

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

# TAV

**The Audiophile Voice**

Vol. 14, No. 4; \$5.95 US; \$8.50 Can

## **Robert Plant: Band of Joy**

**Equipment Reviews:**

**Harman-Kardon HK990**

**Integrated Amp: "Just the best"**

**Music Culture MCT RL-21 Speakers:**

**"Among the top five!"**



## **The Shows in Vegas Record Store Day**

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World Radio History

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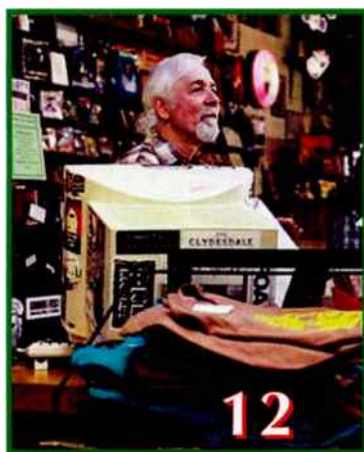


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# New Products

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Data: [www.jhaudio.com/promusic/](http://www.jhaudio.com/promusic/).



## The Goldmund Telos 3500 Mono Power Amplifier

delivers 3,500 watts on an rms voltage basis with the lowest distortion figure ever measured and is designed to drive any ultra high-end loudspeaker with ease and control. The circuitry in the Telos 3500 is an enhanced version of that in its predecessor, the limited series Telos 5000, which itself has been considered a three-decade success. The new Telos 3500 incorporates multiple safety features so that it will function, with flawless perfection, no matter what sort of speaker it is called upon to drive. Aside from its sonic sophistication and subtlety, the amplifier appears as a collectable piece of electronic art, showing off its hard brass main frame together with Goldmund's traditional subtlety of metal finish on the aluminum main surfaces.

Price: \$151,250.00 each.

Data: [www.goldmund.com](http://www.goldmund.com)





# LETTERS

## About That Review

Dear Editor,

VSO Marketing would like to thank *The Audiophile Voice* for the opportunity of having the Music Culture Technology RL21 speaker reviewed. Our thanks go especially to Bernard Kingsley for his thorough evaluation of what we all seem to agree is an excellent product.

While the name "Music Culture Technology" may not be familiar to most readers here in the United States as yet, certainly many will recognize the name of its founder, Wolfgang Meletzky. Mr. Meletzky was the "M" in the legendary German audio company, MBL, and the father of their famous "Radialstrahler" omnidirectional loudspeaker. Wolfgang founded Music Culture Technology in 2005 together with three associates. His mission is to bring exceptional sound to affordably priced components. The RL-21 speaker is the firm's first loudspeaker, part of the "Elegance" line of components. It appears from what Mr. Kingsley has experienced and wrote up in the review, Wolfgang has accomplished his mission!

A "Reference" line of speakers and electronics will be available shortly. All Music Culture Technology products are made in Germany and are available in the U.S. from us, the firm's exclusive United States distributor, VSO Marketing, together with its authorized dealers. We encourage potential customers to contact VSO at 973/808-4188 for the name of the nearest dealer. If none available in their immediate area, we can arrange for an in-home audition.

Honor the Music!, Mike Oltz, VSO Marketing, LLC, Fairfield, NJ

## Bravo

Dear Editor,

As always, it was great speaking with you. Even though we have never met, I feel like old friends when we speak on the phone.

As I mentioned, this most recent issue with the book review regarding the life and times of Keith Richards was the best magazine I

have read in years. Not only did it bring back some great memories, and it's fortunate I am able to remember them to begin with being the times they were, the cover made sense and the content was right on the money.

Thanks again for the memories and remember..."It's only rock n' roll...but I like it."

Rick Isaacs, Syracuse, New York

## Thanks for the Sub

Dear Sir:

Hello again, Mr. Editor. I attach my office address so please send this subscription order there. Again, thank you very much for the opportunity to subscribe to your fine audio magazine. It is as professional as *Stereophile* or *The Absolute Sound*.

Bob Williams, Via PayPal

The Editor Responds:

Thanks, Bob, for your kind words. Sometimes I think this magazine is more work than it's worth, but then I get a note like this one from you and I realize this is worthwhile. Looking at the "as good as" idea, I think that there are two main ways in which both *Stereophile* and *The Absolute Sound* are more "professional" than what I make – more pages and more advertising. It may be perfectly obvious when discussed, but the number of ad pages has a VERY strong influence on how many pages the editor needs to fill. The one main thing I have learned about the ad/edit ratio since I bought *The Audiophile Voice* is how to keep the overhead costs down. What that means to you subscribers is more pages of editorial with fewer advertisements in between. It is amazing how good desktop publishing technique can reduce overhead. Thank God for a fairly good spell check and grammar check in MS Word, but I will brag on the first-rate dictionary of composers and musicians we put together in Quark while I was at *Audio Magazine*. I also have to give credit where it's due to a former writer for TAV, Benjamin Ivry, who helped the dictionary along with his vast knowledge of music and artists.

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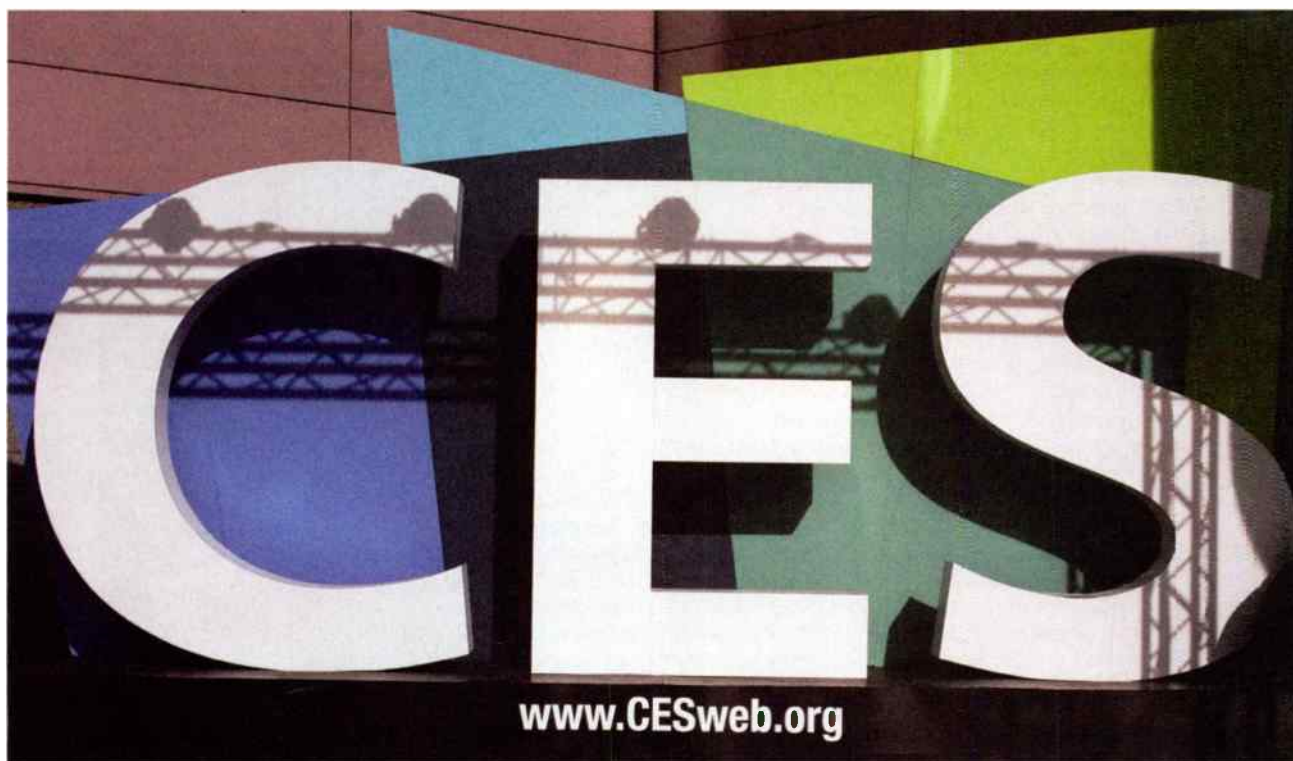
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# *Hi-Fi In Las Vegas: CES & T.H.E. Shows*

Dave Schwartz



**C**OVERING THE Consumer Electronics Show held in Las Vegas during January each year is a formidable task for a writer-reviewer. The 2011 edition had 2,700 exhibitors and 149,529 attendees, and is the largest electronics trade show in the world. International attendance was up about 30 percent from last year, to 31,677. In addition to the massive Las Vegas Convention Center, it occupies the Sands Convention Center and large areas of the Hilton and Venetian hotels. Fortunately for the writers, most of the high-performance audio exhibits are concentrated in the Venetian's Tower Suites. Concurrently, there is T.H.E. (The Home Entertainment) Show, a competing exhibition of audiophile gear and recordings down The Strip at the Flamingo. Visiting the just exhibits at the Venetian and Flamingo hotels requires all four days of the show. With so many items to see in so little time, confusion and exhaustion reigns among attendees.

The big news this year is that computer audio has become much more a main-stream product. Many CES exhibitors used music servers as their source. The one single device present in more demo rooms than any other was the iPad, used either as the source or for controlling a computer-based music server, and we were shown many clever ways of integrating a computer into audio systems. Perhaps the most obvious way is by USB DAC of which there were many, ranging in price from Nu Force's \$129 uDAC to MSB's \$7000+ Platinum IV DAC. USB connections, previously limited to 96K sampling rates, are usable up to 192K on Wadia's 121 decoding computer and 384K on DACs from MSB and Playback Designs. Most of the USB-equipped DACs also functioned as headphone amplifiers and/or pre-amps. USB inputs are also being found on other audio components with built-in DACs. Playback Designs MPS-5 is a CD/SACD player with switchable inputs to





its built in DAC. Peachtree Audio showed its line of integrated amplifiers with built-in DACs, featuring the \$1799 iNova, an 80 watt stereo integrated amplifier with a digital iPod dock as well as coax, Toslink, and USB inputs. A novel approach was taken by Audio Analogue which included a DAC in their Crescendo AM/FM/USB DAC tuner.

Weiss Engineering, a Swiss company noted for their Firewire DACs and other pro audio devices used by mastering engineers, showcased a line of audiophile components. Featured in their room was their MAN 202 Music Archive Network Player. This iPad-controlled server stores and retrieves files from networked storage devices and it can also play CDs and files stored on memory sticks. AMI demonstrated a similar product, their Purist HDR Mini, a \$7,000 music player/server with control from an iPad or iPhone.

Finally, one knows a technology has arrived when audiophiles start to tweak it. Mach2Music demonstrated a highly modified Mac Mini Computer. Their \$3495 ultimate upgrade comes equipped with 8 gigabytes of RAM and includes a replacement of the original hard drive with a solid-state one, removal of all software not needed for music playing, pre-installation of the full version of Amarra music player software, a sandwiched spiked enclosure, and audiophile quality power, plus USB and Firewire cables.

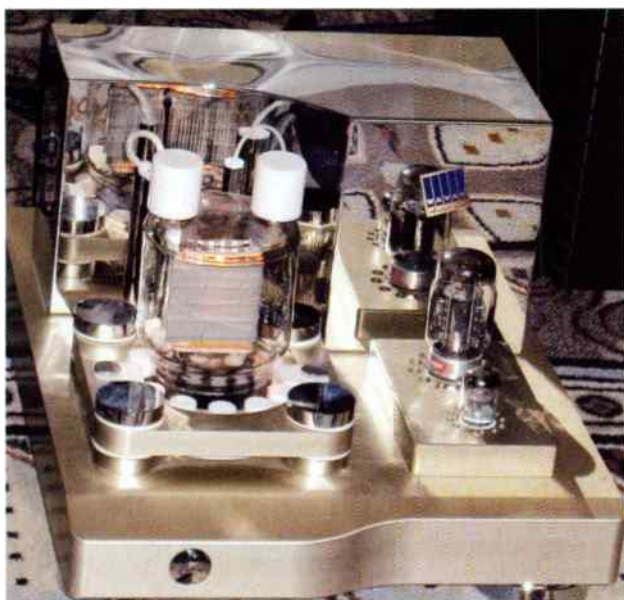
Although developments in digital technology were important, there were many other new products to audition. Dan D'Agostino, cofounder of Krell, has returned with a new company under his own name. His premier product is the Momentum Monoblock Amplifier. Distinguished by its copper cooling fins, it's capable of delivering 300 watts into 8 ohms and 1200 watts into 2 ohms, while drawing only 1 watt at idle. Qualia & Co., not to be confused with Sony's ultra high-end line, is an established audio manufacturer in Japan. They demonstrated their Indigo pre-amp and vacuum tube

monoblock amplifiers. Chord Electronics featured their Chordette series of miniature audio components, which were both innovative and inexpensive. The Chinese manufacturer Xindek has returned with a new U.S. distributor and an expanded line of solid-state and vacuum tube amplifiers. Electra-Print, a transformer manufacturer headed by Jack Elliano, demonstrated their \$395 Magnetic Line Amplifier, a transformer-based passive preamp, which provides a higher output voltage than is at the input, but more importantly its output impedance remains constant and doesn't vary with volume settings. This is used in their \$2,650 Silver Stereo 45SE integrated amplifier, a 1.7-watt single ended tube amp. At the other end of the spectrum, Audio Power Labs is a new company whose first product is a very substantial power amplifier, the 833TNT, a 200-watt monoblock featuring 833 output tubes in a push-pull configuration. The 833 tube is a triode developed in the '40s for use as the audio stage in AM radio transmitters. This same tube was also found in single-ended 150-watt monoblocks by WAVAC.

Bybee Labs is a new company started by Jack Bybee, not to be confused with Bybee Technologies who still make quantum purifiers. They were demonstrating their Music Rail power-supply noise-reduction technology. This is not a consumer product, but is licensed to equipment manufacturers and authorized equipment modifiers. Torus Power displayed their line of toroidal isolation-transformer power conditioners. Their AVR series provides voltage regulation and Ethernet access in addition to isolation and noise reduction, as well as surge suppression.

As usual, there were many super turntables, some priced beyond the means of most ordinary mortals. Thus, I was pleased to see the return of Revolver to the U.S. market with their \$2,400 Rebel turntable and arm combination. Divergent Technologies showed a prototype of their soon-to-be-released turntable featuring





magnetic levitation suspension. The expected price is in the \$2,000 range. Music Hall featured their \$249 USB1 turntable. Complete with arm and Audio Technica AT3600L moving-magnet cartridge, it offers digital output to a computer and audio output through its built-in phono stage. It is an ideal way to get acquainted with vinyl as well as an inexpensive way to digitize it.



Loudspeaker demonstrations are frequently hindered by the poor acoustics of hotel rooms. Avalon Acoustics together with Cardas Audio and Edge Electronics went to Herculean lengths to tame their room. The results were well worth it. Magnepan had a 5.1-channel surround sound demonstration featuring their CCR center-channel speaker and the CC center-channel stand, with 3.7s for the front channels and 3.6s for the rear. It was so good that the result made this surround sound skeptic reconsider.

There were many other speakers worth noting. Ocean Way, a manufacturer of loudspeakers used in studio screening rooms, demonstrated their large studio monitors using 30-ips master tapes for the source, and the sound was magnificent. Audience introduced their \$12,300 ClairAudient 4+4 speaker system. This is a larger version of their \$5000 2+2 system, and uses eight of their 50-mm proprietary drivers, four in front and four in back in a bipole arrangement, with two passive radiators on the side to provide bass extension. Symposium Acoustics demonstrated their \$29,995 Reflection TLS system, adding a transmission-line loaded subwoofer onto their highly regarded \$19,995 Reflection two-way sealed box system. Sony introduced the SS-AR1 a four-driver, three-way system expected to sell for \$27,000.

Glass enclosures seem to be a new trend. SoulSonic had a glass-baffled dipole with five woofers and a long ribbon tweeter imported from Slovenia. Perfect 8 Technologies showed their \$130,000 system called The Point and a more upscale speaker, The Force, a \$325,000 system using larger, glass-baffled dipoles with ribbon tweeters. PSI Audio showed their line of Swiss-made, self-powered studio monitors. Their \$7,000 Master A215-M, a floor-standing consumer model with built-in 120-watt and 40-watt amplifiers, was particularly impressive. Earo offered a self-powered system for \$38,000 featuring their proprietary Lowthers-type driver in a horn enclosure. While Anthony Gallo expanded his new line of non-round speakers, Everything But The Box showed a line of spheroid enclosed speakers, some with flat baffle boards disguising them.

Of course, there was the usual assortment of record and tweak vendors, as well as live music and live vs. recorded demonstrations at T.H.E. Show. These offered some relief from the hustle and bustle of the exhibits. Finally, special thanks must again be given to Anton Dotson and Michael Alazard whose NFS Audio provided a haven of rest and refreshment throughout the show.

**Wavac's use of the 833 tube in a monoblock amp, upper left; Editor Gene Pitts holding up the Chordette cuties, and Wadia's 121 decoding computer.**



"Very nicely done! Editors  
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You can read the complete reviews online at [www.hegel.com/hd2\\_rev.htm](http://www.hegel.com/hd2_rev.htm)

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# Record Store Day



All Photos: Courtesy Twist & Shout.

## James Goss

**I**N THE EARLY morning hours of April 16, 2011, a relatively unknown “holiday” started — Record Store Day. At participating independent record stores around the world, lines of people formed, waiting. Clerks, managers and store owners prepared themselves for what would soon become an abnormally busy day.

Now in its fourth year, Record Store Day is a day of happy festivities, a day bubbling up in the pop cultural firmament. Unlike any other day of the year — even Christmas — this one special day is remarkable for a number of reasons, chief among them the shift to a favorable public perception for the overlooked and much maligned record store business.

At Chicago’s Dusty Groove that Saturday, it was raining. The line out front began to form at 6:00 a.m.;

the store opened at 9:00. Some of the store staffers went over to a nearby dollar store and bought umbrellas and handed them out to people waiting. They also served refreshments to them. For owner Rick Wojcik and company, Record Store Day equals fun. “We like to have a good time. We really go out of our way to make people feel welcome.”

In the days leading up to April 16, some Record Store Day doubters got in their digs. “Some people were grumbling, trying to create a backlash,” Dusty Groove’s owner explains. “They were basically saying, ‘Oh, this is just such a cash-in day for the music industry. They’re forcing these stores to spend all this money’ on specially produced Record Store Day product. “The product is sub-par. That’s the kind of thing you read and you go





'Oh, my God. I hope the customers don't feel that way.' Fortunately, they didn't."

Hundreds of people came through Dusty Groove that day. Extra tables for specially produced Record Store Day merchandise were set up "anyplace people could congregate," Rick says. Among the special just-for-this-day offerings was a Phish 7-inch single, a two-disc, 10-inch Beach Boys set — recorded at 78 rpm; and, two compilations, one a Vanguard Psychedelic assortment and another from Chicago-based label Numero. All were top-selling items at Dusty Groove.

For most of the afternoon, a magician worked the crowd. The store had giveaways and contests with prizes. "It was kind of a carnival atmosphere," Rick says. Chicago musician and Sun Ra alumnus Phil Cohran played a set upstairs in the store's third-floor gallery space.

"We could've opened a whole new store front just for the merchandise," Rick says. "I was a little nervous. There were so many products, I was afraid we would go broke stocking them."

Other Chicago record store owners that Rick spoke with expressed similar sentiments. Some commented that Record Store Day was starting to resemble a "more traditional retail [event], the way a department store might be at Christmas. You know, you better hope the shoppers are there."

"But the shoppers were definitely there this year," Rick continues. "As a result, it was wildly successful. We did double the business we did last year. It was just great."

Of the Record Store Day organization — a loose-knit group comprised of people with different backgrounds

in the record business — Rick is gracious with his praise:

"We thank them profusely. Everything they do is just great. We really appreciate the efforts they go to keep things fair."

This year, one of the things the Record Store Day folks came up with to try to accomplish the "fairness" goal was "The Pledge." To participate, store owners were asked to agree to observe certain policies regarding all the specially produced Record Store Day product: Sell only one copy of an item per person, no inflating prices, no pre-Record Store Day selling, no eBay that day, etc.

"In the past, people have put things on eBay," Rick notes, often doubling prices. "We never did that because it's all about fairness and good will on this day," Rick says, adding, "The Record Store Day people had to get a little stricter this year."

Outside Drastic Plastic in Omaha, Nebraska, it wasn't raining. But there was a seldom-seen line out the door. As owner Neil Azevedo explains, "That rarely happens." Understatement aside, Omaha's music lovers came out in force for Record Store Day. "To give you an indicator of the volume of business we did, we had our best day in the last 10 years after the first hour of business," Neil says. "It was crazy and it was awesome."

At one point that day, Neil remarked to one of his colleagues that the energy in the store felt "more like a cross between the record shows of yesteryear and Christmas morning."

**Twist & Shout had crowds of customers on Record Store Day.**



Logo: Courtesy Record Store Day.

At Drastic Plastic, the musical emphasis is on punk. They have their own vinyl re-issue label: Drastic Plastic Records. That day, more than a dozen of their own titles "sold in bunches," Neil says.

Waxing positive about the ongoing — mostly youth driven — surge in sales for the vinyl format, Neil says, "The vinyl revival is so heartening and fun for us. It seems from my vantage point the very heart and soul of Record Store Day. It is the younger generation, for the most part, that is driving vinyl sales — teens to folks in their early 30's."

In cities around the world, the positive sales and good vibes extended out to many other nearby businesses — including other record stores that didn't formally sign up as Record Store Day participating stores.

This year, Seattle's Bop Street Records, located across the street from participating store Sonic Boom, had a great sales day. Bop Street owner Dave Voorhees said that the scene in his store reminded him of the bank scene in the movie "It's a Wonderful Life" where "They're counting down the time for the bank to close. 'Five, four, three, two, one!'" Dave says the feeling in the store was, "Let's do it! Eventually the place is gonna close!"

Last year, in an effort to reduce inventory prior to moving the store to its current location, Dave was selling plenty of \$3 vinyl. By his count, 2010 transactions amounted to 134 sales in 13½ hours. "That's 1 every 6 minutes," he says. This year, he counted 110 paying customers within the same time frame. But "I think we made more money this time because we weren't selling records for 3 bucks."

Dimple Records co-owner Dylín (pronounced Dye-lynn) Radakovitz had a similar experience with all Dimple vinyl stock which was priced to move at 20% off. "When we got done with that," she says "My district manager said 'We're never doing that again.' We sold a lot."

For Dylín and husband John, the scene in their eight Sacramento, California, area stores was extraordinary. In June, 2010, Dimple acquired their Broadway store, the former home town location for R5 Records, the site

of Tower Records' founder Russ Solomon's last venture into record retail.

"It was a lovely day to own a record store," she wrote in an email wrap-up to Record Store Day co-founder and Music Monitor Network honcho Michael Kurtz. "And when you have eight of them, it is only multiplied by eight!" In 2006, around the time that Tower was closing the last of its U.S. stores (some Japanese franchises still exist), Dylín and Michael were among the initial group of eight people who first defined the concept for Record Store Day. Many of the original group continue to oversee the daily details of mapping its future.

In May of this year, Dylín says, she and others involved in continuing to develop and refine the worldwide impact for their concept had an important meeting. "We were in L.A. with all the labels, distribution companies and independents," Dylín begins. "Everybody had their issues as we always do. We decided that [the record labels] had to keep the items limited. The whole crux of what makes it so special is that these items are made and people have to go out and find them. So, they need to keep the collectability up."

Record Store Day's domestic sales and visitor numbers must surely warm the hearts of its original founders. To date, the official numbers issued by Record Store Day covering the first four years are undeniably impressive. The number of participating stores increased from 429 to 1,967, while the number of record store customers coming through the doors climbed from 144,446 to 694,846.

In Denver, a line of 150 people greeted Paul Epstein, owner with wife Jill, of Twist and Shout. For Paul, this most recent edition of Record Store Day was like "national reminder of what we are losing day."

"I have observed this industry for a long time and seen it as incapable of maintaining any good thought or executing any good idea repeatedly," Paul observes. "It loves shooting itself in the foot; witness the headlong rush to embrace digital/kill physical. The result? The overall diminution of the public's interest/awareness of music and its inherent value."



Downloads are a sizable threat to the record store culture. They're "the ultimate objectification of art," Paul says, and "the death of culture as we know it. It makes me sad, but it is the way of our species. The Internet has just accelerated the social trends to such a breakneck speed that it is impossible to process the stuff as it happens."

The erosion in confidence and favorable public perception for record stores is due to these and other factors, including the unraveling of large independents like Tower Records. But Tower, one of the first record store chains in the country to give adequate space for presenting many, many kinds of different music, is part of what also defines Twist and Shout, an 11,000 square foot store, dedicated to presenting an awe-inspiring range of music.

Of Tower's founder, Paul says: "Overall, I have a huge amount of respect for Russ Solomon. He really did pioneer the 'large store' concept, which I have embraced." Also, Tower was "the first to really embrace deep catalog. On the other hand, they were one of the stores that really went for the advertising coop as a viable business model. It was bound to fail because it put the commerce above the art."

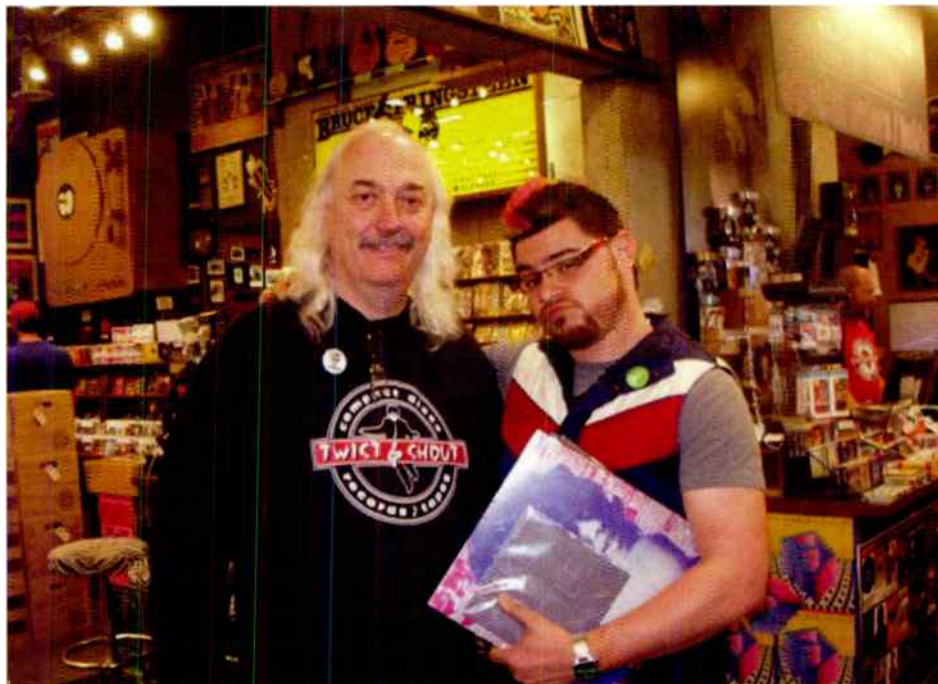
This year at Twist and Shout, the store was packed with people all day. Overall, Twist and Shout's sales were "massive," Paul explains, "up 30% over 2010." These were "fast sales of largely exclusive, vinyl-format releases. We seemed to definitely see more spillover sales this year," he notes, "where people bought other items since they were here. Lots of other used and new vinyl sold."

Many "lifestyle" items sold well too, Paul adds. These included "a Ziggy Marley 'Marijuana Man' comic book, a Mars Volta jigsaw puzzle, a series of Neko Case T-shirts, and a really cool Frank Kozik-designed collectible toy."

"I am blown away," Paul happily admits, "that everyone has cooperated and continued to move this thing in a positive direction. That in 2011, I could say that we had our best day of sales ever is truly miraculous. I hope it continues..."

At Groovacious, located in Cedar City, Utah, this was the fourth Record Store Day for owners Tim and Lisa Cretsinger. In 2000, the Cretsingers moved the contents of their Salem, Oregon store to Cedar City, which sits in the southwestern corner of Utah, near Dixie National Forest.

Prior to having their own store, Tim worked in many Portland area record stores, including DJ's Music City, Tower, and Music Millennium. While at Tower from 1981 to 1990, Tim was Assistant Manager. Later, while working at Music Millennium, Tim hired, then married, wife Lisa.



**Twist & Shout's Paul Epstein with Andy Guerrero of The Flobots.**

While at Tower, Tim recalls, upper management, which included Russ Solomon, fell prey to "the expansion syndrome; the more he got, the more he wanted. We always told those guys: 'You're blowin' it!' because they would budget out of our stores to open other ones. I literally have probably more titles in my store right now than we had at Tower back in the '80s."

The ironies are thick. "That's what this business has been about the past 30 years," Tim says with a laugh. "I'm telling' ya, it's just one irony after the other."

Finding and then setting up shop in Cedar City "was the best thing we could ever have done," Tim says. "Almost immediately — I mean, we weren't even open a month — we were doing twice the business." Not bad for a 3,000 square foot store in a town of 30,000 people. Nowadays, people travel from as far away as Las Vegas and Salt Lake City and from all over the world to visit Groovacious.

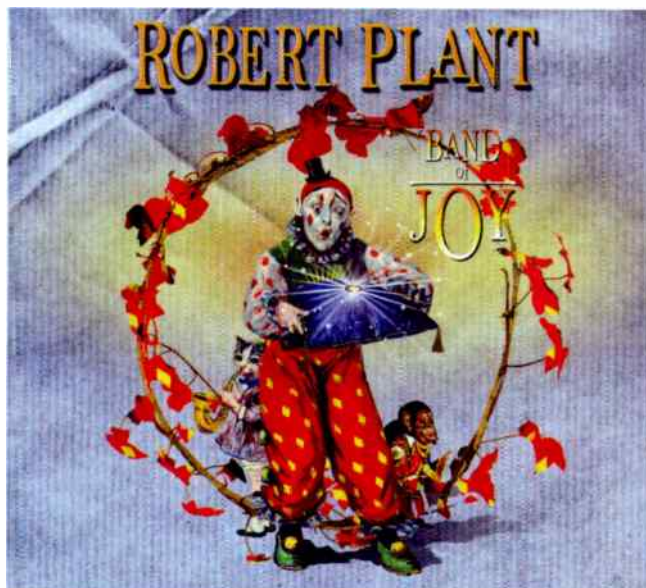
"When we came here, we set it up pretty much the way it was in Oregon. So, when people came in, it looked like we'd been here forever."

Rather than locating the store on a main shopping street, the Cretsingers chose a stand-alone location nearby. "We wanted to stand out. I'd rather stand out as an entity than be part of something else. I guess that comes along with being an independent."

Record Store Day is "a huge deal," Tim says. "People consider it a holiday." This year, "the turnout was exceptional. It was our busiest day since last Record Store Day and that's counting Christmas and everything."

Having said that, Tim agrees with the idea that all the positive attention, good vibes and good will associated with Record Store Day may prove difficult to sustain. "I can almost see it getting to be corporate as opposed to indie. 'You gotta do this and you gotta do that.' I hope Record Store Day doesn't turn into that. The concept is just awesome."





# Rock

Robert Plant *Band of Joy*  
Rounder 11661 9099 2

**B***and of Joy* is Robert Plant's long-awaited follow-up to *Raising Sand*, the remarkable album he made with Alison Krauss. Like *Raising Sand*, it is a rootsy exploration of American roots music, but the personnel are completely different.

Buddy Miller replaces Mark Ribot as principal guitarist and he is also listed with Plant as co-producer. Buddy was on the long Plant/Krauss tour, meshing brilliantly. Guess Plant was real simpatico with Miller's vast knowledge and familiarity with tons of "deep in the bag" blues, country and R&B.

Patty Griffin takes Krauss' role as female foil for Plant. On this disc, and though Patty does not have quite as high a profile as Krauss did, she still is a wonderful performer and irresistible presence. On her own, she is a songwriter whose work regularly astonishes me. Darrell Scott joins the band as utility man, playing acoustic guitar, mandolin, banjo, accordion and pedal-steel and lap-steel guitars. He brings a great variety of textures that dramatically expand the sonic palette available on this disc. He, too, has recorded a bunch of excellent albums on his own. He's a great writer (the Dixie Chicks tremendous hit "Long Time Gone" is one of his). He can sing like a flock of birds. Mario Giovino and Byron House are the rhythm section.

As on *Raising Sand*, if you expect to hear the screamer Robert Plant of bygone Led Zeppelin glory days, you will be disappointed. That is not his style here. But if, like me, you were attracted to Plant's more modulated, softer vocals on *Raising Sand*, you are gonna love *Band of Joy*. By the way the album title, *Band of Joy*, comes from the name of a band Plant led pre-Zep.

If anything, the songs Plant and Miller have selected are an even broader bunch than those of *Raising Sand* and some are from yet more obscure sources. I can only imagine what fun their song-winnowing sessions must have been and what wild songs they checked out en route to the final list.

The dozen finally chosen for the album skitter from contemporary sources like Los Lobos' "Angel Dance" and Richard Thompson's "House of Cards" (both pretty obscure choices from great catalogs) to traditional songs

"Cindy" and "Satan Your Kingdom Must Come Down.". I must confess that I had no memory at all of Townes Van Zandt's desperate "Harm's Swift Way"! And maybe for good reason, as it first surfaced in David Broza's 2010 album *Night Dawn: Unpublished Poetry of Townes Van Zandt* which I have never heard (and intend to hear as soon as I can!). Two very striking songs, the forlorn "Silver Rider" and the rutting if disturbing "Monkey" come from the Minnesota band Low, which has worked with Buddy Miller. "The Only Sound That Matters" is a Greg Vanderpool song that his Austin-based band Milton Mapes has done. "Falling in Love Again" emanates from Soul Stirrers Dillard Crane and Andrew Kelly. The finale "Even This Shall Pass Away" is a hymn written by 19th century abolitionist Theodore Tilton. All in all, this is a dazzlingly eclectic batch of songs from wildly diverse and unlikely sources.

The album sound of *Band of Joy* is delicious. Plant and Miller have loaded the tracks with subtle ear candy, odd sounds and blends of sounds that keep tweaking this listener's ear in unexpected ways. Between Miller's multitude of guitars and Scott's assortment of axes, they have a really wide tableau to instrumental palette from which to create the sound they want. This keeps the album sounding ever fresh!

In the spirit of fair disclosure, I confess Led Zeppelin was never one of my favorite bands, although many of their songs I do really love, especially some from the band's later work. They came on too pompous and self-important for my taste. Plant's post-Zep solo work has generally presented a restless and eclectic Plant trying on new sounds and directions, precisely the type of stylistic exploration I respect most and love to experience. First *Raising Sand* and now *Band of Joy* have become my favorite Robert Plant albums. This is in part due to the variety of players on the albums, but also partially from the song choices and the ways he has chosen to present them. I thoroughly recommend *Band of Joy*, one of the most adventurous albums to cross my path in ages.

Now if we can only talk someone into an American release of the long shelved live CD/DVD of Robert Plant and Alison Krauss.



Alfred Fredel

## LP Remaster

Harry Nilsson *A Little Touch of Schmilsson in the Night*  
Audio Fidelity AFZLP 083

**H**ARRY NILSSON is best known as a songwriter and balladeer from the early 1970s. Not the hottest live performer, Nilsson preferred the studio to the stage but had several hit singles that included "Without You," "Everybody's Talkin'," and "Coconut." For many years, he was the talk of the town and wrote songs for The Monkees, Little Richard, and many of the other luminaries of the Hollywood recording industry during that era. The Beatles are on record as being fans of Nilsson's

work. He was given Grammy Awards for two of his songs, best male contemporary vocal in 1969 for "Everybody's Talkin'" which was the theme song to the Academy Award-winning movie "Midnight Cowboy", and best male pop vocal in 1972 for "Without You."

This boy from Bushwick, Brooklyn was well regarded by the recording industry community but was widely considered to be a maverick. In 1973, Nilsson's disregard for commercialism in favor of artis-

tic satisfaction showed itself in the release of *A Little Touch Of Schmilsson In The Night*, an album that was made up of popular standards penned by such notable songwriters as Irving Berlin, Bob Cole, Gus Kahn and several others. On this project, Nilsson sang with accompaniment from 39 members of the London Symphony Orchestra, and the music was arranged and conducted by the legendary Gordon Jenkins in sessions produced by Derek Taylor between March 15th



and March 22nd, 1973. All of the cuts on the album flow into one another and have that classic sound that Jenkins also brought to the work of Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland and a host of other American icons from the same era. Although this album was not a commercial success, it remains one

mance. The vinyl is heavy in the hand and very flat, offering the listener a good starting point for better fidelity. Kevin Gray, very well-known in the industry for his remarkable professional standards and mastering abilities, remastered this album as well as many of the other albums within the series.

and fuller in the new release where his runs and phrasing on "It Had To Be You" are so much more present and personal than on the original recording. Finally, the bass response is simply stunning on the remastered recording. On some of the songs on the album, I did not realize that having the bass line

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**Schmilsson might be used as an example of what the big labels should have been doing all along.**

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of this singer's best performances captured on a recording.

Audio Fidelity has done a wonderful job bringing this classic album back to the listening public as part of its "Live On" series of 180+ gram virgin vinyl pressings. The series features classic recorded concert performances from such notable artists including Cheap Trick, The Grateful Dead, Kate Bush, Jethro Tull and several others. The covers in the series are either single- or double-gatefold packages that include all the original details and imagery of the recorded perfor-

This Audio Fidelity pressing of *A Little Touch Of Schmilsson In The Night* is far superior to the original pressing that was released on RCA records. When comparing them side-by-side, one cannot but help notice several things that make this new release one to own in your collection even if you have the original recording. First, the strings of the orchestra are open and alive and the dynamic range is fully realized in this remastered recording. On the original album, the strings feel more subdued and a bit bloated. Nilsson's voice seems sweeter

more present would make such a dramatic difference, but it did. There is much less surface noise and much better soundstage on this new release and that makes for a great listening experience to this set of ears.

I have enjoyed listening to this new pressing of Harry Nilsson's *A Little Touch Of Schmilsson In The Night* and I look forward to listening to other recordings from Audio Fidelity's "Live On" series. If you are into Harry Nilsson, pick up this great sounding album for your collection.

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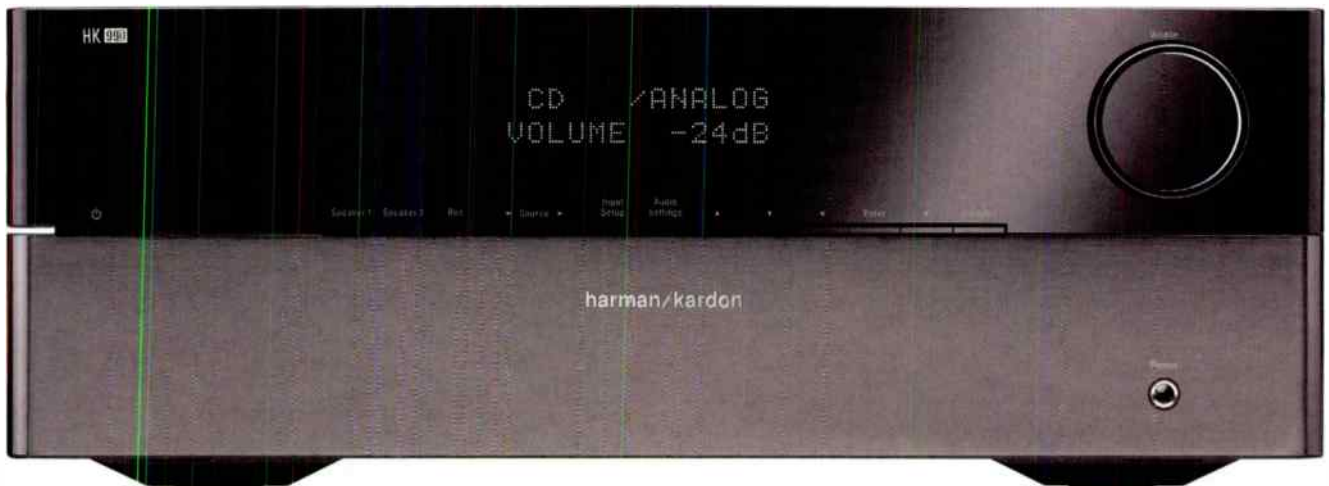
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"Wolfgang Meletzky, the man who founded MBL, has returned to the market with a new company ... Music Culture Technology, [which] brings German-made electronics and loudspeakers to moderate prices. I heard an absolutely fabulous-sounding system that included the MC 701 integrated amplifier (\$4500), MC 501 CD player (\$3400), and RL21 stand-mounted speaker (\$3300 a pair). These prices are a fraction of what [his previous] gear cost, but the products' look, feel and sound were decidedly upscale".  
— Robert Harley, The Absolute Sound, April 2011

# Harman Kardon HK990 Integrated Amp

George Graves



**C**ONTEMPLATING PURCHASE of new speakers? Buy this integrated amplifier instead. Thinking about a multi-kilobuck power amp? Buy the HK 990 instead. Eyeing a new phono preamp in order to climb back on the vinyl band-wagon? Buy this unit. Looking at high-end out-board DACs to use with your server or high-resolution digital sources? Purchase this H-K amplifier instead. Are you contemplating a new pre-amp? Get this Harman Kardon integrated amp instead.

I hear you just saying, "How can an integrated amplifier replace new speakers, a new DAC, a new pre-amp, a new phono stage *and* a new power amp?" Patience, gentle reader, all will be revealed. Because this isn't just another integrated amplifier. The Harman Kardon HK 990 is a revolutionary product, so concisely concentrated are all the control and signal-processing functions that it raises the bar on home stereo amps to a level never before seen by this reviewer. That's a tall order, but considering its features and its performance, the HK-990 is a real audio bargain. Consider: Similar units (most of which have nowhere near the feature set of the Harman-Kardon) can sell for up to five times the price of the HK 990.

Here's an integrated amp that, with its high-current dual mono power amp section, produces 150 BIG watts per channel. I say "big watts" because this integrated will instantaneously put out 200 amps of current at the amplifier's rail voltage. That's more current than most

high-end stand-alone power amplifiers, much less an integrated. Such a spec means that this puppy can drive any speaker load that you might wish to throw at it, at to any level you wish, and do so effortlessly, even at extremely high playback levels, even in largish rooms.

For the vinyl lover, this integrated amplifier has a low-noise, high-performance phono stage capable of handling either moving-magnet or moving-coil cartridges with accurate RIAA EQ. The result is some of the most articulate record playing performance this writer has ever heard.

As if that weren't enough, the HK 990 also has an on-board digital-to-analog converter providing a 24-bit, 192-kHz sampling-rate. It uses dual-differential chips from Analog Devices and up-samples lower resolution digital signals, such as 16-bit/44.1-kHz CDs, up to 24-bit/96-kHz. If you throw at it a true 24-bit, 192-kHz sampling rate DVD-A or a download from Linn or Chesky, you'll get the Full Monty. This function is generally the bailiwick of high-end, stand-alone DACs, yet the HK 990 will play these 24-bit, 192-kHz files, DVD-As and audio Blue-Rays natively, giving quality that compares very favorably with the results from stand-alone DACs designed for a single purpose. I know, because I compared them.

On top of these other features, HK has included a computerized room/speaker optimization system that comes with its own calibration microphone. Just place



the mike at the main listening position and start the process. The system will adjust the crossover frequency and the level for subwoofers (if any are connected), thus matching them to the full-range speaker system. It will also contour the full range system to provide flat frequency response at the listening chair. It does this via spectrum analysis of the room acoustics using frequency sweeps and tone "squirts" played through the speaker by the set-up program and application of digital signal processing. The procedure is

walk-up flat, and the boxed amp weighs close to 60 pounds; the net weight is about 45 pounds.

Dimensionally, the HK 990 is about 17.3125 inches wide by 6.375 tall and 17.5 deep. The front panel is dominated by a large two-line, vacuum fluorescent display and a uniquely lit volume control on the right hand side. When off, the top half of the front panel looks glossy black, and while the bottom is charcoal gray.

On the lower left-hand side of the fascia, there is a headphone jack which doubles as the microphone

ital inputs, and Toslink or coaxial. There are also buttons on the front panel for selection of the source being fed to the record-outs, analog or digital, which is one control not duplicated on the remote. All of these have up-and down and left-right buttons and an "Enter" button.

The end edges of the front fascia are beveled or rounded-off to blend into the side. On the left of the front panel is a light which is orange when the unit is in stand-by (off) and is blue-white when the unit is on. Because the edge is curved, these lights actually wrap around to

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**On every level, the HK 990 is a great choice  
for anyone wanting lots of flexibility and quality.**

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optional (and by-passable) and all or part of it can be done manually as well.

### A Physically Imposing Package

When the UPS delivery guy knocked on my door several weeks ago to deliver this amp, I thought he was having a coronary. I live in a

input jack for the room set-up process. On close inspection, one notices several very small push-buttons where the two halves of the front fascia meet. These are all but invisible from more than a few inches away, but they control power on/off, speaker selection, toggle through input selection, configure line-level inputs as to analog or dig-

the left side of the cabinet.

The volume control is the most prominent feature on the front panel, and unique in that the inside portion of the knob is scooped out like a small, shallow cup. When the power is on, the inside rim of this cup-shaped knob is uniformly lit with a blue-white light from behind, contrasting with the black outside surface of the knob; the look is very dramatic.

The top portion of the fascia hides a largish two-line, green fluorescent display. This gives information such as amp status, input selection, whether that input is analog or digital, volume control setting as well as left-right balance, bass and treble control, settings, etc. It also gives info about input set-up (digital or analog, Toslink or coaxial), and it even provides step-by-step instructions for using the room-optimization software. Unfortunately, what it does *not* do (and it should) is give good indication of what sampling rate the incoming digital signal is.

### Rear Panel Overload

The back panel looks pretty imposing because of the plethora of unusual features. First, there are four pairs of five-way binding posts for connecting two sets of speakers. These are WBT-style and seem very robust and well-made. While two sets of speakers are provided for, Harman-Kardon advises that unless both sets are 8-ohms nominal



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impedance or higher, they shouldn't be used simultaneously. Thanks to a good design choice, one can select either set or both from the front panel. I can see the other set used to power a passive subwoofer more than I can see a second set of speakers in another room.

The HK 990 has five sets of line-level inputs. These can be routed directly through the amp or can be bypassed by assigning these inputs to be fed, internally, by a digital source. When this is accomplished, any of four digital inputs (two Toslink or two coaxial via RCA jacks) can be assigned to any high-level input. It is possible to connect *both* an analog and a digital source to any one of the high-level inputs and then toggle between analog and digital using the remote control. It is even possible, again using the hand-held remote, to assign four digital sources to one input, and then toggle through them after that high-level input has been selected. The procedure for doing this is certainly straightforward enough if a little complicated to figure out the first time. Not to mention unusual!

The high-level input marked "CD" has one more option. Not only does it allow for unbalanced RCA-jack analog inputs as well as any of the four aforementioned digital inputs, but it also allows the user to select a pair of balanced (Cannon-type XLR) connectors as well. Why this pair of XLRs is *only* assignable to the CD input, I don't understand. Why not have the XLR pair assignable to any of the five line-level inputs the way that the digital inputs can?

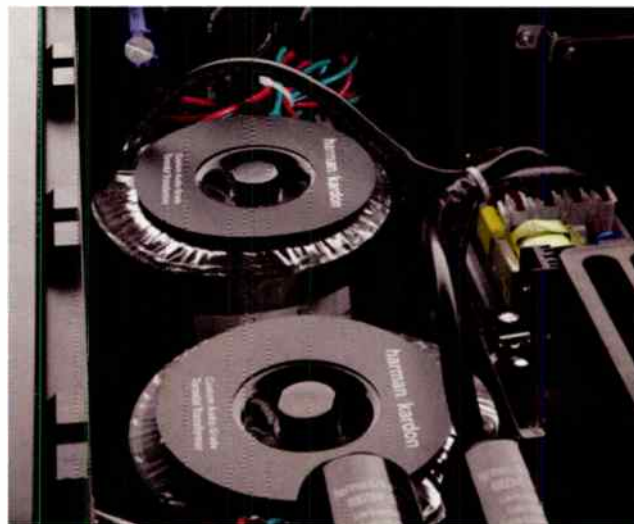
This integrated also has three tape recorder outputs. Two are analog (each with left and right stereo) and one is a digital output (that's right, this unit has an analog-to-digital converter (ADC) built in and will convert analog sources such as FM radio or LPs or analog tapes into a digital signal). I suspect that it's 16-bit/44.1-kHz sampling rate, in other words, CD quality, but the manual doesn't say.

The HK 990 can also be used as a preamp for a system that already has a very good power amp and for that purpose, it has a pair of preamp outputs jacks. It also has output jacks for up to two self-powered subwoofers and can even take a subwoofer input from an outboard surround processor. If the subwoofers take external triggers to power them on and off, the HK-990 provides for this as well with two subwoofer trigger signal inputs. The amp also provides for something called "HRS Synchronization" which syncs the clock of a compatible Harman Kardon CD player to the internal DAC in the amp. This is said to lower jitter and make CD playback more precise. Not having a HK CD player, I was unable to test this.

## Setting Up

While the HK 990 comes with a certain default setup whereby most of the high-level inputs are set to unbalanced (via RCA jacks) analog audio in, all of these can be changed by the user. The instruction manual (one of the skimpiest I've encountered) merely hints at the procedure for changing these defaults. After much futzing, I figured out how to do it, but it could be frustrating.

Let's say that you want to connect your CD player to this amp via a Toslink optical digital input. From either the front panel or the remote control, choose the "CD" input as the source. By default, this is set at "Unbalanced Analog" and the display on the front of the unit will say so. For convenience, I used the



remote to change this, but it can be done from the front panel.

Surrounding the central "cursor control" (a large round button with left, right, up, and down arrows printed on it) are four large buttons. The one on the upper right is marked "Input Setup." If you press this once, the unit goes into the "Input Assignment" mode. The first line of the fluorescent display will say "CD Analog" and the second line will say "Unbalanced." If you now hit the "Enter" button below the cursor control once, you can then scroll through the input type menu using the right-left cursor controls: *Unbalanced Analog, Balanced Analog (CD input only), Coaxial 1, Coaxial 2, Optical 1, Optical 2* and *HRS-Link* (again, CD input only for this choice).

When you find the input source that you wish to assign to this input, you hit the "Enter" button once. If you have selected one of the four digital inputs for that selection, the first line on the display will change from "CD Unbalanced" to "CD Digital" and the second line will confirm the digital input assigned to that selection choice. Hitting the "Input Setup" button one more time exits the setup mode.

You cannot select any other inputs or, indeed, even turn the unit off while still in the setup mode. The manual doesn't explain this but merely tells you to enter the "Input Setup" mode and to use the arrow buttons and the "Enter" button to facilitate changes. It doesn't explain the sequence and, most importantly, does not tell you that you must hit "Enter" after hitting "Input Setup," and before using the cursor control's left and right arrows to scroll through the input choices. If you don't push "Enter" before trying to change the input, the second line of the display will merely toggle between reading "Unbalanced Analog" and "Gain." I was very frustrated until I figured it out.

Since I have a number of digital sources, CD, DAT, DVD-A, and CD-RW recorder as well as my Apple TV (as a music server for my ripped CD collection and my interface to Internet radio), I had to configure most of the available line-level inputs to digital. The exception (oddly enough) is my Sony XA777ES SACD player. It is connected to the HK 990 via the analog unbalanced inputs because, to my knowledge, there has never been either an outboard processor for SACD nor an SACD player which had a digital output for SACD Direct Stream Digital bit stream (although most have a digital output which "comes alive" when a regular CD is played).



The default configuration for the phono input is moving magnet. It can be changed, via the same procedure outlined above, to accommodate moving coil. The MM input seems to work well with both my current favorite, a Grado Reference Master 1, and my alternate favorite, a Sumiko Blue Point No. 2, a high-output MC cartridge. I do not use a low-output MC cartridge at present. The manual says that the impedance of the moving-coil input is 100 kilohms; this is a misprint, and should read 100 Ohms.

One feature that the HK 990 has that I wish ALL control amps (preamps and integrated amps with multiple

"notes" the frequency response at the actual listening position.

The system then asks you to reposition the microphone directly in front of the left speaker and then the right speaker, in turn, about two feet from each, and again, I needed to push "Enter" for each. Longer sweeps were emitted from the each speaker in turn. This is called the "Near Field" Evaluation. This corrects the on-axis frequency response above 1 kHz for each of the two main speakers. The system then asks you to return the mike to the original listening position to set the final bass EQ below 1 kHz (bass is the range most affected by

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## The HK990's room optimization software will transform your listening room in ways that will open your eyes.

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inputs) had is the ability to set the gain ( $\pm 6$  dB) separately for each input. This option allows the user to normalize the level for each source. This avoids a situation where one source is significantly louder for a given volume control setting than is another. For me, this is especially useful because the digital output for my Apple TV box is significantly louder through any DAC I've ever used than is any other source. A thoughtless switch from phono to Apple TV without first reducing the volume will cause a lease-breaking burst of sound! Bravo, Harman Kardon!

### I Have New Speakers!

Perhaps the last frontier in home stereo accuracy is the listening room. Few of us can afford a purpose-built listening room, optimized solely for listening to music. But there is another way: Room optimization software which uses computer processing and digital room analysis to make the "as heard" response of one's speakers as linear as possible at the listening position. The Harman Kardon HK 990 takes advantage of this technology with the inclusion of "EzSet/EQ" room optimization software and hardware. Designed for two channels plus up to two subwoofers, the system comes with an omnidirectional microphone (with a threaded base for mounting on a camera tripod); it can be used either manually or do its job automatically.

First, one plugs the mike, which has a 25-foot cord, into the headphone jack on the front panel; it doubles as a microphone input when the EzSet/EQ mode is invoked. You place the mike at head height in your listening chair, then press the "Speaker Setup" button in the upper left-hand quadrant of the cursor control. The display on the front panel of the HK 990 asks you to select your sub-woofer set-up. Turn both to *On* if you have two subwoofers; if you have just one designed to be connected to BOTH the sub 1 and sub 2 outputs on the back of the amp, turn it *On*. Then the display will ask you to select either "automatic" or "manual" crossover frequency; I selected "automatic." Then, with the mike set-up properly, hit the "Enter" button. This started a series of chirps that come from my speakers. These are actually short but full-range frequency sweeps. This first test is called the "Far Field" evaluation which

room acoustics).

If all went well, that's it. The system prompts you to disconnect the microphone and hit "Enter" to save the settings. Now hit "speaker setup" again to exit the setup mode. It is possible that the system will ask you to move the microphone twice more to a point parallel with but three feet to both the left and right of your listening position for more bass tuning. In my situation, it did not.

The results are not subtle. This room/speaker EQ totally transformed the sound of my system and did it in ways that I hadn't expected.

### EQ'd vs. Not EQ'd

My system consists of a pair of Martin Logan Aeon-i hybrid electrostatic speakers and a pair of recently acquired Athena P-3 self-powered subwoofers. The Athenas each contain a downward-firing 10-inch woofer and are each powered by their own 200-watt solid-state amplifier. While designed as part of a larger A/V surround system, these subs can be used as stand-alone units. While the P3s have a continuously variable crossover point from 100 Hz to 40 Hz, and can be level-matched to most any system, I often found myself fiddling with both the crossover point and the subwoofer level, trying to get a seamless match. After running the set-up program, one of the first things I noticed is that for the first time since I bought them, the P3s sounded *right*. Suddenly the bass seemed to be an extension to the Martin Logans rather than an addition *to* them.

The Martin Logans were even more spectacularly transformed. Not only did the normally relatively seamless integration between the cone driver and the electrostatic panel become even better, but the speakers just seemed to disappear! Suddenly the music sounded more real, more alive. The speakers sounded absolutely natural. I pulled out my trusty Radio Shack sound level meter and ran a test CD of a slow frequency sweep from 20 Hz to 20 kHz. First I ran the sweep with the EQ out of the circuit, then I ran it again with the EQ cut back in. The difference was a real eye opener! In my room, the Aeon-i speakers exhibit a rather large (+3 dB) peak at 500 Hz, substantial (-4 dB) dip at around 2 kHz, and a rising response above about 5 kHz up to about 10 kHz, after which it starts to fall off (but this might be the SPL meter). With the EQ switched in, the meter never

varied more than a dB or two over the entire spectrum from about 40 Hz to beyond 10 kHz (I don't trust the Radio Shack meter below 100 Hz or above about 10 kHz).

While I expected the changes in measured response with the "EzSet/EQ" switched into the system, I was totally unprepared for the

the trumpet. I asked him to pick the position of each instrument (not telling him what the instruments were nor *where* they were). He was able to quickly name and pin-point every instrument, correctly placing the drum set behind the marimba, and the speaker for the electric guitar slightly to the right and behind

## Harman-Kardon's HK990 really shines in handling large works at the highest levels.

changes in sound staging and imaging brought about by taming the speaker/room interaction.

I do a lot of recording, and since I use only true-stereo microphone techniques, I tend to get recordings that have almost visually palpable instrumental placement of the ensemble being recorded. Actually being there for the performance also helps to great degree when playing these recordings back. Since I can remember where the instruments should be in the sound field, localization of individual instrument locations is easier. Even if one's system doesn't image that well, your mind's eye can fill in blanks left by less than perfect imaging.

While the Martin Logans are not slouches in sound staging and imaging, I never thought that they had the pin-point localization of a pair of Rogers LS-3 5As or other mini-monitors. After doing the "EzSet/EQ" setup, I played the 24-bit, 192-kHz DVD-A recording I made of a local jazz ensemble. For the first time, I didn't have to conjure-up a mental image of the ensemble's deployment to be able to accurately locate the different instruments in space. Realizing that this imaging improvement still might be my imagination, I asked an audiophile buddy of mine to drop by, one who'd not been at the recording session. I placed him in the hot seat, and started the recording. The ensemble consisted of a marimba on the extreme right, a set of snares behind the marimba, an upright bass in the center, a hollow-body electric guitar to the left of the bass, a trumpet on the far left, and a full keyboard electric piano behind

the trumpet. The trumpet, he put on the first row to the far left of the sound stage, and the bass solidly dead center!

This improvement in imaging was totally unexpected. On recording after recording, I found the same phenomenon. Instruments were etched to their relative positions in the sound field. The next step was to do the same experiment with the "EzSet/EQ" out of the system. Luckily, this can be done from one's listening chair, on the fly, with the remote control. Switching from EQ to "no EQ" caused the sound field to collapse with "popped balloon" immediacy while the image specificity became much less precise. Impressive!

### The HK 990's Actual Sound

First, I want to make a general statement about amplifiers. Even though all modern, well-designed amplifiers sound much more alike than did the amps of old, there is still no doubt that each amp has its own character and while these different characteristics might not show-up under all listening conditions, the fact remains that, as a writer for another magazine so unerringly and correctly stated it, anyone who believes that all amps sound the same is either uninformed, without experience, religiously inculcated, insane, or unable to hear properly (I changed the wording to avoid plagiarism, but the sentiment and intent of the author has been preserved).

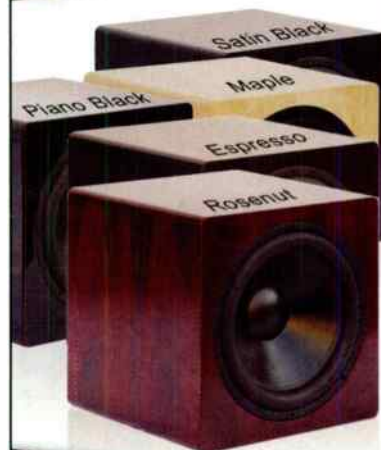
For these listening tests, I resisted temptation and bypassed the "EzSet/EQ" settings, returning the

## Introducing the new ULS-15

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HK 990 to its "flat" response configuration. The reason for this is that I wanted to be able to evaluate the sound of the amp, not the computer-equalized speakers and room. I used a variety of formats from LP to CD, to SACD, DVD-A, DAT tape and internet radio and computer-based sources.

Like most modern amplifying devices, the Harmon Kardon HK 990 is pretty neutral sounding. There are no glaring faults or characteristics to the sound from any source, analog or digital. Prolonged listening did uncover for me subtle characteristics of sound staging, imaging, and sonic detail that might or might not be detected in your usual ABX or double-blind listening test.

### Let It All Hang Out...

I had two very good integrated amps in my listening room during this review period, a Krell KAV-300iL which offers 150 watts per channel and this Harman Kardon HK 990 also putting out 150 watts per channel. The difference? The HK 990 has  $\pm 200$  amperes of rail current to the output devices (instantaneously) from dual power supplies (one for each channel), while the Krell has a much smaller single power supply for both channels. Most of the time, the amps sound pretty much the same (and that's very, very good). I could happily live with either one. But I recently recorded using DSD, a huge 100-piece symphonic band arrangement of Ravel's "Bolero." This work is, essentially, one long crescendo which builds and builds to an explosion of instrumental colors and blaring brasses. The Krell, the more expensive of the two amps, and which normally sounds magnificent, compresses the final moments of the "Bolero" when played at full-tilt while the Harman Kardon lets it all hang out. The dynamic contrast between the two amps is amazing and one doesn't need a double-blind test to notice this. The headroom of the HK amp tells it all, really. Well-designed modern amps sound remarkably similar at low to moderate or even loud listening levels in small rooms; what separates them is how they behave on large-scale works at the highest levels. I'm happy to report that HK 990 is better in this respect than any other amplifier that I have ever auditioned, whether an integrated unit or separate pre-amp/amp.

There are two "instruments" which truly test any amplifier's mettle. One is the solo human voice (male or female) and mass voices in a large choir (a boys' choir is even more telling, but they are so hard to record that it's difficult to find decent demonstration material). To test both orchestral color and vocal performance, I chose the SACD performance on Telarc of Ralph Vaughan Williams' oratorio "A Sea Symphony" with the Atlanta Symphony and Chorus conducted by Robert Spano (SACD-60588). This work uses a full symphony orchestra as well as a full chorus punctuated by Walt Whitman's words sung by a soprano (Christine Goerke) and a baritone (Brent Polegato). Lavished with Telarc Executive Producer Robert Woods' spectacular sound, this oratorio, when played at decent levels on a good system, will show its shortcomings almost immediately. Both solo voices struck just the right balance, neither too reticent nor too forward, with none of the feeling of compressed dynamics that one often gets with solo voice. I have heard this work on amplifiers that gave Ms. Goerke's robust soprano voice a slight edge on peaks. I suspect that

this could be amplifier clipping, but with the HK 990 there was none of it. Her voice was clean and pure at all levels of dynamic contrast. Polegato's rich baritone lacked the chesty character that I have heard in my listening room before, but with the HK 990's room/speaker "normalization" software invoked, the chesty quality was gone, I was able to bring it back by momentarily cutting the EQ out of the system. With the "EQ1" selected, the chesty quality is gone; with the "Direct Path" selected, it was back. Impressive. But the real test was when the orchestra and chorus were in full song ("Behold, the sea itself!"). Not a hint of dynamic compression, even at lease-shattering volume levels. Conversely, in places where the chorus is singing just above a whisper, there is not a hint of undue sibilance and the words are easy to understand. This is not that unusual, but shows a level of microdynamics that is rare in equipment at this price point. Nice.

### Phono Performance

To test the phono stage, I pulled out my Classics Records copy of Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony performing Respighi "Pines of Rome" (RCA Red Seal "Living Stereo" LSC-2436 which are four single-sided, 45-rpm, 200-gram vinyls). I certainly wasn't expecting this 50+ year old commercial analog recording to have anywhere near the dynamic contrasts and just plain jaw dropping sound that were exhibited by my totally unprocessed, modern DSD recording of the Ravel "Bolero," but I was surprised at the fact that in places where the instrumentation was similar, the two pieces sounded more alike than I expected. Since I am quite familiar with this commercial recording of "Pines," I was taken aback by the fully and well-delineated vinyl playback on this amp. In short, the phono stage in the HK 990 seemed exemplary, revealing far more depth and detail than the phono stage in my Audio Research SP9 MKII, for instance.

To be sure about this, I pulled out my BMG SACD copy of this same performance (RCA 82876-71614-2) and listened to both copies at some length. Sound-wise, there is little to choose between them (one just doesn't need to change records every 8-12 minutes as one needs to do with the single-sided 45-rpm records)! The SACD seems a bit shy on the deep bass, compared with the vinyl (but this is not necessarily anybody's fault. Vinyl playback is an electro-mechanical phenomenon, and is therefore fraught with potential resonances that can either enhance or detract from certain frequency ranges, even when using the very best of playback equipment). Other than that, both renditions seemed very similar. Both had good high-frequency extension without being overly bright. Part of this is due, I realize, to the very uncolored nature of my Grado Reference Master 1 phono cartridge. Unlike virtually all moving coils, this variable-reluctance cartridge sounds absolutely flat in frequency response, and is extremely smooth over the entire frequency range). One only has to contrast a state-of-the-art vinyl pressing with the same recording on SACD (as with the Respighi) to hear just how accurate the Grado is (MC fans need not apply. You won't like the Grado and will find it "dull" sounding). While I've noticed this tonal neutrality before, I've never heard this level of detail and air from phono playback before. This made me somewhat suspicious of the

Harman Kardon's phono stage RIAA accuracy, so I pulled out my trusty Old Colony Sound inverse-RIAA filter (which I built many years ago using precision 1% resistors and capacitors), and my audio oscillator and VTVM (both by H-P). I found that from about 30 Hz all the out to 15 kHz, the HK's RIAA curve was the most accurate I've ever measured, not off more than a half a dB over the range from 30 Hz to 15 kHz and up only about 1 dB at 20 Hz and down just a hair over 1 dB at 20 kHz! This is extraordinary performance for any phono stage, but for one that's sold as part of an integrated amplifier, it's pretty much unheard of.

## D to A ... A to D

As home audio systems become more and more digital and less and less analog, it has become necessary for any system to have a good digital-to-analog converter. The other route is to keep the sound sources in the digital domain right up to the speakers. NAD's M2 Class-D integrated takes digital input signals and leaves them in the digital domain up until the Class-D switching amp converts them directly to analog. All analog inputs to the NAD are converted immediately to digital. While such a technique is probably the future of home audio, the price of the technology will keep it out of most of our systems for the near term.

That means that we need to convert digital signals to ordinary analog audio for source selection, modifications, and distribution. There are a good number of stand-alone D/A converters available and one can pay about \$100 for a cheap one or over \$15,000 on the high end. This approach has advantages. One can assign as much of one's audio budget to the DAC as one sees fit. If all you have is a CD player, you don't

really need an outboard DAC at all. But if you have ripped much of your CD collection to your computer and are using some kind of music server to play these titles back on your audio system, or if you are downloading high-resolution files from online sources such as Reference Recordings, Chesky, Linn, NAIM, HDTracks, etc., then you definitely need a DAC. And you will probably want one that can handle anything from the 16-bit/44.1-kHz Red Book CD standard all the way up to 24-bit/192-kHz high-resolution sources.

And here is where the HK 990 adds a feature that you simply don't see on other units; its extensive record-out section sports its own analog-to-digital converter! Any stereo source chosen for recording will appear at the usual output RCA jack pair and as a digital signal via a single coaxial RCA. This includes all analog inputs. Thus, you can digitize your LP collection while listening to them, or if you have a large reel-to-reel or cassette collection, you can convert those to digital. This can be especially useful if you are using a computer to archive your music. With the proper adapters, this digital audio signal can be directly connected to many computers. I have both a pro Otari DAT deck and a pro TASCAM CD recorder in my system. While both have their own built-in A/D converters, it's much easier to make perfect digital copies by going direct digital-in to either. I was unhappy that the manual didn't say what the A/D sampling rate was and the engineering folks at H-K USA weren't helpful on this point either. Transferring an LP to CD told me that analog inputs default to a 16-bit/44.1-kHz output. This is fine as it's what you would normally want. However, I also have an out-of-print copy of the 24-bit/192-kHz DVD-A recording of *Sinatra at the Sands with the Count Basie*



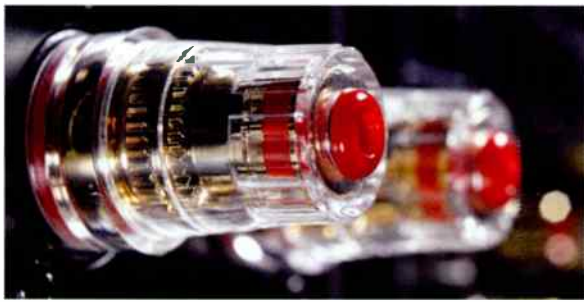
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*Orchestra* that I borrowed from a friend. I have tried making a copy of it for my own use with various computer solutions, but the thing is well copy-protected and I simply cannot copy it. So, I figured I'd let the HK 990 give it a go. I have a refurbished Denon DVD deck which I bought on E-Bay for a ridiculous price which purports to play anything short of a Blu-Ray disc (including SACD). I use it exclusively for audio. Taking the digital out from the Denon into a digital input on the HK 990, I find that the HK's DAC decodes the 24-bit, 192-kHz audio perfectly. Unfortunately, when I turn on my TASCAM CD recorder and set it to digital input, it does not lock on to the digital output of the HK's record-out as it is supposed to do. Now, I know that the digital record out on the HK 990 will allow me to copy a CD or the decompressed output of a streaming Internet radio signal (both 16-bit/44.1-kHz), but it doesn't seem to down-convert a 24-bit/192-kHz source to 16-bit/44.1-kHz. I ended up having to feed the TASCAM from the analog record outputs of the HK 990 in order to copy the Sinatra disc. Not the ideal solution for a 24-bit/192 kHz source. Of course, I wish to make it clear that the main reasons that I copied this disc were two-fold: (1) it's out of print and otherwise unavailable on hi-res digital and (2) I wanted to test the digital record output capabilities of the Harman-Kardon. I do not recommend or support piracy.

### Yes, I'm Impressed, But....

There are a few niggles. (The editor tells me that I **MUST** include some.) First of all, the remote control unit feels cheap and the buttons are dark gray over black, difficult to see low light and impossible in the dark. Even though each has a translucent surround, and look as if they might be back-lit, they aren't.

This next remote-control problem won't bother many, but I don't think there's a way to remedy it. I have an H-K A/V surround receiver on my home theater setup in addition to the HK 990 and both are in the same room. If I use either my A/V's remote or the HK 990's remote, both systems are affected. If, for instance, I use the HK 990's remote to turn on the amp, the A/V receiver comes on, too. Neither seems to have a means to change either of the remotes so it doesn't inadvertently operate both units.

Next, the instruction manual tells little or nothing about the unit. For instance, does the DAC up-convert sampling rate and bit-depth (like CD at 16-bit/44.1-kHz to 24-bit/192-kHz)? What is the bit-depth and sampling rate of the analog-to-digital converter for making digital recordings? How does one change the high-level inputs from "Analog Unbalanced" to "Digital"? How does one switch the "EzSet/EQ" into or out of the system? I'd like to see exact, step-by-step discussions on how to accomplish these important tasks because this is a complicated component.

While most of the controls on the remote are also on the front panel, this isn't as a convenient way to control the unit as you might expect. First, the buttons and labels are tiny, and the labels are printed in silver/gray ink that is almost impossible to read.

The next niggle is an admittedly small one. With a built-in high-resolution DAC, it would be nice to have some indication on the front panel of what bit resolution is being used. With a two-line VF display, the editor and I both wanted a series of symbols along the periphery of the display that could light-up to indicate 44.1, 48, 88.2, 96, 176.4, and 192 KHz inputs. But it doesn't. Since it shows which set of speakers is on, etc., this is not unreasonable.

I didn't initially understand the inclusion of an RS-232 serial port but later found it is only for testing and calibration during final assembly. Computers haven't had serial ports for years, but I think this interface could use a USB port for both factory calibration and firmware upgrades by the owner.

My last niggle is that the volume control itself felt flimsy, awkward to grip, and relatively stiff to turn. My 10-year old H-K "video receiver" uses a volume control which is a heavily weighted metal knob that literally glides on its shaft. Give it a spin and one goes from maximum to minimum almost instantaneously.

### Conclusion

When I started this review, I mentioned that purchasing the Harman-Kardon HK 990 integrated amplifier was the perfect alternative to contemplating such purchases as new speakers (because the "EzSet/EQ" system makes the speakers you have sound like new while in addition compensating for less than ideal room acoustics) or a new power amp (the dual-power supply 150 watt per channel amplifier in this unit, with its high-current capability, ultra-wide bandwidth, and low feedback design sounds as good as any amp I've heard at up to twice this unit's modest \$2400 price), or a new preamp (its extreme flexibility, with a large numbers of high-level inputs, ability to feed two tape recorders including digital recorders, and built-in MM/MC phono stage make it far more useful than most modern preamps with their two or three line-level only inputs and it too sounds great!), or a new DAC (24-bit/192 KHz with two Toslink and two coaxial inputs, dual-differential DAC chips in a dual mono configuration with an all discrete component audio path, makes this Digital-to-Analog converter sound every bit as good as such contenders as the Benchmark DAC-1, or the even pricier and highly-touted MSB "Power DAC," both of which I've heard).

So, yes, on almost every level, the HK 990 is a viable purchase for anyone needing great flexibility, lots of options, and great sound. It can be a new set of speakers. It can be that new high-end power amp, it can be that new preamp or that new high-res DAC you've been lusting after. Sure, it has a few minor flaws, but make no mistake, most of the HK 990's flaws are sins of omission rather than commission, and none of them impact performance. Ultimately, the few niggles that I have with this component are not that important. I am so thoroughly enchanted by this unit that I am planning on buying it! (If I can't get the magazine to buy this one for me as compensation for years of drudgery!) (Actually, George, I am buying this one for myself. Gene)

# Music Culture Technology *RL 21 Speakers*

Bernard Kingsley



I AM ALWAYS a bit suspicious when I am told in advance that a speaker will sound good. And I am doubly suspicious when it is the editor telling me about his latest and greatest find. Not that I don't trust other people's ears, but it's just that often those speakers are heard in ideal settings (say, at a dealership that knows what it's doing). Bring them into a "normal" living room and the sound can easily be altogether different.

When I received these speakers which had been lauded by *Ye Editor*, I was determined to give them a true test in what I consider normal usage. I had no quality source during the first few hours they were in my possession, but I was eager to try them out and finally ended up hooking up my iPod. I do have a large number of uncompressed files on the Pod and thought the sound might be marginally decent until other sources could be connected.

My immediate impression was very positive. Solid bass, strong high frequencies and a good midrange (yeah, I know, that pretty much covers the range). Later on, my sound sources were better, but did not alter my first impression. I soon hooked up some of my reference sound sources and started playing. But first, I needed to do some set up, something that's ordinarily beneficial for any set of speakers.

Shortly after my initial set-up and audition of these RL 21s, I decided to move them around a bit, to determine if there was perhaps a still-better placement for them in my listening room. In the process, I discovered that they were not really sensitive to placement as long as I was half-way reasonable about it. Yes, they have a rear port and that requires some consideration since you don't want to put any such port tight up against a wall. For many critical listeners, bass response is almost



always the major consideration, and the RL 21's bass response varied a bit depending on placement. But to me, more critically, I noticed that no matter where I put these babies, they delivered a seamless soundstage. Even placing them fairly far apart didn't break that stage. Close your eyes and you are greeted with a wide and deep soundstage for your music. This fine quality soundstage outweighed any bass response variation that came from changes in location.

After breaking them in for a couple of weeks using a variety of music, I settled in for serious listening. My taste in music ranges widely and I listened to rock (Rolling Stones), Country (Emmylou Harris on DVD Audio) and classical (Haydn and Mozart). I also listened to some Bonnie Raitt and Johnny Lee Hooker. You should know it was very hard to "critically listen" to these speakers since they often ended up involving me in the music that I stopped taking notes and listening with an editor's ear and just sat back and enjoyed it all. Still, remembering my obligation to you, dear reader, and my long-suffering editor, I did come to some critical conclusions.

Bass is surprisingly good for this size box and driver. But then, over the years, I have become impressed with what can be done with a 6.5-inch driver given a proper



without being "edgy," and natural. Yes, I said natural; I have heard lots of live music. I am not going to give you some bull about hearing things I never heard before because I have listened to too many speakers for that

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### The thing I like best about the RL 21 is its incredible midrange, with vocals among my top five, ever!

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enclosure. I initially thought that I might try out my HSU subwoofer with them, but decided it wasn't necessary. Whether it was the bass guitar on the Stones or the cello in Haydn, these speakers delivered. Bass reaches well down to 40 Hz and is solid. Transient response and damping are very good. In other words, the bass is authoritative when it should be and stops when it's supposed to stop (that stopping part is a problem with far too many speakers). Most of our readers will not require a subwoofer, unless one often listens to music which really goes down below 30 Hz (very few recordings do).

I am sensitive to beaming tweeters and this is always a concern for me with I am presented with new speakers. I just hate it when I have to sit tight in one "sweet" spot just to hear the whole soundstage properly. I am therefore happy to report that the RL 21 delivers high frequencies with wide dispersion. Moving left to right did cause some slight changes, but the soundstage and the high frequency dispersion was always good. I have been told that many German speakers have a tendency to exaggerate bright high frequencies, and that might be the case with other brands. My usual speakers are also of German origin, Elacs, so perhaps you can argue that I am simply used to lots of high frequency. I can only reply that I like high frequencies IF they are clean without being grating, and these speakers deliver!

Given all of the above, I haven't talked about what I probably like best about these speakers: The incredible midrange. Strings, be the notes from acoustic guitar or violin, reveal resonance and warmth when called for and bite when that's in order. Voices are clear, distinct

and read too many reviews. However, I will tell you that when it comes to vocals, these speakers easily are among the top five I have heard! Ever!

So, you might think I forgot about the physical stuff. These are two-way bookshelves (of course, you are not really going to put them on a bookshelf) rated from 45 Hz to 30 kHz. They are considered 4-ohm speakers, ideal for the Krell I was using to drive them. Do check

## NOTES

**Music Culture Technology RL 21 Speakers**, \$2,995.00. Distribution in the United States by VSO Marketing, LLC, Fairfield Industrial Campus, 16 Passaic Ave., Unit #6, Fairfield, NJ 07004; phone 973/808-4188; fax 973/808-1055; e-mail [moltz@vsomarketing.com](mailto:moltz@vsomarketing.com), web site [www.music-culture.us](http://www.music-culture.us)

#### **Associated Equipment**

Krell KAV-300IL Integrated Amp, Denon SACD-DVD-A DVD 756S player, iPod Nano with Wadia 170i Transport, and OPPO DV-980H Universal CD/SACD/DVD/DVD-A player.

your amp since some don't do well with low-impedance speakers. Sensitivity is quite good at 84 dB SPL for 2.83 volts input. A 6½-inch Kevlar woofer and a good size rear port take care of the bass and most of the midrange. A 1-inch soft dome tweeter handles the upper end.

The RL 21s seem heavy for their volume and also to weigh a ton, though actually each one comes in at about 12 kg or just under 27 pounds. Knocking on the cabinet gives a solid, dense response. No resonance here. Aesthetically, you can get them in rosewood, piano black, metallic black or silver. I got the silver ones for this review and they looked very good with their black grilles (which were mostly off during listening sessions). In the spousal acceptance area, my girlfriend, Helen-Marie, thought they were more attractive dressed in grilles and that maybe they should be smaller. (They come in at about 220 x 364 x 381 millimeters; I will let



turer, which did meet the specs for recommended height, were placed on spikes and were quite attractive. The stands used could have been filled with shotgun

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**The new Music Culture brand should cut through some myths of the high end being only high priced.**

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the editor do the conversion math. (Editor's Math: that's 8.66 x 14.33 x 15 inches.) Still, Helen-Marie liked the looks of the RL 21s well enough to give a thumbs up. (Editor's Translation: She gave these speakers a high Décor Score.)

I should note that I did not use the optional Musical Culture stands but rather a pair from another manufac-

ture, which did meet the specs for recommended height, were placed on spikes and were quite attractive. The stands used could have been filled with shotgun

As I am writing this, the price for a pair of RL 21s is \$2,995. I would have expected them to cost quite a bit more. Maybe Musical Culture cut some corners on the profit end ... they clearly didn't cut any corners on the build, parts and design quality.

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# B

## ack Page



# Photos Never Lie!

## These lads ...

are Dylan (as Dusty Hill), Nathan (as Frank Beard) and Ryan Garcia (as Billy Gibbons), actual triplets, age 8, who were third graders at Houston's Harvard Elementary. They won 1st place for best costumes in the Timbergrove Neighborhood Halloween Carnival. Ryan Gracia offered some pithy commentary: "We loved dressing like ZZ Top because they're so cool and they rock! I mean, who else would we be? The Jonas Brothers?" Photo is by their father, Gary Garcia, a lifelong ZZ Top fan; costume design by their mom, Pam Garcia, another ZZ Top "lifer."

Courtesy of Bob Merlis, A West Coast PR man who does not have a beard (I think).

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Photo: Gary Garcia

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# The Audiophile Voice

Vol. 14, No. 3; \$5.95 US; \$8.50 Can

## The Rolling Stones Edition

Reviews of 180-Gram Heavy-Weight Audiophile LP Reissues; Keith Richard's "Life" Autobiography; Ron Wood's "Feel Like Playing" CD; Concert DVDs: "Exile on Main Street" and "Ladies and Gentlemen, The Rolling Stones."

### Equipment Reviews

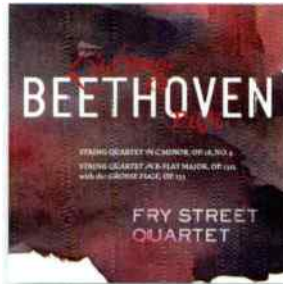
Denon DBP-100 "Plays Every CD"  
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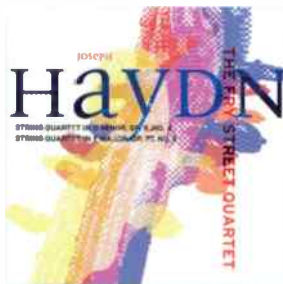
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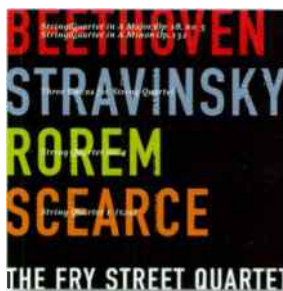
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String Quartet in F **Major**, Opus 77, No. 2  
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String Quartet in D **Minor**, Opus 9, No. 4  
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# Rocky Mountain Audio Fest - 2010

WE HAVE BOTH been attending RMAF for years, finding it to be the most enjoyable of all the audio shows. It's held at the Tech Center Marriott in Denver, a hotel large enough to accommodate most visitors, yet small enough to be intimate. (The overflow is at the Hyatt Regency, a short distance away). Evenings find exhibitors and attendees mingling at the Marriott's atrium bar and restaurant. It's a chance to compare notes with other audiophiles and talk with designers and manufacturers in a relaxed setting. Impromptu after-hours demonstrations and shoot-outs occur. All this is in addition to a full range of seminars conducted by luminaries such as John Atkinson, Michael Fremer, Keith Johnson, and Harry Pearson. Such up-grading of knowledge can make all that equipment almost seem extraneous. Anyway, here's our take on gear we found worth your attention.

Chuck Bruce & Dave Schwartz

## Chuck's Picks

**Kaiser** Kawero loudspeakers (\$66K/pair) powered by a pair of **Silicon Arts** 200-wpc Model ZL-200 monoblocks (\$40K/pair) with signals from an Esoteric X-01D2 SACD player, **Concert Fidelity** 040 D/A and are stored vintage **Denon** DP 3000 turntable and **Shelter** MC cartridge provided a very engaging and "live" scale playback of both CD and LP. To these ears, the expansive soundstage was enhanced by the **RAAL** ribbon super-tweeters which were mounted atop each Kawero tower cabinet.

Another winner for me was the **Daedalus Audio** Ulysses floor standing DA-1.1 3-way loudspeakers (\$8,450 per pair) showcased with a pair of **Daedalus** BOW optimized subwoofers mated with a precision 55-Hz external crossover. A bi-amped pair of **Modwright** KWA 150-wpc solid-state power amps was employed. Both **Gill** and **Art Audio** electronics were used in the source as was a **Galibier** turntable.

**Musical Fidelity** demonstrated an ensemble of top-line electronics featuring their zero-feedback, pure class-A, triode tube amp, the Amsprimo SE, with their Balanced preamp, and their AMS CD player which incorporates both single-ended and balanced topology. These units sent source materials to the firm's 50/100 wpc AMS 50 high-current, solid-state stereo power amp which was driving **Verity Audio** Amadis modular tower loudspeakers (\$30K per pair). Using the best recordings, the purity of instrumental tones was about as good as it gets.

**Magico's** Q5 4-way tower loudspeakers were stirring souls with their dynamic response while paired with **Spectral Electronics** for power. The rhythm conveyed in this room was enough to make stones dance.

Photos: Chuck Bruce & Dave Schwartz



Of special interest was the source, a **Nagra T-Audio** studio grade R-to-R tape machine.

**Von Schweikert** showcased their new \$7,995 per pair Model VR 35 tower loudspeaker sourced via a pair of 50-wpc, 1610 tube power amps named the Kronzilla by **KR Audio**. In another room were the new **VS Audio** Model 33 towers offered at \$3,750 per pair. These were sourced by **JD** brand 3000B tube preamp, **100A CD** player and **1000 P** tube power amp offering 100 wpc. Priced at \$1k, \$950, and \$2K respectively, a lot of bang for the buck here. A beautifully refurbished **Tascam** UHA R-to-R tape machine was spinning hi-rez tapes.

The new **Avalon** Ascendant loudspeaker was showcased with the latest **Jeff Rowland** Model 625 solid-state power amp launched at \$13K and offering 300 wpc into 8 ohms. Jewel like in appearance and construction, this new amp exhibited excellent synergy with the new somewhat down-scaled Avalons that resemble their big brother Eidolons. Offered at a more affordable cost at \$14k per pair, I didn't feel that much was lost compared to their big brothers in this demo.

#### Dave's Picks

There were many fine loudspeakers to be heard. **JBL** demonstrated their DD66000 Project Everest speakers. Weighing in at 300 lbs, and costing \$30-35K each, this is the firm's no-holds-barred, state-of-the-art speaker system. **Joseph Audio** was showing their \$7000/pair Pulsar monitors. Based upon their reference Pearl speakers, they offered a similar sonic signature in a smaller more affordable package. **Siegfried Linkwitz** demonstrated his Orion speakers, a 3-way system requiring 4 power amplifiers per side. Linkwitz does not manufacture these speakers, but sells design documentation and necessary parts. They can be purchased complete with amplifiers starting at \$9200 from **Wood Artistry**, or they can be assembled by DIYers for \$2800 in about 80 hours of construction time. **High Emotion Audio** showcased their Pyra Bella 5 (\$4950) and Pyra Bella 7 (\$5950) speakers featuring a patented bending wave transducer for a tweeter. **Anthony Gallo** demonstrated a prototype of his new non-round speaker system featuring a 180-degree version of his unique tweeter.

Like Chuck, I was impressed with the **Kaiser Kawero** loudspeakers. Also present in that room were **Stein H2** Harmonizers. These powered tweaks are 6-inch cubes, costing \$1200 each, that are said to work by stimulating oxygen molecules to improve the viscosity of the air. Since they were always on, I could not determine the extent of their effect on this excellent sounding system. Digital speaker and room correction processors were offered by **AudioVolver** and **DEQX** which was introducing their \$1950 HDP-Express a lower priced version of their \$3990 HDP-3 pre-amp processor. Conventional acoustic room treatments were offered by **GIK** and **Napa Acoustics**.

Rather than trying to clean up a.c. power, some manufacturers are switching to battery power. **Veloce Audio** showed their \$15,000 LS-1 tube line stage and \$3000 LP-1 tube phono module along with their \$14,000 V-6 120-180 watt hybrid monoblocks; all battery powered. **Red Wine Audio** offered a complete line of battery powered components including their 30-wpc \$3000 Signature 30.2 integrated amplifier, their \$4000 Isabella vacuum tube preamp, and the \$5200 pair of Signature



**JBL's DD66000 Project Everest.**

70.2 35-watt mono-blocks, together with their \$1500 Isabellina DAC.

The use of computers in audio is a growing trend. Many of the display rooms had a computer based music server in their front end. There was an abundance of USB DACs ranging in price from the **Grant Fidelity** \$225 DAC-09 at \$225 to the **Tropos** Sarajida DAC-3 priced at \$8495. **Amarra** offered programs to improve the sound quality of i-Tunes on the **Macintosh** computer that varied in price from their \$79 Junior to the \$695 complete version. **Channel D** was demonstrating their \$129 Pure Music and \$229 Pure Vinyl software also for the **Macintosh**. **Bryston Audio** featured their \$2150 BDP-1 digital player, designed to play a wide variety of audio files up to 24/192 from any external USB thumb or hard drive into a suitable DAC. **Resolution Audio** offered their \$6000 Cantata Music Center, a device that can play CDs by itself, but has inputs for USB, Ethernet and S/PDIF to handle any digital source up to 24/96.

This is just a tantalizing sample of what we saw and heard at this most enjoyable audio show. Much credit is owed to the show sponsors Red Rock Audio, The Colorado Audio Society and its many volunteers and especially to Marjorie Baumert, widow of the late RMAF co-founder Al Stifel.

**Kaiser Kawero speakers with Silicon Arts ZL-200 amps.**







# The Rolling Stones:

Seth Greenstein

**I**N NOVEMBER 2010, The Rolling Stones released two near-impeccable box sets of all their original studio extended play and album recordings. Each album is pressed on 180-gram vinyl, using direct metal mastering, and each set is numbered in a limited edition. The first set, from ABKCO Records, covers the seminal recordings between 1964 and through *Let It Bleed*. These discs follow the U.K. releases which, until *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, feature different track lists (notably, without hit singles) and, in most cases, different jackets and liner notes, from the U.S. counterparts. The second box, from Universal Music Group, houses the 1971-2005 releases from *Sticky Fingers* through *A Bigger Bang*. Late recordings, originally released on CD, are presented as double-albums.

These 27 recordings document a journey we are unlikely to experience again from any band: how the Stones' energy, intelligence, and audacious attitudes evolved over 41 years of a near 50-year career. From raw early efforts to the later refined productions, the sets authentically present the meticulous arrangements,

eclectic timbres, and smart-edged lyrics that epitomized the Stones, from a time when every release was eagerly anticipated and a revelation. And though the early discs are far from perfection, the improved sound of all these discs will permanently shelve your original vinyl recordings.

Bob Ludwig's 2002 SACD remasters, created from the best-available original tapes, provide the source material for set one. Those DSD masters were converted to high resolution PCM at 192 kHz and either 24 or 32 bits, and then converted to analog. These remastered tracks from the Stones' first six years yield a brighter, more-nuanced sound, particularly compared to the victory-lap collection *Hot Rocks*. The first five discs are in mono. If you've only heard them in reprocessed stereo, you've never really heard them; but even against the original mono discs, the remasters sound impressively better.

Unlike the hygienic *The Beatles* set from 2009, it's more accurate to call the first discs in Set One "authentic" than "audiophile." Stones fans will not hear pris-



## The Vinyl Remasters

tine renderings of this most classic rock. Early Stones tracks, laid down under neophyte/hipster Andrew Loog Oldham, are riddled with distortion and subpar production. Overdubbing techniques that layered complex instrumental arrangements onto two or four tracks flattened the original masters. George Martin could not have foreseen the staying power of rock and roll, but his skill, pride, and reputation compelled him to record the early Beatles as if for the ages. The Stones' early productions seemed focused on squeezing a hit through a one-inch transistor radio speaker, never imagining they might be played on parents' hi-fis – no less, nearly 50 years later, on sophisticated audio equipment. All these original flaws limited any later remastering possibilities. (And, unfortunately, these new pressings are imperfect. A few sides begin with a pronounced, sustained tone.)

At its best, Set One recreates each recording as it could have been heard when first released, with less surface noise and a better dynamic range than the original vinyl. The pre-echo from the early pressings is gone, and so is the low hum that began each track on my

original mono version of 12 X 5. We've never before heard the production flaws so clearly. Yet, we've also never felt the true electricity of the early performances as on these recordings. Particularly the mono discs deliver the immediacy and excitement of watching through the studio glass as five boys become The Rolling Stones.

The first disc, a 12" 45 rpm EP from January 1964, debuts the Stones as an unpolished club act. The amateur production on these R&B and soul covers sounds as nasty as any late '70s garage-punk demo. You can almost see the audio board needles pinning red. Compare the early Beatles and Stones contemporaneous versions of "Money (That's What I Want)." *With the Beatles* from October 1963 emulates the piano-centric original featuring John Lennon's rich voice, with every instrument discernable. The Stones' track, piano-less with a thin Jagger vocal surfacing through the muddle, grinds out a Chicago-style guitar-harmonica blues.

The first LP, *The Rolling Stones*, arrived in April 1964. Flouting convention with equal parts hubris and



hucksterism, the band's name appears only on the back cover. The album treats us to an uneven survey of blues and R&B cover tunes, and the production remains dicey. For example, the rave-up "I Just Want to Make Love to You" is marred by distorted vocals, abused ride

Go By," and the stereo separation on "Paint It Black" – the unsettling sitar and acoustic guitar strum on the right, echoing pounding drums, syncopated guitar notes, and bass glissandos on the left. The more frenetic tunes, "Have You Seen Your Mother Baby (Standing in

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## These 27 LPs document The Rolling Stones' amazing career and offer improved sound over the originals.

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cymbal, and poor balance among the instruments. Of the three Stones-penned tunes, only "Tell Me" shows the promise Jagger-Richards later fulfill.

August 1964's 45 rpm EP, *Five by Five*, reveals the Stones as first-rate, self-assured, professionals, and the Stones' growth over just eight months is nothing short of astonishing. It rockets off with the instrumental named for the address of Chess Records, "2120 S. Michigan Avenue," a fitting tribute to their inspirations, and includes high-energy classics like Chuck Berry's "Around and Around." This disc stands up to multiple listens, and the tracks sound crisper than either the original U.S. mono or "reprocessed for stereo" versions from 12 X 5.

*The Rolling Stones Second Album*, also recorded in the U.S., falters with distorted vocals and overindulgent reverb. Still, Mick's confident vocal and Keith's guitar-bends on Irma Thomas's "Time Is On My Side" hold us in their sway, and Ian Stewart's barrelhouse piano on "Down the Road Apiece" proves him the best instrumentalist of this lot.

On *Out of Our Heads*, the Stones persona emerges on four original compositions. Against the chastity of 1965, only Jagger could sing "Come on baby I want to make love to you" on "She Said Yeah," the high-velocity album opener. "Heart of Stone," shows Jagger-Richards' greater maturity as songwriters, melding roots, blues and soul, with a fuzz-bass evoking Marty Robbins' "Don't Worry." (The last disc in the set, *Metamorphosis*, includes a pedal-steel country reading of "Heart of Stone" featuring guitarist Jimmy Page.)

*Aftermath*, the first stereo disc, marks the Stones' breakthrough. The songs, all written by Jagger/Richards, showcase the band's developing originality and innovation. Jagger mocks bourgeois ennui over Brian Jones's sitar in "Mother's Little Helper," then reverentially seduces "Lady Jane" to the strains of harpsichord, glockenspiel, and echoing dulcimer. The misogyny of "Under My Thumb" stings through the incongruous timbres of marimba, booming bass, and acoustic and fuzzed-out guitar.

The compilation *Big Hits (High Tide and Green Grass)* spans five recordings from just three years – an opportunity few young bands would get today. But compare their first single, a sloppy cover of Chuck Berry's "Come On," to the originality of the Jagger-Richards tunes on this collection, to understand why few bands ever deserved that opportunity as much as the Stones. Mick's intense vocal and Keith's buzz-saw guitar riff on "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" deliver the sear of a live performance. The improved sound of these discs shows best on spare arrangements like "As Tears

the Shadows)" and "19<sup>th</sup> Nervous Breakdown" pile horns, guitar growl and jangle into an indistinct wall of sound. "Get Off My Cloud" sounds much brighter here than on the U.S. *December's Children* or *Hot Rocks* (though, unlike the latter version, my disc has what sounds like an audible edit in the third verse).

*Between the Buttons* from 1967, a wild ride of eclectic instrumentation and songwriting styles, was the last Oldham-produced Stones record. On several tunes, Jagger's voice is barely audible through the fog. The dynamic range can be extraordinarily flat, with virtually no bottom as on "Connection"; while densely-layered songs like the lascivious "My Obsession," with its menacing organ and bass riff and roadhouse piano, lack presence.

The bookend to 1967 is the psychedelic indulgence, *Their Satanic Majesties Request*. Produced by the Stones themselves, the music is inconsistent and occasionally disjointed, but the sound is remarkably better than any of the previous records. The exotic repertoire of guitar treatments, modified pianos, African drums, string arrangements, and mellotron is particularly successful on "2000 Light Years from Home," a sonic odyssey of 60's experimental music, early electronic instruments, and straight-ahead rock.

Perhaps *Beggars Banquet*, released December 1968, benefits most from remastering. The disc uses the correct speed master, not the unnaturally-slowed original version. "Sympathy for the Devil" distinctly reveals all layers of percussion, piano, and slashing guitar over Jagger's powerful voicing of one of rock's most cohesive and erudite lyrics. Acoustic features, including the wistful slide guitar blues "No Expectations" and the uptempo "Prodigal Son," have a nuanced, natural presence. It's not until the fourth track, "Parachute Woman," that we hear Charlie Watts' drum kit and, despite this being the Stones' ninth release, Jimmy Miller's expertise as producer and percussionist bring out Watts' distinctive snare thwack and bass drum overtones for the very first time.

The second hits collection, *Through the Past, Darkly*, covers an equally prolific period for the Stones, but reveals another transition in progress. The versatility of Brian Jones defines the sound of earlier songs like "Ruby Tuesday" with recorder and cello, or "Dandelion" with oboe. Later tunes, like "Jumpin' Jack Flash" and "Honky Tonk Women," are dead-eye Keith Richards guitar riffs with bold, smart (and smart-assed) lyrics from Jagger.

From the opening guitar tremolo and "time's-up" scrape of the guiro, through Mick's harmonica and Merry Clayton's bone-chilling cries of "rape, murder," "Gimme Shelter" earns December 1969's *Let It Bleed* its

legacy as the musical demarcation for the end of the 1960's. Although remastering could not bring the vocals on "Gimme Shelter" forward in the mix, the album's pure production remains an absolute joy. On "Love in Vain," each guitar string rings; pick contacting metal, swirling brushes on the snare, and a gliding slide guitar have exceptional clarity. On "Live With Me," among the Stones' best rockers, bass and drums jump through the speakers, while two pianos and multi-tracked guitars duel, distinctly, above. The valedictory, "You Can't Always Get What You Want," builds brilliantly from choir, to an acoustic guitar-French horn duet, to a blazing climax, summarizing just how far the Stones had come: the band that once got no satisfaction now gets what they need.

The forgettable 1975 collection of outtakes and demos, *Metamorphosis*, has few moments of historical interest. If you want to hear "Memo from Turner," with Ry Cooder's first-rate bottleneck work, buy the Singles box or find the "Performance" soundtrack.

The discs in the second set come from 2009 CD remasters. The original recordings, produced by the Glimmer Twins (Jagger/Richards), Jimmy Miller, and Don Was, or mixed by Bob Clearmountain, used state of the art equipment, so improvements, particularly on the later discs, are less pronounced. Nevertheless, the noise reduction on the pre-CD era discs brings new sparkle to each facet of the Stones: lust, down-dirty blues, and some of the best party music ever recorded.

Set Two begins with rock's slickest celebration of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, 1971's *Sticky Fingers*. "Brown Sugar," "Can't You Hear Me Knocking" and "Bitch" swagger with the slash of electric guitar, drums, and gutbucket saxophone, while the tender acoustic work on "Wild Horses" and "Sister Morphine" complements the vulnerable, poignant lyrics. We remember the album's hits most for Jagger's vocals (and stunningly rude lyrics), Mick Taylor's surging guitars, and Bobby Keyes' urgent tenor sax, and the remastering brings out new detail in the guitar fills and piano. But the true star is the punch of the drums. More than any prior album, *Sticky Fingers* crowns Charlie Watts as the quintessential rock drummer, integral to the Stones sound.

*Exile on Main Street* marks the Stones at their most diverse, a mature band thoroughly in command of their sound, if not their finances or themselves. Unlike the clean studio vibe of *Sticky Fingers*, *Exile* exudes presence and spontaneity. We are invited on an excursion through lost weekends and wasted hangover blues. If there is a more kick-ass record than the first side of *Exile*, God has yet to hear it.

A year later, the Stones released *Goats Head Soup*, an unappetizing brew of enervating riffs and glop. Thankfully, the Stones returned to form on 1975's *It's Only Rock and Roll*. Nothing thought-provoking, just sharp-edged party rock from the opening rat-a-tat on "If You Can't Rock Me" to Mick's final "ow" ending "Fingerprint File." It's only rock and roll, but when the Stones play it straight-ahead, we like it too.

Dalliances with reggae and falsetto soul ballads on 1976's *Black and Blue*, and too many later albums, sound inauthentic and unsatisfying. Forgettable club tunes, like "Hot Stuff" and the title track *Emotional Rescue*, lack the clever lyrical substrate of the Stones' earlier danceable classics. The best mid-period Stones albums, like 1978's *Some Girls*, strip down to basics:



guitars, bass, harmonica, drums, and Jagger attitude. "Miss You" exploits the Stones' best personae – Keith's blues riffs, the flash of Charlie's snare, and Mick as party animal off the prowl. There are plenty of kinetic rockers like "When the Whip Comes Down" and "Shattered"; a *de rigeur* Motown tune, "Just My Imagination"; a country ballad "Far Away Eyes"; and the slow grind "Beast of Burden." Its energy, honesty, and clean production make it a satisfying listen 35 years later.

*Tattoo You* from 1981 culled and completed earlier tracks into perhaps the last highly listenable Stones record. The rock side bursts out of the starting gate with the irresistible "Start Me Up," and "Hang Fire," before slinking into the strut "Slave," featuring intense bluesy improvisations by saxophone colossus, Sonny Rollins (who also appears on "Neighbors" and the ballad "Waiting on a Friend").

On *Undercover* the Stones descend into dark territories, reflecting a growing dissent and distrust within the band. The bass drum thumps through the title track, a torrid dance number about the repressive Pinochet regime, progressing through tales of obsessive sex, bondage, and violent dysfunctional relationships. *Undercover* rocks hard, but apart from the trifle "She Was Hot," it's a tough listen.

Weak songwriting and trendy commercial production cheapen *Dirty Work* from 1986, but *Steel Wheels* from 1989 finds the band in better shape. Mining a

Photos: Courtesy Abkco Music & Records, Inc.





familiar formula from their better 1970's efforts, there's more than enough traction on "Mixed Emotions" and "Terrifying" to prove this 25-year old band still knew how to rock.

*Voodoo Lounge* won 1994's Best Rock Album Grammy, without Bill Wyman on bass and under producer Don Was. The best rockers ("You Got Me

drive of "Undercover." Ballads tenderly speak of sexuality and loss, and Keith's voice here sounds its strongest. Yet, snarky "Sweet Neo Con" can't compare to their best sociopolitical commentaries of the late 1960's or the irony of *Some Girls*' "Respectable."

Though it's facile to contrast early and late Stones as a band with something to prove and a lot to say

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**The Stones' most interesting sonic experiments were made when techniques could least accomodate them.**

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Rocking" and "Sparks Will Fly") seem dim reflections of earlier efforts, though the closer, Memphis boogie romp "Mean Disposition," would have been at home on their early LPs. Was' stripped-down production style suits these Stones, and Watts' drums rarely sound better.

*Bridges to Babylon* (1997) misguides the Stones into overproduced pop traps that classic Stones wisely avoided. Songs that cry for attitude drown in sugary bridges, synthesized noise, and drum loops. On "How Can I Stop," Keith reflects poignantly on love as an aging man, filled with memory and experience, but Wayne Shorter's performance seems a superfluous gesture. His saxophone lies lower in the mix than his high-intensity flights on Steely Dan's "Aja," or Rollins' *Tattoo You* walk-ons.

The last LP, 2005's *A Bigger Bang*, avoids these flawed choices in favor of the Stones alone, with minimal backup or adulteration. "Oh No" and "Dangerous Beauty" rock with the best beats of the mid-70's discs, and "Look What the Cat Dragged In" undulates with the

versus one needing a record to tour, the records speak volumes. Each year from 1965 through 1969, the Stones produced one-to-two LPs strutting stunningly original attitudes, evocative lyrics, and inventive arrangements. From 1971- 1981, the Stones produced mostly outstanding recordings, but veered toward the formulaic, and slowed to a two-year release cycle. In the last 20 years of this set, the Stones made just five albums. It's ironic that the later discs print their comparatively unchallenging lyrics on the album sleeves, while for years we strained to learn the words to their best songs. Lots of sex and spite in the newer stuff, but no "19<sup>th</sup> Nervous Breakdown" or "Jumping Jack Flash." Regrettably their most interesting sonic experimentations occurred when production techniques could least accommodate them.

Still, together these two sets track the Stones' complete joyride through their first four decades. It's a satisfying trip, and one well worth taking.

**MC**

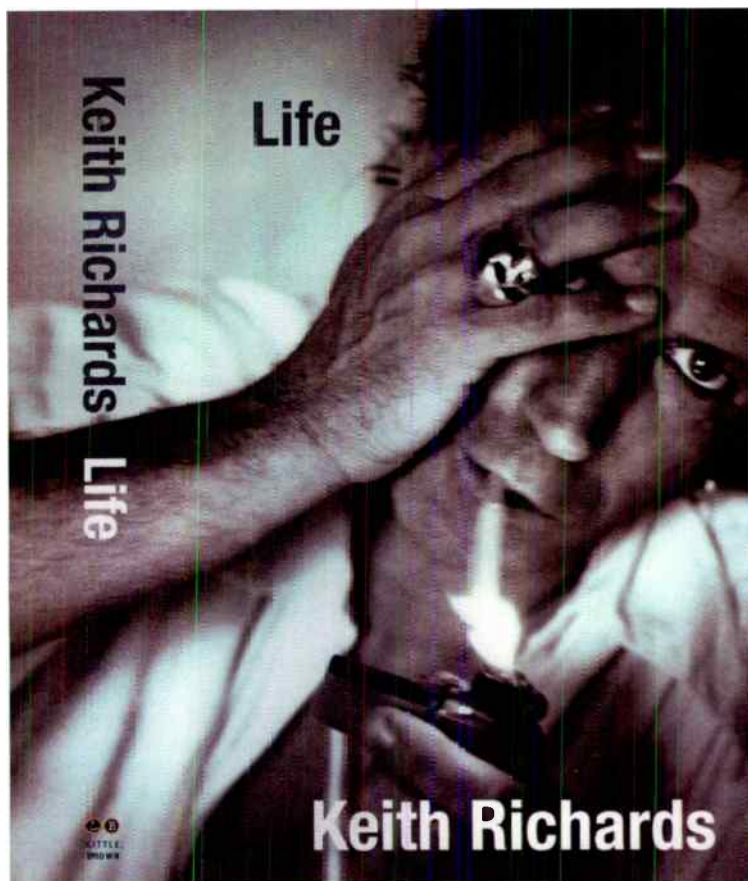
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Steve Sussmann

## Book

Keith Richards with James Fox *Life*  
Little, Brown 564 pages

**T**HE BIG EVENT for many Rolling Stones fans this year is literary, not musical. With the publication of "Life," his 564-page autobiography, Keith Richards sets the musical, historical, and personal, record of the band straight – or as straight as he is able. His ability to remember his past is a marvel, considering how many hard and soft drugs he has taken over four-plus decades, and the anecdotes themselves are marvelous. This is a great, thrilling, rollercoaster of a read, even when the dips all seem to be downward.

As you would expect from one who was there (even when he wasn't *all* there), Keith has stories. Oh boy, does he have stories. The book starts with a typical example, when Keith was pulled over by police officers in Fordyce, Arkansas during the Stones 1975 US tour. He was wearing a denim cap filled with dope, hash, and pills, driving in a car where, under the panels, were plastic bags full of grass, peyote, and mescaline. Oh, and a briefcase in the trunk was full of pure, pharmaceutical-grade cocaine. And yet, as he almost always seemed to, he wriggled out of it: no jail time, just a reckless driving fine of \$162.50. His telling of how he did it makes for great entertainment. It also typifies the lack of consequences for his actions throughout his life.

For the young, it is hard to imagine now what a huge cultural and musical influence the Stones were, first in London, then in England, and then in the world. Keith and Brian Jones became the first international guitar heroes, even when their own idols were the Chicago blues men who were scarcely known in their own

country. Starting in 1965 with "The Last Time" and "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" Keith and Mick Jagger, the Glimmer Twins, were rivaled only by their friends John Lennon and Paul McCartney as rock songwriters. While the earliest Rolling Stones albums consisted almost entirely of covers of American blues songs, beginning with *Aftermath* (1966) the albums comprised Jagger/Richards songs almost exclusively. The book goes into detail about the songwriting process, and Keith gives plenty of credit to Mick for his ability to take one of his guitar riffs and fashion a lyric around it.

His generosity also extends to revealing his tunings and chords. Many a guitar player will learn the secret to how to sound *exactly* like Keith on one song or another. Five strings instead of six, open tuning, Keith comes off as a great student of the guitar. He has helped generations of his imitators immeasurably in "Life."

He uses the recollections of others to fill in parts of the story. Original manager Andrew Loog Oldham, Mick's girlfriend Marianne Faithfull, sax player Bobby Keys, his wife Patti Hansen, and many others are quoted throughout the book. A particularly musically memorable section has the late Jim Dickinson, the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section piano player, telling a previously unreported story about the recording of "Brown Sugar" and the writing of "Wild Horses" in December, 1969.

His honesty about his drug use is also impressive, though he still seems guarded or oblivious about consequences. One of Keith's worst experiences was during



the Stones' 1976 tour of Europe. The mother of three of his children, Anita Pallenberg, was as hopeless a junkie as Keith himself, and Keith made the decision to bring their seven-year-old son, Marlon, on tour with him as navigator and minder. Marlon would read the maps and

Johnny Depp's father in *Pirates of The Caribbean: At World's End* (Depp famously modeled his Captain Jack Sparrow character on Richards). He has homes around the world but seems to have mellowed, at age 67, into a country gentleman.

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## Keith Richards' "Life" is the definitive insider story of perhaps the greatest of all rock bands

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let him know how far he was from the border so his father could shoot up and either dump or re-hide his stash. And since Keith slept with a gun under his pillow, Marlon was given the assignment of waking him before he was due on stage. Keith once fell asleep while driving and crashed his Bentley into a tree coming back from a show at Knebworth with Marlon on board. Marlon is quoted in the book, "Until five or six years ago there was still my bloody handprint on the back-seat. And on the dashboard there was still the dent where my nose hit it." This is not responsible parenting! Yet Keith seems to have no remorse in any of these drug adventures; some small regret occasionally, but no sense of the monstrosity of putting his child through these experiences.

Keith eventually gave up hard drugs, and started to branch out on his own projects: musical director for Taylor Hackford's Chuck Berry film, *Hail, Hail, Rock & Roll*; the formation of his own bands, the X-Pensive Winos and, later, the Wingless Angels; even a part as

Still, he spends about 40 pages near the end of the book explaining the problems he has with his bandmate, Mick Jagger. He ridicules Mick's small penis, his knighthood, his Studio 54 jet-set crowd, and especially his solo albums. This is the kind of stuff that makes the book so enjoyable – the behind-the-scenes gossip and backbiting. And all the rumors – getting his blood changed in Switzerland, snorting his dead father's ashes, among others – are finally put to rest.

"Life" is a great read for anyone who wants to know how The Rolling Stones came to be the dominant rock 'n' roll band of their generation, and wants the story from the inside as told by their rhythm guitarist. Someday Mick Jagger may tell his own story, but it hasn't happened yet. Brian Jones is long gone. This may be the definitive inside story of The Rolling Stones for a long time to come. At 564 pages, it was a lengthy read, but utterly compelling. Wild horses couldn't pull me away.

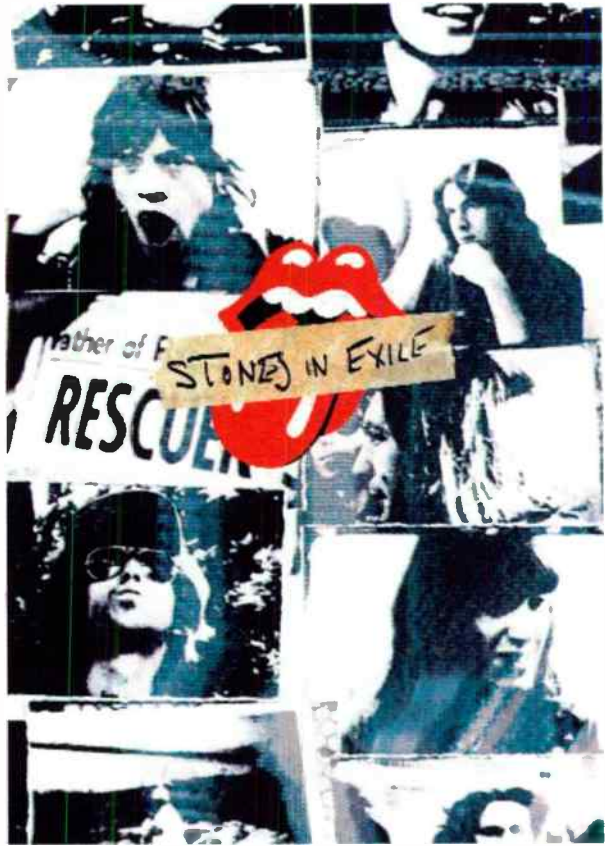
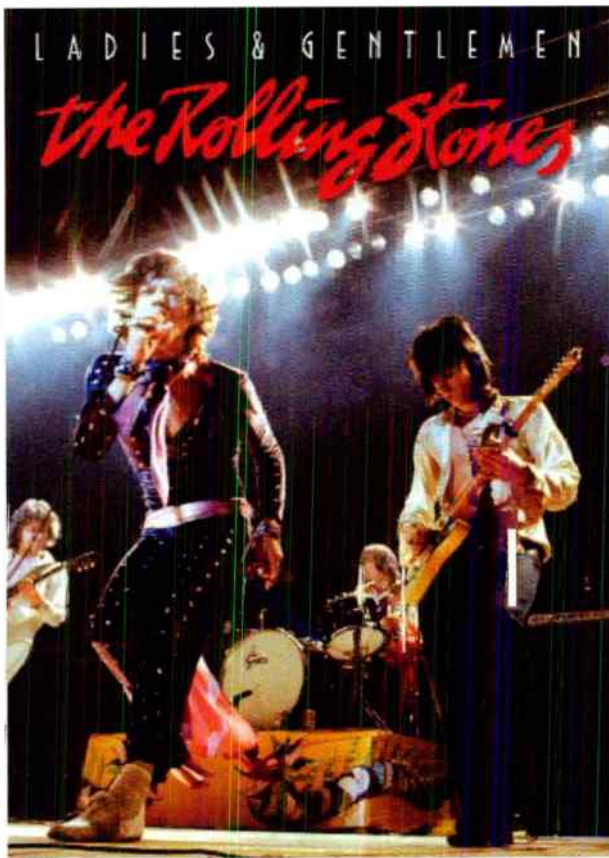


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## Rock DVDs

**The Rolling Stones**  
*Exile on Main Street - Eagle Rock EV303069*  
*Ladies and Gentlemen, The Rolling Stones - Eagle Rock EV303159*

**E**XILE WAS FILMED in black and white during a period when The Rolling Stones were literally exiled in France, having fled the UK's 90 percent-plus tax rates. Musically during the time, they were very much on Main Street in Memphis, Muscle Shoals or Chicago. *Stones in Exile* is a documentary about the recording of *Exile on Main Street*, one of the band's classic albums. Important for its literally behind-the-scenes look at the band's recording method at this point, it's entrancing from start to finish. One of its best aspects is that it adds fresh seasoning to the mystery of how a band of skinny Brits, holed up in Villefranche-sur-Mer, France, could compose and record a double LP of such deep, whiskey-soaked Americana decades before the term emerged to define a genre in the US music business.

*Ladies and Gentlemen, The Rolling Stones* is an entirely different look at other Stones material from the era. Filmed in Texas during the "Exile on Main Street" tour and rarely seen since its limited release in 1974, it captures the band at their live peak when every song

was still fresh in The Stones' live repertoire. The onstage energy produced by these incredible young musicians is astonishing. Performing on a small stage, so they were physically close to each other, they played it straight without bombast but rather with transparent joy. Mick Jagger sells song after song as if his life depended on it. Mick Taylor adds harmony, grace and tremendous guitar virtuosity to the proceedings. The song "Happy" is a highlight among highlights, with outstanding playing and singing. Mick and Keith ply gorgeous harmonies and trade lead vocals which set the crowd alight. The premise of *Exile on Main Street* was proven in this performance, so many years before most of us have had a chance to see it.

Both DVDs are recommended, *Ladies and Gentlemen The Rolling Stones* the more so because it will reward you more strongly from repeated viewings. And kids, if you want to know why The Stones were the greatest Rock and Roll band in the world, this DVD will show you. Maybe they still are.





Rock

Steve Sussmann

Ronnie Wood *I Feel Like Playing*  
Eagle Records ER201832

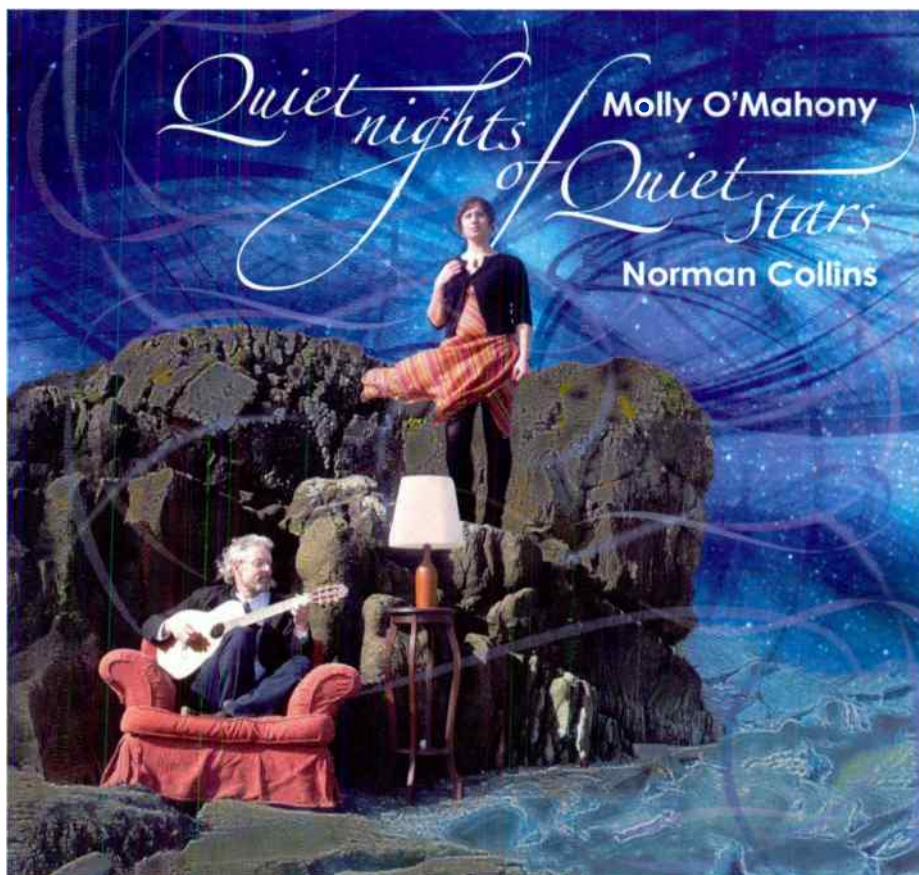
**R**ON WOOD has played with some of the greatest British rock bands of the last half century. Starting with The Jeff Beck Group in 1968, and then with The Faces in the early '70s, and finally as Mick Taylor's replacement in The Rolling Stones since 1975, he has been a musician's musician. Along the way, he has made seven solo albums, starting with *I've Got My Own Album to Do*, in 1974. His latest solo venture, *I Feel Like Playing* was released last September. It's his first solo recording since 2001's *Not For Beginners*, which showcased his acoustic side. Here, his full-blown electric guitar work is on display to fine advantage.

By solo, it's not to say he's the only player on the album. Guests include such top-flight musicians as Slash, Flea, Eddie Vedder, Ivan Neville, Billy Gibbons, Bobby Womack, Waddy Wachtel, and Ian McLagan. And there is a chemistry between these players that makes the album sound like one of the world's greatest jam bands playing late into the night at some smoke-filled dive. And Wood's world-weary rasp meshes perfectly with both the instrumentalists and the backup vocalists, especially the soulful Bernard Fowler and Bobby Womack. This is intimate, bluesy, rock, played with great feeling and tremendous ability.

*I Feel Like Playing* sounds great. If only he hadn't felt like writing. If there's any weakness to the album, it's the material the musicians are working with. Eleven of the 12 songs are written or co-written by Wood, and let's face it, can you name a single Rolling Stones song he wrote? There's a reason for that, at least as evidenced here. The songs tend to veer toward generic hard rock and guitar blues. The first single, "Lucky Man," is credited to Wood and some genuine songwriters: Paul Hyde, Bob Rock, and Eddie Vedder. The other song not written by Wood is the Willie Dixon classic, "Spoonful," first recorded by Howlin' Wolf in 1960, at just the time The Stones and so many other British groups were busy memorizing and imitating Chicago-style blues.

There is a pleasant surprise about the Ron Wood compositions, and that is their lyrics, displaying a frank, confessional tone that reveals much about the drinking, drugging, and general inner turmoil that provided so many stories to the tabloids in recent years.

This is a lovely album for the wee small hours of the morning, performed by one of the true icons of rock 'n' roll. He felt like playing, he felt like recording it, and we all can be grateful he did.



## Jazz

Molly O'Mahony & Norman Collins  
*Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars*  
West Cork Guitar Music

**W**HEN FORTUNE SMILES, gemstones may be created at the intersection of songwriter, vocalist and instrumentalist. Such is the case with *Quiet Nights and Quiet Stars*, a collection of Antonio Carlos Jobim's sambas, bossa novas, and other intimate songs rendered by Irish artists Molly O'Mahony and Norman Collins.

Eight of the 13 songs on the CD are by Jobim, the late Brazilian composer most responsible for launching the Bossa Nova movement in the 1960s. Attempting a Jobim-themed album is audacious for two reasons. First, it follows in the footsteps of top-line artists like Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and, of

course, the iconic Stan Getz and Astrud Gilberto. Second, this duo of young songstress O'Mahony and veteran guitarist Collins are probably unknown to you as they hale from the windswept and remote Mizen peninsula in County Cork on Ireland's southwest coast.

It probably seems counterintuitive at first that an Irish pair would record an album of largely Brazilian music, tunes composed half a world away, but there are common physical elements in mountain and ocean which inflect the album's mood. Further, Irish and Brazilian music share musical elements, including cool, understated singing styles and modes of acoustic accompaniment.

So suffused is this album with pleasures large and small, the single unfortunate aspect may be its title, and that's only if one's deterred by an earlier listen to Diana Krall's recent "Quiet Nights" CD, which differs in material, concept and instrumentation.

O'Mahony and Collins recorded all the numbers in just one or two takes, and this freshness shows to good effect. They make each song their own, as if never sung and played before. Seemingly neither unhampered by the past nor pressured by constraints of fitting their work to modern norms, the duo makes music that seems as much for their own pleasure as ours.



O'Mahony conveys passion and assurance in such classics as "Wave," "How Insensitive," "Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars" (the English lyric version of "Corcovado"), and "If You Never Come to Me." She is capable of that flute-like purity of voice often associated with Irish folk singing. However, far from being a

words are delightful and charming, as is the whistled interlude on "If You Never."

O'Mahony gives brilliant focus and appropriate weight to each phrase while successfully carrying the emotional line through each song, as in Jobim's "Triste" and the Ray Charles R&B classic "Hallelujah

Kenny Burrell; his intricate finger-style also carries "trad" and even flamenco influences. Collins' accompaniment is skillfully interwoven with O'Mahony's vocals, and his solos are both succinct and intriguing. Indeed, if you can drag your attention away from O'Mahony's singing for long

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## Perhaps counterintuitive, this CD combines traditions of Irish folk music with Jobim's rhythms and tunes.

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one-tone samba, O'Mahony's vocal qualities move descriptions towards synesthesia. Terms like Chablis, cognac, chocolate, silk, velvet, and suede came to this reviewer's mind. Most impressive to me, though, is her startling ability to be "there" in a song. Much like the classic American crooners, O'Mahony exists in the song without seeming to need to push or sell it. Her refreshingly precise elocution and occasionally idiosyncratic pronunciations (Irish, perhaps?) of a few

I Love Him So." "Boy from Ipanema" gets a quite fresh reading, rising emotionally and dramatically without slopping into sentiment. O'Mahony adds her own punch line here, flavoring the well-known song with just a slight taste of resentment. "Night Train" boogies along, simultaneously bluesy and joyous. Sung as a straight blues, "Cry Me a River" is an absolute standout.

The fine arrangements are by Norman Collins, whose work on a nylon-stringed guitar reminds me of

enough, the entire CD may be enjoyed as a guitar album.

If a jazz duo can be called tight (and why not?), this pairing exemplifies the term: Talented musicians with seemingly telepathic technique of simpatico playing classic material, recorded in complete takes, using but two microphones and no post-processing. Highly recommended. (Note to string-pluckers: Collins offers transcriptions and guitar tablature to album purchasers on the CD Baby website.)

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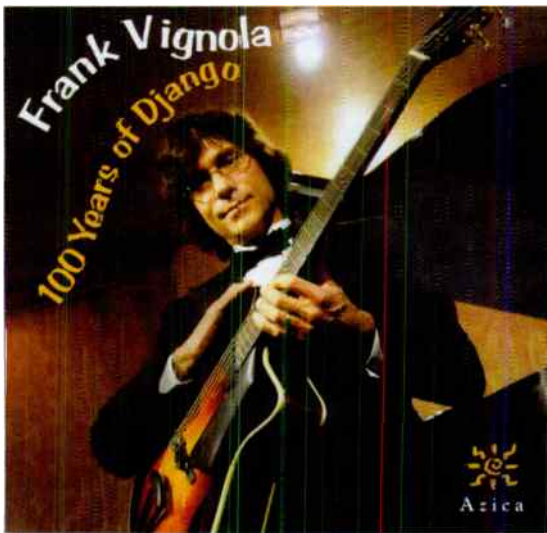
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Jim Keenan



**F**RANK VIGNOLA has been one of my favorite jazz guitarists for several years. I've been fortunate to see him in concert with great guitarists such as Bucky and John Pizzarelli and Gene Bertoncini, and often enjoyed his joyous live playing with his trio partners Vinnie Raniolo on rhythm guitar and bassist Gary Mazzaroppi. My CD collection contains a half dozen or so jazz discs led by or featuring him, including his Hot Swing Trio outing with Mark O'Connor reviewed in these pages a few issues ago – all terrific stuff to these ears.

Mr. Vignola played with Les Paul for some time in New York, and has also played in many bands in jazz, pop, rock and other genres – a real all-around player. On this disc, he pays tribute to the legendary Belgian/French gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, who was born in 1910. Jazz fans know Django as one of the major influences on modern jazz guitar music, both for his spirited swinging style and for his many wonderful compositions, ten of the best being featured on this disc. Mr. Vignola arranged all tunes, and he artfully blends Django's tunes with more modern styles of playing – but never too far from the original.

The album opens with *Rhythm Futur*, with unusual harmonies apparently influenced by modern French classical composers, featuring the guest accordionist Julien Labro playing extended solos at

high speed and in high style. Accordion is rarely used in jazz, but here it is well played and supplies the melody line that Stephane Grappelli might have carried in Django's original Hot Club of France. Mr. Labro also joins in on *Swing Gitane*, a very solid swinger, and the jaunty *Douce Ambiance*, one of the tunes closest to Django's original sound.

Mr. Vignola leads in most tunes, and does especially well in two slower numbers, the reflective *Tears* and the impressionistic *Diminishing Blackness*, where he can sensitively convey the poetry implicit in the melodies. I also enjoyed his solo work on the more modern *Troublant Bolero*, along with the excellent bass solos supplied by Mr. Mazzaroppi – often an important melodic contributor as well as rock-solid bass player.

*Nuages* (clouds) is possibly Django's best known composition, and the group serves it well, staying close to the original beautiful melody and style.

The few remaining tunes are also fine. This album is a great tribute to Django and his wonderful music, which has influenced many guitarists in many genres. It is also a good demonstration of the skills of Frank Vignola and his trio – catch them live if you can! Besides terrific playing, you'll get great spirit and probably a few sight gags, and you'll leave happy. Meanwhile, buy this disc.

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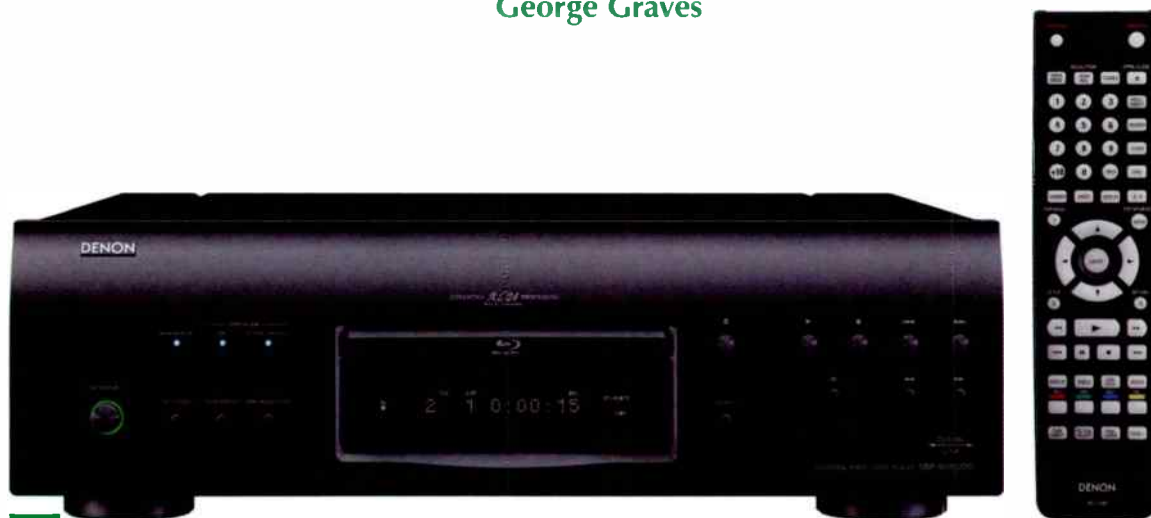
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# Denon DBP-100 Universal A/V Player

George Graves



**T**HE DBP-4010UDCI is Denon's next-to-the-top-of-the-line silver-disc player. At \$2000, it's certainly not cheap, but it's less half the price of the Denon Flagship, the DVD-A1UDCI.

This unit is sold by Denon as a universal player, and it certainly seems flexible enough. According to Denon, it will play just about any 4.5-inch "silver disc" format you can name. Specifically, Denon points out Blu-Ray (Region A only), DVD-Audio (all), DVD-Video (All Regions), DVD-R and -RW as well as DVD+R and +RW, AVHCD, SACD, Audio CD, CD-R, CD-RW, and, of all things, SD and SDHC Memory cards from 8 MB to 4 Gigabytes (SDHC). With an adapter, it will also play Mini-SD and Micro SD cards! The range of formats it recognizes is, indeed, impressive: MP3, WMA (up to 48-KHz sampling rate), AAC (up to 48-kHz sampling rate), LPCM (Wav or WAVE – again up to 48-kHz sampling rate), JPG for video "slide shows" of one's digital pictures, and DivX up to 2 GB. Whew!

## Video Performance

As this is an audio magazine, I will not comment on the video performance of this unit except to say that it looks good with normal DVDs and I was able to confirm that it seemed to have excellent high-definition performance with the couple of Blu-Ray discs that I borrowed from a friend. (Editor's Note: I found the same with a handful of Blu-Ray disks, including one of John Meyer. This was on a fairly new Panasonic 42-inch LCD unit in my home. Gene Pitts) After using the SD memory card feature to look at some pictures I had just taken with my Nikon D90 at the famous war birds collection at the Castle Air Force Base Museum in Atwater, CA, I confirmed that this feature gave excellent still picture performance on a 60-inch High-Definition TV but was disappointed to find that it would not play the 720P

HD movies that this camera can take. When I had finished trying out the SD card feature for JPEGs, I put the Denon in my audio system for some serious listening.

## Front Panel Layout

The DBP-4010UDCI looks very similar to Denon's flagship DVD-A1UDCI and is very handsome in its flat-black livery (that's for US customers, EU and Asian buyers get a silver fascia). The unit sports a center-located loading tray above the vacuum fluorescent display. To the left of the central loading tray/display is an on/stand-by switch with a power indicator next to it and a disc layer button and a pure direct button (which turns off all unnecessary video circuitry and enabling only the analog outputs when listening to audio-only sources) and the HDMI resolution button. Above the controls is an Advanced AL24 indicator light which comes on when AL24 processing of audio signals is employed. (The Denon manual is not completely clear in its description of this feature. AL24 Processing is, apparently, a newly developed technology that reduces quantization distortion by sensing the nature of the digital data being input and interpolating data so that it faithfully replicates the original analog waveform.) Next to this is the clock control indicator light with announces the Blu-Disc playback through Denon's proprietary "Denon Link" interconnect technology. Under the display and to the right of center is the SD card slot. On the right side of the panel is a "source" button (which toggles between disc and SD card playback selection), a pause button, fast forward and fast reverse and above those is disk tray open/close, play, and reverse/forward skip buttons.

## Rear Panel Features

The rear panel of the DBP-4010UDCI is pretty standard for this kind of player. It sports RCA connectors for

7.1-channel surround sound as well as two-channel audio output. There are both coaxial (RCA) and TosLink optical digital outputs and the special "Denon Link" connector as well as HDMI out and an Ethernet connector (about which, more later). For video, the usual complement of composite video (RCA), S-Video and component video (PB/PR/Y via RCAs) outputs is provided. There is also a pair of proprietary remote control ports (for a wholly Denon system control) and an RS-232C serial port for high-end AV systems remote controls such as those used in elaborate, dedicated home-theater systems. The a.c. power is connected via a two-pronged (no ground) IEC connector. A full-feature infra-red remote control (I will discuss this in greater detail further on), is supplied with the unit.

## Operation

Like most DVD players, much of the set-up and operation for the DBP-4010UDCI relies on access to a TV screen to view the various set-up menus. Those who plan to use this player as a universal audio player in their hi-fi system may well find themselves at a serious disadvantage without some sort of video display or computer monitor connected to it. I temporarily connected the player to my HD video system in order to set the unit up for its initial operation as an audio-only player. This will work, but keep in mind that some audio Blu-ray formats and most commercially released DVD-A recordings rely on access to video to play the discs at all. For instance, I have a 24-bit/192-kHz DVD-A of Sinatra at the Sands with Count Basie and His Orchestra. Unfortunately, the disc defaults to surround mode (5.1 channels of 48-kHz audio), and in order to play the hi-res, two-channel 24/192 content, you have to select it via an on-screen menu. It's difficult to do this without a screen. (Editor's Note: I have come to nearly hate this aspect of universal players, especially given the ease with which an inexpensive multi-line LCD display might be put in. Even a row of LED signal lights, but no.... Yet worse, in my opinion, is the slipshod programming of the chips governing which decoding circuitry is engaged. And there is no warning about the "default to..." situations in the owner's manual. I frankly do not understand why it is programmed to default at all; let it stay where it was set. Gene Pitts)

Once set-up (and overlooking the aforementioned problems with DVD-A and Audio Blu-Ray Discs), the operation of the Denon is pretty straightforward with some caveats. For best quality, of course, it is advisable to use the "Pure Direct" mode for audio-only playback.

The DBP-4010UDCI is touted to be a universal player, but I found that this description has its limitations. For instance, long-term readers will remember that I do a lot of recording. Since I have the equipment, I generally use high-resolution recording formats. My field recorder, for instance, captures the performance in the DSD (SACD) format. But since it is not practical for the home recordist to burn his own SACD discs (the cheapest SACD software is about \$5000), I "down-convert" my masters to 24/192 and 24/96 and burn them to DVD-A format for playback on my own system ("customers" generally get regular CDs). For my own personal use, I have a Denon DVD-758, a previous generation high-end "universal player" (everything but Blu-Ray and HD-DVD). The DVD-758 plays my homemade 24/96 and 24/192 DVD-A discs just fine (and sports a high-

performance Burr-Brown 24/192 D/A chip as well). This new DBP-4010UDCI does not recognize these discs at all and spits them out. On commercial DVD-As, it's a mixed bag. With some DVD-A's (like the aforementioned Sinatra at the Sands), it plays just fine, but others it refuses to recognize. I realize that the DVD-A standard is very loose and there are a myriad of sampling rates, bit depths, and channel numbers represented, but the DBP-4010UDCI's discriminating tastes in DVD-As doesn't seem to be omnivorous. I'll admit that I'm at a loss as to why it will play some DVD-As and not others especially when its predecessor had no such limitations.

SACD playback is not so straightforward either. If I insert an SACD-only format disc, the DBP-4010UDCI plays it as an SACD right off the bat, as I would expect. However a dual-layer disc (one layer is Redbook CD and the other is SACD) defaults to the CD layer and hitting the "Disc Layer" button on the front panel seems to have no effect. One has to use the "Play" button on the remote (apparently) to toggle through the three possible sections of an SACD disc (CD layer, two-channel section, multi-channel section). This works, once one knows about it, but it is certainly not intuitive.

I know that my own Denon DVD-758 and the current Denon flagship model, the DVD-A1UDCI, both down-convert the SACD's DSD format to 24-bit, 192-kHz PCM before decoding it, and while I cannot confirm this using the supplied manual, I strongly suspect that the DBP-4010UDCI does the same. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and in fact, I do this all the time with my own recordings. Since I cannot burn an SACD from my DSD masters, I down-convert them to 24/192 PCM using the software supplied with my DSD recorder, and burn them to DVD-A using a pro DVD-A mastering program. When A-B comparing the resultant DVD-A with the master DSD recording directly off of my recorder, I cannot detect any appreciable audible difference. I suspect that the same is true here, so it doesn't bother me much, but I feel that it is important for you to know that this is a good possibility here, and that if you want the best in SACD playback, you're probably better-off buying a real, true, dedicated SACD player from Sony or Marantz rather than a universal like this Denon DBP-4010UDCI or its big brother the DVD-A1UDCI.

Like all the other Blu-Ray players that I have ever encountered, this Denon DBP-4010UDCI takes forever to "warm-up" when power is applied: Almost 45 seconds elapses before it is available to insert a disc. Once a disc is inserted, even a plain old garden variety CD, it takes a further 25 seconds before the disc is available to play. I have never been given an adequate explanation as to why this should be so, as normal DVD players, regular CD players, and even SACD players come up almost instantaneously. It must be something about high-definition formats (the now defunct DVD-HD players had the same characteristic of long warm-up times and slow disc loading), but every Blu-Ray player I've seen is like this.

## Remote Control

Remote controls were conceived as a convenience feature for televisions in the 1950s. Anybody remember the old Zenith "Space-Command" remotes that sounded an ultrasonic "tuning fork?" All the operator could hear was the "twang" of the springs in the mechanism when



he hit a button? It only changed channels, raised and lowered volume and muted the speaker, but at least it didn't use batteries! Since then the remote control has transformed from a convenience into a necessity, as electronics components have become so complex that most parameters cannot be simply controlled from the front panel. The RC-1140 remote that ships with the Denon DBP-4010UDCI is no exception. The 54 buttons on this remote do many things directly and many other things by giving access to on-screen video menus that add many more layers of complexity. The RC-1140 is well-marked, easy to hold and easy to understand. The only complaint I have is that it's not lit. You have to turn-on the room lights (or some other form of auxiliary illumination) to see what you're doing in the dark (assuming that what you're doing in the dark involves the Denon player).

## The Denon's Sound

I played audio discs from all formats, Redbook (standard) CD, HDCD, DVD-A, as well as SACD and I cannot really fault the audio performance of this unit in any way. While Redbook CDs don't sound quite as good as I feel they do on my Sony XA777ES SACD/CD player, they are nonetheless better than most every stand-alone CD player that I have heard.

The HDCD logo is stenciled on the front panel and is shown in the manual table of supported formats. When an HDCD disc is inserted and playback is initiated, the letters "HDCD" light up in the unit's display. Since no mention is made in the manual about true HDCD decoding (merely copyright information is given), one can only guess that it's taking place.

My Sony converts CD to DSD before decoding it. This gives CD playback an "up-sampled" quality that seems to make the top end of most CDs less strident and gives more air around the instruments. Because DSD gives high-frequency extension out to 100 kHz, the Sony has several filter slopes for CD playback, and the one I use really makes CDs sound very smooth and analog-like. The Denon lacks this attribute, and also seems a little lighter on bass. It doesn't have quite the authority and bite of the Sony. On Gary Karr's *Adagio d'Albinoni* CD (King Record's K33Y-236), the bite of Karr's bow on his Amati Kontrabass bass fiddle has a deep resonance and bite that the Denon doesn't bring out as thoroughly. This is a minor quibble, however, especially in light of the fact that the Denon plays almost everything. The commercial DVD-As that the player will play sound better than on my Denon DVD-758, which makes me wish that it would also play home-brew DVD-As.

On the aforementioned Sinatra DVD-A, highs seem to have more extension than I've heard from this disc on other players and the noise floor seems darker, as the presentation comes from a deeper black background than on other players. This recording hails from the mid-sixties and I have the LP of this DVD-A as well. Comparing the two, I find that the DBP-4010UDCI sounds much more "analog-like" than does its predecessor. I briefly listened to this disc's "surround" layer, and find that the difference is only post-production added reverb. Not really worth giving up the "you-are-there" presentation of the 24/192 two-channel version of the performance for that.

SACD performance was surprising. Playing two copies of the same SACD recording (a Telarc sampler),

one in my Sony XA777ES SACD player and one in the Denon, revealed little difference once both were adjusted for equal output (using a test-tone CD and an audio voltmeter). Again, the Sony exhibited more bottom end, but otherwise the presentation was very similar for both, which is to say, excellent. I'm impressed. Again, the Denon probably converts SACD to PCM, but whatever it does, it does it well.

HDCD playback was an interesting experiment. The same differences between CD playback on my (non HDCD) Sony XA777ES and the Denon DBP-4010UDCI were also noticed on HDCD playback. The Sony doesn't decode HDCD; the Denon, ostensibly, does. I listened to a number of Reference Recordings HDCD encoded discs such as Respighi's *Belkis* Queene of Sheba Suite with Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra (Reference RR95CD) and Walton's *Crown Imperial* With Jerry Junkin and the Dallas Wind Symphony (Reference RR-112). On the interesting and delightful *Belkis* by Respighi, I noticed an ever so slightly cleaner string presentation with the Denon and its HDCD decoding than I did through my Sony, so perhaps there's something to HDCD after all. The effect is subtle, but given the choice of having it or not, I think I'd opt for having it.

## Blu-Ray Audio Playback

For audio-only Blu-Ray playback, I have two hybrid titles from a Norwegian recording company called 2L. These were the famous Edvard Grieg Piano Concerto (from a Norwegian Company? Naturally!) and the fairly obscure violin concertos by Norwegian composer Ole Bull (this is not "Ole" as in Merry Ole England, but as in "Oh-Lee"). Each title contains two discs, a multi-channel SACD (which has the performance presented as both a two-channel stereo version and a surround version) and a Blu-Ray disc which has the performance presented as a 5.1 surround version in 24-bit/192 KHz DTS format, a 7.1 surround version in 24/96 DTS, and a 2-channel LPCM version at 24/192.

2L has designed this disc to be very audio-user friendly. The Blu-Ray standard calls for the player remote-control unit to use color-coded buttons to allow direct selection of the desired version of the many possible audio formats available to Blu-Ray. In the case of the 2L discs, the red button will directly access the 5.1 channel 24/192 version, the green button will directly access the 7.1 24/96 version, and the yellow button will directly access the two-channel 24/192 version, thus obviating the need to have the player connected to a video display. This is nice. At the bottom of the remote, there are, indeed, four dedicated buttons marked both in color and in text as Red, Green, Blue and Yellow. Depressing the yellow button gives immediate access to the 24-bit/192-kHz, two-channel program that is what I used for my evaluations.

The Grieg Piano Concerto and other Grieg piano works on the program are very nice if a bit mechanical. The piano portion of these performances is "provided" by the late Australian composer, Percy Grainger. In 1921, he visited New York where he recorded, for the Aeolian company's Duo-Art Pianola player piano "recorder," a three piano roll version of the Grieg Piano Concerto and later, also in the USA, he recorded other Grieg works for Aeolian. It is these "Player Piano" rolls that provide the piano for this "re-performance".

In order to get a feel for the Blu-Ray playback, I first played the SACD disc in my Sony XA777ES SACD player. After getting a feel for how it sounded in that player, I then moved it to the Denon DBP-4010UDCI and listened to it there. Then, finally, I replaced the SACD disc with the Blu-Ray disc and pressed the yellow button, listening to the performance again in the Blu-Ray 24/192 format.

As before, my Sony produced a more convincing bottom end on the two-channel SACD version of the Grieg recording, but otherwise there is little to choose between the SACD presentations on either machine. When I compared the two-channel SACD with the 24/192 version on the Blu-Ray disc in the Denon, there was, not surprisingly, no discernable difference at all. The main difference between the Blu-Ray version of a 24/192 program and a DVD-A at the same bit-depth and sampling frequency is merely the format of the digital media, not the content or the recording format. The 2L discs are not mastered as DSD (SACD) but rather as 24-bit, 352.8-kHz PCM recordings that 2L calls Pure-Audio "Digital Xtreme" Definition. Since the SACD playback on the Denon is most likely converted from DSD to 24/192 before decoding, anyway, I would expect the processing of both formats to be the same. That accounts for the two sounding identical.

## SD Card Use

The inclusion of an SD card reader in the Denon DBP-4010UDCI is a nice touch, but I'm somewhat disappointed at its performance limitations. The Wave (LPCM) format (the only non-compressed format supported by the Denon on memory card) is limited to 16-bit and 44.1- or 48-kHz sampling rate (CD and Digital Audio Tape (DAT) resolution) as are all of the supported lossy compression schemes (MP3, WMA, AAC).

The two card types supported are the SD and its higher density SDHC sibling. Mini-SD and Micro-SD cards can also be accommodated with the proper physical adapter but not, surprisingly, mini or micro SDHC (that one makes no sense). Unfortunately, Denon does not include these adapters with the unit.

I am also somewhat disappointed that Denon did not include a USB connector for a so-called "thumb" memory. These ubiquitous portable data transporters are far more ubiquitous for MP3 use than are the SD cards (which are mostly used for digital camera storage) and are often used to plug one's collection into a car stereo, many of which sport in-dash USB ports.

To test the SD-Card function, I captured some Internet radio (I don't rip to lossy compression schemes, preferring Apple's Lossless Compression (ALC) for my iPod use) onto my computer hard drive and then copied the resultant MP3 file to an SD card. It played it without a hitch. One caveat, though. You must insert the card with the Denon's power in the standby mode. If you don't, the DBP-4010UDCI won't read it. It is also recommended that one turn the power off to remove a card as well. This is inconvenient and easy to forget, making it a PITA.

## Ethernet Connection

The Ethernet connection is provided to give the DBP-4010UDCI direct access to the Internet. This can be via a CAT-5 (or better) Ethernet cable to an Ethernet router or to the LAN port of a suitable computer or other device giving Ethernet access. This is done for two reasons. The first is to give the player access to BD-LIVE

content when viewing Blu-Ray or DVD discs so enabled. An SD card can be used directly in the DBP-4010UDCI to capture and save BD-Live data. The second reason for the Ethernet ports is to allow firmware upgrades of the DBP-4010UDCI itself. To do this one must use the video on-screen set-up function to access the Firmware Update instructions.

## Conclusion

Overall, the Denon DBP-4010UDCI player is a beautiful performing piece of equipment. It's well made utilizing a special high-end transport designed to reduce jitter. The unit sports separate power supplies for the digital and analog sections and goes to a great deal of trouble to use the highest quality parts possible.

While its main claim to fame is the fact that it is a universal player which will play most CD and DVD-based formats as well as solid-state media like SD cards, it's also a better than average performer at all the tasks this reviewer tried it with. It is picky about DVD-As, but this format is mostly obsolete and unless your collection contains a large number of DVD-A discs, or if you have need, as I do, to "roll your own" high-resolution audio discs, this should be of little concern.

While it is best served as the centerpiece of a high-end home-theater system where its versatility and Internet features can be accessed through a video interface, it nonetheless can be used as a stand-alone audio player in a dedicated stereo system, but with the aforementioned caveats.

## NOTES

**Denon DBP-4010UDCI Universal A/V Player,** \$2,000.00. Denon Electronics (USA), 100 Corporate Dr., Mahwah, N.J. 07430-2041; phone 201/762-6500, FAX 201/762-6670; web site [usa.denon.com](http://usa.denon.com).

### Associated Equipment

Audio Research SP-9 Mk. II preamp; Audio Technica AT-PEQ3 head amp; Krell KAV-300iL integrated amp; two VTL140 tube monoblock power amps; two Denon POA6600A solid-state monoblock power amps; Behringer A-500 amp; Sony XA777ES CD/SACD player; Denon DVD-758 DVD-A player; TASCAM CD-RW700 CD recorder; Otari DTR8S DAT recorder; Korg MR-1 DSD recorder; TEC (Beresford) TC-7510 and Sonic Frontiers DAC2.6 DACs; 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, Grado Reference Master, and Soundsmith Carmen-M phono cartridges; Martin Logan Aeon i electrostatic speakers; Yamaha YST-SW150 subwoofer; Monster M1000 and AudioQuest Blue interconnects, and Monster M1speaker cable.



# *Vandersteen Anniversary 2Ce Signature II Loudspeakers*

Chuck Bruce

**H**IGH IN THE PANTHEON of what I consider benchmark loudspeakers, especially those from the decades such as the 1960s and '70s, the Vandersteen 2C series, now standing strong for some 33 years, has held up against such legends as the Acoustic Research 2 and 3A, KLH 9, Dynaco A25s, Quad Electrostatics, Dahlquist DQ10s, Accustats, Apogee of various models, and all manner of Bozaks. These and a number of other famous brands extended the technology and launched many of us into the world of audiophile level stereo gear, the stuff that was later called "high-end." Several manufacturers of this era remain and to their credit continue to evolve and improve their lines. These include Martin-Logan, Magnepan, Thiel, Phase Technology, Quad and others. There are many others, however, which are just memories, having faded from the production scene. But not these Vandersteens, not in this Model 2Ce Signature II incarnation. And you should recognize and rejoice that the firm has thought it fitting to release this commemorative model, celebrating the high performance and standards of the original.

The original Vandersteen 2C was launched in 1977, and for many of us it was our first entry into the magic world of top-rated audiophile speaker systems. The design continued to evolve as company chief Richard Vandersteen took advantage of proven technical advancements to firmly establish a sensible policy of continuous improvement. Based on what I heard, time has not stood still for the 2Ces; they've just gotten **lots** better, not just a little better. Plain and simple, these moderately priced speakers incorporate much of the technology of their brother, the up-market Vandersteen Model 5.

Similar in appearance to the original Model 2C, this current version has an acoustically transparent fabric sock covering the 39¾-inch high, 16-inch wide by 10¼-inch deep rectangular enclosure. Natural oil-finish wood veneer end caps are supported with four heavy dowels at the corners, so there is no formal finished cabinet; this technique keeps the costs of manufacturing and materials down. The MDF enclosure is heavily braced, has a black finish, and uses a minimum-size baffle, which is discretely obscured by the sock.



Vandersteen's design uses just the minimum baffle area required to house the low frequency drivers and crossover components. This reduces opportunities for vibration which can color the sound. Vandersteen indicates it allows focusing on internal components and quality instead of fancy cabinetry.

The review samples were provided with T-shaped stands, which are a \$150 option. These were heavy, about three inches tall, had a black crinkle finish, and were sand-filled. They bolted on in a straight-ahead manner, while the adjustable three-point spike system effectively anchored them to the wood floor. From

ing from this unit, no matter what I throw at it. The midrange is a 4.5-inch curvilinear polycone with an operating range of 600 Hz to 5 kHz. Both the tweeter and midrange are housed in a separate sealed sub-cabinet mounted atop the main cabinet with the midrange angled upward for better dispersion. The woofer is an 8-inch curvilinear polycone with a 1.5-inch, two-layer voice coil with ventilated aluminum former, featuring a 40-ounce, focused-gap magnet structure and operating range of 35 Hz to 600 Hz. According to Vandersteen, this latest Signature II version uses the firm's patented tweeter and midrange assembly also used in the up-

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## **This 2Ce Signature II speaker is based on a design that's nearly 35 years old — but it's not out-dated!**

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experience, they are to be recommended. They can be sand or shot filled to increase mass and solidity. I will offer more on set-up and stand adjustment further on.

The 2Ces may appear a bit retro to some observers, yet they are not unattractive. The sock design is simply a practical solution to help meet the very affordable price-point of \$2195 per pair. This allows more of the design dollars to be put into the items that make the music, the speaker drivers. It should be noted that equivalent dollars haven't increased much since the late 1970s.

### **Technical Summary**

The 2Ce Anniversary Signatures IIs are basically a time-coherent, three-way, four-driver configuration using 600-Hz and 5-kHz crossover points; the design uses first-order, 6-db per octave slopes. There are separate sealed sub-cabinets for the tweeter/midrange drivers mounted atop the main cabinet which houses the woofer, Active Acoustic Coupler, wiring, and crossover network. The bass is augmented by an Active Acoustic Coupler which consists of a heavy-duty 10-inch, low-frequency driver with 1.5-inch voice-coil, that operates over a primary range of 29 to 55 Hz. It fires rearward from the main cabinet and is centered approximately 12 inches off the floor. It isn't defined specifically as an integral "subwoofer," yet its output does go into a frequency range that subs work in. The Acoustic Coupler extends the range of the woofer and results in a summed composite response filling-in, lifting and leveling of the response from approximately 100 Hz (where the woofer begins its roll-off) to 29 Hz. Furthermore, Vandersteen defines the Acoustic Coupler's role as complementing or filling in the lower portion of the response of main 8-inch woofer. In addition, "by reducing box and thermodynamic loss, it serves as a novel electro-mechanical optimized woofer system." Pretty fancy talk, but it worked both in my personal listening situation, where it produced smooth, authoritative lower bass in a real listening room, and in measurements via my AudioControl SA 3050A third-octave spectrum analyzer which indicated useful response down to a bit below 29 Hz.

The 1-inch, dual-chamber tweeter is a critically damped, ceramic-coated, alloy dome with an operating range of 5 kHz to 30 kHz, and I've yet to hear any ring-

market Model 5 which includes high-grade capacitors and a more refined woofer alignment.

Speaker connections are made via four terminal barrier screw-type bindings, which are gas-tight and fitted with No. 10 gold-plated Philips-head screws. This provides for bi-wiring or vertical bi-amping; the owner's manual addresses these options extensively. One pair is labeled "Low," which the adjacent pair is labeled "High" for crossover routing. The Signature IIs also feature coin-slot tweeter level controls with a range of +2 dB to -3 dB and midrange level controls with the same range; these are for fine tuning of output, to match room acoustic conditions, or personal listening preference. At minimum, bi-wiring is recommended for best performance and per my experience is definitely a good thing to do. Vertical bi-amplification is also supported with matched amplifiers required for proper operation and performance. For the review, I primarily utilized bi-wiring from a common stereo amplifier and two pairs of speaker cables matched for identical length and gauge. I also tried mono wiring with a quality single cable and got good results so long as I followed sensible connection techniques.

### **Speaker Set-up**

As with any loudspeaker, set-up is critical. Vandersteen pays close attention to this step and provides extensive instructions in the owner's manual. I guarantee from experience, if you pay careful attention to these instructions, the results will pay dividends in frequency smoothness as well as phase or time correctness. The optimum listening height is 33 inches when the speakers are placed on the three-inch stands. Those provided by Vandersteen came sand-filled and have a tilt-back that is very important to maintain phase and time correctness from this time-coherent system. The stands feature adjustable spikes that are intended as an integral element of set-up.

I must stress set-up measurements are well worth the effort; measure the distance from the listening position to room boundaries, especially the side walls. Confirm the tilt-back to ensure the best dispersion. Several graphs and math conversion tables, especially for odd dimension rooms, are provided by Vandersteen. I enlisted the aid of a friend with tape measures, spirit levels (a



plum-bob may be substituted), and a long straight edge ruler. With diligence, set-up can be accomplished in an hour or less, depending on the complexity of the room and your preferred listening position. Experimentation is encouraged and the owner's manual is quite useful and effective in its suggestions. I tried some and gained enhanced performance. In my case, the speakers ended up in a short-wall configuration, several feet into the rectangular room and a bit asymmetrical from the side

## Selected Specs

**Impedance:** 7 ohms nominal, 4 ohms minimum  
**Sensitivity:** 86 dB SPL with 2.83 volts of pink noise input at 1 meter on axis.

**Frequency Response:** 29 Hz to 29 kHz  $\pm 3$ dB; 32 Hz to 21 kHz  $\pm 1.5$  dB by FFT step function.

**Dispersion:** 29 Hz to 16 kHz  $\pm 3$ dB 30 degrees off axis.

**Crossover:** 600 Hz and 5 kHz crossover points, phase coherent, first order 6 dB per octave slopes utilizing computer-grade, high-quality film capacitors and low impedance air core inductors.

**Recommended Amplifier Power:** 40 to 160 watts per channel, 8 ohms.

**Tweeter:** 1-inch, critically damped, ceramic-coated alloy dome, using dual-chamber design, Ferrofluid-cooled voice coil. Range of operation: 5 kHz to 30 kHz.

**Midrange:** 4.5-inch, die-cast basket with linear surround and curvilinear polycone, Ferrofluid-cooled voice coil. Range of operation: 600 Hz to 5 kHz.

**Woofers:** 8-inch, die-cast basket and curvilinear polycone; 1.5-inch two-layer voice coil with ventilated aluminum former and 40-ounce, focused-gap magnet structure. Range of operation: 36 Hz to 600Hz.

**Active Acoustic Coupler:** 10-inch, critically damped, long-fiber cone and heavy-duty, 1.5-inch, four-layer voice coil with ventilated aluminum former and 40-ounce, focused-gap magnet structure. Range of operation: 29 Hz to 55 Hz.

**Cabinet Finish:** Hand-finished natural wood veneer, options available. Review sample supplied in light oak with charcoal-colored acoustically transparent fabric cover.

**Video Shielding:** The Signature II is not magnetically shielded and should be placed at least 10 inches away from direct-view TV sets.

**Warranty:** One year, extendable to five years by registering the free optional warranty within 30 days of purchase.

**Optional Accessory Base:** Black steel 2 Ce-1 adjustable spike bases that may be sand or shot filled and firmly bolt directly to loudspeaker base, \$150.00.

**Weight:** 60 pounds net each, 70 pounds gross.

walls. Richard Vandersteen has been a speaker designer and builder long enough to know his stuff. Following his set-up instructions works and extends appreciation for the process. The Signature IIs are not of a size to physically overpower a room and in this lighter color scheme (ours were charcoal fabric with light oak end caps) has acceptable spouse appeal (at least according to my lovely yet outspoken spouse Joan. We gave them a high Décor Score. Luckily, I have my own man-cave retreat (16 feet wide x 27.5 feet long x 8 feet high) for hi-fi fun where I can properly receive spousal visits when made with due approbation.

## The Performance

Having access to a pair of the original 2Cs, I can attest that the acoustic signature of the first edition offers a polite yet detailed overall presentation with good imaging and depth of field. Bass was certainly acceptable, yet not really exciting or extended. The original was a system that did more right than wrong; in its day, it was a definite advance. Those first 2Cs offered emerging audiophiles a good way to move up-market without breaking the bank and they didn't require super expensive or exotic electronics. Thousands of pairs were sold around the planet and in my experience many are still in use by original owners.

Today, in these latest Signature IIs, we have a whole different game. They project a tight, authoritative and extended bass, have an extremely smooth and detailed midrange, and offer an extended high-frequency response from the tweeter. As I mentioned above, Richard Vandersteen notes that they incorporate many design elements of the notable up-market Model 5, which makes these something of a bargain.

I experienced little if any high-frequency beaming and there was respectably wide 30-degree dispersion off the central axis, so that multiple listeners to receive accurately balanced sound. While this speaker does have a sweet spot, yet it is not so narrow or small that you need a vice to keep your head still during listening. This loudspeaker is just an all-round capable and very enjoyable music reproducer that lets you keep your mortgage payments current. It never fatigued or bored me and I kept inviting folks over for a listen. I even had some non-audiophile neighbors applaud with gusto when I played the famed 45-rpm LP of Louis Armstrong doing "St. James Infirmary." This recording often gives folks goose bumps because of its intimate realism. The Signature IIs delivered their share of realism to the task and then some.

For these listening sessions, I often use high resolution CDs from FIM (First Impression Music). In this case, I used one entitled *K2-HD Sound* and, in particular, the "Rachmaninoff: Symphonic Dance No.1" excerpt among others (FIM K2 HD 078). Another stunner from FIM is *Misa Criolla* (LIM K2-HD 040) featuring Jose Carreras and Ariel Ramirez (piano). This one gave goose bumps galore, especially from the stirring low bass. Here are some other discs I use for reference. *Nojima Plays Liszt*, CD/HDCD, Reference Recordings RR-25, is quite nice. The marvelous Stokowski-conducted *Rhapsodies* RCA Living Stereo re-release on SACD, 82876-67903-2, is also a real stunner, especially if you have three-track gear to recreate the original triple-track recording provided on this disc. *Best Audiophile Voices* (XRCD PR-27901) is always a good bet for popular and

jazzy tunes done up by some of our current-best female artists including Jane Monheit and Alison Krauss. Moving to the jazz front, let me commend a Horace Parlan disc, *Speakin' My Piece*, which has some superlative piano this XRCD24 re-release of the Blue

their candid opinions. I have even schlepped these speakers to a local A/V Club meeting. In all cases the listeners were unexpectedly surprised but pleased by the 2CE's performance. Most all of us have heard the earlier 2C models and remember their attributes and

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## These speakers have lots of lovely, delicate air, sparkle and image float. Vocals are especially attractive.

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Note original (AWMXR-0002), a terrific reference. Plenty of LPs live in my reference catalog, way too many for my editor to list. You'll have to just trust me when I say that LP playback is first rate via the Signature IIs, conveying the relaxing yet involving attributes of pure analog from this medium. There are no stresses, strains or sharp edges here and the Signature IIs help one's ability to listen into the performance and plumb its emotional character.

All in all, the Signature IIs kept me reaching for more CDs and LPs to evaluate and, indeed, re-evaluate. Depth of image and lateral expanse of their soundstage is excellent. Soundstage height is not as extended as the one projected from taller, more costly implementations of big dipoles or electrostatic panels, but this is hardly a fatal shortcoming. At 86 dB sensitivity (efficiency in lay terms) and a nominal 7 ohms and 4 ohms minimum, it's not an especially efficient speaker. It will perform best with a power or integrated amp that has good current capacity. As a point of reference, among the various amps I employed was a Marantz Reference series PM-15S2 integrated amplifier with an output capability of 140 watts per channel into 4 ohms. This amp showcased the attributes of this loudspeaker extremely well. I would say further that its price matches up with that of the Signature IIs. Owners should not be required to own super-buck amps to get good performance at reasonable listening levels. Just go for as much quality and power as one can afford.

The Signature IIs conveyed copious amounts of lovely, delicate air, sparkle and image float, especially from chimes and upper register cymbals, bells and similar percussion, as well as piano. Both male and female voices are reproduced in an especially attractive manner. Their presentation was natural and not at all strident and indeed both were very appealing and involving. The presentation from bottom to top of the frequency range is quite linear, with no audible bumps, humps or aberrations across the music spectrum.

Some speakers I have owned or auditioned give performance that eventually appears to max-out, regardless of the quality of signal sources. These Vandersteen 2CE Signature II loudspeakers continue to set new performance peaks when presented with increasingly good quality signal source material, reproduction electronics or accessories. Such new heights of dynamics, definition and musicality were reached when I applied either Audio Research Reference series preamps or EAR pre and power amps.

When auditioning equipment of this grade, I most usually assemble an informal listening session with a select group of experienced guests, so that I can solicit

shortcomings, but few listeners were prepared for this latest Signature II edition.

I found this speaker kept me coming back for more listening. I kept being amazed at their price/performance ratio, and I kept being surprised at how strongly they kept me involved in the listening experience regardless of the type of music played. I spun a boatload of CDs and LPs via the Signature IIs well into the wee hours on quite a few nights.

I did not find this loudspeaker had any notable shortcomings, especially for one at this price point. I just advise paying attention to room positioning using the set-up graphs and guides in the owner's manual. In particular, look at the rather precise positioning measurements, especially tilt-back from the listening position. Doing this in the "recommended way" will give you much more than expected. If you get a friend to help with set-up, it actually goes pretty quick.

And then begin enjoying your music collection, all over again. You won't regret it.

## NOTES

**Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II Anniversary Edition Loudspeaker**, \$2195.00 per pair. Vandersteen Audio, 116 W. Fourth St., Hanford, CA 93230; phone 559/582-0324; e-mail [information@vandersteen.com](mailto:information@vandersteen.com); web site [www.vandersteen.com](http://www.vandersteen.com).

### Associated Equipment

Audio Research Ref. II MK-II preamp; Audio Research PH-5 phono preamp; EAR 868 preamp with phono; EAR 890 tube power amp.; McCormack ALD-1 preamp; McCormack DNA-1 balanced power amp; PASS X150 balanced power amp; Cary V12 Rocket tube power Bal/SE amp; Marantz Reference PM 15S2 integrated amplifier; OPPO SE Blu-Ray CD player; PS Audio Digital Link D/A; VPI HW-19 Mk-IV with Benz Micro Ruby 3-H phono cartridge; various power cords and interconnects including AudioQuest Colorado (battery shield version); Kimber Select; Soundstrings; Dual-Connect and DynaStrand, and dual-module power conditioner by TIFF (500 w/each module) for low current devices.



# Hegel HD10 D/A Converter

Bascom H. King



**T**HE HEGEL COMPANY of Oslo, Norway, has a number of interesting and innovative audio products including CD players, preamps, power amps, and integrated amplifiers. Looking at their web site, they seem to take a pretty sophisticated approach to the design of their products, for instance, they make their own CD player servo electronics as their tests showed this improved the sound of their player.

As I have always been interested in D/A converters and how they measure and sound, I was agreeable when the editor suggested I review this one, the Hegel HD10. Physically, it is a nice, compact, and simple little unit with four digital inputs and both balanced and unbalanced audio outputs. The inputs are two S/PDIF coax, one S/PDIF optical Toslink, and a USB. A front panel push-button switch has the four inputs listed around it, and the button toggles through the four inputs, while a blue LED illuminates for the selected input.

Hegel says of its USB input that it “has a soundcard inside the DAC.” I am not quite sure what that means. It must be something special in that it is said to accept input sample rates up to 192 kHz whereas most of the other modern or advanced USB input circuit schemes are limited to a 96-kHz input sampling rate. One thing I found was, like some other recent DAC designs, the HD10 does not work naturally at sampling rates higher than 96 kHz. By “naturally,” I mean that in normal PCM operation as the sampling rate goes up, the corresponding audio bandwidth goes up proportionally; with a sampling rate of 192 kHz, the audio bandwidth would be above 90 kHz. In the case of the HD10, all incoming sampling rates are upsampled or downsampled to

something around 110 kHz, the result of which is that the audio bandwidth of incoming sampling rates higher than 96 kHz have a just slightly higher bandwidth than that of a 96-kHz sampling rate, some 45 to 50 kHz. The reason given for this by some other DAC manufacturers is that the DAC chips really don’t work all that well at those higher sampling rates and it is felt by converting everything to the 110-kHz frequency, the overall performance is better.

When I got the HD10, I took it into my lab and made a few key measurements to make sure it was working correctly. I then put it in my system with one coax input coming from my Genesis Digital Lens, the Lens input coming from the McCormack UDP-1SE player. The other coax input was fed from a PS Audio PWT. Over a period of few weeks, I listened to the HD10 along with my other players and the output of a PS Audio PWD.

In general, the HD10 sounded very good and didn’t stand out as particularly different from the other sources. I have compared the sound of the HD10 and the PWD playing the HRx sample disc in the PWT and they were pretty darned close with a nod going to the PWD with slightly more perceived definition. I have done most of my critical listening of the HD10 with prototype set of electronics, line preamp and power amp, that I am working on for a client. I just finished listening to a pirated live recording CD of John Corigliano’s Symphony No. 1 using the UDP-1SE, Genesis Digital Lens, HD10 driving this prototype set of electronics. Let me tell you, I was stunned at the power of the drums, the overall ambience and simply compelling presence of this recording! I have not heard much in my experience that has sounded better. The

HD10 is a very, very good sounding DAC! Using a number of cuts from a compilation I got from Robert Lee of Acoustic Zen, particularly a piece called "Duende" from the album *Bozzio Leven Stevens Magne Carta* (MA-9019-2). This piece really had power and bash galore. It sounded great with the HD10. Another of my favorite cuts, "Keith Don't Go" from Nils Lofgren's *Acoustic Live* (Vision Music VMCD1005), sounded beautifully defined and convincing to me when played with the HD10.

Doing a little more in the lab with the HD10, much to my pleasant surprise, it did play back files with either the 176- and 192-kHz sampling rate through its USB input. In general, however, the noise floor was uniformly higher through the USB input at about -94 dB full scale, regardless of sampling rate or bit depth. Using the coax input, at a sampling rate of 44.1 kHz, the noise floor was about -106 dB full scale, but was not as good when the sampling rate increased above 44.1 kHz. At 96 kHz, it was more like the USB input's noise level of about -94 dB full scale.

After convincing myself that the USB input would accept high sample rates, I ran a long USB cable from my computer on the office side of my listening room over to the HD10, which was on the other side of the room with the rest of my music listening gear. I had a number of 24/96 and 24/192 WAV files of various music sources along with some 24/176 WAV files from Reference Recordings HRx DVD discs on several HDD drives that I use for playing music from my desktop computer. Connecting up the HD10 to the computer resulted in a generic USB player being created with no special software needed. Sure enough, the HD10 played all of the high-resolution WAV files with no

problems. Using the files from the HRx Sampler, the sound was very good but not quite as good as playing those same files on the DVD sampler disc on the PS Audio PWT into the coax input of the HD10. Still, the flexibility and sound of the HD10's USB input is quite impressive.

In conclusion, the HD10 operated flawlessly during the review period. I can enthusiastically recommend you listen to this piece. Judging from how the HD10 sounds, I wouldn't be surprised if the company's other products would be worth a serious listen too.

## NOTES

**Hegel HD10 D/A Converter**, \$1200.00. Hegel USA, 303 S. 6th St., Fairfield, IA 52556. E-mail [info@hegel.com](mailto:info@hegel.com), Web site [www.hegelmusicsystems.com](http://www.hegelmusicsystems.com).

### Ancillary Equipment

Genesis Advanced Technologies (GAT) 6.1 speakers with GAT G928 subwoofers; Sonic Frontiers Power One power amplifier, prototype power amplifier and preamp; Genesis Technologies Digital Lens; PS Audio PWD and Hegel HD10 D/A converters; ModWright/Sony NS9100ES; McCormack UDP-1 SE and PS Audio Perfect Wave Transport disc players, and aHP a1220n computer running Windows XP Home.



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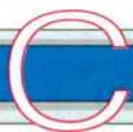
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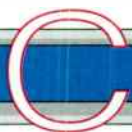
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