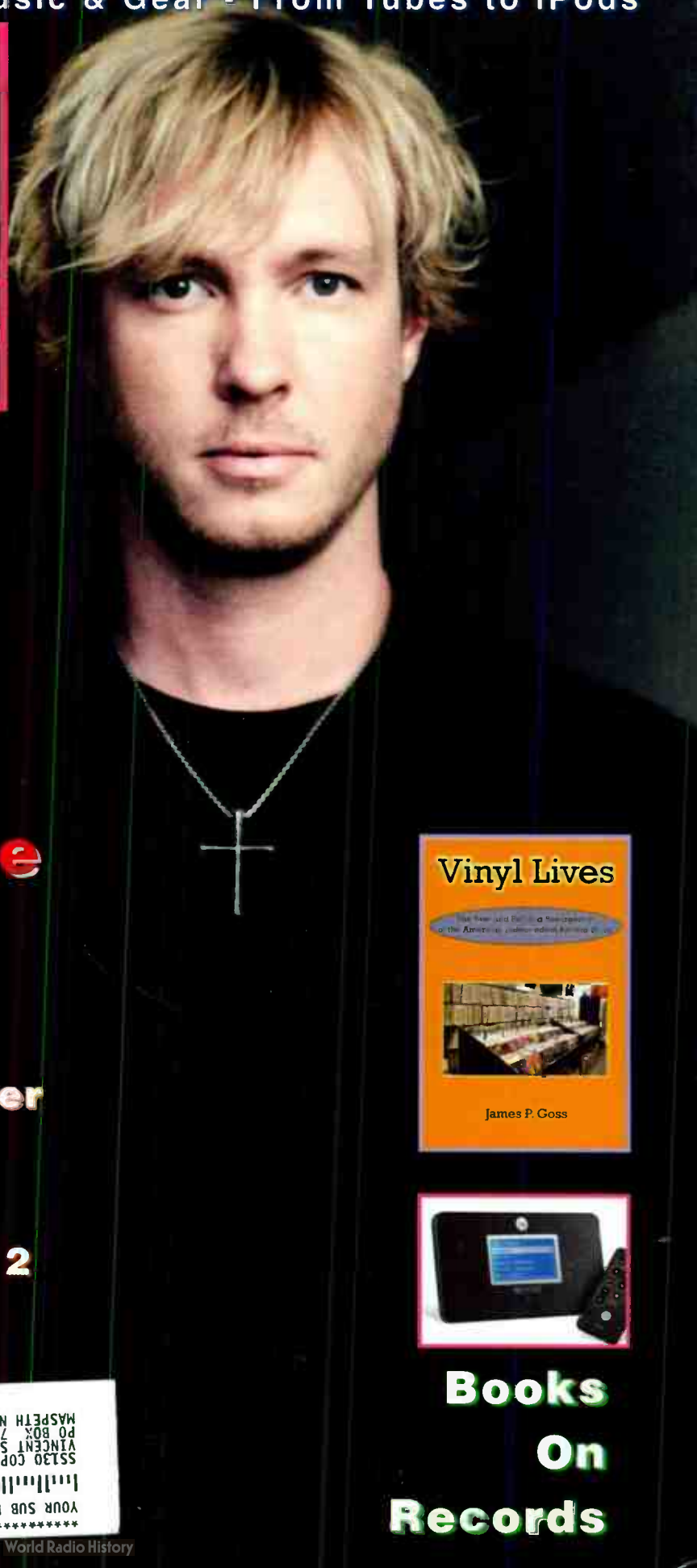


The Insider's Guide To Music & Gear - From Tubes to iPods

# TAV

## The Audiophile Voice

Vol. 14, No. 2; \$5.95 US; \$8.50 Can



**Penny Wayne  
Shepherd:  
Not Blues**

**Equipment Reviews:**

**Anders 10B ES Speaker**

**Line ira Wi-Fi Radio**

**Amnny DC8T Speaker**

**Amiko Blue Point No. 2**

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**Vinyl Lives**

How New and Old Records are Resurrected in the American Underground



James P. Goss



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VOLUME XIV, ISSUE II

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### ADVERTISING

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e-mail audiophilevoice@verizon.net

### THE AUDIOPHILE VOICE

was founded in 1992 by The Audiophile Society  
under President Hy Kashalsky and purchased by  
Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing Ltd. in 1995.

The Audiophile Society may be contacted by  
phoning Recording Secretary David Nemzer  
at 347/834-6412.

Inquiries regarding reviews should be made  
to the Editor via e-mail or phone.

### SUBSCRIPTION SERVICES

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**U.S. subscriptions** are \$12 for six issues, \$24 for 12  
issues, or \$36 for 18 issues; Canadian subscriptions  
are \$39 (U.S. dollars) for six issues and \$65 for 12  
issues; overseas subscriptions are \$66 (U.S.) for six  
issues and \$110 for 12 issues. If you prefer to use a  
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www.audiophilevoice.com.

**The Audiophile Voice** Vol. 14, No. 2; publication  
date, Nov. 20, 2010. Dewey decimal number  
621.381 or 778.5, ISSN 1522-0435, is published  
quarterly by Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing Ltd.,  
605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. Printed  
in U.S.A. The \*.pdf files (and editorial solace) are by  
Satellite Advertising & Design, Montclair, NJ.

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THE BOOK SHELF: What We're Reading

# *"A Drum Gone Still"*

## *Record Industry Histories*

Larry Jaffee



**"O**NE REASON WHY the record industry has been hit so hard by the internet is that the CD was not a beloved product," concludes Fred Goodman, in his new book *Fortune's Fool: Edgar Bronfman Jr., Warner Music, and an Industry in Crisis*, chronicling the mainstream record industry's tailspin for the past decade since the emergence of Napster.

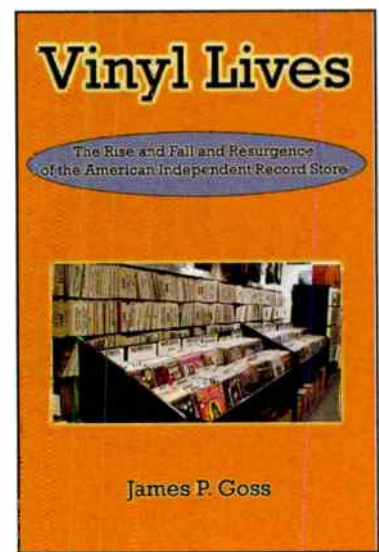
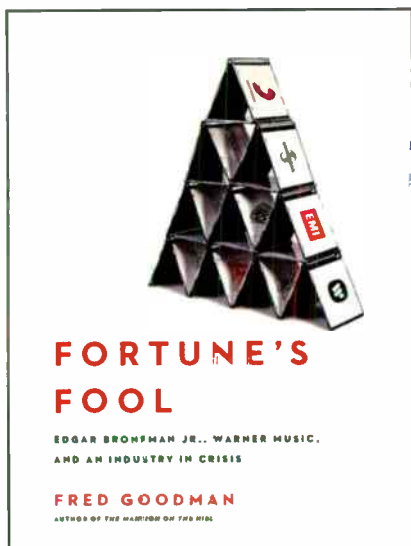
From the major labels' perspective, the CD was a cash cow that had a fairly good run – a quarter century – and despite physical media's declining volumes, it is still the way by which the majority of recorded music is sold. But as Tom Silverman, pioneering rap-label chief of Tommy Boy Records, recently stated at his newly revived New Music Seminar, "how many CDs sold" is an irrelevant indicator of what counts for success in the music business these days. Instead, the number of

"fans" who follow artists on FaceBook, Twitter and other social media is far more meaningful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Goodman focuses on Seagram scion Edgar Bronfman Jr.'s desire to be accepted as a music mogul, first with Universal and then Warner, which he still runs. Life would have been so much simpler for Bronfman had he entered the business during the era of Goodman's last music industry book, *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen and the Head-On Collision of Rock and Commerce*. When that book was published in 1997, the CD was well along its historical path, having become a commodity that carried a price that was far too high for a full album during a period that CD singles were inexplicably being phased out. In my opinion, the greedy majors shot themselves in the foot, and drove away music fans who were not willing to shell out 16 bucks for a couple of good songs. These fans turned to the file-sharing services, which the record industry fought tooth and nail as being "illegal." Then

**The lead photo above was taken at Encore Records, Ann Arbor, Michigan, as seen in the DVD, *I Need That Record!* This store is still in business.**





iTunes came along in a flanking “can’t beat ‘em, so join ‘em” move from Apple.

Goodman details all the majors’ machinations of off-and-on mergers and futile attempts to put the Napster genie back in the bottle. For the most part, it’s pretty dry reading. (This observation is coming from someone who covered most of those developments as they unfolded in my eight years editing the now-defunct, CD/DVD manufacturing trade journal *Medialine*.)

But back to Goodman’s point about how consumers now are perfectly fine with digitizing their CD collections via iTunes and doing away with the jewel cases, whose miniscule graphics can’t compete with the same aesthetics of 12-inch LPs. As someone who has recently succumbed to space pressures, I have decided to part with the lion’s share of my 4,000-CD collection (even boxed sets), and it wasn’t as emotional as I thought it might be.

Opines Goodman: “Today, as it is nice to be able to go online and hear virtually what I want, I miss the experience of buying a music product worth owning; filling a terabit storage device with ten thousand music files isn’t anywhere near as engaging as wandering through a great record store.”

Two new books, James Goss’s *Vinyl Lives* and *Record Store Days*, capture what Goodman yearns for, providing histories on the best stores across the U.S. and entrepreneurs who found their calling as record sellers. Of course, many of the fine establishments in both books are no longer in business, providing a bittersweet epitaph to a slowly dying industry.

Perhaps Goss’s greatest accomplishment was getting the media-shy Tower Records founder Russ Solomon, who set the bar for what a superstore could do, to go on the record of why his venerable chain went bankrupt and disappeared in 2006. That interview first appeared in *The Audiophile Voice*, and kudos to TAV for publishing such a scoop.

*Vinyl Lives* has a great companion website at [www.vinylives.com](http://www.vinylives.com), but in book form is text heavy when compared with *Record Store Days*, which is laid out with interesting vintage and modern photos throughout (though it is not quite of coffee table-book standards).

Both books cite Amoeba Records’ three massive locations in California as providing the example that music retailing can succeed even in today’s economy, selling healthy levels (\$25 million annual



## The List

*Fortune's Fool: Edgar Bronfman Jr., Warner Music, and an Industry in Crisis* by Fred Goodman (Simon & Schuster)

*Vinyl Lives: The Rise and Fall and Resurgence of the American Independent Record Store* by James Goss (Aventine Press)

*Record Store Days: From Vinyl to Digital and Back Again* by Gary Calamar and Phil Gallo (Sterling Publishing)

*I Need That Record! The Death (Or Possible Survival) of the Independent Record Store* (MVD Visual)



**Closed in 2007: Vinyl Mania Records in Manhattan.**

sales from the Los Angeles store alone) of both old and used product.

*Record Store Days* does a good job finding record label executives like Hale Milgrim (former president of Capitol Records) who started out working in record stores, and peppers the text with quotes about the importance of record stores from famous musicians like Paul McCartney and Elvis Costello making in-store performances and signings. Of course, it's a marketing channel that is slowly disappearing since the "big box" Wal-Marts don't offer that kind of experiential platform for musicians and labels. Peter Buck, guitarist in REM, contributed the foreword.

The documentary *I Need That Record!* – sort of a companion DVD to both books, although there is no direct link between the projects – shows the physical dismantling of several indie stores in their final hours, as shell-shocked owners and employees still can't believe that it's over. Greedy landlords are viewed as the culprit. Elsewhere in the film, which started out as a college thesis by filmmaker Brendan Toller, blame is put on the major labels who are accused of keeping CD prices too high for too long.

Steep rents typically do in the little guys, whose landlords could get a different kind of tenant, such as a mobile phone store or tanning salon, and not worry about doing enough volume to make the rent. But ironi-

**Russ Solomon had a pretty good run with Tower Records, from 1941 to 2010 (give or take). His more recent venture R5 Records was bought out by Dimple Records, a small chain, also in Sacramento. James Goss called and spoke to the R5 store manager in June, 2010, their last day. Mr. Solomon has remarried and apparently is out of record retailing. He's 85. Photo: Jesse Vasquez, Midtown Monthly, Sacramento, CA.**



cally the big specialists also couldn't meet their unaffordable overheads even when they diversified into "lifestyle" products, such as fashion and mobile phones.

These days even the specialist superstores (i.e., Tower and Virgin and HMV) have also chucked in the towel, all closing up shop in the U.S. HMV remains last man standing in the U.K.

*I Need That Record!* relies on B-list musicians like Lenny Kaye (Patti Smith sidekick), Thurston Moore (of Sonic Youth), Chris Frantz (Talking Heads) and avant-gardist Glenn Blanca, who all had been or still are obsessive collectors.

Despite all the romanticizing about LPs making a comeback and being the rare physical format that shows growth these days, compared to CDs, vinyl is still only a blip on the radar screen.

Few would argue with the notion that the recorded music industry is in need of new business models that allow everyone concerned – the artist, the label, the merchant – to make money comfortably and keep consumers flush with new tunes, while acknowledging and respecting traditions that shouldn't yet be retired.

For socially inept teenagers, it was at the record store that they first gained a sense of community where they could learn the facts of life, and share in the intricacies of popular culture that needn't necessarily be the titles that sold the most number of units. It was here where consumers who followed the beat of a different drum could find their latest musical obsession.

Digital downloads, while offering immediate gratification for the individual, completely removes the social interaction of getting recommendations from the store clerk who has great taste or knows what the customer likes. Somehow the Amazon experience of ordering a CD that arrives in the mail a few days later doesn't quite match the old-fashioned, mom & pop, brick & mortar retail experience. Independent record stores had a personality, and when they disappeared over time en masse, that "poof" left a void for their patrons.

The so-called "big box" retailers like Wal-Mart and Target only stock the hits, rapidly decreasing floor space devoted to music. Even consumer electronics and book chains like Best Buy, Barnes & Noble and Borders don't have nearly the depth of catalog that Tower, Virgin and HMV used to stock.

(Editor's Intrusion: One thing that Wal-Mart and Best Buy might do is provide kiosk-based downloads and burns of back-catalog CDs which are no longer on the market. I can't get accurate figures but from what little I glean, something like 75 per cent of all the CDs ever issued are no longer available. Wouldn't take much investment in hardware to set up in a mall aisle, high-speed burner perhaps with Lightscribe, Fios or other broadband internet connection, stock of cases and CD-Rs, but getting the agreement from the labels – ah, there's the rub! – Gene Pitts)

The subtitles of the three books and film really tell the story. Yes, the industry is in a crisis from which it most likely will never recover, and vinyl has led to digital in the form of both CDs a quarter century ago and now to downloads.

While 12-inch records refuse to go the way of 8-tracks, "resurgence" might be a bit of an overstatement. Sales are still under two percent. How much longer independent record stores will be able to survive, or any record store for that matter, is the real question.



## Chris Howley



## Blues

Kenny Wayne Shepherd Band *Live! In Chicago*  
Roadrunner Records CD 1686-177422

**I**MAGINE, IF YOU WILL, a musical time-space continuum. Now hear it being ripped and torn to shreds by Kenny Wayne Shepherd's Stratocaster when you listen to his latest disc, *Live! In Chicago*. This is one guitar player, it cannot be denied, who has mastered the blues sound. Shepherd is a master of American roots music in many of its true blues forms: Louisiana, Texas, Southern, Delta, Rockin', and, while he's generally not known for it, make no mistake, he's a howlin' Chicago blues player too. KWS is schooled deeply in the soul, sound and feel of each style. His prowess as a contemporary blues guitar master comes though loud and clear, and all of these styles are represented here. Recorded live over two nights at Chicago's House of Blues in 2007 during the filming of his *Ten Days Out, Blues From The Backroads* CD and DVD project, this disc is special not only for the fact that it's Shepherd's first live

album, but also because it contains standout performances from many living Blues legends that you may never heard of before. If so, you will forever thank KWS for introducing you to them. There are so many standout performances, it will be little wonder if this set ends up in heavy rotation on your CD player's shuffle mode.

Blistering blazes of fret-board fluency light up the first third of the disc with KWS signature blues/rock standards like "Somehow, Somewhere, Someway," "King's Highway" and "True Lies." Going all the way back to their own "Déjà Voodoo," the band is electric and their excitement is contagious, as if they just wrote the song the day before and are dying to let the world hear it. With Double Trouble veterans Chris Layton and Tommy Shannon on board, the ghost of SRV is singing right along with long-time vocalist Noah Hunt. You can feel the band's energy and see Hunt's

signature toothy smile as they rip through what will be this band's enduring live recording statement. The solid pocket-filling bass of Scott Nelson and Riley Osbourn rollicking on the keys and B-3 fortify the backbone of this solid live set, much like Klaus Voormann and Billy Preston used to prop up some heavy-weights of their day. And it's from here that the band is primed to create a roots experience with what should become legendary versions of some classic blues. With the help of some very special guests, the band creates living blues history.

First up is Bayou bluesman and long time KWS mentor Buddy Flett on a time-bending rendition of B.B. King's "Sell My Monkey," followed by a version of Flett's own "Dance for Me Girl" which will leave you beggin' for sweet mercy. But from there on, the band just turns on more cold blues heat. You'll be hard-pressed to find a better version of Jimmy Reed's "Baby, Don't Say

that No More," here featuring Chicago blues legend Willie "Big Eyes" Smith on vocals and harp. The riff trading between Smith and Shepherd evoke a crowd response that'll get you on your feet, even if you're driving while listening to it. This track made the price of admission worth it all by itself. And hard to believe, the disc actually gets better from here. Smith leads the band

your head and playing air guitar with fluidity.

However, things truly become magic with the entry of Hubert Sumlin to run through his "Feed Me" and "Rockin' Daddy." When you hear the cool stylings of Sumlin, who counts among his biggest fans the likes of Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Keith Richards and Carlos Santana, paired with

through his own boisterous voicing, each accepting its comfortable home within his lexicon.

Toward the CD's finish you'll find a muddy version of "Blue on Black" that will have your head swimming in the whispering, screaming fuzz of Shepherd's fretboard mastery.

"I'm a King Bee" closes the disc in with the most appropriate send

---

**Young as he is, Kenny Wayne Shepherd already shows his mastery of several blues formats. Do yourself a favor. Buy this CD.**

---

through Ronnie Earl's "Eye to Eye" and blows that searing harp harder than players half his age.

From there, KWS introduces the world to the accomplished Bryan Lee, whose six-string interplay and Cajun flavored vocals make the perfect 12-bar compliment to Shepherd's shredding on Howlin' Wolf's "How Many More Years." Next, they claim a funky new feel on a Nawlin's standard, "Sick and Tired" which will have you nodding

Shepherd's outrageous fretwork, you can feel the generation gap close in what seems like KWS' induction into the league of guitar greatness. Listen closely to Shepherd's lead on this song. You can feel what it must have felt like for him to be sharing the stage with this man who is some of the concrete in his musical foundation. The performance is singularly one of Shepherd's strongest recorded offerings. Every influence shines

off any crowd could hope for. It's a foot-stomping version of Slim Harpo's swamp mash that would even have the Stone's saying, "Damn ... they nailed that one."

This CD is an experience, just the way KWS intended it to be. It's a musical journey through the very fabric of the blues tapestry and rocks harder than most anything that's been released in the last five years. It's simply a must have for your collection.

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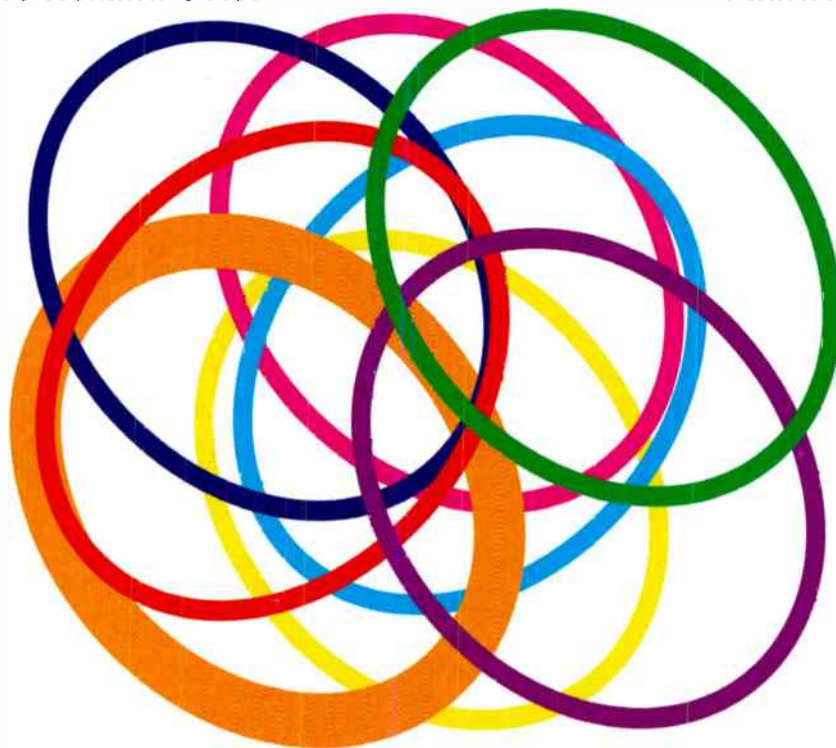


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Dave Holland Octet

Pathways



*Jazz*

Dave Holland Octet *Pathways*  
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### Seth Greenstein

**D**AVE HOLLAND'S NEWEST CD, *Pathways*, showcases in seven tracks the multi-faceted talents of this jazz giant. A virtuoso on bass, Holland lays down percussive lines which propel his compositions as forcefully as any drummer's. Holland's accomplished compositions explore complex time signatures, ethereal moods and bossa nova rhythms with equal parts of ease and surefootedness. Combining horns and vibraphone, his arrangements achieve a distinc-

tive warm and haunting sound. And, as a masterful bandleader, Holland's ensembles swing tightly together, yet never lose their improvisational feel – true whether he plays in a trio or big band setting.

*Pathways*, featuring Holland leading an octet, was recorded live last year at Birdland. This group has many faces familiar from his groups over the last decade: Steve Nelson on vibes and marimba, Nate Smith on drums, Antonio Hart on alto sax and flute, Chris Potter on tenor and

soprano saxophones, Gary Smulyan on baritone sax, Robin Eubanks on trombone, and Alex Sipiagin on trumpet and flugelhorn. That familiarity pays off. What makes *Pathways* so satisfying is how these eight players perform as one. They execute the twists and turns of each composition with ease and energy, and while each solo is featured prominently on this recording, overall *Pathways* sounds as much like a conversations between members of the band as individual statements.

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A perfect example is "How's Never," one of the several compositions on this disc that was first heard on past recordings of Holland and other Octet members, some from more than 25 years ago. "How's Never" first appeared on the 1995 "Homecoming" recording of the trio Gateway with John Abercrombie on guitar and Jack DeJohnette on drums. That recording had a spare

piece's many rapid-fire time signature changes. The performance ends with the horn section soloing simultaneously in a shout chorus before taking the theme out. Nate Smith again puts in a first-rate performance, pushing the complex rhythms of the piece without dominating, and picking up on and highlighting rhythmic patterns from Eubanks's and Holland's solos.

## **Pathways, a new CD from Dave Holland, makes the impossible seem effortless. Highly satisfying!**

but aggressive funk feel, beginning with two choruses of the theme by Abercrombie, then expanding immediately into group improvisation. On *Pathways*, the track instead starts with a Holland solo that, joined by drummer Smith, evolves the theme into its 7/8 groove. Vibes and horns launch the melody, then the tune, into full swing. Antonio Hart solos in the funk groove, at first only with Holland and Smith behind, then Nelson's vibes chiming occasional punctuation, then comping behind. Tight interplay between Holland and Smith yields to a Smith solo, before the band brings the theme home.

A Holland rarity, "Blue Jean," also gets an update from an acoustic trio setting. Originally an up-tempo bossa nova from his "World Trio" CD, featuring Kevin Eubanks on guitar and Mino Cinelu on drums, on *Pathways* Holland's octet slows down the melody. Smulyan introduces the melody and takes the first solo, redolent with heat and romance, interpolating "The Shadow of Your Smile." Nelson comps on vibes, but turns to the marimba for his solo to enhance its tropical flavor.

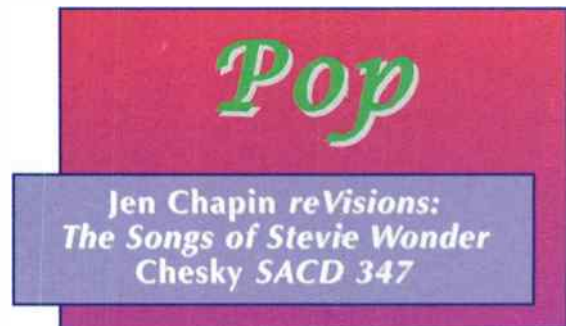
"Ebb and Flow," another Latin-influenced composition, originally appeared on the 1995 Dave Holland Quartet recording, "Dream of the Elders." The melody flows upward, then seemingly ebbs by repeating figures down the steps of the scale. Originally charted for vibes, tenor saxophone, bass, drums, here the first solo goes to trombonist Eubanks whose spirit and bravado complement the

Two compositions by other band members are equally at home on *Pathways*. Chris Potter's "Sea of Mamara," a slow poem in 7/4 time, layers horns like waves atop Nelson's vibes, with soprano sax and muted trumpet. "Wind Dance," which appeared on one of Alex Sipiagin's solo efforts, features Hart on flute, along with solos by Sipiagin and Eubanks. The orchestration is at times too busy, and not quite as crisp as on Holland's compositions, but the structure of the composition (in 9/8 time) and solid performances stand on firm ground with the remaining tunes in the set.

The disc concludes with "Shadow Dance," which previously received a big band update on 2002's "What Goes Around," from the original quintet setting on 1983's "Jumpin' In." "Shadow Dance" builds on an Afro-Cuban foundation, with Antonio Hart's solo taking the intensity up with bop riffs and sustained high notes. The composition then explodes into a furious 4/4 swing that takes off full force as Chris Potter takes over. Nate Smith fans the flames, then breaks the beat down in a transition back to the Afro-Cuban mood.

The Dave Holland Octet succeeds throughout in making the impossible seem effortless: A big band whose playing thrives on both solo and ensemble improvisation, and flows naturally through complex time and contrasting rhythms. Holland's orchestrations and compositions play to these strengths, and make Holland's *Pathways* an approachable and highly satisfying experience.





**RECOMMEND YOU THINK** twice before buying this disc. Because if you do buy it and listen to it, you'll likely be doing a *lot* of thinking. *Some* toe tapping maybe, but much more thinking.

This is not a CD of covers of Stevie Wonder's Greatest Hits. Anything but. It's an intense look at Wonder's most serious compositions, the songs of political and social commentary for which he is less well known than for "My Cherie Amour." Of the tracks on this CD, only "Master Blaster (Jammin')" went anywhere on the charts, I believe.

The presentation by Chesky Records on hybrid SACD is first class. First of all, singing the songs is Jen Chapin of the well-known musical and social activist Chapin family. Treating the material as texts first and melodies second, Chapin is accompanied by husband-bassist Stephan Crump and by Chris Cheek on various saxophones. The trio, clearly long and well acquainted, plays with great elegance, taste, and precision, but they don't generate anything like pop music from their thin texture.

Instead, what they give us is an ideal emphasis on the *words* of Stevie Wonder. The sparse texture, reminiscent of but vastly better than the beat poetry-jazz of decades past, really does make for a kind of This Is Poetry First experience.

Be forewarned too (a lot of warnings and disclaimers in this review, I can hear Editor Pitts grumbling now) that this is not Republican conservative material. In fact, in her CD booklet preface, Jan Chapin blows the trumpet for the Obama Presidency. If, like me, you have political sympathies that lie elsewhere on the spectrum, you might find this album unappetizing. I'd still urge you to give it a listen.

I found the presentation and the material of such quality that it is at least *possible* to enjoy the excellence

of the delivery and the songwriting, without having to share the message. And it never hurts to question your own political opinions.

These are, as I've indicated before, very spare presentations of serious lyrics, all of them by Stevie Wonder except for "Renewable" and "She's Gone," excellent works by Chapin herself. Given her obvious talents as a songwriter, I think it's okay for her to include two of hers on an album subtitled *Songs of Stevie Wonder*.

Chapin's pure, spare delivery, and stupendously good diction, serve the songs well. You'll hear every word so clearly that there is no need for booklet texts, though I generally like to receive such with an album.

You'll get to hear the songwriter's words sympathetically presented by the trio and set forth in magnificent SACD sound by Chesky, as of course you would expect from that estimable audiophile label. The disc is multichannel, which I can't play on my system, but the two-channel SACD and CD layers sound terrific. It's not as if we have the Chicago Symphony to present here. It's only a mini-ensemble proceeding very quietly about their message business. But the sonic excellence proves of value: the soundstage is high, wide and deep, the quiet is absolute, and the intimate interplay between the three musicians easy to enter into and *experience*.

Thus, I suspect that anyone who takes seriously either the work of Stevie Wonder, or the songwriting of our time, will find this CD interesting. Those in sympathy with the message will find it compelling. And rewarding.

As will any TAV reader willing to spend a few dollars and a few minutes or perhaps hours on an occasion for *thought*.



Chris Howley

*Blues*

Moreland & Arbuckle Flood  
Telarc TEL-31909-02

**M**ORELAND & Arbuckle's CD *Flood* ain't no joke. It's straight-up roots rock and bad-boy blues, but this Kansas-based duo takes their gritty garage sound in surprising and inspired directions.

A Mississippi sax wails from the opener *Hate to See You Go* and it's powerful enough to break any levee this side of the Big River. The hammer-slinging steel drive of *The Legend of John Henry* is made thicker by way of grade-A cigar-box guitar sludge.

Then in the straightforward *Don't Wake Me*, Moreland & Arbuckle establish a no-fly zone over tradition and pretense, painting the sky

with textures schooled in the delta and applied with innovation.

The eerie and ethereal backwoods space-out intro *Before The Flood* launches you into 18 Counties, a song steeped in true-life blues experience, the authenticity of which you simply can't deny.

On *Bound and Determined*, you feel the angry strumming enough to make you an accessory to the sordid details that ensue, leaving your soul to rot in hell along with the song's repentant protagonist.

From there, the longing of *Can't Get Clear* can't help but draw comparisons to the best of early ZZ-Top, infused with a little whisky-soaked

Ronnie Wood slow slide swagger. They've even included a banjo version for those inclined to alt takes on great songs.

*Can't Leave Well Enough Alone* has a clean picking-and-slide bounce, but it could have been left out to make way for *In The Morning I'll Be Gone* and *What You Gonna Do*, a couple of rough tumbles that leave you feeling used in a good way.

Finally the storytelling and playing on *Red Moon Rising* takes you back to where it all began, on the other side of midnight deep in blues country, where these guys are well at home.

Photos: Gavin Peters





## George Witterschein

**A**ARON PARKS' *Invisible Cinema* CD is a simple pleasure, and a rich one.

Parks composed the pieces on the disc for his own jazz piano trio-plus-guitar quartet, and they're all immediately accessible and attractive. Maybe even addictive!

The pleasure is simple because you just put the CD in your player and sit back and let yourself be captivated. No need to rack your brain about structures or chord changes, because these compositions just pour into your imagination right off the bat. To refer out to the classical vocabulary, you might say that Parks is a French composer. That is to say, he seems to work from the French notion that music should

give pleasure first. Or, as Duke Ellington said, "If it *sounds* good, it *is* good." The Duke was something of a French composer himself, in my not-so-humble opinion.

Anyhow, Parks is not self-compelled to sound weighty, "deep" or, if you will, Germanic. Contrast him with another jazz pianist-composer of today, Brad Mehldau. Mehldau has an earlier, broadly similar CD out, *House on Hill*, on Nonesuch. It's widely acclaimed, and really good, but not very "French." In fact, Mehldau, in his lengthy booklet essay, writes a learned analysis of Bach and Brahms in which he coins the stunning phrase "stealth polyphony." Mehldau claims Brahms used such a technique in

his chamber music, and that he, Mehldau, uses it too in his compositions on his CD. Mehldau even goes so far as to write this: "To follow Hegel, the particular is subsumed in the universal. By the time Brahms came along, this relationship had already been fractured." (Don't get me wrong. I'm a Mehldau fan. But that doesn't stop me from making fun of him for sounding too-too-Teutonic in print. I'm entitled. Take a look at my last name.)

Whatever that Hegel-subsumption language means, you can be sure that Aaron Parks would never have written it! The most intellectual-sounding quote from Parks that I can find is this, from his website, "Somebody once asked me to find

two words that describe the music I make, and the words I picked were *spontaneous* and *cinematic*," that latter adjective lying at the root of the album title, I imagine.

Straightforward and personal, no stealth polyphony there.

Still, Parks is pretty smart, having skipped high school to go directly to the University of Washington in his native Seattle,

(Terence Blanchard on the soundtrack to the Spike Lee film *When the Levees Broke*), etc. etc. etc.

But five minutes' listening to this disc will convince you that his music does not sacrifice beauty to brains. It *sounds* wonderful. Ellington would be highly pleased, I'm sure.

How to describe Parks' compositions? Part of me wants to say, "I

guage is somewhere between jazz and rock/pop, which means among other things that virtually every human being on the planet today will be stylistically comfortable with the music.

And, the recorded sound is very fine. Precise image placement of the four musicians, and the presence of some low-level detail, I got to "participate" (from my listening chair

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**Rich and simple pleasure are what you'll find  
on Aaron Park's *Invisible Cinema*,  
a brilliantly crafted set of beautiful melodies.**

---

where, I hear, he was a combined music and computer science major. His extraordinary talent landed him a transfer at age 16 to the Manhattan School of Music, where he studied with no less than the Main Man of contemporary jazz piano, Kenny Barron. He's won numerous awards, worked with Important Jazz Names

refuse to try, folks. Go listen for yourselves." That doesn't make for good magazine copy, and I want to keep the editor and you readers happy, so here's an attempt, admittedly inadequate.

Parks brilliantly uses his small ensemble of four to create beautiful timbres and textures around beautiful melodies. His harmonic lan-

anyway) in the intimacy of the ensemble.

As will you, if you give it a listen. Hey, readers, this is the 21st century. We're all working too hard, if we're working, and stress is our daily bread. Our times occasionally compensate us some for our fretting, and Aaron Parks' *Invisible Cinema* CD is such an instance. Grab it.



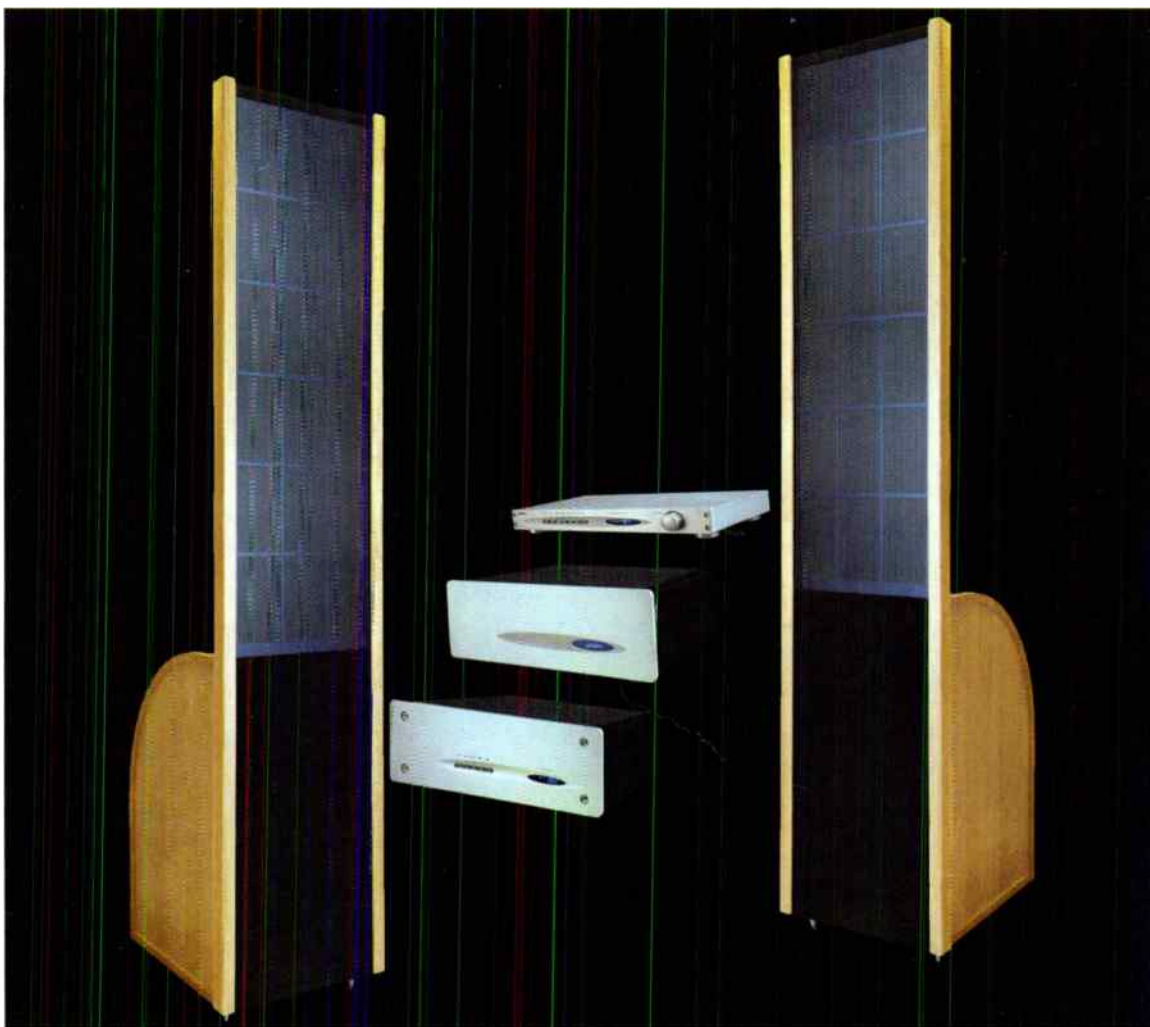
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# *Sanders 10b Hybrid Electrostatic-Dynamic Speaker System*

Chuck Bruce



**M**Y ENCOUNTER with the Sanders 10b ES loudspeaker has been one of the more interesting and enlightening extended audition and review experiences I have ever had. These are definitely not your grandma's plain vanilla loudspeakers. They comprise a wide-range electrostatic panel and dynamic transmission line woofer hybrid design that provides both pleasures and

challenges, yet does provide ample rewards. The challenge is surmountable by a top-flight designer, yet it requires a bit of patience and attention to detail during set-up from the end user. As you'll see later, selection of amplification is very important as well.

Designer and manufacturer Roger Sanders is located in Colorado and at his base there, Sanders has been



refining his electrostatic hybrids since the early to mid-1970s. Sanders' tenacious passion for the technology and performance of his loudspeakers is paralleled by only a few other speaker designers in my experience. Jim Thiel, Richard Vandersteen, Albert Von Schweikert, Jim Winey, Peter Walker, Bill and Ken Hecht, and Dr.

42 inches tall) are very low mass, finished in semi-gloss black, and do not have cloth covering.

Sanders has spent nearly 30 years working at achieving perfect insulation on his ES panels; he says that the present Ultrastat panels are good to over 20,000 volts. Besides the panels being of machined glass, the conductors in the panel's stators are completely encapsulated in glass. The glass is then machined to form slots between the conductors so that sound can pass through. Sanders finds this difficult technique of making an ES panel to be expensive, complex, and time-consuming, but he believes it solves any and all insulation problems. Sanders says his speakers can be "driven to ear-bleeding levels without damage or the need for protective circuitry." (I was able to convince the editor I didn't need to test the bleeding ear part.)

Roger is so certain his ES panels are arc-proof, immune to humidity, and more rugged than conventional magnetic speakers that he offers a life-time warranty. There aren't many such warranties around.

The 10b is basically a two-way, bi-amplified, bi-wired system with the woofers covering the range from 330 Hz and below and the wide-range electrostatic

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## Basically a two-way system, the Sanders 10b is also a hybrid with electrostatic and dynamic drivers.

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Roger West are among the small number loudspeaker designers with such a passion and life-long dedication.

### System Description

Sanders Sound Systems provided all of the electronics needed to support the 10bs for this review (excluding a CD or LP source). This included some of Sanders' optional gear. A brief examination of the 10b reveals a dipole radiation pattern (equal front and back) from each of the electrostatic (ES) panels. These are coupled with a front-firing, 10-inch dynamic woofer mounted in an integrated and supporting transmission line cabinet. Each side weighs in at 80 pounds. Various high-quality wood veneer finishes are offered, including an attractive natural walnut as in the review sample. The flat see-through perforated glass ES panels (15 inches wide by

panels covering the remaining audio upper frequencies to 27 kHz and beyond. The overall speaker dimensions are 15 inches wide by 18 inches deep by 69 inches tall.

To support the speakers electronically, a purpose-designed 330-watt-per-channel integrated amplifier and crossover are provided in the basic system package. The Sanders bass amplifier may be operated in single-ended or balanced mode, or the owner may provide his own bass amplifier. The Sanders bass amplifier easily drives the woofer modules and thus actually does most of the work, while the ES panel can be driven by a relatively low output tube amplifier. The outcome is that the total system subjectively seems a bit more sensitive than the typical loudspeaker. One might search the Sanders' specs for a typical sensitivity rating, where some dB SPL output at 1 meter is given for a one-watt input rating (2.83 volts into 8 ohms). While Sanders gives a 94 dB SPL rating to the ES panels, this carries a couple of caveats. First, the impedance of any ES varies a good deal so that the calculations are immediately off, and second, only single-amp systems can have their sensitivity measured in this way, and the 10b is bi-amplified.

The crossover-amplifier incorporates analog electronic circuitry with three up-down push-button level controls and a blue LED digital readout. The buttons control Bass, Midrange and a master Level control. The master Level circuit has 100 one-db steps and ramps both channels simultaneously. The settings affect Level, but not the crossover points. The newer 10c version features a separate electronic crossover that provides even more flexibility and contour control.

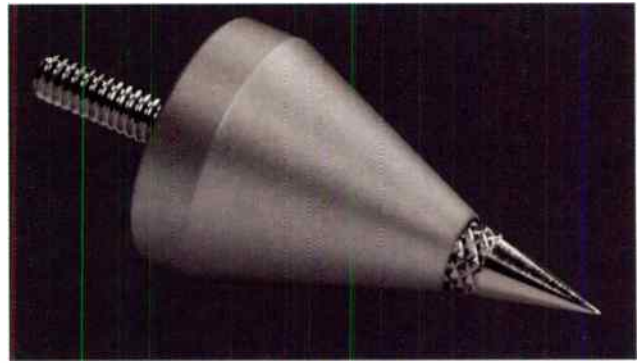
Robust remote control features are additionally provided when the optional Sanders Slim Line Preamplifier is utilized. The owner may provide his or her own pre-





amplifier or bass amplifier but I felt no need to experiment as the Sanders Crossover/Amplifier performed without the slightest hitch and was sonically neutral. I also found this highly flexible preamplifier to be a capable performer; both it and the crossover-amplifier come in silver or black finishes. The preamp sports a full range of inputs and outputs as well as offering both single-ended and balanced operation plus a remote control and a detachable power cord. I might mention that all Sanders electronics sport detachable power cords. The unit was responsive, fast and extremely quiet without any malfunctions and was sonically neutral.

I was also provided with a second solid-state, stereo power amplifier rated at 360 watts per channel that is purpose-designed by Sanders to serve the ES panels and came to good use. This is an optional item that performed without flaw throughout my audition. Robust binding posts are fitted to all amplifiers and they offer a wide spacing to accommodate heavy-gauge cables. The application of this amplifier is not restricted to just electrostatic drivers; they may be applied to any loudspeaker load. A new and even more powerful Magtech stereo amplifier providing 800 watts per channel into four



to the ES amplifier to determine if a well-engineered, mid-power tube amplifier could do this particular job, as well as give vacuum tubes a fair run on this test. This Cary amplifier (100+ watts in P-P ultra-linear mode) performed remarkably well in single-ended or balanced mode. In this case, it did the job.

However, I primarily used the Sanders ES amplifier as it handled the challenging electrostatic load with total aplomb. Anything less would not likely have done the trick with these tough ES panels (more on this later).

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**The Sanders 10b is among the very best in accurately conveying the full sense of the recorded space.**

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ohms is available as another option. During this review, I used a Cary V-12R unit as an alternate for comparison

In still other audition cases, I used a mix of my own pre and power amps for reference to get a better sense of

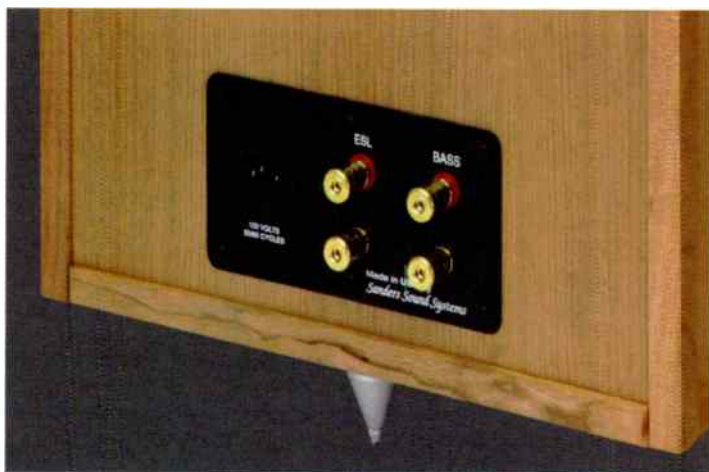


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which unit did what. I need to mention an Audio Research Ref-II Mk-II preamp in particular here. Outstanding in this testing. I also used a set of Sanders eight-foot low-capacitance loudspeaker cables with good results. One should be wary of high-capacitance cables in ES panel service as they may cause amplifier instability. The main strength of the Sanders cables when used with ES speakers is that they offer ultra-low inductance, a yet more important contributor to stability of an ES system. Owners can provide their own amplifier to drive these speakers, however they should take care to select a unit with high current capability and very good stability when driving predominately capacitive electrostatic loads.

The optional Sanders ES amplifier is rated at 360 watts per channel into eight ohms and 600 watts per channel into four ohms. Single-ended or balanced operation is provided. His ES panels, says Sanders, present a wide-ranging impedance: 112 ohms at 500 Hz, but just two ohms at 20 kHz. With user-provided amplifiers, Sanders recommends at least 60 watts per channel with a vacuum-tube unit and 250 watts per channel with a solid-state amp. All of the Sanders electronics were extremely quiet, ran cool and "green." I left all the electronics on continuously, as recommended by the manufacturer. I also found that there was no huge difference with background noise when I switched between single-ended and balanced modes since my environment is low in RFI/EMI and cable distances relatively short.

Overall height of the model 10b's is 69 inches and includes three spikes. Each tower requires two sets of speaker cables (one for the ES panel and another for the woofer). In addition, a 120-V, 3-prong, detachable a.c. power cable is needed to energize the high-voltage d.c. supplies for each ES panel. Sanders provides 10-foot cords for this use and does not recommend special after-market units for this duty.

## ES Characteristics

The opposing electrical characteristics of electrostatic vs. dynamic speaker drivers present electronic design challenges and strongly mandated to Sanders that he create his own solid-state amplifiers offering special output characteristics to assure best performance of the speakers and thus high customer satisfaction. In this, he has encountered the same challenge as other ES speaker designers and manufacturers in that power amplifier selection and performance are highly critical to performance success and customer satisfaction with ES speakers. The a.c. "reactance" of the ES panels is predomi-

nately "capacitive," such that the music signal current actually leads the driving voltage by as much as 90 degrees, resulting in a "leading" power-factor, the ratio of current to voltage. This is a difficult load for many amplifiers, especially those with limited power supply capability. Such amps lack the ability to deliver sufficient instantaneous current without internal rail supply voltage collapse. For their part, music signals are a.c. with all those associated complexities.

On the other hand, the a.c. reactance of dynamic drivers (in this case, the woofers) is primarily resistive and inductive (electromagnetic energy is stored and released), resulting in a lagging power factor where the current component lags the voltage by many degrees and this, too, varies with frequency. This is typically seen in "polar" data plots of these characteristics. This is a normal characteristic of a.c. music signals in magnetic driver system circuits where component parts are predominately inductive, such as driver coils and crossover elements. Applying an electronic crossover eliminates the passive inductive elements in the system. This type of electrical "load" for woofers like the 10b's woofers is with a robust power amplifier, and this need appears ably served by the Sanders bass amplifier provided with the basic system package.

## Speaker Set-Up

Unless you are really lucky, the 10b's are not typically a loudspeaker you can simply unpack and just drop down anywhere in your listening room and achieve first-rate performance. They assemble or set up with techniques similar to those for a "kit." They come in multiple corrugated boxes (typically shipped via UPS) and you'll be provided with several pictures and good instructions. Assembly and basic set-up can be properly accomplished in an evening by just one person, but you should not rush. However, tuning or placement for best sound will take awhile longer.

## NOTES

**Sanders Sound Systems Model 10b Electrostatic Speaker System with Crossover Amplifier,** \$13,000.00. Sanders Sound Systems, 12054 Deer Trail Rd., Conifer, CO 80433; phone and fax 303/838-8130; [www.sanderssoundsystems.com](http://www.sanderssoundsystems.com); [roger@sanderssoundsystems.com](mailto:roger@sanderssoundsystems.com)

### Associated Equipment

Audio Research Ref 2, Mk-II line preamp; Audio Research PH-5 phono preamp; Sony ES 999 CD player; Pioneer Elite D49A universal CD player; Theta Gen 5-A outboard D/A; VPI HW 19 MK-IV turntable; Benz Micro Ruby 3-H phono cartridge; Cary V-12R, Pass Labs X-150, and McCormack DNA-1 power amplifiers, and Sanders Sound Systems, Soundstrings, AudioQuest Colorado Battery Shield, and Kimber Select Interconnects and cables.



Remember, these ESLs are dipoles that radiate as much energy to the rear as to the front. You will have to be mindful of reflection issues from rear and side walls, and there will be questions about corners and ceiling to consider. These are not insurmountable issues, but they

set-up adjustments, I worked toward the biggest stage I could achieve in my modestly sound-treated listening room. (FYI, this room measures 16 feet wide by 28 feet long, and is eight feet high, with wood paneling and carpeting.)

## The Sanders electrostatics are an adventure in musical playback which will return you to rarely visited highlights.

will require some understanding and attention to detail. The 10b owner's manual devotes a good bit of text and sketches to the subject and I recommend Sander's suggestions be followed. You want just enough reflection to give a bit of "air" and spaciousness to the presentation. Over-damping the rear and side walls is not recommended. To save extra pages and the patience of my editor, I'll summarize the process (and the one I followed) to get the best performance.

Because the 10bs require some care in set-up, designer Sanders provides rather detailed user manuals with diagrams and recommendations for best performance, including woofer and ES panel electrical "phasing," where the drivers push and pull in unison. Distance from the rear wall and corners does matter due to the dipole rear wave and associated time delay off the rear walls (and to some degree the side walls). This may be effectively controlled and optimized by tweaking one's set-up. The walls can enhance the spaciousness and huge soundstage these speakers are capable of producing. So in my auditions and resulting

Careful measurement of the distance from the primary listening position and the speakers is critical (I suggest a good, long tape measure for this). I found that sloppy measurements from the speakers to the listening position, with differences of even a quarter or half inch, resulted in loss of accuracy and channel balance. While some might consider this a difficulty inherent to ES speakers, it is actually a measure of the accuracy of such systems. Accuracy is especially desirable for the high frequencies above 10 kHz, those with shorter acoustic wavelengths. Channel balance will be affected if the distance to the primary listening position is not accurate. After initial "rough-in" of set-up and listening, adding the help of a friend and a tape measure will help this process go pretty quickly.

The primary listening position should be equidistant from the speakers, which should be aimed directly at this spot. The instructions from Sanders include many good set-up suggestions, especially if you have not had personal experience with an ES dipole before. A set of

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"slider" feet are provided for set-up tweaking, with three spikes for final anchoring.

I'm also not a slave of the oft-used "rule of thirds" listening room set-up. I find that if you do not aim the 10b's rear wave into the corners, do not over-damp the back and side walls, and allow the speakers to breathe a bit, the back wave reflections will enhance soundstage spaciousness. The user manual addresses basic set-up for more casual listening (and a wider sweet-spot) and advanced set-up instructions for the most serious listening. The latter focuses on an optimum but smaller listening position where the speakers aimed directly at the listener. From experience and owner manual recommendations, performance is best when the 10bs are set up in a somewhat asymmetrical configuration within the room. One adjusts the lateral distance closer or farther apart to achieve best soundstage, and then works at best distance from speaker to listener. Using this adjustment order will result in optimum imaging and channel balance with "no hole in the middle." Since the woofer modules are incorporated into the system directly below the ES panels, you don't want to place the system too near room corners or the bass could likely boom. If your room is nearly exactly square and perhaps of modest volume, you may find the best set-up to be across the diagonal of the room. This will achieve an asymmetrical configuration of the speakers and work toward best dispersion and overall performance.

Then finally in my set-up procedure came the audio fine-tuning of the multi-band electronic crossover (in this case, the analog version integrated within the bass amplifier). Of the three "bands," Low, Mid and Main Level, the Mid level is most critical for the heart of the music lies within, all the music above 100 Hz, which is handled by the ES panels.

Using different types of well-recorded music is invaluable. Dramatic piano such as the one on "La Campanella" on the Reference Recordings Nojima Plays Liszt, sopranos such as Kathleen Battle, and strings by Heifetz off RCA "shaded dog" LPs are most useful to provide the correct tonal character along with fast attacks just right. Some of the hi-rez, DVD-A Latin/Cuban combo recordings from AIX were similarly excellent pieces of music to determine percussion speed, detail and accuracy. For final evaluation, I always use music I have played many times on many different systems in various settings. Which is to say, use what you like and know.

## Listening Impressions

This Sanders 10b speaker, together with its associated electronics, are among the best I have heard, regardless of price, when it comes to conveying the full scale of orchestra from the best recordings. One of their most outstanding traits, simply put, is that they excel at allowing the listener to hear into the stage and recording venue. Panel speakers, electrostatic or otherwise, attract a community of devotees that seldom leave the fold. The 10bs reviewed herein serve this devotion well. Your best recordings will project a sound field that is well beyond the speakers' sides and do a good imitation of a 3-D sound field. Intimate recordings, such as those of small jazz combos, are also well-conveyed, especially where vocals are featured. My favorites include about anything from Ella and range all the way to the current favorites such as Diana Krall's Live in Paris. I will tell

you too, that this recording is especially in the LP version. Operatic singers Sylvia McNair and Kathleen Battle are others that are well conveyed via the Sanders speakers. McNair is highly gifted in both operatic and popular song rendition; her Jerome Kern Songbook is very well regarded in my listening room. Good recordings of The famed Dave Brubeck "Take Five" is a good recording that contains a lot of subtle studio ambiance and reflections that are easily heard via the 10bs, which is not always the case with lesser systems. Julie London's "Julie is Her Name" 45-rpm reissue LP has a stunning rendition of "Cry Me a River" which transported this listener to another time and place. Bass response is excellent and I rarely felt a need for a subwoofer that went deeper. The Sanders woofers did the job admirably.

The overall lack of coloration is one of the key attributes of the 10b and allows the tonal qualities of recordings to show through prominently, though this can be either pro or con. I spent a lot of time playing LPs (which I think still trump most other formats except the best R-to-R master tapes). But then again, the 10bs take no prisoners when it comes to honest conveyance of recording quality. Don't expect them to prettify recordings; what you hear is what you get. The 10bs are an honest speaker with little if any coloration without being harsh or strident when properly set-up in the room and using good source material.

## Conclusion

It has been a unique experience to review a complete system, electronics and loudspeakers from the same designer manufacturer. When set-up for the most advanced or highly focused listening position, some audiophiles may wish for a wider sweet spot. However, the high level of performance and enjoyment within the sweet spot in my opinion more than compensates for the restriction. Few speakers I have auditioned can convey a more expansive, and multi-dimensional soundstage as the 10b's.

The specifications of Sanders electronics and acoustic elements are impressive. All the pieces of electronics are low distortion and exhibit low noise, while the amplifiers (both for the bass and ES panels) offer voltage stability and high-current with very fast slew rate. They also run very cool and are quite "green" in power consumption considering their power capability. Integration of the ES panels and woofers via the electronic crossover is excellent when some care is taken by the user, especially when addressing the Midrange level setting. The very low mass of the ES diaphragms allows quick response with difficult instruments, voices and especially percussion.

Having seen and heard Roger Sanders loudspeaker design efforts evolve over time, I must say this model 10b showcases his efforts to achieve the most accurate sound reproducers he knows how to create. After many years of in-depth research into ES panel design and electrical characteristics, pre and power amplifiers and electronic crossovers, including cables, he has produced a product system that is unique and very fine in its listening characteristics. The Sanders are an adventure in musical playback and will take you to highlights in your record collection I will bet were not often visited (with other speakers) and but were long remembered. If you have a chance, go listen.



# Sumiko Blue Point No. 2 Phono Cartridge



George Graves

I BOUGHT THE ORIGINAL Blue Point cartridge back in the early nineties. I thought it was flawed, but still, it showed enough promise to encourage me to buy, over the ensuing years, the original Blue Point Special and the Blackbird. Alas, while I still have both the Blackbird and the Special, neither of them have styli or even cantilevers. These moving-coil cartridges with their fast transients, smooth frequency responses, and high output (for an MC) are very fragile. The cantilevers are long and there is no stylus guard. Both designs are “nude” cartridges – meaning that they had no cartridge body, just the guts and a mounting plate. I admire their performance, but find them impractical in a real-world situation (obviously).

Several years ago, Sumiko undertook to improve the Blue Point, and they came-up with the Blue Point No. 2. This is a totally different beast from the original. The first Blue Point was actually designed in the waning days of LP hegemony and was meant to be a “P-mount” cartridge. As you may remember, the P-mount was an attempt by Japanese turntable manufacturers to standardize the mounting of cartridges by making them all the same size, the same general shape and weight, and have the output pins mate with “jacks” in the arm tubes directly, without using a head shell. Another line of thought was that standard plug-in mounting would make it easy for the neophyte to achieve pretty decent performance. The downside of this type of standardization was, of course, that if your cartridge of choice wasn’t available in

P-mount, you were out of luck.

Because the P-mount’s mechanical specs were extremely tight, it was difficult for cartridge designers to innovate. Perhaps needless to say, this noble attempt at standardization was relegated to inexpensive turntables for the masses. When the CD effectively killed the mass turntable market, the P-mount died with it (although one can still buy replacements). Audiophiles during this era stuck with the older method of mounting cartridges in a head shell at the end of the tonearm.

Sumiko decided that the MC Blue Point could be sold in the audiophile market as well, so they designed a P-mount adaptor for the cartridge. The original Blue Point simply plugged into this adaptor and the adaptor would mount to any standard head shell. They sold like hotcakes and many a budget-strapped audiophile used that cartridge as an inexpensive introduction to the joys of moving-coil cartridges.

But let’s be perfectly clear. The Blue Point No. 2 is not a P-mount. With its rectangular body, half-inch screw spacing, and 6.3 gram weight, the No. 2 is designed to be mounted in a standard tonearm.

## Setup

Installing the Blue Point No. 2 is straightforward. If you’ve ever mounted a cartridge before, you know the drill. If not, you’d best have your dealer take care of that chore, at least the first time. If you still want to do it your-

self and don't have the tools, there are alignment protractors available for download from the Internet. Just print one out (do that at 100%), and follow the instructions. One really must use an alignment protractor of some type. I cannot express this too strongly. Nothing sounds worse than an improperly installed phonograph cartridge and it can damage your records as well.

I installed the Blue Point No. 2 in my AudioQuest PT-6 tonearm (actually a Jelco SA-250 ST relabeled by the seller) and because of its relatively high-output (2.5 mV), the No. 2 had no trouble driving the phono stage of my Audio Research SP9 Mk III. Sumiko recommends a tracking force range of 1.6 to 2.0 grams, and I used 1.8 grams for all my listening tests.

## Sound

As I said earlier, I am very familiar with the sound of various MC members of Sumiko's "Oyster" line of cartridges. The original Blue Point was certainly pleasant sounding. It was a little bright on the top, though just an okay tracker. It did have that characteristic "snap" and fast transient response that we all expect from a good moving-coil cartridge. It exhibited a fairly flat soundstage, however, one that wasn't particularly wide or deep. Image specificity was fair at best. My main complaint was that the bass wasn't as good as I thought it should have been. The Blue Point No. 2, on the other hand, couldn't be more different.

## NOTES

**Sumiko Blue Point No. 2**, \$299.00. Sumiko, 2431 Fifth St., Berkeley, CA 94710; phone 510/843-4500, fax 510/843-7120; e-mail mail@sumikoaudio.net; web site www.sumikoaudio.net.

### Associated Equipment

Audio Research SP11 MKIII preamp; Krell KAV 300iL integrated amp, VTL140 tube monoblocks, two Denon POA6600A solid-state monoblocks and one Behringer A-500 amps; Sony XA777ES CD player; Denon DVD-758 DVD-A Deck; TAS-CAM CD-RW700 CD recorder; Otari DTR8S DAT recorder; Korg MR-1 DSD Recorder; TEC (Beresford) TC-7510 and Sonic Frontiers DAC2.6 D/A converters; J.A. Michelle Gyrodec SE turntable; Audioquest PT-6 (Jelco SA-750 D) tonearm; Sumiko Blackbird, Sumiko Bluepoint No. 2, Grado Reference Platinum, and Grado Reference Master phono cartridges; Martin Logan Aeon i electrostatic loudspeakers; Yamaha YST-SW150 subwoofer; Monster M1000, AudioQuest Blue interconnects, and Monster M1 speaker cable.

### Specifications

Frequency Response, 15 Hz to 35 kHz; output voltage per channel, 2.5 mV; channel separation, 32 dB; channel balance, 0.5 dB; compliance, 15 x 10<sup>-6</sup> cm/dyne; impedance, 47 kΩ; stylus shape, elliptical 0.3 x 0.7 mils; tracking force range, 1.6 to 2.0 grams; weight, 6.3 grams.

This newest Blue Point cartridge has much more in common with the high-priced Blackbird than it does with its predecessor. The first thing I noticed is the No. 2's tracking. At the recommended 1.8 grams, this new baby will track anything. I pulled out my copy of the Telarc *Holst – Two suites for Military Band* with Frederick Fennel and the Cleveland Symphonic Winds (Telarc 5038). The bass drum whacks at the end of the Suite No. 1 are so prominent that one can see the groove excursions on the disk from across the room (well, almost, anyway). The No. 2 sailed through them without any trace of mistracking. If the cartridge can track that LP, it can track anything. This record allowed me to also examine two other characteristics: Low-frequency transient response and the bass presentation. Both were superb. One can hear the difference, for instance, between the sound of the drum mallet hitting the drumhead and the startling retort of the big bass drum itself. Many cartridges meld these two distinct sounds together (the original Blue Point did). This is especially true of the lower priced moving coils. The whack itself is deep, loud and hits one in the gut like a cannonball.

Why is it that the CD of this recording never sounded as good as the LP? The CD bass drum whacks are anemic and the rest of CD is overly bright and almost totally lifeless. If the CD is more accurate than the LP, I'll take the LP, thank you! The CD is not more accurate than the LP in this particular case. In fact, the CD is a pale shadow of the master tape. Around 1978, I was at the Audio Engineering Society Convention at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in NYC. Soundstream, the company that recorded the Holst for Telarc, was playing the two band pieces almost continually in their hotel suite. These digital copies of the master were the first digital recordings I had ever heard. I was flabbergasted. I'd never heard such bass from a recording. I'd never heard such low levels of noise or distortion either. The recording was simply amazing. I went back to the Soundstream room over and over again during the three days I was there to hear this amazing recording.

When the LP came out, some months later (half-speed cut by the great Stan Ricker at the JVC Cutting Center), I bought it. In fact, I bought two of them, one of which I have yet to open (the original is still quiet). A few years later, the CD came out. As good as the LP was, I anticipated that the CD would sound exactly like the master tape copy that I heard in New York. Boy, was I disappointed. The CD is lifeless, restricted in dynamics, harsh and strident on the top and so bass shy that it was hard to believe that they were the same recording!

This cartridge also has a tendency to suppress surface noise. I don't know if this is caused by stylus shape or size (causing it to ride in a different part of the groove where wear and noise aren't as prevalent) or by some other characteristic of the cartridge, but whatever it is, it will certainly be seen as a welcome trait to most record collectors.

To check high-frequency transient response, I pulled out another early digital-to-LP recording called *Bits of Percussion* with Farrell Morris, Stan Getz, Ron Carter, and a group of Nashville session musicians (Audio Directions AD-102). This recording combines traditional jazz renditions of such standards as "The Lamp is Low" (Debussy's "Pavane for a Dead Princess"), "Someday My Prince Will Come", etc. with gobs of percussion instruments including wind chimes, hand gongs, marimbas, wood blocks,



every exotic drum you can name (and some you can't), etc. This recording never came out on CD and, of course, the LP has been out of print for decades (and the company that produced it is long defunct), but it is still a perfect recording for checking high-frequency response and especially high frequency transients.

On "The Lamp is Low" cut there is a section where exotic Malaysian chime trees rattle while sharp high-frequency percussive wood blocks are struck. On some cartridges, the bell tree gets this glaze of distortion that makes the entire thing sound all smeared together and the wood blocks get lost. The No. 2 tracked this perfectly with just smidgen of upper midrange hardness. Transients were crisp and clear with the blocks of wood etched against the bells and perfectly delineated from them. I did notice a bit of glare in the very highest octaves and suspect that the cartridge's frequency response is a bit elevated there, but this is by no means a deal breaker. This is, after all, a "budget" moving-coil cartridge.

Finally, I wanted to check soundstage. To do this, I used my Classic Records remastering of Antal Dorati and the London Symphony in Stravinsky's complete *Firebird* ballet (Mercury SR90226). This recording is one of the best orchestra recordings ever made and the Classic Records reissue was mastered at 45 rpm on only one side of three 200-gram LPs. It sounds simply stupendous. This is another instance where the LP sounds great (it was mixed by the late Wilma Cozart Fine, the original producer, as was the CD of the same performance) and the CD is a pale shadow of the recording. I use this recording for soundstage and imaging because correctly reproduced, one can close their eyes and point to the location of every instrument in the orchestra. With the Sumiko Blue Point No 2, the soundstage stretched beyond the

edges of the speakers, throwing a wide image. Image specificity was above average, but not pinpoint like my reference, the Grado Reference Master 1. Front-to-back imaging was just so-so as well, but let me point out that in this price range, the soundstage of this cartridge is fantastic. It gives a real feeling of depth and width to the ensemble and allows you to tell the difference between real stereo and multi-channel mono instantly. Most jazz recordings played with the Blue Point No. 2 sound like the three-channel mono mixes that they are, and multi-tracked classical (and even rock) sounds as if the ensemble is stretched across the stage in single file, with no depth at all, which is what they are.

## Conclusion

At a list price of \$299, this cartridge is one of the real bargains in hi-fi today. It's a great tracker; it has (mostly) smooth frequency response, with just a hint of elevation in the upper registers coupled with a bit of glare. The bass can be tight and goes really low. A lot of bass performance is predicated upon things other than the cartridge. These include turntable platter dampening, arm design, the combined system resonance of arm and cartridge together, etc.

Soundstage is far above average for this price range, as is detail retrieval. Transient response is excellent, easily as good as my Grado. In short, if you are in the market for a new cartridge and would like to take the plunge into the world of moving coils, this is the ideal candidate. Even if you've owned MCs in the past, the breakthroughs in materials and manufacturing technologies represented by this cartridge may astound you. Twenty years ago, you couldn't have purchased this level of cartridge performance at any price. We've come that far.

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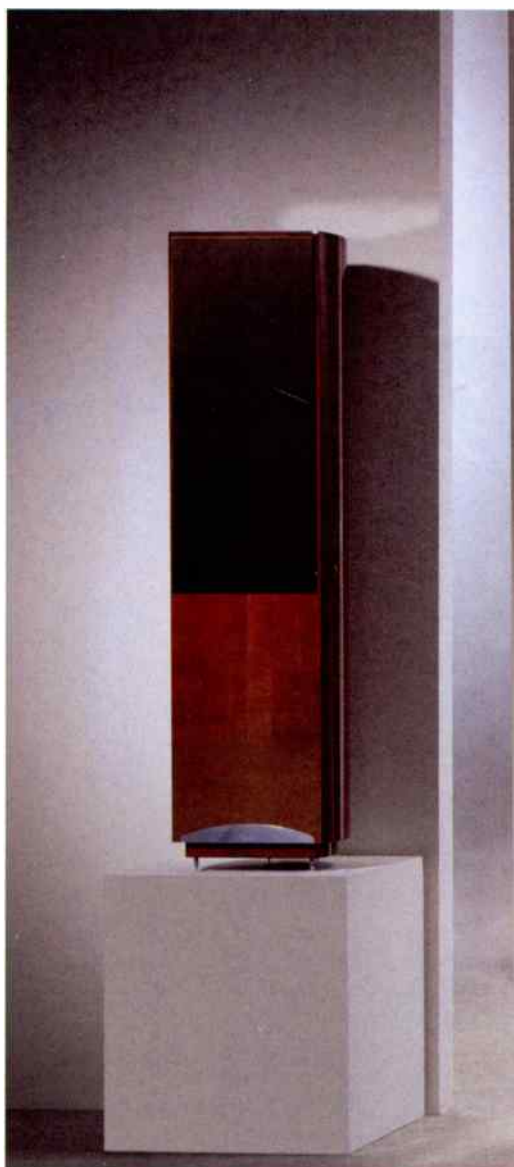
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# Tannoy DC8T Loudspeaker

Mike Driscoll



**T**HE TANNOY DC8T loudspeakers are medium sized floor-standers, 470 x 271 x 260 mm. The pair I received for review were clad in a high gloss cherry veneer, which looked very classy, indeed. The tweeter is a one-inch titanium dome with "tulip wave guide." The low frequencies are handled by two eight-inch treated paper cones with rubber surrounds. The speaker utilizes Tannoy's "Dual Concentric" technology, which according to the owners manual, gives a "time coherent point source, and constant directivity." Frequency response is said to be 42 Hz to 35 kHz. Recommended amplifier power is from 30 to 175 watts, and the system's continuous power handling is specified as 87 watts. I drove them with a Primaluna Prologue 5 tube amplifier (36 watts per side) and experienced no problems.

The aforementioned owner's manual is extremely concise but still contains far more information than you will find in most such documents. As an example, the manual advises the owner to connect the positive terminal on the amp to the positive terminal on the loudspeakers. (Plus to plus and minus to minus ... always good advice unless one is constructing a monster who looks suspiciously like Peter Boyle. In that case, it's Plus to Minus and Minus to Plus. You then must wait for "yummy

sounds" coming from the lab. Sorry, I couldn't help myself.) Other equipment used in this review include a Primaluna Prologue 3 tube preamp, VPI HW-19 Jr. turntable with AQ PT-6 tonearm, and a Sumiko Blue Point Special cartridge to grab the signal from vinyl, a Denon DVD-2900 universal player, Discovery speaker cable, and interconnects from Kimber. Assorted tweaks, idols, and talismans embellish the system.

When the speakers were first fired up, there seemed to be a sort of irritating underpinning to the sound. A friend of mine, upon listening, said that he thought the speakers sounded too detailed. After about 100 hours of break-in time, however, this trait disappeared, and even my friend marveled at the sound quality emanating from these marvelous loudspeakers. Bass was extremely tight, seeming to extend far lower than the specs would indicate. The all-important midrange was as good as I have heard from speakers costing far more, and the treble was not only extended, but extremely clean as well. The first thing one notices upon listening to these speakers is the tremendous amount of detail present. At least that's the first thing that struck me.

My listening included LPs, CDs, SACDs, and DVD-As. The Cowboy Junkies "Trinity Sessions" showed how deep in the bass these speakers seem to go, and as far as



detail, I was able to hear that errant air conditioning duct noise about as well as I ever had. The midrange, though, is where a great loudspeaker must shine, and the Tannoys do. On the CD of *Real Live Roadrunning*, by Mark Knopfler and Emmylou Harris, the National steel guitar sounded so real that I felt I could reach out and touch it. Vocals, both male and female, were also reproduced exceedingly well.

One of my favorite male vocalists currently is Jimmie Dale Gilmore, who performs with the Flatlanders. On their CD, *Now Again*, his vocals were as lifelike as any I have ever heard. He has a rather strident, nasal quality to his vocals, which suits country music to a "T." Likewise, the "white soul" sound of Van Morrison's vocal on "Moondance," from the LP of the same name, came across as soulfully as could be. I could hear the emotion in his voice, as well on "Into the Mystic," from the same LP.

How about Imaging? Well, on my favorite test for outside the speakers imaging, Gram Parsons' *Grievous Angel*, there is one cut, "Love Hurts," in which Gram and Emmylou's voices begin far to the outside of the speaker positions, and

well forward. A friend of mine, listening to this cut, once said to me that it was "almost psychedelic." These speakers handle this trick with aplomb, the vocals starting almost directly to the left and right of the listener, and gradually moving forward and closer together, until, at the end of the song, Gram and Emmylou are together in the center of the soundstage. I don't know if this was done deliberately by the producer, or was simply serendipity, but it sure sounds great.

Female vocals were also reproduced realistically, as on Diana Krall's *All For You*. Her vocalizing simply jumps out at you, front and center, with all the sweetness inherent in her voice right there. Diana's husband, Elvis Costello, has an LP, *All This Useless Beauty*, which showed me, once again, not only how good these loudspeakers are, but the inherent superiority of the LP format. The little details present on the recording are reproduced as well as I could imagine. On the LP of *Witches Brew*, not only was the subway (sorry, underground) present with its distinctive background rumble, but it was also possible to determine what direction the trains were running. Now, that's not

exactly a musical sound, but it is present on the recording, and the Tannoys reproduce it well.

Would I recommend these loudspeakers? Go out today and listen to a pair. Get an in-home audition if you can. Then make up your own mind. I'm willing to bet that your mind will say "buy them." I can honestly say that the only thing which bothered me about the Tannoys was the grilles, which are held in place by magnets, and seem to fall off if one simply walks by the speaker a little too closely. I ended taking them off for most of the review period, and I think that improves the sound by a tiny fraction anyway. So buy them and throw the grilles back into the box. Then simply enjoy.

## NOTES

**Tannoy DC8T Loudspeakers,**  
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# Myine ira Wi-Fi Internet Radio



Don Scott

**B**ELIEVE IT OR NOT, I have pleasant memories of my '60s college dorm days in West Virginia. Contributing to this euphoria was the chassis from a Grunow model 1191 multi-band AM/Short Wave console radio. With the aid of a long-wire antenna from my second-floor window to a distant tree and 2,950 feet elevation, I could seemingly receive short wave stations from the four corners of the earth. Most memorable was the satisfaction of listening to the Ted Heath Band recorded live and broadcast Sunday afternoons on the BBC. "A Nightingale Sings in Berkley Square" was a favorite, or was it in Berkeley Springs, WV – can't remember?

Also memorable was hearing Hawaii's icon, Don Ho, singing "Days of My Youth" and spilling "Tiny Bubbles" and "Pearly Shells" all over my dorm room floor via a short wave station in Hawaii (perhaps an AFRS outlet).

Fidelity was quite good, as I remember, because I had stepped into hi-fi realms while inhaling smoking rosin fumes in the process of soldering upgrades into the audio stages of the Grunow receiver using the popular Williamson amplifier circuit. Adding to the satisfying audio experience was construction of a bass-reflex cabinet fitted with a wide-range 15-inch Cletron speaker. The heck with studies, this radio stuff was where it was at and those experiences had a lot to do with launching my career as a hi-fi reviewer. And besides, aren't rosin fumes what most college students inhale, or did I miss something?

Now short wave is becoming passé, and Internet radio is replacing the fading, drifting signals and added

lightning hazards of an outside antenna often necessary for good reception. Enter the Myine ira Wi-Fi internet radio which is one of several emerging new iPod-type products aimed at reviving a world-wide interest in an endless selection of music, news, and cultural tastes — far more than offered by typical local or terrestrial radio — and all without concern of location or feeding the meter of satellite radio.

One added bonus is that many Internet radio stations are 64-128 kbps, a step above typical HD Radio stations. Resulting fidelity can be "golly-gee" — all that without the aid of a dedicated computer, but rather in the form of a slightly oversized hand-held stand-alone device. According to Jake Sigal, of Myine Electronics, "Sixty-nine million Americans a month listen to online radio." Nationwide, this is far more than the handful of HD radio listeners; consequently, the editor and I are marching to the beat of this new drummer and we urge you to consider joining the parade.

The gloss-black device is a mere 6 inches wide by wide by 3.125 high by 2 deep. There is a bright blue, all-inclusive function display on the front, output connections on the back for standard stereo RCAs, and a jack for the 9 V d.c. wall-wart-style transformer to supply power. All functions are via the remote, including provisions for 40 presets. In addition, the last 10 stations can be selected for faster access. Stations are accessible internationally by A. Location, B. Genre, C. Search Stations, D. Popular Stations, E. Select New Stations recently added to the database of the host server, and F. Podcasts, prerecorded shows from around the world.



Direct entry of known call letters can also be achieved, which I found to be the fastest way to program the tuner.

How does all this work? The Myine tuner simply requires a broadband wireless Internet connection. Selection of the current database of over 15,000 stations is contracted though a provider, Vtuner. Upon turn-on, here is what happens:

A) The Myine tuner contacts the Vtuner login server.

B) The log-in server passes the request to one of three data base servers that cover most of the world.

C) The designated server helps you to browse or search the station listings. (If by genre, all three are contacted.)

D) The server identifies your chosen station and establishes a connection.

E) As a result, the requested station or Podcast provider streams its content directly to the end user's ira radio unit.

If the originating host acknowledges your request, it will automatically start playing that station, providing its Internet service is up and running. If you request a station by call letters and it is rejected as "unknown," go to the VTuner website ([www.vtuner.com](http://www.vtuner.com)) and fill out the request form for inclusion of that station in its database. Then, henceforth, you will always be able to access it through the Myine tuner. Support is given for MP3, WMA, RealAudio, AAC, OGG, etc. Contrary to normal hi-fi purity thought, I would like to have further amplification with tone controls or a separate graphic equalizer in the audio path because tonal balances from one station to another are quite pronounced. In my tests, I used an old Pioneer SX-650 receiver, which has wide-range tone controls and both *High* and *Low* filters with overall fairly clean audio, except for some slight smear from excessive negative feedback in its audio design.

Here is what I found: Since the original data stream is kept intact from the end host, audio quality is basically limited to the source quality and ira's D/A converter and analog audio stages. Certainly, if the ira had a separate digital output, then the internal D/A converter could be compared to an outboard device, but I found the end results quite pleasing.

One familiar station in Lancaster, PA, WJTL, sounded as normal, not great but acceptable. On the flip, fidelity on the The Big Band Network out of Canada had me floored. All the bite of the brass was there and overall the sound had smooth foot-tapping fidelity. The volume level goes from 0-20. Lowest perceived distortion occurred at 8-10.

## The Editor's Experiences

I got to play with the Myine before I gave it up to Don. It was tricky for me to get it going at first because the Link-Sys router in my house actually belongs to my son, Gene IV. He does computer work in another part of the electronics industry for a firm named Pepperdash; look them up at their web site. Suffice to say, my son's router has a password that is strong enough to get approval from suppliers to the Pentagon. Or maybe it was just me who wasn't smart enough to guess the word and then get the system running. Whatever about that, despite my son's subversive opinion that it was my simple-minded failure.

Actually, connection and recognition are pretty simple, if you don't have to try and hack someone else's

heavy-duty system code. I could have simply bought another router. They are pretty cheap these days. Once running, I found the system very easy to navigate and absolutely fascinating in its breadth of sources. I don't know that it was truly "worldwide" but it sure felt like that. And new sources every day, it seemed.

This was my first long-term exposure to internet audio, and at first I was annoyed by what I thought was irregular and poor system fidelity. I was starting to think I'd made a mistake in promising a review. A couple of listening sessions later, I realized the quality into my audio system was totally dependent on the original broadcast quality — which could be good, bad, or indifferent.

Now, I live in the Metro-NYC area and there is only one FM station I can tolerate for any great length of time. Most of the time I spend listening to radio is while I am in my car or in the kitchen doing dishes. I can easily see having two or five of these babies scattered around my house. I wonder if there is a multi-unit discount. It would be wonderful to soak in a hot Jacuzzi with such a program source. I wonder if Myine has a waterproof remote. Something like that "I need it" happens in our house during supper when we go from the PBS News Hour, to BBC News, to France24 news. Yeah, yeah, to keep the gravy off. Back to Scott.

## Summing Up

Are there things the editor and I didn't like about the ira Myine? Not really. My gripe is about the instruction book. I think that the manufacturer has to think about the people who are not completely computer savvy and who may purchase this device. In both Gene Pitts and my cases, we needed help establishing router connections, and I know Gene is arrogant enough to think he's fairly hot with computers just because he does the graphics for the magazine single-handedly. Perhaps a dictionary of the computer terms used in the instruction booklet would avoid calls to the Myine's help line.

All seemed rather simple after verbal instruction, but this needs to be translated into idiot-proof written language. Our only wish was that there was an alternate hard-wired connection to the Internet, Ethernet or HDMI or some such.

As far as we are concerned, buying the Myine would be \$150.00 well spent.

## NOTES

**Myine ira Wi-Fi Internet Radio, \$150.00.** Myine Electronics, LLC, 3136 Hilton, Ferndale, MI 28220, phone 248/591-0333, fax 248/591-3335, web site [www.myine.com](http://www.myine.com)

### Associated Equipment

Pioneer SX-650 receiver, Amrita 8-inch Monitors, Twisted Pair interconnects, and various speaker cables.



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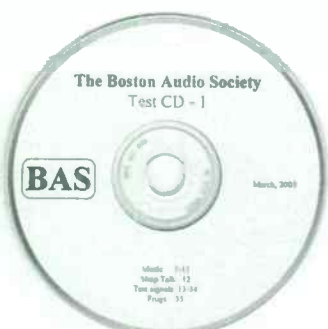
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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, Management, and Circulation of *The Audiophile Voice* magazine required by 39 U.S.C. (Postal Service form 3526, October 1999): Publication title: *The Audiophile Voice*. Publication number: 018-639. Filing Date: Nov. 22, 2010. Issue frequency: Quarterly. Number of issues per year: 4. Annual subscription price: \$12.00. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office of publisher: 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor: Publisher, Eugene Pitts, III, The Audiophile Voice, 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043.; Editor, Eugene Pitts, III, The Audiophile Voice, 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043; Managing Editor, none. Owners: Eugene Pitts, III, and Sharon Pitts, The Audiophile Voice, 605 Valley Rd., Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043. Known bondholders, mortgages, or other securities: None. Tax status: Not applicable. Issue date for circulation data below: Volume 14, number 1 (August 6, 2010). Extent and nature of circulation (net press run): a) Total number of copies: Ave. number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 14,000; Number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 13,500; b) Paid Circulation: 1) Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions stated on form 3541: Ave. number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months, 10,359; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 2,476; 2) Mailed in-county paid subscriptions stated on P.S. form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months, 0; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0; 3) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, counter sales, and other non-USPS paid distribution: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,995; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 4,119; 4) Requested copies distributed by other mail classes through the USPS: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 25; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 4,100. c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months, 12,379. Number of copies of single issue nearest filing date, 10,695. d) Non-requested distribution: 1) Outside-county as stated on form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,083; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 25; 2) In-county as stated on form 3541: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 0; 3) Non-requested copies mailed through the USPS: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 0; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 2,400; 4) Nominal rate copies distributed outside the mail: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 420; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 300; e) Total free or nominal rate distribution: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 1,503; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 2,725; f) Total distribution: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 13,882; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 13,420; h) Copies not distributed: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 118; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 80; i) Total: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months: 14,000; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date: 13,500; j) Percent paid and/or requested circulation: Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months, 89 per cent; number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date, 80 per cent. Publication of statement of ownership is required and will be printed in Vol. 14, No. 2 issue, to be published in Nov. 22, 2010. Signature and title of editor, publisher, business manager or owner: Eugene Pitts, III, publisher; Nov. 22, 2010; I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete.

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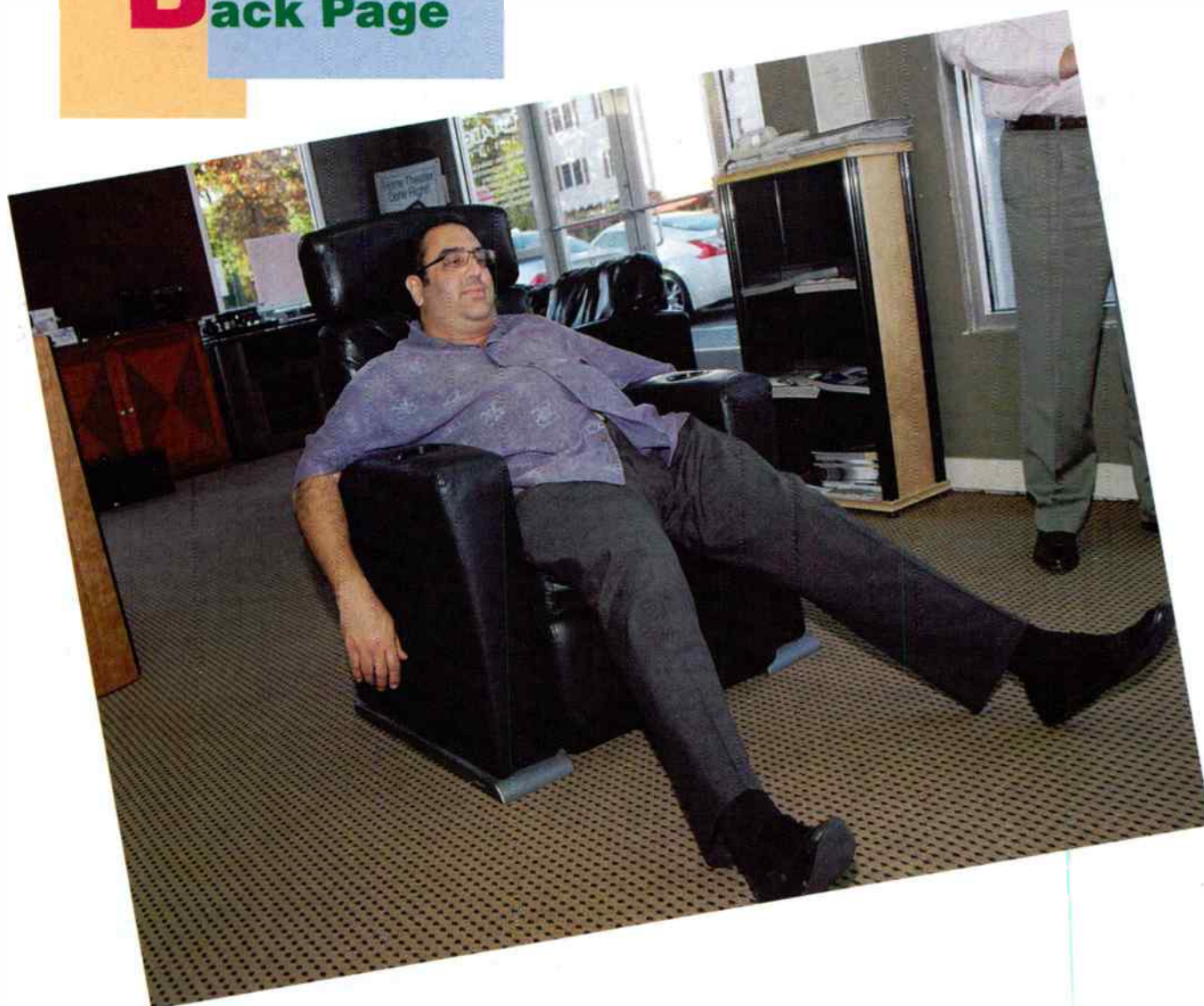
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## High-End Hi-Fi Heavy-Weight Ralph Fonte ...

takes a quick rest after going 15 rounds with each of three prospective suppliers of new and unheard of equipment brands they intended to place in his store, CSA Audio, a classy old-line audio salon located just around the corner from TAV's offices in Upper Montclair, NJ). (The store does some advertising in TAV; I have to write that "full disclosure" business or I lose my "Objective Editor" license.) But I am misleading you readers. It could have been 15 rounds with an otherwise good customer about why the guy's new home theater had a low Wife Acceptance Factor. She forgot to wear her glasses for the new 3-D system.

Gene Pitts, Editor, *The Audiophile Voice*  
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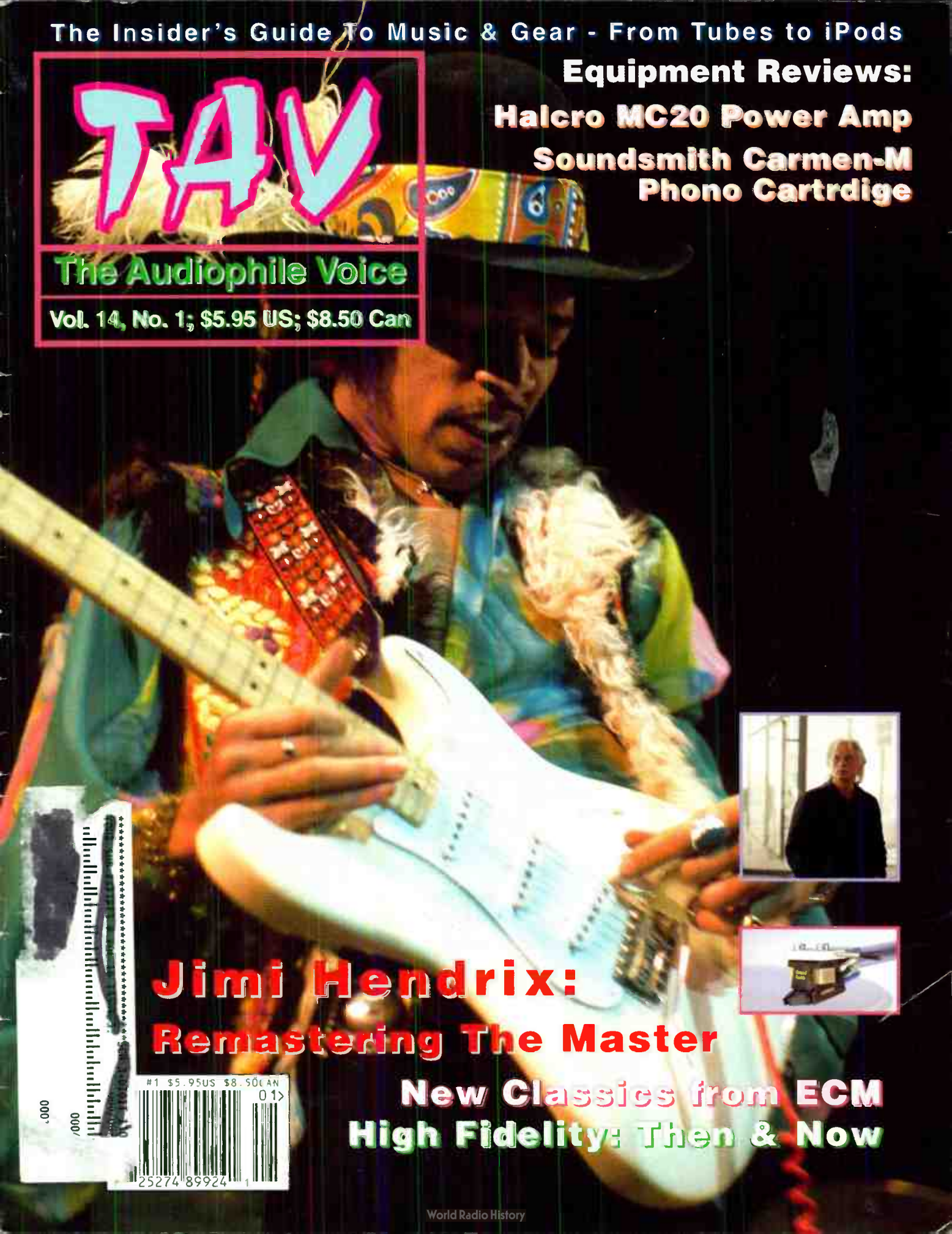
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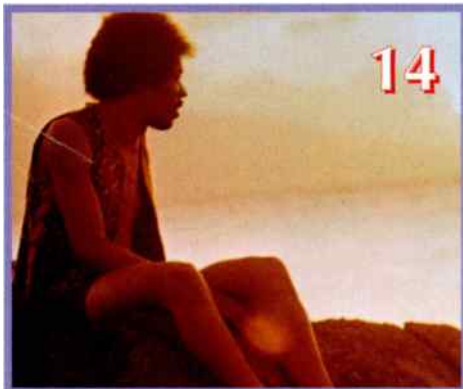
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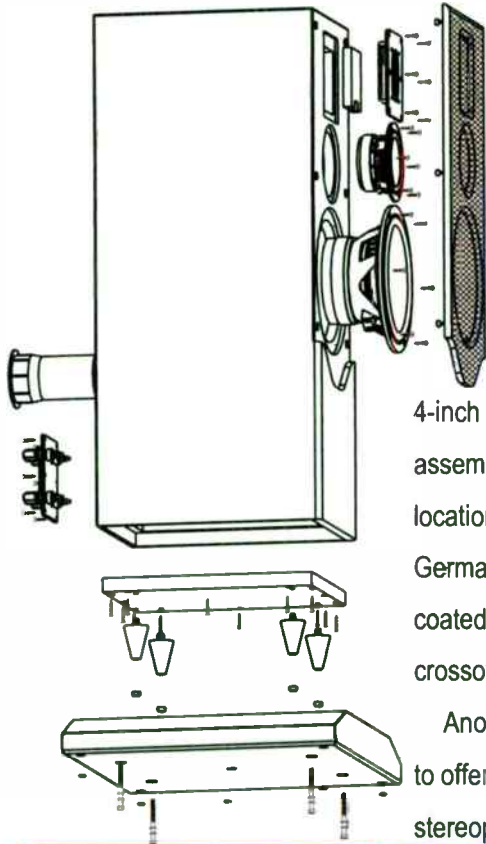
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Technically, the A801 is a three-way, three-driver, floor-standing speaker system that is a little shorter than the A3. It incorporates a German-made AMT tweeter plus a 4-inch mid-range cone and an 8-inch low bass driver. The crossover network is precisely assembled and is totally isolated from sound waves from within the cabinet because of its location beneath the bottom of the box. Only the best quality parts are used in the crossover: German-made M-Oil capacitors and M-Coil inductors which are made of solid silver wire that is coated with gold. Only the very finest high-end solid-copper wire is used to connect the crossover to the speakers.

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### ADVERTISING

Publisher Gene Pitts at 973/509-2009,  
e-mail audiophilevoice@verizon.net

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was founded in 1992 by The Audiophile Society  
under President Hy Kashalsky and purchased by  
Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing Ltd. in 1995. The  
Audiophile Society may be contacted by phoning  
Recording Secretary David Nemzer  
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Inquiries regarding reviews should be made  
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The Audiophile Voice Vol. 14, No. 1; publication  
date, July 30, 2010. Dewey decimal number 621.381  
or 778.5, ISSN 1522-0435, is published quarterly by  
Guts & Elbow Grease Publishing Ltd., 605 Valley Rd.,  
Upper Montclair, NJ 07043. Printed in U.S.A. The  
\*.pdf files (and editorial solace) are by Satellite  
Advertising & Design, Montclair, NJ.

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Editor & Publisher

# 3 ECM Masterworks

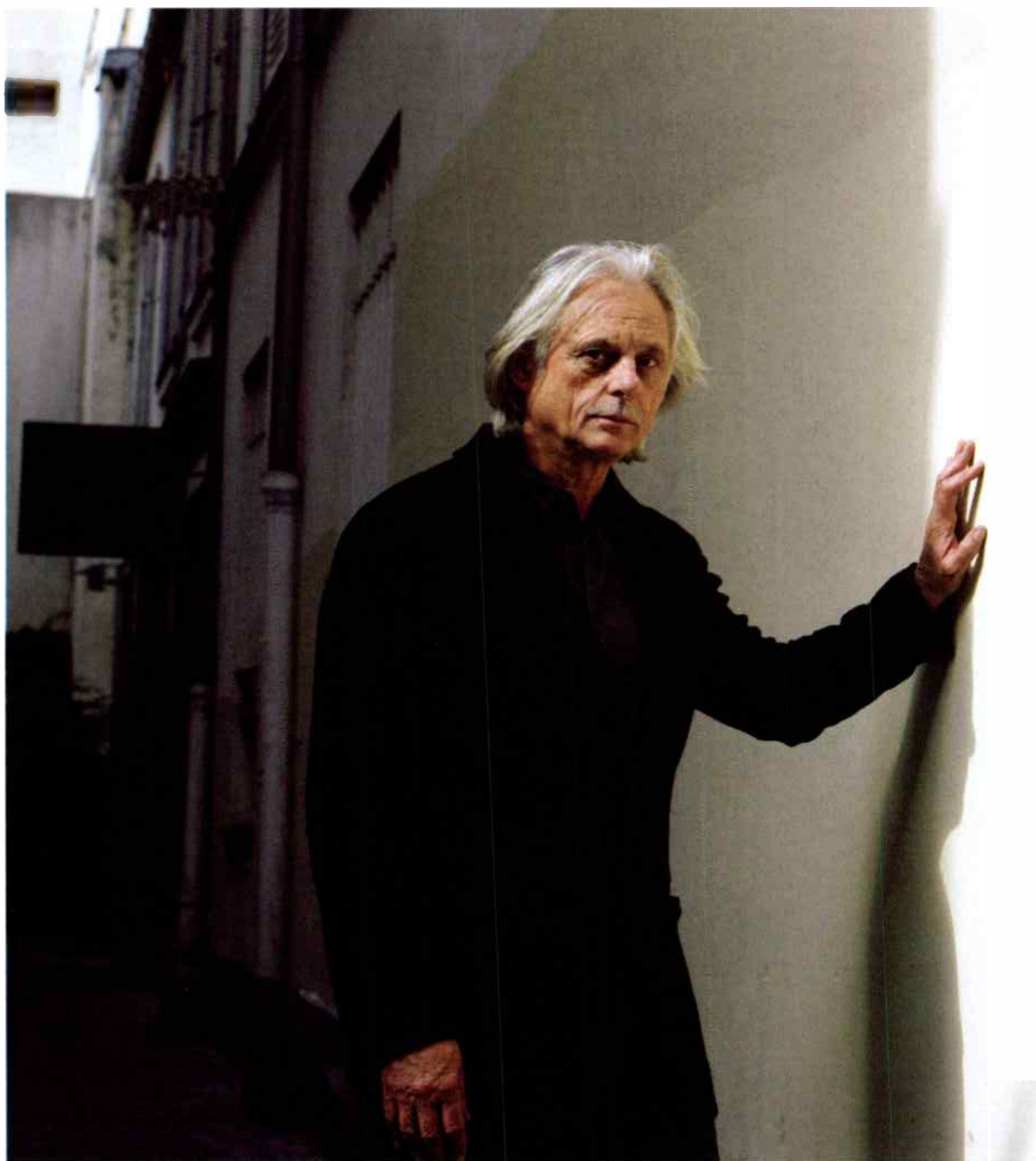


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## George Witterschein

**G**OT THOSE “hasn’t the music industry gone to hell in a handbasket” blues? Convinced that lousy sound, barbaric music and postliterate marketing signify doom for the audiophile pursuit and the end of the arts as we’ve known them? And on a bad day, maybe the end of civilization too, and on a *really* bad day, the end of the world?

I’ve got a cure for you, so simple even your HMO might approve it. It’s all of three letters long: E-C-M. South German ex-bassist Manfred Eicher and his Munich-based ECM Records have been carrying the torch for 40-plus years now as a truly first-rate jazz label. Think Keith Jarrett, Jan Garbarek, Charlie Haden, Carla Bley, Paul Motian. Great artists in consistently great presentations that include artistic packaging on nearly every box and audiophile-grade sound on virtually every disc. And for the last 26 years, they’ve been doing the same thing for classical music on their ECM New Series sub-label.

Let’s consider three of ECM New Series’ recent releases.

The András Schiff *Bach Partitas* set manages to stand out clearly, a tall monument well above the already very high level of the field for these works. I own and love versions of the *Partitas* by Angela Hewitt (on Hyperion), Murray Perahia (Sony Classics), Wolfgang Rösam (Naxos), and the infamous Glenn Gould (Sony). I’ve borrowed the Richard Goode (Nonesuch) from the library. Any of those could be my desert island choice for the *Partitas*. And I’d want a set of the *Partitas* on the island. They’re a treasure hoard of intimate musical gems, and almost peerless Late-Night Listening Fare.

But if the building started to burn, I’d probably grab the Schiff on ECM. Why is that, you ask?

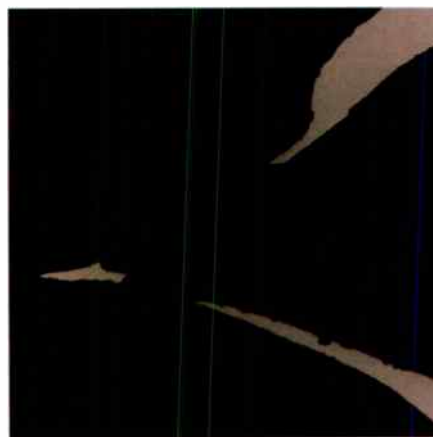
First, because of Schiff’s reputation as “Son of Gould” and what that means for the music. Like the eccentric and, to many, infuriating Torontonian, Schiff takes his Bach at quick tempos. Not quite as quick as Gould’s, but nearly. This may not be to everyone’s liking, and there are days when it’s not to mine, but I will almost always beat the drum for this approach. Because, in Bach’s tightly constructed compositions especially, a fast tempo makes it easier for the listener to grasp the logic and flow of the music. Sounds are easy to forget, and the quicker we get from Idea A to Idea B, the less likely we are to have forgotten A. And that in

turn gets us ready to grasp Idea C. Great musicians do their ABCs all of a piece, by which I mean that B is strongly related to/sprouts organically from A, and then C from B. And since we learned in algebra class that — yes, I’ll stop there.

But the brisk tempo approach runs a risk. How do you shape a melody beautifully at high speed? It’s not easy, and one of the reasons why Glenn Gould blew away the music establishment was not just that he played Bach on the piano *much* faster than anyone else (thus revealing the logic and structure of the works as perhaps no one ever had on record), he could *also* shape a melody in sublime fashion. Consider the Aria in his epochal *Goldberg Variations* recordings, and I’ll have won the point here. The fast tempos and the beautifully lyric singing articulation have to go together, and alas these appear to be two separate gifts that will not often grace the same pair of hands.

They do, however, grace András Schiff’s hands. The Hungarian exile pianist is so much in the School of

András Schiff    Johann Sebastian Bach    Six Partitas



ECM NEW SERIES



Photo: Colin Eick

Could that he even settled in Toronto after fleeing his native country in the Soviet era. "Brisk but Beautiful" works very well indeed in the *Partitas* here. Schiff's tempos are almost uniformly quicker than anyone else's, but at the same time he shapes and sings (not literally, as was often the case with Gould, who notoriously hummed along as he played) Bach's melodic ideas in a fashion I would confidently call both lyric and *cantilena* (Italian for "in singing fashion").

Then there's the ECM recorded sound. I'll call it That Acoustic. Some folks profess not to like it, finding it dry. I don't understand them, and tend not to associate with them. The ECM sound is not so much *dry* as *quiet*. Really quiet. It seems to me that Manfred Eicher has been aiming at a background silence akin to what we hear in the vibrant seconds when the conductor has his baton in the air and we're all waiting for that first down stroke. It's a quiet that says, "Music is beautiful, and

really *important*. It's not background; it deserves our fullest and best attention." And That Acoustic's emptiness points to the music and says, "Stop, and listen!" This is not a dry void of a blackness, but calls to mind the infinitely rich contemplative darkness of the mystics. In John of the Cross's Dark Night of the Soul, or the early Greek Fathers' apophatic, or "unknowing" imagery, darkness is the only possible place in which to look for The Light. It's maybe an instance of Contrast Makes Vision Possible. Or Silence Makes Hearing Possible. If it is conceivable that engineers and microphone preamps etc. can evoke such a thing on compact disc, ECM has done it. [Why does Editor Pitts put up with this kind of raving from me?] In any case, the "ECM Acoustic" serves recorded music very well, I find.

In the case of ECM, my references to religious mysticism may be on point. Herr Eicher's company seems to enjoy recording in churches (not unusual) and obscure monasteries. One of their favorite venues is the Propstei St. Gerold, a thriving Benedictine abbey in a remote Austrian mountain valley. The Paganini CD under review was recorded there. I have a strong hunch that Eicher feels a basic spiritual kinship with priories and monks anyway. The fact that outstanding recording venues can be found in many monasteries doesn't hurt either.

However slowly, I'm getting to my point: Beautiful music beautifully played; beautiful sonics; it all adds up to the outstanding CD set of the Bach *Partitas* out there today.

Similar considerations apply to our next two discs.

I'm much less familiar with, and less partial to, the *Paganini Caprices* than the Bach *Partitas*. Still, the ECM approach clearly recommends this disc to listeners, too.

Not only does the Austrian violinist Thomas Zehetmair (TSE-het-mire) have technique to burn (and, of course, flammable quantities of chops are needed for these notorious finger busters), but his approach is unusual to say the least. The Book on How to Play the *Paganini Caprices* has read, for the last quarter century or more, something like this: "Not great music; might as

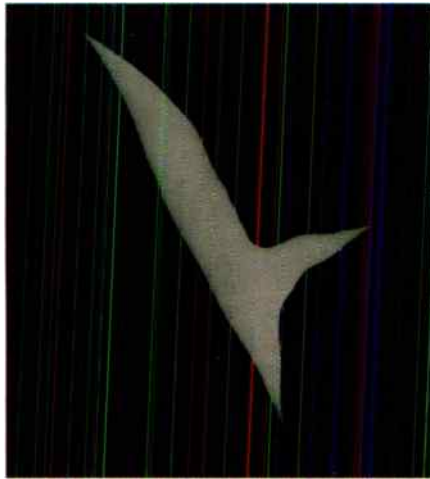
## DISCS

**Bach: *Six Partitas***  
András Schiff, piano  
ECM New Series CD 2001-2002

**Paganini: *24 Capricci***  
Thomas Zehetmair, violin  
ECM New Series CD 2124

**Beethoven: *Piano Concertos Nos. 4 and 5***  
Till Fellner, piano; Orchestre Symphonique  
de Montréal, Kent Nagano, conductor  
ECM New Series CD 2114





ECM NEW SERIES

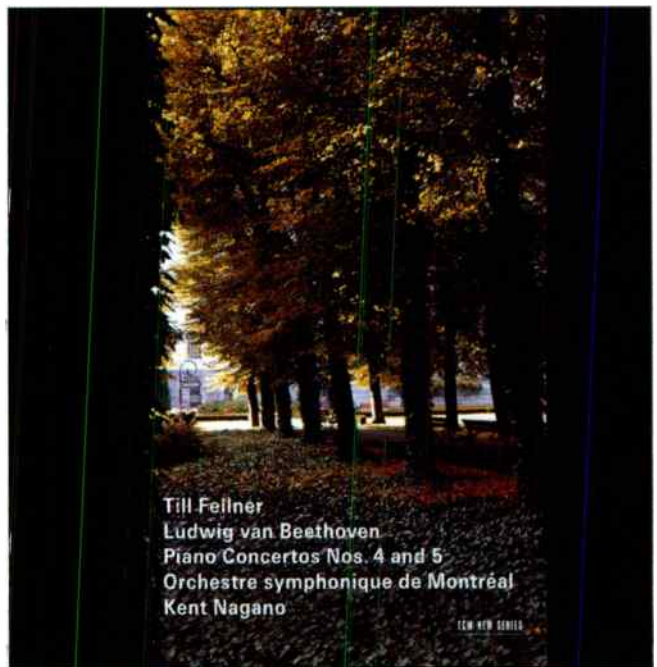
well play it as humor." Zehetmair's Nomex fingers have apparently torn the book up and thrown it away. He takes the *Caprices* seriously. If you want to hear this music according to The Book, try Midori on Sony. She's a great violinist too, and she'll let you hear the humor. By comparison, Zehetmair will not. But then again there's an English joke to the effect that "a German joke is no laughing matter." (Being made up of both ethnicities in equal parts, I'm allowed.)

Does Maestro Zehetmair's serious approach to Paganini's *Caprices* succeed? To be honest, I'm not sure. I don't know the works well enough to declare with confidence one way or the other. In situations like this, the reviewer will generally cop out by "letting the reader decide". Which I hope you'll always do anyway.

But I can tell you that, especially heard in That Acoustic, the serious approach gets a fair and sympathetic presentation from ECM. And isn't that what musical civilization is about? Musicians trying new or different things and getting a serious listening. Bravo, ECM... even if you failed, and I'm not at all sure you did.

Not even a hint of failure about our third CD. German pianist Till Fellner has made quite a splash of late with his powerful interpretations of the German repertoire. Reviewers call his playing poetic, aristocratic, high-minded, reflective, and Stately Without Being Stiff. I couldn't agree more. His Bach *Inventions and Symphonies*, also on ECM (ECM New Series 2043), startled me with their musicality. Paired in an almost ideal coupling with conductor Kent Nagano and the Montréal Symphony on the disc under review here, Fellner gives readings of the Beethoven *Fourth and Fifth Concertos* that captivate the listener from the first few seconds. You know right away that something extraordinary is going on.

This is thinking man's Beethoven *Concerto* playing, both by the soloist and conductor/orchestra. BBC Music Magazine's review of this CD made a point of praising the interpretation for its wonderful dialogue between piano and orchestra. True enough, but I'd like to take that one step further. The dialogue I hear is Fellner's *interior* dialogue. It sounds to me as if Fellner, borne aloft on Beethoven's elegant wings, is communing with



himself and a Higher Authority. "Who knows himself, knows his Lord," the Sufis are fond of saying. I'm reminded of that when listening to Fellner, particularly in the slow movement of the *Concerto No. 4*. My late friend Bruce used to call that movement "stone soul Beethoven", by which he meant not that it sounded like rap music, but that it was *soulful*. Fellner gets it all, and thereby, dear readers, so do you.

And then there's That Acoustic directing your attention where it ought to go: Onto Beethoven's music, as played for us in moving fashion by Till Fellner and presented to us very beautifully by Manfred Eicher and ECM.

If you don't have enough Beethoven piano *Concerto* recordings in your house, jump up from your reading chair and order these via the quickest route possible. Click the Express Ship button on Amazon.com or wherever. Or drive to the mall in your son's sports car. If you do have several discs of the concertos on hand, get these anyway. You'll be happy you did.

And when you do, you can congratulate yourself for contributing to the entropy-busting, life-and civilization-affirming efforts of Manfred Eicher and ECM Records.

Photo: Roberto Masotti





# High Fidelity & Live FM Then and Now

George Graves

**H**OW FAR WE have come since a tiny record company called Audio Fidelity produced the first commercial modern stereo phonograph record in 1957? If audiophiles from that era could see the plethora and quality of the equipment available today, they'd be amazed. They'd be even more amazed at the prices: amplifiers that cost more than a large house did back in their day, speaker systems priced like Aristotle Onassis' yacht, turntables that cost more than a new Rolls-Royce or Ferrari did. Today's prices would certainly bedazzle and puzzle audiophiles from the late 1950s and early 1960s when a pair of good 60-watt per channel power amps could be had for \$120, and a very decent

belt-drive turntable, with arm, was \$60.

Yes, it's certainly true that today's equipment is much better than the stuff available back then, but it's also true that gear is certainly a lot more expensive, even if one adjusts for inflation.

But do modern audiophiles get any more pleasure out of today's megabuck systems than their 1960s counterparts did from much more modest investments? I wonder.

## Let's Look Back...

At the risk of giving myself away as the old geezer that I am, let's take a look at a typical "decent" component stereo system from about 1962. It was my system, and it would be

equivalent to what would, today, be considered a medium-priced "high-end" system. Not state-of-the-art equipment by any stretch, but a system consisting of decent performing components (for the day), carefully selected and assembled.

I was 17 in 1962, and I had been an audiophile since I was 12. Over those five years, with the help of my father who was an electrical engineer and a fine amateur cabinet maker and furniture builder, I had assembled the following components: Two \$35.00 Knight-kit Model 83YX797 18-watt mono amplifiers from Allied Radio in Chicago (which I built with my own hands), two \$20.00 Knight KN-820 12-inch "full-range" speakers (made for



Allied by Electro-Voice and virtually identical to that company's 12-inch "Wolverine" model) with "whizzer" cones. The two 12-inchers were paired with two Japanese-made horn tweeters from Lafayette Radio, (\$5.00 each) and all of this was mounted in bass reflex cabinets my dad built. Feeding the Knight-Kit amps was an Eico HFT-90 FM mono tuner kit, which listed at \$40.00, and a Knight-kit KS-11 stereo multiplex decoder (very new then) added another \$20.00 (FM stereocasting has just started in '62).

For record playing, I had recently used \$60.00 of my savings from a summer job to purchase a Bang & Olufsen "Beogram 1000" belt-drive turntable with integrated arm and B&O "Stereodyne" stereo cartridge. I was going to buy an AR table for the same price, but I didn't like the AR's arm (I turned out to be right; it was the weakest part of that design). Besides, the Beogram came with a decent cartridge and the AR did not come with any cartridge at all. I had no tape recorder although I lusted after a Crown tape deck, but at around \$400, it was way out of my league.

That was it, all \$240 worth! My entire stereo system, amps, speakers, turntable, tonearm, phono cartridge and tuner, and did I love it! I had discovered classical music and film scores a couple of years earlier and had collected about 30 LPs. You know the stuff: Richard Rodgers' Victory At Sea, Rozsa's score to Ben Hur, Ravel's Bolero, Wagner's music from the Ring of the Nibelung with Szell and the Cleveland. Real teenage boy classics! Sitting in my easy chair in my room, feet up on the ottoman, Coca-Cola in hand listening to this stuff even took my mind off of girls for oh, as much as 10 minutes at a stretch.

The thing is, that knowing what other people were listening to, which consisted, in those days, mostly of cheap console RCA and Zenith systems (called "brown-goods" at the time) with big mahogany cabinets and horrid record changers with ceramic or crystal cartridges and two-pole induction motors, flea-powered single-ended amplifiers and cheap stamped-basket speakers with half-inch voice coils and four-ounce magnets, had me convinced that I had the best system of any kid my

age in the world! Of course, my system today is, like most of yours, light-years beyond anything I could even fantasize about (with the electronic porn of an Allied catalog in hand), much less own. Yet, there is at least one aspect of that system that I'd give just about anything to be able to revisit.

## Live FM

Living just a bit over 20 miles south of Washington D.C., I had access (by tapping off the family's outside TV aerial) to all of that city's FM stations; many of which, by this time, were broadcasting in stereo. FM in those days was very different from today's crowded dials. FM stations, even in metropolitan areas like DC or New York City, were few and far between. The distance between stations on the dial meant that nobody cared if an FM station "overmodulated" as there was little chance that one station's signal would intrude into a neighboring station's bandwidth as it likely would today. Therefore, there was no compression and no limiting. Those would come later. FM was also relegated mostly to college stations and a few commercial outlets. In D.C., for instance, there was an NBC FM station (I used to listen to Willard Scott on WRC-FM long before he became the weatherman on NBC's Today Show and a national figure), a Mutual Network FM station, a CBS affiliate FM station (WTOP-FM) and an ABC FM station, WMAL-FM, which was all classical music. There was also WASH-FM, which was a member of the "QXR" radio network and rebroadcast programs from the famous WQXR-FM in New York City including live performances. I don't remember any rock-n-roll FM in those days, the kids in the D.C. area all listened to either a single "top-40" station called WPGC-AM or the single folk-music station in the area, WAVA-FM, depending, of course, on which "camp" they were in, "rockers" or "folkies."

Washington D.C., in those days, was a big music city. We had the National Symphony Orchestra, the "President's Bands," Army, Air Force, Navy, and the Marines, and when they weren't playing for occasions of State, they were giving concerts. In the spring, summer and early fall, these concerts were most often performed on Friday and

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*Johnson, Jr., Editor-in-Chief, Secrets of Home Theater and High Fidelity*

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Saturday nights at a place called the "Watergate." This was long before the scandal of that name which torpedoed the Nixon Presidency, and before the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts was built. The name "Watergate" referred to a large barge tied up in the Potomac River next to the Lincoln Memorial. The area in which the barge was moored was at the mouth of the first

Memorial and there were long rows of step-like marble seats – Greek amphitheater style as well. People also used to pull-up beside the barge in their small boats and rented canoes and listen to the music, their lights twinkling on the still water. Every Friday and Saturday night, in-season and weather permitting, one of the military bands or perhaps the National Symphony

and the National Symphony gave its winter concerts in the rotunda of the National Gallery of Art on the Mall.

Almost more fun than actually being there (for a budding audiophile anyway) was that these marvelous concerts were broadcast live, with some in stereo (too bad I couldn't afford to record any of them). Most of them were broadcast

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**I believe audio was a better hobby back when, more accessible and satisfying, if not as sonically excellent.**

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lock (also called the Tidewater Lock) of the old Chesapeake & Ohio canal (which started in D.C. and continued up-river, bypassing the "Great Falls" of the Potomac and extending almost 185 miles all the way past Harper's Ferry to Cumberland Maryland), hence the name "Watergate." The barge had an acoustic shell mounted on it reminiscent of the Hollywood Bowl, but smaller. People would bring blankets and sit on the lawn leading down to the water's edge below the

would be playing a free concert there, which was hosted by the National Parks Service. It was glorious. If you want to see what it looked like, rent the 1957 Cary Grant/Sophia Loren movie Houseboat. There is a whole scene near the beginning of the film of one of those concerts.

In the winter, of course, the Watergate was closed, but the concerts continued. The military bands moved inside to the large State Department Auditorium

by WRGW-FM, the radio station associated with George Washington University although some were broadcast on the above-mentioned WASH-FM as well as WAMU-FM (The American University Station). Simply produced, with only two microphones for stereo, sent to these stations from the Watergate barge over class-A telephone lines, and broadcast with no signal processing of any kind, the concerts sounded magnificent (except for the occasional airliner flying overhead



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on final approach to National Airport, just across the Potomac – and even they added a certain exciting “presence” to the program). The simple pick-up technique assured decent stereo imaging, and a spacious soundstage. Often the concerts were highlighted with special appearances by famous personalities such as Robert Merrill of the Metropolitan Opera. I once heard a

same kinds of music, station after station. All compressed to make them sound loudest to the dial-twiddler and severely limited to control over-modulation with no dynamic range, no visceral excitement, none of the joy that this medium used to bring into people’s homes.

Today, of course, we do still have some stations that broadcast

ter how well recorded, simply cannot capture.

Do I enjoy my current multi-kilobuck system? Yes. Do I enjoy it as much as I enjoyed that \$240.00 worth of kit components and home-built speakers that I had all those many years ago? No, I don’t think I do. I don’t and I can’t.

Chalk some of it up to youthful exuberance, and some up to nostal-

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## Current FM and “live” broadcasting simply is not as interesting or stimulating as it was 50 years ago.

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concert performance of Strauss’ “Der Rosenkavalier” with Merrill and Joan Sutherland – live, from the Watergate. “Live From The Watergate.” What magic words to hear emanating from one’s speakers on a summer’s evening. Oh, to hear them again.

But we don’t have that kind of FM any more, nor the variety of programming that FM offered in those early days of stereocasting. Now everything is the same. The same canned programming, the

digital recordings of live concerts, but it’s not the same. The audio quality is not as good due to limiting and compression (not that the recordings themselves aren’t good. It’s just what modern broadcasting methods do to them) and most tuners are indifferently designed these days because nobody cares about broadcast quality any more. Also, the knowledge that you are listening while the concert is actually happening added an excitement that canned performances, no mat-

gia, but I believe that audio as a hobby was better then, more accessible, and ultimately, more satisfying if not as sonically excellent. I also believe that since FM was pretty non-commercial in those days, it let us experience more varieties of music than the very commercial and tightly programmed broadcasting business allows for now, and that’s the tragedy. The magic is gone and all of the million dollar stereo systems in the world can’t bring it back.

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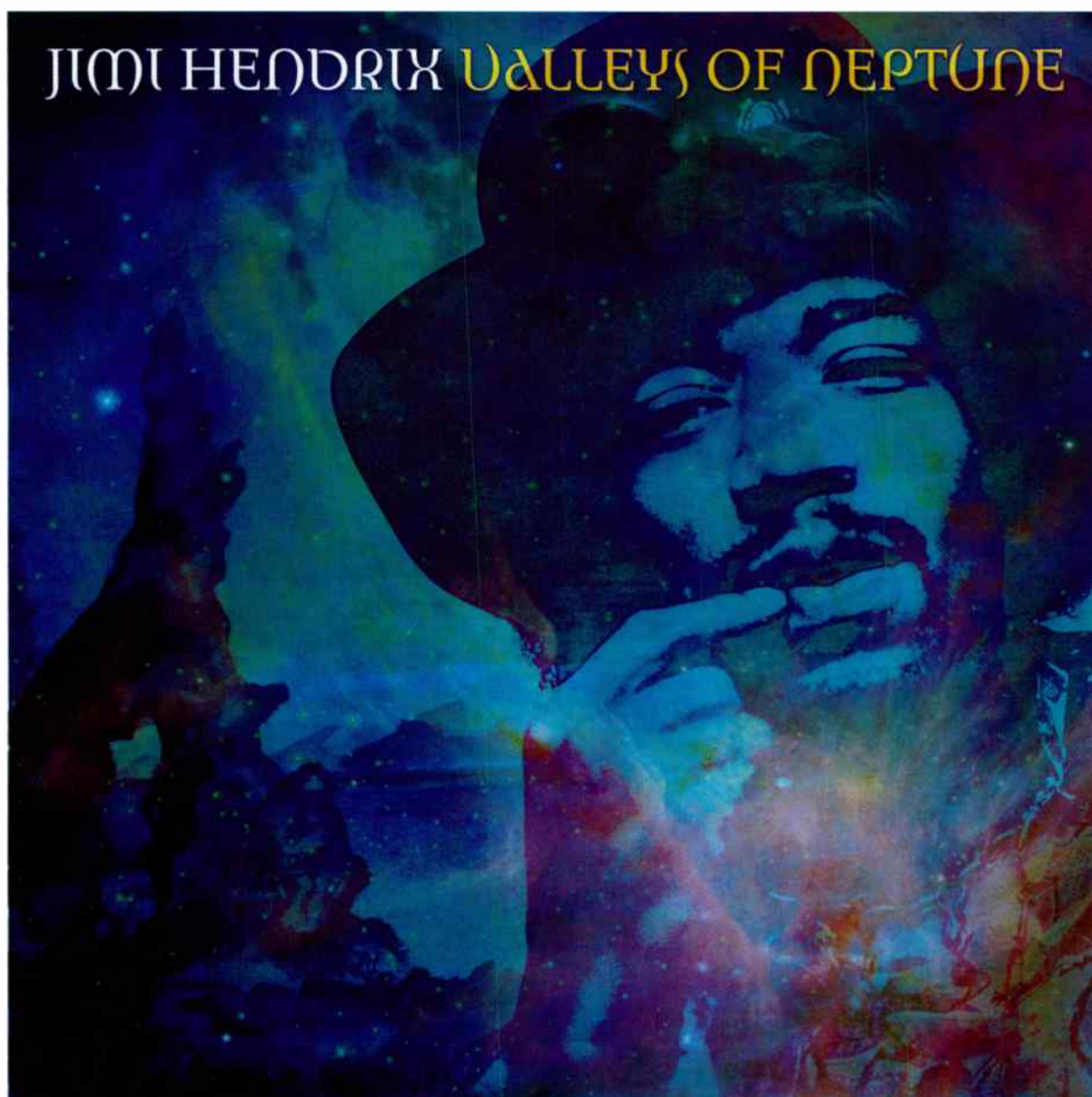




Time Warp

# *NEW* *Jimmy Hendrix* *Albums - cd & lp*

Michael Tearson





**T**HE ENORMOUS IMPACT of Jimi Hendrix redefined the very parameters and possibilities of electric guitar during an astonishingly brief window from 1967 to 1970. The proof of his greatness is how vital and fresh, how utterly current his work still sounds today over 40 years after his premature passing.

Over the years the Hendrix legacy became something of a hot potato whose ownership was the cause of serious dispute. For over 20 years, producer Alan Douglas held the keys to the castle, but a mid-1990s court settlement led to him passing the stewardship and all control to Experience Hendrix, which was then led by Jimi's father who himself has since passed on. Douglas had taken the attitude that any and all studio recordings were per se unfinished and therefore open to any changes he wanted to make to them (or as his detractors would say to inflict upon them). During the Douglas era, the recordings all remained with Reprise, Jimi's original label.

A new day has dawned, as Experience Hendrix has moved the Hendrix catalog from Universal Music, its home since 1997, to Sony/Legacy. Under this latest deal, the first releases are remastered reissues of the first four Jimi Hendrix albums. These are the three Jimi Hendrix Experience albums *Are You Experienced*, *Axis: Bold As Love*, and *Electric Ladyland* and Jimi's *First Rays of The New Rising Sun*, a fuller set than the material's initial incarnation as *The Cry of Love*, the first posthumous release of Hendrix material. The best of set *Smash Hits* has also reappeared.

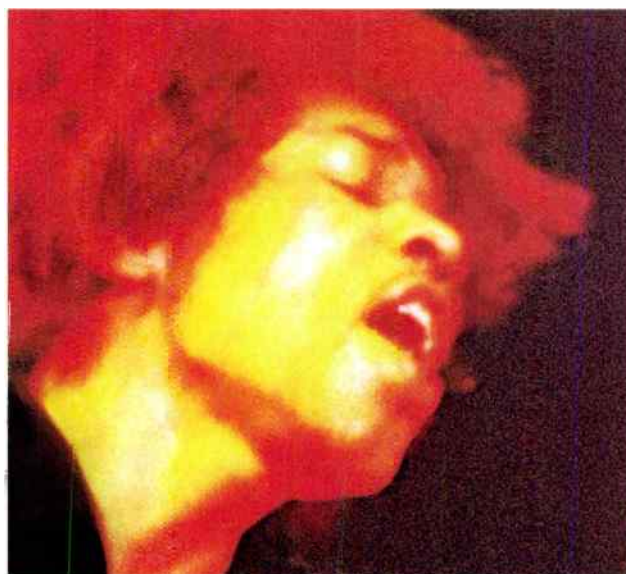
Universal did reissue all of these four in 1997; they'd been remastered from the first-generation flat-EQ master tapes Jimi had created in the studio, the first time these had been used as sources rather than the vinyl-EQ tape masters or multi-generation copies. The new Sony releases are essentially the same as they were mastered from the same sources. My extensive A/B listening tests of the two revealed virtually no differences.

John McDermott supervises Experience Hendrix's projects and has done so since the 1990s changeover. He says, "[finally] you are literally listening to the tapes that Jimi Hendrix finished with Chas Chandler or Eddie Kramer back in the day, and that was the master. So the enhanced quality comes from the tape itself."

Indeed, the differences between the early Warner Brothers/Reprise CDs and Sony's reissues is very palpable, with lots of details and depth as well as added clarity audible even in casual listening.

Making Sony's new releases more special is that each of the four albums comes with an extra, a DVD with a 15-20 minute documentary about how some of the album's key songs were created. McDermott notes, "You hear Mitch [Mitchell, Experience drummer], Noel [Redding, Experience bassist] or Jimi, Eddie Kramer, Chas Chandler, Billy Cox [who succeeded Redding as bass man] all talking about how great songs like "Purple Haze" and "Freedom" and "Little Wing" all were pulled together in the studio."

Each album also has welcome liner notes providing information on how the album fit into its time and its input came from, as well as anecdotes on the recording



process. McDermott himself did the *First Rays* notes as well as detailed song by song notes about the songs' origins and evolutions.

The overlying concept has been to make the albums much more accessible to younger generations just discovering the nova-bright genius of Jimi Hendrix.

Along with the reissues (and for me the most significant development) comes an album of newly released Hendrix studio material, *Valleys of Neptune*. This material comes from the time between *Electric Ladyland* and *First Rays* and includes the final tracks cut by the original Jimi Hendrix Experience and the first recordings after Billy Cox replaced

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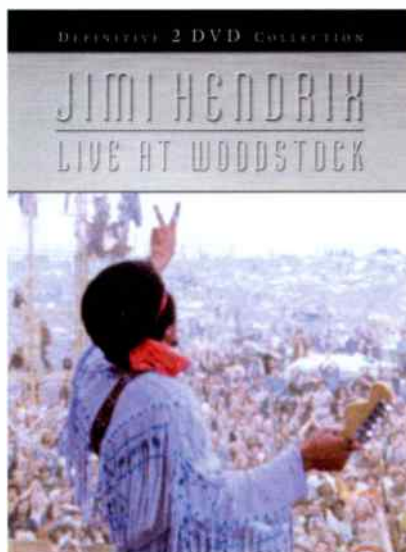
**These extraordinary  
remasters make us see Jimi  
as a more important  
musician than ever before.**

---

Noel Redding.

Some tracks are new versions of classics and these include "Stone Free," "Fire," and "Red House," plus the first full-band recording of Jimi's blues, "Hear My Train A-Comin'." Note that the "Red House" take here is a completely different and later session than the variant included in the *Jimi Hendrix Experience* boxed set.





There's also a playful instrumental take of Cream's "Sunshine of Your Love" which had become a staple of Jimi's concerts. Three tracks ("Mr. Bad Luck," "Lover Man" and "Crying Blue Rain") have re-recorded drum and bass tracks which Mitchell and Redding cut in June, 1987 under the auspices and at the invitation of original producer Chas Chandler. Other cuts are "Bleeding Heart6," "Ships Passing Through the Night (an early version of what became "Night Bird Flying"), the instrumental "Lullabye for the Summer" and the title track "Valleys of Neptune." McDermott opined, "Our view was OK, let's pick the very best examples [of this period] and put them together as this record."

The Experience Hendrix team positively nailed their goal. *Valleys of Neptune* is strong enough to stand tall proudly among the classic Hendrix albums. Appearing 40

years after the original sessions, it truly is an astonishingly potent album, especially the title track.

Talking with John McDermott, I offered that "Valleys of Neptune" had become legendary among bootleggers, and he replied, "Well, it was. And it was an important song, something that [Jimi] had begun in development in late '68. Then through '69 Jimi had begun to demo the song both on piano and guitar. Finally he was able to cut a version in September of '69 with Mitch and a percussionist. From there he continued to work on the song until he had it in place in May, 1970 where he was able to put the full-band version onto it. So is it what it would have been had he lived? No one ever knows. I think it's wrong to enter into that kind of debate because Jimi was so meticulous and

to face the unauthorized bootleg market where the pricing and quality and annotation are usually a mess and not of any value.

And there will be a steady stream of Hendrix releases through the Sony/Legacy connection notes McDermott. "There's lots of interesting things that are going to come. We are very fortunate in that we have and have been acquiring a number of things particularly film and sound with respect to live performances that are really wonderful. We have an anthology project we want to put out which is really an overview of his career done as we did with our box set [*Jimi Hendrix Experience*] featuring alternate takes and unreleased music to again fill in the gaps and give people a taste for some of the angles and interesting directions that Jimi was looking

down and into in that time period. So you can certainly expect a good run of releases as a result of this new distribution agreement with Sony. I think *Valleys of Neptune* is a good first start. And

it's a good indicator for the kind of quality of music I think fans will be able to look forward to."

Thus, the four CD/DVD reissues, the reappearance of *Smash Hits* and the new album *Valleys of Neptune* we enter into a golden age for Jimi Hendrix fans. Those impossibly fertile four years Jimi Hendrix had to produce a life's work before he was gone will continue to enrich and inspire as old Hendrix fans discover things they could never have imagined hearing and new fans discover the majestic genius of Jimi Hendrix.

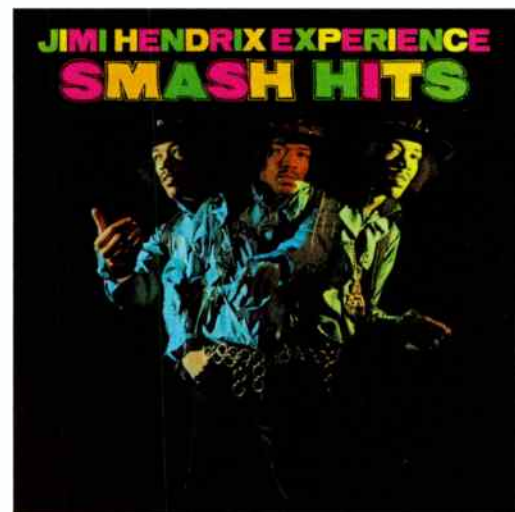
### Jimi's fantastic four year career still inspires fans, old and new alike.

so specific in terms of what he wanted.

"This is an artist who wasn't happy with *Electric Ladyland* when he was finished with it. He had very high standards, but we just felt this was such an important song. It meant a lot to Hendrix. He had given a lot of time to it. It's important, and that's why we included it here."

Completists will want to know about the two bonus tracks to *Valleys of Neptune* available only on the special pressing sold only at Target stores (and likely long gone by the time you read this) or through digital purchase of the album at iTunes. These two "Slow Version" and "Trash Man" are both instrumental studio jams nice to have, but not terribly consequential.

However, there is an additional cache of "authorized bootleg" material Experience Hendrix has released on its own Dagger Records imprint. So far 11 live recordings are out all available only at [www.jimihendrix.com](http://www.jimihendrix.com). McDermott says more are planned. "We have rehearsals for the Band of Gypsies concert," he says. "We have different periods of live concerts by the Experience. So it's nice to give fans more content without them having





# Side-By-Sidebar

Gene Pitts, Editor

**M**OSTLY I FIND this discussion to be a tempest in a teapot, more about egos than about musical fidelity or reproduction of good sound. There is ordinarily more overlap in the fidelity and accuracy of both systems than there are differences, at least to my ears, and that has not changed in these new Hendrix recordings.

I can and often have heard differences between the LP and CD versions of releases said to be manufactured from the self-same master tape. There are very few such differences in these Hendrix recordings. When I have heard differences elsewhere, investigation usually revealed that it was not the same master tape; with a few releases, I can hear a limiter being used to make the LP. I do not find that one or the other format is inherently better mechanically or better sounding than the other, and there's not reason to use one on a CD. The CD system is always easier to get running reliably, while the LP offers a "characteristic sound" that some folks with good ears prize above all else. But it's like saying that Marilyn Monroe is "better" than Grace Kelly – or that gorgonzola cheese salad dressing is better than extra virgin olive oil with balsamic vinegar. You may prefer one over the other, but yours is just one vote.

One of my mentors, John Eargle, now at the board in that Great Recording Studio in the Sky, early on noticed that the guys making CDs were often using the running masters from LP manufacture where the stampers were intended to be used for overly long runs. Such masters have a "brightened" high end, which is good engineering since those stampers will have a lot of their high frequency information knocked off by midway in the LP production cycle. Thus, the engineer setting up those running masters, heats up the high end of the range so that the sound will have the best balance at the midpoint of production. However, if that exact same master tape is used to make a

batch of CDs, then ALL of them will be too bright or harsh or whatever one calls that poorly balanced sound. Eargle also pointed out that if there was even one CD recording that exhibited accurate sonics, then the CD system could not be vilified.

Anyway, the point of this intrusion into friend Tearson's review of these Hendrix re-releases is to say that the LPs are simply wonderful, excellent examples of their kind. They are nice, big, thick slabs of vinyl said to be "virgin," and apparently made with long pressing times so as to relieve stresses and thereby keep self-warping to a minimum. I have also heard a couple of guys at LP plants say that the longer cycles keep the static charges found in almost all LPs low. Shure Bros. did a groundbreaking study of LP static charges about the time they introduced the original V-15 cartridge. The best I can recall, these charges were responsible for large variations in tracking forces and thereby large differences in wear patterns as well as irregular output.

If I was going to buy one or the other, the LP or the CD set, it would be the CDs. Yeah, there is a very sweet "bloom" in the sonic presentation of these LPs not fully present from the CDs. On the other hand, I can't play the LPs in my car. (So there!) Rather more important in this discussion is that I find these new re-remastered versions to sound MUCH cleaner with BETTER timbre of instruments than the originals. That is true for both the LPs and the CDs. At least, that's my opinion after listening to two vintage LPs and three original CDs – all those versus these remasters.

I think *Neptune* is the one you ought to buy first if you are at all skeptical about whether these guys have actually done something good with the project. I suspect that the reason *Neptune* was so startling to me was because it presents new versions of songs I knew from older releases. This let me focus on the instruments better, especially the Hendrix guitar work. Everyone concerned should be proud.



Photo: Daniel Tehaney / © Authentic Hendrix, LLC



## Blues

Eric Bibb Booker's Guitar  
Telarc 31736-02

### Mike Driscoll

**T**HIS IS ONE FINE acoustic blues album! The first line in the initial cut tells the story "A guitar owned and played by the great Booker White / found its way by grace into my arms. Booker's guitar's got a story to tell / A story the world needs to hear. / Booker's guitar rings like a bell / It's gonna keep on ringin' / for a thousand years." This same territory was covered by Neil Young in "Hank's Guitar." Bibb, however, in my opinion, does it far better. Sorry, Neil!

A blues gospel tune, "With my Maker I am One," follows, featuring some great harp work by Grant Dermody. The Louisiana flood of 1927 inspired the next cut, "Flood Waters." "People straddlin' their rooftops / Water reachin' to their knees / Heard the preacher holler, Lord, Lord, Lord / Have mercy if you please." Although written about that earlier flood, this song is also a commentary on much more recent

events in the wake of Katrina down in New Orleans.

Another great cut is a cover of "Wayfaring Stranger" previously done by many others, including Emmylou Harris, but I have never heard it sung with such feeling as Bibb achieves here. Again, Dermody's harp adds to the feeling of this outstanding performance of a great song.

"Building a New Home" tells the story of a man who works in a turpentine camp, but dreams of a better life where the "water tastes like cherry wine." Here again, Dermody's harp adds a great deal to the feel of this song. In "Nobody's Fault but Mine," the singer has been thrown out of his home by his woman, and admits that he never listened to the preacher or his parents, and "It's nobody's fault but mine."

"Rocking Chair," has the singer showing off his new chair to his woman, who, much to his sur-

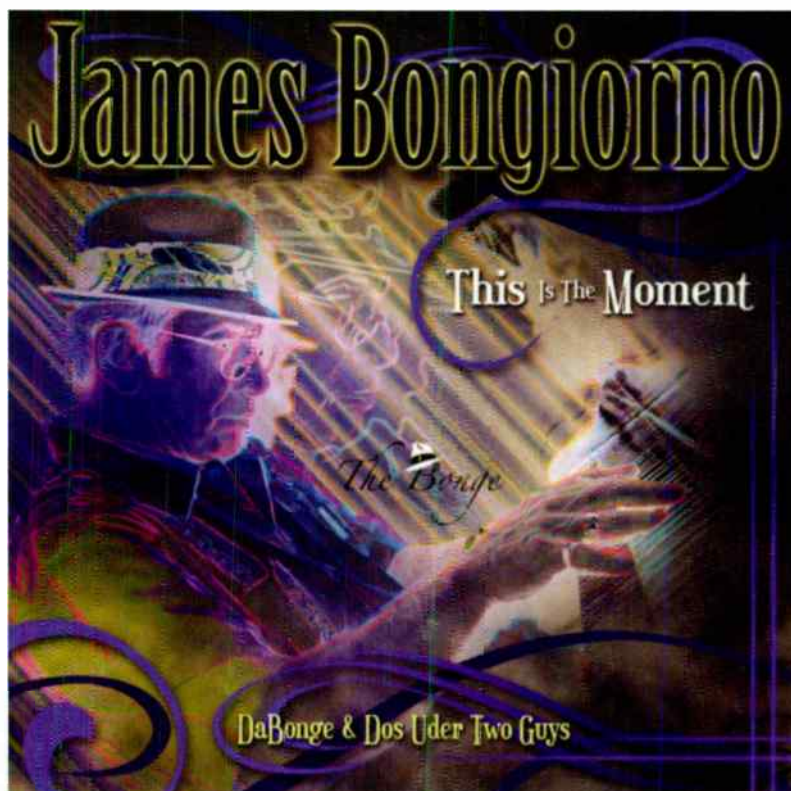
prise, has come back, and may want to work things out. At least that's what he's hoping. "Tongues will be waggin' / all over the block / Don't say a word, baby / just rock." "Turning Pages" explains that the singer doesn't care for TV, poker, or many leisure activities, but "If I couldn't read? I wouldn't know half of what I do. I've been turning pages since I first met Dick and Jane."

Dermody's great harp again adds so much to "A Good Woman." The liner notes say to "Imagine Leadbelly, 12 years old, listening to a wise uncle point him in the right direction when it comes to women. Advice we could all use at one time or another."

The sound on this compact disc is exemplary, clean and crisp, with a good sense of space and, well, it's everything you would expect from a Telarc disc. Five stars out of five! Great job!



Jim Keenan



A FEW YEARS AGO in these pages I reviewed James Bongiorno's solo piano recording, *Prelude*. I reported enjoying that CD, and looked forward to hearing Mr. B in the trio setting being planned. Now here he is with that trio, and the new CD, *This is the Moment*, is worth the wait.

This time out, Mr. Bongiorno, again playing powerfully at the keyboard, a Yamaha grand, is joined by Del Atkins on bass and Rayford Griffin on drums. Here, they are engaged in making an album primarily of American Songbook standards; there is one original.

Overall, this CD is mostly a joyride during which the pianist drives in high spirits over familiar terrain, while the drums and bass add propulsive force and occasional brief lead relief. This is solid mainstream jazz music, with plenty of melody, harmony and rhythm, as I mostly like it – no doodling along with ethereal chord voicings or super up-tempo races with the pianist running scales in the right hand with fixed chord banging in

the left while the bass and drum play their own tunes (rant over).

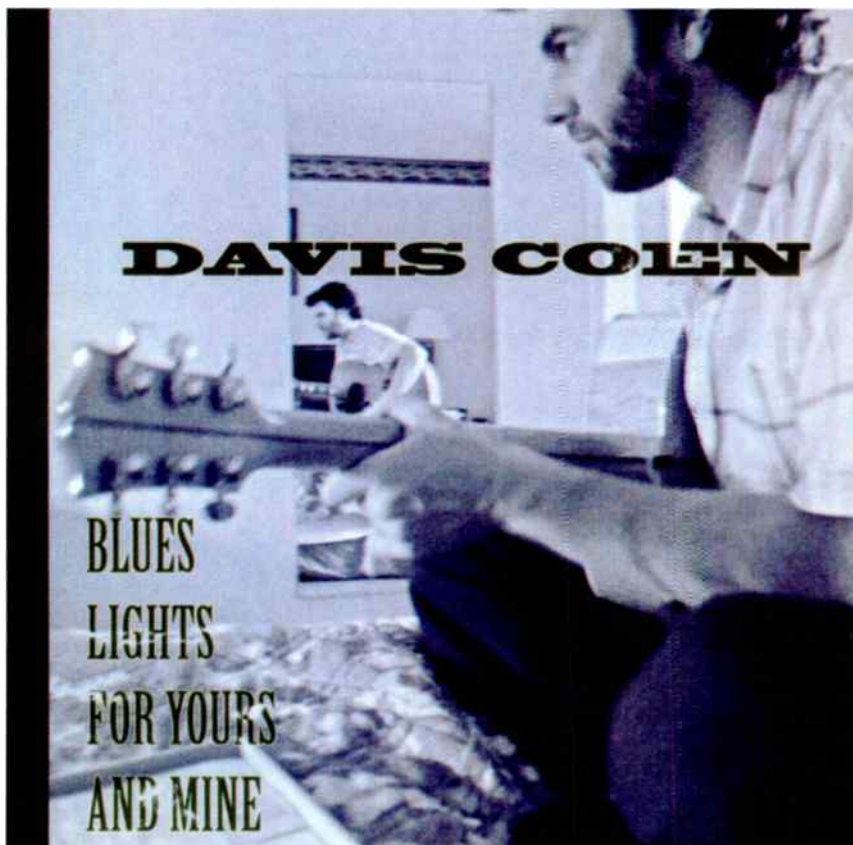
There are 11 tunes, of which my favorite is "On Green Dolphin Street." This hardy perennial is taken at mid-tempo with full statement and extended development of the melody by the pianist, over solid and thoughtful chord changes, with solid anchoring and propulsion by the other two musicians. The mood and tempo shift at times, at one point sliding into a Latin style for a bit, but the basic melody and rhythm are never lost. At another point, bassist Del Atkins provides a brief but enjoyable break. As with several of the other tunes on this CD, my feet they were a'tappin and my head was a'boppin throughout.

Next in my list of favorites is Jobim's "Wave." It opens in a reflective mood and then eases into the familiar bossa nova style with good drum support. This piece is at a moderate tempo maybe best described as easy and steady swinging. More of my body parts came into motion to join feet and head.

Next on my list was the up-tempo, driving "Falling in Love with Love" and the mid-tempo stroller "Bye Bye Blackbird." The other tunes on the CD were all pretty good – no clunkers in the bunch.

I smiled at "Have You Met Miss Jones," as the bluesy back-beat made me imagine Miss Jones stepping through a velvet curtain in a stripper's costume, moving her body parts.

So, we have a CD of enjoyable, enthusiastic and inventive mainstream jazz playing, one you'd play just for the pleasure of it. The playing does have some rough edges, a bit less than total studio perfection but close to the enthusiasm of live music being played in a good jazz club. Bass is a bit heavy in the mix, but overall recording quality is good. There is a full-range dynamic with a fairly close perspective. The liner notes are best ignored in favor of the music. Buy this CD to share in the pleasure of the well-played music, more than for demo or audiophile-type sonics.



## Blues

Davis Coen *Blues Lights for Yours and Mine*  
Soundview SP1003

**O**N *BLUES LIGHTS For Yours And Mine*, Davis Coen has brought back into our conscious mind the heavy moods and feelings that every blues guitarist tries to show his audience, as well as showing off a wide range of engaging guitar styles. This can be subtle stuff or can be as simple as a nursery rhyme or maybe as overwhelming as Katrina was to New Orleans. However, it's always powerful. Plus Coen has added some of the spice of '50s rock-a-billy and "greaser" pop for added musical flavor. Now, there are all sorts of musical styles and techniques used on blues tunes. On *Blue Lights*, we find a masterful guitarist, "just doin' his job," by playing wonderfully well in about 10 styles or traditions. If you have an ear for the old styles, obscure but ear-grabbing, you should listen hard to this release which contains 11 songs; four written by Davis, one by B. Willis, and one by Professor Longhair, though his credit reads H.R. Byrd, while five are traditional tunes. Even when Coen gets a credit for penning a new tune, the music leans on some old and well-established riff.

Coen is a blues guitarist that has been touring the U.S. since his teens. He mostly toured as a solo acoustic guitar and vocal act. Currently, he is performing with a bass player Trevor Coen and drummer Joe Izzo. He contributed instrumental tracks for PBS's landmark series *The Blues* and backed up the late Jessie Mae

Hemphill. He's also shared the stage or opened for many classic blues artists such as James Cotton, Junior Wells, Koko Taylor, Big Jack Johnson, North Mississippi All-Stars, David "Honeyboy" Edwards, Eddie Kirkland, and Britain's John Mayall & The Bluesbreakers.

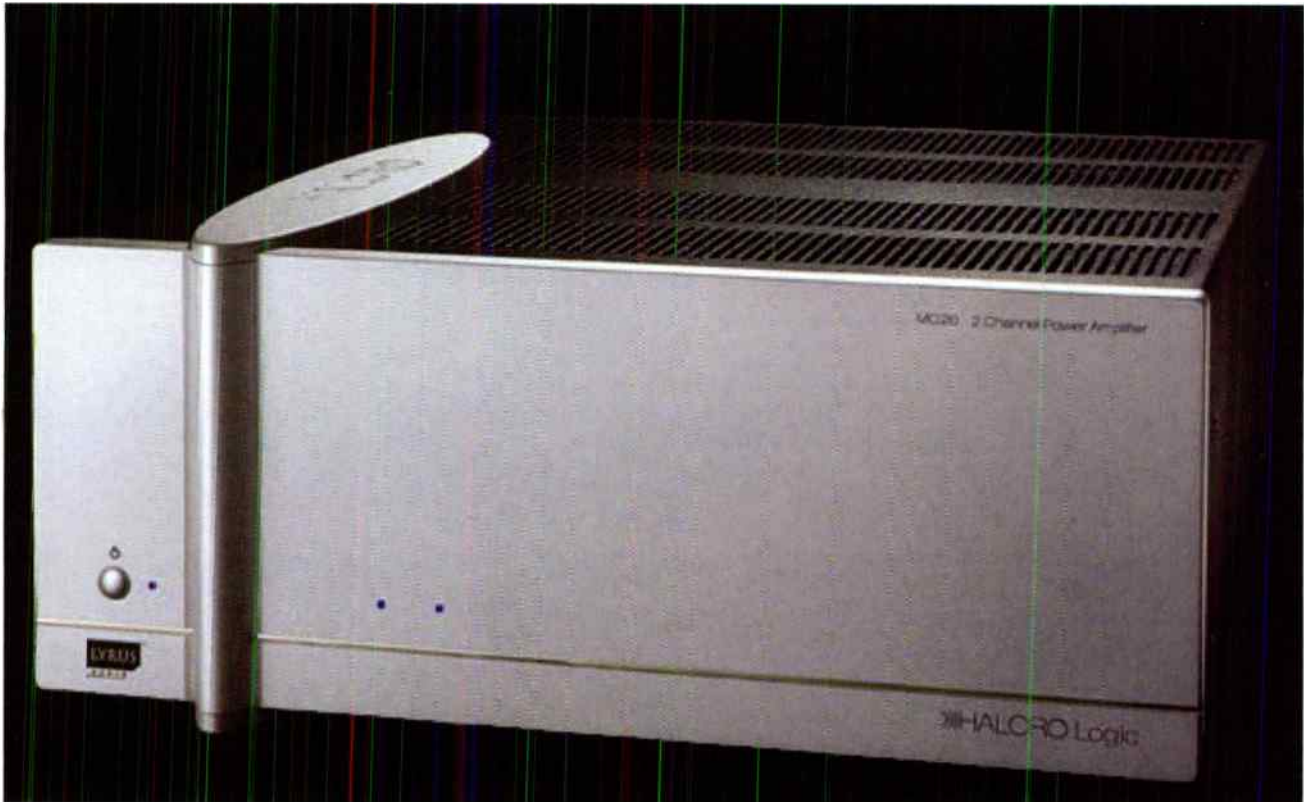
His fifth CD begins with "Basement With The Blue Light" which has a sound that is nearly unique, with lots of funky wah-wah pedal. It's as if a gritty old blues man met up with an electronics technical wizard and they did some recording. The lyrics are from a guy coo-cooing his new and nervous girl friend into the intimacy of the blue-lit basement. Next is "Mambo Jumbo" where a do-right guy is complaining about a wife (or girl friend) who's always got a story. ("When I ask you what happened to my car, I get the mambo Jumbo!") It's followed by "Jack of Diamonds," the first of the five traditional blues songs. Coen does this song on one or another resonator guitar; guy's got style and it sounds just right. In this song he also demonstrates his ability to tell stories; that is the true essence of blues. The CD ends with a version of "CC Rider" which marks an epoch in Davis Coen's career.

Overall, *Blues Lights...* sounds similar to a mellow Robert Cray. It's good to hear these traditional blues songs and Davis's new tunes brought out for our pleasure with an indelible style on an excellent recording.



# Halcro MC20 Power Amplifier

Bascom H. King



**REMEMBER WHEN** the first Halcro amplifier came out. I was intensely interested in getting a pair to measure and listen to. For whatever reasons, that never happened. I remember getting hints that the amp's schematics were extremely interesting to guys like me who find it fun to check out such drawings for innovations and improvements. In addition, I also learned more about the amp from Bruce Halcro Candy's patent about the circuitry. (Editor's Note: Freshpatents.com lists Patent No. 20080122534 by Candy with the title "Amplifier Switching Output Stage with Low Distortion.") I thought those original mono dm68s and later dm58 units were most impressive accomplishments. Currently, the Reference series has two mono units, the dm88 and dm78 along with a dm38 stereo model.

For Halcro's present Home Theatre Logic series of amplifiers, it appears that the talented Mr. Candy has come up with his own switching amplifier design for these units along with a switching power supply. This

makes sense as it eliminates the large and heavy 50-60 Hz power transformer of a conventional type power supply. Even with the switching amps and power supply, the unit weighs a hefty 49.6 lb. The enclosure of the MC20 is of a moderate size, measuring 7 inches high, 17 inches wide, and 16 inches deep. The actual amplifier modules nicely fit in the enclosure with space for up to seven channels. The MC20 reviewed is the two-channel version with two amplifier modules fitted.

## Halcro Reliability Assurance Service

The Halcro Reliability Assurance Service (HRAS) is an interesting feature of the Halcro Logic line of amplifiers. The HRAS is a computer application that has to be installed and configured on a network-connected PC running Windows 2000 or later. The app monitors the performance and health of the amplifier. It can be set up to notify your dealer, installer, or yourself by e-mail if any amplification module or the power supply is in

## Specs

**Halcro Logic MC20 Amplifier**, \$5,490.00, Halcro International, Head Office Halcro Audio Suite 1 Level 1/8 Greenhill Rd., Wayville, South Australia 5034; phone 61 8 8238 0807, fax 61 8 8238 0852, e-mail: Admin@halcro.com; Halcro Audio (USA), phone 818/245-0371, web site www.halcro.com, e-mail gary.barker@halcro.com.

### Associated Equipment

Genesis Advanced Technologies (GAT) 6.1 loudspeakers; GAT G928 subwoofers; Sonic Frontiers Power One power amplifier; DTG module experimental and Supratek Chinin preamplifiers; Genesis Technologies Digital Lens; PS-Audio PWD and Hegel HD10 D/A converters; ModWright/Sony NS9100ES, and McCormack UDP-1 SE and PS Audio Perfect Wave Transport CD transports/players.

danger of failing. Through an event log, a failure can result in a new module being sent out for replacement. If you are so inclined by the running HRAS application, you can set various channels into standby or operate mode, and check the condition of each module and the power supply. Seems like in this web-connected era, more and more devices can be accessed by web appli-

cations running on a PC or Mac. Apparently in the case of the HRAS app, however, it's for PCs only.

## Listening And Measuring

From the moment of first connection, turn-on, and listen, I had the feeling that the MC200 was a very good amp. Subsequent listening has only strengthened that impression. The long and short of it is that this is one very excellent sounding amplifier!

It has been said elsewhere about the MC20 that it sounded different from other amplifiers, but I didn't find that to be so. To me, the MC20 did sound very musically detailed, believable, and enjoyable. In fact, I had to make myself re-listen to some of my other amps even though I didn't have any inclination to do so. For me, that is a very strong indication of how much I enjoy what a good amplifier is doing in my system.

However, when I did hook up my Sonic Frontiers Power One tube amplifier, there was that immediate sense of "oh yes, this is a bit more like it and I'm sure glad I own this amp!" At a later point in the review process, I was able to borrow a Supratek Chinin tube preamplifier for a while. Adding that unit raised the level of musical reproduction a considerable amount and made me respect Halcro's MC20 even more. In particular, when using the ModWright player and playing a recording of THTST (made by Steven Rochlin that I made a DAD of from the downloaded 24/96 files from HDtracks.com) really showed off the ability of the MC20 to retrieve ambiance and spatial properties. Wow, the slam and decay of the large drums on track 8 titled "Tom Tom Tom" was truly awesome. Another favorite of mine, "A Tribute to John Hartford" on the Blue Plate label, playing as a down-

## Solid-state more musical than a tube?

*Learn more about the amplifier that audio reviewer Jerry Seigel says, "Makes obsolete the idea that solid-state cannot be as involving and pleasing as tube...groundbreaking design."*

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load from HDTracks, sounded very natural and convincing to me.

Using the PS Audio PWT and PWD, I played the Reference Recordings HRx Sampler Special Edition 2008 DVD disc of 24/176 wav files. Most of the material on this disc sounds really good. Track 2, a cut from nine delightful Renaissance dances by Tielman Susato, starts out with some very taut sounding drums that are very present in the sound stage space. One of my favorite tracks on this disc is No. 6, the "Overture" to Weill's "Three Penny Opera," where the lower midrange power and blarney of the trombones is quite convincing. Track 10 is of an unedited outtake of the Trio Blues jazz trio that just sounds amazingly present and real. As I went through the various music I like to listen to and the discs that I use for evaluation, the MC20 continued to impress me with its neutrality and musical revealing qualities.

Being the measurer of audio gear that I am, I put the MC20 through a few tests in my lab. The first thing that I noticed that should have been mentioned in the specs for this series of Halcro products was that it inverts signal polarity. It is also of interest, since the MC20 is a switching amplifier design, how the out-of-band high frequency response varies with load. For loads of 8 ohms and below, the response rolls off nicely with a bandwidth of some 40-50 kHz. Unloaded, there was a sharp peak of some 5 dB at about 85 kHz. The low frequency end starts to roll off at about 50 Hz and is down about 0.7 dB at 20 Hz. Harmonic distortion in this unit, while not in the class of the Halcro Reference series, is down in the low thousandths of a percent in the mid range. However, the amount of distortion does start to rise as the test frequency goes down below about 200

## Notes

**Power Output:** 400 watts into 4 ohms per channel.

**Distortion:** Less than 0.007% THD+N, at 1 kHz, up to 400 watts into 4 ohms.

Less than 0.03% THD+N, at 7 kHz, up to 400 watts into 4 ohms.

**Frequency Response** (3-dB down points): 5 Hz to 45 kHz.

**Power Consumption:** Less than 14 watts at idle, in standby.

**Input Impedance:** 10 kilohms, balanced or unbalanced operation.

**Miscellaneous:** Operates with a.c. line voltage 100 to 120 or 190 to 250 volts; full control via RS232 or Ethernet, remote trigger between standby and operational states.

Hz; this is similar to a tube power amplifier with an output transformer. A final note is that the power consumption was about six watts in the standby mode and about 46 watts at idle in the operate mode.

The unit performed flawlessly in the review period. The only anomaly was a slight pop upon coming out of standby in the right channel. I would recommend giving this amplifier a serious listen for use in one's stereo system. I am sure that the 3, 5, or 7 channel versions of the design would be outstanding in home theatre use, too.

*Audio 202*  
*Listening Studio*

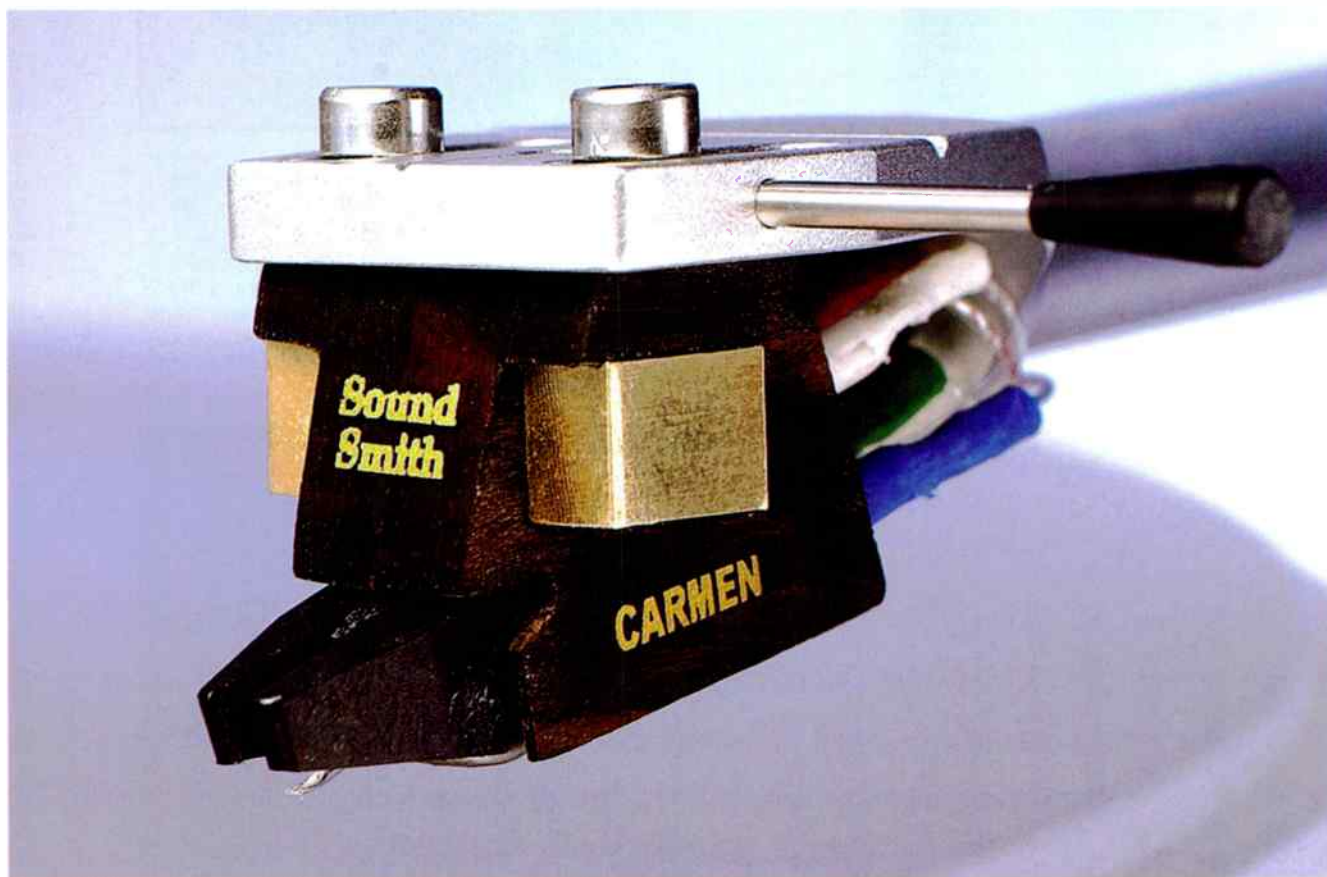
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Acoustic System Resonators

Bret Mesler,  
Principal

908.766.0456  
www.audio202.com

by appointment  
Far Hills, NJ

# *Soundsmith Carmen-M Phono Cartridge*



**George Graves**

**W**HEN I WAS A TEENAGER, I managed to have the sweetest summer job ever (for a young, budding audiophile, that is). I was employed at one of Washington, D.C.'s premiere audio salons where I set up and demonstrated equipment, installed systems at customer's homes, and set up turntables in-house for customers so that they could take their newly purchased prizes home with them, ready to play. Generally, I immersed myself in all things hi-fi. The shop sold all the top brands of the time. The electronics included

McIntosh, Marantz, Harman-Kardon, and Dynaco. They sold AR, Bozak, Electro-Voice and Altec-Lansing speakers. There were Grado arms and cartridges as well as similar items from SME, ESL, Shure, Stanton, and Ortofon. For turntables, they sold Weathers, AR, Grado, Garrard, Thorens, Audio Empire, Miracord, and Dual.

From my princely salary of about \$25/week, my plan was to return to school in the fall with a brand-new turntable, arm and cartridge that would occupy a place of pride in my bedroom stereo system. I had tired of my



Garrard AT-6 Automatic Turntable (Garrard's euphemistic term for "record changer") and wanted something that was belt-driven, had a good suspension and a nice, thick 12-inch platter. In my mind, that was the *beautiful* Audio Empire 208 with the equally yummy Grado "Lab Series" walnut tone arm on it. John Grado, the current proprietor of Grado Labs, told me on the phone recently that they *still* receive calls from people wanting one of those arms! I wanted mine fitted with either a Grado moving-coil cartridge or the highly rated Audio Empire moving-magnet cartridge. But at almost \$200 for the 208, \$40 for the Grado arm, and another \$25 or so for either cartridge, this setup was so far out of my league that I might as well have been asking for my own private jet! Luckily, there was another table with almost equal "sex appeal" available, the AR turntable which then cost just \$69. It also was gorgeous, ticked all the right audiophile boxes, and I lusted after the store's display sample daily as I, by dint of extreme self-sacrifice, scraped together the \$80 or so dollars that the table and a decent Shure or Stanton stereo cartridge would cost me.

In the course of that all too short and terribly hot summer (never spent a summer in Washington, D.C.? If not, you don't know what you're missing – or maybe you do...), as I set up and installed a lot of AR turntables, as they were, by far, our best sellers, I began to hate that record player's tone arm. It turned out to be a miserable contraption that couldn't be swapped out for another. The long list of complaints about the AR's arm included ones that the bearings weren't very good, and that the silicone dampening fluid, which was touted as such a great idea by AR, was in reality responsible for more mistracking and distortion than anyone had the right to expect. Sure, it kept butterfingersed users from dropping the stylus on the record, thereby destroying both, but it also messed up many a good cartridge's high-end by over-damping and created lots of drag on the stylus.

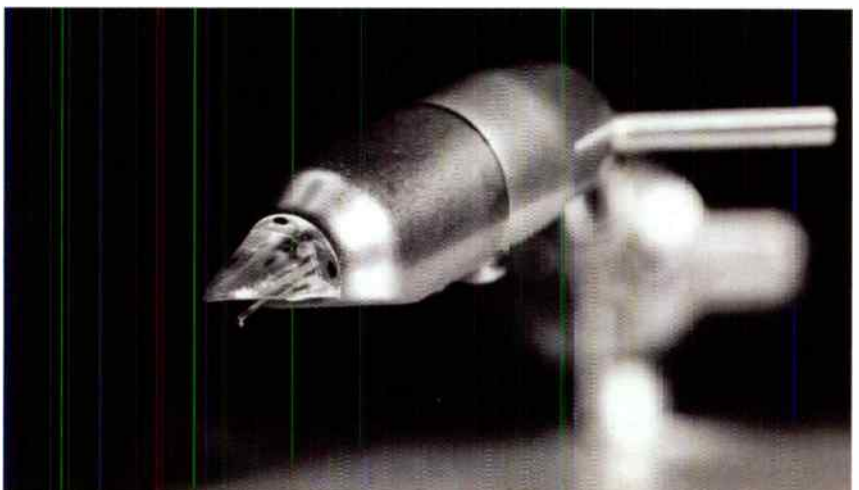
But these problems were mere niggles compared to the plastic, detachable head shell. This awful design was a nightmare. It was incredibly easy to strip the threads that held the cartridge in the head

shell; but it was even easier to over-tighten the ring nut that affixed the head shell to the aluminum arm tube. And you needed it tight because the pins that connected the shell to the contacts in the arm didn't make very good contact and this caused lost channels and hum. Added to these shortcomings were the AR's (then) two tiny "clock" motors which produced so little torque that it took forever to get that gorgeous machined platter up to speed (unless one helped it along with a little push). At some point that summer, I stopped drooling over the pretty but flawed AR.

**Beogram 1000 similar to the author's. A later model, this one lacks the gray rubber mat covering the entire platter. Notice the famous B&O LT/S15 Tone arm with the SP-12 "Stereodyne" cartridge affixed.**

My boss to the rescue! He had some Bang & Olufsen (B&O) Beogram 1000s that he wanted to unload, so he gave me a great "employee discount" and sold me one at cost (about \$40, as I recall). It wasn't exactly what I had in mind and definitely was not on my short list by any stretch of the imagination. Yes, it was belt-driven by a stout four-pole German Pabst motor, but the platter was only

**B&O SP 12 phono cartridge. This cartridge can still be retipped by Soundsmith if need be, and is still an excellent performer.**



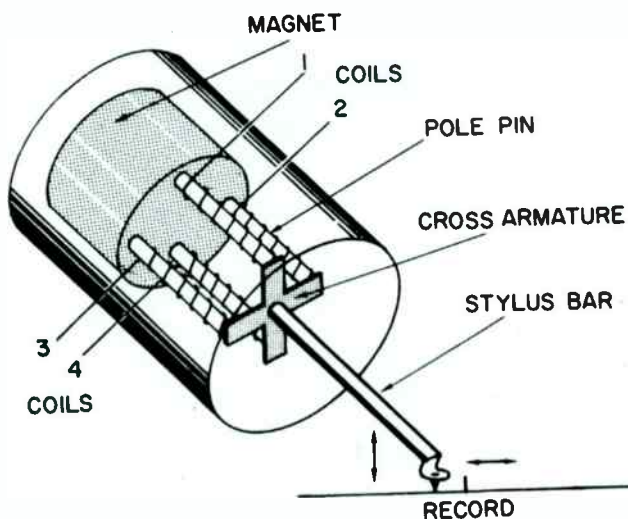


Diagram showing both the old Stereodyne and the current Soundsmith cartridge operating principle  
Diagram Copyright 1974, Howard Sams & Co., Inc./Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc.

about 11.5 inches across, very thin and covered with a gray rubber mat with ridges that doubled as a stroboscope. No thick, gleaming aluminum platter like the AR. The arm was integral with the record player, and like the AR's, it couldn't be swapped out for another. But there the parallel stopped. Where the AR arm was miserable, the B&O LT/S15 arm was superbly designed and executed. It had high-quality gimbal bearings in both planes and, in fact, the arm was mounted like a compass in a ship's binnacle.

But the piece d' resistance was the cartridge shell or rather the lack of one. The Beogram came with a B&O Stereodyne II cartridge of the same diameter as the arm tube. The tube was bent in, toward the center of the table, and down. The Stereodyne plugged directly into the end of this arm and that was it for installation. Danish modern styling coupled with the best in Scandinavian engineering. While not ecstatic about my purchase, the fact that I got table, arm and cartridge all in one package, and got it all so inexpensively, more than made up for any disappointments. After listening to my new purchase for a while, I realized that the B&O Beogram 1000 was better by far than the AR. Probably, because of that Stereodyne II cartridge, it had performance as good as, if not better than, anything in that store, including the Audio Empire 208. I kept this ensemble for many years and have often regretted finally selling it.

This started me on a long love affair with the B&O cartridge. While I would occasionally stray from the fold, I always came back. There was something about the B&O cartridge that simply beguiled the listener. They were always fast, like a moving coil and flat of frequency response and audibly lower in distortion than any other design. Alas, in the mid eighties, about the time I bought my last one, B&O gave up on the cartridge and the turntable business altogether, having seen the writing on the wall with the coming of CDs.

## What's So Special About the B&O Stereodyne?

Most modern phonograph cartridges fall into one of two basic categories: Moving coil (MC) or moving magnet (MM). There is a third type and in most circles, it's overlooked. This class of cartridges is called moving iron or variable reluctance (VR). The first two types are pretty self-explanatory. In the MC cartridge, the magnets are stationary while the coils are wound on the stylus armature. When the stylus moves in response to the modulation in the record groove, the coils (generally wound of thin copper or silver wire) move proportionally in the magnetic field, generating a voltage that's analogous to the stylus movement. MC cartridges generally put out miniscule voltages compared to other types because the coils need to be light and neither silver nor copper wire are very light. As a result, the number of turns tends to be few. The actual voltage output is a product of both the number of turns in the coil and the strength of the magnetic field in which they move. MC cartridges generally need more amplification than other types of magnetic cartridges. This usually comes in the form of a step-up transformer or a pre-preamp although some phono preamps have enough gain to accommodate any type of magnetic cartridge, even low output MC types.

MM cartridges, on the other hand, use stationary coils wound around a permeable (magnetizable) core. In this case, it's the magnet(s) that are attached to the stylus armature and they move with the stylus causing the magnetic field induced in the coil to vary proportionally. MM cartridges generally produce more output than do MC cartridges because it is possible to wind and use bigger coils when they are designed to remain stationary. Modern rare-earth magnets mean that the magnets can be tiny, light and strong.

In the variable-reluctance or moving-iron design, neither the coil nor the magnets move. Instead, the coils are wound around pole pieces in the magnetic circuit path and both the coils and magnetic system components are fixed and stationary. Connected to the stylus cantilever is a piece of permeable material such as iron or "mu-metal" which moves alternately closer to and further away from the magnet pole pieces, causing the lines of magnetic flux to vary. This moving magnetic field is what generates the voltage, and again, this voltage is analogous to the movement of the stylus in the groove. Since neither of the two most massive parts of the cartridge has to move, both can be proportionally large when compared to designs where one or the other is the moving element. This means that output is high. Usually, these characteristics can be traded-off for weight, making it possible for a very high-output VR cartridge to be extremely light and physically small.

B&O expanded upon this concept by using a patented push-pull arrangement of the permeable armature piece. Push-pull characteristics are very desirable in any audio circuit because they tend to cancel harmonic distortion. If you look at the diagram, you can see that B&O used a permeable cross at the apex of the cantilever. This cross was set at an exact 45-degree angle to a line perpendicular to the groove. This mimics the stereo groove-cutting geometry exactly and the motion of the stylus moves the cross back and forth over the diagonally opposed pole pieces in an exact push-pull configuration. This not only reduces the cartridge's dis-



tortion, but because the cross is extremely light and very small, the moving mass of the cantilever assembly can be kept very low. This gives moving-iron designs good transient response because they are able to respond more quickly to the movements of the groove. Also, because of the low mass, the system's mechanical reso-

the 1970s and 1980s. Definitely a high-end item, this cartridge "system" with its user replaceable stylus and included preamp uses a semiconductor material, which changes its resistance as it is flexed, thus creating a change in the applied voltage, which is proportional to the stylus movement. In addition, Soundsmith also mod-

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## **How does the Soundsmith Carmen-M perform? Magnificently, much better than I ever suspected.**

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nance can be moved way out beyond the audible pass-band and the low mass also lowers the amplitude of that resonance. This eliminates the rising top-end prominent in many MC cartridges. The result is higher output (obviating the need for a pre-preamplifier or "head amp"), lower distortion, faster transient response and flatter frequency response. The cross design also insures better stereo separation. No wonder these B&O Stereodyne cartridges were such a successful design.

Unfortunately, when it looked as if CD was going to kill-off vinyl altogether, B&O abandoned this visionary design as it ceased manufacturing of record-playing equipment altogether in 1985. It seemed as if these wonderful cartridges were gone forever.

### **Enter Peter Ledermann of Soundsmith**

American Engineer Peter Ledermann had been Director of Engineering at Bozak, as well as an engineer at Richard A. Majestic's RAM Company. When he started Soundsmith, it was primarily as a cartridge re-tipping facility (a service that Soundsmith still offers) and an audio equipment repair school. At some point, it became clear to Ledermann that there were many fine B&O turntables still in use. Most were the later tangential tracking models with the company's top-of-the-line MMC series of cartridges. Unlike the earlier SP-12 and SP-14, these did not have user-replaceable styli, so when the stylus wore out, they needed to be either professionally re-tipped or replaced. Seeing a marketing opportunity, Ledermann obtained the rights from Bang and Olufsen to start building the cartridges under license. B&O was happy to accommodate him, but was of little practical help because they had discarded all of their designs and tooling for these cartridges! It was fine if Soundsmith wanted to embark on such an enterprise, but B&O recognized the difficulties that reverse engineering their cartridge design under the circumstances would cause. Ledermann pushed ahead anyway, reverse engineering and developing the required tooling and engineering know-how to manufacture them from scratch. Using more modern materials and manufacturing techniques, Soundsmith was actually able to improve on B&O's original design work while building half-inch mounts for them to make them compatible with more universal and standard tone-arm mounting.

As well as re-tipping most cartridges, and building a line of cartridges based on the B&O "Stereodyne" principle, Soundsmith also builds an upscale strain-gauge cartridge similar to the one pioneered by Sao Winn in

ifies Denon MC cartridges and offers a line of electronics and speakers which, like the cartridges, are all designed by Peter and manufactured by Soundsmith in the U.S.

### **The Carmen Cartridge**

The cartridge reviewed here is a hand-selected version of Soundsmith's SMMC3 "B&O" replacement cartridge which has been mounted in an ebony wood carrier with universal half-inch mounting centers. The Carmen sports a nude elliptical diamond stylus of 6x17- $\mu$ m radius and has an effective tip mass of 0.35 mg. Even with the ebony mount, the entire cartridge weighs less than 7 grams. So light is it that I had to add mass to the head shell of my new Jelco SA-750D tone arm to allow it to balance when I installed the Carmen. The output of the Carmen is about 2.12 mV, or roughly the same as the Sumiko Bluepoint #2 high-output MC cartridge. It should work fine with any decent modern phonograph preamp.

The Carmen was a snap to install with its tapped mounting holes. Soundsmith recommends that one be especially careful with setup of this cartridge to make sure that the alignment is spot-on. They are quite insistent that the azimuth of the stylus be exactly perpendicular to the surface of the record. I used my trusty Mayware Formula 4 alignment protractor to set overhang, and a surface-coated mirror and magnifying glass to check azimuth and stylus angle. When I obtained the new Jelco arm, I also purchased a number of Ortofon SH-4 plug-in head-shells of different colors. These shells are standard SME bayonet mount and sell for about \$25 each from sources such as Jerry Raskin's Needle Doctor. Whenever I get a new cartridge to test, I merely reach for one of these shells. Arguably, arms without detachable shells are more rigid and have lower mass, but when you want to swap-out cartridges as often as I do, you'd find an arm with SME-type head shells to be a godsend.

### **How Does It Sound?**

Ah, the crux of the matter, at last. How does the Carmen perform? In a word, magnificently; in fact, it's much better than I ever suspected it would be. I will go so far as to say that this is the most musical, clean, focused, and fastest sounding cartridge I've ever used! I have a Grado Signature cartridge (also a VR design) as well as the aforementioned Blue Point No. 2, along with a Blackbird, and a Benz Micro Glider, and while these

disparate designs represent the yin and yang of modern cartridge thinking (as well as about everything in between), and they all perform quite well, all present a very different "vision" of sonic reality, and none are as "right" as the Soundsmith. The Carmen has the sparkle and speed of the Bluepoint No. 2 and the Blackbird, and the warmth and body of the Grado coupled with the harmonic correctness of the Benz. At 1.4 grams of tracking force, the Carmen will track anything and sails through both the infamous Orion test record's highest excursion bands in its trackability test cut as well as the Telarc "Two Suites for Military Band" by Holst (you know, the one with the bass drum whacks from hell?) without a hint of distress, distortion or break-up.

Speaking of distortion, this is one place where the Carmen really shines. Earlier, in this discussion, I said that the patented push-pull design of the B&O cartridges made them an early favorite of mine due to their low distortion. The evolution of this principle in the Carmen is, if anything, even cleaner than those earlier B&Os that I used back in the '60s and '70s. The cleanliness of the presentation with this cartridge is at once apparent and is a constant reminder of how "veiled" most cartridges are. In other words, you've probably never heard your records sound so clean and pure. I sat up far into the night after installing the Carmen, pulling out LP after LP and reveling in its detailed, lifelike sound. When I awoke the following morning, I was appalled at the mess of record album covers strewn all over my listening room. Appalled but elated because I couldn't remember the last time that I had enjoyed my record collection so much!

On the incredible Wilma Fine 45-rpm re-mastered recording on Mercury of Stravinsky's "Firebird" ballet

(Antal Dorati, London Symphony) for Classic Records (Mercury/Classic No. SR90226), the sound really comes to life. This is, by far, the best sounding LP that I have ever heard. It's so good that it is hard to believe that the CD of this same recording is the same recording. Where the CD is lifeless and bland, this performance literally jumps off of the disc and into my listening room. Its sounds that *real*. The dynamic range, the frequency extremes, the transients simply explode off of the vinyl. This has been my favorite, ultimate test LP ever since I bought it some 10 years ago, but I've never heard it like this. The low coloration of the Soundsmith Carmen allows me to hear deeper into this milestone disc than ever before. Small details, heretofore obscured by most playback systems, just keep coming at me. The 200-gram "virgin" vinyl and the single-sided nature of the Classic records (that's right, one side of each disc is blank) assure maximum signal-to-noise ratio, and the orchestra just appears out of a totally black background. While this might be considered normal for a CD or other digital medium, it's downright spooky for an LP and cartridge.

Equally impressive is the Carmen's ability to focus. The soundstage is wide and deep with excellent image specificity. Images are stable, and even on this rather expansive recording (made around 1959 with spaced omni-directional microphones. Usually, such a set-up is not the best choice for pinpoint imaging). One can literally point to various instruments in space. Again, it is this cartridge's ability to resolve detail missed by other cartridges in the general price range, coupled with the design's unusually good channel separation, which allows this great imaging. Ledermann maintains that if one "nails" the azimuth of one of these cartridges per-

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fectly during installation, it will reward the user with better than 40 dB of channel separation! But it is the low distortion that this cartridge brings to the party that is, in my estimation, its primary asset.

For a change of pace, I tried John Klemmer's "Brazilia" Album (ABC Records AA-1116). Klemmer's tenor saxophone work has always been big and brassy. Most good cartridges get the sound of the sax right enough, but miss on the details. Again, the Soundsmith Carmen peeled up for close inspection layers of detail that I had no idea were even there. The breathiness of Klemmer comes across in a way that I've never heard before. That "reedy-ness" real saxes give off, and which is quite separate from the brass sound emanating from the horn itself, is discernable on my system for the first time. The brush strokes of the drummer, Alex Acuña, are so well represented that one can hear the difference between the sound that the brush makes when it hits the drumhead and the sound of the drum responding. Cymbals sound like cymbals, not a bag full of mechanic's wrenches as is so often the case with phonograph systems. Impressive.

## Conclusion

It's been a long time since I have heard what I characterize as the "Stereodyne" sound. I feel that Peter Ledermann has done the audio world a great favor by resurrecting these marvelous variable reluctance cartridge designs and picking-up on their development where Bang & Olufsen left off. Owners of the excellent linear tracking Beograms of the '70s and '80s can pull these gorgeous and great performing turntables out of retirement because there are new, modern replacement cartridges available for these linear-tracking beauties.

## NOTES

**Soundsmith Carmen—M Phono Cartridge**, \$499.95. Soundsmith, 8 John Walsh Blvd., Suite 417, Peekskill, NY 10566; phone 800/942-8009; website [www.sound-smith.com](http://www.sound-smith.com); e-mail address [admin@sound-smith.com](mailto:admin@sound-smith.com).

### Associated Equipment

Audio Research SP11 MKIII preamplifier; Audio Technica AT-PEQ3 head amp; Krell KAV-300iL integrated, two VTL140 tube monoblock, two Denon POA6600A solid-state monoblock, and one Behringer stereo A-500 amps; Sony XA777ES SACD player; Denon DVD-758 DVD-A player; TASCAM CD-RW700 CD recorder; Otari DTR85 DAT recorder; Korg MR-1 DSD recorder; TEC (Beresford) TC-7510 and Sonic Frontiers DAC2.6 D/A converters; J.A. Michelle Gyrodec SE record player; Jelco SA-750 D and Audioquest PT-6 tone arms; Sumiko Blackbird, Sumiko Bluepoint No. 2, Grado Reference Platinum, and Grado Reference Master phono cartridges; Martin Logan Aeon i electrostatic speakers and Yamaha YST-SW150 subwoofer; Monster M1000 and AudioQuest Blue interconnects, and Monster M1 speaker cables.

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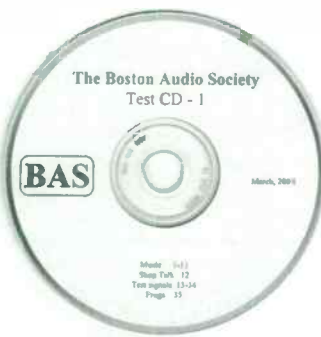
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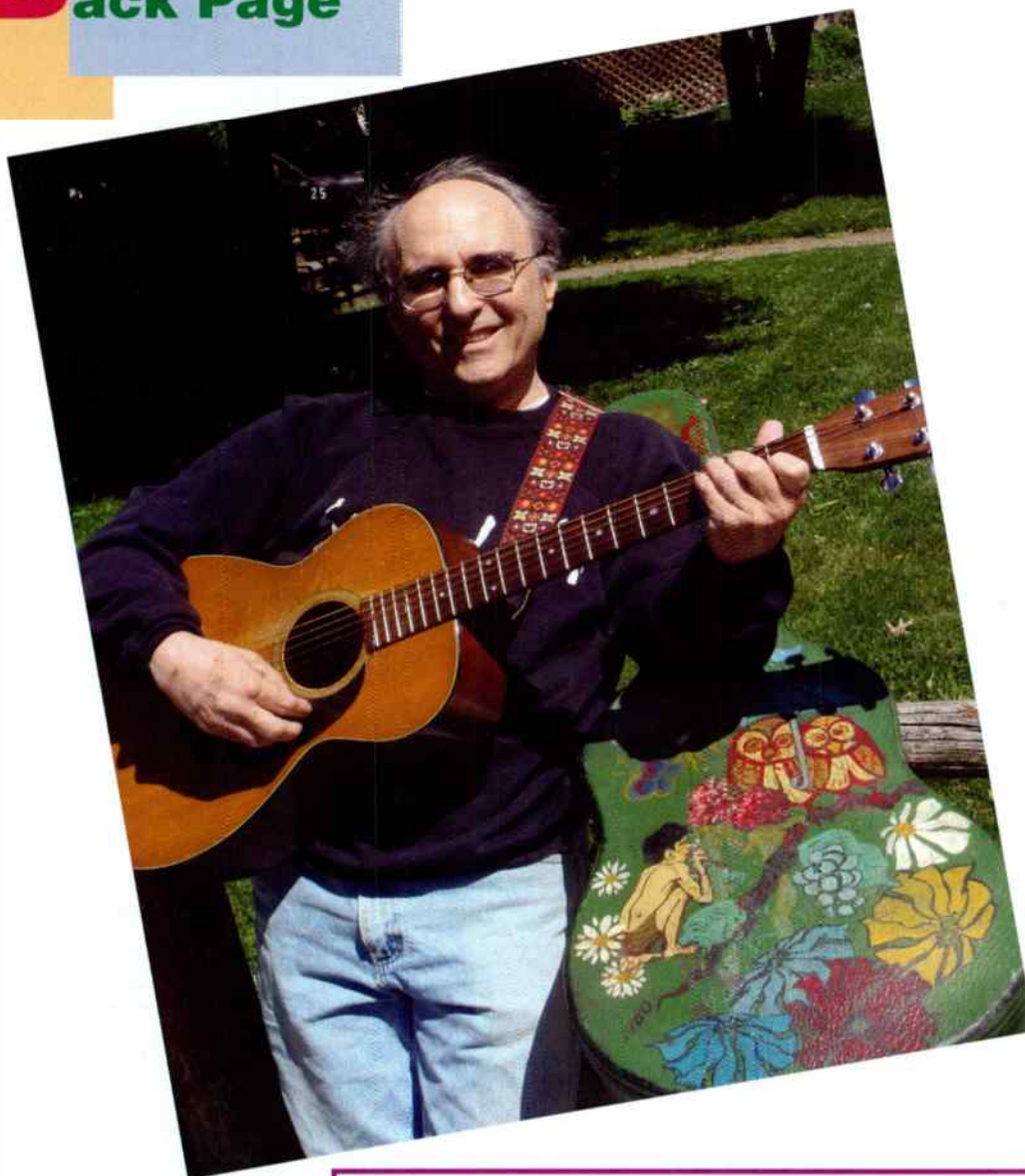
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# B ack Page



## Photos Never Lie!

### Almost everybody played a guitar back in the day ...

but not everybody had one of these great guitar straps. Here, Michael Tearson, who was the Boss Nighttime Radio Disc Jockey at WMMR in Philadelphia when I met him back in the early '70s, shows off his. Michael was The Voice of Whammer-Philly for about 35 years, and has written for me first at *Audio Magazine* and now *The Audiophile Voice* for about as long. You will note that another guitar player, Jimi Hendrix, sports the same strap elsewhere in this issue. Tearson got his in 1968 and is pretty certain that was before Jimi got his. The guitar case was painted in 1969 by Greg Kihn's first wife, Meg Otto.

Gene Pitts, Editor, *The Audiophile Voice*  
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