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"Good Sound, Good Music"

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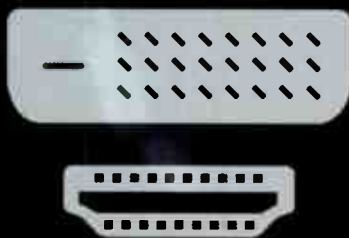
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CONTENTS

VOLUME X, ISSUE 111

Avec Panache

11

Mike Driscoll

Canada's "Le Festival Son & Image"

Sony Masterworks

14

Benjamin Ivry

Expanded Editions of Classics

Guido Cantelli

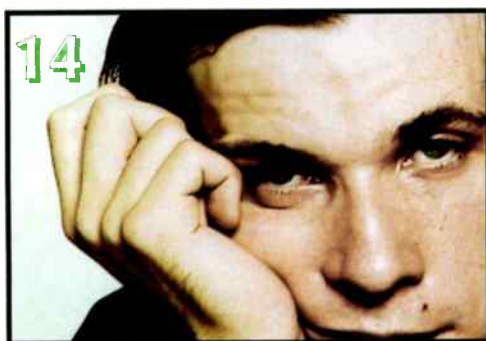
17

Benjamin Ivry

The '49 - '50 NBC Recordings

COLUMNS

- 4 Subscription Information
- 6 New Products
- 8 Letters: Carol Harley
- 10 Editorial: Eugene Pitts III
- 20 Under Lock & Key: Pat St.John
- 53 Classified Ads
- 55 Ad Index
- 56 Back Page - Humor



14



17

RECORDINGS

Alvin Lee: *Alvin Lee In Tennessee*

Pat St.John

20

Vassar Clements: *Living With The Blues*

Don Wilcock

22

Steve Earle: *The Revolution Starts ... Now*

Michael Tearson

24

Gianluigi Trovesi Ottetto: *Fugace*

Jack Skowron

26

Little Feat: *Kickin' It At The Barn*

Michael Tearson

28

Denyce Graves: *The Lost Days*

Benjamin Ivry

30

Dave Mason: *It's Like You Never Left*

Arnie Goodman

32

John Lee Hooker: *Jack O'Diamonds*

Jon Tiven

33

Charlie Hunter Quintet: *Right Now Move*

Jack Skowron

34

Herbie Nichols Project: *Strange City*

Jack Skowron

35

The Bad Plus: *These Are The Vistas*

Jack Skowron

36

EQUIPMENT

Intellinet by Russound RS3000 Multi-Zone Custom Installation System

Robert Kingsley

37

Pass Labs XO.2 Stereo Preamp

Anthony Cordesman

43

Polk LSi 15 Loudspeakers

Ron Nagle

47

Sumiko Blackbird Phono Cartridge

George Graves

50

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World Radio History

New Products



The ASC SubTrap

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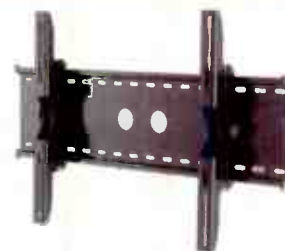
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World Radio History

LETTERS



Photo: Owen Carey

Blue Note

Editor's Note: The Misty River Band played at the Winter Show in Las Vegas, making many new fans and entrancing old ones, but there is some unhappy news about one of my favorite ladies from band member Dana Abel. – Gene Pitts

Dear Misty River friends and fans:

With great sadness, we share the following news with you. One of our band members, Carol Harley, has been diagnosed with Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia. This is a life-threatening disease affecting the bone marrow and white blood cells. Carol has begun chemotherapy through drugs she administers at home and we are waiting to see how she responds to treatment before considering other measures such as a bone marrow transplant. Carol continues to be in good spirits and is taking one day at a time.

Misty River has every intention of fulfilling our current concert schedule and we continue to book future dates. In the unlikely event that Carol does not feel well enough to perform a particular show, we are lining up other musicians to stand in for her. We know this news will hit many of you hard, as it did the four of us when we first learned Carol's diagnosis. We do think of our fans as family, which is why we are choosing to share this news at this time.

Many of you might wonder how you can be of help, so we ask that you keep Carol in your thoughts and prayers to aid her through this difficult time. If you wish to send email or written notes, please send them to:

Email: GetWellCarol@mistryriverband.com;
Postal Mail: Carol Harley,
1111-B NW 13th Way,
Vancouver, WA 98685

For those of you who can do even more, a medical fund has been set to help Carol pay for the treatment she is currently undergoing. The cost of treatment is significant, and after Carol's back injury in 1990, she was forced to quit her job as a public school teacher and take Medicare as her primary insurance. Medicare does not cover prescription medications or many of the treatments for leukemia, so Carol must bear those costs herself, and her out-of-pocket expenses can be thousands of dollars each month. To make a donation of any amount, please make a check out to:

Carol Harley Leukemia Treatment Fund and send it to: Misty River, P.O. Box 5482, Eugene, OR 97405. Your contribution is not tax deductible, but it will be used solely for medical expenses for Carol Harley.

If you would like to learn more about Carol's condition, please visit www.mistryriverband.com.

To learn more about Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia (CML), visit:

CML Help <http://www.cmlhelp.org>
The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society
<http://www.LLS.org>
OHSU <http://www.ohsucancer.com>
National Cancer Institute
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/leukemia>

Thank you for your support. We will update you on Carol's health as new developments arise. Please be assured that although Carol experiences moments of discomfort, performing with Misty River and interacting with our audiences continues to give her great joy. We hope to see you at a show!

Sincerely,
Dana Abel,
for Misty River, Dana, Laura, Chris and Carol

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HOLST THE PLANETS ZUBIN MEHTA / LAPO

JVCXR-0228

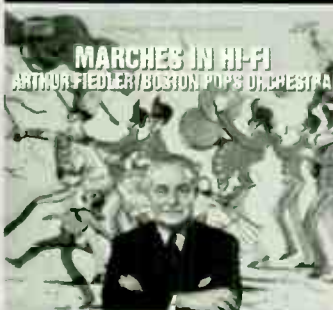
Written by Gustav Holst over a three-year period in 1914, "The Planets" is a true masterpiece of classical music and features seven movements based on the planets in our own solar system excluding Pluto and the Earth itself. This world renowned piece, that always overshadowed Holst's other famous works of music, is here conducted by Zubin Mehta and performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. From the thunderously charged emotion of "Mars, the Bringer of Wars" to the faint and distant passages of "Neptune, the Mystic," this release demonstrates the high quality of recordings made by Decca in the early '70s, as well as the highly refined sound of the XRCD²⁴ process. Listen and compare.



LISZT RHAPSODIES LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI

JMXR-24019

This important classical release has been considered by many as the best example of the sheer brilliance of English-born conductor Leopold Stokowski. As a conductor, Stokowski is known the world over for many unprecedented performances, including his work with the Philadelphia Orchestra on the Walt Disney's animated classic "Fantasia." "Rhapsodies" is a collection of several romantic pieces of music, including hypnotic versions of Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody" and Bedrich Smetana's "Moldau." The emotion, warmth and presence brought to you on this XRCD is truly unforgettable. Remastered in true audiophile quality by JVC, this XRCD²⁴ release is a necessity for any serious classical music collector.



MARCHES IN HI-FI ARTHUR FIEDLER & THE BOSTON POPS

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Gene Pitts Download This!



Microsoft has started selling music tracks for 99 cents each from its MSN Music website. Oddly, the operation started up within a very few days of my wife requesting that I change our home-page to Google from MSN. And, no, I haven't bought any of their stock either. It's not that I think that editors are stupid about money and where to invest it. In fact, I think quite the reverse is true, even though I find myself at least somewhat "disqualified" by temperament to run the overall operations of a Big-Deal Magazine within a Big-Deal Corporation. The politics are too heavy, having to walk sideways down the office halls with my back pressed tightly against a wall and a death-grip on my nearly unused Corporate Dagger. Not making pages doesn't make it for me.

Anyway, Microsoft is joining Apple which is supplying tracks to download via their iTunes service to their iPod, the hugely popular portable. Is there a portable (and maybe even home gear) in Microsoft's future? Maybe, and I certainly wouldn't bet against that. After all, which audio-guru would have bet five years ago, say, that Dell Computers would be selling TV monitors, true Big Screen TVs.

MSN's Corporate Vice President, Yusuf Mehdi, says the operation is about breaking even at the 99 cent price. While Apple charges the same price, you can buy tunes for 88 cents per over at www.walmart.com, and if you really want to search for the "low ball," see if RealNetworks is still offering their 49 cents a song promo rate. (Probably be over by the time you read this, but....) The cutting edge on this, at least to me, is figuring out which service is going to have the songs I want, right there, for instant down-load. Which outfit is going to cut a deal with which digital satellite radio service or streaming broadband cable or DSL for instant down-loads of the tunes you *just* heard on that *wonderful* music-radio program you always listen to? After all, isn't the MP-3 Generation only about instant gratification, just as mine was, the Baby-Boomers? (I mean, why else would my belly be so large?)

MSN users can pick from about a half million tunes from the million or more that the firm has licensed so far. What's more interesting is that Microsoft has entered into arrangements to sell only entire albums (no single cuts) with some major artists including Metallica (right, the guys who sued Napster), the Dave Matthews Band, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.



Comcast, the service I use, offers Rhapsody, which claims to have a library of more than 750,000 songs. Their "where's the money?" model is different, too, in that you can have unlimited downloads for \$25 per three-month period.

But suppose you aren't a major artist or maybe you are a major artist but your label doesn't think so. What then? Well, surprise, surprise, and if you didn't get it from the comments above, it isn't illegal to download music from the Internet! Just as it isn't illegal for an unsigned band or artist to peddle their tunes on a website. No matter what the Law-Suits from the Recording Industry Association of America say they are doing, they are actually bringing people to heel in court for "unauthorized distribution" of copyrighted material.

But thank you, thank you, Jon Pareles, for pointing this out in your very fine article on websites offering free music on-line in *The New York Times* for Sept. 10th. Before giving us his 20 listings, plus cogent comments, Pareles writes about various performers who post hard-to-find songs on-line (bobdylan.com), various radio stations (including one of my fave's, WFMU, though he doesn't get around to my pick for "Best Station In My Area," WFUV) which offer streaming audio or down-loading (classical, public radio, college, and "eclectic"), and even about the vaunted MTV which offers "an entire album each week as an audio stream." (Wonder what the RIAA thinks about that.) I will have to check out a utility program Pareles mentions, Stepvoice, for recording streaming audio. Go buy the *Times* back issue for his helpful and insightful comments, which starts on the front page of the Weekend section(!), but let me give you my selection from his list: epitonic.com for indie band recordings, furthernet.com which started with the Dead but now includes such as Phish and Gov't Mule, Folkways Records at folkways.si.edu (perhaps the first label I was aware of as a *separate* label), Internet Archive at archive.org which was new to me but has the hugely ambitious goal of "preserving material that might otherwise disappear from the Internet," and CNet's techies give us music.download.com from which Pareles lauds their Editor's Picks.

Is it trivial to point out that these sites are more labors of love than occupations? No more than it would be to point out that most musical instruments are not played by professional musicians. Someone once asked me if I played the Taylor guitar that now mostly sits in my listening room. I replied, "No, I can only play my audio system acceptably well these days."

Hi-Fi avec Panaché The Montreal Show



Mike Driscoll

AH! APRIL IN PARIS! OK, Montreal. At least they speak French there, and have some great food, as well as some of the most beautiful women in North America. The city is also only about a four to five hour drive from my western Massachusetts home. Paris is a little farther. Oh yea, they also have this audio show each spring called Le Festival Son Et Image. This year my friend Steve, his lovely wife Gail, and I all stayed at the Hotel Four Points, one of the two hotels hosting the event. A big plus this year was the slightly later date, avoiding the youth hockey madness we ran into other years.

The big new thing at the show this year was something old, actually. A hint: they're round, black, and 12 inches in diameter. There were at least 15 rooms featuring the LP, most of them up and running. I mentioned to a demo-guy that it was surprising to see so much analog gear, and he replied that the popularity of vinyl had soared in the past year or so, particularly, in the U.S.

One quite interesting booth was set up right next to the registration desk, and was run by a company called Audio Doctor 007. These folks were playing a CD into an FM modulator, and broadcasting the signal out to a mile or so radius of the show. They used no compression or EQ, just sending the signal out into the ether. An 83-dB signal-to-noise ratio was claimed, as well as 65 dB separation. An FM tuner was connected to a pair of electrostatic headphones, allowing show goers to hear what a truly high quality FM signal can sound like.

In the Inner Ear Report room on the ninth floor, the signal was being played through speakers, and a copy of the CD was synched to the broadcast, allowing instant comparison. The results were eye-opening, to say the least. If only the FM broadcasters really cared what their signals sound like, we could be listening to sound from FM that is almost indistinguishable from that of CD.



Simaudio Eclipse CD, P-5 LE preamp, and W-5LE amp with Dynaudio Confidence C2 speakers.

Just across the hall from Audio Doctor 007, the Hatdn suite featured a Classé CAP-2100 integrated amplifier fed by a DCS Purcell/Verdi combo, through JM Labs Diva loudspeakers. The sound was fine, but both Steve and I were a bit disappointed that the Clearaudio Maximum Solution turntable wasn't up and running. This is one serious 'table! The Vivaldi suite next door had Living Voice speakers with Conrad-Johnson electronics and a Chord CD player, and was sounding just fine, thank you, while Linn had set up in the Liszt suite. They were demonstrating their new Unidisc multifORMAT player, said to play any format digital disc, including MP3. At \$16,500, it should. The sound was typical Linn, that is to say very, very good.

A big surprise to me (at least at first) was my reaction to the Lammhorn MK1 which was being driven by a Tenor Audio Ivory amplifier. Source was an Audio Aero CD player, and the sound was airy and open, with a good handle on that "pace and rhythm" thing that's so hard to define. I asked to have my copy of Rory Block's "Last Fair Deal" played (the CD version, not the SACD) and was amazed at what emanated from these loudspeakers, considering my long-time aversion to horn-loaded speakers. Upon a bit of questioning, I was advised that this model is not a horn (ah ha!), but rather a bass-reflex design utilizing German-made drivers from AER. They sure made Rory sound good!

Nearby at the room occupied by Acoustic Energy and Arcam, the AE1 speaker was partnered with Arcam's FMJ (Full Metal Jacket) series of components, and I again asked to have the Rory Block CD played. While this setup seemed to produce a sound with slightly more "weight" than the Lammhorn/Tenor system, the presentation was much less spacious and "airy."

In the Roksan room, ASW loudspeakers were being driven by all Roksan electronics, with the source being

the Roksan Radius turntable, delivering delicious sound. The Radius is available with an optional wood plinth, instead of the standard acrylic one, and looks absolutely gorgeous that way. Since the wood version wasn't hooked up, I didn't have an opportunity to see if the difference in material affected the performance of the 'table. Meanwhile, over in Rega land, the P9 turntable (\$3,500 U.S.) was spinning vinyl, connected to an all-Rega system, which also sounded fine indeed. Down the hall, Dali Quattro speakers were sounding very good being driven by an Atoll integrated amplifier and CD player. The sound was extremely open, with a deep taut low end. The Dali's were able to pull off a great "disappearing act," at least in this room under these circumstances.

The best sound I heard that first day had to be in Room 416, occupied by Conrad-Johnson electronics and a pair of Quad 989 loudspeakers. The C-J Premier 17 preamp and MX60SE amp, partnered with an Arcam CD33 seemed a perfect match for the Quads. I asked to have a disc of mine played, a Mapleshade Wildchild recording of a swing group called The J Street Jumpers. The recording features an acoustic bass, which the system was able to reproduce with incredible realism. The sound was spacious, with a deep and wide soundstage. It was all there, pace, rhythm, tonal accuracy, soundstaging, and just plain musicality. My friend Steve agreed wholeheartedly.

After a stop in a room featuring "Brand X" loudspeakers and "Brand Y" electronics, I wrote in my notes "Nice, but after the Quads, ho hum." Perhaps that wasn't fair, but that's what happened. We decided that our ears needed a rest and a break was in order for at least a few hours. For an early supper that evening, the three of us went to an Indian buffet called the Buffet Maharaja, on Rue René Levesque. If you are ever in Montreal and in the mood for Indian food, check it out. The food was absolutely great, with a wide variety of Indian dishes, and a few American style choices for those who were dragged along by friends, but don't appreciate Indian cuisine. A warning, if you don't like REALLY HOT food, stay away from the chicken vindaloo here! It's fire on a plate!

Since we had chosen to eat early, and the show would stay open until at least 9:00 p.m., Steve and I decided to check out the exhibits at the hotel we stayed at, the Four Points. The first room we hit was a gem, with JM Lab Cobalt loudspeakers, a Rega Jupiter CD player, and a Connoisseur 300B integrated amp putting out a mighty 8 watts. The proprietors of the room were playing a Norah Jones CD, and the sound was truly awesome: Immediate, crisp, and clear, with Jones voice detailed and breathy. Just wonderful. Next door, Project was playing their RPM9 turntable, and had on display their entire line, from the RPM4 at \$699 to the Perspective at \$1499, all with tonearms.

Newform Research were displaying their R645 loudspeakers using a Behringer DCX2496 digital crossover and equalizer, and a Panasonic XR45 digital amp (six channels of 100 watts) Whether it was the speakers, the room set-up, or the digital amplification I can't say, but this room didn't really "float my boat" as they say. The Wilson Benesch Act loudspeaker, however, did. Driven by an Audio Aero Capitole 50-watt tube amp, these speakers were sounding extremely good, with open, detailed sound, and that elusive "musicality."

Loth-X Ambiance loudspeakers sounded a bit "off" at first, but when pushed, came alive, providing room-filling sound with notable transient response. The Loth-X Troubadours, however, gave listeners a large dose of what I would describe as "typical horn sound". That is to say, sound not to my liking. Clearaudio and Hovland were spinning vinyl, and sounding really great, but my attention was really grabbed by the Cabasse Baltic II speakers across the way. These things look like eyeballs mounted on stands, and gave me the distinct feeling of being watched. When partnered with the Cabasse Thor II subwoofers, however, and driven by Art Audio's Jota amp, they managed to pull off a wonderful disappearing act, simply vanishing sonically, leaving only the music.

Back at the Delta the next day, I found myself enamored of the Focus FS888 loudspeakers. Used with an Ayre DVD player and PS Audio electronics, they sounded magnificent, well-balanced and alive. They were easy on the eyes as well, with a beautiful burl-walnut finish, which, I presume, is optional. Chord was showing off their Blu CD/Dac 64 combo, along with the CPA 4000 preamp, SPM 1400e monoblock amps, and Neat Ultimatum MF7 speakers. The sound was great, alive and very musical. These Chord components stack up on one another by way of cylindrical projections on the sides of the chassis, thus making their own rack. The look is very cool and ultra-modern, and, as I said, the sound was great.

Codell audio was spinning vinyl on a Nottingham Horizon turntable (a moderate \$1700 with arm and cartridge), Naim NAC12 preamp and NAP150 amp, and Spondor S/P 3/1 speakers. The sound was warm and involving, in the way only vinyl (at least in my experience) can be. In Codell's second room, they were showing Dynaudio Contour SS4 speakers, Pass X1 pre/XA150 power amps, and a Musical Fidelity M1 turntable. Everything I said about the sound in the first Codell room goes here in spades!

Vinyl seemed to be everywhere! There were 'tables by such companies as Brinkmann and Amazon, neither one of which I am familiar with, as well as "old standbys" such as Rega, Thorens, and Pro-ject. The Amazon table was being used with Omega 950b loudspeakers, which are switchable for use as either bipoles or dipoles by inverting the phase of the rear-facing drivers. These drivers can also be disabled entirely for use as a conventional speaker. Electronics here were Minimax by Eastern Electric of Hong Kong. These diminutive components, a tube preamp for \$1195, and an 8-watt push-pull tube amp for \$1350 (both in U.S. dollars) looked and sounded really good. The Brinkmann Balance table, with a 10.5-inch tonearm, EMT phono cartridge, and tube-based power supply for the 'table cost a cool \$21,600, the Brinkmann Marconi preamp \$9600, the Mono power amp \$11,950, and the phono preamp \$1,950. When used with the Eggleston Andra II speakers, this system was truly awesome, but it's only for those of us with extremely large amounts of discretionary income.

Son Ideal, a local dealer, was also spinning vinyl on a Thorens TD850 with TP300 arm and Clearaudio cartridge. Using a Unison Unico P hybrid (tube and solid state) amp, and Opera Platia speakers, they were doing a great job of it, too. Last time I attended one of these shows, Son Ideal was showing a vintage system with dual Quad speakers and associated electronics circa

early '60s. The sound was, in my opinion, the "best in show" that year, and it wasn't too far off the mark this time around.

Other rooms worth noting included, as usual, the Creek/Epos room, where great sound for only a little money is the norm. Innersound loudspeakers made a really good impression on me during my first day at the show, but when I went back the next afternoon, I found that one of the speakers had given up the ghost after a show-goer demanded "more volume!" The folks from Innersound explained that their electrostatic speakers are immune to arcing, thanks to a proprietary coating they use on the stators. They surmise that a manufacturing defect left one of the speakers improperly coated and ... you guessed it ... the speaker arced, leaving the room with glorious mono sound. Really too bad, as this room, in original stereo form, would have been my pick for best sound.

My companions and I, looking for a place to eat not too far from our hotel, stumbled upon a place called "The House of Jazz." Located only a block from the Four Points, they feature live jazz every evening, along with Buffalo wings, ribs, and other "juke joint fare." The food and drink were great, ditto the acoustic jazz quartet, bringing our trip to the "Great White North" to a very satisfying end. This is always a great show, and I urge any audiophiles in the northeast to attend the next Festival, which will be taking place on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd of April 2005. It's an easy drive, at least from Massachusetts, the exchange rate is favorable, and Montreal is one great city.

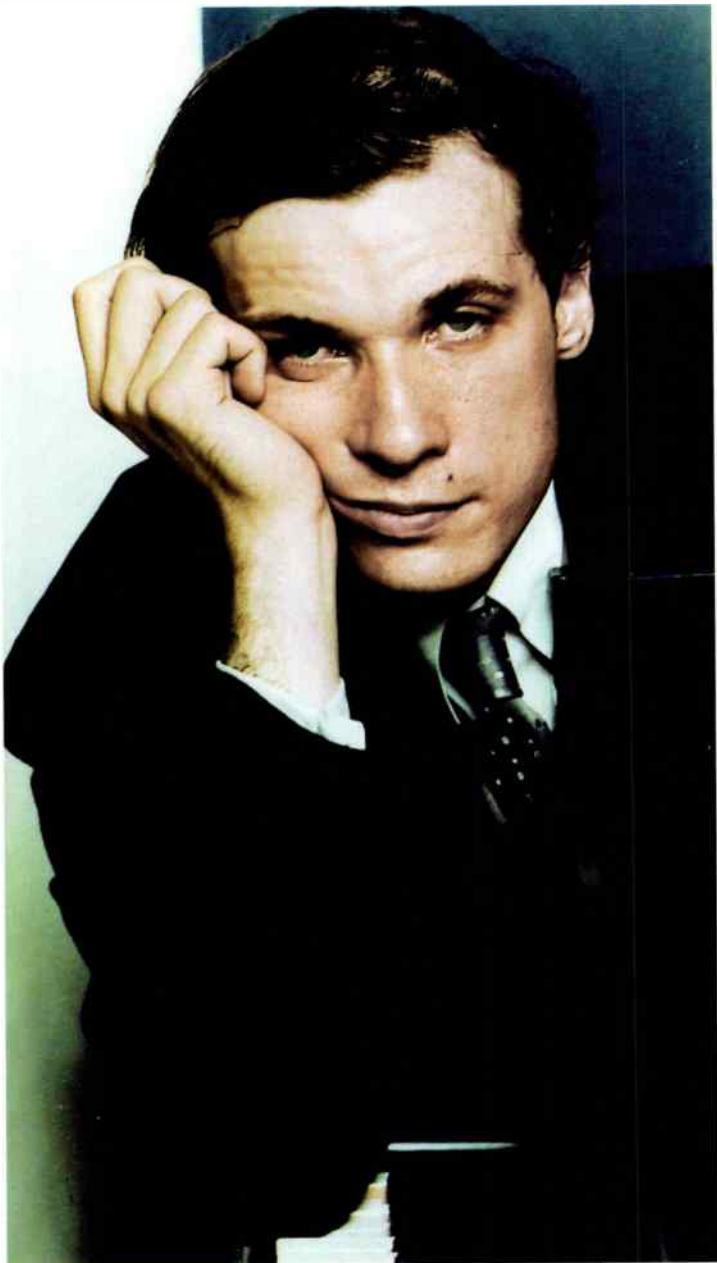
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Sony Masterworks Expanded Editions

Gould

Benjamin Ivry



REISSUE SERIES can be occasions for righting all sorts of wrongs. Sony Classical has just added 20 more releases to its previous 20 from this past fall in its Masterworks Expanded Edition, which features state-of-the-art remastering with Sony's Direct Stream Digital (DSD) System and SBM Direct. More than 100 titles are planned for release in the series over the next two years, but one of the most intriguing for audiophiles is already among the new batch, the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's 1981 recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations (SK 93070). Gould's classic effort sounds better than ever, using an approach he might have never suspected. Reissue producer Louise de la Fuente explains in a candid booklet note that the disc was remastered from the "original analogue source tapes, not the original digital masters." Glenn Gould was famously obsessive about studio techniques, but this Bach Goldbergs disc was his last – he died prematurely in 1982 – when digital technology was still at an early state. Fuente reminds us that at the time: "Recorders were using digital circuits rather than the ever-improving conversion chips that we use today. As a result, digital technology delivered a very clean, quiet sound – free of tape hiss and LP noise – but it was also brittle, compressed, and not quite 'musical' to many listeners' ears." Musicians like Gould who leapt at the new technology were simultaneously recorded onto high-output analogue tape, which Fuente plausibly argues was highly developed by 1981, and with "properly aligned machines and perfectly calibrated Dolby units, analogue's fidelity was far superior to anything digital had to offer."

Does the result succeed, Sony's conversion of the analogue tapes to Direct Stream Digital drives, followed by editing based on notes from the original Gould recording sessions, winding up with a 16-bit, 44.1-kHz compact disc? In a word, yes, and even the stringent sound-maniac Gould would doubtless be delighted to hear this unexpected version of his musical testament. (Unlike an earlier, peppier 1955 recording of the Bach Goldbergs which became a permanent bestseller,

Gould's 1981 has many moments of poignant autumnal regret.) A word of criticism: This series features "bonus tracks" and the present CD offers a 23-minute conversation between Gould and critic Tim Page. I am second to none in admiration of Tim Page, who is one of the two or three salaried classical music critics in America who does a good job, but Gould merited one conductor's comment, "This nut is a genius!" and listening to his verbal waffling about his cranky beliefs is a deflating experience. Only music should have been offered following these moving "Goldbergs."

Other wrongs may be righted in reissue series, such as the philistine and shortsighted policy of Sony Classical to fire from its roster almost every artist who does not bend to the current policy of recording Hillbilly-Hollywood crossover trash for bigger sales. Apparently only the great pianist Murray Perahia – Perahia's glowing performance of Bach's English suites is part of the reissue series (SK 93083) — has escaped the Sony massacre of non-crossover artists. Even Perahia may soon be required to play accompaniment one day for a Britney Spears *lieder* recital or be fired, so enjoy him on Sony while you can. To date, one of Sony's cruelest crimes against art was firing the sublime violinist Cho-Liang Lin, a direct descendent of their great line of refined, elegant fiddlers including Arthur Grumiaux and Nathan Milstein. Curiously, Sony includes Lin's refined reading of a Haydn violin concert in its *Haydn: Three Favorite Concertos* reissue (SK 90392) while another



perfectly fine Lin recording, of Fritz Kreisler favorites, still sleeps unreleased in Sony's cellar, a victim (as was the violinist himself) of Sony's heartless policy. If one of the great virtuosos of our time is not welcome at a label for which he produced dozens of immortal recordings, what does that say about the label?

NOTES

Bach: Goldberg Variations (SK 93070), Glenn Gould. The 1981 recording, with additional track featuring excerpts from Tim Page's 1982 audio interview with Gould about the Goldberg Variations.

Haydn: Three Favorite Concertos (SK 90392), Yo-Yo Ma/Wynton Marsalis/Cho-Liang Lin. Includes Haydn iano Concerto with Emanuel Ax.

Serkin Plays Beethoven (SK 90395), Rudolf Serkin. Piano legend plays Beethoven's three most popular sonatas – *Moonlight*, *Pathétique* and *Appassionata* – as well as other favorite Beethoven piano works.

Horowitz Plays Scarlatti (SK 90414), Vladimir Horowitz. The fullest disc yet available of the pianist's celebrated Scarlatti sonata recordings.

Mozart: Piano Concertos Nos. 19 & 20 (SK 93074), Rudolf Serkin/George Szell/Columbia Symphony Orchestra. Additional tracks include Mozart's Concert Rondo in D Major for Piano and Orchestra, K. 382, with Serkin, Alexander Schneider conducting the Columbia Symphony Orchestra.

Vladimir Horowitz (SK 93075), Vladimir Horowitz. Pianist performs works by Chopin, Debussy, Moszkowski, Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Scarlatti, Schubert, Schumann, Scriabin and his own "Variations on a Theme from Bizet's Carmen," with additional tracks featuring Chopin Etudes Op. 25, No. 1 ("Aeolian Harp") and Op. 25, No. 5, taken from the pianist's last recordings.

Bach: English Suites Nos. 1, 3, & 6 (SK 93083), Murray Perahia. Additional tracks feature Handel's Suite No. 5 in E Major, HWV 430.

Bach: Keyboard Concertos (SK 93089), Glenn Gould. Glenn Gould is soloist in these classic recordings of Concerto No. 1 in D Minor, BWV 1052, with Leonard Bernstein and the Columbia Symphony Orchestra and Concertos No. 4 in A Major, BWV 1055, and No. 5 in F Minor, BWV 1056, with Vladimir Golschmann and the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. Additional tracks include Bach's Italian Concerto in F major, BWV 971, and Concerto in D Minor after Alessandro Marcello, BWV 974.



The rest of the series offers other lessons as well. For example, in much improved sound, we hear Glenn Gould play Bach piano concertos (SK 93089) with two different conductors, proving that the comparatively obscure Vladimir Golschmann (1893 -1972), who led the orchestra for Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* before settling in for a

long career with the St. Louis Symphony, was a far better conductor, and better Bach specialist, than the galumphing, if vastly popular, Leonard Bernstein.


Other releases, like Vladimir Horowitz: *Favorite Encores* (SK 93075) and *Horowitz Plays Scarlatti* (SK 90414) confirm the impression that Horowitz (1903-1989) was a

master miniaturist, best at focusing on technical derring-do in works just a couple of minutes long. Although he was capable of stirring performances of longer works, notably by Schumann, Prokofiev, and Scriabin, as well as some concertos, many of Horowitz's attempts at playing longer works seem episodic, lacking a sense of the larger musical line. With the short fireworks, the problem simply never arises.

Finally, the Sony series permits relishing wonderful musicians such as the pianist Rudolf Serkin, playing at his philosophic, meditative best on two Mozart concertos accompanied by the chilly but perfectly suave conductor George Szell (SK 93074). Faulty connoisseurship and ever-present commercial imperatives may have led to including a release by the permanently jejune fiddler Midori, a still-active Sony artist whom they are clearly anxious to sell.

But for the most part, the Masterworks Expanded Edition series includes really valuable recordings which any company should be proud of. Additional information can be found on their website www.Sonyclassical.com.

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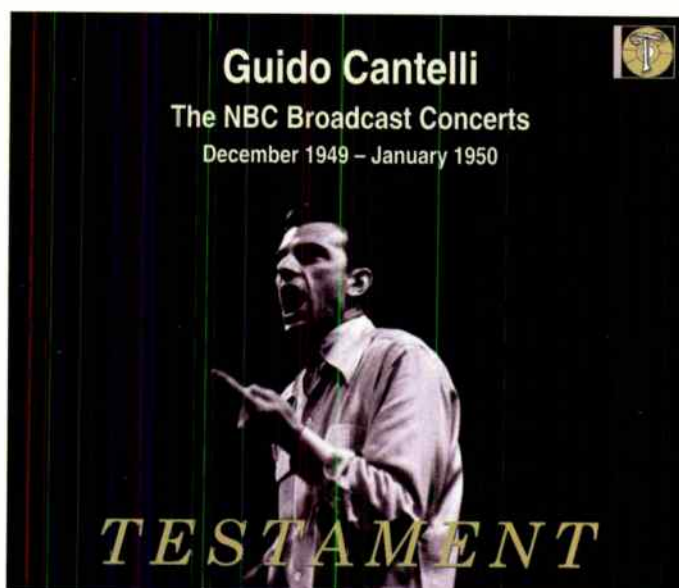
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Guido Cantelli: The NBC Broadcast Concerts 1949 - 1950

Benjamin Ivry



TWO SETS OF FOUR CDs each from Testament are drawing attention to the Italian conductor Guido Cantelli (1920 - 1956). Cantelli, a much-admired young conductor whom Arturo Toscanini, no less, considered his artistic heir, died tragically in a plane crash just after takeoff from Paris' Orly airport in 1956, on his way to fulfill a contractual engagement to conduct the New York Philharmonic. Cantelli was a majestic talent and like the great pianist Dinu Lipatti (1917-1950) who died of leukemia at 33, his artistry fully justifies any posthumous cult motivated by his early demise. Unlike Lipatti, most of whose recordings have long been available on EMI, only a smattering of Cantelli's work has been generally available, whether on EMI (EMI 74801) or Testament (Testament SBT2194; SBT 1317; and SBT 1011). Now, however, all that is changing.

Testament is leading the way in the U.S. with its new releases, complemented by the American company Music & Arts, which has just released *The Art of Guido Cantelli: New York Concerts and Broadcasts, 1949-1952* (Music & Arts CD-1120), a wonderfully varied 12-CD set which is not for sale in the U.S.A. However, the Testament recordings offer enough of an idea why any-

one who cares about symphonic conducting will realize that Cantelli's death was the greatest tragedy for the music world in the past fifty years. He was reputed to be in line to direct the New York Philharmonic instead of the show-bizzy Leonard Bernstein, a much less consistent podium talent. Assuming a traditional conductor's lifespan, Cantelli might still be conducting the Philharmonic, the way Eugene Ormandy stayed forever with the Philadelphia, and New Yorkers might have been spared Zubin Mehta and Kurt Masur, to name only two. Moreover, Cantelli was a brilliant opera conductor, and his example might have caused the likes of James Levine to leave town in disgrace years ago. Cantelli's disappearance — along with the standard he represented — made it easier for comfortable mediocrity and worse to triumph in American music.

What were the most compelling aspects of Cantelli's art? He had a lyric intensity which few conductors attained; Toscanini was among these. He was able to convey true nobility, as well as humility, an almost unheard-of combination in conductors. He was passionately successful in early music, romantic works, and modern music as well. In his few short years Cantelli

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Guido Cantelli

The NBC Broadcast Concerts

December 1950



TESTAMENT

experienced much. Born in the Piedmont city of Novara in 1920, he was a lifelong anti-fascist, and escaped from a prisoner of war camp during the Second World War, which nevertheless permanently damaged his health, leaving him with painful stomach ulcers. At the Milan Conservatory, he studied composition with Giorgio Federico Ghedini (1892 - 1965), a now-overlooked disciple of such masters of tunefulness as Pizzetti and Ravel. Ghedini's music and arrangements of old Italian music were often conducted by Cantelli, who seemed to relish their deceptive simplicity. Ghedini's own career may have been marred by simple bad timing, such as when he produced a one-act opera on Billy Budd with a libretto by the major Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo, in direct competition to Benjamin Britten's grand opera also based on Melville's story. Although Ghedini's version was performed in 1949 in Venice at La Fenice, it has rarely if ever been heard of since.

By contrast to his teacher, Cantelli's timing was always excellent. He started out conducting the Orchestra della Scala. By 1948, he was working as rehearsal assistant for Toscanini. Cantelli first conducted the NBC Symphony in 1949, and his first encounters with the group were recorded, although Testament has not included any of these first performances in the present set. By 1951 Cantelli was principal guest conductor of the New York Philharmonic, sharing the podium

with the fine maestro Dimitri Mitropoulos. Cantelli was regularly reinvited to lead some of the world's best ensembles. In his short career in America, he conducted the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Boston Symphony Orchestra. Tapes of some of his legendary outings with these groups are still circulating, and it is to be sincerely hoped that they too will be transferred to CD one day.

On November 16, 1956, Cantelli was named artistic director of La Scala, and eight days later he died in the aforementioned air crash. These noble recordings are part of his legacy, recordings originally produced by Don Gillis (and not Don Gilles, as Testament misidentifies him). The Cameron, Missouri-born Donald Eugene Gillis (1912 - 1978) was a multitasking composer, conductor, and producer. In 1944 he became producer and scriptwriter for the NBC Symphony. After Toscanini retired in 1954, Gillis helped to organize the Symphony of the Air, using members of the former NBC Symphony, which had been dissolved by the NBC tycoon David Sarnoff. A loyal keeper of the flame after Toscanini died in 1957, Gillis produced for NBC radio a program "Toscanini: The Man Behind the Legend," which ran for several years. Gillis was able to get good sound quality for these recordings, many of which were made in the notoriously dry acoustics of NBC's Studio 8H in Radio City.

Throughout the Testament sets, there are great joys; for example, two Haydn symphonies performed with the vim, vigor, and wit of a young conductor who manages never to sound smart-alecky. Following the precedent of his teacher Ghedini, Cantelli conducts Corelli's Christmas Concerto including a Pastorale movement with a real evocation of a Manger scene, as the solo instrumentalists collaborate to create a mood of barnyard humility. Star fiddlers Mischa Mischakoff and Edmund Bachmann (and not Bachmann as Testament spells the name) are joined by the great cellist Frank Miller and organist George Crooke (and not Cooke, as Testament has it). Too-hasty proofreading is one of the only reproaches one can make against these wonderful sets – even the author of the booklet notes, Mort Frank, was not spared, as not only his essay but also his name is translated into French here as Mort “Franck.”

There is innate grandeur in the works performed here by Corelli, Vivaldi, Geminiani, and Monteverdi (with a burly-sounding Robert Shaw Chorale adding to the resonance of the performance). But there is also a secondary meaning for an anti-Fascist Italian conductor to reclaim old Italian music from the clutches of Mussolini's cultural initiative to revive ancient traditions, including violin making and the scores of long-forgotten maestros. This

became such a fashion in the 1930s that even the arch-amateur musicologist but ardent fascist Ezra Pound became involved in reviving performances of Vivaldi's works. By performing the same music in the postwar years, Italian performers like Cantelli remind us of the permanence of art, which can transcend temporal agonies of history and politics.

Cantelli also had a deep understanding of modern music, and his performance of Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* symphony captures that work's spooky sense of German mysticism, just as his vibrant *Chant du Rossignol* by Stravinsky actually adds passion to a composer who can sometimes seem clinical when conducted by others. There are some lesser items in the Testament sets, including a Beethoven *Fifth Symphony* conducted better by Cantelli in other, more immediate-sounding recordings, and a version of Mozart's *Musical Joke* that seems too literal and deadpan by half.

But overall these CDs are a precious gift indeed, and one can only hope that many more archival rediscoveries will follow. Perhaps Testament will in future take into account audiophiles on a budget, and change their current format of placing a single radio concert on a CD, which can result in around 50 minutes of music per CD, instead of more generous programming.

NOTES

Testament 1306, four CDs, Works by Handel, Bach, Tchaikovsky, Haydn, Stravinsky, Wagner, Mozart, Hindemith, Frescobaldi, Beethoven; NBC Symphony Orchestra, Guido Cantelli, conductor.

Individual Works and Recording Dates: Testament 1306

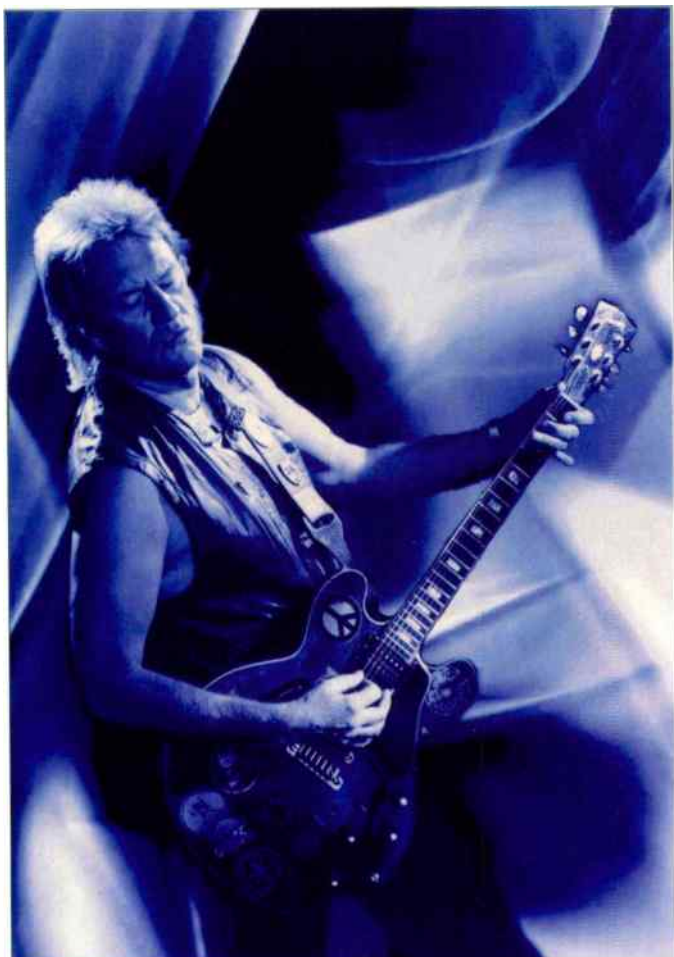
1. Messiah, HWV 56: Overture by George Frideric Handel; 12/24/1949.
2. Christmas Oratorio, BWV 248: No. 10, Sinfonia in G major by Johann Sebastian Bach; 12/24/1949.
3. Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, Op. 36 by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky; 12/24/1949.
4. Symphony No. 94 in G major, H 1 No. 94 “Surprise” by Franz Joseph Haydn; 12/31/1949.
5. Chant du rossignol No. 1 by Igor Stravinsky; 12/31/1949.
6. Rienzi: Overture by Richard Wagner; 12/31/1949.
7. Symphony No. 29 in A major, K 201 (186a) by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; 1/7/1950.
8. Symphony “Mathis der Maler” by Paul Hindemith; 1/7/1950.
9. Pieces (4) for Organ by Girolamo Frescobaldi (arranged by Giorgio Federico Ghedini); 1/14/1950.
10. Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92 by Ludwig van Beethoven; 1/14/1950.

Guido Cantelli: The NBC Broadcast Concerts, December 1950, Testament 1317 four CDs, Works by Rossini, Mozart, William Schuman, Milhaud, Dallapiccola, Verdi, Haydn, Vivaldi, Busoni, Beethoven, Corelli, Geminiani, Monteverdi; NBC Symphony Orchestra, Robert Shaw Chorale, Guido Cantelli, conductor; Soloists: Mischa Mishakov, violin; Edmund Bachmann, violin; Frank Miller, cello; Sylvia Marlowe, harpsichord, and George Crooke (organ)

Individual Works and Recording Dates: Testament 1317

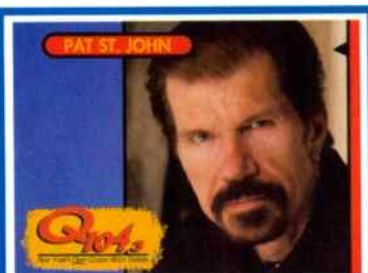
1. Semiramide: Overture by Gioacchino Rossini; 12/4/1950.
2. Eine musikalische Spass, K 522 by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; 12/4/1950.
3. Undertow by William Schuman; 12/4/1950.
4. Le quatorze juillet: Introduction et Marche funèbre, Op. 153 by Darius Milhaud; 12/11/1950.
5. Marsia by Luigi Dallapiccola; 12/11/1950.
6. I vespri siciliani: Overture by Giuseppe Verdi; 12/11/1950.
7. Symphony No. 93 in D major by Franz Joseph Haydn; 12/11/1950
8. Concerto grosso in A minor by Antonio Vivaldi; 12/18/1950
9. Tanzwalzer, Op. 53/K 288 by Ferruccio Busoni; 12/18/1950
10. Symphony no 5 in C minor, Op. 67 by Ludwig van Beethoven; 12/18/1950
11. Concerti grossi (12), Op. 6, No. 8 in G minor “Christmas” by Arcangelo Corelli; soloists: Mischa Mishakov, violin; Edmund Bachmann, violin; Frank Miller, cello; Sylvia Marlowe, harpsichord, and George Crooke, organ. 12/25/1950
12. Andante by Francesco Geminiani, arranged by Gino Marinuzzi; 12/25/1950
13. Concerto for Violin in F minor, Op. 8 No. 4; RV 297 “L’inverno” by Antonio Vivaldi; Soloist: Mischa Mishakov, violin; 12/25/1950
14. Vespri della Beata Vergine: Magnificat a 7 by Claudio Monteverdi; 12/25/1950

Pat St. John



Blues

Alvin Lee *Alvin Lee In Tennessee*
Rainman Records RM04012



Pat St. John plays tracks from this album on his national Blues Show on Sirius Satellite Radio (Sirius Blues 29) from 7:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. (ET) and plays Ten Years After on his local radio program on New York City's Classic Rock Station WAXQ, "Q-104.3". Visit him on www.Sirius.com, www.Q1043.com, and www.PatStJohn.com.

IT'S ONE OF THOSE RARE and wonderful moments when you put a new CD in your machine, and within 15 seconds, you know you're going to love the whole disc. Funny, when you do experience that prediction, you're somehow usually right. Such was the case for me when I loaded *Alvin Lee in Tennessee*, the master guitarist's 25th album. The first song is titled "Let's Boogie," and it sets the tone for what is sort of a return-to-his-roots record for a guy who is mainly remembered for his blistering guitar work and performance at Woodstock in 1969. For most of us, that was the first time we'd ever heard the leader of the band Ten Years After.

Born in Nottingham, England, Lee fell in love with American rock-'n'-roll, and number one on the list was the music of Elvis Presley, primarily because of the guitarist on those sides, Scotty Moore, who quickly became Lee's main inspiration to pick up an axe himself. Alvin couldn't have imagined at the time that one day Scotty Moore would be backing *him* up on one of *his* albums. What a thrill for Alvin. But why stop there? Get The King of Rock'n'Roll's drummer D.J. Fontana to pound the skins for the session as well! Then, *record* it at Scotty's home studio in Nashville! You know, just as he was beginning his career in 1967, Alvin told a local

newspaper that his favorite guitar player to listen to was Scotty Moore. Not only "wow!" but this gets better. Recorded mostly live in the studio, this is an album of blues & boogie-woogie that rocks! I can't tell you that the album builds and builds because it just starts so strongly with that opening track, but this is a collection of mostly original songs written expressly for this project that capture the "feel" of the good old R&R of the '50s. Scotty and Alvin crafted this album together and the whole band plays with their hearts as well as their instruments. His guitar work here is as masterful as ever, though not as intricate, as for this album, it doesn't need to be. I don't think I've ever heard Alvin sing like he's had this much fun before, even though he has given' it his "all" before, like when he got to yelling on "I'm Going Home" at that legendary Woodstock performance that blew everyone away. By the way, that's the song here that closes *Alvin Lee in Tennessee*, but done in a way that harkens back to a time when rockabilly was just loose, and made you want to get up off your

seat & shake (not that this CD isn't "tight")! My guess is they put this tune on the album as the closer just for a final grin.

Now that I've told you about the first and last track, let's get to the middle of this great, "drop-the-top-and fly" 55-minute ride. Sure it

can sound so raw, and are done with such passion, yet at the same time sound so crisp and clean, while still getting "down and dirty."

While the album maintains what they set out to accomplish, it's consistent, yet varied enough to hold your interest from start to finish.

Sure, if you look at the titles, "Why Did You Do It?", followed two songs later by "How Do You Do It?", you might think this is just going to be the same thing over and over, but it's not. "Let's Get It On" (not Marvin's)

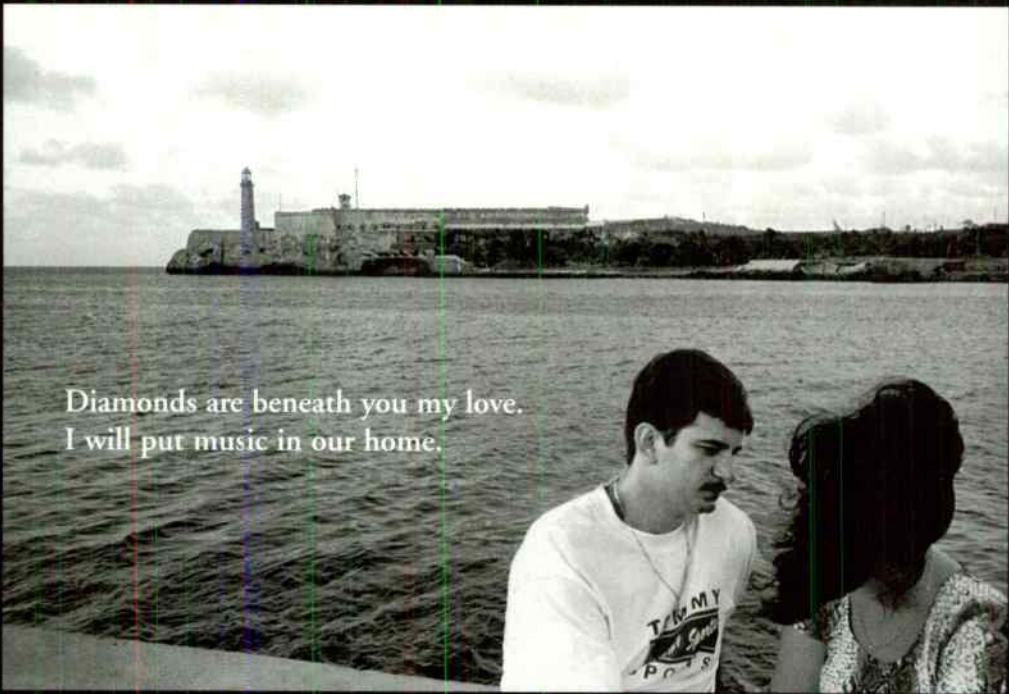
is just blues that makes you feel good, which is what great blues does.

There is nothing fancy about this album, no studio tricks, just a great singer/guitarist (who's airplay these days pretty much consists of TYA's "I'd Love To Change The World" and that original "I'm Going Home" by a guy who is a hero to many himself) playing with *his* heroes, to create one of my favorite albums of 2004. If you want authentic rock, bop, blues and a whole lot of fun just jumping out of your speakers, all you have to do is join *Alvin Lee in Tennessee*!

Nothing fancy about *Alvin Lee In Tennessee*, just a truly great guitarist playing with his heroes.

slows down to the in-town speed limit once in a while, but like any great pleasure cruise, it picks right up again, time after time. When you add the rollicking piano work of Willie Rainsford, and Pete Pritchard's wonderful bass to the mix, man this record's got it! Imagine your favorite Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis tunes and the feeling you got listening to them. Now picture (through today's recording technology) that you can hear each note of every instrument so clearly, it's like you're there! Fontana's snare is really there! It's amazing that these songs

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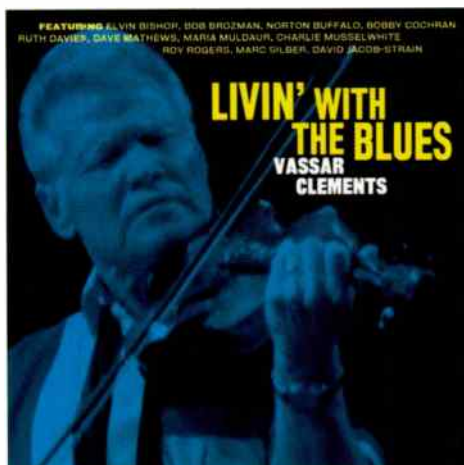
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Donald E. Wilcock

Blues

Vassar Clements *Livin' with the Blues*
Acoustic Disc ACD-58



THIS ALBUM is the antithesis of most contemporary recordings and is released by Acoustic Disc, a label that prides itself on recording and selling "100% Handmade Music." This alone is reason enough to buy the album. Add to that the curiosity factor of bedrock blues artists like Elvin Bishop, Roy Rogers, Maria Muldaur, Norton Buffalo, and Charlie Musselwhite working together with arguably the best fiddler in bluegrass, Vassar Clements. He's been called "the father of hill-billy jazz" and he has more than 2,000 recorded performances to his credit. Bring to this party the icon of the folk world mandolin player

David Grisman as the album's producer, and set as your goal producing a blues album, and you have a fascinating prospect.

The first question has to be a basic one. Does it work?

Of course it does, on several levels. But you already knew that, or you wouldn't be reading this magazine. It is strange. The newest song they cover, "Green Onions," is 40 years old, and the originals for the most part sound like they came out of the Delta or Piedmont hills and quite conceivably could have been recorded by Alan or John Lomax on Skip James' or Son House's front porch.

Photos: Jim McGuire

Listening to Vassar Clements slip into the zone with blues artists who have an uncanny way of tying tradition to original and contemporary influences is as exciting as it must have been to first hear B. B. King try to make his guitar sound like a sax.

Blues is all about the emotional voice. And the fiddle has a large vocal vocabulary, much of it well suited to "the deep, dark sadness in Vassar's music" to quote liner notes writer Matt Glaser. Clements has enormous dexterity and musical range, having played with everyone from Bill Monroe to Paul McCartney, and he applies that versatile "vocal" instrument to the music of each of his partners' in this project. The remarkable thing is the level of skill he applies, which makes his presence on all 15 cuts seem like the most normal accompaniment. You have to remind yourself that the fiddle was not always a primary instrument in rural Delta blues recordings of the '20s and '30s.

Clements' playing certainly "violates" blues' rule of simplicity. I put the word violates in quotes because it can be a charged word but I do not use here as a negative. Clements often dances around the basic melody and vocal, turning his fiddle into "wind in the trees at a campfire sing-along." He's a presence whose voice adds to the mood of each piece.

On "Mambo Boogie," one of the more upbeat numbers, he dances with Dave Mathews on piano and Norton Buffalo on harp. This whole album would make great soundtrack music. On this particular cut, I can see Fuzzy St. John doing a jig over a campfire hosted by a young John Wayne. Sparks are flying as Fuzzy tramps dangerously close to the flames, and the sparks explode like a million lightning bugs in a West Texas sunset. On "Honey Babe Blues," by Doc Watson and sung by Marie Muldaur, I see a remake of "Deliverance" with lingering scenes of bubbling streams and weathered drift wood.

The seasoned sideman that he is, Clements gives each of his guests plenty of room to showcase their distinctive talents. Elvin Bishop takes on the caricature of the southern Bubba on two songs he wrote for the project, "Dirty Drawers" and "That's My Thing." Bishop sings, "In the country, there's one thing I




need, home grown tomatoes, potatoes and peas." Roy Rogers' precise but seasoned guitar is a perfect foil for the dance he does with Clements on Robert Johnson's "Phonograph Blues." Norton Buffalo's deep nasal vocals and expressive harp (which were put to such fine use for decades with Steve Miller) finds a new comfort zone with Clements, particularly on "Don't Stand Behind A Mule." Like Clements, Buffalo has a knack for seeing life from the perspective of rural basics. "If you don't wanna feel the hoof, don't stand behind the mule," he sings logically.

Dave Mathews' boogie piano on "I Ain't Gonna Play No Second Fiddle" shows us why he's the master of the jam with younger mass audiences, and Charlie Musselwhite takes an uncharacteristic backseat on the most laconic "Green Onions" ever recorded.

If the major label marketing types get a hold of this album, they'll probably label it something like "bluegrass-blues crossover." But if people in the hills of Kentucky get to hear this, they'll recognize it as a bunch of friends getting together to let their instruments do the talking.

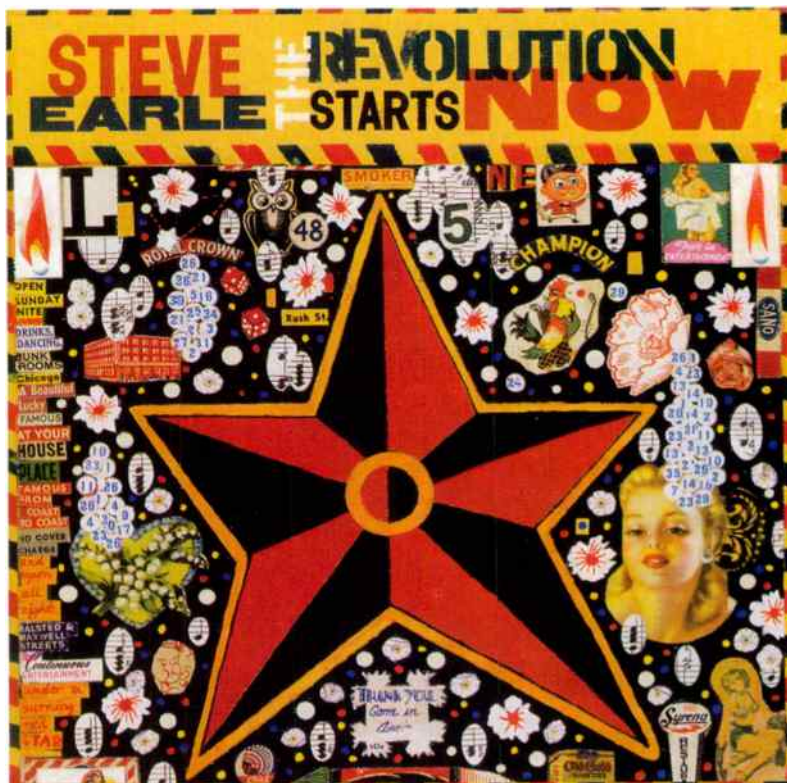
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Michael Tearson

Rock

Steve Earle *The Revolution Starts ... Now*
E-Squared Artemis ATM-CD-51565

N OBODY EVER HAS or ever will accuse Steve Earle of being shy about telling folks what he thinks. He touched off a firestorm with "John Walker's Blues" on his 2002 album *Jerusalem* in which Earle tried to get into the head of John Walker Lindh, that young American captured while fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan, to try to understand why he'd wind up there. Many accused Earle of glorifying Lindh. Insight was the true agenda. Earle openly courts more trouble from George W. Bush supporters and the right-wing in general with

The Revolution Starts...Now, which is an unabashed screed designed to rouse votes to help oust Bush in the November election.

Earle's personal politics aside, *Revolution* is a very powerful document many will misunderstand. And many will condemn. But a close listen to the songs could surprise them. They might find not the anti-American album they expect, but one of the most profoundly pro-American albums in memory.

Revolution is a true song cycle. It opens and closes with the title song's bold call to action: "Yeah,

the revolution starts now/In your own backyard/In your own home town/So what you doing standing around/Just follow your heart/The revolution starts now." This is a call to reclaim the government by getting involved from the grassroots on up the chain. Subtly it quotes the staccato keyboards of the Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again."

The closing version is the full song. The opener is truncated specifically to jumpstart the album's movie of the mind.

In a razor sharp segue "Revolution" turns to "Home to Houston," a kick-ass C&W trucker song with a long time trucker over in Basra driving bulletproof vehicles and vowing "If I ever get home to Houston alive/Then I won't drive a truck anymore."

"Rich Man's War" might be the most provocative song here. It limns three young men all sucked into the war. Jimmy is a poor kid not sure how he'll make his living since the jobs he knows all moved to Mexico. Now he's a Guardsman called up for active duty and clueless about what comes next. Bobby, the American flag and an eagle tattooed on his arm, is in Khandahar, his wife and baby girl left behind in the states with mounting bills and their car repossessed since he's been gone. Ali is an Arab kid who grew up in Gaza tossing bottles and rocks at tanks because that's what Arab kids did there. He's recruited as a suicide bomber. Pawns all, each is "just another poor boy in a rich man's war." "Warrior" might be Ali's thoughts as he's driving to complete his mission.

What will bother some is how willing Earle is to look through the eyes of fighters on both sides.

"The Gringo's Tale" is one for the ages. Set to a jaunty tune it cinematically plays out a meeting of two Americans in a bar in a nameless town somewhere in the middle of Mexico. The storyteller here plies the stranger in town for whiskey so he'll tell his tale. Turns out he's a soldier turned mercenary turned fugitive after he started asking the wrong questions so "the Colonel himself dropped the dime." A string quartet illustrates his story chiming in just as the tale begins. They paint an unnerving, discordant sheen bordering hallucinogenic. A brilliant arrangement meets brilliant storytelling.

"Condi, Condi" is a hilarious tongue-in-cheek calypso love song to the steely Condoleezza Rice complete with a hint of Springsteen when Earle sings "Condoleezza, come out tonight."

"F the CC" is an F-bomb filled peek into the mind of an average Joe outraged at all the lies he sees in the news and how people condemn and squash anything they don't like as anti-American. Joe lacks eloquence, but he does know a bit about his Constitutional rights.

"Coming Around," a duet with the luminous Emmylou Harris, is the story of a couple living underground since their radical actions in the 70s. Now weary of the run, they are ready to surface.

"I Thought You Should Know" might be the couple baring souls to each other in the still dead of night trying to decide what to do next. "The Seeker" could be the song of their son who has known nothing but life on the run.

The Twang-Trust team of Earle and Ray Kennedy has given the album a brash, in your face sound. The crisp digital edge intentionally heightens the album's immediacy. The sound adds context to the content.

It is important to separate the songwriter from the song when he places the song in the voice of a character. This has been Randy Newman's stock in trade from the beginning, and Earle uses this device brilliantly here. The songs are linked short stories adding up to a bigger picture.

In the long run the question of the album as art will rest on how well the songs continue to relate after the historical moment that produced them passes by. I suspect *Revolution* will age better than most expect. What Steve Earle is writing about here is really universal. The call to care in "The Revolution Starts Now" could become a perennial call as future causes discover how well it applies.

The Revolution Starts...Now is powerful stuff. I love how it feels playing loud in the car on the open road. Frankly I am partial to the message, but I hope those who choose to condemn the album at least take the time and responsibility to listen to judge fairly.

Freedom of speech must contain tolerance so that all may share the right.

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possible exception of Django Reinhardt, no Europeans (or other nationalities) made much of a contribution to the music. Indeed, they looked stateside for inspiration. Over the past two decades, this has changed, to the point that some feel the most creative music now is from the continent. (*JazzTimes* did a controversial issue on this.) There are musicians like Willem Breuker of Holland, The Tord Gustavsen Trio, The Danish Radio Big Band, Bobo Stenson, Martial Solal, Dave Holland, to name but a few, and the Italian native who leads the ensemble being reviewed, who blends jazz and European sounds into a unique amalgam. While these guys definitely do not possess names which will be familiar in the average household, they are known locally in their home countries as well as critically acclaimed.

The opener, "As Strange as a Ballad," gives us a sense of what's in store over the remainder of the CD, balancing spacey synthesizer sounds, a herky jerky rhythm, and mournful clarinet. Trovesi maintains a balance of disparate sources,

melding classical, jazz, and Italian folk elements, even distorted, over-driven rock (shades of the "Star Trek" where Captain Kirk and the crew go back to the past, phasers and historic scenery colliding). The sound of baroque horns introduces

European jazz usually takes a back seat to the American version; not with these guys!

"Sogno d'Orfeo," then a folksy theme becomes a swinging Dixieland interlude; a harpsichord-bongo interlude (!) leads us out. It's a musical clash of the New and Old World.

"African Tryptic" sounds like it borrows South African vocal music in the first of three sections, then Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues" makes the first of many cameos in the third section, before fast, hot solos are traded over chords reminiscent of "25 or 6 to 4". "West End..." peeks out to open "Canto di lavoro," with jungle/synth sounds

bubbling underneath, becoming a New Orleans strut, with distorted rock-guitar flavoring. There are three short interludes called "Siparietto," built on Trovesi's trademark circular chord patterns, and featuring harpsichord (the first iteration has the whole band; the others only harpsichord). Heavy metal and our old friend "West End Blues" crash on "Blues and West," while "Tiger Rag" and Bird's "Ko Ko" peek in through dark cello/bass backgrounds on "Il Domatore." The New Orleans chestnut "Oh, Didn't He Ramble" morphs into a funk number on "Ramble." The finale, "Toto nei Caraibi," opens with plaintive trumpet, a heavy cello-bass walk, and a haunted house feel. Before things get too heavy, a danceable calypso theme enters ("Totolypso"). (Dig the interesting low-end contrasts: cello/bass, electric bass/acoustic bass).

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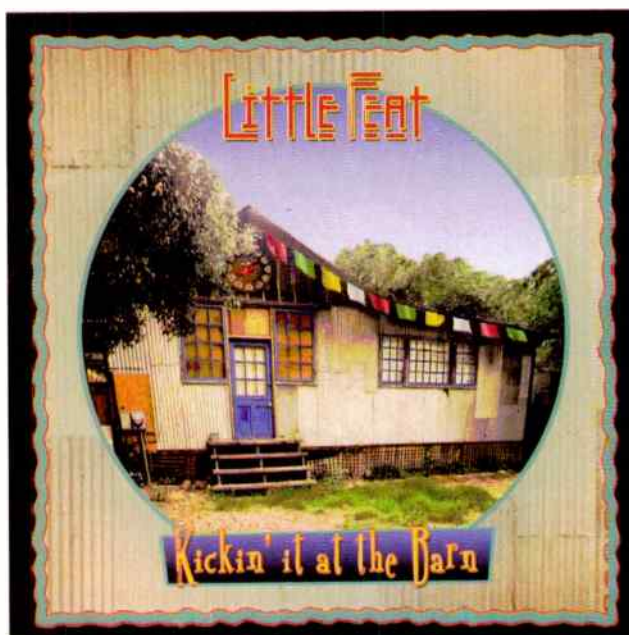
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Michael Tearson

Rock

Little Feat *Kickin' it at the Barn*
 Hot Tomato HTR 0208

THERE ARE TWO KINDS of Little Feat fans: Those who wrote the band off forever when co-founder Lowell George died suddenly in 1978 and those who to this day avidly, enthusiastically continue to celebrate the band since it first reconvened in 1988 after a decade long hiatus. For the record, I am one of the latter while Editor Gene Pitts appears to be one of the former.

The post-'88 Little Feat has had two periods: From 1988 to '94 with former Pure Prairie League vocalist and guitarist Craig Fuller in the band, and then from 1995 onward with singer Shaun Murphy, Feat's first female member, on board.

From its first appearance in 1970, Little Feat has delighted in an ever-widening eclecticism that often juxtaposes ingredients one wouldn't think of together in close proximity. Beside the originals of keyboard whiz Bill Payne and the remarkable slide guitarist Lowell George, their very first album included Howlin' Wolf's classic "Forty-Four Blues. Over the course of that decade, Feat expanded from four to six members when the original bass player Roy Estrada left and was replaced by bassist Kenny Gradney, percussionist Sam Clayton and guitarist Paul

Barrere. During the same period, their music expanded, too, embracing the quirky rhythms of New Orleans R&B plus jazz, funk, country and some others to a lesser degree — before George's sad, untimely, premature passing shut them down.

Flash forward to the present.

Little Feat are tough road warriors who are out performing much of the year. In the band's downtime members pursue other projects. Notably, Paul Barrere and Fred Tackett (a 1988 addition who plays guitar, mandolin and trumpet) tour as a duo. Bill Payne does session work and some occasional outside production. As I write, charter drummer Richie Hayward is on the road with Bob Dylan's band.

The band's support system includes a rabid, active fan base which helps the musicians all they can, every chance they get. Go to any Little Feat concert and right next to the merchandise table, you'll see a table manned by fans spreading word about the band's www.littlefeat.com and www.littlefeat.net websites and trying to get more fans involved.

Speaking of merchandise, Little Feat, tired of the endless hassles it

has had with record companies, finally started its own label, Hot Tomato, a couple years ago. So far, Hot Tomato has released five two-CD sets of live Little Feat, all of which are available in the usual stores, while Fred Tackett's first solo album, *In a Town Like This* (Hot Tomato 0207) is available only on line.

Which finally brings us to *Kickin' it at the Barn*, the first Hot Tomato Little Feat studio album of new material and their first since 2000's *Chinese Work Songs*.

Much of *Kickin' it at the Barn* fits comfortably with the sounds and ambience of vintage Little Feat. "Night on the Town" by Barrere and Tackett could be a latter-day companion to Feat classics "Dixie Chicken" and "Rock And Roll Doctor." Larry Campbell's violin adds a fresh dimension to the Feat sound here. Barrere and Tackett also penned "Heaven Forsaken" with its slithery herky-jerky feel and Gradney's bass grunting like an alligator, and the cautionary "Why Don't It Look the Way It Talk."

Shaun Murphy steps forward as a key writer on her showcase number here, the slinky "I'd Be Lyin'." A rare Fred Tackett lead vocal drives his own hard charging "In a Town Like This." A stripped-down acoustic version of the same song leads off Tackett's charming solo album. Bill Payne's *Stomp* is a steaming, funky instrumental. Payne and Barrere co-wrote the wistful finale "Bill's River Blues."

However, two other tracks, both total departures for Feat are this album's masterworks. "Corazones Y Sombras" (translates to Hearts and Shadows) by Payne, Barrere, lyricist Stephen Bruton, and Michael Donnelly is an eight-minute excursion into Mexican life and music with its tale of Mexican justice set against the bright colors of a fiesta. Nacho Hernandez' accordion

sparkles throughout and stamps authenticity on the piece right from the start. Sergio "Checo" Alonso plays *arpa de jalisciense*, a Mexican folk harp, in the central section, and when he does, you can just about see the angels watching on. Jesus "Chuy" Guzman adds mariachi trumpet and mellophone. Gabriel Gonzales takes the lead vocals in the piece's Spanish language sections. Kudos to Shaun Murphy for tackling and mastering the tight harmonies with Gonzales in breakneck Spanish; no easy task.

Payne also wrote "Fighting the Mosquito Wars," the other standout. This one is a 6½-minute valentine to nature's treasures, the vanishing simple things in life. Some of Bill's most eloquent lyrics roll over a gently flowing melody. But about three minutes in, the track morphs into a shimmering minute of raga-like break for guitar and tablas before returning to the song's setting on a placid trail in the mountains.

These two songs are such stunning surprises that they grab and shake you when they suddenly appear. Yes, Feat are making explorations into previously unknown territory, and coming back with new and unexpected treasures in the Little Feat strong box. But these songs exemplify the fearless adventurousness that makes Little Feat such a unique and important band.

If you have not been following Little Feat for some time, *Kickin' it at the Barn* is the perfect place to renew acquaintances. The album is a spicy stew sporting nearly all of the vintage Feat sonic hallmarks and several totally new ones. Theirs is intricate music with many different facets to focus on.

If you are an ongoing Feat fetishist, you might well already have the album. If you don't, you'll want to go out and get it.

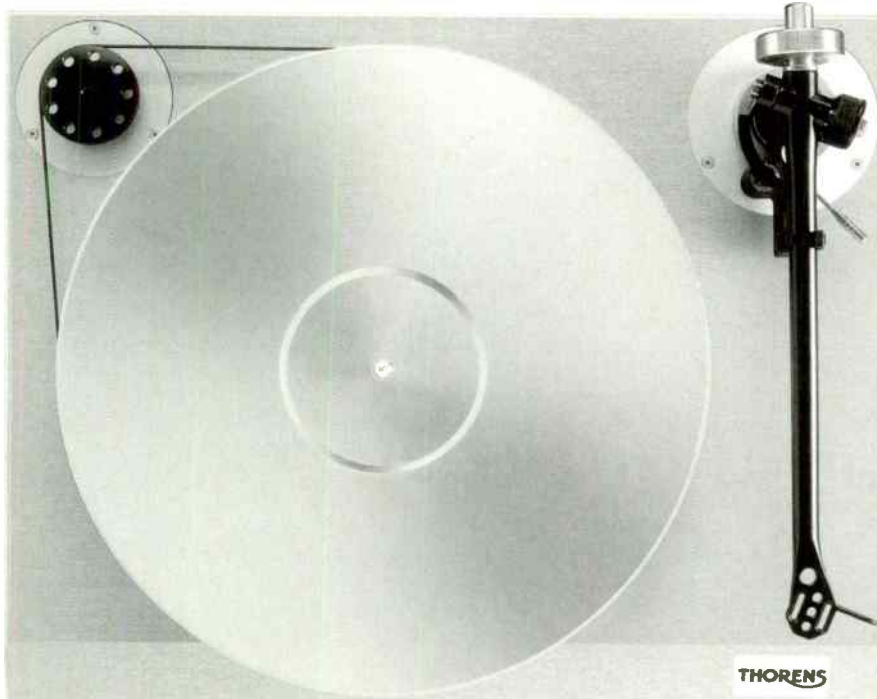
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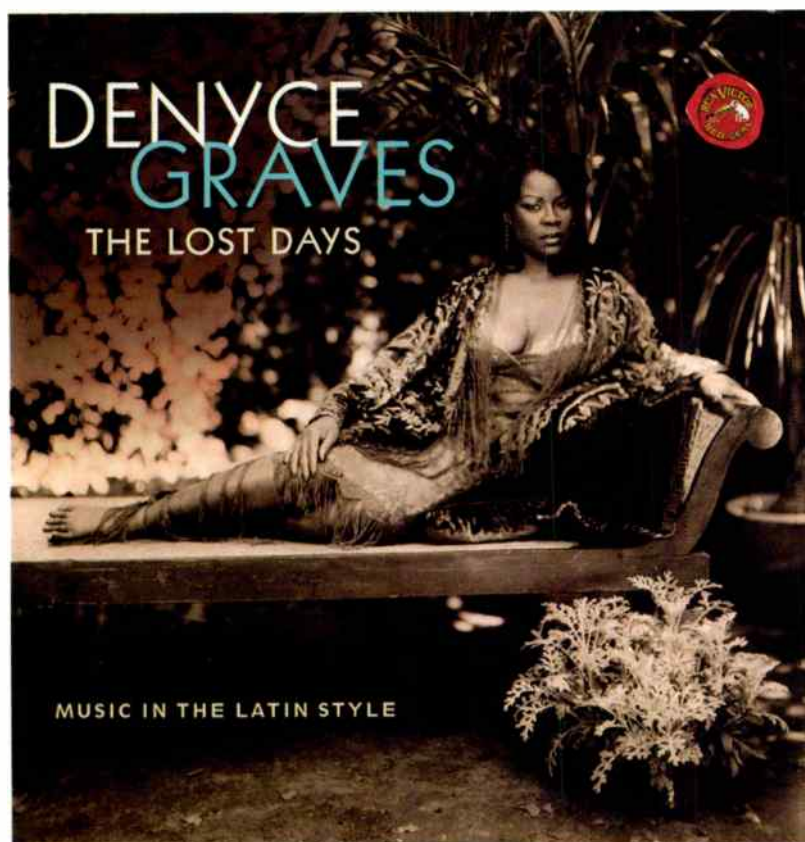
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Classical

Denyce Graves *The Lost Days*
RCA Red Seal 63726

THE AFRICAN-American mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves is continuing her triumphal march as one of our country's most exciting classical vocal personalities. After a much-praised aria album for BMG, *Voce di Donna*, her latest CD, *The Lost Days* (RCA Red Seal) is out recently, featuring Graves performing with such Latin music stars as Chucho Valdés and Pablo Ziegler. Renowned in the title roles of operas such as Bizet's "Carmen" (which she recently sang at New York's Metropolitan Opera) and Saint-Saëns' "Samson et Dalila," she is branching out to wider repertory, operas such as Donizetti's romantic "La Favorita," Offenbach's fizzy "La Périchole," and Bartók's tragic "Bluebeard's Castle." As befits an operatic superstar, Denyce Graves is the subject of a PBS documentary film aired this fall, and is launching personalized perfume and jewelry lines later. What is the basis for the widespread fascination with this young artist?

The Frenchman Marc Soustrot, who conducted Graves in an album of *Heroines: French Romantic Arias* (Aria Records), praises Graves' "warm voice and great musicality," and pianist Warren Jones, who accompanied her on *Angels Watching Over Me* (NPR Classics), a disc of spirituals, comments, "I find that the combination of intellect and intuition that Denyce possesses is quite unique, for she is capable of the most refined moments as well as unbridled emotion and expression. Her physical beauty and stage presence are unmatched by others in her repertory, and her determination to succeed is fierce, indeed!" Even normally stern critics gush about Graves, including the exacting connoisseur of opera James Jorden, editor of an online magazine, who likens Graves to the Golden Age singer Blanche Thebom, adding, "She is an amazingly beautiful woman, plus she has genuine star quality, the type that 'lights up the

stage.' And she's not embarrassed to be a diva."

Graves' fierceness and lack of embarrassment help her unwavering quest to grow as an artist, striving for new projects and challenges. Chatting on the phone the morning after her first Carmen this season at the Metropolitan Opera, Denyce Graves expressed her excitement about working with composers of today on her latest album, *The Lost Days*: "In older music you are given a map that tells you how loud or soft you're supposed to sing, an instruction booklet. With new music, you create your own instructions ... it's very liberating." Liberation has been a key part of Graves' life and career since her humble beginnings in Washington, D.C., where a turning point in high school was discovering a record of the great soprano Leontyne Price. "A girlfriend of mine found it in the listening library ... we cut all our classes and sat there all day listening, amazed."

Soon Graves was studying with top professionals including the legendary Greek-American mezzo-soprano teacher Elena Nikolaidi, who died last year at age 96. Nikolaidi, says Graves with great emotion, "taught me freedom. I'm not sure I've mastered it, but she symbolized that — singing is difficult and mysterious — She'd start a lesson by asking me if I wanted some ice cream — she didn't care if milk caused phlegm — she was very joyful and brought a real joy to singing — she would sing with me — she was a grand lady — and funny and she swore like a sailor and taught me Greek swear words." Nikolaidi, renowned for her elegance even in old age, advised Graves on clothes and hair-dos before recitals, giving the singer tips on moving onstage: "She cared about the entire presentation."

Maybe that's why Graves is praised today for offering what Jorden calls "a package, which very definitely includes the visual element." Part of the package is jewelry, which Graves considers "an important element of performance." Her own jewelry line, designed with Nazlie Satar, will be launched later, along with her personal fragrance, "Music by Denyce Graves" with citrus elements and woody odors because her husband David Perry is a guitarist and she "loves the smell" of his guitar.

But despite these accessory activities and a frenetic touring schedule, Graves' mind and heart are concentrated on her artistry. A recent high point was at the Los Angeles Opera in Bartok's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, where the stage director was the famed Hollywood director William Friedkin ("The Exorcist"), a production that traveled to Washington Opera. Graves explains that unlike other directors who focus on the music, Friedkin "worked directly from the text ... he walked around with the libretto and directed from that, giving us a terrific amount of freedom to see what we were going to create ... we all felt freedom because he wasn't stifled by ideas of what opera should be."

A much-anticipated future project is a new opera, "Margaret," based on Nobel-prize-winning author Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved," with music by the contemporary American composer Richard Danielpour and a libretto

by Morrison herself. Morrison has already told Danielpour that she feels that the operatic form is the medium that will "lift her material up and exalt it." Audiences accustomed to being exalted by Graves' exciting presence will also look for her to continue expanding her repertory, perhaps as James Jorden recommends, to Wagnerian roles "like Fricka or Venus: they lie in a powerful part of her voice, and she has that dark smoky quality that

would convey the menace and ambiguity of these characters." Graves herself says she would like to spend some time singing the title role in Gian Carlo Menotti's melodramatic *The Medium*, or Dorabella in Mozart's "Cosi fan tutte." And if Denyce Graves has proven anything so far in her remarkable career, it's that if she is hankering to sing Menotti and Mozart, chances are she will be doing just that to popular acclaim quite soon.

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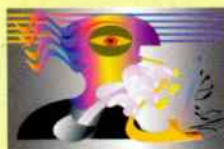
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Arnie Goodman

IT'S FUNNY how things work out. In the middle of January 2004 I went to see Dave Mason at BB King's in NYC. While watching the show, I thought to myself, "What a great artist! I should go back and listen to some of his old albums." The records I was thinking of were the first two Traffic LPs and *Alone Together*. The next day I got a call from Gene Pitts, TAV's editor, saying that S&P records has just reissued Dave Mason *It's Like You Never Left* on vinyl, and asking me if I wanted to review it. So here we are.

The original CBS album and new S&P release both use open-up covers and are almost the same, other than the S&P version has a glossy finish (which I prefer). The first thing I did was to open up the album and study the personal and the production credits. From this, I got info that I just hadn't paid attention to in the past. Of greatest interest were the album's special guests: George Harrison (Son of Harry), Stevie Wonder, and Graham Nash. Another thing I didn't realize in the past was that Malcom Cecil had recorded the album and co-produced it. People who are not familiar with Malcom might not know his credits, but he recorded and co-produced all the big Stevie Wonder

LPs, which explains how Stevie Wonder ended up on this album. Cecil also was the man behind Tonto's Expanding Head Band, which did one of the first Moog synthesizer recordings, not to mention the somewhat larger group, Devo. I was lucky enough to see him work first hand on a Savoy Brown album. This present disc is a great sounding album, and Malcom is one of the very best at his craft.

The music here will stand up with anything Dave has ever done. If you are big George Harrison fan, give "If You've Got Love" a listen. My other favorite tracks are "Head Keeper" and "It's Like You Never Left." This is very strong album all the way through.

As I said, the sound on this LP is very good. However, the new S&P version is pressed on 180-gram vinyl and thus is superior to the original's production level. It was mastered by Steve Hoffman, who did a very good job in my opinion. This record was, I think, a very good choice to put out again on vinyl, since to me, it has been overlooked by collectors in the past, myself included. I would recommend the S&P version to any rock music or Dave Mason fan, and especially to those who collect rock vinyl.

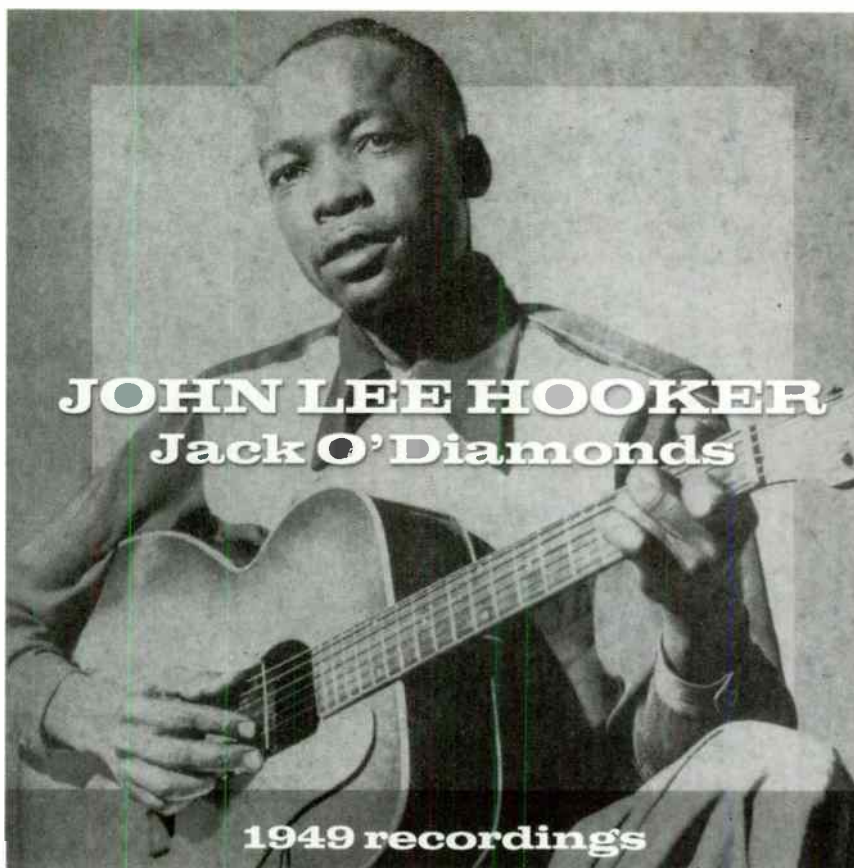
Vinyl

Dave Mason
It's Like You Never Left
S&P Records S&P-503

Jon Tiven

Blues

John Lee Hooker *Jack O'Diamonds*
Eagle ER 20024-2



TO MAKE A RECORD these days, one needs at least 24 tracks to record upon — sometimes two or three times that — and a budget that could support a small nation for a month or more. These simple recordings of the young John Lee Hooker were made more than 50 years ago when considerations like these had not been made even for the first time. The songs often do not stray from a single chord, and Hooker accompanies his vocals with his own guitar work, with no other musicians to help clothe the songs. Now I'm not saying, "Oh, for those days of simplicity," but this CD should serve as a reminder that technology can be the enemy of talent.

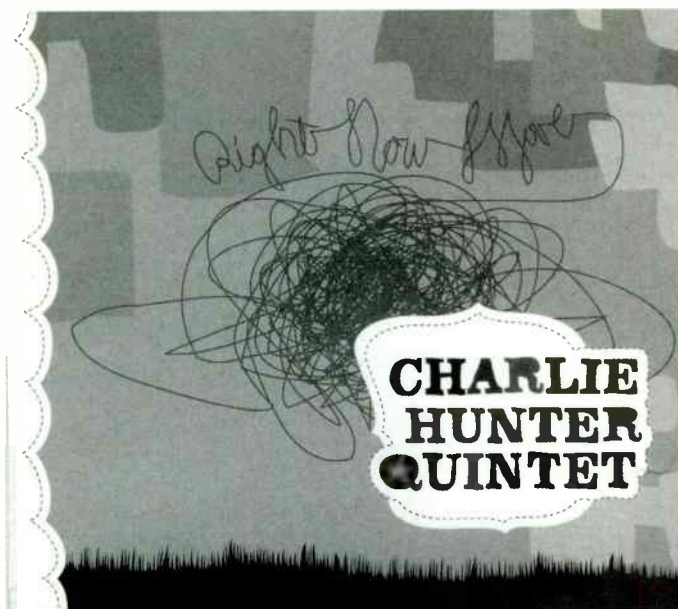
This recording is truly the compelling stuff of which legends are born. The spare approach John Lee is known for was already well

formed at this point. He had already done some studio recording but this is an intimate living room performance of not only his originals but traditional numbers not necessarily present in his stage repertoire. He is relaxed, but delivers an emotional vocal performance, not to mention playing some fine guitar.

In 1949, the year these recordings were made, there was no national forum for this kind of music, only regional pockets around places such as Detroit and Chicago where a blues musician could find an audience. Thus, John Lee's blues is a form very much unto itself. We are indeed fortunate that Gene Deitch, a visual artist who had a great appreciation for the blues, had the foresight and care to document Mr. Hooker's dining room concert.

Of the songs themselves, tradi-

tionals like "Trouble In Mind" and "John Henry" adapt well to the Hooker style, blending well with originals like "How Long Blues" and "33 Blues." Of course, at this beginning stage of the "Music" game, as well as for musicians such as John Lee, there was very little distinction between original and non-original material in his set list. Indeed, the idea that one might reap the large financial rewards John Lee saw later in life when everyone from Bob Dylan and George Thorogood to Van Morrison "covered" his songs, would not have occurred to him. Here is John Lee Hooker, just sitting down and playing what he knows, and the thought that these recordings could ever be commercially issued probably never entered his consciousness. Just as well, as the performance may be better for that.



Charlie Hunter Quintet *Right Now Move*
Ropeadope 0-7567-93137-2-0

IT SEEM TO BE on a guitar binge- guitar conquered the pop/rock/blues world, but has been almost a novelty instrument in jazz. Guitarists never quite had the front line expressiveness of horns or the rhythm section flexibility of piano. Certainly the electric guitar (and its pioneer, Charlie Christian) changed this somewhat, but Christian's electrical energy was later toned down, mellowed out, and guitar found it's voice primarily in the aforementioned genres. Jimi Hendrix blasted open the sonic palette of the instrument, and many creative jazz voices have emerged on the guitar.

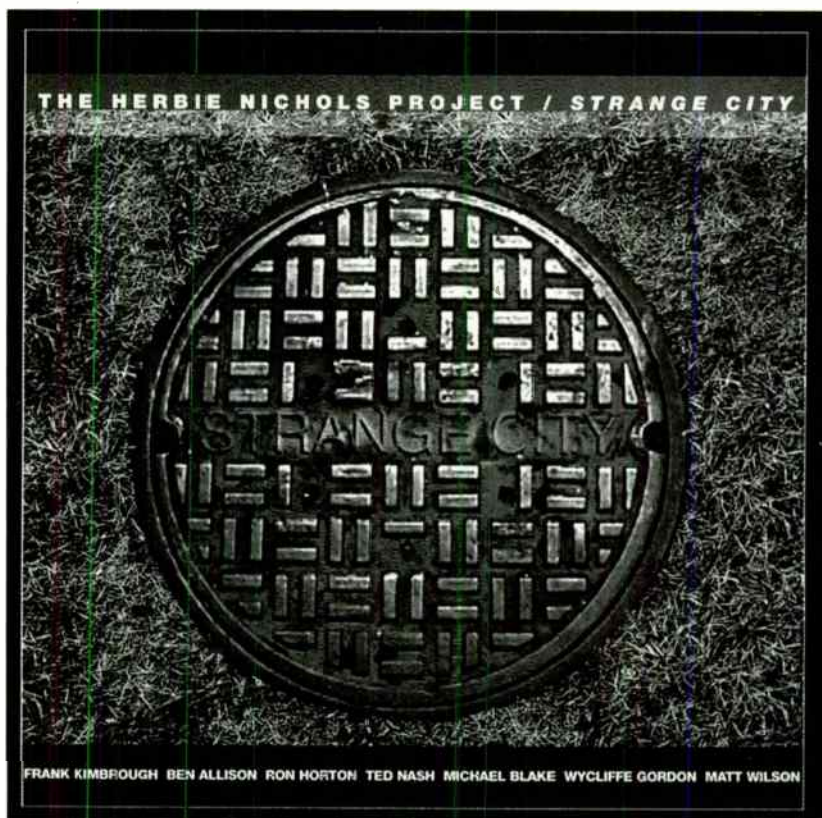
Hunter is one of the monster guitarists who never learned that the guitar is suited for one activity at a time- single line soloing or accompaniment. He supplies bass lines, rhythm, and melody on his 8 string guitar (anyone interesting in this gear can see it and get more info at Charliehunter.com). On this album he assembles an unusual ensemble, featuring a front line of tenor sax, trombone and chromatic harmonica. The music is a funk-jazz amalgam, with catchy writing and hip playing. Compositionally, he's always going for catchy themes and hip beats, with thoughtful, nuanced arranging that exploits the sonic palette available.

From the funkified blues and "Leslie"-fied guitar sound of "Mestre Stata", with it's swirling instrumental interludes, through the salsa-ish "Changui", with it's gotta-dance rhythm and fractured, Ribot-style guitar solo, things are at a constant boil. "Try" is drenched in DA FUNK, with interesting counterlines driving things along; Greggoire Maret's chromatic harmonica delivers a fine solo; textures shift for John Ellis' fine, cascading tenor outing, while trombonist Curtis Fowlkes takes it

out nicely. (The theme is a good test of your system's resolution-the harmonica/sax lines double on the right channel, with guitar/trombone on the left.) "Whoop-Ass" is booty-shaking stuff, with Leslie-fied guitar. The only non-original, "Wade In The Water", is arranged nicely, with swatches of odd combinations (bass clarinet, harmonica, trombone), and a crying solo by Fowlkes. A second-line march feel buoys "20th Congress", with exciting solo trading by sax and trombone. A Bond feel pervades "Freak Test", with Fowlkes blasting away, and Hunter playing in a choppy but driving style, almost against the grain of the music. "Mali" has a dramatic, theatrical feel, and features the harmonica. The last tune, "Le Bateau Irvé", has an attractive theme, a slithering guitar solo, with only his own bass line and drums, then over interesting horn vamps.

I have heard (and covered) a few of these two-handed plectrists, playing bass, chords, and lead, and Hunter is by far the most convincing. Particularly when it comes to bass playing, he can hold his own with most bass players, while still comping and playing fabulous solos-it's uncanny (usually the bass is OK, but not quite as snappy as the real deal; I feel the same about organ bass). This album also benefits from a maturing of his composing and arranging skills, making for music that is engrossing on its own irrespective of the "Wow" factor of Hunter's technique.

There are rich instrumental tones captured (these instruments are nuanced). There's not much happening beyond the speakers, some depth, but we do avoid the hated "bloated drums" sound.



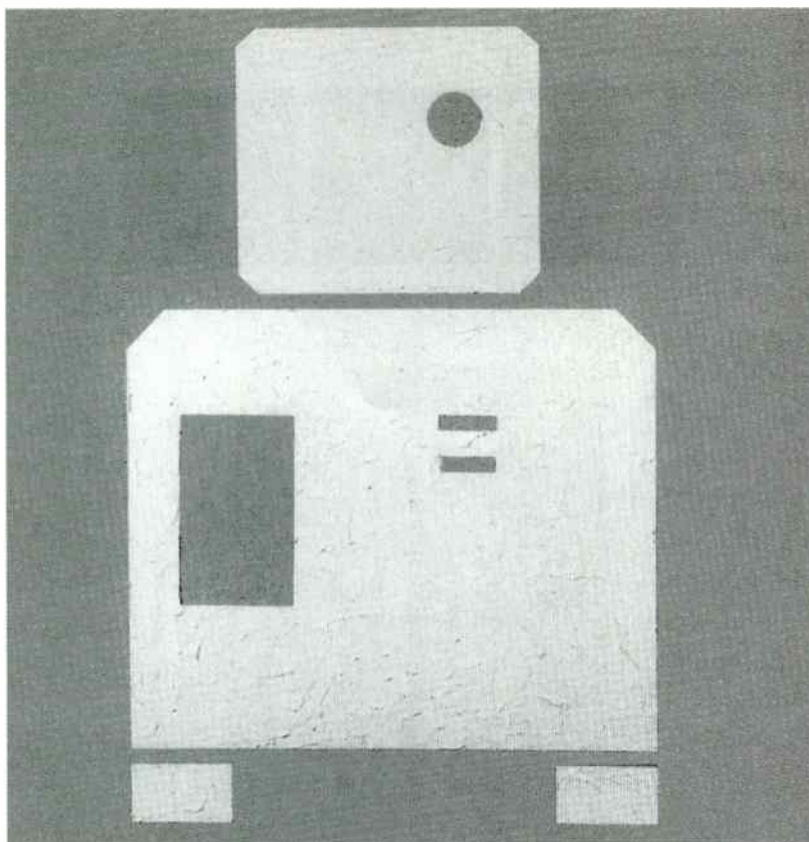
THIS IS THE LATEST release by the Jazz Composers Collective, a loose aggregation of Downtown jazz artists. I have reviewed CDs by a few of its members, bassist Ben Allison, drummer Matt Wilson, and trombonist Wycliffe Gordon. This particular incarnation focuses on the music of the under-appreciated pianist-composer Herbie Nichols, focusing on unrecorded Nichols compositions in multi-horn arrangements (treatment Nichols couldn't garner for his music during his lifetime). These are well thought-out, with constant movement and much variety, with hints of Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton.

"Moments Magical" offers up its pretty melody in a legato free-time, utilizing only horns at first. Michael Blake's soprano sax solo slashes as an Ornettish rhythm is established. Trumpet and rhythm tackle "Enrapture," an upbeat, medium tempo swinger, with interesting harmonic shifts (as most Nichols' tunes have) that present the insinuating melody in slightly differing lights. Horton's Clifford Brown-influenced (i.e. lovely, warm) tone and his chops and rhythmic sophistication make for nice commentary. "Delights," another attractive, minor melody over a 6/8 African-sounding vamp, has an exciting tag-team soprano and tenor sax (Ted Nash) match; Kimbrough's piano solo over changes is the perfect release. Da blues at their most basic, "Blue Shout" features guttural trombone and passionate tenor,

arranged in a stripped-down trombone/sax/drums trio. Trumpet and rhythm return for the haunting, floating "Strange City," again highlighting Horton's pretty tone; Frank Kimbrough's lyrical piano solo is ear candy.

During his life, Nichols was often (unjustly) written off as a Monk-copyist, and though his angular melodies can bring Monk to mind, his richer, more varied palette and nuanced composition style are unique. This brings up "Karna Kangi," whose melody (but not the harmonies or form) have some Monk-sounding angularity. Played here by piano trio, it highlights both why this mislabeling was so prevalent, and why it was specious. It's another blues-with-attitude on "The Happening", with Gordon doing his "Tricky" Sam Nanton, Blake veering into Coltrane territory, and Wilson taking a tongue-in-cheek stripped-down drum break. "Change Of Season" sounds more like Bill Evans than Monk, with expansive, romantic piano. "Some Wandering Bushman" features a circular, shifting muscular line in 5/4, and Nash solos in a R&B-ish mode. "Shuffle Montgomery" ventures into Monkish territory again, and Horton dispels the sweet, Brownie impressions of his earlier outings with a solo full of spit and fire that tiptoes into free territory over an elastic rhythm section.

Sonics are excellent with a very wide stage, good depth, and instruments with body and bite. Once again, this group's a winner.



Jazz

The Bad Plus *These Are The Vistas*
Columbia CK87040

YOU KNOW SOMETHING is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones? First, check out the label; no shoestring Ma and Pa operation based in Spain here. Second, dig all the commotion surrounding this album. NPR did a big feature, while a writer at *JazzTimes* who dissed it (as one of his many controversial stands) got canned. Songs mostly run only three to five minutes (only one tune out of the 10 makes it out to eight minutes, and it is the least involving). It is that most traditional of jazz units, the piano trio so beloved of Bill Evans and others, yet the album rocks and is making inroads with a young, non-jazz audience. Indeed, The Grateful Dead and Pink Floyd come to mind before Bud Powell or Wynton Kelly.

"Big Eater" lets you know what's about to come. Certainly not unsophisticated (it alternates 7/8 and 4/4 sections), it is about energy, power, intensity, with pianist Ethan Iverson alternating between acoustic power chords and chiming sections. A mix of ragtime feel and "Mr. Fantasy" yields "Keep the Bugs Off Your

Glass and the Bears off Your Ass," with a funky bass solo (Reid Anderson) and glass-like tinkling from Iverson. Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," an unlikely cover for piano trio, captures all the anger and forcefulness of the original, while deconstructing the theme. The crew stretches out while rocking madly (dig drummer David King New Orleans shuffling). "Everywhere You Turn," a pretty ballad, starts out sounding distant, and builds in dynamics, with romantic (as in classical music) piano expressions. If Monk played rock (and maybe studied with Keith Emerson), it might come out like "1972 Bronze Medalist," with its skittering, off-center lines, power chords, and slightly demented romantic gestures.

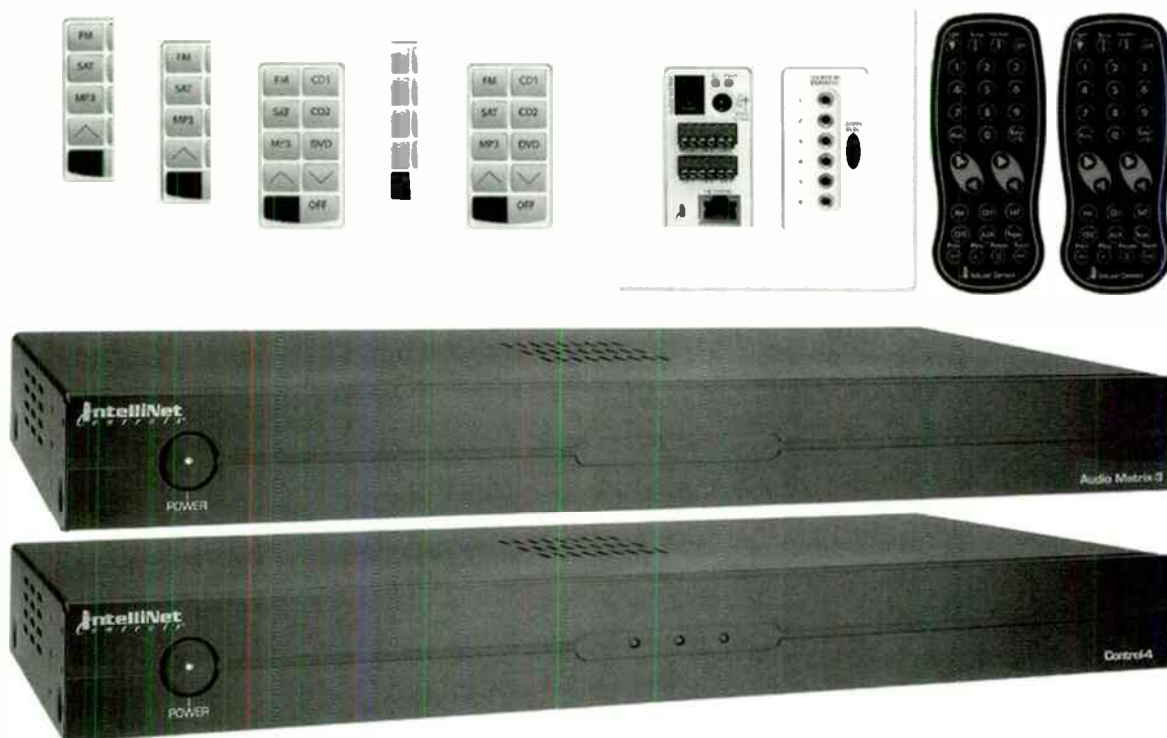
"Guilty" is a blues, or a cousin thereof, and it gives bassist Anderson room to strut his stuff. The knotty, foreboding "Boo-Wah" moves through dark vamps and rhythmic motifs, over which Iverson tinkles and struts. "Flim" is as light as the previous track was dark;

acoustic and electronic drums maintain a running commentary. Blondie's "Heart of Glass" is given full honors, with the sing-songy original taken through some dense thickets, with interesting counter-melodies and dissonances, and Iverson sounding stormy. The "B" theme is particularly fractured, and the solo has Iverson moving simple lines around and against each other in free time; the rhapsodic theme drifts in and out; intensity builds to almost unbearable levels. It ends on a quasi-reggae feel reminiscent of the original. The last and longest track, "Silence Is The Question," introduces the lovely theme very softly, and slowly builds to a romantic (that word again) crescendo.

Sonics are fine, with nice depth, a wide stage, and good separation and imaging. The liner notes are also interesting, with analysis of tracks that is often more visual than musical. I found this to be one of the most interesting and engaging discs I have heard these past 12 months; certainly, it was one of the most spun discs of my year.

Intellinet by Russound RS-3000 Multi-Zone Custom Installation System

Robert Kingsley



THE RS-3000 is a multi-source, multi-zone audio control and distribution system by IntelliNet Controls. The twist to this system is that it is also accessible through your home computer network. Not only can you control the system from any computer on your home network, you can set it up and modify it via a computer. I reviewed this system in my house and divided up rooms into “zones.” I then set up different sources for listening. Besides the obvious CD player, I added an FM tuner and a Satellite music source (Direct TV Sony) among others. This allowed my wife and me to be in different rooms and listen to a variety of material or sources.

To make the IntelliNet system function, you will need to have several components linked together by Ethernet cabling and RS485 cables: The Control4 (C4) is the brains of the system. It serves as the central command center as well as a web server for audio functionality. In addition, the C4 acts as a gateway that merges the distributed audio system with the 10/100 home network. All of the configuration and control functions are

processed and delivered from a number of optional PC-centric devices such as a PC tablet or a wireless-enabled laptop.

The DH1 is an essential part of the system and in conjunction with the C4; it integrates IntelliNet networked devices (such as keypads and relay controllers) with the LAN network. This unit is an interpreter and it communicates all of the IC RS-485 network functions; it is also the device which uses the source IR emitters. The DH1 is capable of “learning” IR commands for some of the lesser-known source devices, and the C4 communicates with the system over the LAN network in the home through the DH1.

The Audio Matrix (AM3) is a six-zone/six-source pre-amplifier controlled by the Control4 Processor. This is the audio-switching portion of the system and contains the audio circuitry. This is a separate component so it provides isolation from the networking portion of the system. The Audio Matrix also has the capability to integrate with a paging system, but that was not included with the system reviewed here.

The Audio Keypads (AK2) are to be installed in each zone's wall and provide for easy access to zone controls. The keypad has source buttons (CD, DVD, FM, etc.), volume control, and an IR (infrared receiver) for the RS3000 remote. In addition to the equipment above, you will need a couple of other components to complete the installation.

Obviously you're going to want source components to provide tunes through the system. I used my CD player, a DVD player, an AM/FM tuner, and a DirecTV receiver for satellite radio. The brochure that is provided with the system indicates that the RS-3000 is able to play web content via a "website importer". I failed to make this work when I tried to port National Public Radio's streaming content into one of the zones. I also have numerous hours of MP3 content on a separate server in the house and I would have liked the ability to play them through the RS-3000. Unfortunately even after checking the "Help!" file on the Control4, I could not get this source configured. In fairness, I did not consult with IntelliNet for this review as I wanted to see if a lay person can truly install and configure this system. (Editor's Advice: Use their installer, it's worth it to get this system running right!)

IntelliNet also provided two types of speakers for this review: Some nice in-wall speakers, the Model SP-H6IM, and their ceiling-mount SP-H6TT speakers. Since I wanted to try out four different zones, I set up one of the zones outside by the hot tub and used my JBL Northridge N24II speakers. Just for fun, I also rotated

two sets of speakers downstairs in the basement zone. I hooked up my B&W Nautilus 801s (which required a different amp) and some older Infinity Reference Three speakers.

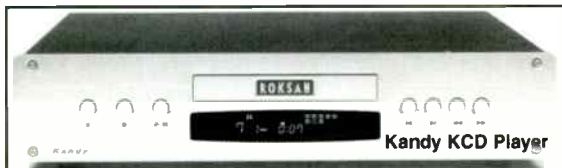
One of the most important requirements of this installation is also the one I gave the least thought to, cables. To make this system work, you have to run RS485 cables through the house. Now, in its ordinary or standard configuration, RS485 usually uses just two wires, but IntelliNet uses a four-wire version (similar to RS422). Data rates of up to 10Mbps are supported over short distances (up to 40 feet) with this type of cabling though the rate decays from there. IntelliNet may be using the standard in a slightly different fashion, and I did not have the opportunity to check thoroughly or measure the data rates. You must also run Ethernet cables from the C4, DH1, and a HUB. In my case, I already had a home network and I just added these devices to my existing setup.

Last, I needed an amp to drive the six zones and IntelliNet provided Russound's DPA-6.12 amp. This amp can handle up to 12 separate channels and up to six stereo zones. The amp has a power output of 50 watts into 8-ohm loads and 75 watts into 4 ohms. Each pair of stereo channels can be independently configured for stereo or mono operation, and the amp allows you to bridge the channels to provide 120 watts. The DPA-6.12 amp also allows you to bring in a single source into a bus configuration on the amp. This is handy for playing a single source all through the house. To drive

While I was able to get the IntelliNet system installed and running, that's better left to a professional.

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my 801 speakers, I utilized my Proceed AMP5 amp.

Installation

IntelliNet says that this system is "as easy to use as it is to install and configure." I have to disagree on the "easy" part. I just cannot recommend the installation of this system to anyone but a determined and educated amateur or a professional installer. I'll talk about "easy to use" later on.

One of my first exercises was to determine where all of this equipment should be located. I wanted to cut down on the length of cable runs and also wanted to keep as much of the system centralized as possible. I ended up using a closet to house all of the IntelliNet RS-3000 components, and transplanted most of my source components into the same closet. I did this because it was close to the attic and I already had a small audio system there along with my home network.

The C4, AM3, and DH1 were installed together in the closet. While the DH1 is designed to be in a double-gang box (sometimes called a junction box, I found that it was easier to nail it directly to the closet shelf to enable easy wire access. I can see the charm of having it enclosed in a wall and not having to look at all of the wires connected to it, but since I was "playing" with the system for this review, I needed to be able to move cables around at will.

The first step for me was to validate the network environment. I connected the Digital Hub (DH1) to my router, along with the Control4. At this point, while attempting to power the system up, I discovered each IntelliNet device requires a different power source. Each power adapter is unique in its power metrics but this is not readily recognizable, at least to me, a first-time

NOTES

IntelliNet RS-3000 Multi-Zone Custom Installation System, system price, \$7,000; **IS THIS CORRECT?** Do you wish to have prices for individual components? Is there another better way to do these prices? Intellinet, 3 Forbes Rd., Newmarket, NH 03857; phones 888/888-8049 or 603/659-5388, fax 800/659-5388, e-mail sales@intellinetcontrols.com, website www.intellinetbyrussound.com.

Associated Equipment

Proceed CDP CD player, Sony NS999ES DVD player, Yamaha TX-492 AM/FM tuner, and Hughes HIRD-E8 DirecTV receiver.

installer. This made things difficult as I had to carefully compare each power adapter to ensure I didn't "let the smoke out of the devices". I would have liked to see a color coding on their power adapters (or perhaps change the component circuitry so that they all could use the same power supply).

Once I had gotten the systems powered up and running, I went to my wireless laptop to access the system. When I tried to configure the RS3000, it occurred to me that I didn't know the IP addresses of the DH1 and the C4. The manual says that I could run their "FindC4" utility but since there were no supplied disks, I had no way of running the utility locally and I could not locate



PASS

Pass Laboratories, PO Box 219, Foresthill, CA 95631, 530.367.3690 - www.passlabs.com

it on their website. However, I still had two methods to identify the IP addresses: Randomly checking or use the network Sniffer application I have on my PC. This may well not be an issue for most people since they probably do not have more than a handful of IP devices on their network, but I have 17 at the moment (wireless printers, laptops, computers, wireless server, and TiVo). After some mumbling, I found the IP address of the C4 and was able to configure the processor to ask for a static address.

Finally, after I had the networking configured, I set about hooking up the keypads in the different zones. Having learned the hard way over the years, I first did a quick test of a keypad prior to running cables through walls. I am glad I did because I managed to fry the first keypad due to my own faulty wiring. Since each cable run was going to be complex, I did not order the RS485 cables from a vendor but decided to create them myself. I am not sure if I crossed wires or if it was the keypad, so I started over and checked the cable with a multi-meter. I then fried another keypad. At this point, I wondered if the drawing in the manual of cable connections was correct, as I was only utilizing four of the six wires as shown in the manual. I manufactured another cable that utilized all six wires and everything worked fine on the next keypad. I then snaked the wires through two walls and lined the keypads up near the light switches in two bedrooms upstairs.

Overall, the Intellinet RS-3000 system is quite well thought-out.

Aside from the two zones upstairs, I ran a keypad down to the hot tub area and to my basement audio room. For the outside zone, I purchased an outdoor gang box and installed it in a protected area. Having completed this, I turned to running the speaker wires and installing the speakers that were provided from IntelliNet. Each keypad has to have dip switches set to correlate with the zone you want. For example, I made the upstairs office, where all of the IntelliNet equipment was located, zone 1. I looked up what the 8 dip switch settings were for zone 1 and then validated this worked prior to putting the panel over the keypad. When accessed from the network, you can customize the zone name to anything you like.

The in-wall speakers were the pair I listened to first. Russound provided a template to draw the location on the wall prior to cutting. After verifying as best I could that there were no vents or pipes behind the marked spot, I rushed my wife out of the house and installed the speakers. Russound has a mount system that took me a moment to understand. You install their plastic rectangle frame into the wall and then install the speakers into the frame. This worked great and at least as far as I'm concerned is pretty ingenious. The frames have a gasket around them which cuts down on vibrations and makes for a very snug fit. My only difficulty came with the in-wall and ceiling speakers I installed next, putting on the grilles. In each case, I ended up bending and denting

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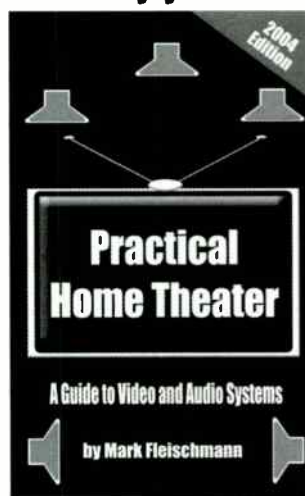
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the grilles to varying severity. It looks like the frame has a very low tolerance for being out of angle and my cuts may not have been perfect. This is another reason for letting a pro do this installation.

Usage

Now that I have the system up and running, fully configured, and a wife that no longer fears my cutting into drywall, I started playing around with the system.

I set up the zones and sources in the configuration part of the C4 and this was fairly easy. To set up a zone from the network, you simply access the C4 (once you know the IP address) and you give the zone a name. Then there are settings for the volume when the source starts, the max volume for the zone, and the volumes for when a source is changed to prevent unwanted jarring noises. There are also settings for doorbell chimes and paging along with various macros you can set to run when the zone is activated.

The next step is to set up the sources. Each source can have a custom name (instead of "DVD" you could say "Sony DVD") along with the source type that identifies the transport control type that will be utilized via the web interface. The C4 has the numerous IR codes needed to control the sources in an on-line library; I only found difficulty with the Proceed item in that it was not in the library. For that, however, I could teach the C4 the codes by placing my Proceed CDP remote near the DH1 and identifying each button on the remote.

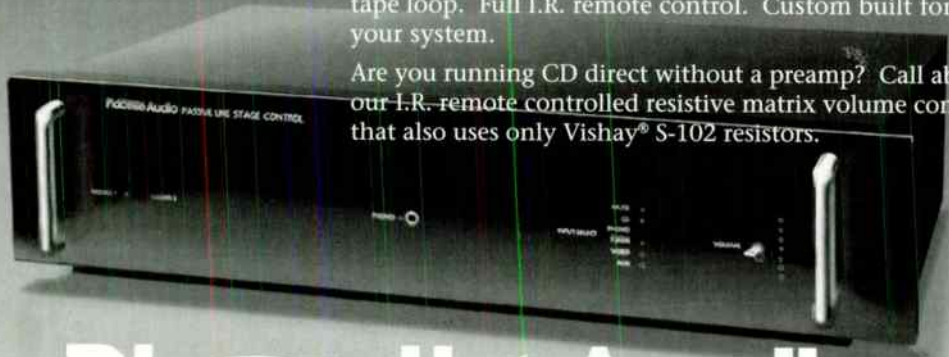
This took a long time to accomplish as each control was handled one at a time, and I was glad I only had one source component to teach to the C4. I also noticed that after teaching the C4 the codes, there wasn't an indication of this on the Audio Source "Setup" page. I double-checked in a panic, hoping that I hadn't lost 45 minutes of work. I then quickly backed up the settings to my desktop and configured the rest of the components.

From my office (zone 1), I was sitting back in my chair listening to Big Head Todd and the Monsters, when my wife went to the laptop in the kitchen and turned off the music to "remind me" it was time for dinner. In this case, technology wasn't so great for me. The flexibility to select audio sources via our laptop was wonderful. I bring a lot of work home from the office and can now control music from four locations via my computer. My wife loves being able to select and control music from the keypad by the light switch and the blue LEDs on the front of the C4 and Audio Matrix look "pretty."

I liked the two Russound speakers I tried; one's an in-wall while the other is a ceiling-mount.

Senses

Both the Audio Matrix and the Control4 are small devices that can easily fit into your stereo rack or closet. They are about 2 inches high by 17 inches wide by 8 inches deep and made of black steel. They both have a single button in the front for power switching (with a blue LED), but I had trouble getting either of the devices to shut off from the front panel. Both are light weight and have a rack mounting option.



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Dual Mono Line Stage Preamplifier

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The remote is a gem. It is tiny and is contoured to fit into your hand perfectly. Being only a third of an inch thick, it kept me from getting into trouble from my wife for adding to my growing remote pile. IntelliNet provided two remotes with the system and they work for every zone. I thought they had made a nice touch by adding light and temperature control to the remote for connectivity to the HVAC and any remote lighting application you might have. While I did not utilize these macros, I can see how it would be nice to use the same remote for turning the air handler up and down as well as turning the lights off and on. The lights and temp buttons on the remote are specific to a zone. Each zone gets two macros each for the light and temp buttons. Each of them toggles and is alternatively selected with sequential presses of the button.

To begin my more-formal testing, I made certain that all of the equipment had been on and running for an hour prior to doing any heavy-duty listening. I wanted to give all the components time to warm up and be at their best. To understand the impact of the RS-3000 on sound quality, I listened to a variety of CDs in Zone 1 (my office) and used a sound level meter to check the SPLs. I then hooked my CD player directly to the Russound amplifier and put the CD player on a variable gain control and listened to the same CD. I made this change for each CD and alternated the inclusion of the RS-3000 in the room. I kept the speakers, cables, and the adjustment of the gain on the amp the same.

When the test bed was set up, I began the long process of listening to music. Frankly, I don't think the system is up to audiophile standards, however good its media management capabilities are; the RS-3000 has an exaggerated bass, a muddy midrange, and overall acoustic clarity was disappointing. The brightness of the cymbals and the distance between instruments was less than when the RS-3000 was removed from the equation. In addition, there seemed to be a 3- to 6-dB drop in gain with the RS-3000 in the system. I had to be careful not to clip the signal and was disappointed in the maximum output from the amp when the RS-3000 was in. The output capability from the RS-3000 and the Russound amp won't meet the demands of real concert levels or that of a teenager's birthday party, however I don't think it is designed to produce levels like that. The dynamic range (the difference between the loudest and softest parts of music) was noticeably less through the RS-3000.

For casual listening in various places around the house, the RS-3000 is more than adequate. The majority of your listening will likely fall into the middle-output range and most people using this system will likely not be maxing out the volume during parties.

To test the speakers, I used my CD player and the Russound Amp along with a speaker splitter, which allowed me to easily switch between the Russound SP-H6IM and my JBL Northridge speakers. I had the amp and CD player running for an hour and then placed the JBL bookshelf speakers up on the wall next to the in-wall speakers to minimize effects of the listening environment as much as possible. For the ceiling-mount SP-H6TT speakers, I did not switch back and forth between

a different set of speakers but utilized the same CD player and amp (along with the same audio material). (It just wasn't possible to put the bookshelf speakers up on the ceiling for this test and I had already gotten myself in enough trouble with the wife.)

As I have said previously, the SP-H6IM impressed me. It has a long-throw 6.5-inch woofer with a pivoting, aluminum-dome tweeter. A two-position switch adjusts the high-frequency level (0 and +3 dB) and it is located in the front of the speaker just behind the grille. For this testing, I set it to +3 dB. To increase bass performance, I placed the speakers approximately three feet away from the corners of the room. The pivoting tweeters on the SP-H6IM really did allow me to optimize imaging. Specs for the SP-H6IM include an impedance of 6 ohms, output for 1 watt of 90 dB, and frequency response of 45 Hz to 20 kHz +/-3 dB.

I listened to Lindsey Buckingham's *Out of the Cradle* along with some of Alison Krauss's *New Favorite* and found that the vocals on both albums were remarkably good. I believe that the gasket provided with these speakers damps out much of the vibration commonly found with in-wall speakers, and this design feature is one of the keys that led to such a good performance of the mid and upper range. The bass was slightly less than I would have liked while listening to Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation Of Lauryn Hill*, but that album would strain the low-end response of most speakers, in-wall or not. After listening to Chris Isaak's *Baja Sessions*, I have to say that it was hard for me to believe these SP-H6IMs were in-wall loudspeakers!

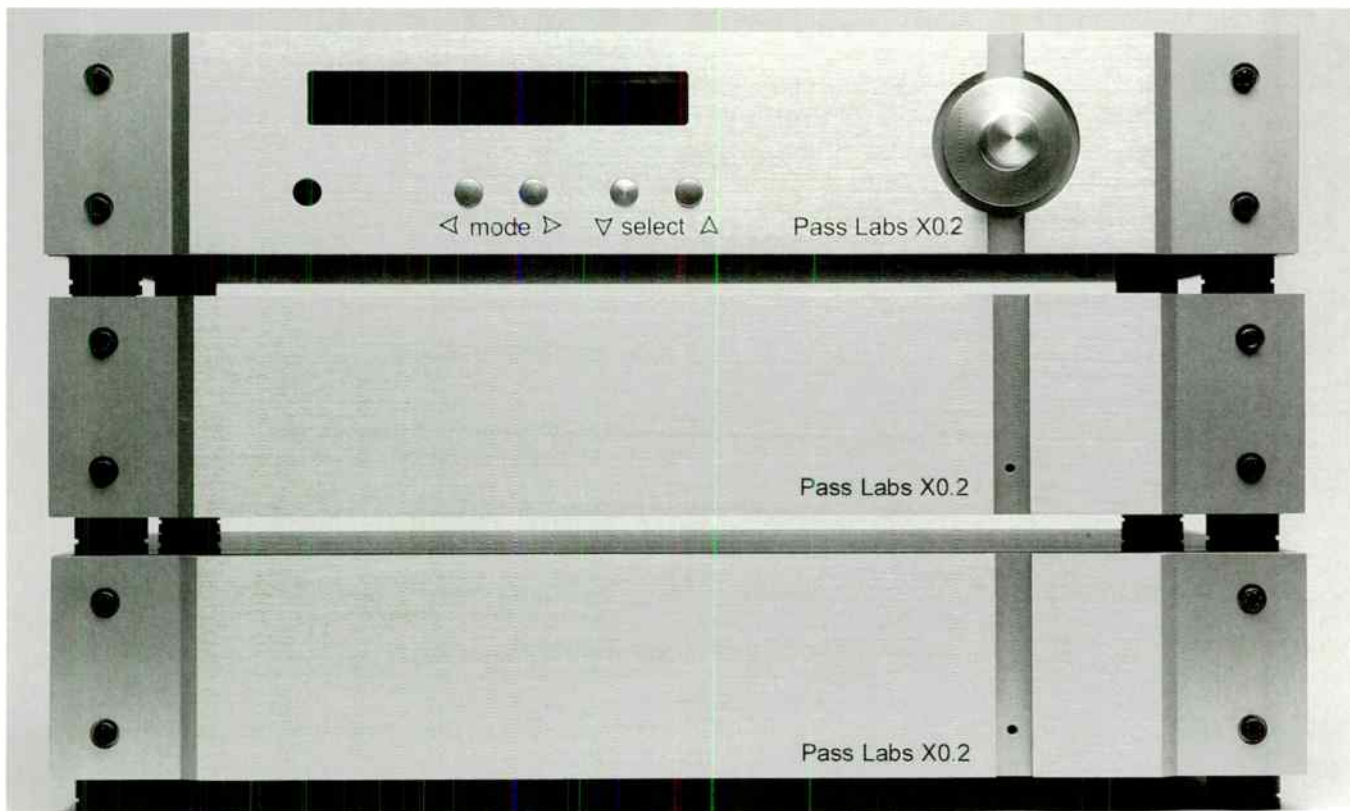
As I mentioned earlier, the SP-H6TT in-ceiling speakers were a breeze to install, and I found in my listening that their sonic characteristics are very similar to those of the SP-H6IM. To be honest, it was difficult to tell if the sonic differences between the models were due to placement or design. The specs are the same but where the in-wall speakers offer an adjustable-level tweeter; the SP-H6TT has a "twist & tilt" feature that allows you to aim the direction of sound output from 0 to 15 degrees off the center axis of the speaker. Russound intends this to allow you to direct the sound to the prime listening area while permitting an easier and broader choice of ceiling locations. While the SP-H6TT does not have the high-frequency level adjustment, this seemed less of an issue with these speakers than bass was. Both of the speakers provided by Russound turned out to be fantastic but if I had to choose, I would go with the SP-H6IM through the house.

All in all, I have to say that the system was worth the installation hassles, but as I said, you really ought to leave that to a pro or be dedicated to the project. My brother-in-law has a Niles ZR-4630 multi-zone receiver installed in his home and I have had ample time to compare the systems. While the Niles system is a nice "all in the box" solution, the IntelliNet system gives you extra flexibility for sources, expansion, and, of course, web control. While this system doesn't fare well in comparisons with the sound characteristics of a high-end audio system, I believe it easily achieves its goals of providing reasonable sound quality through the house together with a plethora of features and flexibility.

The RS-3000 can be installed in places no normal system can.

Pass Labs XO.2 Stereo Preamp

Anthony H. Cordesman



LET ME BEGIN by admitting that I am biased in favor of this product. I used the Pass XO preamp as a reference for several years before I got the XO.2 for review. If I didn't love the sound of the Pass XO, I would never have made it my reference. I also have to admit that while appearance and technology have little importance unless a unit has great sound, I also liked Pass XO's styling and that necessarily meant that I like the appearance and technology of the Pass XO.2. As I wrote in a review of the XO, some preamps have a better "feel" than others do. They have controls that are easy and intuitive to operate. You can smoothly adjust gain and balance to the exact setting you want without finding that the steps in the control do not permit the exact setting you want or provide sudden sharp gain changes with small movements of the control. They

have enough inputs to meet the needs of a complex system and that includes a tape loop. Clear markings or digital read-outs make it possible to set the gain and balance settings exactly, and then repeat those settings for any given recording.

While I began this review believing that the Pass XO represented something close to the state of the art in preamp technology, several decades of reviewing leave me just as firmly convinced that far more depends on the specific execution of a given technology than on the basic circuit topology. I have heard tube preamps which were great but romantically colored, but I have also heard great ones that were accurate. I have heard transistor preamps that make the simplification of the circuit into an art form, and others that get the best results from complexity. What really seems to count is

how *dedicated* a designer is to combining the best of design practice with really serious auditioning, and how dedicated a manufacturer is to actually executing the result in terms of appropriate parts and manufacturing techniques to ensure the best product quality.

I already had a good idea that I could count on this quality of design and execution with a Pass product. I've reviewed four other Pass designs over the years, and quality tells. Like most other top high-end manufacturers, in a Pass unit, you get a product designed by some one who knows and loves state-of-the-art sound and excellent parts, layout and assembly. Given the fact that the Pass XO.2 costs \$10,000, this is really what you deserve, nothing less. In fact, it is nothing less that what you ought to be able to demand. High-end audio has no place for fragile designs, mediocre parts, or flawed execution.

Styling and Design Features

As you may have already guessed, I did not find the Pass XO.2 to disappoint in any way. In fact, I immediately made it my reference, replacing the earlier XO. There are some sonic differences, but they are small, and this too was predictable. The circuitry of XO.2 is virtually identical to the XO except for a tenfold increase in the capacitance of the power supply and the addition of a control feature that allows the preamp to turn a properly configured amplifier off and on.

The circuit design of the XO.2 was based on one designed and patented by Nelson Pass and is here implemented by Wayne Colburn of Pass Laboratories. It is housed in three separate units which are made entirely of machined aluminum. Two units are devoted to the left and right analog gain stages, while the third unit houses the power supply and the digital control circuitry. The control unit offers both remote and manual control of the source-select and gain settings and features a fluorescent digital display of the control and gain settings for each channel.

The individual gain channels connect to the power supply control unit with four cables provided with the unit. All three chassis are relatively small, though not exactly lightweight, measuring 17 inches wide by 12 inches deep by 3.5 inches high and weighing around 30 pounds. They can be stacked, or they can be placed on different shelves and connected with the two sets of computer-style cables that run between the power unit and the right and left channel gain units.

The Pass XO.2 flexible enough to meet the needs of virtually any high-end system, with five sets of input connections, two sets of output connections, a tape loop, and a full-function remote control which mirrors all the functions on the front panel. All inputs and outputs are both balanced and unbalanced, and you can change from one to the other without having to flip switches or use adapters, which is a nice option for a reviewer.. The unbalanced input impedance of the pre-amplifier is, worst case, 10 kilohms. In balanced mode, the input impedance is higher, with a differential impedance of at least 20 kilohms.

Operation and Functions

Operation is a bit unusual, but soon proves to be simple and straightforward. The "mode switch" allows you to select between nine different functions: Volume, input selection, mute, tape, balance, display, mono and unity gain, and amplifier "on-off" (which sends trigger signal to suitably equipped amplifiers.) The "select" switch alters the gain or balance, or switches between settings. There is also a round volume control on the right. The remote uses the same four-button system as the "mode" and "select" switches on the front panel.

There is a digital read-out for each channel's gain, which allows you easily repeat any given volume settings for a given recording or input. Similarly, the balance control can also be set precisely to very fine levels, rather than in large steps to something "in the vicinity". Far too many otherwise-good preamps only allow balance to be adjusted in such overly large steps.

Like the earlier Pass XO, the XO.2 uses new type of volume control developed by Wayne Colburn. It sets new standards in the performance achievable in active attenuation. As a result, volume and balance are independently adjustable over a 70-dB range in 1-dB steps. The control is driven by a microcontroller that reads an optical encoder which serves as the front-panel volume control. In this manner, tracking of the two balanced channels is possible with accuracy unavailable on an ordinary volume control, assuring both precise level steps and high common mode rejection in balanced circuits. Pass Labs claims that distortion and noise are one-

tenth the previous state of the art and dynamic range is 100 times greater than previous designs..

Why do I stress the performance of a balance control in a world where there are some preamp designs that make a point out of being so "pure" that they don't "need" a balance control?

Well, first, I have yet to hear that such "purity" actually results in a preamp that sounds better, as distinguished from one that is merely easier or cheaper to make. Second, I regard preamps without a balance control as being so inherently flawed in limiting the owner's opportunity to achieve the best sound stage that no good manufacturer should produce them and no good dealer should sell them.

I think Dave Wilson was the first person to point out that audiophiles should use their balance control as if it were a "sound stage" control and not leave it in the default setting. He was and is absolutely right; you need a good balance adjustment need to "lock in" the sound stage. The sound stage is at least slightly unbalanced on far too many recordings. There often are minor imbalances in the left-right level of CDs and records. Source inputs often do not have precisely matched gain (particularly true of phono cartridges), and room-speaker interaction affects relative loudness both in terms of frequency response irregularities and overall level. You can compensate, at least in part, by using a good balance control to find the best setting in terms of center fill, depth, and left and right extension.

Two other features of note for the XO.2: The control software of the preamp allows one input to be set to

**The Pass XO.2 does not
disappoint in any way.
It is now my reference.**

unity gain, facilitating use of the primary audio system in a home theatre system. A true monaural connection is also available; The 25-pin DIN connector that is marked "Control" allows the preamp to function in mono mode

Circuit Design

The rest of the circuit design of the Pass XO.2 is also very close to that of the Pass XO. In fact, the only major differences are that the XO.2 has ten times the capacitance in the power supply and the external amplifier turn-on, both of which I mentioned earlier. The digital and analog power supplies are completely independent and have separate power transformers, while the circuitry is shielded from digital and radio frequency noise. The audio power supply for the XO.2 uses a toroidal power transformer delivering an unregulated ± 45 volts

which is then actively regulated before feeding passive filtering and powering the constant current sources which bias the gain stages. It should be noted that each channel has individual regulation. The power supply noise reaching the circuit is quite low, on the order of a microvolt, and is differentially rejected at the output in a balanced system. The preamplifier is designed to run constantly, and Pass claims it will exhibit optimum performance about 10 hours after initial turn-on.

The gain circuits of the XO.2 integrate power Mos-Fet and FET devices in Class-A operation in about as simple a circuit topology as possible because Pass feels this provides the finest possible sound. Each gain stage minimizes the number of components in the signal path and consists of a dual monolithic FET feeding power Mos-Fets. These are configured in what Pass calls a "Supersymmetry" circuit topology which is said to improve the performance of a balanced amplifier by precisely matching the characteristics of the two balanced halves of a simple Class-A circuit. To the extent that the two halves can be made identical on the two output connections, distortion and noise will not be seen at the balanced output. Pass claims that ordinary matching techniques can only achieve improvements by a factor of 10 or so under the best conditions, and that the "Supersymmetry" technique lowers distortion and noise by another order of magnitude without requiring high feedback. Pass also claims that the common-mode rejection of the preamp reflects the intrinsic common-mode rejection of the topology, the matching of the gain devices, and the matching of the attenuator channels. In this case, Pass has been able to keep the total mismatch to about 0.1%, achieving a common-mode rejection ratio of approximately -60 dB.

Sound versus Technology

Now to get down to what matters. The Pass XO.2 only makes subtle improvements in the earlier Pass XO, and these are largely in dynamics and microdynamics. When you are going for absolutes, however, even a slight improvement can be enough to cause you to pull your wallet out of your pocket.

The end result is that the XO.2 preamp offers bass that is tight, fast, and beautifully defined, and which seems even better in the deep bass than the XO. This showed up quite clearly on all of my collection of Reference Recordings CDs (Has any other firm ever come close to making so many musically natural bass spectaculars?), as well as the usual analog audiophile demos. I partnered XO.2 with a Pass Xono phono preamp, and with both the Pass X600 and Mark Levinson 436 monoblock amplifiers. The end result was superb bass with a high level of measures energy going well below 25 Hz on my reference Dynaudio Temptations and Thiel 7.2s speakers

I did not hear the XO.2 make an improvement in the midrange and upper octaves over the XO but that performance in that area was state of the art in the Pass XO. However, there was a slight improvement in low-level resolving power. I love a truly quiet preamp, and I haven't found anything better than the XO or the XO.2. There are tube preamps with which you can listen to very low-level musical information down below the noise floor and get excellent signal resolution, but you can do this only at the cost of the additional faint touch of noise. In the case of most competitive transistor pre-

NOTES

Pass XO.2 Preamplifier, \$10,000.00. Pass Laboratories, P.O. Box 219, 24449 Foresthill Rd., Foresthill, CA 95631; phone 530/367-3690, fax 530/367-2193; U.S. sales, Peter Perkins at peter@passlabs.com; website www.passlabs.com.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Reference Audio System

Van den Hul Black Beauty, Sumiko Celebration, and Koetsu Onyx phono cartridges; VPI TNT turntable with HWjr II tone arm; Pioneer Elite DV-47A SACD/DVD player; PS Audio Lambda CD transport (modified); Mark Levinson 360S D/A converter; Pass Xono phono preamp; Pass XO stereo preamp; Pass X600 power amplifiers; Dynaudio Evidence Temptation and Thiel 7.2 Speakers; Kimber XL, Transparent Audio Reference XL, and Wireworld Supereclipse and Eclipse interconnects and digital cables.

AV System One

Lexicon DC-10 DVD/SACD/DVD-A player; Meridian 861 A/V preamp processor; Lexicon MC-12B A/V preamp processor; Theta Dreadnaught II seven-channel amplifier; Infinity Intermezzo speaker system with four 4.1T towers, two 2.6 rear speakers, and 3.5C center channel; Revel B-15 subwoofer; Zenith P60W38/38H plasma monitor and Zenith HD-520 receiver; Mitsubishi WS-65907 rear-projection HDTV set; Kimber and Wireworld video and audio interconnects, and Kimber, Wireworld and Discovery Cable speaker cables.

AV System Two

Onkyo SPDV-800 DVD/SACD player; Onkyo TS-RX-800 A/V receiver; Sony XBR-400 HDTV monitor; Pioneer PDP-HD 4330 plasma TV; Samsung SIR-TS160 HDTV tuner; Polk LSi-25, LSi-15, LSC five-channel speaker system, with Polk 650 subwoofer; and Kimber and Discovery video and audio interconnects and speaker cables.

amps, there is less apparent noise, but there also is normally slightly less resolution.

This superior resolving power is something I'd suggest you listen for with considerable concentration if you audition the Pass XO.2. A slight addition of upper range energy (really hardness) makes some transistor preamps sound more detailed — until you remember the true sound of live music, that is. You then realize that you actually hear more musical information from a preamp like the XO.2, even if it comes to you in a less "etched" or "hi fi" form. Like the Pass XO, the XO.2 excels in resolving dynamic detail, microdynamics, and soundstage information, but the only way to really gauge its excellence is prolonged listening to complex, highly detailed, and musically natural material.

I found this to be particularly apparent when I used really good SACD recordings as well as the few top quality DVD-A recordings worth listening to so far. I was comparing SACD and DVD-A players and material at the time of this review of the XO.2, and the Pass did a much better job of revealing the faults of such players, as well as what was and was not on such recordings, than all but a handful of top competitors — none of which were more revealing.

Dynamics and transient response of the XO.2 were also slightly better than in the XO — at all frequencies and at all levels of musical energy. Some tube fans may feel that the XO.2 has less apparent life, but I suspect that this is the function of two factors: One the slight warmth common in many tube designs and the other is the fact that some tube preamps have more apparent life in the midrange at the cost of similar life in the deep bass. The Pass XO.2 has dynamics that are both lifelike and neutral, and while this may not lend "romance" to some recordings, it is more convincing with the broad range of high-quality records and CDs.

I did not hear any change in the neutral character of the sound stage, going from the XO to the XO.2, although there was a bit more low-level detail. The Pass XO.2 does lack the ultimate depth you can obtain from a few competing tube preamps, but I wonder how much of this "depth" is really on the recording and how much is actually coloration. I was also struck by the overall balance and integration of the XO.2's sound stage, and by its ability to resolve instruments in as natural a mix of depth and width as the recording permitted. And this was true with solo voice and instrument as well as with full orchestra, a jazz band, and choral music.

Timbre is very neutral, but sweeter and more harmonic than is the case with many competing transistor preamps in its price range. I have heard a similar type of neutrality in timbre from the in the best Audio Research preamps over the years, but rarely in a transistor unit. It seems to strike just the right balance between the lower and upper midrange. It is neither soft nor hard, and the strengths and flaws of the recording, source equipment, speakers, and cables almost totally dominate the sound.

Summing Up

I am always afraid to write a review this favorable because it leads some audiophiles to react by buying

without listening or letting the written word do more to influence their decision than their ears ever could. My praise for the Pass XO.2 reflects my taste in a world where the state of the art is constantly evolving. I also have recently heard top-of-the-line units from leading firms like Audio Research, Conrad-Johnson, Krell, Mark Levinson, and Rowland which make it clear that anyone should listen long and hard before making a choice — although there aren't that many rivals out there.

I also should end with a note of mild heresy. This is one of the best (and possibly *the* best) of that very limited number of preamps which give you recorded music as pure and accurate as any product around. However, it still does cost \$10,000. Pass also makes a somewhat simpler version of the XO.2 called the X1 that sells for \$5,900.00, and a still less expensive unit called the X2.5 that sells for \$3,900.

I know that there are reviewers who go into a state of ecstasy over the smallest sonic improvement in preamps. The fact is, however, that such differences are less audible than in most other components, and particularly when the same manufacturer or designer is producing similar products with similar goals in terms of sound quality. System building involves some kind of investment strategy and trade-offs, not just a search for the best sound in individual components.

If you have the money, fine. Get the Pass XO.2. If you don't, the Pass X1 provides at least 90% of the sound quality and investing in speakers normally means investing in the component that does most to color your system.

Think as well as listen!

S P E C S

Gain: 14 dB, whether from balanced-in to balanced-out or from unbalanced-in to balanced-out
Frequency Response: -3 dB from 2 Hz to 100 kHz.

Total Harmonic Distortion: Less than 0.1 per cent, typically 0.003 per cent for 2 volts output at 1 kHz.

Maximum Output: Balanced output, 20 volts rms; Unbalanced output, 7 volts rms.

Output Impedance: Unbalanced, 150 ohms; 750 ohms, balanced.

Input Impedance: Unbalanced, 10 kilohms; Balanced, 20 kilohms.

Common-Mode Rejection Ratio: Typical -80 dB, 20 Hz to 20 kHz.

Crosstalk: Typical, -90 dB, 20 Hz to 20 kHz.

Output Noise: -110 dB V, 20 Hz to 20 kHz.

Power Consumption: 35 watts.

Dimensions: 19 inches wide by 11.5 inches deep by 3 inches high.

Shipping Weight: 100 pounds for all three units.

Polk Audio LSi 15 Loudspeakers

Ron Nagle

THE MIND FOLLOWS strange byways; this must be so for only later did I see the unusual path mine had followed. In retrospect, I must have been at a crossroads when I heard these speakers at the Hilton Show in '02. The following year my quest continued and I found Polk Audio at the 2003 Consumer Electronics Show (CES) at both the Las Vegas Convention Center (LVCC) and the Alexis Park Hotel. As I had before, I listened, but this time a budding idea blossomed into a full-flowered concept based on a simple notion.

What end had I reached, after all these years? What had I achieved with my costly and complex system? Bi-amped, bi-woofed, bi-wired, up-sampled, reclocked, de-jittered, filtered, and isolated, etc. The highly applicable and most-appropriate phrase here is "Been there, done that!"

You and I both know the path did not have to be quite so convoluted. But were Polk's LSi 15 speakers a short-cut through the maze? At the very reasonable price of \$1,740 the pair, these speakers seemed to offer a cure for my Hi-Fi Fever. Now don't get me wrong. I possess a first-rate rig, and in that all-important mid-range, I would go so far as to call it world class. Did I really have to continue wandering through the highways and byways towards High-End Nirvana?

Still, the Polk LSi 15 seemed to call out to me: "Find your audio origins, redefine your sonic center." Was I possibly being drawn into the dreaded "Lair of the Second System Center?"

Middle Earth

The LSi 15 speakers (I will hence forth refer to as the "15") combine variations of design elements I've seen before on much more expensive speakers, and to my mind they all made perfect common sense. Made from Medium Density Fiberboard (MDF), these nominally four-ohm speakers are manufactured as mirror-imaged pairs; that is, the 15's VIFA compression-ring tweeter is off set toward the inside edge of the face of each mini tower. This is the same tweeter used on the Earthworks Sigma 6.2 two-way mini-monitors (\$6,000 a pair) that I thought imaged so amazingly well. Like the \$9,000 NHT VT-3, sound is launched from a narrow front baffle set on a relatively deep enclosure. The 15's front face is 8-5/8 inches wide, the gloss black upper half of the enclosure holds the 1-inch VIFA tweeter and two 5-1/4-



inch mid-range drivers along with two tuned-pipe ports. This top portion of the enclosure is sealed off from the lower portion by an internal baffle/brace.

The 13-inch deep enclosure provides the internal volume necessary for the side mounted woofer. The 15's lower half has additional side panels, bracing the bass enclosure, and on my sample these were covered in an attractive cherry wood veneer. The 15 uses an 8-inch woofer in each speaker, and these are mirror-imaged on the outsides of the enclosures. Like the high-priced B&W 800 series speakers, just to mention another familiar group of speakers, the 15 is vented straight downward through the bottom of the enclosure and just below this opening is a cone-shaped "port control." The whole speaker is 45½ inches high, and sits on four corner spacers 1¼ inches above the base plate. The weight of all that is 66 pounds; it can be spiked to the floor if desired. Although the two mid-range drivers are identical, they are crossed over at different frequencies, one at 200 Hz, the other at 2.4 kHz. It might look or sound like a D'Appolito driver arrangement but Polk calls it a "cascaded tapered array," which makes this a 3½-way speaker.

And so there you have it, the 15's three major or basic design elements, which are ones both you and I have known and have admired in other first-rate speaker systems. But now, they come all rolled into one very clever package and are offered at a price that won't leave a vacuum in your wallet. Is it any wonder, dear reader, that I hunted down Paul DiComo, the Polk Marketing-Man, like Elliot Ness hot on the trail of Al Capone?

Empirically Speakering

Like most all piston dynamic driver devices, the 15s need time to break in. There are test CDs that will hasten the process, but I believe that wide range music, with a complex harmonic structure, is the only way to go. Using FM radio when I was not home or playing music CDs at a background level when I was, the Polk 15s opened up at about 50 to 60 hours. To be more specific, after that long a break in, the rate of improvement slowed down to near imperceptibility. I would guess by that much break in, they had achieved at least 90 per cent of their optimal performance.

My first serious sit-down session, note pad in hand, was disappointing. Imaging at center stage seemed two-dimensional and moreover the bass sounded, well, "thick." By that, I want to indicate lowest frequency content predominant, lacking speed and upper bass delineation. Our British 'phile cousins would say "plummy" (I love that word). The first thing that popped into my mind is that the bass drivers were still not broken in, but in the end that proved wrong.

A glimmer of a solution entered when I played a CD known to have deep bass at a low volume. The presentation was at once both airy and spacious, but if I pushed up the level, confusion began to creep in.

Now, I have my reference speakers, Quad ESL 63s, set up on the short wall of my long, rectangular listening

room, which measures 11 feet, 8 inches by 23 feet. The Quads do not pose many set-up problems in this room; after all, they are bi-polar speakers which do not radiate very much energy to the sides. I was fortunate to recognize this while listening to this CD with the bass, because I immediately understood that the Polk 15 speakers were not the problem. "Most likely," I thought, "It's a bass interaction with my room!"

What followed was an extended trial and error process where I tried every positional permutation to kill the beast, short of buying the old lady's apartment next door.

Proof of my theory came when I repositioned the speakers on either side of my TV on the long wall of my room. (I have to say that "furniture moving" is now an evolving aspect of my pastime.) With a Hi-Rez 24/96 music-video DVD spinning and a state-of-the-art Krell Kav 300 iL integrated amp providing power, this system sings. The audio image was centered right on the screen and the bass was extraordinary. So much so, that I pull my little AAD E-8 powered subwoofer out of the system,

and I believe the Polk people must have anticipated this sort of application. After all, the 15s use fully shielded drivers. Mirror imaged as they are, the tweeters are off the center line of the cabinet and placed nearer the picture on your monitor, while the woofers are placed outward on left and right sides of the enclosures.

"Yikes," I think, "I've been compromised! The sound is detailed and clean, but I'm glued to the Boob-Toob." Rats, from now on I won't be able to snicker under my breath as my wife watches "All My Children." Totally side-tracked, I finally wrench myself back to my SOTA-based sound rig to ponder the set-up problem further. I start with bass panels on the outside, swap speakers, bass panels facing each other, disconnect woofer from binding post, grilles on, grilles off, more toe-in, change speaker cables, swap interconnects, change amps, etc.

This continued for two or three days, but in the end, I succeeded!!!

Ultimately, the solution was to move the speakers 31 inches from the sidewalls, which is about as far as I can go, and this left about 5 feet, 4 inches between the speakers. I angled each speaker inward so that two direct laser shots meet about 6 feet behind my listening position. Keep in mind, all this is on the short 11 foot 8 inch wall of my listening room and not very far from where I first placed the 15s. Also significant this time around is room treatment; I used 20-inch square Gryphon Audio diffusion panels and Argent Acoustic Lenses to help deal with reflections and room modes. The panels sit next to the sides of each woofer on the floor while my Argent Acoustic Lenses are next to the panels but toward the front of each speaker. The brain finds it hard to distinguish direct sound from reflected sound, at least up to the point the reflection becomes a distinct echo at about 30 mS. The reflected sound further alters frequency response due to comb filtering effects, and there are changes in the response of the reflected sound due to the nature of the material this sound's bouncing off of – the difference between a

Polk's designers have outdone themselves with their LSi15 speakers.

tapestry on your wall or ceramic tile. The desired image specificity can be easily destroyed by reflections arriving from different directions. What I had effectively damped was mostly lower frequency bass room modes. What genuinely shocked me was how far up the frequency spectrum the sound was affected. (You can find a wonderful primer on room acoustics addressing exactly these problems at www.rivesaudio.com; I urge you to read it.)

Finally the depth and layering of the musical envelope and the placement within the space between the 15s snapped into focus. Articulation made an appearance; what had been muddled and congested opened up before my eyes. [Editor's Note: Uh, Ronnie, that's "ears" – before your "ears."] Now the low bass did not dominate the system's response and the timbre of things like brass cymbals decayed naturally while the reverberant field of the hall surrounded me all about.

I love it when speakers can float an image and all three dimensions are palpable and fleshed out. The room recedes and becomes an afterthought and I am present at the event, an audible time machine of sorts. For me, that's what this hobby is all about; if a speaker can transport me out of my little room and carry me, believing, into the performance venue, then I require little else.

And this was where I finally arrived, sitting a little to one side of Eric Clapton as he sang "Layla." I sang along with him and doing a marvelous job of backup, I might add. If you own Eric Clapton's *Unplugged* (Reprise 9-45024-2), give it a try. The human voice is my ultimate reference source. The intake of breath, the sibilant consonants, the chest resonance, this I know very well.

Final Analysis

What you get when you plunk down your \$1740 for Polk's LSi 15s is a very fine and cleverly designed pair of speakers. It doesn't seem very long ago that you would have had to spend twice as much to get to this level. (Okay, I know that reviewers have worn this statement out, but I really mean it!) All of this only reminds me that by a complex mix of technology, really good speakers are slowly becoming more

affordable. To quote a respected speaker designer Carl Marchisotto, the fine-tuning and voicing of any speaker is what the designer believes to be the musical truth. I believe the Polk team has reached a higher plateau in their 15 than they ever have before in their pursuit of sonic truth.

If I have any minor critical comment, it would be directed toward the lower part of the mid range and include upper bass which should be more evident. You might hear this on a recording that has, say, low frequency content from the wood-based resonance of a concert grand piano, but very little deep bass. I suppose Mr. Joe Public would initially be very impressed by this speaker's low bass prowess. And while the 15 does well in that area, an audiophile will know the real magic of the 15 is in that part of the music where voices become warm flesh and blood, where intimacy takes control.

Polk recommends a good solid-state high power amp, which describes my Hafler 500. But I ended up using my AR Classic 60

tube/Mos-Fet hybrid amp because of the air and bloom it gives the mid and high frequency elements within the 15's performance. After all, it was not one of my objectives, given my listening room's peculiarities, to find the ultimate lower limits of the bass possible with the Polk loudspeaker system.

It's been 30 long years since Polk first impressed me with their affordable Model 10 speakers. It helped convince me back then that I could be satisfied by my audio hobby even though I had very little money to spend on gear. If you find yourself in the situation I was in, I can recommend Polk's LSi 15 speakers without reservation.

I send my sincere congratulations to the design and engineering team at Polk Audio; you seem to have surpassed yourselves. And you, gentle readers, should just give the 15s room to perform and you will smile as I have smiled.

P.S. I have only set down some of the 15's speaker basics; there is far more information on their web site including their recommendations for setup of their speakers.

NOTES

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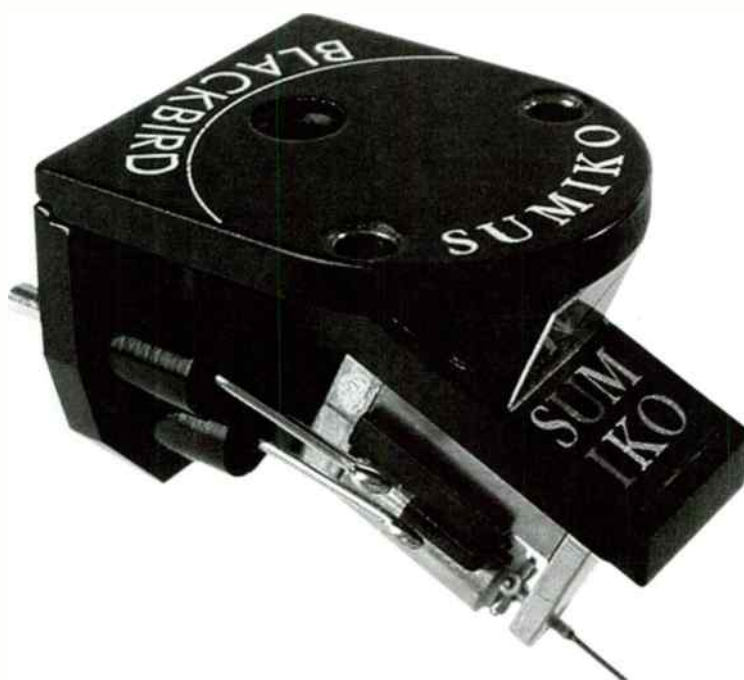
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Accessories

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

Sumiko Blackbird Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge

George Graves



IT'S KIND OF FUNNY, actually. You open the familiar slightly perfumed wooden box, and inside is a phono-graph cartridge that looks suspiciously like a Sumiko Bluepoint Special, the world's most popular moving-coil cartridge for more than a decade. Look a little closer and it is slightly different. The plastic is black, not blue, the mounting plate is heavier and circular in shape, but otherwise, on cursory examination, there is little to differentiate our old friend the Bluepoint Special from this, the new Sumiko Blackbird.

Both the Bluepoint Special and the Blackbird are body-less moving coil cartridges of high output (2.5 mv). Both have a dangerously exposed cantilever and stylus, and

no stylus guard. Both are made in the same factory, and were designed by the same person. They look enough alike to be mistaken one for the other (except for the plastic color) but don't do it. They are as different as night and day, Japanese and English, beef and chicken.

Where the two differ is mostly in the cantilever and stylus design. The Bluepoint Special was originally, simply a Bluepoint (a P-mount cartridge, remember those?) with the plastic case removed. Most of the increased performance over the standard model was eventuated by the reduction in mass and the absence of the cheaper cartridge's resonant plastic body as well as

flimsy P-mount-to-standard-mount adapter.

The Bluepoint Special has a thin-wall aluminum tube cantilever and a fairly standard elliptical diamond stylus of 0.3mm by 0.8mm. The new Blackbird replaces that aluminum cantilever with one made from long-grained boron, a material with an incredibly high stiffness-to-mass ratio. The Blackbird's diamond is a much smaller, lower mass, proprietary profile elliptical shape.

I had been using a Benz Micro Glider in my system as my reference, but like many of us, I do have a perfectly serviceable Bluepoint Special lying around. The Benz and the Blackbird are similar cartridges in concept and execution as well as

price. Certainly, when one is thinking about cartridges in this price range, these two will likely come to mind and are obviously competitors. But just for comparison's sake—due to the outward similarity and family heritage— I decided to reinstall the Bluepoint Special and use it as a baseline for comparing both the Benz Micro Glider and the Blackbird.

The Bluepoint Special

I reinstalled my Bluepoint special according to the usual procedure, applying the recommended 2 grams of stylus force, and gave it a long Saturday afternoon listen. As I remembered, the BPS (Bluepoint Special) proved to be a good tracker. Its superbly sectioned and polished tip gleans great amounts of information from the grooves with less surface noise than many high-output moving-coil cartridges. High-excursion passages are tracked at 2 grams without a hint of breakup and the dread inner groove distortion is all but nonexistent. The cartridge paints with a broad brush with large, stable images to complement its big sound. Soundstage is only average, however, with front-to-back layering somewhat compressed, especially in the upper mids. The top end of the BPS is what can only be described as bright. From about 5KHz on up the cartridge exaggerates upper-end detail slightly and because this brightness is very clean and distortion free, it makes the cartridge sound as if it is super analytical and therefore eliciting great detail from one's recordings. This type of sound, while certainly not accurate, can be, nonetheless, very addictive. It makes one's better recordings set-up and do tricks, and certainly is not the screechy sort of top end that one often associates with cheap MCs, especially older designs. I can readily see why the BPS has been so popular for so long. For the money it's a remarkable buy; musical, easy on records, and able to drive almost any phono section without resorting to expensive and often colored step-up devices. If all you've got is \$350 to spend on a cartridge, you really cannot do much better than this.

Hello Blackbird

Using the extremely comprehensive and surprisingly entertaining instruction booklet that came with

the Blackbird, I installed it in my trusty AudioQuest PT-8 arm. Every aspect of the installation is covered in the book, from horizontal alignment to VTA to stylus pressure recommendations; all profusely illustrated and crystal clear. After using all due diligence, - the naked, and totally unprotected stylus assembly, you know- the cartridge was ready to play a stack of my favorite audiophile recordings as well as some regular old standbys. But first, it had to be broken-in. Like most of us, I spend most of my listening time on CDs and in my case, SACDs and DVD-As, and I don't really listen to LP as much as I used to. I have thousands of LPs but most of the time, I find myself listening to the little silver discs instead of the big black ones. Therefore, the Blackbird somewhat languished in my turntable setup and it took literally months for the 100 hours to accumulate that I like to 'cook' cartridges for before evaluating them. Finally, at the end of February 2004, I figured I had put enough time on the cartridge, and it was time to listen with a critical ear.

The World's Best Record

I have the world's best phonograph record. It is a re-mastered Mercury "Living Presence" recording of Antal Dorati conducting the London Symphony Orchestra in Stravinsky's complete ballet, "The Firebird" (Mercury SR90226). What makes this recording so special? Well, it's part of the Classic Records "45 Series" and as the moniker indicates, it's mastered at 45 RPM. It's also pressed on only one side of the 180-gram virgin vinyl disc. The

recording consists, therefore, of three 45-RPM sides to duplicate what would normally fit on one two-sided 33.3-RPM release. It is the best sounding recording that this listener has ever heard. I use it as well as another disc from the series: Reiner and the Chicago Symphony in a collection of Albeniz, Goyescas, and De Falla compositions called "Spain" (RCA LSC-2230) for all my cartridge evaluations. The third and final audiophile record I used is a direct-to-disc recording of the Glenn Miller Orchestra directed by Jimmy Henderson and recorded in 1977 by Wally Heider in Studio A at the Capital Records facility on Wilshire Ave., in Los Angeles (Century Records GADD1020). Other records include various jazz recordings, and some symphonic band by the Cleveland winds on Telarc to check bass performance.

How does it Sound?

My overall impression of the Blackbird is one of supreme refinement. Like its sibling, the BPS, the Blackbird is a good tracker. If anything, it picks up even less surface noise than does the BPS, and like the older design, simply sails through whatever audio obstacle course that one is likely to throw at it including the infamous Shure test record. On the "Firebird" disc, the climactic and orgiastic 'Infernal Dance of Kastchei and his Court' the Blackbird never misbehaved once. If it can track this 45-RPM cut, it can track anything.

The quiet opening of the Firebird is myriad of post impressionist orchestral colors. Simple solos con-

NOTES

Sumiko Blackbird Moving-Coil Phono Cartridge, \$749.00. Sumiko Audio, 2431 Fifth Ave., Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-4500, fax 510/843-7120; website www.sumikoaudio.net, e-mail info@sumikoaudio.net.

Specifications: High-output moving-coil, with low-mass elliptical stylus and long-grain boron cantilever. Dynamic compliance is 12 x 10⁻⁶ cm/dyne. Frequency response is 10 Hz to 50 kHz. Output voltage is 2.5 mV into 47-kilohm input impedance standard for moving-magnet cartridges. Separation is 35 dB at 1kHz. Balance between channels is within 0.5 dB at 1 kHz. Recommended tracking-force range is 1.8 to 2.2 grams. Cartridge weight is 9.6 grams. Mounting is with standard half-inch hole spacing.

trast with complex tonalities to form the fabric of this perennial concert favorite. The low volume passages easily get lost in surface noise on most pressings of this performance, but the blackbird reveals them in pristine silence. Where the BPS and the Benz Glider exhibited some surface noise on this cut, the Blackbird revealed a velvety black background from whence the music just emerged. I attribute this mostly to the somewhat different stylus shape used by Sumiko for this cartridge. Basically, it's riding in a different part of the groove than are the BPS and the Glider, a part not worn by previous plays.

Where the BPS is bright and clean, the Blackbird is merely clean. While this presentation might seem somewhat dull to those upgrading from a BPS, one will soon find that this is actually more realistic and much more musical. The bass on the Blackbird is very similar to the BPS, and is, compared to the Glider, a bit less well controlled. The big bass drum on Telarc's famous record of Holst's "Suite #2 for Military Band" With Frederick Fennell and the Cleveland Winds (Telarc #5038) is just a hair woollier on the Blackbird than on the Benz.

I'm not saying one is right and the other wrong, just that they're "different" in much the same way as two fine speaker systems are different.

The all-important midrange is where the Blackbird really shines. (Editor's Pun: Uh, George, I think the phrase is "spreads its wings.") This cartridge is smooth and yet it has real bite. The brasses on the aforementioned Telarc wind ensemble disc have real authority and sound quite the real thing (the "Ouverture" cut from Handel's 'Music for the Royal Fireworks' and Falla's Dances from "The Three Cornered Hat," Classics RCA LSC2230). Yet, the sound is never forward in this all-important range, nor does it exhibit the suckout that many moving-coil cartridges exhibit just before the transition to the brightness range. Glenn Miller's classic sound of trombone, saxes, and muted trumpets is a great test of midrange. Too forward and the brass tends to overpower the ensemble, too reticent and the performance is rendered limp and lifeless. The Blackbird gives this stunning direct-to-disc recording a you-are-there quality that, on the right speakers, can be startling. My Benz is somewhat sucked-out in this

range, and the Blackbird is a breath of fresh air here.

Imaging is much better than either the BPS or the Glider. The soundstage is wide and deep, with no falloff on the edges of the ensemble. The "Firebird" recording is spooky in its ability to place instruments in space and the Blackbird reproduces this imaging information beautifully. One can tell where each instrument in the orchestra is in relation to the listening space. How C.R. Fine, Mercury's recording engineer, was able to get this kind of soundstage and imaging specificity with three spaced omni directional microphones, I'll never know. Maybe that's why he's still a legend.

Overall, The Blackbird is quite an achievement for the folks at Sumiko. The outward resemblance of the Blackbird to the older Bluepoint Special is merely that – an outward resemblance. The Blackbird not only raises the bar considerably from the Bluepoint Special, but in my estimation it also eclipses the Micro Benz Glider in this price range as well. If you are in the market for a cartridge in the range of \$500 to \$1000, put this one on your short list. You'll be glad you did.

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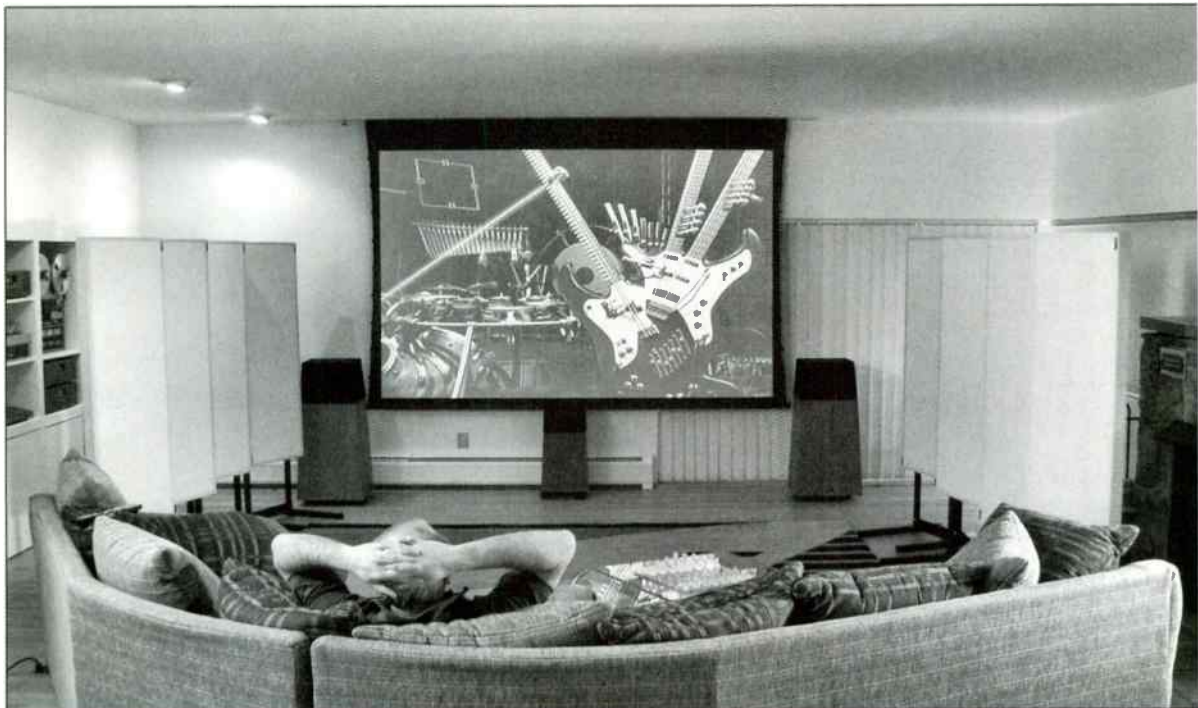
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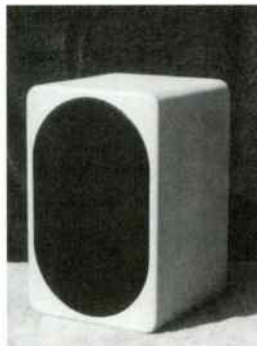
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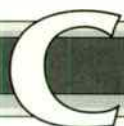
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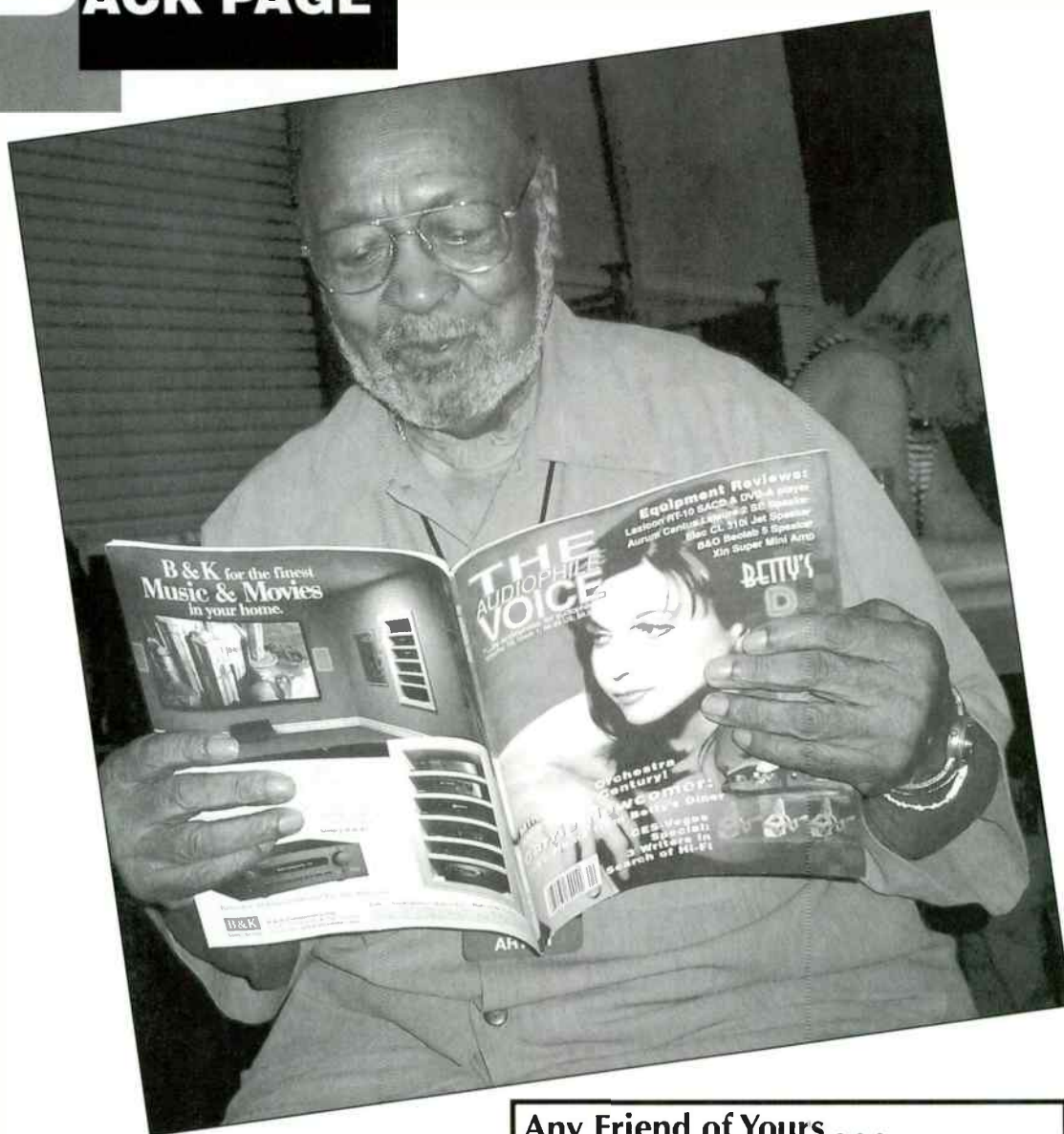
Ad Index

Acoustic Sciences Corp..	55
American Audiophile Network	28
Art Audio	16
B & K Components	Cover 4
Bohlender-Grabner	18
Boston Audio Society	54
Cardas Audio	3
Classé	Cover 3
Enjoy The Music	4
Flat Earth	40
Fleishman: <i>Home Theater</i>	40
Hsu Research	25
Immedia	21
Induction Dynamics	1
JVC XRCDS	9
Kimber	Cover 2
E.M. Long, Speakers	54
Marchand	54
May Audio	38
Parts Express	4
Pass Labs	39
PBN	27
Per Madsen	53
Placette	41
Purist	24
PNF Audio	32
Sanus	7
SOTA	52
SoundStrings	5
TekLine	53
Thorens	29
Totem Acoustic	31
Wisdom	26

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Photos Never Lie!

Any Friend of Yours . . .

This is Robert Lockwood, Jr., during a break from his guitar-duties at the Crossroads Guitar Festival, put on by Eric Clapton June 4 - 6, in Dallas. The pic comes from *TAV* columnist Pat St. John, who took on some of the announcer chores at the Festival. Pat can be heard nationally on Sirius Blues 29 Monday through Friday from 7:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. (ET). He's also the channel's programmer.

Gene Pitts, Editor
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