely unimpeded. It's a skill they share with the Hovland and Ayres, but in combination with their astonishing transparency and sheer clarity, it producing some quite breathtaking musical moments, a host of captivating instrumental detail. Listening to the (normally murky) opening passage of the Stewboss classic 'Wanted A Girl', ▶

▶ the wash of sound behind the picked guitar and bass lines – which starts out as thunder and rain – is effortlessly revealed as a shimmering array of differing and carefully melded percussion. The count-in has an intimacy and quietly convincing breathiness that conjures singer Greg Saffarty with an almost physical presence, preparing a path for his eventual vocal entry, adding an all-important humanity to this desolate song.

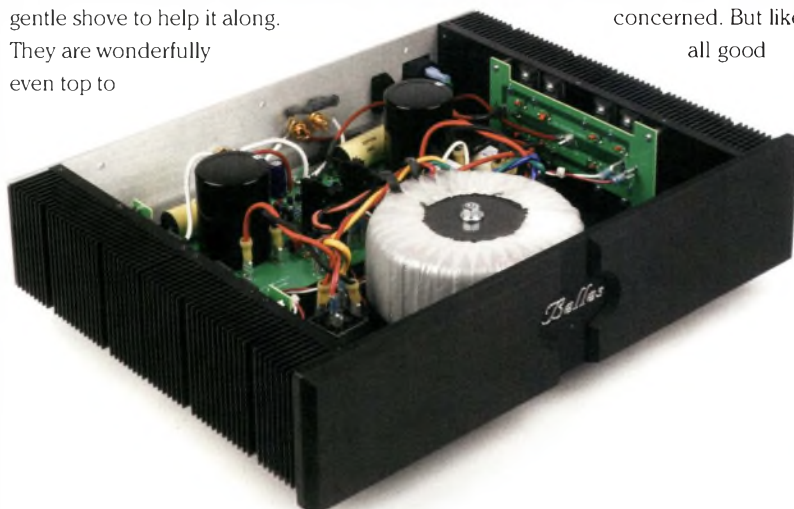
But it's sparser tracks like the Duke Ellington/Ray Brown 'Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me' (from *This One's For Blanton*) that reveal the MB-200s' inner workings. There is a slight vestige of Mosfet softness to leading edges, which robs the plucked bass notes of that last ounce of immediacy and attack. But at the same time there is an easy flow to the difficult lines, absolute pitch security and precision spacing of the notes, that makes what can be a difficult and somewhat staccato track on the wrong system sound fluid and engaging, even catchy – and I never thought I'd say that about what amounts to extended bass solo. The gently tailored leading edges have their upsides too, and the occasionally strident interjections from the Duke take on a less aggressive tone without losing any of their rhythmic urgency.

In fact, as well as getting out of the way of the music just like any good amp should, the MB-200s almost seem to give it a quick brush and tidy up and a gentle shove to help it along. They are wonderfully even top to



bottom, and if they err tonally it is ever so slightly to the lean, clean side of things, making sure that the signal is never burdened with unwarranted dollops of extra weight, slowing or slurring its progress. It's a quality that also makes the Belles mono-blocs remarkably transparent to source components and quality, another reason that they've become something of a fixture around here. I used them with both the Connoisseur and their own matching pre-amp with excellent results, and sources as varied as the Grand Prix Audio Monaco and Kuzma turntables, and Goldmund, Wadia and Zanden CD players. Their surefooted and confident delivery never once let me down. The particular qualities of the Monaco have rarely been as apparent, the differences between the Wadia and Zanden players rendered clear and distinct.

The MB-200s mark a seriously impressive debut for Belles, at least as far as *Hi-Fi Plus* is concerned. But like all good



stories this one saves the best bit for last. At around £5K, there should be plenty of takers for the MB-200, but if that's a little rich for your blood then there's a line-integrated on the way, whilst moving up in price you have a choice of 500 or 80 Watt Class A mono-blocs – none of which I've heard. Yet! But what I have heard is the LA-01 line-stage and if you think the MB-200s are a bargain, just wait until you hear this sucka... ➤

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state mono-bloc
Output Devices:	Mosfets
Inputs:	1pr RCA/phono
Input Impedance:	1.9v
Input Sensitivity:	100 kOhms
Outputs:	1pr Cardas binding posts
Output Power:	200 Watts/8 Ohms 400 Watts/4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	432 x 119 x 330mm
Weight:	15.9kg
Finishes:	Black and silver
Price:	£5500 pr.

#### UK Distributor:

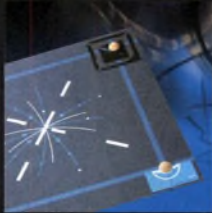
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### WORKSHOP NOTES 3: REVIEWS REVIEWED

Reviews are important in the great game of audio and rightly so as a good reviewer will bring independence, insight and experience to his trade. But many people find that far too many reviews have only a passing acquaintance with reality. Why so?

A list of what goes wrong includes reviewers with cloth ears (they do exist, it seems), or just having a bad hear day (sorry..), non standard kit sent for review, editors changing copy (very common), poor system matching etc... And that's before we factor in prejudice & dirty tricks (audio is a business). Common sense tells us that good reviews in several magazines earmark a product for *further investigation*. I put it to the jury that buying kit unheard, based on a single frothy review is daft. I mean, who is going to be living with it? You or the reviewer? You are the only reviewer that really matters. Read first, then listen, then decide.

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# Emillé KI-40L Integrated Amplifier

by Roy Gregory

Seemingly intent on demonstrating that Korea can do high-end as well as providing a superior standard of off-shore, low-cost manufacturing, Emillé landed on these shores in the not insubstantial shape of their statement product, the KI-120 integrated amp. And quite a statement it is too. Not just dual mono, this is a dual chassis design; arguably the worlds first mono-bloc integrated – if that’s not an oxymoron – with each half taking up the kind of real estate and material resources that most companies would devote to a stereo design. If Emillé wanted to create a splash, they certainly succeeded.

Of course, esoteric hi-fi from Korea is actually no stranger to these shores; just think Kochel, or more recently, Usher. There have also been various ranges of solid-state electronics, but none that have really captured the public’s imagination. Well, that might just change, now that Emillé’s more affordable and (somewhat) more manageable KI-40L has arrived. Much as I love the extravagant presentation and bold musical authority of the KI-120s, they’re hardly real world. But take most of the pluses and build them into a stereo chassis with around a third of the power for around a third of the price and now you’re talking...

So, picture the 120’s corner columns and aluminium plate construction, but broader in the beam with a central “saddle” separating the left and right valve decks. In fact, it’s a look that works better in the wider footprint, making the KI-40L a strikingly attractive fusion of the traditional and modern. The tubes themselves are protected below a Perspex top-plate (although prying fingers might gain access through the large side apertures). There are individual stepped attenuators for the left and right channels, positioned on the front-plate before their respective tubes, while the central front-panel contains the source selector and biasing arrangement – ►



▶ a valve selector, trim screws and an illuminated meter which doubles up as a power indicator and style icon.

At the other end you'll find widely separated left and right channel connections (further underlining the dual mono construction of this amp) for five line inputs and 4 and 8 Ohm speaker outputs. Apart from an earth post and the IEC input, that's all you get, so no pre-out, record output or unity gain input. No remote control either – a fact I find rather welcome, although others will disagree. Also absent is any description of the circuit topology, although the 40 Watt output from a pair of KT77s per channel suggests a push-pull output stage, while a pair of 12AU7s and one 12AT7 a side likewise suggests an additional gain stage and a proper buffer, making this a pukka integrated with a genuine internal line-stage, rather than just a power amp with the gain wicked up. The chassis is constructed to the same exemplary standards as the one on the KI-120, the massive panels, tubes and Perspex work contributing to the unit's substantial 38kg mass. It's an awkward cuss too, so much of the weight being located in the rear transformer housing. Fortunately, the quality extends inside, with heavy duty, gold-plated circuit boards littered with precision resistors and Mundorf coupling capacitors. Each corner column is tipped with an adjustable cone foot for leveling, whilst a rather attractive aluminium leg and sheet Perspex isolation stand was also supplied. I kind of assumed that this was of largely cosmetic rather than sonic value; it adds considerably to the amp's visual appeal and is well worth considering for that purpose alone. But in practice it also proved to add

considerably to the sonic potential of the amp. Placed between the KI-40L and the shelf of a finite-element HD-03 rack, it added focus, dynamic range, transparency, depth and a more even sense of energy to proceedings. Playing Dolly Varden's 'Some Sequined Angel', the stand made for a much more natural sense of perspective and space, more emotive vocals, better phrasing and separation of harmonies and longer, more complex tails to notes. Not trivial then!

I used the KI-40L to drive a variety of speakers, but mainly the excellent



little Spendor SA1, the Living Voice OBX-R2 and the Martin Logan CLX full-range electrostatic. As if to further underline the danger of jumping to conclusions, this latter and least likely pairing also proved to be spectacularly successful, playing to the amp's greatest strength, its sense of space and intimate dimensionality. That Dolly Varden track again, and Diane Christiansen's voice is beautifully fragile and intimate, but also dimensional, a physical presence solidly locked in space. There's no question over its height, or the spatial separation with Steve Dawson's

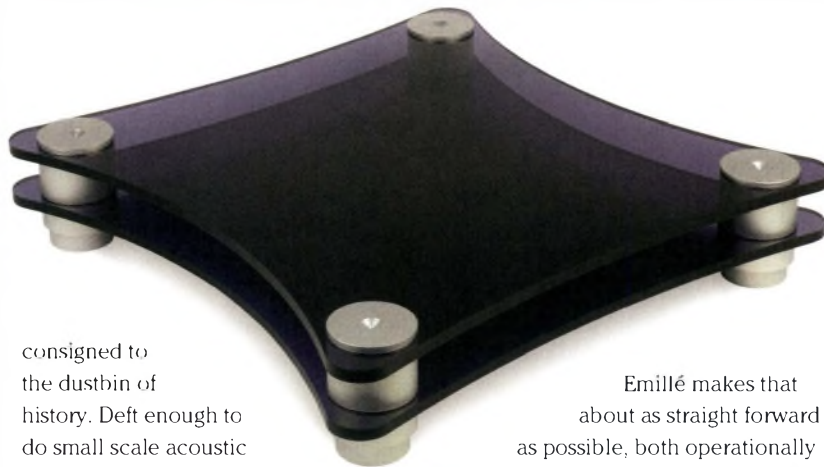
harmonies. This sense of natural scale and perspective is brought home by great live recordings like Nanci Griffiths' *One Fair Summer Evening*, with the easy, unforced rhythm of the spoken interludes breathing life into the performance. This ability to be stable yet unhurried, engaging yet relaxed is a quality that graces the better units in Audio Research's latest range; it's unusual enough at that elevated price point – it's not something I'm used to finding considerably further down the pay scale. Of course, it's easy to make an amp seem relaxed if it's also lazy, but the Emillie never even flirts with

that line. Not only does it kick up its heels with gusto when required ('Spin On A Red Brick Floor') but it holds your attention even through the slowest of tempi; notes are placed, they never lag. Drop a bit of Basie in the CD drawer and the Count's insistent left-hand prods, the underlying urgency of 'Way Out Basie' propel the track along. The wonderfully undulating bass line is pitch perfect, the brass tuttis big, bold and colourful. Even the strummed rhythm guitar chords are there, even if they do get a little lost in the mayhem...

And that signals the KI-40L's weakest suit. If you want pinpoint precision and the sort of etched detail and vertiginous leading edges that seem de rigueur in certain high-end circles, the rounded images, big on physical volume – not so big on the space around them, that inhabit the Emillie's soundstage might seem a little blousy and lacking precision. That's your call, but I'll take the musical coherence, the tonal separation of voices and instruments and the beautifully layered stage depth every time. The explosive enthusiasm ▶

► of the Basie band, the infectious energy of their up tempo swing should have you up on your feet, while the wonderfully hesitant smooch of 'Beaver Junction' will melt the hardest heart. To quote a phrase, "It's all in the timing" and boy does the KI-40L get that right, allowing the performance to lock to its own natural pace rather than driving it or imposing a false sense of purpose by accentuating the front of notes and clipping their tails. It speaks of a temporal deftness, a way with the shape and pace of a phrase that serves music well.

Irrespective of partnering speaker, the Emillé never lost its composure, despite its modest power rating – something that suggests a seriously well-engineered power supply behind what is an essentially simple output stage. Okay, I didn't try it with a really inappropriate load, but why bother? No it doesn't possess the iron grip of the KI-120, but the agility and rhythmic flexibility are ample compensation. The expressive range and even balance of the Wadia 581 delivered the perfect foil for the Emillé's fluid lines and warm tonal balance, while the aesthetic parallels are hard to miss, and many a joyous hour was spent with these two driving the CLXs, further proof that the old rules of system building are best



consigned to the dustbin of history. Deft enough to do small scale acoustic works with a breathtaking sense of life and presence, beefy enough to handle all but the most outrageous beats and kind to old ladies and poor recordings, this is a perfectly poised performer. Sit back and simply enjoy the expansive soundstage, the subtlest of intimacies, the sweeping majesty of a full orchestra. Devoid of extreme extension or air, equally devoid of hardness, edge or exaggerated softness, the Emillé sticks close to traditional valve virtues but avoids the normal pitfalls. It is above all, and unashamedly, musical.

Indeed, its rare combination of delicacy and sheer physical presence makes for rewarding listening. To enjoy the experience you'll have to forego the (dubious) pleasures of remote control and a home theatre loop.

You'll also have to engage with those weird, glowing bottles, but the

Emillé makes that about as straight forward as possible, both operationally and in terms of its useable power output. Maybe not the first or most obvious amp to play to a firm believer in the virtues of solid-state, this is more one to grow into; but I've a feeling you'd enjoy the experience. ►+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Push-pull integrated valve amp
Valve Complement:	2x 12AT7 4x 12AU7 4x KT77
Inputs:	5x line-level (RCA/phono)
Input Sensitivity:	0.2 mV
Biasing Arrangement:	Fixed bias via internal meter
Output Power:	40 Watts/Ch
Dimensions (WxHxD):	457 x 256 x 460mm
Weight:	38kg
Finishes:	Silver or black
Prices -	
KI-40L Amplifier:	£4800
Matching Stand:	£690

**UK Distributor:**  
Angel Sound Audio  
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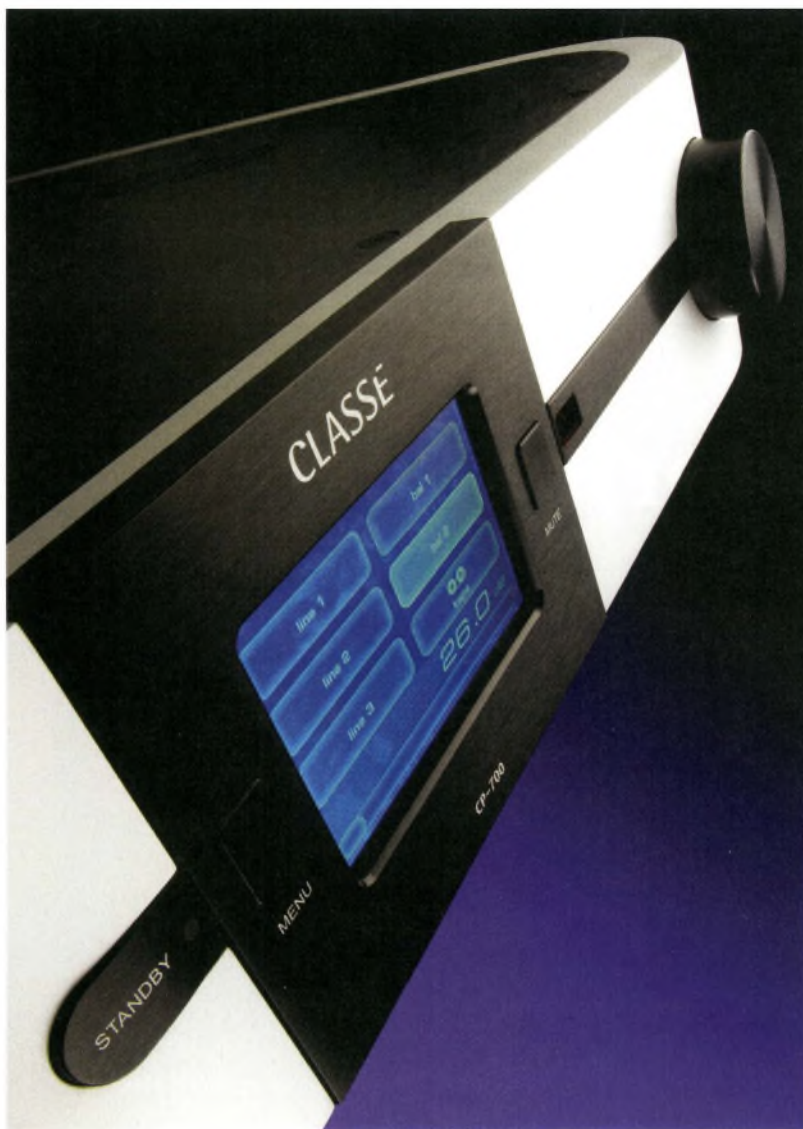
# Monumental Power... The Classé CA-M400 Mono-blocs

by Jason Kennedy

Just as the cars of the world are being downsized in engine terms and having every last ounce of power extracted from them in an attempt to appease the carbon religion, amplifiers are slowly but surely becoming more powerful, the most successful examples still relying on good old-fashioned linear power supplies and ever bigger transformers. At 400 Watts per channel Classé's flagship mono-blocs, twin pinnacles of their Delta series, might once have been considered OTT; now they're almost me-too.

The distinctive broad radii and contrasting colours of the Delta components are the work of Morton Warren, a name you may recall from the time when Bowers & Wilkins (which owns Classé) launched its original 800 series. He is the industrial designer who came up with those curvy speakers and he has continued that theme with the Delta series. But the casework is more than just attractive it is also designed to isolate the electronics from vibration – internal and external. Classé point out that as electronic components pass a signal or charge and discharge, it generates mechanical energy which in turn becomes a low-level addition to that signal. This is made worse by the intrusion of external energy, much worse if the equipment is placed close to the speakers. Working to eliminate these effects should generate lower distortion, greater clarity and more consistent performance. The Delta casework is a combination of steel and aluminium, with large isolating feet made from soft, Navcom material, the latter tuned to each amp's massive 37kg bulk.

Whilst in the dim distant past, Classé products were indeed Class A, that's no longer the case, although their Class AB output stages run to about a third of their rated output in unswitched mode. They also double their output into half the



► load, so would seem to promise the best of both worlds, high power without the heat. The CA-M400 has both balanced and SE inputs but you need to switch between the two on the front panel. Other back panel connections are for 12v triggers, firmware updates and Classé's bus system. Internally Classé has incorporated three types of transistor, so there are J-FETs in the input stage, MOSFETs in the driver stage and bipolar output devices. The choice of multiple transistor types is made to capitalize on their relative strengths and conceal their weaknesses. A JFET input stage is easy to drive, relatively insensitive to interconnect cable variances, with very low distortion and very low noise. The JFET is an excellent voltage gain device. It cannot, however, deliver the current necessary to drive a proper output stage, let alone a loudspeaker. So MOSFETs are used after the JFETs to deliver both voltage and current gain. The MOSFETs can easily drive the bipolar output stage, which is widely recognized as being ideal for linearity and high current. How high? The output stage is limited to a mere 90 Amps maximum, a protection measure that's seen a zero failure rate in the field, despite the several thousands units in use.

As I use the top of the line Classé CP-700 pre-amplifier at home, the CA-M400s fitted right in. As you might expect with this much power on tap one thing

you are guaranteed is an assured and relaxed sound. The CA-M400 is unlikely to break a sweat driving the majority of loudspeakers and will only have to try if it needs to fill a large room using insensitive



transducers. But power can often be a barrier to the more subtle musical elements of audio reproduction, it is often suggested that the lower the power the more nimble and dynamic an amplifier tends to sound, at least this is the thinking of many in the glass audio appreciating fraternity. So it was heartening to find that this pairing has an impressively light touch for its class. It doesn't impose a bone crunching bass on the sound, nor does it

seem sluggish. What it does sound is effortless and luxurious, and while these are attractive qualities they do suggest a degree of smoothing that might not expose the finest of details. With the wrong choice of cable this might well be the case, I tried a couple of balanced pre/power interconnect cables before picking the skinny but high resolution van den Hul Orchid. This cable's character is on the light side; its strengths lie in timing and imaging and in some systems its bass might be a shade lean. With these amps it proved the perfect match, the power amp having no trouble in extracting trouser flapping, sofa shaking low registers and revelling in the definition it brings to leading edges. The speakers it was charged with manipulating were my usual B&W 802Ds, making this a real family affair.

The CA-M400 is primarily about control, something it exerts in a remarkably calm yet revealing fashion. Some will feel that this sounds like a lack of dynamics but in truth it means that the amp can deliver all the required power without having to resort to the distress that can make a system sound exciting but which is in fact a mild form of clipping. There is an awful

lot of headroom on offer, which means that it can produce high levels with a degree of ease that's not available with lower power designs. You may have seen a power requirement calculator



produced by Musical Fidelity last year which allows the ►

▶ dialling in of your speaker's sensitivity and your amplifier's power giving a result that says how well matched they are. It seemed a little crude to me but is essentially correct because its indication is that we need more power to drive our systems without pushing them into the red than most of us would imagine.

The CA-M400 are also extremely transparent and have an uncanny ability to peel apart the elements in a recording to reveal precisely what each one contributes, without making the sound seem analytical. These amps are in fact extremely strong on detail but it presents the finest nuances in such an effortless fashion that your attention is never distracted from the music and its underlying message.

Inevitably the power on tap makes itself apparent in the bass. At this all important end of the spectrum the CA-M400s deliver low frequencies that surprise with their weight. There's

for many years it was quite surprising to find that the Classé clearly outguns it with the doubling in power. There was a time not so long ago when 200 watts was considered overkill, yet if you want to get the low frequencies from a B&W 802D to imitate a big active loudspeaker it would seem that there's no substitute for wattage.

To put things into perspective I happened to have a pair of Bryston's even more powerful 28B SST monoblocs at the same time that the Classé were in the house. The 28B is a 1000 Watt amp, with each channel costing over two grand more than a CA-M400 so the fact that it resolved more of the space in a recording and more substance in voices came as no great surprise. The difference was not enormous, but the bigger amp does produce extra grip and has more overall transparency, suggesting that the Classé is a little soft through the mid-band. Just don't forget that price differential.

The usual competition at the CA-M400's price includes the likes of Krell, Mark Levinson and home grown

brands such as Chord Electronics, most of which tend to be a bit more emphatic in terms of character.

The Classé system does not make a big thing about grip, speed or slam. Instead it goes about its business in a remarkably neutral and unprepossessing way.

This means that the music has a better chance than usual of doing precisely what the artist, producer and mastering engineer had in mind. It also means that differences between

musicians, instruments, recordings et al are very clear. As previously mentioned the smoothness on offer can give the impression that clarity is not as great as it might be, yet when you turn up the wick the presentation remains precisely the same, there is no sense of edginess or strain and as a result high level listening is far more comfortable than usual.

Classé has produced an excellent blend of power, resolution and musicality at what is a competitive price for the build quality on offer. You might not think that you need 400 watts but if a reasonably realistic facsimile of anything bigger than a chamber orchestra is what you are after at home you are probably wrong – especially when it is delivered with this much class. ▶+



no suggestion of emphasis, it's not particularly speedy or hard edged, nothing about this amp is, but it is realistically strong and purposeful. Having used a 200 watt Gamut D200

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type:	Solid-state mono-bloc power amp
Inputs:	1x balanced XLR 1x single-ended RCA
Input Sensitivity:	2Vrms
Voltage Gain:	29.1dB
Power	
Output:	400W into 8 Ohms 800W into 4 Ohms
Dimensions (WxHxD):	445 x 222 x 470mm ea.
Weight:	37kg ea.
Price:	£3,950 ea.

#### UK Distributor:

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# The Spendor SA1 Loudspeaker

by Roy Gregory



Maybe I just like swimming against the tide... Maybe I just want to be different... Or maybe, just maybe I resent being told what to think... Anyway, more years ago than I care to remember, when I first started out in hi-fi retail, the mini-monitor debate was a whole lot more focused than it is now. Long before the arrival of the SL6 there were only two camps – the LS3/5a and the Linn Kann – and you were in one or the other, fuddy-duddy or young Turk, reactionary or revolutionary. Except that perched on our shelf next to these two was a third speaker, a speaker that I felt was considerably better than either of them. Matching the BBC design in terms of neutrality and the Kann when it came to dynamic coherence, here was a speaker that had all the get up and go of the Linn design along with the tonal qualities of the 3/5a, didn't suffer from the latter's pinched, constipated delivery or the bizarre colourations and curtailed range of the former – and possessed more musical scale and drama than either. It was the original Spendor SA1 and it was a sad day for the hi-fi industry when the company stopped making it, first indicator that people were listening to reviewers rather than their own ears.

Well, the SA1 is back – in name if nothing else. I've been looking forward eagerly to the arrival of the new version, whilst quietly having qualms about rose-tinted memories. I needn't have worried; this new version is just as impressive, just as distinctive and even more worthwhile than the original. Musically sublime, beautifully engineered and with fit and finish to challenge anything out there, it could and should cause quite a stir.

Gone are the slightly dumpy proportions of the original, replaced by a fashionably slim enclosure complete with elegant (and effective) matching stand, magnetically

▶ attached grille and deep lacquered finish over the piano black or exotic Zebrano veneer. There's even a satin finished dark Wenge alternative for those of a more traditional bent. But underneath the fancy clothes this speaker is all Spondor. The sealed cabinet follows the company's thin-wall approach with a 15mm front baffle, 12mm rear and 9mm side walls, all in MDF and treated to minimal but critically placed damping. The single-wired crossover employs their trademark, tapped inductor technique to precisely tune the bass output without the need for additional subtractive elements, and is equipped with good quality WBT terminals (hurrah!). This low-loss, low-mass approach is echoed in the stand, where MDF/polymer constrained layer sandwiches top and bottom are coupled by a light, stiff four-part central column to create a low-mass, non-resonant structure. The carefully shaped base gives a wide stance to its three, nicely machined spikes, making for a stable assembly despite its minimal weight.

Drivers consist of a new, in-house designed and built 150mm bass-mid unit using the company's proprietary ep38 polymer to form its cone, coupled with a 22mm ring-radiator type tweeter. There's nothing particularly extraordinary about the electrical characteristics that result (85dB sensitivity and 75Hz to 20kHz bandwidth) although the 6.30hm minimum load and high 4.8kHz crossover point might be considered significant; likewise, the low 5.4kg weight, most of it taken up by the drivers.

Expecting great things (or perhaps "hoping for" would be more accurate) I was nonetheless floored by the immediately confident, capable and assured sound of the SA1s. Seemingly impervious to stress or the indignity of distress, attempts to unsettle them with either musical demands or matching

equipment proved utterly fruitless – right up to the point where I got just too enthusiastic with a pair of 300 Watt mono-blocs, resulting in a sudden loss of volume and a telltale plume of smoke from the bass driver on the left-hand speaker. Yes, I know that the amps deliver well over twice the rated power handling of the speaker and yes, I know that reviewers are supposed to know better, but I include this anecdote



because it's illustrative of the SA1's singular quality, a capability that's unique in a speaker at this size and price – at least as far as I'm aware. This is the least intrusive, least invasive speaker I've heard short of the likes of Avalons, the Eben C1 and the Wilson-Benesch Trinity (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). Now check the prices on those products and you'll begin to appreciate both the reason for and the extent of my enthusiasm.

What exactly do I mean by "unintrusive" and how does the SA1 achieve it? Well, the first is easy – the

second is down to guesswork, or we'd all be building little gems like these. Play music on the little Spondors and you'll be amazed by just how intimate and expressive it is. Girls with guitars perch just in front of you, while songs of loss and longing will tug at long forgotten sympathies. The complex intricacies of interweaving brass lines, the insistently upbeat or slyly offbeat rhythms of small jazz ensembles are effortlessly apparent. The energy and purpose in guitar driven rock is given a sense of direction. Even large-scale orchestral works draw you into the space occupied by the orchestra, the artistic headspace of the conductor. It matters not what you play, the system shifts in front of you to reflect the recorded acoustic, the scale, the emotional compass and intent of the performers. All of a sudden it's the music that's dictating terms, the players not the system playing it.

Likewise, change the system and you'll hear the results immediately. As impressive as the Spondors sound on the end of the

Electrocompaniet ECI-5, there's no mistaking the leap in quality as soon as you hook up the Gryphon Diablo, the change in character with the VAS valve mono-blocs or the impact of changes to the cable loom or mains arrangements. The Connoisseur 4.2 PSE and LSE feeding the Belles MB-200s? Sure, why not? The SA1s take it all in their stride, so easily, without ever drawing attention to themselves, without ever registering discomfort that, if you are not careful their stiff upper lip leads you down the road from Rorke's Drift to Isandalwana.

What allows these little speakers to disappear so completely? It's a combination of virtues, but it has to ▶

► be built on their intrinsic lack of character, in turn reflecting the low stored energy levels and spread resonance of their cabinet, banishing the same-ness that afflicts most loudspeakers, an expressive narrowing you tend to only really notice when it's gone. Add to that a degree of dynamic freedom reflecting the lighter touch

this I'm listening to Eliza Gilkyson's 'Beauty Way', the SA1s being driven by the Wadia 581, the Connoisseur and the Hovland RADIA. On paper they should be way out of their depth, but whether it's the natural delivery of Eliza's distinctive voice or the steady solidity of the drumming, they simply get on with it, standing aside and allowing the excellence of the partnering equipment and the musical performance free rein.

There's an articulate, involving quality to the singing, an

only direct comparison reveals). If you want huge levels and deep, deep bass then look elsewhere. But if you simply want the greatest musical insight into the widest possible range of different genres and performances then that is exactly what this speaker delivers. It gets the fundamentals spot on and if you can't afford or accommodate a full-range loudspeaker system of this quality (and make no mistake, that's going to cost you – plenty) then the SA1 is an enticingly affordable and capable alternative. At \$1100 including stands it's a musical tour de force. Don't be fooled by its diminutive dimensions

– it's a wider window on the world than any floorstander at this price. Buy now, score a ton of Brownie points for its petite prettiness, and reap a serious musical dividend into the bargain. Make no mistake, the SA1 is alive – and kickin'!



and less energy sapping nature of the crossover, the benign load together with a carefully voiced bottom end that preserves the surprising sense of scale, and you've got the basis of a balance that's judged just as beautifully as the SA1's cabinet is crafted. The inherent continuity that comes from the high crossover point is the icing on the cake.

The end result is a speaker that (fed properly) delivers music with shape and direction, with an emphatic sense of purpose. Of course, if the rest of the system is limp or disjointed, it tells you that too, but it's remarkable how much of the damage done to musical expression, coherence and colour can be laid firmly at the feet of the transducers, the source and especially the loudspeakers. Writing



emotional depth and pathos, which is what makes this most intelligent of writers so special. The ability not so much to show that but more importantly not to hide it, is what makes the SA1 so special. The music speaks for itself; you hear what the artist recorded – not what the speaker thinks they recorded.

The Sendor SA1 is far from perfect. It is necessarily limited in bandwidth (not that you tend to notice) absolute transparency and resolution (which

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Type:	Two-way sealed box
Driver Complement:	1x 22mm ring-radiator hf 1x 150mm ep38 bass/mid
Bandwidth:	75Hz - 20kHz ±3dB
Sensitivity:	85dB
Impedance:	8 Ohms nominal 6.3 Ohms minimum
Crossover Point:	4.8kHz
Dimensions (WxHxD):	165 x 305 x 190mm
Weight:	5.4kg ea.
Finishes:	Piano black, Zebrano or dark Wenge
Prices:	£800 pr. £300 pr. (stands)

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CopperFoil speaker cables in this  
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# Firm Foundations – The Second Layer...

## Cable Looms From Crystal, Magnan and Atlas

by Roy Gregory

Having discussed mains quality and equipment supports at some length in the last issue, it's time to turn our attention to the third leg of any system's supporting tripod. Of course, in an ideal world the power cords and signal cabling should all be considered as a single coherent entity. However, I chose to split the cable coverage (initially at least) to underline the priorities that pertain to building your system foundation, namely: power supply; equipment supports; signal transfer. Generally speaking, most listeners would place that order in reverse – and the whole question well behind the issue of electronics and speakers. Unfortunately, if you want to hear what your equipment actually sounds like, a firm foundation is essential, just the same as if you want to know how high a person can jump or how fast they can run, first you'd better provide a firm footing!

Less is more is an oft quoted hi-fi mantra – and sometimes it's even true, although generally in the conceptual rather than the physical sense. But when it comes to cables, there's a certain logic in applying the philosophy literally! If cable performance depends on four factors (conductor quality, construction, dielectric material and connectors) then the less of each you have, the less influence it has – up to a point, at least. The cables here all obey the basic rules of completeness (they provide solutions for each function

in the system) and simplicity (despite appearances in some cases!) and all were used as coherent looms to cable the entire test system (as detailed in Issue 59 – same kit, same tracks).

### Crystal Cables Piccolo

You don't get much more minimalist than Piccolo. In common with the other designs in the Crystal range, every cable in the Piccolo family shares the same conductor, a simple coaxial construction of almost impossibly diminutive dimensions. A bit of a shock when you first glimpse the interconnects, many audiophiles will need



resuscitation once they realize they're expected to use the same wires on their speakers and for power cords, although at least in the latter case they are doubled up. Having said that, the cables used in the rest of the Crystal range are not much bigger, and it's not until you reach the Ultra (reviewed in Issue 55) that you get to a construction that seems sufficiently bulky to adequately serve audio purposes.

But the whole point of the Crystal philosophy is to take minimalism to its logical extreme – whilst executing the end result with the best possible materials and considerable precision. So, Piccolo employs a single, hair-fine solid core conductor in its center, drawn from the same silver/gold alloy employed in the rest of the range. The theory here is that the gold actually fills the voids that would otherwise exist

in the silver's crystal structure, eliminating contaminants or air and leading to higher conductivity and more consistent performance. This is wrapped in an extremely thin layer of tough Kapton insulation, before a pure silver screen is laid over the top.

Finally, the coaxial conductors are coated with a thin layer of Teflon. The tiny cross-section of the conductors themselves, combined with the minimal bulk of the dielectrics used is what makes the cables so thin. Yet, as I mentioned above, Crystal employ exactly the same cable for the Piccolo speaker wires and a pair of the coaxial-conductors twisted together for the power cord. Of course, once you take that first, brave step, what you end up with is a set of thin, flexible, unobtrusive and actually very attractive cables that rate very high on the practicality scale and very low in terms of domestic impact, things that might be of secondary sonic significance, ▶



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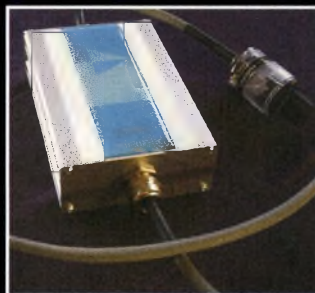
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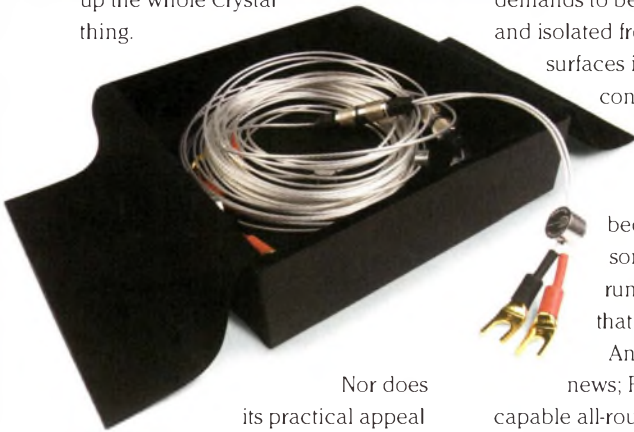
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▶ but shouldn't be underestimated in the overall scheme of things. Crystal Piccolo is one of the (very) few cables you might actually want on show.

Such minimal construction would be wasted (as well as aesthetically incongruous) unless it was carried over to the connectors, and Crystal have wisely chosen to stick with lightweight plugs and spades throughout the range. Even the packaging is simple, svelte and elegant – which pretty much sums up the whole Crystal thing.



Nor does its practical appeal stop there. The Piccolo shares other important features with the Ultra, not least the elegant, oval six-way distribution block, a significant contributor to its overall performance as well as a useful staging post when it comes to upgrading. Termination options seem almost limitless, with single-ended, balanced, 5-pin tonearm and mini-jack (for iPod) offered as standard on the interconnects, and the same removable tail system on the speaker cables as seen on the Ultra, making swapping from 4mm to spade, or single to bi-wired termination simplicity itself. Finally, the power cords are available with all the various IEC options as well as UK, Schuko and US mains plugs. Ours arrived with Schuko plugs, allowing simple optimization of mains polarity for each individual item in the system, a really worthwhile

contribution to system performance that is all too often neglected.

Let's start with the good news; using the piccolo is an absolute joy. Wiring systems should always be this easy! Not only is it easy to place and dress, the beautifully engineered connectors make nice, positive connections without being fiddly or demanding undue force. More importantly, it displays none of the positional sensitivity of the Ultra, a cable that demands to be left totally undisturbed and isolated from the surrounding surfaces if it's to give of its

considerable best. Plug the Piccolo in and tidy it up, leave it for half an hour to settle down and bed-in – preferably with something fairly boisterous running through it – and that's all it takes.

And now, the even better news; Piccolo is a stunningly capable all-rounder with a poise and balanced performance that belies its affordable pricing. Given its svelte elegance and stylish presentation, it would be easy to assume you are paying a sonic penalty for the pleasure, but nothing could be further from the truth.



Just like Ultra, Piccolo presents a complete, holistic musical picture, balanced and natural in every aspect. But the really impressive thing is the way it's dialed that performance back without disturbing the inherent structure and sense of the music. So, Piccolo can't match the weight,

## The Ultra Upgrade

Having a range of Ultra cables on hand too, allowed me to investigate the issue of cable priorities within the loom, swapping the superior leads in and out in various positions. The results completely confirmed our theory, the biggest upgrade coming with a single length of Ultra power cord between the wall and the distribution block. Improvements included increased dimensionality, tonal range and presence and a significant increase in dynamic and expressive range. Performers were more planted, stable and solidly believable, their musical technique and odd slips or incidental noises more apparent, making for a much more immediate and direct musical experience. Which is great news for Piccolo users looking to upgrade, especially with four more expensive models to choose from...

transparency and acoustic scope of the Ultra, its range of colours and textures – but it matches it for musical integrity, and gets much closer in those other regards than you might expect.

The key here is the natural sense of scale and overall balance. Although the Piccolo does diminish and smooth musical dynamics and accents, certainly compared to the like of the Vacuum State cables or its big brother, the Ultra, it does so without disturbing the music's shape or proportion. Timing and structure are kept clear and intact, and are remarkably coherent and involving. So, while the impromptu comments on the TvZ track lose a little of their twang, they lose none of their conversational timing or playful interaction. Likewise, the slight clumsiness that penetrates a few of the chord shifts is smoothed over and less obvious – adding to the

feeling of musical flow at the expense of intimacy and also absolute insight. But all these negatives need to be viewed in an absolute sense, relative to what's possible irrespective of price. At the relatively modest cost involved in a complete Piccolo loom, this sort ▶

► of musically complete and engaging performance is frankly unheard of. Switch to the Art Pepper and the sure-footed insistence of the smoochy groove is compulsive, the steady repetition of the piano part and bass underpinning the meandering horn lines, keeping them anchored and purposeful.

What you get with Piccolo is the Crystal trademark, a cable that really lets your music breathe. Lively and agile with excellent dynamic scaling and contrasts, transparency and clarity (especially at the price), these things you might well expect from its simple coaxial construction and solid-core central conductors. But what will take you by surprise is its easy, unforced sense of instrumental weight and musical power, studied poise when required, headlong momentum on demand. It's so holistically coherent that you simply don't question what isn't there. Instead you simply revel in its ability to let you ignore the system and enjoy your music. What it actually sounds like is a cable that's really enjoying its job! Weird I know, but it's the only way I can explain its ability to cherish and caress one minute and drive things on the next – and the way that puts a smile on your face when you hear it: although, in point of fact, what you hear is the music – and the expressive input of the players – finally let off the leash that too many systems impose.

CrystalConnect Piccolo (1m RCA-RCA): £260  
 CrystalSpeak Piccolo (3m Single-wired): £1044  
 CrystalPower (1m IEC): £217

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### Magnan Audio Cables

On the face of it, the contrast between the Crystal interconnects and their Magnan counterparts couldn't be much greater,



the diminutive Crystal conductors, light, flexible and unobtrusive, the Magnan Signatures each consisting of a 40mm diameter cylinder with bulky end-caps and short flying tails to the plugs. Fortunately, they're not as heavy as they look, but there's no escaping the fact that these are the most intrusive designs I've used since I said goodbye to the (marginally thinner) Cogan-Hall cables. Yet, under that extreme exterior, the Magnans offer a similar conceptual simplicity to the Crystals...

Designer David Magnan holds that many of the electrical qualities sought in traditional audio cable designs are largely irrelevant to the way they sound. Instead, he posits time-smear as a result of skin-effect (and in the case of interconnects, dielectric absorption) as the critical factor. His response is radical to say the least. Instead of high-purity, low-resistance wires, his interconnects are constructed using extremely thin, highly-resistive signal conductors – in the case of the Signature interconnects, a thin coating of conductive plastic



“paint” on a non-conductive substrate – specifically designed to reduce skin-effect. In the single-ended designs, earth return is via a low resistance copper ribbon. He is unforthcoming on the subject of insulation, other than specifying that it uses “air-space Teflon” technology, from which, along with the sheer bulk of the cables, I'd deduce that the conductors run, largely unsupported in an air dielectric with an external Teflon tube to protect and insulate them. The end result might not be elegant, but it is certainly effective.

Like any such solution, in reality the Magnan interconnects face a number of trade-offs. Extremely thin, high-resistance conductors might reduce



skin effect, but they'll also reduce system gain. In order to limit this effect, the Signature interconnects are all built to offer the same basic 30kOhm resistance as a standard four-foot pair: this is achieved by using broader ribbons or even doubling them up. In addition, the broad conductors and massive diameter also present issues when it comes to termination, requiring the aforementioned flying tails to interface with the plugs – at the risk one would have thought, of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

We also received a tone-arm cable and a set of single-ended interconnects constructed using the company's Silver Bronze series conductors. A thin ribbon design, these are far more conventional in appearance, more ►

► flexible and easier to use and also considerably more affordable than the Signatures, weighing in at £690 a pair, as compared to £975. Along side these, we also had a set of power cords and a distribution block, similar in appearance to the Signature interconnects, but even bulkier and considerably heavier.

The speaker cables, in stark contrast, require both high conductivity and low total resistance, in addition to minimizing skin-effect.

For these, Magnan use a five-inch wide copper ribbon, individually insulated and terminated for each run, meaning that laid side by side (as recommended) the two conductors required to run a single-wired speaker will present a mat nearly a foot wide. Once again, the precise details of insulation are not revealed, the speaker cables being finished with a soft, open-weave fabric and once again, short tails. An eight-foot pair will cost you £625, which in high-end cable terms is almost a giveaway price! Also included was a handy set of Signature jumpers for bi-wired speakers, always a nice touch and an often overlooked tweak.

So, despite appearances, the construction of these cables would seem to be very nearly as simple as possible, congruent with their design aims. Their consistency lies in their use of ribbon conductors with minimal skin effect, even if the materials differ from one function or cable to the next. Their complexity lies in effectively meeting the physical challenge of terminating those conductors without degrading their contribution.

I have gone to some lengths to describe the theoretical benefits and practical implications of these cables. That could be read as implied criticism,

but that would be a mistake, because believe me, I wouldn't have persevered with these if they didn't deliver the goods. Instead, with a product this distinctive in its approach and different in execution, I think it's important for readers to understand the whys and wherefores of employing them, whether

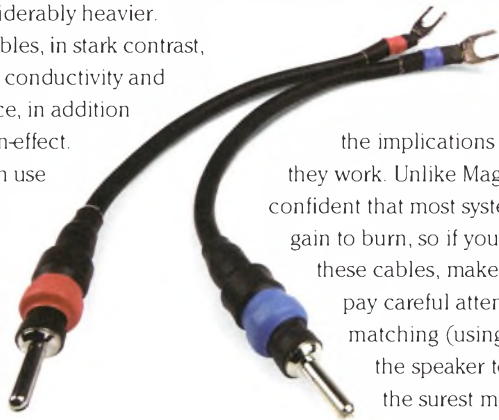
that's a question of the way they look or the implications of the way they work. Unlike Magnan, I'm not confident that most systems have gain to burn, so if you audition these cables, make sure that you pay careful attention to gain matching (using a meter at the speaker terminals is the surest method) and also playing a range of recordings cut at lower levels to ensure that you have sufficient volume to work with.

Running the test system with the full Magnan loom delivered a quick, full and full-tilt sound with tremendous presence and energy. The same day these cables entered play, the deluxe edition of Steve Earle's *Copperhead Road* landed on the mat – a fortuitous arrival indeed, because Earle's heavy roots and riff-laden melodies could have been written with these cables in mind. Their sound is powerful, smooth and solid, just like the two-lane blacktop the speaker cable so resembles. There's weight and substance a plenty, but no sense of lag or drag in the deep bass. Indeed, the overall pace, coherence and purposeful sense of musical progression makes these engaging, involving and exciting cables. They build their performance on those well-rooted low frequencies, but they're definitely a launching pad rather than a sheet anchor. If you want pace, substance and drive then look no further.

But all that power and drive comes with a price. There's a noticeable

loss of level on straight comparison with other cables, and whilst that can be rectified with the volume control, the attendant lack of air and dynamic range can't. Consequently, the musical picture lacks air, depth and transparency, favouring the direct sources of sound rather than the reflected energy that defines the acoustic space. So, listening the Townes van Zandt track, TvZ himself is big, solid and present between the speakers, his guitar bold, rich and round, its lines clear and his phrasing smooth. But the guitar also lacks harmonic texture that robs the notes of length and tail, while the lack of air, the rounded sweetness and absence of edge mean that the depth between lead singer and the impromptu backing vocals is foreshortened, the sense of transparency and a single space containing the singer and his audience (along with their various contributions) is totally absent. Paradoxically, resolution is good so that the barking dog out in the yard can be clearly heard, it's just that you can't tell how far away it is. Likewise,

the up-shifts in tracks like Nanci Griffith's 'Listen To The Radio' and Steve Earle's 'Copperhead Road' and 'Johnny Come Lately' are smoothed over, more muscle car than real performance machine. The swelling progression sure carries you along, but it lacks the kick in the seat of the pants you get when you floor the pedal in something with a really good power to weight ratio like a Lotus Elise. ►



► Their sound was also remarkably consistent across systems and running the full set-up (including the tonearm cable) with the Stabi XL4/SME 312, Connoisseurs and the RADIA produced near identical conclusions, as did the VAS Citation Sound One and Twos, two systems that couldn't, in themselves be much more different, and an indication of the way in which this cable loom dominates (or releases) musical proceedings.

So what you are trading here is temporal coherence and an impressive sense of substance and momentum for transparency and articulation, agility and air. Neither one is necessarily right (or wrong) but they are very, very different, different enough to give one pause because if one is all right, the other is very definitely all wrong. In practice it's more a case of which way you lean. The appeal of the Magnans lies in their particular combination of virtues, a mix it's hard to find elsewhere. Rather like a traditional Naim system, they do things their own way to deliver a particular result – and rather like a Naim system, they major on pace, presence and musical drive. They are engaging, exciting and ever so slightly addictive, and one thing's for sure – if you like what they do, then you'll find almost everything else wanting. At the same time, the sheer presence and power they deliver does enough to make you wonder whether maybe, just maybe, they really are the only ones who've got it right.

- Signature Interconnect: £999 (4')
  - Signature Speaker Cable: £625 (8')
  - Signature Power Cord: £480
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### Atlas Mavros Cables

Atlas cables are the latest in a long line of brands to promote Ohno Continuous Casting long crystal copper conductors. They are of fairly conventional construction, their interest lying in the use of a micro-porous PTFE dielectric, designed to reduce contact with the conductors, rather like the monofilament approach created by Nordost. Interestingly, Atlas also use the transmission speed measure first suggested by Nordost as an arbiter of cable quality, although they cite an "85% improvement" in



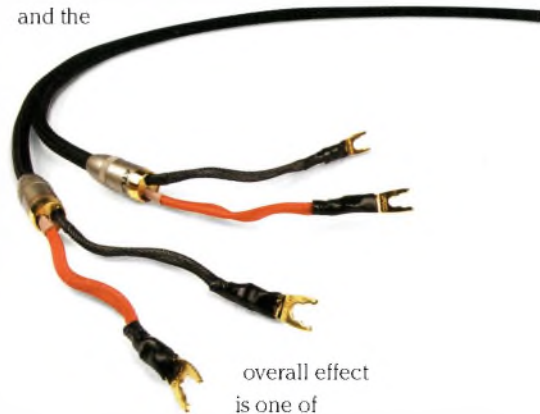
transmission speed without clarifying what is being compared, as opposed to Nordost's VL reference standard.

The interconnect cables use a twisted pair construction, the 7-nines OCC conductors insulated with the new mpPTFE compound before being wrapped in a natural cotton layer for mechanical damping, twin shields and a PVC outer jacket. Terminations are self-cleaning, silver-plated OCC copper RCA plugs. The speaker cables are a four-wire design to facilitate bi-wiring or shot-gun termination, two 3mm square and two 1.77mm square OCC/mpPTFE conductors being wrapped in a single cotton/PVC sheath. Terminations are either OCC spades, crimped directly to the conductors to provide continuous material contact, or lightweight Z-plugs. Finished with a smooth, black fabric outer and understated hardware, the Atlas cables

offer, a subtle, attractive appearance, while their flexibility helps them to be both unobtrusive and practical in use. There are no Mavros power cords as such, but Atlas supplied their standard IEC leads, using OCC conductors and conventional PTFE insulation.

With their emphasis on conductor quality and conventional construction, svelte appearance and familiar dimensions, the Mavros cables fly in the face of both the Magnan and Crystal approaches. However, in one other important respect, they surpass either, material continuity and consistency between the conductors and terminations across the entire signal path is second to none, the same OCC copper being employed throughout. This alone justifies their inclusion, whilst the promise of reduced dielectric effects is equally welcome.

In practice, the Mavros cables had by far the most distinctive sound in this group, perhaps reflecting their more conventional construction and the close coupling of the conductors with a substantial and mechanically damped cylindrical construction. They present music with a big, bold and slightly forward clarity that majors on presence and impact. Dynamic heft and weight are immediately impressive and the



overall effect is one of substance and immediacy. Detail and clarity are also first rate, rounding out exactly the sort of performance that will attract instant attention in the showroom. ►



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▶ But listen longer and a little deeper and you start to unearth the weaknesses hiding behind the bold front. Voices and instrument are big, solid and focused, but whilst you can hear exactly what TvZ is singing, as well as the rising and falling contribution of his sometime harmony singer, the actual relationship between the lead and backing vocal, the position of the two singers in the room, the dimensions of the room itself, are all much more equivocal. It's odd, because the voice itself is mightily convincing, with a very realistic quality and presence – it is the relationship it bears to its recorded surroundings that's more problematic.

This concentration on the source of each sound undermines the sense of acoustic space, a lack of dimensional coherence that overlaps into the temporal domain too. So playing the Art Pepper track, you don't just miss the weighting of the piano phrase and its heavy bias on the final chord, the drums are detached and fail to really hit the off-beat their patterns are there to emphasize. In contrast, the dense mix and pile-driver momentum of 'Copperhead Road' are meat and drink to the Mavros cables, as they pile on the presence and energy, digging out the detail and hidden intricacy. At the same time, it doesn't challenge the cables' dynamic range in the same way that a solo voice and guitar does. The Atlas wires impose a subtle restraint on the signal's dynamic range, so that things tend to be a bit "all loud" or "all quiet", rather than allowing instruments played at different levels to coexist. It's subtle enough that it will likely pass unnoticed without direct comparison, rather like the Crystal's smoothing of dynamic jumps, but it does dilute the dynamic contrast and drama in a performance.

Which leaves us with something of a curate's egg. Like the Magnan cables, your views on the Mavros will depend on where your priorities lie – and, to



an extent, the spatial and temporal coherence of the system in which they're used. If their view of the world matches yours, or compensates for failings in your system, they might be the perfect fit. If you are after delicacy, intimacy, transparency or the sense of air and space in a recording; if your system needs help in those regards, then you might find the results a little clumsy and awkward. But if you want sheer substance and detail and don't give a fig for the niceties of acoustic perspective or the subtle inner workings of an arrangement, the Mavros cables will be right up your street. Listen to them – but listen long and listen deep, to make sure that their obvious virtues aren't bought at too steep a price elsewhere in the performance envelope.

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### Cables And The Credibility Gap

One of the enduring problems facing cable companies and frustrating audiophiles is the sheer cost of top-quality cable looms, especially given the apparent physical disparity

between the cable itself and the price demanded. It's not helped by the presence of so many "off the shelf" conductors, dressed up to look good and rake in a healthy profit.

Existing cable technology can deliver astonishingly good results but should benefit from the cost savings that industrial scale production of the principal elements entails. The Chord Company are an excellent example of a brand that uses careful selection and obsessive attention to detail when it comes to construction and termination, to deliver excellent results at reasonable prices.

But what if you want to extend the envelope beyond that? In fact, the really high-end cable companies find themselves in a difficult situation simply because few people really understand the cost and complexity of what they do. The genuinely top-flight cables are nearly all purpose designed solely for audio applications. That means that they have to be specifically manufactured in (what are in industrial terms) very small quantities. Add to that the increasing number of companies working on their own terminations and you are looking at an actual manufacturing industry, as opposed to a simple assembly task. That means that all the manufacturing and development costs land lock, stock and both smoking barrels, firmly at their feet. Contrast that to amplifier manufacturers who generally build their products from components, assemblies and even casework actually manufactured by third parties; it's a completely different cost structure. The trouble is, understanding that doesn't make the products any cheaper or more accessible.

However, if we stick to basic principles and materials, the enthusiastic amateur can actually create a cable of surprisingly capable performance for comparatively limited cost. Let's not forget that the first rule of cable construction is that less is more. The fly in this particular ointment is the

▶ considerable effect that choice of termination and the skill with which it's executed have a profound effect on the final result – both of which are generally dependent on experience, which is where the professionals score. But what I have collected is a pair of signal looms created along just the lines I've suggested (I didn't venture into the realms of power cords for obvious reasons) yet actually offered for sale by their creators. Indeed, in the case of Vacuum State they even offer kits and publish *The Super Cables Cookbook* for those who want to go it alone...

### Vacuum State Cables

Vacuum State delivered both their Silver Wire interconnect and their Copper Foil speaker cables. The former is almost as minimal in appearance and dimensions as the Crystal Piccolo, and looks rather nice in its thin black sleeve. Constructed from three, thin solid-core silver conductors, employing one for signal and



two for return, these

are enamel insulated and tightly twisted

before being terminated with Eichmann Silver Bullet plugs. You don't get much simpler than that, a simplicity that's echoed in the speaker cable. This uses two copper ribbons, placed back to back with a thin layer of urethane insulation between them, producing a 25mm wide, flat cable, much in the style of a Goertz or one of the various other, similar designs. The cable itself is sleeved just like the interconnect, although the finishing where it interfaces

with the 4mm Z-plugs leaves a little to be desired. True purists can of course dispense with the plugs altogether and simply cut "spades" into the end of each foil ribbon, a fragile but undeniably direct connection. Bought fully built, interconnects will set you back £400 for a 1m pair (with an additional £150 for each extra meter), the speaker cables the same, whilst kits are available (direct from Vacuum State only) for around half that. Maximum lengths in both cases are 3m, making this one of the shorter cable options on offer. In use, their flexibility, compact dimensions and good quality terminations make the Vacuum State cables a cinch to use. In the absence of a matching power cords I stuck to the CrystalPower cables and block, which seemed closest in terms of conceptual simplicity.

No matter what system I used them with, these cables came as a breath of fresh air. Clean, quick, open, detailed and dynamic, as soon as the music started you found yourself relaxing and forgetting about their performance, focusing instead on THE performance. In that sense, they offered the same sense of rightness and musical coherence that made the Crystal Piccolos so engaging, but without that more affordable cable's subtle sins of omission. As a result they are both more detailed and more musically expressive, not just letting you hear the background details on the TvZ track more clearly and easily, but making more sense of them too; you hear the dog bark more clearly, but it's also less intrusive. Likewise, the snatches of whispered conversation are fully revealed for the first time in this group, as is the point at which our would be backing singer first starts her low, hummed harmony, something that escaped the notice completely with all the other cables here.

The dynamic range and harmonic complexity are welcome too. For the first time you really get a sense of the low-frequency power available from Jackson Browne's guitar on *Solo Acoustic, Vol. 2*, for the first time you realize that there are two instruments (guitar AND mandolin) on the opening bars of 'Copperhead Road'. This level

of detail, transparency and musical coherence is something I



associate with the best cables. In comparison to those the Vacuum States come up short on colour, absolute weight, dimensionality

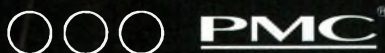
and micro dynamic texture, but they don't fall far short in any category – except price, which makes them a real bargain. These cables are certainly not cheap and they lack the finish, termination options, range and robust construction of more mainstream offerings. Instead, they major on performance, pure and simple – which actually sums their sound up pretty well!

Vacuum State GmbH  
Net. [www.vacuumstate.com](http://www.vacuumstate.com)

### The AntiCables

The AntiCables have already graced these pages in the perhaps surprising company of the Gryphon electronics in Issue 58. Well, now they return in their own right. Once again, simplicity is the watchword, this time applied to enameled copper solid-cores. The speaker cable is a simple twisted pair of what looks like a 2.5mm conductor, terminated in this case with the simplest of copper spades. ▶

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► The interconnect is visually far more striking, a hair fine (0.25mm?) central signal conductor running through an extended spiral of the 1mm wire that provides the return. Plugs are once again Eichmann Bullets, but this time the copper version. And that's all she wrote...

Although they are the most affordable cables here, the near-rigid conductors and startling appearance of the interconnects in particular, make the AntiCables far from shrinking violets; their springy nature means they stand out and up, and reward careful dressing to keep them as clear of walls and floor as possible. They do run in over time, although not as obviously as other wires, especially those using Teflon insulation. The effects of which are documented in detail on the company's web-site – a site you'll be visiting should you want to purchase the AntiCables as it is the only source.

Once wired in and settled down, the one word that sums up these cables is "unobtrusive". To say that these wires succeed by dint of doing nothing wrong might sound like a backhanded compliment, but it isn't. The problem that confronts too many cables is that their performance is uneven, delivering significant strengths that are offset by equally significant weaknesses. The Magnan and Mavros cables are cases in point, examples of the rule rather than the exception to it. All well and good if you subscribe to the corrective school of system cabling, but an approach that definitely limits their application. However, if you follow the foundation building logic advocated in this series of articles then it's balanced performance that you require – and the AntiCables are the most affordable

way of getting it that I've come across.

Although not startling in any particular performance category, these simplest of wires scale their presentation near perfectly. So, they aren't the most transparent, dynamic, richly coloured or quickest cables here. Their levels of detail are good rather than great, their presence and immediacy likewise. But the fact that

everything is in proportion, that there's no bloated or pumped up bass, exaggerated dynamics or etching, means that their sense of order, musical organization and flow is remarkably natural, making melodic lines lucid and rhythmic patterns clearly understandable.

In absolute terms, you can criticise their lack of colour and a compression of dynamic contrasts – but that's to ignore their cost, and the fact that they actually outperform their price peers in these respects anyway. And that's really the point. These cables are so comfortable and confident in use, so listenable that you find yourself judging them by far more exalted standards than their cost dictates. Yes, you can do better – but at some considerable damage to your wallet!

Anti Cables  
1m phono - phone \$150  
9' stereo pair 4mm - 4mm \$130  
Net. [www.anticables.com](http://www.anticables.com)

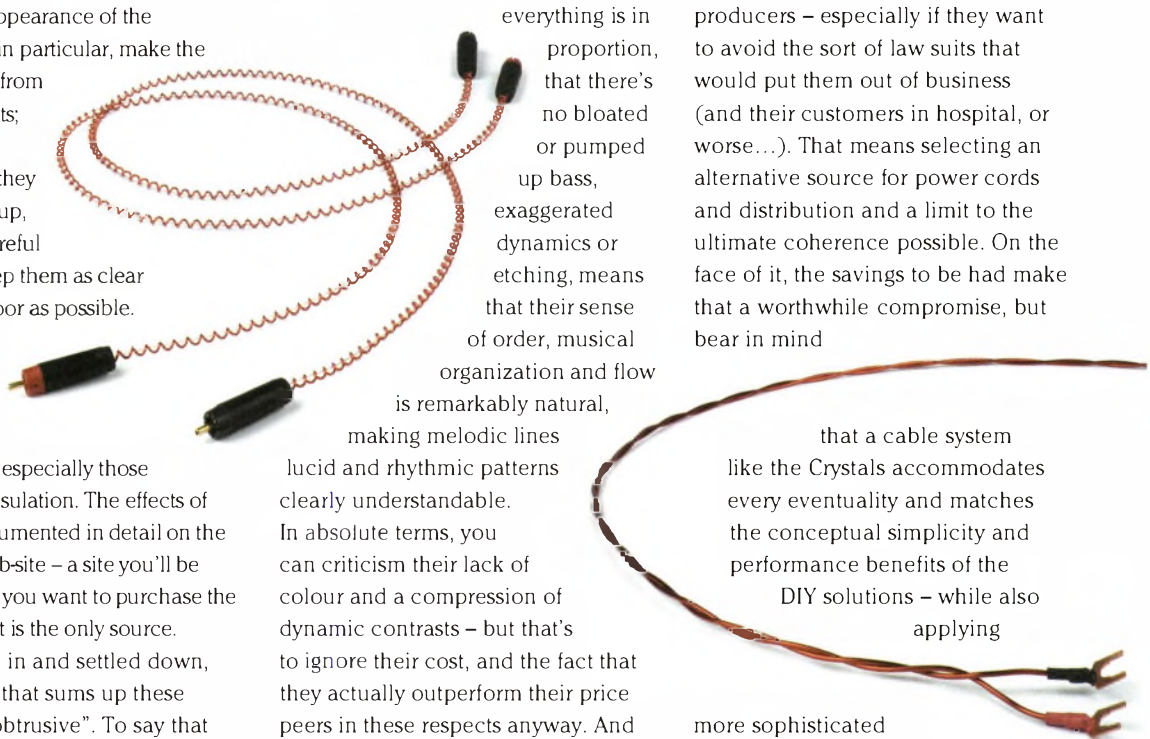
### Does the DIY approach make sense?

In terms of the performance/price

equation, both the AntiCables and Vacuum State cables offer astonishing results for the money – but there is a limit to how far you can take them, a limit dictated by their lack of matching mains cables and power distribution elements. Their minimalist construction and limited insulation makes that a very, very sensible option on the part of their producers – especially if they want to avoid the sort of law suits that would put them out of business (and their customers in hospital, or worse...). That means selecting an alternative source for power cords and distribution and a limit to the ultimate coherence possible. On the face of it, the savings to be had make that a worthwhile compromise, but bear in mind

that a cable system like the Crystals accommodates every eventuality and matches the conceptual simplicity and performance benefits of the DIY solutions – while also applying

more sophisticated metallurgy and insulation materials. If you are using cables that haven't kept pace with current thinking, or a mix and match loom constructed from various expensive options, a switch to something like the AntiCables could come as quite a shock – and a salutary financial lesson into the bargain. But the real lesson to learn here is theoretical. It's not about one cable as opposed to another; it's about understanding what allows cable systems to work and then selecting accordingly from those products that take those things seriously. The key words here are "simplicity" and "coherence". What you have to decide is how far to take things within those concepts. ▶+







# Aiming High... Goldmund For Beginners

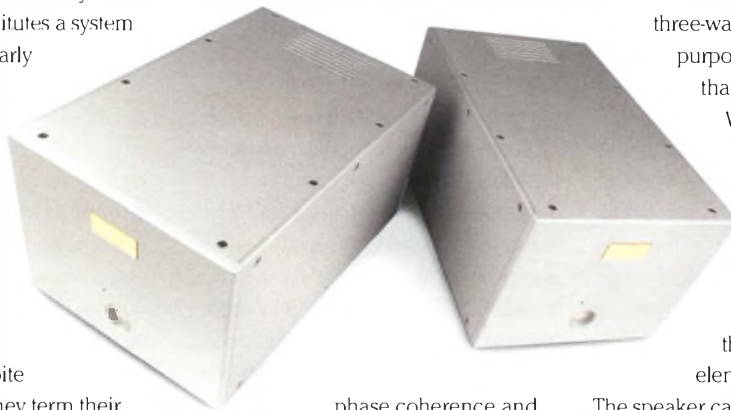
by Roy Gregory

Goldmund is a company that's nothing if not individual. But this isn't a case of different for difference sake. The distinctive visual identity of its products reflects their conceptual coherence, a philosophical identity that's just as clearly defined as their stand-apart aesthetics. So much so that, units that look off-beat, even odd-ball when seen in isolation, make perfect sense when assembled together, underlining the fact that this, more than almost any other range I know, constitutes a system approach. Here, form clearly follows function.

Beyond the instantly identifiable appearance, the one other thing that most people know about Goldmund is that their products don't come cheap. The system assembled here is no exception, and despite being drawn from what they term their High-End Series, represents one step up from entry level in the Company's product line. What does that mean in financial terms? Think of these units as costing £8K a box and you won't be far off, yet they are smaller and simpler in appearance than most of the competition. Just what is it you are paying for?

To answer that question you first have to appreciate the Goldmund agenda. C.E.O. Michel Reverchon (interviewed back in Issue 51) describes them as a "fundamental research" company, pointing to their investigation of both human hearing response and the

high-tech solutions they've developed in response to their discoveries. For Goldmund, hi-fi performance rests on several basic performance parameters – parameters that are woefully inadequate in most products on the market. First and foremost is wide bandwidth, which in Goldmund speak means not just passing signal from DC to 3MHz, but developing amps that deliver full power across that bandwidth. Then there's



phase coherence and minimizing group delay, followed closely by mechanical grounding designed to that end. Finally comes dynamic range. These priorities are of course, inextricably linked, but their importance informs every aspect of Goldmund product design and development. Look ahead to their recently revealed Project Leonardo and you see the use of DSP to correct phase inaccuracies in passive crossovers – which might sound simple, but believe me, it isn't! The results are also shockingly audible, but we're getting ahead of ourselves...

To really understand the depth to

which conceptual thinking informs Goldmund system designs, the easiest place to start is the speaker. The Logos 1/2 combination supplied for review is a modular set-up, consisting of a smallish two-way, reflex loaded head unit and a pair of active sub-woofers. The elements can be bought separately, allowing the speakers to be assembled over time, but it is in their full, final form as seen here that they best reveal their nature. Rather than a sub-sat system, this is a dedicated

three-way design, mounted in a purpose built stand. Having said that, all is not as it seems.

Whilst the stand serves to lift the bass unit 42cm off the floor, perching it at a visually incongruous height, and fixes the head unit around 5cm above that, supporting those elements is its sole function.

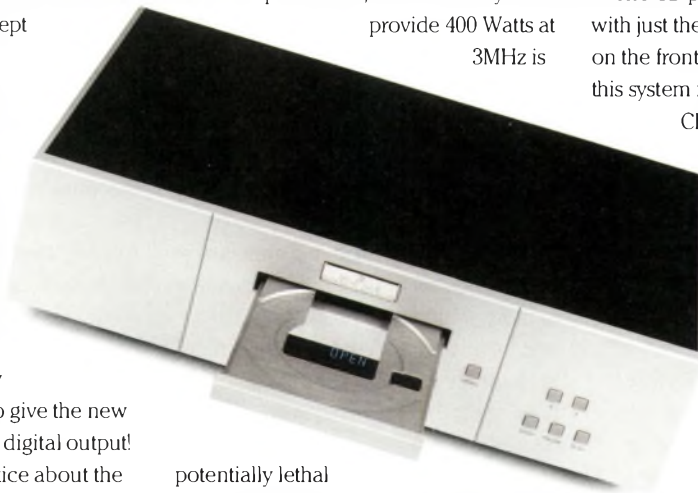
The speaker cabinets themselves are constructed from aluminium plates, close coupled by solid alloy rods that ground mechanical energy directly into the floor. Look around the back and you'll be in for another surprise. As well as the expected inputs and controls on the back of the Logos 2 bass units (level, roll-off and an RCA analogue socket) there's a pair of digital inputs too. Yep, inside each sub there's a DAC. You can buy an active version of the Logos 1 as well, and that has a digital input option as well. In fact, every power amp in the Goldmund range offers the option of digital inputs, allowing the company to institute digital signal transfer within the system, ▶

▶ eliminating the losses associated with analogue cabling, as well as harnessing DSP to provide phase coherent active crossovers. Of course, digital signal transfer and DSP don't exactly have the best of reputations in high-end audio circles, where practitioners have been all too willing to accept theoretical performance standards in place of the real thing, but like just about everything else in audio, it's not just about what you do, but how you do it that matters, and Goldmund are very, very serious about their DAC and DSP technology. How serious? Serious enough to give the new Reference record player a digital output!

Another thing you'll notice about the Logos 2 bass units is that despite the relatively compact dimensions of their sealed, 35cm cubic cabinets, each one contains two horizontally opposed, 305mm drivers. This "force-canceling" arrangement is clearly in line with the concept of good mechanical grounding, but the use of such large drivers and their removal from the benefits of boundary reinforcement demands the use of a high-quality, high-powered amplifier to deliver good linearity and bass depth. The electronics package in the Logos delivers 300 Watts with an unusually low output impedance to guarantee excellent linearity and control. The twin drivers help to maintain the sense of scale and wide dynamic range, while the carefully chosen pulp-coned midrange driver and soft-dome tweeter in the Logos I were selected to maintain micro-dynamic detail and instrumental texture: Dynamics cut both ways and you need to be able to do the smallest changes in level just as convincingly as the widest ones – at high and low frequencies.

The Telos 200 mono-blocs share many characteristics with the amps found in the Logos bass units, including their digital inputs. These are the smallest incarnation

of Goldmund's most advanced amplification circuit, yet are still capable of delivering 400 Watt peaks into an 8 Ohm load, their high power output reflecting the importance the company places on uncompressed dynamics. The problem is, that the ability to provide 400 Watts at 3MHz is



potentially lethal to speakers if anything goes wrong. Thankfully, the Telos amps incorporate a parallel fault sensing circuit that clamps their output in a matter of nanoseconds – in itself no mean technical feat. Each chassis is densely packed, not least by the complex, multi-stage power supply, while the slab-sided construction is used to sink mechanical energy out of the components and circuit boards. The Telos 200s run noticeably warm to the touch, three colour coded LEDs on the front panel showing power and signal status (including digital lock) as well as a range of possible fault conditions. Chunky and solid, their compact dimensions make them quite manageable – but only because of their mono-bloc construction. I wouldn't fancy lifting a stereo version!

In comparison to the maps and speakers, the Mimesis 27.3 analogue line-stage and Eidos 20 CD/SACD player seem quite conventional – although both are considerably heavier than their appearance suggests. The line-stage offers four line-level inputs, a tape loop and two sets of main outputs (essential to drive the hybrid active/passive speakers). There are also three digital inputs, which

will feed an optional internal DAC, although this wasn't fitted to the review unit. The large, central display offers numerical readouts for input and level, the massive red numerals easily legible from distance.

The CD player is similarly minimalist, with just the basic controls represented on the front-panel, and it is here that this system is open to criticism. Like all CD/SACD transports, the one used in the Eidos 20 is slow to react. What I don't understand is why the display is just as lethargic. The screen stays resolutely blank until the transport actually reacts, leaving you wondering if the machine is even powered up. What's more, the small green numerals clash horribly with the size, colour and style of

the ones on the pre-amp; definitely a case of "should do better". However, once the disc drawer finally opens, things start to look up. The normal plastic tray has been replaced with a beautifully CNCd alloy slab, much more in keeping with the inert chassis and surprising mass of the player. Round the back you get analogue outputs for stereo and discrete multi-channel, as well as TosLink and SPDif digital. Remote is a nasty plastic item, although thankfully not over-populated with buttons. In the absence of any video connections the various on-screen menu options essential for full SACD functionality can't be accessed, whilst the player has the disconcerting, DVD-esque habit of returning to the last point played on any disc, even after its removal from the machine. Once again, the user interface is letting the side down; why no system remote and why no video output? Goldmund's insistence that this is a CD player first, but one that also plays SACD, might just explain this, but if I was filling in a report card then the phrase "could do better" wouldn't be far away...

In fairness, such operational issues ▶

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(HiFi + September 08)

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and while stocks last

► are par for the course with much high-end equipment, but in this case they do detract from what is otherwise an astonishingly accomplished system. Be in no doubt, this Goldmund system's musical performance, it's ability to sound real – especially on live material – can teach many a system more than a thing or two. If you want immediacy and clarity, look no further. This set up places musicians, solid and present, right in front of you, with credible scale and in a believable acoustic space. Start with something simple like voice and guitar and you'll be astonished at just how impressive and convincing a good recording can sound. Whether it's majoring on micro-dynamic acoustic detail or the kind of explosive, almost percussive pyrotechnics you hear so often from spot-lit electric instruments (and their players) this system doesn't just rise to the challenge, it encompasses it without any noticeable effort or strain, no limits on soaring levels, tiny details or intimate textures.

Just one track is all it will take you to realise that this is one of the fastest systems you'll ever have heard. It transits dynamic steps with ease, follows rhythmic twists and turns like a bob-sleigh on a gold medal run, leaps giant buildings in a single bound... Because this isn't just speed for speed's sake; this is speed harnessed to a purpose, speed that's been rooted to solid ground, giving it the sort of firm footing and traction that makes for both surefooted agility and giant steps. Just like a really good dancer, it combines delicacy with an explosive power and the ability to bridge gaps without apparent effort. And just like a dancer it's all down to power to weight ratio. This isn't the biggest system and it doesn't have the deepest or heaviest bass, but it absolutely makes the most of what it has. Indeed, in many respects, the real secret of its performance lies in the way it delivers low frequencies.

Take one look at those bass boxes, each with its pair of 12" drivers and the old volume monster starts to wriggle at

the back of your mind. Read the specs and experience their considerable mass and you start mentally rubbing your hands in glee – mentally because it doesn't do to be seen contemplating the extreme physical abuse of expensive equipment in front of its owner. And yes, the Logos speakers will go loud. In fact, they'll go VERY loud if you really want them to. But their bass doesn't really do the gut-churning, trouser-flapping thing. That's not what it's about. Instead of rampaging around your listening room it stays firmly in the plane of the music, within the acoustic space, there when it needs to be, loud when it needs to be – but otherwise, it's remarkably unobtrusive, noticeable more for the planted stability it brings to images and the sense of physical acoustic boundaries, than the sort of rumbling, impromptu eruptions so beloved of AV demonstrators. But fear not, reach for *This One's For Blanton* or Mina Agossi's riotous take on 'Slap That Bass' and you'll quickly appreciate the tactile qualities, speed, texture and agility of this bottom end – the way it moves along, setting the pace, clearly defined in pitch and progress. The rapid fingering of a Ray Brown or Eric Jacot, so often smudged or blurred by even the best hi-fi systems, is quick,

clear and articulate, full of shape and energy, the work they put on notes, the rhythmic accents and subtle pushes, the way they stretch the tail of this note or chop that one.

Part of the clue lies in the sub settings themselves. Clear of boundary reinforcement, you'll find that unlike most sub-woofers, which you seem to be constantly turning down, these run at much higher levels and deliver a cleaner signal that integrates more readily and far more meaningfully. Hence my insistence that the Logos set-up be considered a three-way design: It's not a physical or conceptual thing – more a question of the way it sounds and the balance of virtues and issues it brings to the problem.

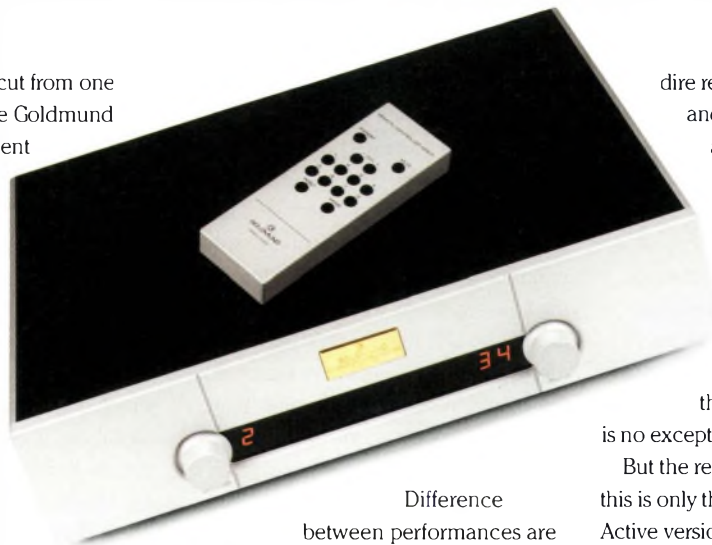
Of course, all that clean, uncluttered and coherent bass, matched so seamlessly to the mid and treble, would be useless without the amps to drive it and the source to deliver detail (and make sense of it); which is exactly where the Goldmund system scores. Because each and every link in the chain shares the same concerns and design criteria, there's a balance of abilities that's mutually reinforcing – the complete opposite of the mix and match, compensatory approach adopted by so many listeners when it comes to "system matching".

Coherence is the watchword here: conceptual, technological but above all, musical. Really successful musical reproduction relies first and foremost on presenting the ►



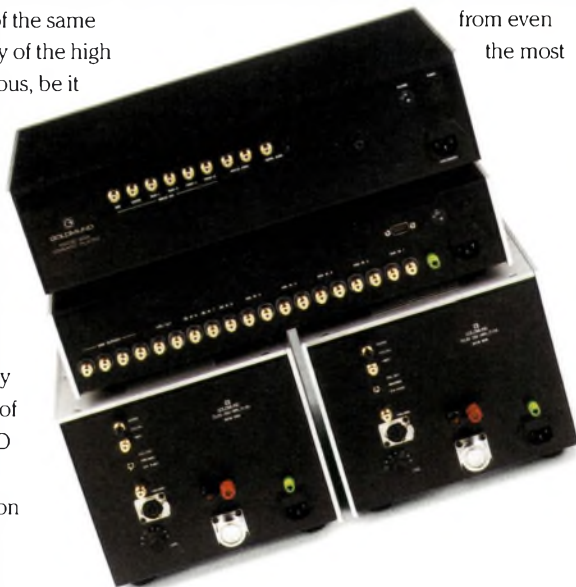
performance as a piece, cut from one cloth and it's here that the Goldmund excels. The binding element here is that sheer speed of response across the system's bandwidth and the impressive dynamic range that results. This set-up could never be described as warm or cuddly and those who bask in the cozy glow of traditional tube amps will blanch at its self-effacing clarity and unashamed precision. This is the epitome of the ultra transparency, almost hyper reality that many listeners have come to associate with high-end performance. This is one system for whose performance you will never have to explain or apologize to the uninitiated. Its qualities are starkly, almost smack you in the face apparent – never more so than with a live recording; whether it's the funky, up-beat groove (and incidental noise) on the opening of Art Pepper's *Besame Mucho*, or the immediacy and presence, the sudden dynamics and "right there" feel of Jackson Browne's solo acoustic recordings.

The clarity isn't just about detail either; it's about musical purpose too. Comparing the differences between CD and SACD versions of the same recording, the superiority of the high definition format is obvious, be it the Pixies' *Doolittle* and the texture and tactile quality of the bass, the way the system sorts out and layers the dense mix, adding clarity and focus without dismantling the driving rhythms and edgy feel, or Reiner's reading of the *New World*, the SACD adding transparency, acoustic space, separation and dynamic range.



Difference between performances are just as apparent, so that comparing Piatigorsky and Starker in the Dvorak *Cello* has rarely created a more dramatic contrast, while ushering Queyras into the equation underlines both his lack of power and lyrical sweep in the opening movement, but his poise and total mastery of the second.

The beauty of a true system is that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts – and this is a system in the truest sense of the word. It's also a system that never forgets that the musical whole is more important than the parts that reproduce it. Whilst the Goldmund approach could never be described as devoid of character, I can't imagine anybody being less than captivated by its musical insight and authority, its ability to conjure the spirit and life from even the most



dire recording. In that regard – and in its unflinching clarity and linearity – it reminds me of the Lavardin amplifiers, which is praise indeed, especially given the scale and bandwidth of which it's capable. Michel Reverchon's systems are never less than musical – and this one is no exception.

But the really exciting thing is that this is only the first step on the journey. Active versions of the Logos 1 and the introduction of the Mimesis 30 Universal (digital) pre-amp promise significant advances in performance over these already impressive results – without significant increase in cost and with a reduction in the number of boxes and the resultant domestic impact. As many people who have tried to do "B&O for the customer where musical quality counts", Goldmund have delivered the first solution that really scores in that regard. Unashamedly post-modern aesthetics, unequivocally impressive performance and remarkable system versatility constitute a powerful and striking package – and one that gets bigger and better from here. I can't wait to take that next step... ➤+

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# Record Reviews

## How To Read Them


The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

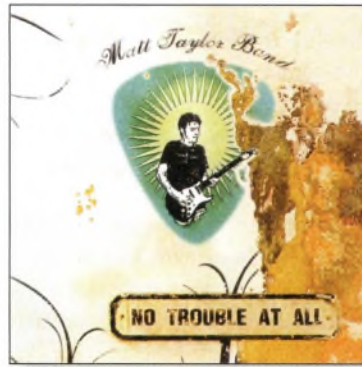
The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

The reviewers are identified by their initials.

They are:- Dave Ayers, Tim Britt, Anke K. Bronner, Mark Childs, Richard Clews, Dave Davies, Dennis D. Davis, Peter Downard, Richard S. Foster, Roy Gregory, Simon Groome, Jason Hector, Andrew Hobbs, James Michael Hughes, Reuben Parry, David Stirling.


### Key to Icons

	CD		120g LP
	Gold CD		150g LP
	HDCD		180g LP
	XRCD		10" LP
	Double Disc		Availability As S/H LP
	DVD		Vinyl Double Album
	SACD		
	Hybrid SACD		
	Multi-Channel		



### Matt Taylor Band

#### No Trouble At All

B.E. Recordings BECD108 


Matt Taylor's first album earned him nominations for best guitarist and best album at the British Blues Awards, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to expect to hear plenty of string bending on traditionally bluesy songs. That's catered for on *No Trouble At All* but there's also a whole lot more going on. This is what one might call eclectic; even some of the covers raise a few eyebrows. True, the Allman Brothers' 'It's Not My Cross To Bear' gets the full-on slow blues treatment and jolly good it is too, but to find a version of Sheryl Crow's 'Everyday Is A Winding Road' nestling alongside – now that is something of a surprise. It stays relatively faithful to the original although not any better, but I still applaud Taylor for having a crack at it. He also tackles Dylan's 'To Be Alone With You', infusing it with honky tonk piano, handclaps and a delicious solo, which is very pleasing on the ear. Diversity can also be found in the originals. 'The Open Road', with its gentle guitar intro would make a great single, such is the strength of its chorus, and 'Snakes' has an almost Rumba-like groove. 'You Are The One', however, is an insipid ballad and should have been strangled at birth. Purists will have kittens but there's plenty here for the rest of us to sit back and enjoy.

AH



### Tekameli

#### Escolteu

Jade 699 654-2 

Originating from Perpignan in the South of France, not so very far from the Gypsy Kings' Camargue, Tekameli have forged a reputation as one of the best bands to emerge from the French Catalan Gypsy scene over the last decade. The founding members of the band, Jean Soler, Salomon Espinas and Julio Bermudez also play Rumba Catalana and Flamenco, blending Latin American beats with flamenco, extending the range and flavour of their music.

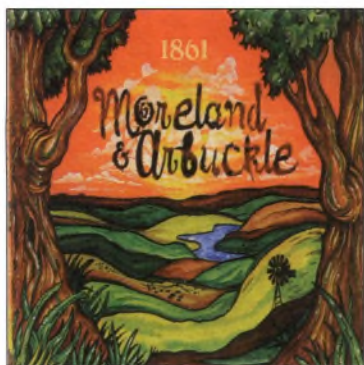
The band's name means "I Love You" in Calo, the old language of Spanish Gypsies, and conveys the band's desire to convey joy, love and celebration in their music.

Recorded in Perpignan's Casa Musicale, the set reflects the deep-rooted influence of Evangelical music on the band with an excellent collection of heartfelt and genuinely passionate singing and playing around religious themes. Particular standout tracks in this consistently strong selection are 'A Capella' and 'Soy Hereadero', the former since the singing reaches a peak of emotional intensity, the latter due primarily to its engaging melody and joyful mood. This is a strong and uplifting album, my only small gripe being the lack of translated lyrics in the sleeve notes.

DD







## Moreland & Arbuckle

1861

Northern Blues NBM0044 (CD)

The Northern Blues label has a habit of unearthing some real gems from the world of blues and they've gone and done it again with *Moreland and Arbuckle*, a throwback delta blues and country band from Kansas. Guitarist Aaron Moreland grew up on Zeppelin and Kiss but switched interest to the blues at the age of 22 after hearing a Son House record. Singer and harpist Dustin Arbuckle's calling came after hearing Elmore James and BB King at the tender age of 15.

Completed by drummer Brad Horner, Moreland and Arbuckle have a way of hitting the listener hard in the midriff with their particularly authentic take on the blues. Dustin has an earthy growl and blows the harp with real menace, and his style blends beautifully with Aaron's considerable dexterity on the guitar. Whether the band are thumping their way through the all-out manic electric blues of 'Gonna Send Yo' or stripping the sound right back to the acoustic guitar, harp and vocals of 'Teasin' Honey', the end result is always the sound of musicians who learnt their trade by absorbing the traits of the masters. To listen to them throb their way through 'Please Please Mammy' with its easy going roll of a beat is to be in the presence of out and out quality.

Fans of the Fat Possum sound who want to hear how it used to be done should stop by.

AH



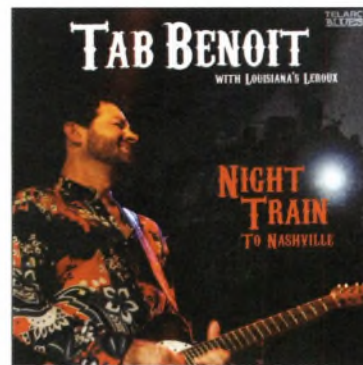
## Various artists

You Don't Know: Ninja Cuts

Ninja Tune (CD)

Ninja Tune is the record label that offers a home to artists such as The Cinematic Orchestra, Fink, DJ Shadow, Roots Manuva and many more. This is Ninja's fifth label compilation and includes 49 tracks of such variety that they cannot be grouped under a single musical genre: there's a lot of hip hop of both the rap driven and turntable powered variety, but there's also Jaga's Scandinavian prog and John Matthias who's a bit of a folkie. With variety in material you get variety in sound quality, so there is a fair amount of sampled sounds but the live and acoustic recordings bring a welcome spaciousness and surprising intimacy. But this is all about spreading your musical horizons. The title chosen indicates that few will be familiar with all the material that this label has on its roster, which also means that only the truly enlightened will appreciate everything on these three discs. I enjoyed more than half the tracks on offer and particularly appreciated a dozen of them, Cinematic Orchestra's rocked out take on *Rite Of Spring* and RJD2's guitarfest 'True Confessions' among them. If you want to know what's going on in the more adventurous extremes of beat oriented music you should get to know *You Don't Know*.

JK



## Tab Benoit

Night Train To Nashville

Telarc Records CD83674 (CD)

Regular readers of *Hi-Fi +* will know I'm a big fan of this guy. His last album, *Power Of The Pontchartrain* found its way onto my 'favourites of last year' list, and if you haven't discovered it yet you're missing out. Fresh from being honoured with two awards in 2006 for BB King Entertainer Of The Year and Best Contemporary Male Performer, Tab unleashes his first live album. It was recorded over two nights in Nashville and finds him and some of his friends in truly scintillating form. Benoit's sound leans heavily on his Louisiana upbringing, so there's plenty of that fiery Cajun gumbo going on. Hot New Orleans combo, Louisiana's Leroux are along for the ride and they provide masterful backing to a true genius of blues guitar. Whatever this guy plays, be it the thumping blues rock of 'Night Train' with its insurgent beat or the gentle country blues of 'Moon Coming Over The Hill' – featuring Jim Lauderdale on guest vocals – he always does it with the highest professionalism.

Working the riff is one of Tab's specialities; he gets hold of a big fat juicy one and proceeds to grind it into a frenzy, punctuating the song with bursts of blistering soloing. Check out 'Muddy Bottom Blues' for evidence. There are few more exciting players out there than this man. The blues is lucky to have him.

AH





# QUEEN OF THE SOUTH...

## THE FANTASTIC TALENTS OF EMMYLOU HARRIS

by Andrew Hobbs

In the Oxford Dictionary a legend is described as "somebody famous, admired for their skill and talent." Is that ever true of Alabama born singer Emmylou Harris, a woman blessed with the pristine voice of an angel and who has taken country music and the art of record making to previously untapped heights.

Her career officially took off in 1969 with an album called *Gliding Bird* on Jubilee Records, but the label folded shortly after its release. Undeterred, Emmylou continued performing as part of a trio around Washington DC, and it was during one of these performances that she was noticed by the Byrds' Chris Hillman, who was aware that Gram Parsons was looking for a female singer to duet with him on his forthcoming release, *Grievous Angel*. So began one of the most famous partnerships in the history of country music; the drug taking, alcoholic outlaw and the beautiful woman with the most devastating vocal talents imaginable. Gram never was a top-notch singer but his voice had a certain cracked charm; however, once it fused with Emmylou's scaring tones and drop dead gorgeous harmonies, magic on a grand level ensued. Gram and Emmylou became lovers, but disaster struck in 1973 when Parsons was found dead in a motel room from an accidental overdose. The whole saga left Emmylou traumatised and the scars of coming to terms with Gram's death took a long time to heal. She found solace and comfort in the pen, and although at this time she didn't write prolifically, she did write the moving 'Boulder To Birmingham' as a tribute to her missing second heart.

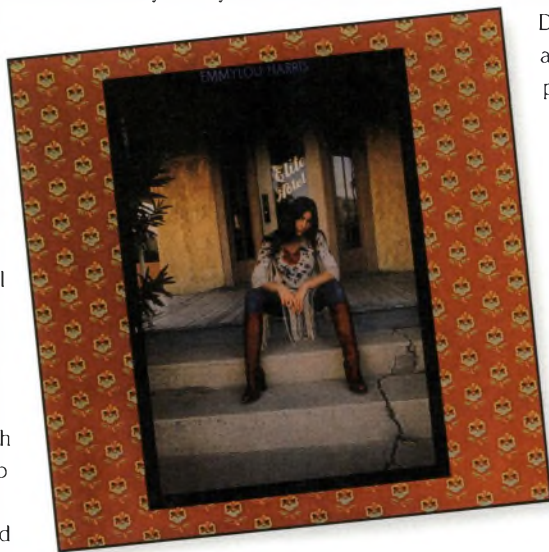
Things took a turn for the better in 1975 with the release of *Pieces Of The Sky* on Warner Brothers Records, which at the time was one of the most expensive country records ever made. The band she assembled to help her included Elvis' guitarist James Burton and his pianist Glen Hardin, but all the players were well known around town and amongst the best in their field. The choice of songs showed

remarkable taste and included the heart wrenching 'Boulder To Birmingham', which nestled beautifully in the grooves alongside other notable classics like Shel Silverstein's 'Queen Of The Silver Dollar', Dolly Parton's 'Coat Of Many Colours' and Lennon and McCartney's moving 'For No One'. The album performed well and started to cross over to the rock market – no mean feat back then, as the two genres were not generally seen as bosom buddies. With an ever-growing reputation for quality, Emmylou formed the now famous Hot Band, recruiting Rodney Crowell, Emory

Gordy Jnr, John Ware and Hank De Vito to play alongside Burton and Hardin. Her second album proper, *Elite Hotel*, pulled off the near impossible and eclipsed *Pieces...* for the sheer quality of the performances and the flawless interpretations of the songs. Here were definitive takes on classic country tunes, including three from Parsons, two from young buck Rodney Crowell and another from Lennon and McCartney, a breathtaking rendition of 'Here, There and Everywhere', which to this day has never been bettered by anyone – and that takes into

account The Beatles' version. Crowell's 'Til I Gain Control Again' is another highlight and possesses a guitar solo from Burton that has to rank as one of the most moving ever committed to record.

By now, Emmylou was on a roll. Her third album, *Luxury Liner* again featured the Hot Band, except for James Burton who was replaced by English wizard Albert Lee. Lee's impact was immediate; his playing on the title track absolutely dazzled the senses, such was the speed and fluidity of the picking. Ever the sublime interpreter, Emmylou chose to cover Townes Van Zandt's 'Poncho and Lefty', and as she's done countless times before and since, she reworked it and lifted it onto a higher plane. *Luxury Liner* also features a foot-tapping stroll through Chuck Berry's 'C'est La Vie (You Never Can Tell)', another Crowell gem, 'You're Supposed To Be Feeling Good' and ►

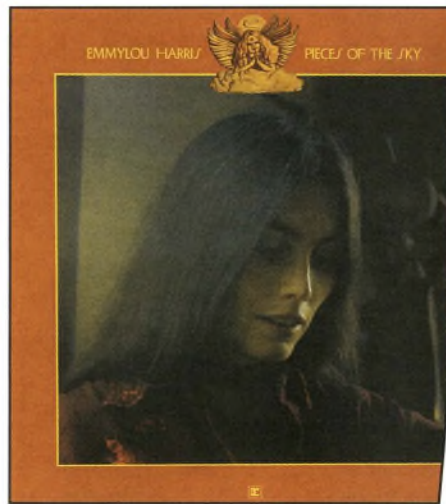


▶ one of her finest ever ballads in 'Making Believe'. The next two releases, *Quarter Moon In A Ten Cent Town* and *Blue Kentucky Girl* kept the standards to the same level, and these five albums represent a truly golden period in contemporary country music.

Throughout the 80's Emmylou continued to release exquisitely crafted country albums and they were always well received by the press, but a growing trend towards a more pop-oriented field fuelled by Nashville money-makers hungry for bigger things meant a sharp decline in sales and popularity. If an artist as well established as Emmylou wanted to survive, a new direction was called for, and that came in the shape of U2's producer Daniel Lanois. In 1995 Daniel and Emmylou collaborated on a new and exciting adventure resulting in *Wrecking Ball*, one of the most critically lauded

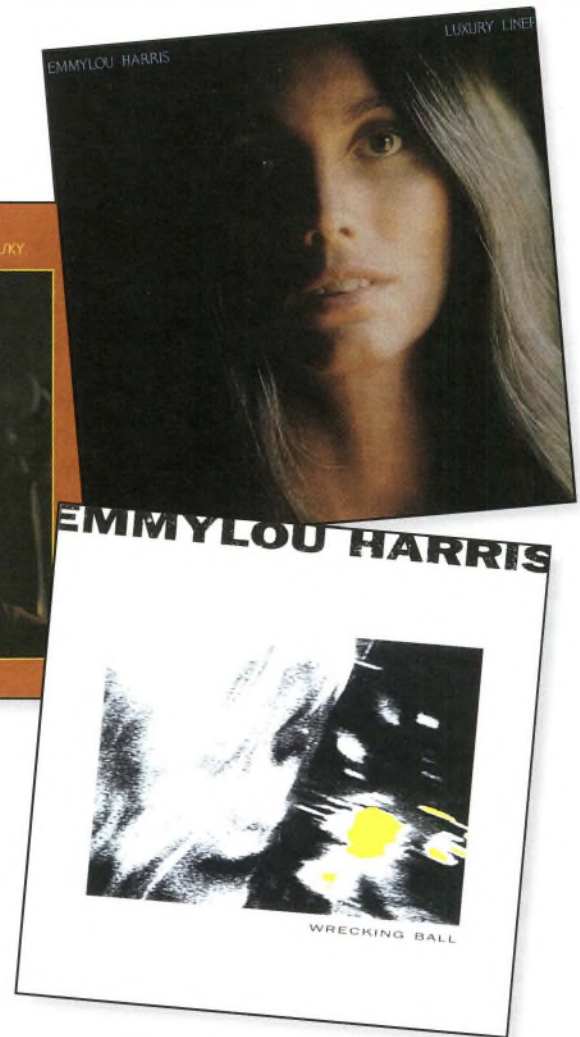
albums of that particular decade. Lanois' ethereal production and ghostly arrangements married spectacularly to Emmylou's soul-searing voice, and armed with the usual impeccable choice of songs and some very high profile guests *Wrecking Ball* catapulted her back into the hearts and minds of the

record buying public. One of its many highlights came from the pen of Steve Earle. 'Goodbye' fitted seamlessly into the mix on the strength of its very simple melody and some of the most plaintive lyrics Earle has ever penned. Knowing Earle's past, it seems this particular song about a broken love affair was written from an autobiographical viewpoint: "I remember holding on to you, all them long and lonely nights I put you through, somewhere in there I'm sure I made you cry, but I can't remember if we said goodbye." The second verse is just so unbelievably poignant: "But I recall all of them nights down in Mexico, one place I may never go in my life again, was I just off somewhere or just too high, but I can't remember if we said goodbye." Neil Young helps out on the title track, one of his own compositions, and Earle, Young, Larry Mullen Jr., Malcolm Burn and Lucinda Williams join forces with Emmylou for another tearjerker, Lucinda's 'Sweet Old World'. With stunningly original versions of Hendrix' 'May This Be Love' and Dylan's 'Every



Grain Of Sand' thrown in for good measure, *Wrecking Ball* had everything it needed to be a huge smash and it was, featuring very near the top of just about every music magazines' 'Best Of The Year' lists. Emmylou had reinvented herself in spectacular fashion.

She followed up the success of *Wrecking Ball* by releasing a terrific live album with a new band consisting of Buddy Miller on guitar, Brady Blade on drums and Daryl Johnson on bass, with the band and the record sharing the same name – *Spyboy*.



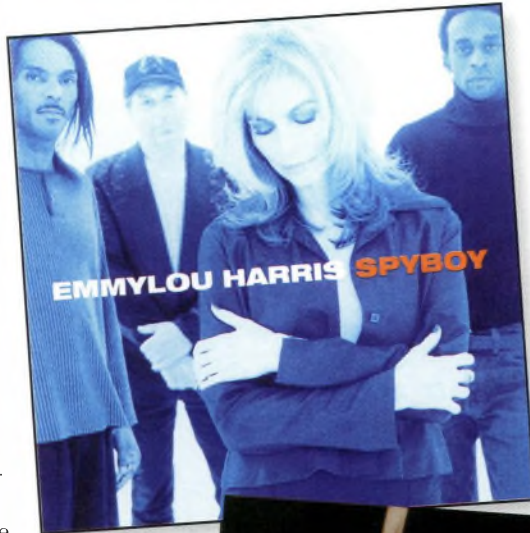
Although the band were compact, the sound was full and the recording punchy and to the point. The blend of new and old material and the quality of the musicianship marks it out as probably her best live album, and it's very interesting to note the subtle changes occurring in her voice. At this time she'd taken to smoking, and that coupled with a long career gave her voice a slightly rougher edge when she pushed it to the outer edges.

► Up until this point, Emmylou's interest in writing her own material had been sporadic, to say the least. After all, being blessed with such a supreme gift for interpretation and with top writers falling over themselves to have their songs recorded by her, there appeared to be little need for her to exercise this side of her talents. So when her next release, *Red Dirt Girl* hit the streets, it was a major surprise to find eleven of the twelve tracks

either written or co-written by Emmylou. *Red Dirt Girl* was the sound of a woman baring her soul and no way could it be called lightweight or an easy listen. With Malcolm Burn installed in the producer's chair, the music weaved dark patterns behind Emmylou's mystical but pain-ridden words. She seemed to be

trying to exorcise some long held ghosts, and whether 'I Don't Wanna Talk About It Now' is written about Gram Parsons or not, someone somewhere has left a very deep emotional scar: "God knows why you don't want me / no one would do the things I do, but to my grave it's gonna haunt me / how I got down on my knees for you; you are my obsession and the reason that I live / you already got my soul, there's nothing left to give." Bruce Springsteen and Patti Scialfa helped out on 'Tragedy' and Patti Griffin's gorgeous harmony vocals shadowed 'One Big Love', but the outstanding track had to be 'Bang The Drum Slowly'. Over a sensual backdrop of synth bass, EBow guitar and percussion, Emmylou's vocals oozed with a weariness of almost hymn-like proportions, as the resignation in the words reached fever pitch: "Bang the drum slowly, play the pipe lowly / to dust be returning from dust we begin, bang the drum slowly, I'll speak of things holy / above and below me, world without end."

The follow up to *Red Dirt Girl*, *Stumble Into Grace* once more featured mainly self-penned material and continued her move away from the country sound of old.



And I haven't even mentioned Emmylou's vast catalogue of recording work with an incredibly diverse array of talents. There are the collaborations with Linda Ronstadt and Dolly Parton (*Trio* and *Trio 2*), two albums with Mark Knopfler, the amazing harmony work on Bob Dylan's *Desire*, contributions to albums by Ryan Adams, Neil Young, her friend Lucinda Williams, Elvis Costello, Lyle Lovett, Roy Orbison...the list is almost infinite. It's doubtful if there's another artist out there who can match Emmylou's track record as a guest harmony vocalist. If somebody wants to enlist a specialist voice to enhance their record, then chances are Emmylou Harris' name comes out of the hat first.

She has just released a new album, *All I Intended To Be*, her second recording for Nonesuch Records. There are self-penned numbers but not so many; instead she shares those writing duties with other celebrated names from the world of country, roots and rock, and her interpretative skills are as keenly observed as ever.

Patti Griffin, Mark Germino, Billy Joe Shaver, Merle Haggard and Tracy Chapman all lend their talents to a record that leans more towards the rootsy sound she carved her name on, and she clearly believes she's finally arrived at exactly the place she always wanted to be.

Emmylou has an innate love of dogs and supports various charities tirelessly. She is also a passionate supporter of


the Campaign For A Landmine Free World, the charity Princess Diana gave so much of her time and energy to. In some ways, Emmylou is the Princess Diana of roots music; she is incredibly beautiful, radiates warmth and grace, is respected and adored by her fellow professionals and fan base alike and has an almost reverential presence. But Emmylou Harris didn't stumble into grace, she carved it almost rainbow-like across a remarkable career, and everything she's ever applied herself to has been touched by a talent as pure as 24 carat gold. A legend? Oh yes, in every sense of the word.





Eric Lindell

## Low On Cash, Rich In Love

Alligator Records ALCD 

There's no way that a Californian kid with this amount of funky rhythm and soul coursing through his veins was ever not going to find his way to New Orleans. Eric Lindell is the living embodiment of that area's sound; he has the swagger of early Mink DeVille, the punch and groove of the Neville Brothers and the swing of The Meters. *Low On Cash, Rich In Love* follows on from his sparkling debut and roars along at a cracking pace. Lindell's sound is summer personified, it's like listening to Van Morrison without having to imagine the grumpy old sod scowling out from under his hat and hating everyone and everything in the world. This music is all about the groove and connecting with the dancing feet... if you can't move to it then you're clinically dead. Ferociously infectious bass lines, horn breaks in all the right places, swirling keyboards and some of the tightest and funkiest guitar playing ever urge Lindell's songs on, whilst the rest of us try to catch our breath. I get absolutely sick and tired of listening to the soulless drivel masquerading as music on the radio. If the powers that be had a modicum of courage or taste they'd create an 'Eric Lindell day' and play his music non-stop. God knows we all need cheering up and this is the perfect antidote for misery.

AH

RECORDING 

MUSIC 



Fred Frith &amp; Henry Kaiser

## Friends &amp; Enemies

Cuneiform Rune 

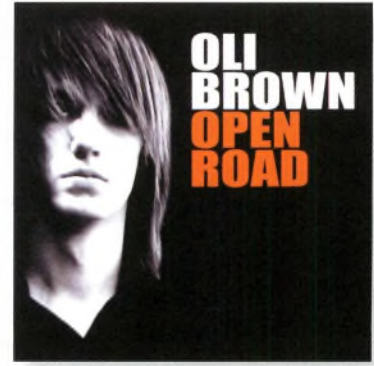
If you have a taste for the outer reaches of what can be achieved with guitars, this compilation is sure to prove diverting. It's also the only place where you find Frith's instrumental interpretation of 'Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues' (by Skip James), released in the 80's. This is one of the finest blues guitar pieces ever recorded. Frith manages to hold the tune together despite straying all over the place and attacking the notes and bending the strings with a ferocity rarely encountered. Frith and Kaiser were the most 'popular' exponents of such avant garde, experimental guitar music in the 80's and 90's. Fred Frith played in Henry Cow and has made records alongside Brian Eno, John Zorn, Evelyn Glennie and many more. Henry Kaiser has likewise played the field with artists as diverse as Richard Thompson, Herbie Hancock and is a key member of the essential Yo Miles project. As a pair, they recorded two albums, *With Friends Like These* in 1979 and *Who Needs Enemies* in 1983 and this compilation includes both albums alongside 11 live tracks from 1984 and six numbers from a 1999 studio session, making 36 tracks in all.

The material runs the gamut from the completely free and musically challenged to the almost normal and even tuneful. In between there is a lot of noodling of the free persuasion and no shortage of high intensity Strat abuse.

JK

RECORDING 

MUSIC 



Oli Brown

## Open Road

Ruf Records RUF1139 

If you're a follower of homegrown blues talent then no doubt you'll have heard of Oli Brown at some time or another. He joins a wealth of hot players out there; the likes of Aynsley Lister, Ian Parker, Ian Siegal and Matt Schofield are all doing sterling work and showing the rest of the world that Britain is once again a thriving blues community. Now it's the turn of Oli Brown, and he's got what it takes to be the best of them all. He reminds me of Jonny Lang – before his record company turned him into something of a joke. He's got the voice of an older, wiser man – much the same as Lang – and he approaches the blues with fire in his belly. He knows his way around a guitar too, not in a flashy way but an honest-to-goodness one. Never wasteful or interested in 30 notes a second, he puts it in where it's needed and makes it count for something. He can play it mean or he can let it soothe your soul and he does it all with a minimum of fuss or effort, and like all the great players, he understands that when it comes to 'feel', less is most definitely more. Peter Green was a master of that philosophy so Oli's in good company...and this is one belting debut that improves with every listen. Highly recommended.

AH

RECORDING 

MUSIC 



Cat Power

Jukebox

Matador OLE 793-1 

This may be the best album of cover versions I have heard. The largely obscure or underrated songs Chan Marshall (Ms. Cat Power) has selected are excellent and have sufficient strength to grow more involving with repeated listening. Marshall has also put together an excellent band, with no passengers in this group. Judah Bauer plays tasteful and precisely crafted electric guitar lines, often bathed in vintage tones with nice dollops of reverb and tremolo. Gregg Foreman's straightforward acoustic and electric keyboards are often at the heart of the songs and Jim White is a splendid drummer. The sonic presentation is fairly consistent throughout. It takes a little getting used to, particularly since Marshall's voice is usually treated with a sizable dollop of echo. Where a more natural presentation is chosen on the Highwaymen's 'Silver Stallion', and on the sole new Marshall composition here, her excellent 'Song to Bobby' for Dylan, the purity of the vocal is refreshing. The presentation of the instrumentalists is excellent throughout, especially on Bob Dylan's 'I Believe in You', which has a tremendous groove, and 'Aretha, Sing One for Me', a tasty sample of swamp rock. This two LP edition, like the limited edition 'Deluxe' 2 CD version that is also available, even includes five additional tracks, while the 180g pressings are excellent.

PD



Beth Hart

37 Days

Provogue PRD 725B 2 

Beth Hart, that immensely gifted and troubled singer songwriter and rock pianist, has crafted an album that delivers on all the promise heard in her earlier outings. She has an agonising and gritty vocal style, emotionally supercharged and lyrically at least, it takes no prisoners. Hers is not one of those syrupy voices to beguile you. Instead, true to herself, she rips and tears into the early songs demanding recognition and respect. There's no sign of passivity in the deeply personal material contained within 'Face Forward Son', 'Sick', 'Jealousy' or 'One-Eyed Chicken'. When Beth dissects a relationship she's at your throat, tightening her grip and demanding to be acknowledged. This is a profoundly honest woman's perspective; powerful advocacy propelled by an excitingly edgy rock groove. If I had a minor criticism then it would have to be the unremitting and singularly relentless and impassioned dramatisation of her life that unfolds in nearly every song. It eventually dulls the senses. Beth actually does delicacy rather well. The gentle and considered openings to 'Crashing Down' and 'At The Bottom', as well as one of the bonus tracks, the especially beautifully sculpted 'LA Song', prove there are subtle depths to her art that require further exploration.

Supplier: Frontier Promotions

RP



The world is full of wannabe rock singers who think they have what it takes to make a difference, but most will never leave their mark because they're either not good enough or they just won't get the breaks. One, however, is so good that she stands head and shoulders above the rest, and her name is Beth Hart. She isn't just another rock singer – she's the greatest female rock singer since the legendary Janice Joplin.

When her first album, *Immortal* hit the streets it became abundantly clear she was something very special. The power in her voice and the quality of the songwriting was stratospheric, but Beth, like so many before her, walked a tightrope between brilliance and total self-destruction. She eventually, in her own words, "got her shit together" and went on to release more albums showcasing that extraordinary voice. *37 Days* is the latest, and it's rammed with amazing songs like 'Soul Shine', the incredible 'Jealousy' and two of the hardest hitting rockers anywhere in 'Sick' and 'Fast Forward'. To hear this woman spit the word "bitch" is to listen to anger at its most primeval. There is a DVD available called *Live @ The Paradiso* and I suggest that if you want to know what all the fuss is about, you purchase it immediately. I guarantee you won't believe your eyes and ears - the woman's a force 10 hurricane!

AH





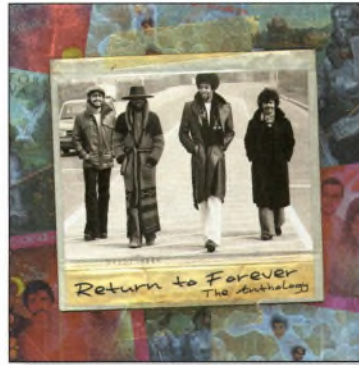
## Kinda Blue

### Anita Wardell

Specific Spec009 

Following the success of her debut album *Noted*, which featured an impressive set of vocalese performances of instrumental originals, Wardell has returned to conventional songs in this collection, carefully selecting a nicely balanced choice of numbers she particularly loves. Not to say that she has entirely abandoned her remarkable vocalese skills. These are re-employed here in 'Loose Bloose' (also known as 'A Race Against Time'), where she has put lyrics to Jim Hall's guitar solo, entirely successfully too, resulting in one of the strongest numbers of the set. Her reading of Rogers Et Hart's 'Little Girl Blue', whilst it will never erase Nina Simone's magisterial version, has a compelling lightness of touch about it. Another particularly strong number is Oliver Nelson's 'Teenies Blues', with some terrific scat singing from Wardell and an equally powerful performance from her band, notably Phil Robson on guitar. 'Learning the Blues' nicely couples downbeat lyrics with a jaunty reading, the number fairly bouncing along. It shouldn't work but Wardell and the band bring it off beautifully; great piano in this number from Robin Aspland too. Taken together this is another very fine CD from Wardell that easily equals and in some cases betters her excellent previous album.

DD



## Return to Forever

### Anthology

Concord Records 

Funkier than Brand X, more disciplined than Mahavishnu Orchestra, Return to Forever was a definitive super-group and its output while not always consistent was righteous. This two-disc set, released to coincide with the band's first reunion and a summer tour, gathers 20 of their finest tracks, culled from four albums released between '73 and '76. The stellar line-up consisted of Stanley Clark on bass, Chick Corea on keyboards, Lenny White on drums and Al Di Meola on guitar; how so many egos managed to sit down and create music is remarkable, the fact that their output was not all of the same calibre not surprising. But condensed down in this fashion you can hear all that's good about a musical style that has remained unfashionable for long enough to let you know it must be good. One reason virtuosity is in such scarce supply is because it's no longer a requisite of musical success. RTF reveals that great musicianship can be allied with great compositions. At their best this band produced truly majestic work which for this anthology has been re-mastered from the ground up by Mick Guzauski (who did Back Home for Eric Clapton). He has done a fine job, extracting the energy and finesse and presenting them in a clean yet organic form that encourages extended listening.

JK



## Whiskeytown

### Stranger's Almanac (Deluxe Edition)

Geffen Records 0602517398603 

When *Stranger's Almanac* appeared in 1997 it thrust into the limelight a young singer called Ryan Adams. His talent was there for all to hear but his band Whiskeytown constantly lived on the edge of destruction, such was their inner turmoil. Destiny dealt its cards though, and against all the odds they came up with this fantastic album. The original 13 songs appear on disc one in re-mastered form and are a reminder of just what a great songwriter Adams is when he puts his mind to it. Some of his finest compositions are here; 'Excuse Me While I Break My Own Heart Tonight', '16 Days' and the utterly gorgeous 'Everything I Do' are consummate examples of a truly gifted tunesmith. This Deluxe Edition also houses some real treasures. Too often the extra tracks are little more than throwaways, but here you get five in the studio live performances and 17 unreleased demos, along with soundtrack inclusions and early versions that really are a delight to hear. 13 tracks are taken from the *Barns On Fire* sessions; stripped back pre-production takes that, because of their rawness actually improve on the originals. '16 Days' in particular benefits from an uncluttered approach, and in quite a few cases the recordings are staggering in their simplicity. It's over 10 years old now, but it still sounds as fresh as the day they laid it down.

AH





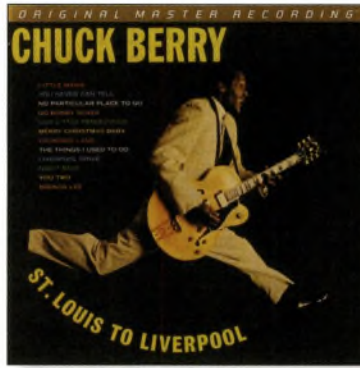
**Watermelon Slim and the Workers**

**No Paid Holidays**

Northern Blues NBM0047

William Homans – aka Watermelon Slim – is one of those bluesmen that makes it all sound so damned easy. Blessed with the perfect growl for the blues, and a really mean guitarist and harp player to boot, Slim sings it with honesty and grit. Homans' rise to prominence has been remarkable. His last two albums won him many awards and even managed to score highly on Mojo's 'Best Of The Year' lists – no mean feat for a relatively unknown artist. But then Slim's nothing if not resilient, and he surely knows how to make one unholy racket, and I mean that in the nicest possible sense! There's more than a touch of Hound Dog Taylor's style in his guitar playing; it's loose but wild and instantly finds its way to the dancing feet. The same can be said for his harp playing, and there's no better example of both instruments in perfect harmony than on the manic stomp of 'Chearzy's Boogie'. 'Max The Baseball Clown' shows off Slim's prowess on acoustic slide, and when he switches to electric and tells us how much it hurts on 'I've Got A Toothache' it's easy to hear why he's so revered. *No Paid Holidays* crosses many styles on its 14 track wander through the blues, and it will no doubt lead to more awards and a lot more critical acclaim.

AH



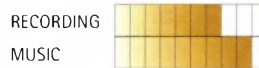
**Chuck Berry**

**Is On Top & St. Louis To Liverpool**

Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab UDCD 776

Berry is of course a seminal and hugely influential figure in the evolution of rock music. His performances defined the genre and a prolific appetite for recording, especially on the Chess label between 1958 and 1965, delivered a succession of fine LPs. Two of them are presented here and in one, the truly magnificent *St. Louis To Liverpool*, we have what is widely acknowledged to be one of the greatest ever rock & roll albums. These songs captured an essence of American life. Big, bold and brassy – they often paint quite personal yet striking pictures of teenage romance: the fumbling uncertainty and heartache with which they could identify. Elsewhere there is a distinct sense of ambition and destiny often communicated through Berry's zippy, zinging and wickedly adaptable guitar work in songs such as 'Maybellene', 'Johnny B. Goode', 'Promised Land', 'Roll Over Beethoven', 'No Particular Place To Go' and 'The Things I Used To Do' that chase down the elusive American dream. His super cool vocal style assertively dramatises the confidence of a generation in pursuit of this goal. It's also brilliant entertainment.

RP



**Tift Merritt**

**Another Country**

Fantasy Records FCD30455

What does an American who's spent more time than she can remember travelling round the world do when she feels the need to find herself again? She packs her bags, travels to Paris and books herself a little apartment with a piano – and just writes. That's what Tift Merritt did; in fact, she wrote so much that she almost convinced herself she was dying. "Otherwise, how could I possibly write so much?" she says in the liner notes. The time spent in Paris redefined her sound; this is a far more reflective offering than the big production on her last one, *Tambourine*. Tift's always been an exemplary writer, one who knows how to convey the heart's emotions. She has an incredible ache to her voice and a keen ear for a rich melody, and those qualities hit home on this lovely, lovely record every time. Although this is essentially a singer/songwriter album, it's underpinned by a gentle country lilt, with the pace of the tracks being one of quiet solitude. That's hardly surprising given the nature and surroundings of how it came about, and therein lies its beauty and undeniable charm.

The lyrics point to a woman searching to find herself again, acknowledged in 'I Know What I'm Looking For Now': "Well, I got here early, trying to decide / there was nothing to hope for, nothing inside." What a delightful way to return to self.

AH







## Roy Haynes Quartet

### Out Of The Afternoon

Impulse/Speakers Corner AS-23 

Drummer extraordinaire Roy Haynes leads a super group composed of multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Tommy Flanagan on piano and Henry Grimes on bass. This is a jewel of the Impulse catalog, easily one of my top five favorite Impulse releases. This 1962 recording from the Rudy Van Gelder studio, made during Impulse's most creative period, when Bob Thiele was in control, defines the genius of that label – modern jazz of the highest quality. No other label came close during the 1960s. This title includes the only appearance on Impulse of a young Roland Kirk who was just starting his string of remarkable recordings for Mercury. About half the numbers are Haynes' compositions, including his 'Snap, Crackle'. Haynes, who played in Charlie Parker's quintet for several years and innumerable great bands thereafter, continues to perform at a high level in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. No matter how many times I listen to this music, I always hear something new, and there are few records I can say that about. Speakers Corner has come close to matching the sound of the original and those original pressings are quite expensive at three or four times the cost of this re-issue, so this has been near the top of my re-issue wish list for some time. Unless you already have an original, run, don't walk, to get this music.

DDD



## Milt Jackson Sextet

### Invitation

Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab UDSACD 2031 


A terrific line up with Kenny Dorham, Jimmy Heath, Tommy Flanagan, Ron Carter and Connie Kay joining "Bags" at the New York Plaza Sound Studios delivers a really well-balanced and often captivating set. Jackson's ebullient caresses breathe renewed vigour into starchy standards like 'Stella by Starlight', 'Ruby' and the title track, 'Invitation'. The playing here is imaginative and formidable. For less familiar repertoire that includes 'None Shall Wander', 'Ruby My Dear' and 'Too Close For Comfort' the solos are smooth, intuitive and engaging. A relaxed atmosphere, easy communication between some big personalities, appropriate moments of discipline and freedom and that intoxicating mix of bluesy and swinging rhythms is fully realized in a stunningly good SACD transfer. Its intimacy, cleanliness, and tactile presentation of individual instrumental details – whether they are those muscular and versatile Jackson vibes, Heath's resourceful tenor, Carter's powerfully propulsive bass technique or Dorham's soaring trumpet playing – are memorable. Alternative and previously unreleased takes for 'None Shall Wander' and 'Ruby My Dear' are a real bonus too, as it gives us valuable insights on the group dynamic and the direction these sessions eventually took. They further enhance this *Invitation's* desirability.

RP



## Cassandra Wilson

### Loverly

Blue Note 50999 5 07699 1 9 

To put this in a nutshell, Cassandra Wilson is my favorite jazz vocalist performing today; and this is her finest record in years, a strong contender for best album of the year. Her two songs on David Murray's *Sacred Ground* last year whet my appetite for a new Wilson album, and then along came this disc of standards – not exactly what I was expecting after the edgier fare on *Sacred Ground*. But dashed expectations gave way quickly when the disc went into the CD player. Backed by a septet of top-notch players, including my favorite pianist, Jason Moran, Wilson puts her stamp on a very broad selection of standards ranging from Hammerstein (*Lover Come Back to Me*) to the blues tune 'Dust My Broom' best known in its Elmore James performance. Her rendition of Bonfa's 'Black Orpheus' is as good as I've heard, and her 'Wouldn't It Be Loverly' is simply enchanting. I've heard Wilson perform live a few times and can't recall her catching fire with such consistency as she does on this album. The CD sound was pretty good, but this new LP re-issue is much better. It's a Capitol Records in-house mastering job, pressed on regular thickness vinyl, leaving us to wonder how good this would sound with first-rate treatment.

DDD





Horace Silver

The Cape Verdean Blues

Blue Note/Music Matters 84220 

Horace Silver had been with Blue Note for ten years when this album was recorded in 1965, and was a follow-up to his incredibly popular *Song For My Father*. The front line brought back Joe Henderson on tenor sax and added Woody Shaw on trumpet and J. J. Johnson on trombone. Shaw replaced Carmell Jones in the trumpet chair, and these back-to-back records make for a fascinating comparison, featuring two of the outstanding trumpet players of the era. Whereas Jones received first-rate recorded sound on his recordings for Pacific Jazz, Shaw suffered less than perfect sound at the hands of Columbia and other labels during his prime recording period in the '70's and '80's. It is refreshing to hear him so well recorded here. I continue to marvel at the improvements wrought by Hoffman and Grey in these Blue Note re-issues. I can hear so far into the mix that low level details I thought were lost in the recording process turn out to be details buried in the original mastering process. Little cues that are hard to catch unless you're sitting close to the stage and visually confirm them, like the drummer's brushwork and light stick work, are evident for the first time in this splendid mastering job. This is a top notch performance by great musicians, and the sound is far better than I thought could be pulled from these master tapes.

DDD



Pat Martino

East!


Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab UDSACD 2018 

Between 1967 and 1972 Pat Martino, that wonderfully supple, dark-toned yet vibrant and lightning quick jazz guitarist from Philadelphia, cut five albums of a consistently high standard for the Prestige label. *East!* was perhaps the most remarkable of them all. The rehearsal session at Richard Alderson's studio in January 1968 at first descended into musical farce. In the absence of any rapport, the planned tracks were jettisoned one-by-one. With under two hours recording time left and the supporting line-up reduced to Eddie Green (piano), Ben Tucker (bass) Lenny McBrowne drums and Tyrone Brown (bass for the delicious mysticism of the title track) all formal structure was abandoned for an impromptu jam, with Brown's inspired bass line for 'East' causing everything to click. Martino wrote 'Trick' on the spot. Coltrane's 'Lazy Bird' was picked to close out the session - with the beautiful 'Park Avenue Petite' and resonant 'Close Your Eyes' sandwiched in between. The focal point is Martino's sustained and dynamic solos - five minutes long on 'Trick' - but the sidemen shine through too in this highly articulate recording that majors on precision, tonal accuracy and instrumental realism. It's a lovely and colourfully infused album.

RP



Stan Getz  
with guest artist Laurindo Almeida

Verve V6-8665/Speakers Corner 

This was Getz's fifth bossa nova LP - this time around with guitar player Laurindo Almeida, George Duvivier on bass and a quintet of drums and percussion. Recorded in 1963, music lovers had by then filled out the bossa nova section of their record collections and this LP did not sell in large numbers. That was the loss of the many who passed on this foldout package of mostly Almeida compositions. Getz and Almeida blend beautifully and produce one of the most consistent and romantic of bossa nova albums. Indeed, the case can be made that of all Getz's bossa nova collaborations, this is the most consistently romantic of the lot. The session was recorded at New York's Webster Hall, then one of the premier acoustic recording venues and RCA's east coast recording venue of choice. Many of the finest sounding classical and jazz recordings were made here and this is no exception. Recording engineer Val Valentin created a recording that perfectly captures Almeida and Getz at their luscious best. By 1963, Verve had been acquired by MGM, and the MGM pressings do not always serve the recordings particularly well. Speakers Corner's fine re-mastering and pressing solve this problem, giving us a guilty pleasure we need not be guilty of.

DDD





## Little Richard

### Here's Little Richard

Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-287 

Rev. Richard Wayne Penniman, better known as Little Richard, is definitely one of the founding fathers of Rock 'n Roll. The music he sings on this album belongs with the best of Chuck Berry, Bill Haley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly to name but a few. You can clearly hear the transition from rhythm and blues to rock and roll in this album and I here to tell you that Mobile Fidelity has given us one for the ages. This is the 'classic' 1957 Specialty album which contains such hits as 'Tutti Frutti', 'Ready Teddy', 'Slippin' and Slidin'', 'Long Tall Sally' and 'She's got it'. I've owned a beat up original for many years and have heard earlier re-releases of this album, but nothing prepared me for the fabulous job the engineers and Mo-Fi have done in re-creating this masterpiece. There is no one I know that can sit still during the playing of this record. Little Richard bursts on the song stage with 'Tutti-Frutti' and the madness doesn't stop for almost the next 30 minutes. There are not many records I've heard that fall into the "must own" class, but with a limited edition of only 2500 copies, I must suggest you rush out to your local retailer (please leave your air guitar at home) and grab a copy of this fabulous record. I guarantee you will be glad you did to have this masterpiece in your collection.

Supplied by: <http://www.mofi.com>



## Joni Mitchell

### The Hissing of Summer Lawns

Asylum/Speakers Corner 



This 1975 recording marks a turning point in the impressively creative career of arguably the finest female artist in contemporary music. Joni Mitchell's work before *Hissing* was largely folk influenced, with a background in protest songs. Here however she moved to more ambitious and complex song structures and instrumentation. Mitchell plays an Arp-Farfisa synthesiser alongside piano and guitar. This is not a jazz record but it features jazz musicians like Joe Sample and the inimitable Victor Feldman alongside John Guerin and Wilton Felder. The first track, 'In France They Kiss On Main Street', has an all-star line-up, with G.Nash, D.Crosby and J.Taylor, on backing vocals alone. It's a high-class production that matches the talent with song-writing of rare beauty and daring. In fact, the ideas apparent here were reworked in subsequent albums such as *Dan Juan's Reckless Daughter* and *Hekira*, albums which are less challenging than this one (and in some ways stronger for it). *Hissing* does have some superb songs on it: tunes like 'Edith And The Kingpin', the title track and the remarkable 'Harry's House' which morphs into a 1947 Tune Centrepiece half way through and features snatches of spoken word that could almost have been sampled from a movie. Speaker's corner has done its usual first class job with the all revealing pressing and full gatefold sleeve, let's hope they do the same with more of her 70's catalogue.

JK



## Santana

### Abraxas

Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL 1-305  



For mere mortals that follow up album is often something of an artistic nightmare, but not when you are Carlos Santana. If anything *Abraxas*, which was recorded in San Francisco over a three-month period in the summer of 1970, is an even better record than his eponymous debut for Columbia. The finely etched reworking of Latin maestro Tito Puente's 'Oye Como Va' was one of several hit singles that it spawned; the Peter Green cover, 'Black Magic Woman' which is widely held to be "definitive" also topped the US charts and if you want a track that oozes sensuality then you need look no further than 'Samba Pa Ti'. Over its slowly simmering Latin beat, the Santana guitar solo cuts a brilliant and sexually charged groove as it builds to an inevitable, steamy climax. An unchanged line up and two hungry sounding tracks in 'Mother's Daughter' and 'Hope You're Feeling Better' penned by keyboardist Gregg Rolie emphasised the band's all-round capabilities. Tightly knit arrangements, musical generosity and an absence of self-indulgence help to make *Abraxas* an exceptionally enjoyable album. The vibrant technicolor sound should also be praised and so too Mo Fi for their accuracy, realistic dynamics, instrumental balance and the tactile guitar and percussive definition that displays no signs of fragility; these are probably the best versions of this oft re-issued disc.

RP



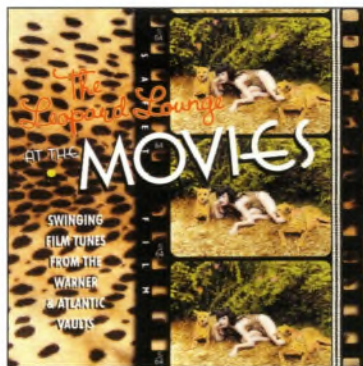


Santana


Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab MFSL 1-303  

Carlos Santana's slight frame concealed the emergence of a genuine rock behemoth from the late 1960s San Francisco new wave scene, conquering the genre with his unmistakable blend of polyrhythmic Afro-Latin rock, gritty vocals and translucent and purposeful guitar style, playing that displayed rare clarity for that time. Memorable and fire-tempered solos in this eponymous debut include but certainly aren't limited to the irresistible 'Shades Of Time', 'Jingo' and 'Treat'. But it's not all fire and brimstone, as his striking moments of virtuosity are often contrasted with the poise and quiet subtlety that instead closes out a song like 'Treat' with that delicate piano thread. The energy and for that matter the synergy in this line up, featuring Dave Brown (bass), Gregg Rolie (keyboards), Mike Shrieve (drums) and Jose Areas (timbales, conga and percussion), is at all times both palpable and sustained. The exoticism and swaying Cuban eroticism will have you breaking out into a hot sweat. Both these audiophile re-masters are revelatory, irrespective of format, and regale us in some style. *Santana* is an ageless album and Carlos an iconic guitar-god whose greatness from the outset simply could not be denied.

RP



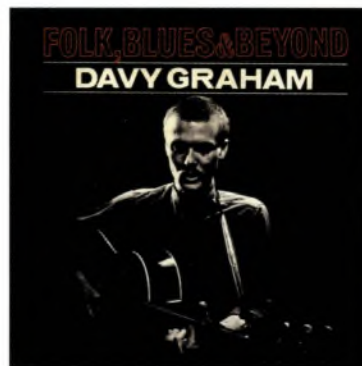
Various

Warner Classics & Jazz 514423272 

### The Leopard Lounge

Individually, these are evocative, tuneful and generally quite enduring themes. Collectively, four sides and twenty-one swinging lounge lizard film tunes is enough to raise the heckles and a few questions about durability, because this is an LP that could easily be played once and then filed and forgotten under the "large dollop of kitsch to be served at a theme party" category. The records waiver between the unashamedly nostalgic: 'Theme From Mash' (Jimmy Smith); the innovative and quirky: 'Daktari' (Shelly Manne) and the teeth jarringly annoying: 'Moon River Cha Cha and Latin Golightly' (Barney Kessel). Highs in the shape of Dionne Warwick's 'Alfie', lows like Edd Byrnes' 'Kookie's Mad Pad' and the fun fuelled 'Batman Theme' played by the Marketts spectacularly converge – often rebounding off one another with unpredictable results. Encouragingly, Warner's Leopard Lounge compilation promotes significant vocal gems that will almost certainly lead you to look beyond the single Mel Torme 'Sunday In New York' and Lea DeLaria 'Cool' tracks offered here. The other overriding pleasure can be found in the variety, texture, imagination and execution shown in the arrangements. Inside this spoof bikini clad sleeve there is a core of musical integrity – even if it's bikini clad too.

RP



Davy Graham

Stamford Audio 100560 

### Folk, Blues & Beyond

*Folk, Blues & Beyond* is an album that encapsulates Davy Graham's creed. In the 1960s he challenged the then-rigid boundaries of British folk music with an unbridled willingness to mine jazz, blues and country idioms – in the process reinvigorating a rather tired and stuffy musical backwater. As a musician the esteem in which his fellow guitarists hold him is immeasurable. Just why is clear from the opening chords of 'Leavin' Blues' where his freer style, less formal than that of contemporaries like John Renbourn, helped to place him amongst John Mayall's esteemed group of breakers. Graham plays with precision, intensity, considerable dexterity and compulsive personality. Versatility as a performer, writer and as an arranger is reflected here in the varied and diverse repertoire that includes 'Sally Free and Easy', 'Rock Me Baby', 'Goin' Down Slow' and 'I Can't Keep from Cryin' Sometimes'. The pared back nature of the recording lovingly captures that purity and sharply etched shape of Graham's guitar as well as the contrasting vocal warmth with which he shapes a lyric. This is all nicely realised on a Pallas pressing and while it's true to say there is a little residual tape noise (consistent with the age of this recording) its never intrusive.

Supplier: [www.stamfordaudio.co.uk](http://www.stamfordaudio.co.uk)

RP





# AVISHAI COHEN...

Interviewed by Jason Kennedy

Avishai Cohen is an Israeli bandleader and double-bass player who likes to get physical with his instrument; on stage he almost seems to grapple with the thing. As you might imagine he does not wear a suit. Cohen made his name while based in New York working with a range of artists including Chick Corea, Brad Mehldau and Danilo Perez in the nineties. In 1998 he released his first album *Adama* and has gone on to produce another eight albums since, including his first with drummer Mark Guiliana and pianist Shai Maestro as the Avishai Cohen Trio this year.

Stylistically this band has a lot in common with another piano trio, e.s.t. from Sweden. Both have a strong attachment to rhythm and stretch the jazz genre to include world music. Unlike American jazz there is very little of the blues in Cohen's work, his latest album, *Gently Disturbed* has two traditional Israeli tunes on it and Shai Maestro is clearly influenced by Bach, which makes for a very different piano trio sound. Maestro is the youngest member of the band and the newest to the international scene, but you'd never guess it to hear him play.

Drummer Mark Guiliana has played with Branford Marsalis and Bobby McFerrin and has his own "experimental-garage-jazz" trio, Heernt, with whom he has made the album *Locked in a Basement*. His style is intense yet restrained with plenty of imagination. When they play live you can see why Avishai finds him inspiring and one suspects the feeling is mutual, because when things hot up they seem to spark off of one another, taking things to the next level and beyond.

It's surprising that Avishai Cohen had the confidence to hire a 21 year old to play piano in his trio but you don't have to listen to more than one number to realise why he did. At Ronnie Scott's in April, Shai Maestro lived up to his name, with a delicacy of touch and nimbleness that almost any keyboard player would envy. In fact he steals the show in a remarkably

democratic band, one where leader Cohen gets the longest solos for sure, but inevitably one where the voice and the melody come from the piano. They are a superb balanced band; Mark Guiliana on drums is no slouch, with an attack and snap that no hi-fi system could hope to emulate. This gig had its faire share of virtuoso playing from all three musicians, but it's on the intros and choruses that it's at its best, interlocking and playing together with precision and verve to produce a coherence and drive that is irresistible.

For the most part they stuck to the material recorded for the album *Gently Disturbed*; the Trio has not been together for long so it makes sense that they should play what they

know. However with Guiliana having played in Cohen's previous group and Maestro having a strong familiarity with all of the bassist's albums it was perhaps surprising that there was so little older material. But there was something new and perhaps surprising for the finale, when AC took the mic and sang for the first time, something that he indicates will be



Photo © Jim L. Knapp

happening more in future in the following interview.

The crowd at Ronnie Scott's was highly appreciative of what was spectacular playing, none more so than when Mark Guiliana got to let rip on the tune 'Eleven Wives', where he built up to a controlled but impassioned and dynamic crescendo whilst his cohorts held down the beat. This is a band where each member takes responsibility for the rhythm so that at any moment one or two of the trio can take off on a flight of imagination. The way they play live is barely hinted at on *Gently Disturbed*, which seems restrained by comparison but gives as good an insight as any into the potential. With luck this Trio will release some of its live work so that more people can enjoy ACT to full effect.

Just before that concert I caught up with Avishai at his hotel and asked him a few questions:



► **JK:** What are your influences and inspirations?

**AC:** Anything, just another day with inspiration and devotion. I'm blessed to be inspired a lot. I don't know how it is for other people. It comes from inside and outside, just like it's been for 20 years but more and stronger for the last ten. When I write music, play it with people it becomes alive, it joins life and it stays in the hearts of people. I haven't yet written something that was inspired by one thing; I just make music that seems to make sense at the moment, that moves me, makes me want to be involved in that emotion.

**JK:** What brought this trio together?

**AC:** Mark is from another generation of kids to me; now I'm 38 and Mark is 28, he's still the younger generation. He used to come to my shows in New York with his friend Brian Killeen who is a bassist who then came to study with me. It was through Brian that I got to know Mark. They asked me to play at college with them and I sensed that Mark was really good and we decided to make a rock band by the name of Gadu. It still exists in spirit, for sure, with a front man called Jeff Taylor and a great guitarist Daniel Hieman with Mark on drums and myself on bass (electric bass).

Then I was at a crossroads, trying to decide what would be my next band within the jazz thing. When I finally decided it was to form a trio and I thought Mark would be amazing. And then there was this other guy Sam (Barsh) that I met in New York, where I saw him play organ and I really liked his energy. We tried a rehearsal and I added a saxophone, but that's how I met Mark and Sam, which led to Mark and Shai.

**JK:** Why did you change from Sam Barsh to Shai Maestro as your keyboard player?

**AC:** I wanted a different sound on the piano, I was looking for a more classical sound which I found with Shai who is a phenomenal musician.

**JK:** You say on the album "I truly want to keep going with this Trio for as long as possible" which could be misread?

**AC:** I hope it doesn't appear like that. What I meant to say was that this is great and I hope it lasts as long as possible because you never know. It's to say that when you have a good thing

it's nice to appreciate it. Now I recognise something that's just fun. It's got some maturity in it where everybody's comfortable. I'm comfortable to have these guys be stars like they are and just bloom. You've got to be on your toes though; there's a lot to do within that to be able to celebrate the great talent of Shai and Mark and to run with it and find new things, try to stay cool enough to respond well enough to anything that could happen.

**JK:** What's next for you and the Trio?

**AC:** We will be going out with a bigger band of nine people that plays new work from a project I've been working on for three-years already, a record of me singing songs that I wrote and older songs of the heritage. Really interesting and deep stuff – and singing is a whole new spectrum and life. That is just starting, we are going to Europe to play some festivals.



**JK:** When you recorded *Gently Disturbed* did you do it live?

**AC:** Yes, I was right by the piano and the drums were in a booth and we played together like a live show.

**JK:** Why do you think that CDs never sound quite like real music, like it does in the studio?

**AC:** In the last 10 or 15 years the quality of recordings in pop has shrunk to a compact, fast, informative type of media. So the passion that 70s and 60s records with analogue tape and a bunch of tricks to make things have soul is gone, a lot of it is gone. Young people don't know what it is or don't miss it. I don't blame them;

modern pop is more of a hint as to what really is – it's a sample. There are a few good things about it too. But people who play improvised music like us are still tapping into that older medium and sound and are still dealing with real ambience and room sound and real live playing. That always has a bigger power or a power that something made in an instant doesn't have. Combining these worlds today and being open minded could bring us things that never happened before and you can hear that in Radiohead and other very smart musicians that are working today.

**JK:** How do you find Ronnie Scott's as a venue?

**AC:** I love Ronnie Scott's. I've played there with Chick and with my own bands lots of times, it's always fun. There's an energy there that belongs to the place and I always feel like ►

► I'm welcome; there's always a good reception from people that want to hear the music. It's a wonderful experience, it's a home for me in London. I used to play at Pizza Express, which was a bit of a hole. Then I got to play at Ronnie's and it just clicked. It's got a lot of old energy preserved in it.

**JK:** Which contemporary artists do you like?

**AC:** I like Brad Mehldau, I like e.s.t. I really love Amy Winehouse. There are incredible artists like Bjork – who really has the ability to uplift you? Amy Winehouse does that. Since Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington and Ella Fitzgerald, I think she belongs to that line of artists. I know it might be crazy to say but I feel comfortable saying it. When I hear her voice she gives me this feeling of life and the bigger picture. She's got this pain that's honest in her singing: she's got real soul and to me that wins.

**JK:** Of the people that you've worked with who was the most influential?

**AC:** Of course Chick was very influential and I always think of the time that I served in his camp with total pride, happiness and respect. Bobby McFerrin is someone that I had a chance to work with and he's the most top notch performing artist that I've ever been acquainted with.

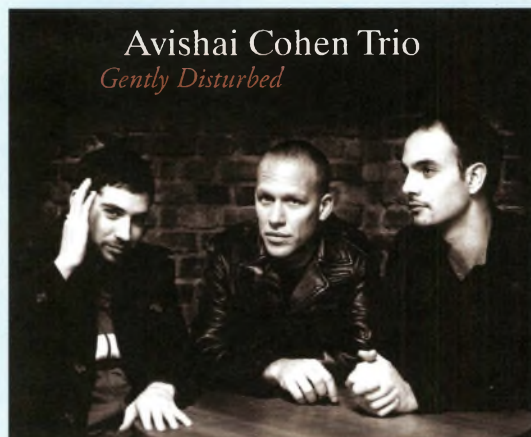
**JK:** Do you have a hi-fi at home?

**AC:** No. I'm a caveman. I still write music with a pen... I have a nice, very nice stereo, some English shit. I gave myself a birthday present after years of listening to a little box and it's great, it's wonderful.


**JK:** What inspired you to change from the piano to the bass?

**AC:** When I was 14 I was listening to some English rock in St Louis, Missouri, after my parents moved there for two years. I had an Israeli friend who played me some Led Zeppelin, the Who and Pink Floyd and I liked it and got into it. So somehow it seemed cool to start playing electric bass. Then I went to a teacher that played me Jaco's (Pastorius) records early on and once he played that, that's how it happened. Then I took it seriously for the next few years until I was twenty and wanted to take it to the next level. I was playing jazz on an electric bass and to be jazz you had to play... (gestures and mimes upright bass). Something happened there where you find your instrument or you find your love. Ever since then I've been known as an upright bass player.

Avishai Cohen's Eastern Unit will present *Shaot Regishot (Sensitive Hours)* at the Indigo Club, 02 Arena on Saturday 25th October



## Avishai Cohen Trio Gently Disturbed

Razdaz 

If you appreciate the rhythmic sophistication and complex interweavings of e.s.t., then this is another band that should also appeal. It has the same instrumental line up of piano, bass and drums, but in this instance the leader plays bass and the internal balance is quite different – and more evenly weighted. Having honed his chops with Chick Corea, the New York based but Israeli by birth Avishai Cohen has developed into a musician of considerable skill and imagination. Prolific both as a performer, teacher and recording artist, this is his ninth album, and finds him in the company of compatriot Shai Maestro on piano and New Jersey drummer Mark Guillana, a band for whom this is the debut outing. By now you'll have read the accompanying interview so you'll have an idea about this set up; if not, read it now, because like all great trios, the music and the personnel are indivisible.

The 11 tracks on *Gently Disturbed* are largely Cohen compositions, but because they are all ensemble pieces you'd be hard pressed to tell by listening. The piano takes the lead as often as the bass and on the most invigorating tracks all three are playing rhythmic patterns around one another with a verve that you rarely encounter. There's never any sense of a musical pecking order at work here, with an almost exaggerated respect for the room given to each other. The way bass and piano intertwine on the 'Ever Evolving Etude' for instance, is like a stilted Bach toccata with extra groove. This is an intoxicatingly complex pattern that works round and round on itself. The influences here are as much middle-eastern as western jazz, which is probably what makes A.S.T. similar but different to e.s.t. But following the sad news of Esborn Svenson's tragic and untimely death in a diving accident, that more established unit is no more. Nature abhors a vacuum and hopefully Avishai and the boys can keep the torch burning for rhythmically dynamic piano trios.

JK

Recording  
Music





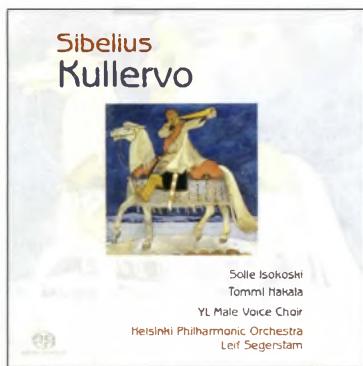
**Ida Haendel**

**Mendelssohn, Stravinsky, Szymanowski, De Falla & Albeniz**

Dutton CDBP 9772

As always the release of historic Ida Haendel material is of more than passing interest. These tracks, including a Mendelssohn *Concerto* with Sargent conducting the National Symphony, were cut by Decca between 1941 and 1947 and they indelibly chart Haendel's development as a violinist. The *Concerto* (1945) is a considered, yet expressive performance delivered with warmth and some affection, but is perhaps one that ultimately fails in terms of drama, drive and conceptual depth. It's also handicapped by an anaemic recording. In Stravinsky's *Divertimento* "La Baiser de la Fee" arranged for violin and piano and *Danse Russe* from "Petrovichka" (1947) she gives more sustained and interesting accounts, especially in her exploration of the rhythmic and harmonic textures that lie beneath those sentimental and melodic tunes. A brooding Szymanowski *Notturmo* and fleet-footed *Tarantella* (1946) coupled with the evocative *Danse Espagnole* from De Falla's *La Vida Breve* (1942) and the closing Spanish bouquet in the Albeniz *Mulaguena* (1941), confirm what we've always known - Haendel's early charms were strongest in the encore pieces. The trio of pianists here: Ivor Newton, Adela Kotowska and Noel Mewton-Wood give sympathetic accompaniment for these better sounding vignettes.

RP



**Jean Sibelius**

**Kullervo  
Isokoski; Hakala; YL Male Voice Choir; Segerstam; Helsinki P.O.**

Ondine ODE-1122-5

Kullervo, a character from the Finnish mythological poem and book known as the *Kalevala* was set to music very early in Sibelius's career. The *Kalevala* can be thought of as analogous to Homer's *Iliad*. The interesting story line is set out in the accompanying booklet and if you are as curious (as I was) as to who Kullervo really was, mythically speaking, it is worth doing a little research which will increase your enjoyment of this music even more. It was the composer's wish in 1893 that this five-movement work not be performed until after his death. My reference performance for this has always been the famous Berglund/Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra collaboration on EMI SLS807, but Ondine has given us a truly exceptional disc containing superlative performances by all parties. Isokoski, the soprano, has a wonderful full bodied voice and is an ideal partner to Hakala, the baritone and as I have found in the past, Leif Segerstam is the ideal conductor for the music of Sibelius. This near 80 minute outing is most enjoyable and for those of you who may be afraid to explore vocal/choral music, might I suggest this music as it is very accessible and involving. Spend a bit of time reading the liner notes to understand the storyline and you will be richly rewarded with a disc that you will return to often. Sound quality is of demonstration level and the recording enjoys a



large, spacious acoustic. While the CD layer fulfills, the richer DSD layer is better still. This is an outstanding disc, both musically and sonically.

[www.ondine.net](http://www.ondine.net)

RSF

**Symphonies No. 5 & 7; En Saga, Op.9 Davis; Boston S.O.**

PentaTone PTC 5186 177

When it comes to the music of Sibelius, there's no shortage of fans out there and for once, no shortage of great performances either. Collectors may look as far back as Sir Anthony Collins on Decca mono, and if you are seeking exceptional vinyl performances with great sound, the range of conductors is an almost alphabetical 'who's who' of the great and good in 20<sup>th</sup> century classical music: Barbirolli, Beecham, Berglund, Dorati, fjeldstad, Charles Groves and Herbert von Karajan just to start. But amongst the best has to be Sir Colin Davis and now, finally, his great cycle with Philips has been given the sound quality (read great bass foundation) that was always lacking. This coupling of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> symphonies is a revelation in this revitalized edition, re-mastered to DSD. While we may not see any more discs from this collaboration between Davis and Boston, having these two works will satisfy me just fine delivering exceptional performances and sound quality. Definitely add this to your collection - you will be pleased you did.

[www.pentatonemusic.com](http://www.pentatonemusic.com)

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I really enjoy your website and find it very informative (and read it every day).

— Richard Holbrook

I have never replied to online audio reviews but wanted you to know that I have enjoyed several articles.

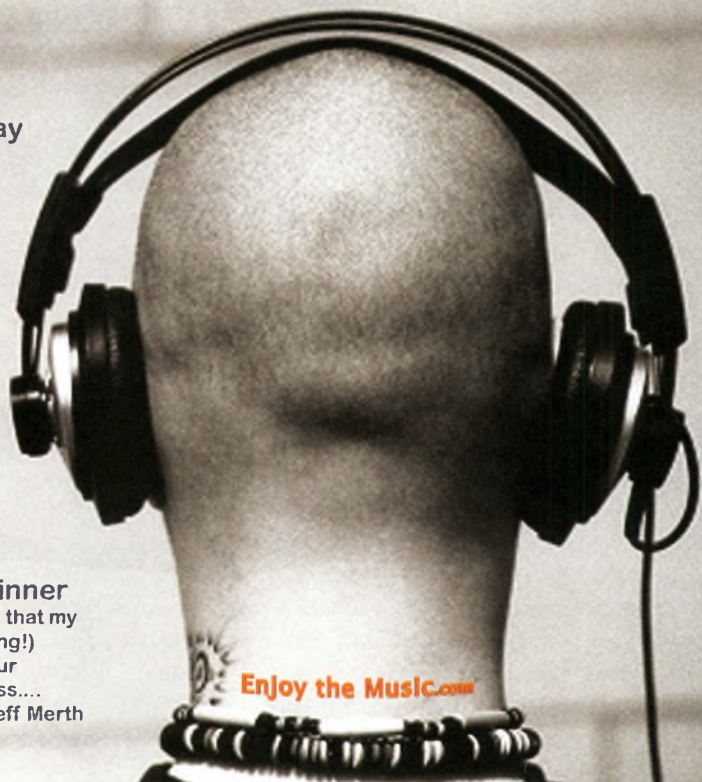
— Craig Mattice

What a great review! — Paul Kittinger

### Enjoy the Music.com Contest Winner

In fact, the Axiom Audio EP500 works so well that my wife and I both stood mouths open (not kidding!) as it shook the rafters and window glass in our house. Amazing! Love that palpable, tight bass....

Thank you again for the awesome prize! — Jeff Merth



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# EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE

## IN PRAISE OF THE UNDER-RATED, UNDER-APPRECIATED OR JUST PLAIN DISCARDED MUSICAL MASTERPIECE

by Dennis D. Davis

Jefferson Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow* blasted onto the scene in 1967 and forever changed my life. My longing to become part of the San Francisco scene began with Grace Slick's soaring vocals, and I started to plan my escape from Motown for the City of Love. My debt of gratitude to *Surrealistic Pillow* has never waned, but in 1967 the Airplane's greatest album still lay ahead, with the 1969 release of *Bless Its Pointed Little Head*, a live album taped partly at the Fillmore West (in the Fillmore District of San Francisco), and partly at the Fillmore East (in New York). Grace Slick was a young goddess and I had just purchased my first audiophile turntable, a slick new AR, when this supercharged session showed how much fire lay beneath the surface of the radio-friendly songs on *Pillow*. The album opens with the band plugging in their instruments while the crowd watch (and we listen) to the closing dialogue of the movie *King Kong* ("Oh no, it wasn't the airplanes, it was beauty killed the beast"), after which the Airplane blasts into a speed infused version of '3/5's Of A Mile In 10 Seconds'. Then Grace Slick lets loose with a version of 'Somebody To Love' that takes all the smooth edges off the *Pillow* version. Had the album ended there, I swear that even if you've never been to San Francisco, taken a psychotropic drug or weren't even alive in the late 1960s, you could close your eyes, transport yourself back to the period and be absolutely convinced that you actually lived the life, hanging out on Haight and Ashbury. But it doesn't stop there! An extended version of Donovan's 'Fat Angel' ("fly Translove Airlines, gets you there on time") floats you along on a cloud looking down on the audience from 39,000 feet. 'Rock Me Baby' features the acid tinged guitar of Jorma Kaukonen and bass of Jack Casady in a bluesy tune (the Jefferson in the band's name comes from Blind Lemon Jefferson) that presaged the duo's future as Hot Tuna. Of the band's two featured vocalists, Marty Balin dominates over Grace Slick, except on 'Somebody To Love'. Like many albums of that period, it is front-loaded with the strongest material on side one. While that makes for an adrenalin filled ride, side two of the LP tends toward a bit of a jam session, and is less consistent than side one. The running order of the tunes flips back and forth between songs recorded on the east and west coasts. The 2004 CD



issue throws in three bonus tracks, but nobody will be surprised that these cuts were not included on the original album. They aren't bad, but they come up short compared to the superlative fare on the original disc. First pressing of the US issue came with an orange label, but had thick sturdy vinyl, rather than the dynaflex that lay in the not

too distant future. The earliest of the original pressings are cut with the grooves a half centimeter from the label, so close that the dead wax inscriptions are almost completely covered. I've seen UK originals selling for silly prices, which is remarkable given the superior sound and cheap price of their US counterparts. And how does this LP sound? As good or better than any live rock concert from this classic period, demanding to be played very loud. So if you want a little taste of Haight Ashbury, save the airfare and cue up *Pointed Little Head*.



### Jefferson Airplane *Surrealistic Pillow*

Recorded October and November 1968  
Originally released as RCA LSP-4133 March 1969  
CD released 2004 as 82876 61643 2

Track Listing	CD Bonus Tracks:
Clergy	Today
3/5's of A Mile In 10 Seconds	Watch Her Ride
Somebody To Love	Won't You Try
Fat Angel	
Rock Me Baby	Personnel:
The Other Side Of This Life	Marty Balin
It's No Secret	Jack Casady
Plastic Fantastic Lover	Jorma Kaukonen
Turn Out The Lights	Grace Slick
Bear Melt	Spencer Dryden
	Paul Kantner

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