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The Audiophile Voice

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Equipment Reviews:
Burwen Bobcat Software
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Editor/Publisher Eugene Pitts, III
Senior Editors Chuck Bruce, Mike
Driscoll, James T. Frane, Alfred Fredel,
George Graves, Bernard Kingsley,
Michael Tearson, David Schwartz,
and Don Scott
Assistant Editors Mark Ludas
John Ludas

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Arnis Balgalvis, Hector Chrest, John Gatski,
Bascorn King, Joel Shumer, Jon Tiven,
Les Turcozi, Ross Wagner, and Don Wilcock.

ADVERTISING

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

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New Products

The Niles SW8 and SW6.5 Subwoofers

include many innovative design and use features which make them more user and installation friendly than virtually any other high performance subwoofer. Expanding on its background in custom installations, Niles came up with an ultra-stylish design that will enhance any decor; one nice feature is the piano-black finish that is also resistant to fingerprints. These designs will outperform any similar-sized system with superior sound quality;



using a long-throw woofer with dual long-throw, side-mounted passive radiators, these subwoofers will deliver the sound pressure level of systems four times their size. Both feature automated turn-on via 12 volt trigger or audio signal sensing and include a built-in CAT5 balun to enable audio delivery over easy-to-use CAT5 cable. Additionally, both models come with a built-in bracket-mount that is compatible with the Niles optional OmniMount® 30.0 ST-MP to allow easy wall or ceiling mounting, making it perfect for dens or rec rooms, as well as light commercial installations. The SW6.5 produces 200 watts average and up to 800 watts peak power through a 6.5-inch active driver and two 6.5-inch passive radiators with a frequency response of 42 to

200 Hz. Its cabinet is smaller than 10 inches cube and weighs only 11 pounds. The SW8 produces 300 watts power average and up to 1200 watts peak power through an 8-inch active driver and two 8-inch passive radiators with a frequency response of 36 to 200 Hz. Once again, this cabinet is roughly a 12-inch cube that weighs only 16.5 pounds.

Price: SW8, \$599.99; SW6.5, \$499.99.

Data: www.nilesaudio.com

The Onkyo CS-345 CD Mini System

is designed to deliver high-quality sound from compact discs, FM/AM radio, and music files stored on an iPod or iPhone. It can also display iPod/iPhone video on an external monitor. The unit has a built-in dock for iPod/iPhone, a CD player, and an FM/AM radio.

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Price: \$299.00 each.

Data: www.onkyousa.com



James Bongiorno

"The Bonge plays piano with great force, as if he were unable to restrain his enthusiasm for the instrument while he performs ... adopts Evans' rhythmic looseness, carrying phrases over the bar lines, as well as his broad, spare chords ... he also glides into some stride as well, the resulting mixture reveals his own choices despite the obvious influences of his predecessors and peers ... he creates a musical amalgam that establishes his own signature ..." — *Jazz Improv*

James Bongiorno, piano
Del Atkins, bass
Rayford Griffan, drums



Prelude



This Is The Moment



Candlelight



Alone Again

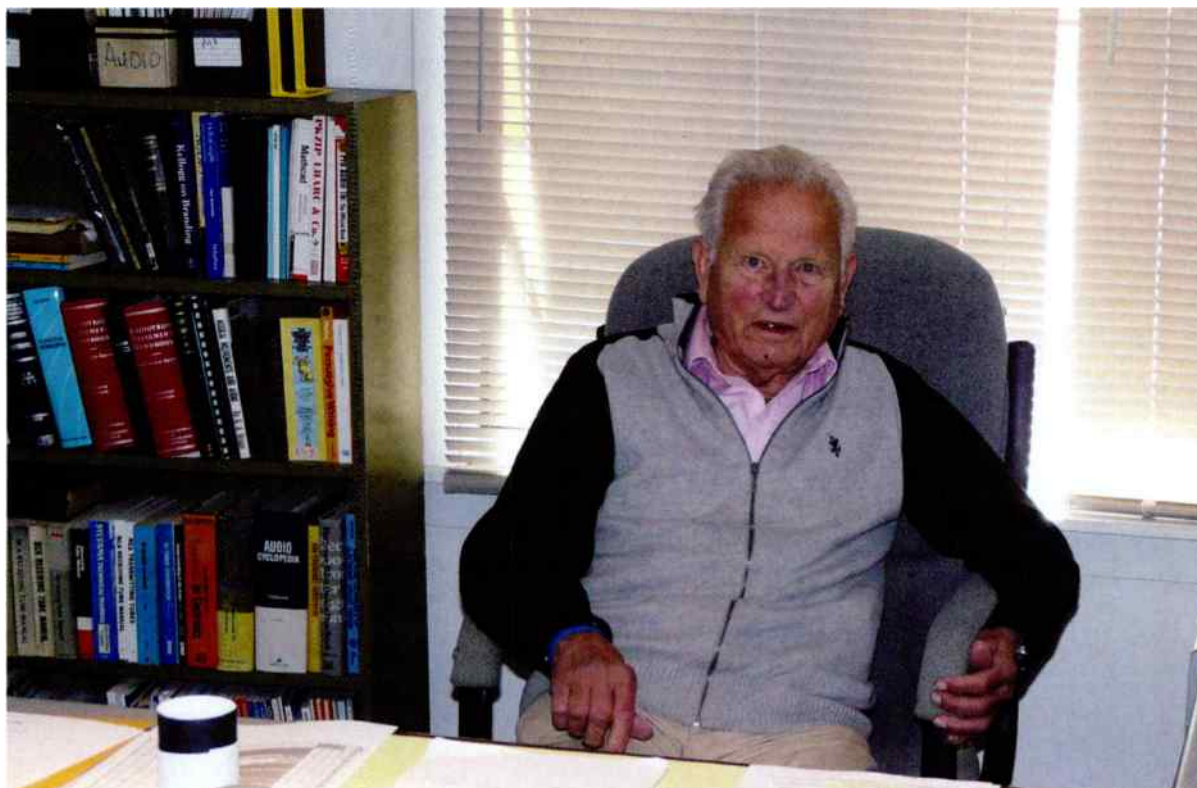
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Interview:

Ed Dell, Publisher Audio Amateur

Jan Didden



IN MY AUDIO LIBRARY, I have several feet of bound magazines, *The Audio Amateur*, *Speaker Builder*, *Glass Audio* and, recently, *AudioXpress*. All published during a 40-year plus span by Edward T. Dell, Jr. Who is this man, who single-handedly did more for the audio construction hobby than anyone else? Jan Didden visited him in beautiful New England and spend fascinating hours talking about audio, life and everything.

Jan Didden (JD): Mr. Dell, what has always intrigued me was why you decided to take up publishing about audio design and construction.

Edward T. Dell (ETD): You got a few hours? Seriously, the one red thread through my life is that I am extremely curious about how things work. I wonder how things work, and that curiosity has been the basis of most of what I did in my life. When I went to college in 1941, we lived in Miami and I ended up working all

summer at Western Electric. I worked on converting the Miami Beach telephone exchange from five digits to six digits. Great experience because I learned color codes, I learned to solder and learned to do extremely accurate and clean work.

JD: How did printing figure in your education?

ETD: To get through grad school, I took up contract printing. I took on a job for the Psychiatric Association, and finished it in two weeks. Then I took a printing job for Railway Express in Washington and I charged them \$9k for it! So, literally, printing paid for my education!

JD: I understand that at a certain point you became interested in theology?

ETD: Yes, since I was growing up in a very religious family, I thought I had to be a minister. I earned two bachelor degrees, Arts and Theology. Now, theology is

somewhat related to philosophy, same type of questions being asked. I was doing what is called supply work in Methodist churches, taking Sunday services, early Sunday morning, do the service and preach. This was late '40s. I was also teaching in high school in Boston, as assistant in the department of philosophy, teaching English and Philosophy. Then I discovered the Episcopal Church in Boston, in a setting so radically different from what I knew. Two years later I started to work as a chaplain in Boston. The parish was 50% white, 50% black, it was a great place for reconciliation, for understanding. I worked there for two years, and we worked hard and did well, but they send in a total idiot as my successor and he destroyed everything I build up, and I came to realize that you can't count on anything that you do will survive.

JD: I remember that the first issues of *The Audio Amateur* came from Old Jaffrey Road in Swarthmore, PA. How did you end up there?

ETD: In my last year in the suburbs, I got a call from a former classmate from seminary. He had just been appointed to a parish in Swarthmore, PA, a town half way between Philadelphia and Delaware. He wanted us to come down and visit.

They had these "parish neighborhood meetings," and I went to one of them and by sheer chance ran into the managing editor of the national edition of a brand-new magazine, *The Episcopalian*. We started talking and we talked and talked and I mentioned C. S. Lewis. Lewis was a phenomenon. I stumbled on him in 1943 when I found his book *Screwtape Letters*. He wrote things about Christianity that were totally different than what had been written in the previous 100 years. Lewis became a lifeline for me, the voice of rationality. To make the story short, I was asked to be book editor for *The Episcopalian*.

JD: So now you were an editor!

ETD: Yes, this was my entry into the circle of professional editors; they were all professionals except me. *The Episcopalian* went quite well and got to a 100,000 circulation. In the '60s, my career was very much influenced by my travels. I had saved up some money and bought a ticket on the Queen Mary to England. I walked into the Selfridge's store and found a book called *A Grief Observed* by N. W. Clerk. I knew exactly who that was, because Lewis had used that pseudonym before. Lewis wrote poems for *Punch* in the '60s under the *nom de plume* N. W. Clerk. A year before that I had written

to Lewis offering my condolences because his wife Joyce had died and I had expressed my hope he would write something about grief. And this was the book! I called his agent and said I was looking for rights for a book by Lewis. I asked about *A Grief Observed* and the man was horrified. I was ushered in the boss' office and they were scared I was going to blow the whistle on them. So I bought rights to that for *The Episcopalian* for \$500 or so, on the condition that we not reveal the pseudonym.

JD: What prompted you to start *Audio Amateur*? When was that?

ETD: *Stereophile's* Gordon Holt lived across the street from me. I was still going to NYC once a month, to the area where later the twin towers stood and where there were any number of surplus stores with great mil-spec electronics parts selling for very little money. I sat down one time with Gordon and said, "What's wrong with us? We put the absolutely very best parts in stuff that we never use, and that is thrown away when obsolete, yet we put the crappiest parts in consumer stuff that's used daily, only because we want to sell them another amp in a few years time." So I said to Gordon, "What would happen if we take all these marvelous mil-spec parts and build the same exact amplifier that Dynaco builds (Dynaco Stereo 70) but with all those hermetically sealed, oil-filled caps, Holtek potted filament transformers, expensive high-quality resistors, and switches? So I build it and Gordon drew the schematics, with a centerfold just for the circuit, and we published it in *Stereophile*. Gordon got a storm of criticism for the article and said, "Well, we're not going to publish these construction articles again!" I called Gordon a few days later when he had cooled off and I said I should start a magazine for people that like to build things. "Great idea," Gordon said, and he lent me his subscriber list, 5,000 people, and that helped to get me started. That was the beginning of *Audio Amateur*.

JD: Looking at the early issues, I see what looks like your entire family on the masthead.

ETD: It really WAS a family affair those early years! The kids used to help me with it. We got the first issue from the printer in my car, and at that evening, we all would get together, the kids, some friends, and we had an abandoned Scriptomatic addressing system, which I had bought from *The Episcopalian*. Once we got the magazines addressed, we had them bundled by area code, put them in mailing bags, labeled the bags, put them in the station wagon and took them to the post office. Then we would go downtown to Green's Delicatessen on Chestnut Street, and the kids could have anything they wanted, this was their pay and we really had a ball! Having the whole family on the magazine masthead is a good American tradition!

JD: So you picked up your printing skills again from your teenage years!

ETD: Yes, indeed! I was going to typeset *Audio Amateur* on a Selectric typewriter, 6 squares to the inch. We pasted up pages that were going to be reduced in a camera on 17x22-inch sheets of cardstock. We reduced it to 75% or 66%. It was black and white to begin with, 24 or 36 pages. I spend \$500 savings to print 100,000 promotional pieces 11x17 folded twice with a pitch for

Editor's Note: This interview was recorded in the fall of 2009. Almost two years later, the publishing activities of Audio Amateur Inc have been acquired by Elektor USA and Ed Dell has retired after 41 years of publishing audio diy journals. Jan Didden is, in his own right, an interesting and respected author. He hails from The Netherlands and has been a regular contributor to Audio Amateur and other audio periodicals for several decades. After recent retirement, he now has time to finish all those projects that piled up over the years. Jan is also founder and editor/publisher at Linear Audio. His personal audio adventures are documented at www.linearaudio.nl.



the magazine, including a sign-up part that was supposed to be cut off and returned with a check! I found out that McIntosh had one of the largest newsletter distributions that went out through their dealers. Their equipment distributor agreed to let us include our flyer with his mailings. I remember being on the floor together with the kids folding 80,000 flyers! The first day we went to get the mail there were eight subscriptions, at \$5 each for four issues. We got 5,000 subs out of the 80,000 flyers. That was our subscription core. That's how it started.

JD: Why a move from Philadelphia to NH?

ETD: I quit my job in 1974 when *The Audio Amateur* was making enough money to support me and my family. In February 1975 my wife and I said we have to go back to New England. We looked to New Hampshire: at that time they had no income tax, no sales tax, everything comes out of property tax. We ended up in Peterborough, in this four-bedroom house built in 1812. It was only an hour and a half from Boston.

JD: If I may ask, what was the connection of *Audio Amateur* with Old Colony Sound Lab? I remember that OCSL sold parts and kits for AA designs.

ETD: The OCSL business was part of something I did before I started AA. I devised a record filing system consisting of small labels and a special stamp. I printed special cards with what we call "bleed boxes" where the ink bleeds across the edge of the card, so you can see the indications by looking at the card edge. So this was a system where you could find back your particular recordings quickly. The name OCSL came from the Old Colony name of Massachusetts where I worked at the time. So when I started AA, I thought we ought to provide the means for people to build the designs and we used OCSL initially to provide circuit cards. Eventually we had people working in my cellar etching simple circuit boards!

JD: Nowadays OCSL carries many audio-related books and reprints.

ETD: Yes. The OCSL parts and kit sales have dwindled considerably, we mainly now sell books and reprints for which we got the rights, or that were never copyrighted to begin with. For instance, we have a CD version of *The Radiotron Designer's Handbook*, 1500 pages, the scanning alone cost us \$5 grand. I think we

probably sold 1400-1500 copies. We also send two copies of *Loudspeaker Design Cookbook* to Beijing for translation into Chinese. We had that also translated into Dutch and French.

JD: I remember your editorials in those early days. Not always related to audio, but always related to human endeavors.

ETD: Sometimes I get moved, something strikes me and then I write about it. In the '90s I collected my editorials in a small booklet ("On mockingbirds and other irrelevancies," available from audioxpress.com), and it's amusing to read it these days.

I was flattered when the Boston Audio Society picked up one of my editorials from 1978. It said essentially that people often say "this magazine is paid for by the advertisers, but that's not true! Every dollar the advertisers and manufacturers have is coming from the customers. Everything, magazines included, is paid by the customers' dollars! This is important to remember. The advertiser/manufacturer has an obligation to be honest and forthright towards readers and customers, and produce a good product."

JD: What do you think of the state of high-end audio these days?

ETD: One thing that becomes increasingly difficult is to experience a first-class system. You need to find a high-end dealer in your area that has some choice of high quality equipment. When Edgar Villchur designed the Acoustic Research acoustic suspension bookshelf speakers, they had a demo room right in Grand Central Station in New York City. Can you imagine how many people got introduced to high-quality music reproduction through that? Briggs in the UK did something similar – he organized comparative listening tests, between live musicians and the reproduced music.

JD: How did you become interested in music in the first place?

ETD: That goes back to my junior college years. My next door dormitory neighbor would play music and I had never heard classical music, growing up in the south. I thought, "What is this?" The guy would go on the street car to the Quincy library every week to borrow 78's. They were heavy and four minutes per side. I remember how heavy the complete Messiah was! He also had to go to the music building on campus and borrow a player. He had to return them the same day, so he played them several times on that day. Later on you could buy equipment from a place called Radio Shack at 167 Washington Street, in Quincy.

I used to gather friends on Saturday evening. We listened to the Boston Symphony on my Altec Lansing 604C speaker drivers in open-back boxes. Boston Symphony is a phenomenon as a prime source of classical music, and organized by a layman, not a musician. He had the Sydney music hall built with architectural and acoustical advice from Sabine, based on scientifically derived acoustical principles.

JD: I wonder whether you are a printer, a publisher or an audio amateur...?

ETD: Well, I am what is officially known as a dilettante! Like a butterfly, going into one thing after the next. I've taken courses in Swarthmore in Cobol pro-

gramming, even! You remember, when I worked for *The Episcopalian*, I had been going to Washington regularly where they typeset *The Episcopalian* in lead, and at that time the whole issue of machine typesetting coupled to a computer was very much in flux. I went to a seminar about typesetting and picked it up. We were paying wages for someone to do the monotype typesetting for *The Episcopalian* to the tune of \$27,000 a year at that time. I made a pitch to the quarterly meeting of the publishers of the other religious magazines (there were nine of them present), and I said, "Look, I think it would be smart for us to set up an electronic typesetting facility pool." There were already two or three systems available at the time. They didn't do it, but I succeeded in convincing my boss to lease a Selectric Composer for *The Episcopalian*. I said, "Instead of having this lady type in all manuscripts, then have to correct it in white-out and type in the words again, why don't we have her type it in the Selectric Composer?" My boss looked at me one day and he said, "If there is one thing that makes me sick, it's an editor that tries to sound like a printer!" After we came to Peterborough, we bought our first computer in 1980 from Ohio Scientific. The day we set an entire page with all the characters and symbols on one piece of paper was a very exciting day.

JD: Did audio give you an excuse to become a printer/publisher, or did you get so excited about audio that you wanted to tell the world about it?

ETD: This fascination with audio reproduction was before I really became fascinated with music. As soon as the LP came out I bought a small clamshell player from Columbia. I wrote to WPCR and said that there was too much distortion in the latest Columbia records, so they called me and invited me for lunch with a few station guys. We went into a room with a Voice of the Theater speaker and a Brook amplifier, put the record on and put it all the way up. Then I realized that musicians hear things very differently. Listening to this music at full blast, they couldn't have heard the distortion if their life depended on it! The love of music is my prime mover, and I also liked to read a good electronics article and enjoyed that.

JD: How did you find authors?

ETD: I was amazed how authors appeared, simply out of nowhere. I have an author file of 850 authors! Also, I kept an eye out for articles in other periodicals including those in Europe. Over time I got introduced to Peter Baxandall and Peter Walker by Reggie Williamson, who always was a good source of interesting articles. We also had a deal with *Wireless World* where we used some of their material and we printed a one-column ad for them as payment.

JD: How did *Voice Coil* start?

ETD: Well, in the late '70s you began to see a lot of articles on speakers as people started to explore Thiele-Small parameters. At a certain point Gary Galo sent me a copy of the *Loudspeaker Design Cookbook*. Vance (Dickinson) had already published it before I found out about it. I send it to Robert Bullock and things began to happen. Not sure about the sequence but I got convinced that there was enough interest in speakers to support a magazine on its own. I started it in 1979 and it was well received. It started a speaker diy movement



by people like Madisound who were very expert on the subject. *Speaker Builder* eventually became as large as *Audio Amateur*. Then I had a special section on tubes in *Audio Amateur* in 1989, and that was well received and we started *Glass Audio*. But, in publishing you don't want to go to press and selling unless you have advertising, and we actually had fractured our audience, so in 1999 we decided to bring the three magazines together.

JD: What's so great about audio do-it-yourself?

ETD: Well, there are several aspects to it. There is the obvious money-saving part, but also the fact that you can make your own equipment more reliable than commercial stuff, and when it fails, you can easily repair it yourself. But also I do believe that building or constructing something yourself is a very satisfying human endeavor. My personal motivation is the music I listen to as well as the electronics and construction and fixing part.

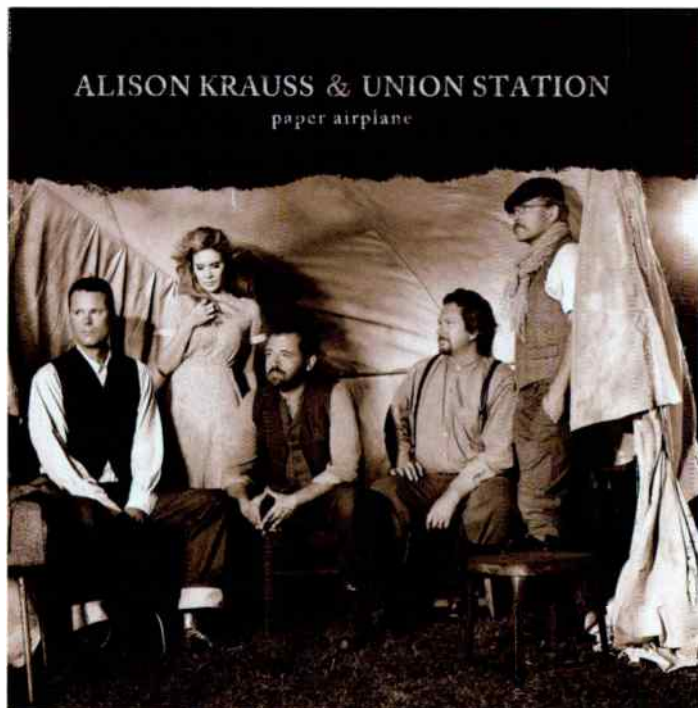
JD: Do you not think that reproduced music is a kind of art form on itself? Reproduced music, when done very well and well recorded, could exist on its own as art, not the same as live music and it never will be.

ETD: But music recorded for reproduction in the home is often tinkered with, and people were not realizing how much this was being done. When the recordings Columbia did in the '70s came out on CD, it revealed the extent of embarrassing engineer manipulation. They made a lot of changes in the final mix, with multi-miking. I remember an AES presentation by a former Columbia engineer where he admitted that the constant moving of control sliders was making the music pretty much unlistenable. This came evident after we got the resolving power of the CD; we found that our precious music was heavily doctored.

JD: What do you find so satisfying in the publishing vocation?

ETD: I do like very much to communicate and interact with people. I don't know what would have happened had I pursued a clerical career. In retrospect, I don't think I would have had the required skill sets. Yet, publishing is a different way to communicate, and the great thing is, you get to read all the articles first!

JD: Mr. Dell, thank you for your frankness and your time. And, on behalf of many tens of thousands of readers, thank you for bringing us 41 years of interesting, intriguing and enjoyable articles!



Bluegrass

Alison Krauss and Union Station *Paper Airplane*
Rounder Records 11661-0665-2

ALISON KRAUSS and Union Station have finally returned to the Bluegrass/American Roots musical genres with a truly wonderful 11 song collection entitled *Paper Airplane*. This is Alison Krauss' 14th album and the band's follow-up to their 2004's triple Grammy Award winning, *Lonely Runs Both Ways*. It is Alison's first release since her 2007, multi-platinum collaboration with Robert Plant, *Raising Sand*, which won six Grammys including awards in the elusive "Record of the Year" and "Album of the Year" categories.

The release of Alison's highly acclaimed album, *Paper Airplane*, has seen phenomenal results on the charts as well as enthusiastic and near-universal critical acclaim. The album made its debut on Billboard's Top 200 Album Chart at #3 and captured the coveted #1 position on the Country, Folk and Bluegrass Album Charts for two consecutive weeks, a career pinnacle for her and Union Station!

The band, Alison Krauss and Union Station, features the colossal talents and rare chemistry of: Alison Krauss (fiddle and lead vocals), Dan Tyminski (guitar, mandolin and lead vocals), Barry Bales (bass and harmony vocals), Ron Block (banjo, guitar and harmony vocals), and highlights the incomparable genius of Jerry Douglas (Dobro, Resophonic guitar, and harmony vocals).

Paper Airplane was produced by the band and recorded in Nashville, TN, with famous recording engineer, Mike Shipley. As bluegrass icons, the members of Union Station have maintained their virtuosity and prove once again that they are not just mechanical drones duplicating the same old sounds and riffs, but are capable of renewal and revitalization of their first love, Bluegrass. Through the years, the Station's contri-

bution to the resurgence of the Bluegrass and the American Roots music genres has been immeasurable, yet their music extends well beyond these two areas. They can bend their sound around any other area of music and blend in seamlessly. Their albums, and their work on such ever-popular films as *Cold Mountain* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* have, more than any other band, made an international return to American Roots music not only possible but inevitable.

Alison Krauss' talent bridges the gap between bluegrass music and country, rock, and pop. She has worked with some of the biggest stars in music, including James Taylor, Dolly Parton, Bonnie Raitt, and, yes, even Yo-Yo Ma. It is no wonder that she has won more Grammys than any woman in history. Hopefully, *Paper Airplane* will be a contender for another Grammy award.

The song titles and writers are pleasantly varied. They showcase such great writers as Aoife O'Donovan's "Lay My Burden Down." The title track features another song ably crafted by Alison's longtime songwriting collaborator Robert Lee Castleman, a talented writer she has used many times throughout her recording career. Dan Tyminski's high lonesome tenor sparkles in his version of Peter Rowan's "Dustbowl Children" and Tim O'Brien's (Hot Rize) "On the Outside Looking In." There is even the Jackson Browne-penned "My Opening Farewell." Every song has been meticulously chosen and together provides a cohesive landscape of beautiful musical excitement.

Hopefully, another seven years will NOT pass before their next Bluegrass studio recording. *Paper Airplane* has certainly attained my very most hearty and loving recommendation.

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— Brent Butterworth, Sound + Vision, www.soundandvisionmag.com, February 2011

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— Tom Norton, Home Theater Magazine, December 2011



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Photo: Kevin Nixon

Blues

*B.B. King Live at the Royal Albert Hall
Shout Factory CD, Blu-ray, and DVD.*

Charley Burch

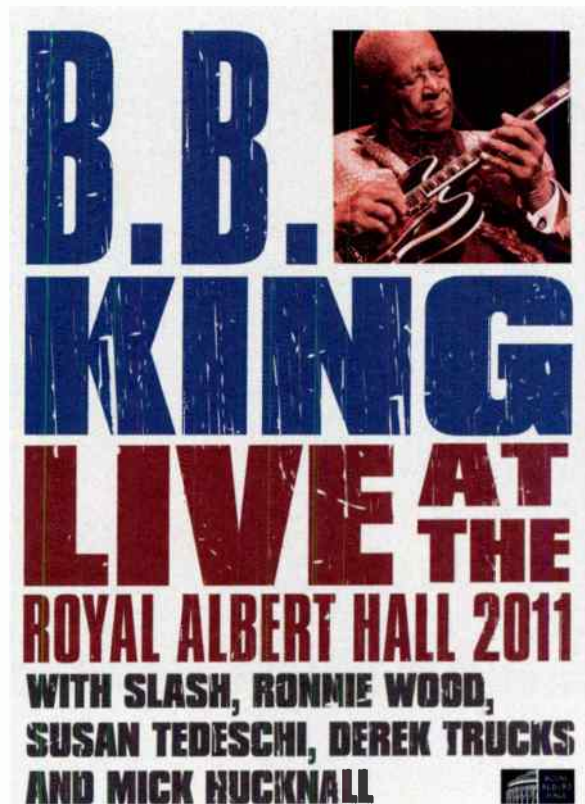
B.B. KING *LIVE at the Royal Albert Hall* was recorded and filmed on Tuesday, June 28, 2011, and was released on DVD, Blu-ray, and CD by Shout Factory March 20, 2012. The audio version on CD has the same great sound quality as the other two formats, and gives the listener an intimate listening session which commands one to play it from track number 1 until its final note. The Red Book CD is the most convenient medium through which to experience that magical evening, however, I must stress that the DVD is the better way to experience the concert due to its stunning visuals and kinesthetic beauty. The visual and audio continuity of this concert maintains my interest throughout the DVD's entire play length, and left me with no desire to pause or wander when watching. Be sure to play this set through a surround-sound system and preferably with a 1080p HD monitor. The Blu-ray version really "pops" and the lighting seems less washed out on the faces of the audience and players, giving an almost hyper-realistic experience. If you do not already own a Blu-ray player, this release is a very good reason to make the investment in one.

The film/audio versions of the concert at The Royal Albert Hall in London begin with exceptional and well-transitioned, multi-camera angled HD cinematography and splendid live-quality Dolby 5.1 surround-sound production. The Red White and Blue lighting are not only complementary to the appearance of the performers and the crowd, but magically unite the national colors of the two great allied nations that are represented by the band and the hall.

Usually with B.B., one experiences a 20 to 40 minute intro by the band, but on this occasion, we get B. B. introduced and seated within the first three minutes of the video giving us (the fans of the maestro) exactly what we want; The King of The Blues, B.B. King! Tossing picks to his hungry audience and graciously gesturing to them like an Eastern guru, B. B. sits down and begins to worship and wail on Lucille the way only he can do, masterfully. Adorned in a beautifully tailored three-piece tuxedo, he greets the audience, commands a roaring response and after hinting to the surprises that they are about to experience that evening, sublimely begins with "I Need You So"

(Hunter). The symbiotic relationship and decades of road experience with The King and his Band is clear and profound. The Memphis Sound is paid a tribute and qualified by the four-piece horn sections and B3 organ which raise our spirits and transfers the venue to the Delta, as if Dr. Who had crammed the Royal Albert Hall into his Tardis. The next number is "Key to The Highway" (Brooz/Segar). King's "voice to mic" techniques are as proprietary as they are mesmerizing. When B.B. sings, there is no question of his signature and ownership of a song. B.B.'s guitar playing has been influenced by many including his second cousin Bukka White. Though similar in vibrato and attack, King's identity and evolution of the style is beyond argument. T Bone Burnett suggested the fourth number "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" (Jefferson/Lewis) when King was 84 years old (he's presently 86). B.B.'s interpretation is a perfect example of his previously mentioned skill set. "All Over Again" (King/Adams) is used as a vehicle to tell his audience about the world as he sees it, through "spyglasses." A masterful storyteller, King makes us laugh and cry simultaneously, yet always in a positive light. He also uses this song as an introduction platform to introduce 2012 Grammy Award winners' wife & husband Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks. They take the stage and accompany the maestro and prove their soul connection with "Rock Me Baby" (King/Josea). "One of them is a beautiful lady, but her husband is with her." King teases and trawls magnificent vocal and instrumental performances out of the dynamic duo. The trio then sweetly slides into the American classic standard "You Are My Sunshine" (Davis).

And now the moment we have all been waiting for, The Jam. First enters Slash (born Saul Hudson) stage right, followed by Ronnie Wood (both Rock-n-Roll Hall of Famers) stage left, for a total of six master guitarists on one stage as one must include B.B.'s awesome rhythm man Charlie Dennis. Just when you think you have everything necessary for a once-in-a-lifetime, star-studded jam, multi-BRIT Award winner Mick Hucknall (a.k.a. Simply Red) sits down and takes the microphone.



insight to his earliest influences and inspirations of his music and heritage. Slash tells us how he cancelled his long overdue vacation with his wife to play the Royal Albert Hall for the first time. Slash and King have shared many stages together before this event. Ronnie Wood and Simply Red are interviewed next. King states "when I first heard him sing, I didn't realize he was a white man," an opinion that I have shared for years. Wood reminds us that he and B.B. have had a bond with "Rock Me Baby" (King/Josea) for decades. Trucks and Tedeschi share their experiences next, and this is fol-

If you can't see B.B. King live, do the next best thing and buy one of these concert records; the Blu-ray is best.

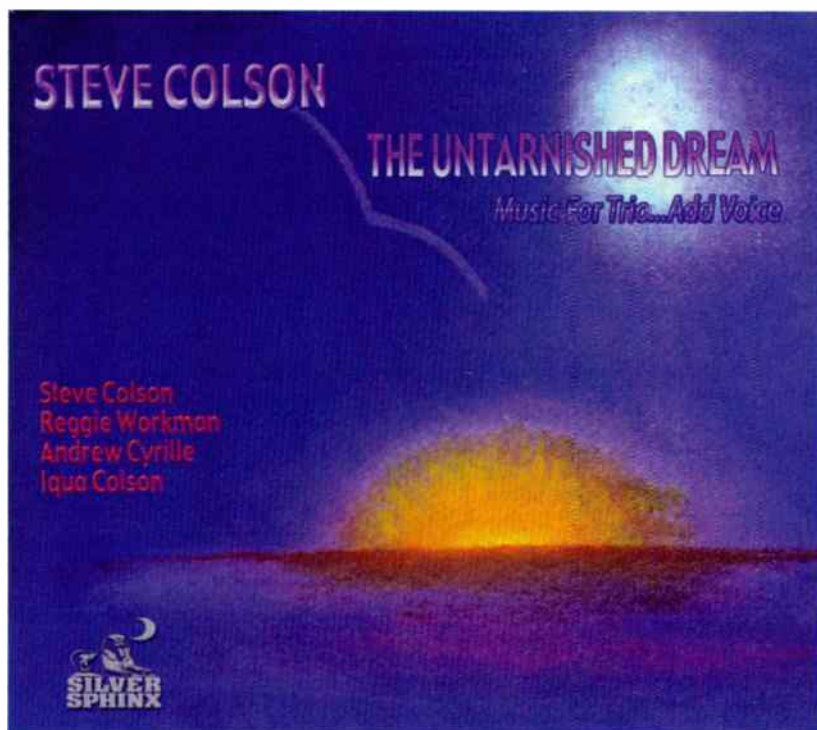
Fasten your seat belts, because you are in for one heck of a ride when you acquire this CD or DVD as a set (legally I suggest). A medley of Muddy Waters and various other blues tunes segue into what all B.B. fans desire the most and what was previously not present, "The Thrill Is Gone" (Darnell/Hawkins). One instantly wants to grab the hand of the one next to them and share the love with "Guess Who" (Belvin/Belvin). B.B.'s nephew Walter Riley King's angelic flute accents (not to mention superb sax playing the entire evening) and Slash's mind-blowing voicing on guitar caused a standing ovation which continued into a soul-stirring celebration of life with a stunning version of "When The Saints Go Marching In" (public domain traditional). King wearing Slash's leathered top hat is classically priceless!

On the DVD and Blue-ray menus, you will find a "backstage interviews" tab through which King gives an

lowed by a montage of all the above describing how all blues-based players are influenced by The King at the end of the day. King later reminds us of the infamous Twist, AR knife fight story that incubated the name of his beloved Lucille and how every Gibson ES-355 custom re-issue or incarnation takes on her name.

The B.B. King Band consisted of James "Boogaloo" Bolden, musical director/trumpet; Stanley Abernathy, trumpet; Melvin Jackson, sax; Walter King, sax/flute; Reggie Richards, bass; Charlie Dennis, guitar; Tony Coleman, drums, and Ernest Vantrease, B3/keyboards.

Having been privileged to attend well over a hundred of B.B. shows in my life, this one stands out as one of the better ones I have seen and am thankful that I could experience it vicariously through this CD and DVD set. Like a grand-cru Pomerol region Bordeaux, B.B. King only gets better with age.



Seth Greenstein

Jazz

Adegoke Steve Colson *The Untarnished Dream*
Silver Sphinx Recordings SS12403;
For info, contact fullyaltered@gmail.com

IN THINKING about and evaluating jazz, we critics tend to a fault to equate what's new with what's next. We look to the next generation, the "young lions," for directions in jazz. But the young have no monopoly on the new. The American Jazz Scene is filled with players of great musical expertise, who bring decades of experience to the bandstand or recording studio. Steve Colson's new set, *The Untarnished Dream*, reminds us that great players of every generation still have territory to explore, and places to lead us.

Colson came from a generation of jazz greatness, as part of Chicago's Association for Advancement of Creative Musicians. While some called it the avant garde, it was always the music of its time and timeless music.

On this disc, Colson leads a trio with bass giant Reggie Workman and drummer Andrew Cyrille. Colson's compositions are soulful, satisfying, and sure-footed, and his experience shines throughout. "Circumstantial," the opening track, and "Maybe" swing from high-speed straight-aways down more leisurely melodic back roads, yet their twists and turns feel natural and familiar. This trio comfortably handles the complex harmonies of songs like "Iqua's Waltz" and the title track, as well as masterfully shaping the intensely impro-

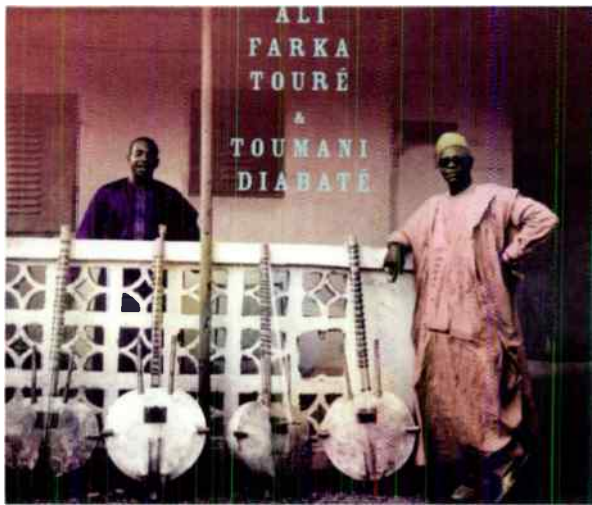
visational "Parallel Universe" into a dynamic swirl of tension, emotion, and ultimately resolution.

Colson proves his piano virtuosity throughout the set. He is as comfortable with bop sensibilities as with expansive melodies and classical technique. His solo performance, "Warriors," demonstrates the deftness of his ideas and dexterity of his musical vocabulary. It is a challenging piece, and Colson's two-handed *tour-de-force* on this collection.

The CD's subtitle suggests that this is "Music for Trio - Add Voice," and so there are four vocal tracks featuring Steve's wife, Iqua Colson. Her rich voice ably navigates often-challenging melodies such as "Digression," the title track, and the final cut, "And It Was Set in Ivory," with not just technical aplomb but an uncommon depth of feeling. When Ms. Colson sings of love, of mysteries, of hopes unachieved and goals beyond, we hear the warm, knowing voice of experience.

Steve Colson's music is, indeed, *The Untarnished Dream*, in pursuit of a musical vision he began decades ago. These voices of experience, his piano and her voice, still have much to tell, and *The Untarnished Dream* is well worth hearing.

Seek out this fine CD which is available from CDBaby or iTunes.



World Beat

Ali Farka Touré & Toumani Diabaté
 Ali and Toumani
 World Circuit / Nonesuch
 522937-2

THE WEST AFRICAN nation of Mali has given us some of the most renowned artists from the whole continent. A handful of the names that immediately come to mind include: Salif Keita, Oumou Sangaré, Baboucar Traoré, Ali Farka Touré and Toumani Diabaté. These artists serve as the pre-eminent exponents of their respective musical traditions, bringing us some of the most successful and beautiful music from Africa. Traditional music of Mali is based on the songs of the *jalis* or *griots*, a social caste that has been part of the culture since the days of the Malian Empire. The instrument of choice for the *jalis* is the *kora*, a harp-lute string instrument that has 21 strings stretched over a long neck of rosewood and is plucked with the thumb and index finger of each hand to create a unique and delicate sound.

Ali and Toumani is the second and final album that pairs the late Malian guitar virtuoso Ali Farka Touré and *kora* master Toumani Diabaté. Their outstanding first joint production was titled *In the Heart of the Moon*; recorded in Africa, it received a Grammy Award. I believe this second recording is equally deserving of such recognition. Recorded at London's Livingston Studios in June of 2005 over the course of three afternoons, *Ali and Toumani* has significant contributions from the late Orlando "Cachaito" Lopez (of Buena Vista Social Club fame) on bass and Vieux Farka Touré, Ali's son, on congas. Produced by Nick Gold and recorded/mixed by Jerry Boys, this is the same production team that was behind the duo's first effort. It was also to be the last album recorded by Touré, who passed away on March 7, 2006 after a long battle with cancer.

This album brings together different folk musical elements from Northern and Southern Mali. Touré comes from the northern Songhai and Diabaté from a long line of Mandé *griots* from the south. About the recording, Diabaté states "what we are doing is very important because we are both, above all, Malians. It's about love, sincerity, [and] solidarity." There is a lot of love in this recording that includes love of tradition and culture with a genuine mutual understanding and appreciation of each other's musical roots and talents. Even though Touré was in great pain and had to take frequent breaks; this recording demonstrated great sensitivity with an improvisational relationship between the two men that is almost jazz-like in nature. The work on *Ali and Toumani* is more refined than that of the first album recorded by these two masters and has more emphasis placed on the acoustic nature of the instruments. Because the two men had more time to talk about what they really

wanted to say, the album is steeped in introspection and intimate communication that helps to weave all the songs together.

I have to say that I have listened to this recording over and over again and find it quite difficult to have any favorite tracks...they are all very good. As individuals, the two artists are both outstanding musicians but as a duo, there is a bit of magic that one hears when listening to the music on this album. Some of the pieces that were familiar to either artist had never been recorded before. There were also a few pieces on the recording that were composed on the spot using traditional melodies and stories. Without a doubt, one can only imagine that the process for both of them was a truly organic experience. The selections on the recording are gentle, subtle and share beautiful melodies that allow the listener to relax to the album's well-tempered flow. Of note, Diabaté's work on the *kora* features shimmering runs and creative musical effects that entranced this listener. On the first track "Ruby", his gentle work on the *kora*, mixed with Ali's deeply personal and hypnotic groove is just entrancing. Notoriously difficult to record, the deep subtleties of the *kora* are revealed on this track. The Cuban inspired "Sabu Yerko" is a tune that Touré had been playing since the 1960s, is a take on salsa with lyrics in Songhai, his native tongue. The title means "Thanks to God" and celebrates Malian independence. This is the first time that this song had been recorded and was enhanced with the addition of congas and backing vocals. The song is light, yet energetically and rhythmically happy, an interesting contrast to the remaining 10 tracks on the album that are slower paced.

This is a wonderful tribute to both artists who have made careers by bringing people great music and letting the public experience the richly diverse musical traditions of Mali. This recording is playful, effervescent, and demonstrates the sheer mastery of the musicians. "It wasn't about covering old songs just because there weren't any new ones, non not at all. It was about revealing all the different possibilities once again... I believe this album to be stronger and wiser, better than 'In the Heart of the Moon,'" said Toumani Diabaté. This reviewer absolutely agrees with the wisdom of his keen observations. *Ali and Toumani* is a must-have album for the aficionado of African music who seeks to experience the true roots of Malian musical expression. I recommend this recording without any hesitation. Put it in your CD player, relax and smile.

Burwen Bobcat Tone Balancer & True Music Software

Bascom H. King

FIRST HEARD of Richard Burwen's software efforts when they were still in the form of the original Burwen Bobcat program. Mark Levinson was working with Burwen on promoting the Bobcat software at the time, some 8 years or so ago if I recall correctly. Mark was an early critic of CD sound and felt that Burwen's software programs truly helped to eliminate listener fatigue when listening to CDs.

At the time, it sounded like an interesting idea but I didn't pursue it strongly enough to find a way to try it out. A few months ago, *Audiophile Voice* Editor Gene Pitts e-mailed me about a newer and less-expensive version of the Bobcat software and asked if I would be interested in reviewing it. It turned out that Mr. Burwen not only wanted the simpler Bobcat "TR" or True software reviewed but also very much desired that the more expensive Bobcat "TB" (Tone Balancer) program be covered in the review.

As I understand it, the "TR" program is a simplified version of the original Bobcat program. It was found that users of the more complicated original Bobcat pro-

gram tended to use the same small number of the possible choices. This led to the much simplified and less expensive "TR" program. It is a plug-in to the Windows Media Player (WMP) software that, utilizing digital signal processing, alters the tonal balance and adds some patented high-frequency artificial reverberation which is said to make the sound more musical. When playing music files on the WMP and with the Bobcat "TR" program running, there are three choices: Off, "Pure Bobcat" and "Smooth Bobcat". The "Pure Bobcat" uses the aforementioned high-frequency reverberation to restore the sound originally intended. The "Smooth Bobcat" choice adds some fixed equalization and "no screech" equalization to reduce shrillness without muffling high frequencies. (See Fig. 1 for the "TR" program window.)

The following is what Burwen says Bobcat "TR" is intended to do, and it is taken from some of the voluminous Burwen literature on the web:

"When you listen to Burwen Bobcat processed audio, you don't hear it adding what sounds like room reverberation or echo. The reverberation you notice is almost entirely that already present in the recording itself. Burwen Bobcat adds what I [Dick Burwen] describe as *ambiance without echo*. It includes a lot of what audiophiles call *"air."* Rough sounding recordings become smoother and more musical because the extreme high-frequency reverberation averages out the grit. Unlike natural reverberation, which tends to obscure transient sounds, Burwen Bobcat stretches transients in time so they are more easily perceived and become clearer. After getting used to this type of processing, many listeners find their original CDs played loud are quite irritating."

The Burwen Bobcat "TB" (Tone Balancer) program is a multi-band DSP-based equalizer that, when invoked, affects the sound of the files playing on the WMP. It is based on the use of Microsoft Office's Excel spreadsheet program to do the filter calculations. (See Fig. 2 for how the "TB" interface looks like when running.) These tone control contours are not what one might expect if you are looking for peak/dip type curves. Unlike graphic



Fig. 1 - The opening window for the Burwen Bobcat "TR" or True program.

equalizers, the six "Tone" sliders are completely independent and non-interacting. The "Low," "Bass," and "Middle" controls boost or attenuate low frequencies while the "Treble," "Mid High," and "High" controls boost or attenuate high frequencies. The sliders behave as either 401- or 601-position switches, providing perfectly flat response at center and ± 20 dB or ± 30 dB ranges in 0.1-dB steps. Volume is automatically compensated for each control to maintain nearly constant subjective loudness. It is possible to boost as much as 73 dB at 15 Hz while attenuating 72 dB at 20 kHz. The "Low" and "High" controls are of the peak/dip type with center frequencies of about 16 and 25 kHz respectively. Further, the Q is moderately high, keeping the effects mostly near the band edges of the low bass and very high treble. The "Middle" control cuts or boosts frequencies below about 600 Hz to 1 kHz, depending on whether it's set to cut or boost. Of interest, this control acts kind of like a tilt control such that the cut or boosted curve produces an opposite effect above the cut or boost frequency, resulting in more highs for the cut positions and less highs for the boost position. (See Figs. 3A and 3B for an example of this.) The "Bass," "Treble," and "Mid High" controls are more conventional shelving-type controls with their turnover points appropriately placed to control their respective frequency ranges.

After sorting out some installation problems, which I will discuss later, I started to play files with the WMP that were on my desktop computer. First playback was with my modest desktop system which consists of a little prototype Analog Devices switching amp development board built into a small box with a volume control. The inputs are driven from the analog outputs from my M-Audio 2496 sound card. Speakers used here are a pair of older HP units that used to attach to the sides of HP CRT monitors. Not super sophisticated for sure, but it sounds pretty good and easily let me hear the effects of the Bobcat "TR" program. The "Smooth Bobcat" choice very nicely took the screech out of some of the Vivaldi concertos I have on the local HDD in standard CD resolution. The "Pure Bobcat" choice was less obvious but beneficial to the sound.

I then started to feed the S/PDIF output of the sound card across the room into my Wyred4sound DAC-2 and into my system. It soon became apparent that to use the "TB" program realistically, I would have to have control of it where I sit, away from the computer. Fortunately, Burwen provides a way to remotely control the "TB" program. I set that up on my laptop and got it going. But wait, I thought to myself, it would be very nice to also remotely control the WMP so I wouldn't have to keep going over to the computer to select tracks to play. Burwen suggests using Windows Remote Desktop for this. However, when Googling for remote control apps for WMP, WmpRemote came up. This one is for Apple devices which I have and use, and it also will control WinAmp, another player program I use on this, my main desktop machine. Now I had the means to select tracks and modify things with the "TB" program at my listening position. Unfortunately, with this app, I can't make the selections of the "TB" program remotely. Listening to the tracks I have on my main machine's HDD was a real treat and I found the "TB" program an interesting experience to use.

In the end, though, most things sounded mostly correct to me in their unaltered way. Most changing of

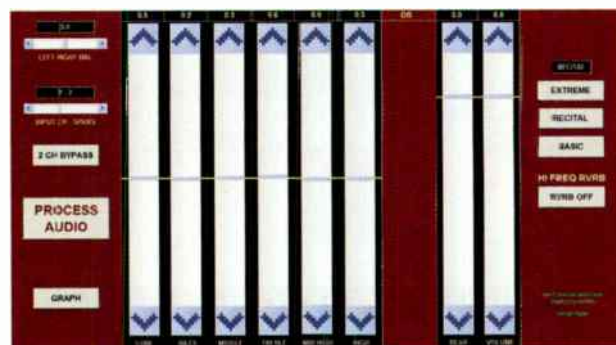


Fig. 2 - The Bobcat interface for its Tone Balancer program while running.

response was in reducing high frequency response, boosting or cutting bass, or going over to the computer and invoking one of the "TR" choices. As flexible and useful as the "TB" program is, I found that using the "TR" program did most of what I wanted in making my music more listenable and enjoyable.

But let me tell you sitting with the Apple iPod Touch or iPad controlling the WMP, my laptop for controlling the "TB" program, and the remote volume control for the Ambrosia preamp was a great audiophile experience. All in all, things sounded very good to me with this arrangement and I enjoyed a great deal and variety of music with this setup.

The Burwen software has the capability to process files modified by the "TR" and "TB" program and save them as processed files. This allows one to take these files and play them out on other player programs or to be loaded into servers or other devices like the Bryston BDP-1, the new Oppo BDP-95 and others. I didn't actu-

NOTES

Burwen Bobcat TB Tone Balancer, \$469.00, and **Burwen Bobcat TR (True)**, \$109.00. Download from www.burwenbobcat.com or contact Burwen Technology, Inc. 12 Holmes Rd., Lexington, MA 02420-1917; phone & FAX 781/861-0242.

Associated Equipment

Genesis 6.1 Speakers, DSPeaker anti-mode 8033 room EQ units for the Genesis active servo woofers, Constellation Audio prototype 250W/ch power amp, Spread Spectrum Technologies Ampzilla 2000 Second Generation power amps, Spread Spectrum Technologies Ambrosia preamp, Constellation Audio prototype preamp, Wyred4Sound DAC-2 with special tube output stage, Forssell Technologies 2-channel 192K DAC Bryston BDP-1 File Player, HP Pavilion a1220n computer running Windows XP, M Audio Audiophile 2496 Sound Card, PS Audio PWT, PS Audio PWD, PS Audio Bridge for the PWD, Apple iPod, and Apple iPad.

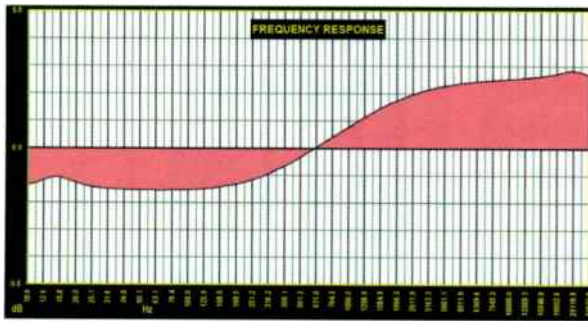


Fig. 3A - Showing the effect of pulling down the "Mid" control an arbitrary amount for cut centered on 1 kHz.

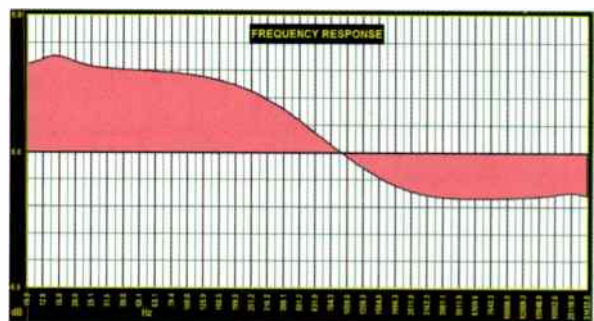


Fig. 3B - Raising the "Mid" control by about the same amount at 1 kHz gives this effect.

ally do this as I was content to play and experience them from the WMP. Burwen is quite adamant about the primal importance of matching frequency responses to very close tolerances when comparing different pieces of equipment. I am sure this is true but I didn't have occasion to use the "TB" for this purpose.

I must say that the Burwen software is not super easy to install and get working, and I some difficulty in getting the "TB" program to work at first, though the "TR" program worked right away. The problem was that I was using an old version of Microsoft Word, the 2000 version, and this was not a problem with the "TR" program. I had a disc for Office 2003 which I installed and with some guidance from Burwen about getting upgrades and patches for that version, I finally got the "TB" program to work on my machine. I had some intermittent freezing of the remote operation of the "TB" program on my laptop. Also, the new WmpRemote pro-

gram would lose ability to select tracks from the playlist after a while although the next/previous track function continued to work.

However, Burwen's site is replete with various instructions and help. Check out Burwen's web site and be amazed at this font of information about all of the software and many other interesting things. Ah, computers and the various new ways of playing music files, what a love/hate relationship!

In conclusion, although I had some frustration with the complexity of installing and using the Burwen software, it offers a great deal of flexibility in playing from the WMP and processing files for later playback on the WMP or other players. I enjoyed the experience and given the great website support information, the Burwen Bobcat TR (True) and Bobcat Tone Balancer software may be the ticket for others to get more musically enjoyable listening from digital sources.

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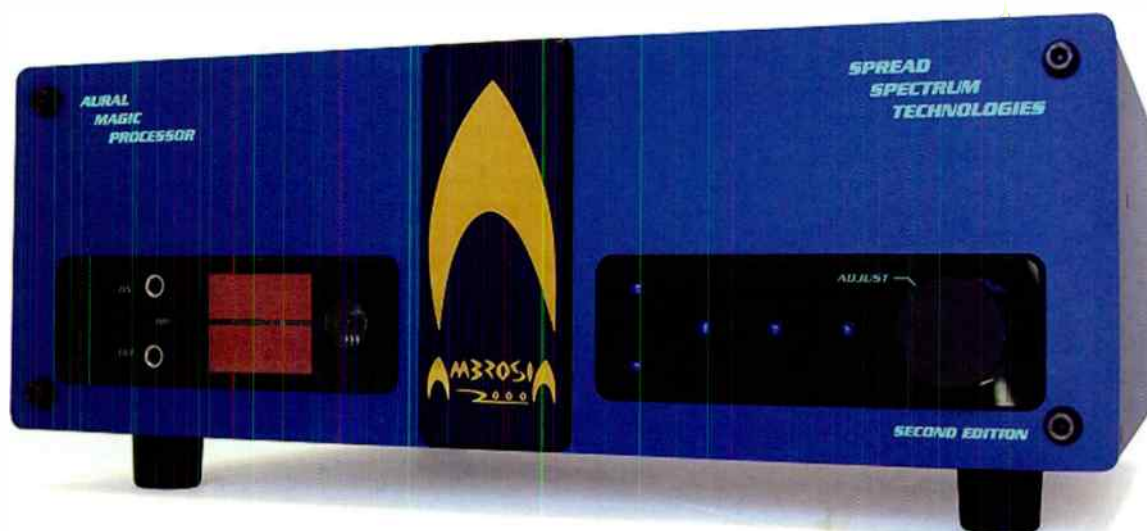
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Spread Spectrum Technologies Ambrosia Preamplifier



Bascom King

MY FIRST impression of the SSI Ambrosia preamplifier was, "Wow, this thing is big!" When I lifted it up, I found that it was also quite heavy, some 50 lbs. or so. One thing I noticed when unpacking the Ambrosia was that the top cover was rather resonant when tapped. This is easily corrected by the application of some internal damping material, something like Blu-tak or silicon putty. Overall, it is an impressive and attractive piece of audio gear.

In a field of minimalist preamps, the Ambrosia is a rare example of the full-featured unit in that it includes tape monitoring and copy functions, mode, separate MM and MC phono preamps, and (gasp) tone controls with four selectable turnover settings each for bass and treble. A unique balanced headphone amplifier can deliver hundreds of milliwatts into a load as low as 30 ohms. All of the switching functions in Ambrosia, including signal selection, mode, tape functions, volume controlling, and tone control, are accomplished with very high-quality, digitally-controlled analog switches. The active line amplifier consists of J-FET

buffers feeding a unique circuit by the Ambrosia's designer, James Bongiorno, using two very good sounding op-amps that provide the two phases for the balanced output, the plus phase out of this circuit going to the unbalanced output connectors. Examples of the usual Bongiorno attention to circuit noise levels are to be found in the magnetic shielding of the power transformer and the internal enclosures for the phono circuits to insure maximum signal-to-noise ratios. All in all, Bongiorno has put in a monumental design effort in coming up with his idea of the ultimate preamplifier.

On the back panel, there are seven inputs INCLUDING three main selectable unbalanced RCA jacks, a balanced/unbalanced combo XLR jack, two unbalanced tape monitor RCA jacks, and a bypass unbalanced RCA jack for home theatre. Outputs include two pairs of unbalanced RCA jacks, two balanced XLR jacks, and two unbalanced RCA jacks, each from both the MM and MC phono preamp outputs.

Front panel attributes consist, from left to right, of an illuminated power on/off switch; a vertically oriented

pair of headphone jacks; a large, easy to read red character display, and the centrally located Spread Spectrum logo. To the right of the logo are five push-button switches and a rotary control. The first two are arranged in a vertical pair and labeled "Set" which implies that they are to be used for up and down setting of the level. Next are three labeled "Enter", "Memory", and "Mute". The rotary control is labeled "Adjust. Explanation of these controls follows.

again. Pressing the memory button brings you right back without having to navigate down through the menu tree to get there. This memory function works this way for any selection that had just been made. A complete listing of the menu functions is shown in Fig. 1.

To be honest here, I had my misgivings about how good the sound would be with this preamp knowing of the signal-switching complexity and the use of those op-amps instead of discrete circuitry in the line section. I

The Ambrosia is a rare item these days, a full-featured preamp with both MM and MC phono preamps and tone controls. Plus it sounds good, detailed and spacious.

The software-controlled menu functions are a bit different from the norm but are logical and functional once one learns to use them. All functions of Ambrosia are controlled by the aforementioned front-panel controls.

The remote control duplicates these functions with the exception that the rotary knob is a mechanical encoder instead of an optical one to save remote battery power. The numerous functions of the preamp are selected by the up/down buttons. The "Vol" (volume) function is the default "home" position. Once a function is selected by one of the up/down buttons, the adjust knob allows for the variables in that selection. For instance, first down from volume is "Sel" which gives the selection of "MC" or "MM Phono," "TUN," "AUX," "CD," "BAL," or "HT" inputs. What is unique about this system is that once a selection has been made, one presses the enter button, and after that, the unit defaults back to "Vol." Say you had adjusted the bass or treble controls and, after pressing "Enter" and gone back to "Vol," you wanted to readjust that tone control setting

must say, however, that I was pleasantly surprised upon first listen. Initial impressions of listening to the Ambrosia in conjunction with a prototype power amp I am working on was that it was detailed, spacious, and a bit bright. It certainly was not emasculating of the music which I feared might be the case. I figured that leaving it on and giving it some break-in time would ameliorate some of the brightness. A few days after receiving it and having it in my system, I went to my reference Constellation Audio prototype power amp and thought the balance was more like I was used to and more musically correct. It was like what I got when using my reference CA prototype preamp.

After about two weeks of break-in, I got serious and started playing back some of my favorite recordings which I have put onto 0.5 TB 2.5-inch portable HDD connected to my Bryston BDP-1. A number of tracks are from the Reference Recordings HRx 2010 and 2011 samplers. Among these from the 2010 sampler are track 2, Telman Susato, and track 10, Trio Blues outtake. From the new 2011 sampler comes track 8, the finale of the Rachmaninoff Symphonic Dances, and track 13, "You're Driving Me Crazy." In general, all these sounded very good and reminded me of how they sounded using the CA preamp. Another excellent source of incredible sound was the album "Explorations in Space & Time." This has both binaural and soundfield tracks of various percussion pieces. I've taken from this album soundfield songs "Seven," "War," and "Stank" for critical listening. Another very nice CD which I just got is Gillian Welch's new album *The Harrow & The Harvest* which sounded beautifully transparent and detailed.

At this point, I am most pleased with the sound of Ambrosia and must pull out some reviewer discipline and go back to my CA preamp for comparative impressions. It was not really a surprise, but when I hooked up the CA preamp and played some of the things that I had just played on the Ambrosia, the sound took on a more musically revealing nature with subtle musical nuances of playing expression and instrumental sounds easier to hear. One piece of music that really brought this out was the SACD *La Folia* by Jordi Savall where the CD layer was up-sampled to 24/88. To me, the true nature of the sounds and playing of the ancient instruments was better revealed. But one can say that this is all as it should be, as a full Constellation Audio Altair preamplifier that uses the gain cell that I have in my simplified prototype unit, sells for an order of magnitude more

AMBROSIA MENU CHART			
Menu Mode Main (HT Bypass off)		Main Mode (HT Bypass On)	
Bal <<90 to 90>>		Vol HT	
Vol -69 to +20			
Sel MC,MM,TUN,AUX,CD,BAL,HT		Sel MC,MM,Tun,Aux,CD,	
Mode Ster, Mono, Strv		Bal, HT	
Basl -7 to +8		Basl -7 to +8	
Basr -7 to +8		Basr -7 to +8	
Bals -7 to +8		Bals -7 to +8	
Trbl -8 to +7		Trbl -8 to +7	
Trbr -8 to +7		Trbr -8 to +7	
Tblr -8 to +7		Tblr -8 to +7	
Filt None, MC, MM, MC & MM		Filt None, MC, MM, MC&MM	
Loft 270, 330, 400, 515		Loft 270, 330, 400, 515	
Hfr 2700, 3200, 3900, 5000		Hfr 2700, 3200, 3900, 5000	
Copy Off, T1, T2			
Tape Off, Mon1, Mon 2			
Menu Main, User		Menu Main, User	
Menu Mode User (HT Bypass Off)		Menu User (HT Bypass On)	
Bal <<90 to 90>>		Vol HT	
Vol -69 to +20			
Sel MC,MM,Tun,Aux,Cd,Bal, HT		Sel MC,MM,Tun,Aux,CD,	
Mode Ster, Mono, Strv		Bal,HT	
Basl -7 to +8		Basl -7 to +8	
Bals -8 to +7		Tblr -8 to +7	
Menu Main, User		Menu Main, User	

Fig. 1 - The Spread Spectrum Ambrosia's Menu.

than the Ambrosia's! At about this point, I hooked up my turntable setup to Ambrosia's MC input and listened to a number of cuts from favorite reference records. I was quite pleased with the results which sounded similar to that with my resident Vendetta Research SCP-2C MC preamp. Noise levels were appropriately very low, a hallmark of James Bongiorno's phono circuit design.

So how does the sound of the Ambrosia stack up to other preamps I have experienced? I had opportunity to briefly try an EAR 868 tube preamp in my setup. This unit did add some refinement and make the music yet more believable and enjoyable. I also know of another tube unit that is superior in neutrality and revelation of musical detail, the Aesthetix Calypso. Noting this does

where the front panel's optical encoder was much faster and responsive. Regarding remote volume controlling, I haven't had much experience with a preamp with remote control of volume in my own system. However, I must say that having this feature is really essential to getting just exactly the right volume for everything that is played. It makes a huge difference in the enjoyment of the various music one plays. Not only the remote volume control but the tone controls were very useful for taming excessively bright source material and generally altering tonal balance when needed. After using this unit's tone controls, I will miss not having this ability to make tonal corrections.

During the course of writing this review, I was able

**The quality of sound and range of features makes the
Ambrosia preamplifier very nearly unique.
Give this preamp a very long listen.**

not take away from the virtues of the Ambrosia preamp. I reiterate that I enjoyed it in my system for more than a month. A relevant note on this is that a recent review in *The Absolute Sound* gave a rave to the Spread Spectrum Technologies gear.

As an aside, I had the opportunity when reviewing the Ambrosia to try a new Oppo BDP-95 player. I learned a lot about that player in a short time. First it played my reference HDD files through my reference DAC and tube output stage about as well as my Bryston BDP-1 and that its analog output sounded very decent. I enjoyed a lot of music via the Oppo's analog output with the Ambrosia in my system. One more thing about Oppo BDP-95s. I had the good luck to try out a new ModWright-modded Oppo BDP-95 in my system soon after experiencing the stock BDP-95. This modded unit is generally thought to sound its best out of its balanced outputs. This provided me the chance to use the balanced inputs on the Ambrosia. I had some misgivings about adding another op-amp circuit in the signal chain which the unbalanced inputs don't have. Anyway, after hooking it all up with the MBS Monitor 0 balanced signal cables I have, I was astonished at how good it all sounded. The ModWright "breathed-on" Oppo is a truly killer sounding device.

I got to know how to use the Ambrosia's menu after using it for a relatively short while, and found it to be rather elegant and useful. The most useful feature was the memory button which immediately takes one back from "Volume" to the previously adjusted and entered choice. This proved most handy for readjusting tone controls or switching inputs.

One operational aspect of the Ambrosia's digital control of the various functions is that there is a tendency for some mild clicking to take place when things are changed. To minimize this, you should short all unused inputs with the supplied shorting plugs. I occasionally heard some of this clicking at very low levels when I was near the speakers. While it might bother some folks, it didn't bother me at all. Another thing that did take a bit to get used to is that the remote's adjust knob did not control the volume immediately when rotated

to get a pair of the Spread Spectrum Technologies Ampzilla 2000 Second Edition power amps to try out with the Ambrosia preamp. Let me simply just say that those amps worked wonderfully with the Ambrosia and produced great musical satisfaction and pleasure in my listening. The overall sound was detailed, with great bass slam and definition, along with an overall tonal balance that sounded right to me.

In conclusion, I truly enjoyed my experience with the Ambrosia preamp and must give kudos to my friend and fellow audio designer, James Bongiorno. He really created a beautiful product in the Ambrosia preamp as well as his big power amps. Give this one a long listen if you get the chance.

N o t e s

Spread Spectrum Ambrosia Preamplifier, \$7,500.00. Spread Spectrum Technologies, Inc., 716 N. G St., #2, Lompoc, CA. 93436; phone/Fax 805/740-9902; e-mails sstinc@earthlink.net or jamesbongiorno@ampzilla2000.com.

Associated Equipment

Genesis 6.1 speakers, DSPeaker anti-mode 8033 room EQ units for the Genesis active servo woofers, Constellation Audio prototype 250-watt power amplifier, Spread Spectrum Technologies Ampzilla 2000 Second Generation power amplifiers, Constellation Audio prototype preamplifier, Wyred4Sound DAC-2 with special tube output stage, Forssell Technologies 2-channel 192K DAC, Oppo BDP-95 DVD player, Bryston BDP-1 File Player, PS Audio PWT, PS Audio PWD, PS Audio Bridge for the PWD, Apple iPod, and Apple iPad.

Benchmark DAC1 HDR Preamplifier, DAC, and Headphone Amp



Chris Reardon-Noblet

HIGHLY REGARDED in pro audio and recording circles for their analogue-to-digital and digital-to-analogue converters, headphone amps, microphone preamps and other products, Benchmark Media Systems manufactures the DAC1 HDR preamplifier in their Syracuse, N.Y., plant — right here in the USA.

When I was asked to review the \$1,895 DAC1 HDR Preamplifier — in most respects identical to the \$1,595 DAC1 PRE but augmented with remote control and motor-driven analogue volume control — I thought naively, “What’s not to like?” The HDR stands for high dynamic range and refers to the volume control. I had purchased a Benchmark DAC-1 PRE for its USB input with 24/96 capability and excellent performance as a preamplifier and headphone amp. Since the DAC1 HDR and DAC1 PRE ought to sound virtually identical, I thought I could easily resist the temptation to upgrade to the slightly pricier HDR for the convenience of remote control. Okay, okay, so I was wrong!

Despite its technological sophistication, the DAC1 HDR wears the “guise” of a no-nonsense, straight-wire-

with-gain preamp. This was immediately appealing to me, as I’m an eternal fan of hair-shirt simplicity in audio components. Massive multi-channel integrated amplifiers with their rows of switches, buttons and myriad inputs induce in me a feeling of queasiness, if not vertigo. Despite the DAC1 HDR’s heartwarmingly straightforward and elegant appearance and interface, in actual use it fulfilled my every requirement for multiple or unusual listening purposes.

The DAC1 HDR appears amply fit for any of its purposes and has a satisfying heft, considering its diminutive size of just 9.5 x 1.7 x 9.3 inches. The size of the nearly identical DAC1 PRE had earlier proved a boon when I carried it back and forth on several trips to Europe. Stuffed into my carry-on computer bag, the multi-voltage DAC1 endured Atlantic crossings, luggage carts and automobile trunks. Using it as a portable headphone amplifier with my MacBook and Sennheiser HD600 headphones, I had access to great sound in whatever B&B or guesthouse I happened to stay.

In my two home systems, one or the other of the Benchmark DAC1s has served as a full-function multi-source stereo preamplifier and DAC with computer USB, optical and (three) coaxial inputs plus an analogue RCA input (augmented with a three-way switchbox to handle tuner, phono preamplifier and tape deck). In all these varying circumstances, I never had any operating glitches, no transient or switching noises, no difficulty dealing with varying data streams — nada as in nothing!

Controlling the Remote

The remote control, which is a main reason for the DAC1 HDR's addition to the Benchmark lineup, is a model of simplicity and usefulness. Its capabilities are few but important: on/off; sequential source selection;

I only have one other quibble with the remote. The volume knob lacks an LED, which makes it tough to see the volume level in a dimly lit room. Benchmark doesn't seem inclined to MkII versions, but it would certainly be a desirable enhancement.

A Challenging Setup

Here's how I implemented the six inputs on the Benchmark DAC1 HDR in my own stereo/home theater system: Analogue input, (via an RCA 3-to-1 switchbox) for turntable, SACD player and FM tuner; Computer USB Input, MacBook computer with external hard drive for music storage; Digital Input 1 (optical), mini-Toslink from Airport Express for wireless computer playback via AirPlay; Digital Input 2 (coaxi-

**Offering a wide variety of features and capabilities,
this Benchmark unit also sounds quite good.
That combination is hard to beat!**

volume adjustment; soft (i.e. faded) mute and "dim" which is ramped volume reduction to a selectable and suitable level for conversation. Benchmark describes this in their outstanding 52-page owners manual: "to reduce the volume to low levels during television or radio commercials." These properties are, to me, key to the attractiveness of the DAC1 HDR over its predecessors.

The muting functions appear to be rare if not unique in home equipment and are eminently satisfying in use. Instant, complete mute is obtained by pushing the "off" side of the on/off switch once, and this state is indicated by a steady glow from all six blue input LEDs. Push the "off" side of the rocker again and you've placed the DAC1 HDR on standby. I rarely made use of the hard mute, quickly abandoning it for the handy and graceful ramped muting functions.

Once you have set an appropriate "dim" level — that is, appropriate to taking phone calls; yelling at guests who use your precious loudspeakers as beverage coasters; demanding fresh beer from your life partner or ignoring Viagra commercials — that level will be remembered until you change it. This, in turn, sets the ramping for the "soft mute" button, which I found most handy. The soft mute button quickly ramps the volume down to the "dim" level and then mutes it entirely. Another touch of the button and the soft mute function ramps the volume back up to where you were originally listening. It takes place swiftly, but completely avoids the jarring effect of instant muting. This is a high-class sort of muting. Touch either the "dim" or soft mute button and with a pleasing whir, the motorized volume control moves to the ordered position.

Most handily, engaging the "dim" mode illuminates all the input LEDs with the sole exception of the selected input. Better yet, using the remote control (or the actual input knob), you can switch to another input and that one will be visible as the selected input by virtue of having the sole unlit LED. Very handy for changing inputs at lowered sound level without leaving your seat! Unfortunately, the "soft mute" button does not share this feature.

al), CD transport via Toslink-coaxial converter; Digital Input 3 (coaxial), Blu-ray/DVD/Netflix player, and Digital Input 4 (coaxial), HDTV via Toslink-coaxial converter.

NOTES

Benchmark DAC 1 HDR Preamplifier, \$1,895.00. Benchmark Media Systems., Inc., 203 East Hampton Place, Suite 2, Syracuse, NY 13206; Phone, 800/262-4675; fax, 315-437-8119; e-mail, sales@benchmarkmedia.com, web site, www.benchmarkmedia.com.

Associated Equipment

Sources: Mac Book computer, LG BD570 Network Blu-ray player, Oppo BDP-93 universal disc player, Sony CDP-X33ES CD player as transport, Marantz SA8001 SACD player, Thorens TD-320 turntable, Dynavector 10X5 phono cartridge, Luxman T-110 tuner. Amplifiers: Cambridge Audio 640P phono preamplifier, NAIM NAP160 power amplifier, Cary Audio Designs CAD-300SEI integrated amplifier; Parasound Halo A21 power amplifier. Speakers: Magneplaner MG1.7, Spondor SP2/3e, Mission 752. Headphones: Sennheiser HD600 with Stefan AudioArt Equinox headphone cable; Grado SR80. Cables: Chord Anthem 2, Kimber Silver Streak, Radio Shack coaxial digital, Amphenol Toslink, Kimber 8TC, NAIM NACA5, Goertz M1, LAT International AC-2. Misc.: Sanus Salamander equipment stand, Atacama speaker stands, PS Audio P300 Power Plant AC regenerator.

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With the DAC1 HDR, as long as the data stream is bit-perfect, then bits are truly just bits. So all digital interconnects needed to be nothing more than heavy-duty, workaday USB, coaxial and Toslink cables. For analogue on the other hand, I used some excellent Chord Anthem 2 RCA interconnects to feed a NAIM NAP 160 power amplifier. For use with my Cary CAD-300 SEI integrated amplifier, I switched to the Benchmark's calibrated output to bypass the DAC1 volume control and use it as a source component. The DAC1 HDR is so transparent that there was no perceptible effect from inserting it into the audio chain ahead of the CAD-300SEI. The Benchmark's analogue section neither added to nor subtracted from the signal. With the Parasound Halo A21 power amplifier, using balanced Blue Jeans interconnects, and serving a pair of Magneplanar MG1.7 loudspeakers, the Benchmark served duty as an active line stage. In all these circumstances, its overall performance and sound was quite exemplary.

Since its XLR and RCA outputs work simultaneously, the DAC1 HDR can drive line inputs for stereo subwoofers. For subs with mono inputs, Benchmark recommends summing with a RCA "Y" cable incorporating a 1 kilohm resistor in series with each leg of the "Y."

The Headphone Amplifier

The DAC1 HDR incorporates a wide-bandwidth headphone amplifier with low (0.1-ohm) output impedance to deal with difficult headphone loads. Selectable gain matches volume range to headphone sensitivity (and also helps avoid blasting your loudspeakers when you unplug the phones from the speaker-muting circuit). Benchmark recommends using similar phones to avoid varying loudness levels, but my spouse and I had no problem listening through two different brands of headphones.

The DAC1 HDR was a great match with the Sennheiser HD600s. Its extraordinary resolution and hushed backgrounds made it my new headphone amp of choice. It is apparently capable of extracting and delivering every ounce of that emotional connection we audiophiles seek with the artist and the music. Listening to *Thelonious Monk Quartet with John Coltrane at*

Carnegie Hall (CD, Blue Note CDP 0946 3 35173-2-5) was truly an epiphany. Perhaps I shouldn't admit this but at long last I really got Coltrane.

The DAC1 system handles data rates up to 24-bit/192 kHz except for the USB interface, which goes up to a native 24-bit/96-kHz. I don't collect 192 kHz files, but I've been downloading music in 24/96 from nice sources such as highdeftape-transfers.com and HDtracks.com. Hearing Paul McCartney's uncompressed *Band on the Run* (Hear Music, HD Tracks Hi-Res Digital Download) was a delight and a major improvement over the vinyl available in the States. "No More Looking Back" from The Kinks' *Schoolboys in Disgrace* (Koch Records, HD Tracks Digital Download) easily surpassed the RCA LP. DVD and digital broadcast quality was fully dependent on the quality of the source and encoding method.

Listening to analogue sources through the DAC1 HDR was as good as anything I've heard. This may seem out of left field, but listening to live Red Sox broadcasts over FM stereo I could hear the crowd arrayed about and behind the announcers with wonderful fidelity – approaching a "you are there" experience.

Summary

The DAC1 HDR's sound is eminently transparent with abundant dynamic reserves. At this level of performance, selecting a product becomes a matter of nuanced preference. In my case, this level of digital and analogue reproduction has led me away from single-ended triodes and back into the world of solid state. With the digital issues resolved (at least those important to my ears) I now obtain more pleasure from neutral reproduction sources.

During my time with it, the DAC1 HDR has been glitch free and bombproof in operation. Remote control of volume and source switching with no loss of fidelity makes the HDR absolutely worth the \$300 premium over the DAC1 PRE. If only I didn't already own the DAC1 PRE, the Benchmark Media Systems DAC1 HDR would surely be my get-off-the-merry-go-round preamplifier. Perhaps in time it will be so.

Precision Transducer Engineering Phoenix Loudspeaker



Hugh Mandeson

MAKING THE ROUNDS of T.H.E. Show in the Flamingo Hotel this past January, I was surprised to find out about the Precision Transducer Engineering (PTE) speakers. These relative newcomers have internal amplifiers for each driver and use crossovers and equalization on the same board as the amplifiers. On first listen, I was very impressed with the imaging and top to bottom coherence of these speakers. The bass and punch from these two 6.5-inch drivers not only impressed me but my rock musician friend also gushed appreciably when we heard them make music. These are some very musical speakers and draw little attention to themselves. The center image I heard was as big and full as I'd ever heard. When I was asked to review these at home, I jumped at the chance.

Powered loudspeakers are nothing new. Computer speakers have been self-powered since the beginning. One account I recently read traces them back to 1975 for high fidelity use. I would not be surprised if there were even earlier examples. Designers I've chatted with tell me how much they wish they could mate the amplifier to the speaker or to each individual driver. Noting how prevalent the practice is with studio monitors now, I was very curious about the PTE speakers.

The PTE literature states, "The Phoenix is that rare combination of high output and high fidelity. From 32 Hz to beyond 20 kHz, your music will be reproduced with stunning imaging, and extended bass and dynamics only possible in a powered loudspeaker."

The full title of the product is "The Phoenix High Output Bi-Amplified Reference Monitor" by Precision Transducer Engineering. They weigh 75 lbs each and are 28 inches high by 12 inches wide by 15 inches deep. Inputs are via RCA (5.09 kilOhms) or XLR balanced (14 kilOhms) with a rated sensitivity

of 100 dB SPL for 0.1 volt rms input. Frequency response is specified as 32 Hz to 22 kHz ± 2 dB.

I spoke with one of the two principals, Mike Thoke, over the phone for some insight into the background of this product. He gave me a lot of technical answers regarding the development of the Phoenix and their previous product that was literally called The Statement. He told me this speaker line had been developed principally by his partner Jim Rush who over the last 30 years has been with some of the best speaker companies you can name. You can read Jim's white paper on "The Case for Powered Speakers" on the pteaoustics.com

tweeter settings are made with a combination of two switches to get $\frac{1}{2}$ -dB steps in cut or boost up to 2 dB. This is a boost to the driver and not an EQ-ed lift. I preferred them with $\frac{1}{2}$ -dB boost.

The manual recommends placement at least four feet from the rear wall. I found that five feet was perfect for me and I created an equilateral triangle of about nine feet with my listening position as the third corner. I did use a bit of toe-in as it was necessary to gel the soundstage. Once set up, the speakers opened up my listening room to many different recording and concert venues. Whether played loud or soft, the Phoenix speakers just

Self-powered speakers are not new but haven't really caught on with audiophiles who usually prefer to chose their own amp, not always the best idea.

website for an in-depth look on the design goals and principles. Jim points out that numerous adjustments are available with powered speakers as the designer can implement internal adjustment to extend response or correct anomalies, peaks, and dips in the speaker itself as well as correct the phase relationship of the drivers. It seems to me a great deal of thought, measurement, and testing was involved in the design of these speakers.

The drivers were initially chosen for overall flatness and are vibration isolated as is the amplifiers in the back mounted on aluminum stock and well braced. The rear and sides of the cabinet are 1-inch MDF, the baffle $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch, and there are internal bracing and supports throughout. The enclosure is vented with dual rear venturi ports which increase overall efficiency. There are some room mode and tweeter level adjustments on the rear and inputs can be either balanced XLR or unbalanced RCA. PTE claims less than 0.003% distortion and 120 dB signal to noise in the internal electronics which use state-of-the-art operational amps and 1 per cent, precision-matched resistors and capacitors. The circuit board itself uses four layers has an extra heavy traces with through-hole mounted parts. A Scanspeak tweeter is used for its high sensitivity and low distortion. Careful matching of all the components yields excellent imaging and as the literature says, "Beautiful dynamic detailed sound you can listen to for hours." I liked what I heard at the Show and was ready to try these at home.

They arrived in double boxes. The wood finish is very nice and attractive as are the smooth rounded edge black faces. The grille covers are held in place magnetically which is sort of cool, but I did my listening with them removed.

Mark was good enough to deliver a set of Sound Anchor stands custom made for this speaker, which turned out to be the selfsame pair of speakers I heard at T.H.E. Show in Las Vegas. The stands bolt to the bottom of the speaker and come with four 1-inch circles of sticky dampening material. Mark gave me a quick run-down on the rear panel controls. The input selector switch offers RCA unbalanced (right), XLR balanced (left), or a center position mute. There's a three-position switch for level control of the bass; positions are "Corner" (no boost), "Near Wall" or "Free Space." The

disappeared and never called attention to themselves.

I spent many hours throwing everything I could think of at these speakers. They never did anything but play music. There were zero issues the entire time they were here. Mark warned me the backs of the speakers might get too hot to touch but I never experienced that. I did feel that the very high sensitivity of 0.1 volt input for full power was excessive as my DACs put out up to 2 V p-p. I would like to have a gain reduction switch on the speakers but I was able to work with them; I just had to be very careful with the knob of my Monolithic preamp as barely a quarter rotation was insanely loud so I had a small range of adjustment.

I always start with the opening track from Artie Traum's "The View from Here" on Shanachie. It is a wonderfully recorded and performed album with Tony Levin and Steve Swallow on basses. The Phoenix speakers had no problem creating the vast panorama of the opening track "Mysterious Stranger." Mostly acoustic; it was lush image, both finely nuanced and rhythmically taut. Tony Levin's muscular but sensuous bass line sat clearly behind and gluing it all together. Everything was crystal clear including the slight fuzz used on the bass guitar.

I advanced to track 4 "Abracadabra" with singer Gabriela Anders. I consider this track to be the worst-case sibilance torture test for speakers and I could not fault the Phoenix's reproduction in the least. Many speakers make me cringe when I play this but not here. So far I was impressed.

Next I played some pure single-point microphone recordings to really test the spatial mettle of this system. Without a doubt, Opus 3 and MA Labs recordings stand out for me. I find Todd Garfinkle's MA Labs releases to be overall great recordings and performances but I particularly like his own releases. On *Further Attempts*, the opening track begins with loads of jangling and clanking percussion embroidered in the rich and deep ambiance of the location. It then melts into some beautiful, gently floating piano which is soon joined by acoustic bass and quiet percussion. Not for a second did I even think about speakers playing, as I was completely rapt in this exquisite music which has tremendous space and very, very fine dynamic and timbre

shadings. The deep and serene quietness of the venue is faithfully implied; these speakers are really quiet. I had to press my ears to the speaker to hear any electronics noise but boy, did they get loud when I wanted.

My copy of the Opus 3 release of the collection of Cyndee Peters and Eric Bibb came out next. I have used the "House of the Rising Sun" track a lot at CES in prior years. The "Wayfaring Stranger" track includes a choir of young girls and starts with sea of wordless voices; when Cyndee starts singing, it is definite goosebump city. It was perfectly rendered by the Phoenix.

Then I played "Uncommon Ritual" from the CD of the same name, collaboration from Edgar Meyer, Mike Marshall, and Bela Fleck's recorded at Ocean Way

midrange, and wonderfully clear high end, let music transpire vividly with lots of feeling. Voices appeared like powerful apparitions and seemed unstrained with superb detail and airiness. They presented a seamless whole cloth rendition of the events being played back. The music seemed to have nothing to do with these nicely finished boxes. They were quite invisible and created a nicely palpable center with a good representation of height and relative distance. These had great bass power and grip without the least impression of being in a box. The response is quite smooth top to bottom. It was very hard to get any sense of a character to these speakers at all. This is certainly a testament to the amplifiers and electronics too. They are remarkably well

Superb detail, tight and full bass, clear high end, smooth midrange, solid soundstage ... I could go on and on.

Studios in Nashville. The thick, textured bowed bass and Edgar's heavy breathing materialized right before me. The reproduced images were rock solid if just a tiny bit smaller than I have heard them in the best of circumstances. The palpability was amazing and the image clear, deep, and distinct.

I played lots of jazz as well, old, new, big bands, live, studio. Pat Metheny's *Secret Story* gave me chills down my spine. This beautiful production and divine music offers a stunning image, with an exotic and broad soundstage that is delicately textured. Arild Andersen's "Molde Concert" with Bill Frisell knocked my socks off. The excitement was tangible. It really had a very live, present, and fluid sound. It was a total focused recreation that had tremendous energy that seemed unbounded.

Finally, it was time for some orchestral music to settle down with. The Sony Classical SACD *Copland conducts Copland* with the London Symphony is a delightful disc. I was transported to the concert hall, and found the presentation dazzling. Great rhythmic power and layered instruments unfolded inside this marvelous performance. The detail was superb as were the dynamics. From loud to soft, there was nothing cold or mechanical about it. The soundstage was always solid and clear during the quietest and the densest parts without any audible strain or artifacts.

Different DACs were subtly different as were cable changes; these are very revealing speakers. When I tried an old, cheap, consumer CD player, it was immediately dreadful sounding, small, hard, and dimensionally flat. The Phoenix just lets all that stuff through. These speakers will respond best when fed the very best sources and deserve such. Only at the very bottom of their range were they lacking the tiniest bit of depth and slam. I am talking basically about what only a subwoofer can do. I note that while PTE does offer The Foundation subwoofer, I did not test it for this review.

Rock music especially was just fantastic fun to listen to with these speakers. It was more than just the potential for volume; they just seemed to have such a tight full bass and particularly unrestrained mid-bass. Rhythms had a great amount of drive. Their smooth

integrated as a complete system and speak with honesty and clarity.

I could definitely live with these speakers and enjoy them. I would love to use them in a control room too, as I think they are that faithful to the source. You might just have seen your giant amplifiers and those fire hose-thick speaker cables for the last time. The PTE Phoenixes are definitely a bargain in my opinion and worth an audition.

N O T E S

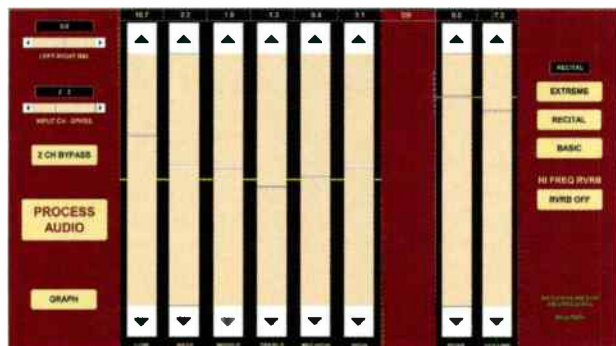
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Associated Equipment

Monolithic PA-1 passive/active preamplifier with PS-1 power supply; California Audio Labs Alpha Tube DAC; North Star Designs M192 DAC; RME ADI-2 DAC; Genesis Digital Time Lens digital processor; Audio Alchemy Digital Drive System transport/player; Pioneer Elite D45A universal player; Echo Audio Layla 3G audio interface; Human Solutions PC digital audio workstation; Dish Network VIP722 satellite receiver; Stealth Sextet BNC, Mod Squad Wonderink balanced XLR, Ensemble Digitflux RCA coaxial cables; Stealth M-21 Signature, Stealth Sakra, Stealth Indra, Stealth 50/50 unbalanced audio cables; Stealth M7000, M7 Signature, Cloud 9, and Cloud 99 a.c. power cords, and Black Diamond Racing and Polycrystal cones.



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Photo: Reviewer Bernard Kingsley passes along this pic from an interesting web site <http://hundredsofhilariouspics.com> which in our vision is a sort of "daily giggle" in one's In-Basket. Beyond the obvious visual pun, I find interesting what the photographer is saying about where music is. *Gene Pitts*, Editor, The Audiophile Voice

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Driscoll, James T. Frane, Alfred Fredel,
George Graves, Bernard Kingsley,
Michael Tearson, David Schwartz,
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Assistant Editors Mark Ludas
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CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Arnis Balgalvis, Hector Chrest, John Gatski,
Bascom King, Joel Shumer, Jon Tiven,
Les Turoczy, Ross Wagner, and Don Wilcock.

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is an ultra-high performance parametric equalizer designed for the home users or engineers who don't need the versatility of having the firm's NSEQ-2 valve and solid-state circuitry in the same unit. The NSEQ-4 combines the musicality of the NSEQ-2 with a substantial increase in soundstage, comments well-known recording engineer Bruce Leek. The NSEQ-4 features:

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NSEQ-2. NSEQ-2 owners can have their units converted to the NSEQ-4 at the factory. (\$800).

Price: \$4,605.00

Data: www.miol-media.com



The Onkyo CS-345 CD Mini System

is designed to deliver high-quality sound from compact discs, FM/AM radio, and music files stored on an iPod or iPhone. It can also display iPod/iPhone video on an external monitor. The unit has a built-in dock for iPod/iPhone, a CD player, and an FM/AM radio. The CS-345's digital power amplifier drives a pair of two-way bass-reflex loudspeakers to high output levels with exceptional sound quality. With its compact size, this system is ideal for a bedroom, office, kitchen, dorm room, or almost anywhere. Onkyo's CS-345's speakers use a separate dome tweeter for more

detailed imaging, plus a 4-inch woofer in a bass-reflex enclosure to provide outstanding bass for its size. Most comparable products only use single drivers which are inadequate to handle the full acoustic range. The system's highly-efficient digital power amplifier can maintain the wide dynamic range of digital sources. Because the amplifier and speakers are perfectly matched, the system runs very cool while generating high output and dynamic range with very low distortion. The CS-345 has a video output jack to play iPod/iPhone video on TV and includes stereo input jacks for playback from other gadgets, such as Android devices. Thoughtfully included are a subwoofer output and a front-panel headphone jack.

Price: \$299.00 each.

Data: www.onkyousa.com



New Products

The NAD T 575 Surround Sound Receiver

has been designed to please both audiophiles and videophiles with high levels of performance, when judged not only by today's rapidly evolving standards but to allow up-dating if a new and essential technology is introduced. The firm calls this approach their Modular Design Technology (MDC) and stresses that it allows the owner to easily up-grade to future digital formats. Even with this forward looking approach to the overall design,



music lovers will find satisfaction in the receiver's use of new high-speed digital signal processors to decode Dolby TrueHD and DTS Master Audio. The T 575 can also handle the newest digital video signals, include 3D, at resolutions up to 1080p. Analog sources are supported via HDMI connections to any compatible screen display or projector. The interface with the user was well thought-out, with ease of use and flexibility both high on NAD's priority list. For example, each source retains

the same custom settings every time it is selected, and there are no blank or empty inputs to clutter or confuse. Those who require an interface with an iPod can add NAD's IPD 2 dock, which shows song data on the video display. Radio lovers will like the receiver's sensitive FM/AM tuner, which has 30 station presets and RDS support.

Price: \$1,599.00.

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The Procella Audio P15 DSP Subwoofer

has been up-graded to produce increased dynamic output and extended low-frequency response below 20 Hz. The long-throw dual 15-inch drivers are custom made and have three-inch voice coils with Neodymium magnets, improving dynamic output and extending the bottom frequency



range. The system is rated at 127 dB SPL output at 50 Hz. An on-board 350-350 watt amp, with DSP control, is optimized for the system's new driver configuration. The integral 28-bit/56-bit ADI Sigma digital signal processing control allows extraordinary control of the subwoofer's output as well as optimizing in-room response by compensating for room boundary conditions. The wide, shallow design is intended for placement against a wall or for being built into a wall of medium- to large-sized rooms up to about 3,000 cubic feet. Great care has

been taken in the box design of the P15, with very heavy bracing ensuring long and trouble-free use.

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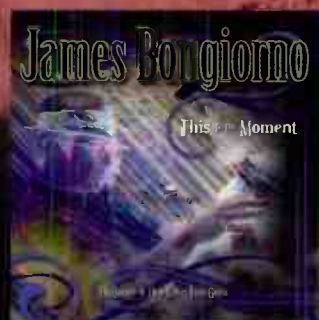
James Bongiorno

"The Bonge plays piano with great force, as if he were unable to restrain his enthusiasm for the instrument while he performs ... adopts Evans' rhythmic looseness, carrying phrases over the bar lines, as well as his broad, spare chords ... he also glides into some stride as well, the resulting mixture reveals his own choices despite the obvious influences of his predecessors and peers ... he creates a musical amalgam that establishes his own signature ..." — *Jazz Improv*

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Taking The High Road

TO MANY of us, downloading music from internet sources is simply convenience. It represents the ability to pick and choose, and to create an ensemble of selections for our very personal enjoyment. It has lifestyle implications; and brings to mind images of joggers in the park and stair-steppers in the gym.

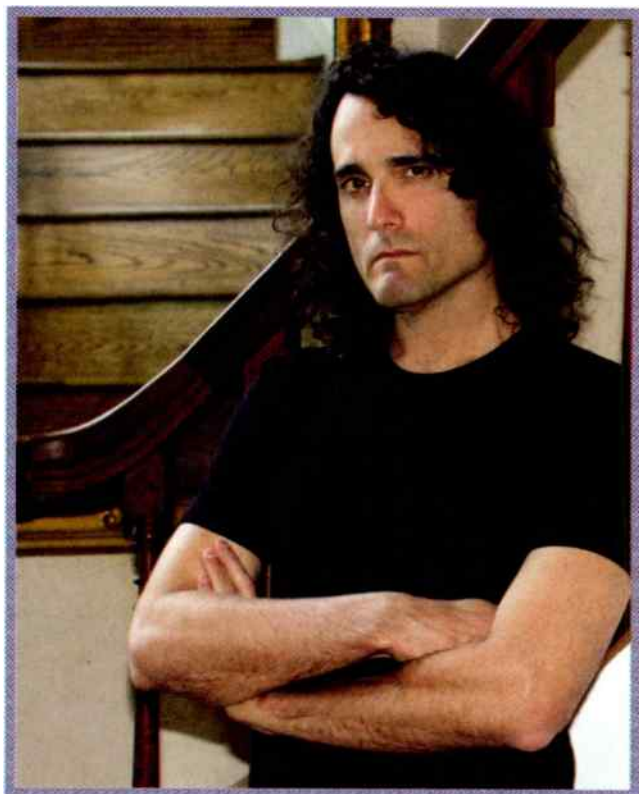
There is another side to downloaded music, however — an extremely important side — which goes far beyond convenience. Many in high-end audio see music downloads as the future. Not only because of the ease of downloading in general and the accessibility it brings to your favorite music, but because the technique has the potential to deliver a superior, higher resolution product.

One of the most visionary companies reading the future in this difficult business period — and arguably writing it — is HDtracks, which was founded by David and Norman Chesky in 2008. Trail-blazing what many would call the high road to the future, HDtracks has integrated music from diverse genres found on hundreds of labels with technology that affords easy availability, accessibility, and download.

Perhaps of overriding importance, the firm's owners are committed to offering the download of this material in the most uncompromised, highest quality formats currently available.

HDtracks grows out of Chesky Records. As an audiophile label, Chesky has dedicated itself for over 25 years to both capturing great musical performances and to recording them in the purest possible way, and the firm has made a reputation for having a near obsessive focus on sound quality.

HDtracks is a bit of a departure, however, not in terms of the company's dedication to sound quality, but more in the implication that the future is not in playing music from spinning silver discs like CDs, but from computer memory. In several conversations with David Chesky, it became clear that the HDtracks mission from the outset was to offer an accessible on-line destination for those wanting the highest quality music available. Period. Downloads proved to be the way, and that technology has continued to advance, giving synergy to the company's mission.



When asked about the assertion from many audiophiles that music played back from a hard drive sounds more alive and palpable, David replies,

"Well, that's true. Because, look, when you play a spinning disc, you have error correction and you have jitter. And these things can be really reduced by playing from memory ... there are no moving parts. There's no laser trying to read in real time."

David goes on to say that he had actually had this idea, his brainchild, long before the technology, and the download speeds, and the inexpensive storage existed to support it.

HDtracks offers downloads in extremely high resolution. Here, "high resolution" means downloads ranging from 24 bit music and over-sampling frequencies of multiples of 44.1 and 48 kHz — i.e., 88.2, 96, 176.4, and 192 kHz — to CD quality material in uncompressed 16-bit, 44.1-kHz file sizes, to the least compressed, and therefore least compromised, MP-3 format available — files at 320 mbps. All good.

But the bottom line is that the top-tier offering, those downloads in 24-bit audio with high oversampling rates, implemented properly, can be bit-for-bit replicas of the source, as perfect as the original. Ultimately, such a source represents the long awaited promise that did not manifest itself in 1983 with the arrival of the CD.

David adds, "We're giving you a copy of the master tape. That's it. You're hearing what the people in the studio heard." He goes on to point out that a good deal of this improvement in download quality is a result of the huge strides and increasing sophistication in the technology on the A-to-D side:

"The thing is, A-to-D is getting a lot better. And as you know, [sampling frequencies] now go to 192 kHz. When we do things at high resolution — let's just take an organ — if you record an organ at 192 kHz, 24 bit, well, ...[there is] this low note and things in the middle — not a lot of high-frequency information there. But the 192 [sampled version] is going to sound a lot better because by recording at these high sample rates, you move the filter way out of the audio band. And these... filters that ... you need to do A-to-D conversion are very far away from audio band ... and this is why we do this high rate of sampling, or over sampling, as you call it. Getting these filters far away from the audio band, so they can't do any pre-delay and post-delay. They can do a lot of damage to the sound, and the farther you get them away from the audio source signal, the better it's going to sound. There's ringing, you know. A-to-D converters cause ringing. So when you have ... ringing in the audio band, before the real music starts you hear "music." And when the music ends, you still hear the "music." It's sort of like hitting a gong. So by getting this "gong" as far away as we can from the actual music, it makes [the result] sound better."

I couldn't help but ask whether going back to the original session tape, even ignoring generations of tape hiss and the inherent losses that manifest themselves in the analogue copying process, would always result in a more pleasing musical product. What if you don't like what you hear when you peel away all the outer layers? Maybe it will be too raw?

What's Hot@ HDtracks

Top Five Best Sellers

Rumours Fleetwood Mac, Rhino
Audiophile 96-kHz, 24-bit

Achtung Baby U2, Island Records
Audiophile 44.1-kHz, 24-bit

Clap Hands Here Comes Charlie
Ella Fitzgerald, Verve
Audiophile 96-kHz, 24-bit; 192-kHz, 24-bit

Roseland Acoustic Alchemy, Heads Up Int'l.
Audiophile 96-kHz, 24-bit

Best of Seal 1991 - 2004, Seal, Warner
Audiophile 48-kHz, 24-bit



David's response is quick and to the point. "Well, I don't agree with that. I think the closer you can get to the session tape, the better it is. I mean, that's the whole point." But he offers a valuable clarification and a redefinition of what a "session tape" is and how it relates to art.

"This is part of the art. Who am I to tell a producer or an artist what to do? If you're making the Randy Patton record, you make the master tape, and after you've made the master tape, you say 'I'm going to EQ it to

sounds a bit "audiophile." And the overwhelmingly most popular file formats have been FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) 24 bit and AIFF (Audio Interchange File Format) uncompressed CD-quality files. Surprisingly, although the company offers music in either complete albums and on a track-by-track basis, most of what is downloaded is full album content. When asked how HDtracks priced its music, and how it could justify selling individual tracks for an average of \$2.49 each, while iTunes offers its track selections at a much lower

**The Chesky HDtracks web site offers
an extremely wide variety of high-resolution music files
from more than 200 labels.**

make it sound better, 'cause I like it this way.' Well, that's your artwork and it's your prerogative. And I'm not going to step in. So as far as I'm concerned, then that [version] becomes the 'session tape,' the master tape ... the artist and the producer are done doing their thing, that's the master."

In stark contrast to this focus on sound quality and artistry, the downloads from other — at least most other — on-line sites, even those from the industry leader, iTunes, are small file sizes, in relatively lossy MP-3 or AAC files. These arguably represent the "cassettes" of the 21st century with a mainstream focus on convenience, portability, and lifestyle. It happens to also be a much larger market, but not the quality-oriented niche that HDtracks focuses on.

In discussing who the target audience is for HDtracks and whether it is the "audiophile" — an older, largely male, affluent customer, representing a declining market segment — David remarks, "Well, look, it's all types of people. The thing is this: it's for people who really care about sound; it's audiophiles — although lot of audiophiles are not rich — but it's basically for people who want the highest quality regardless of price. That's what we serve — if you want the best digital file you can have and play it back on the most amazing system via non-laser or disc playback, this is the way to go."

The most popular downloads at HDtracks have historically been classic rock, jazz, and classical. Which

price, David replies that HDtracks offers higher resolution and significantly larger files. And there is value in this. He further points out that the company has priced each track such that the album would be a more attractive purchase. Album downloads account for an astounding 90+ per cent of HDtracks' business.

However, if file size, storage, compatibility, and download limitations are considerations, HDtracks offers music in a 320 mbps MP-3 format. Company sales history suggests that most who purchase from the HDtracks webstore are largely of a different persuasion. They seem less concerned about file size, and opt for the best quality downloads available, whether full CD-quality "Red Book" files in AIFF or 24-bit recordings in FLAC. With FLAC, the actual files are compressed for download and storage to something smaller than a WAV or AIFF file, but restored in playback to the original. So a sophisticated encoding and decoding algorithm is used to make the whole process "lossless."

It should be noted, however, that FLAC files are not supported by Windows Media Player or Apple's iTunes; but a number of other readily accessible options are close at hand. Some are open platform and free of charge, while others — with technical credibility, product stories, and customer recommendations — charge. Information and suggestions are available on the HDtracks website. I took one of the HDtracks' recommendations, and downloaded Media Monkey. I was off to the races in no time. In fact, I am so pleased with Media Monkey, I've made it my default media player!

HDtracks is quick to point out that music downloaded from their store is 100 per cent free of DRM (Digital Rights Management). It is your music once downloaded and yours to play back, copy, and to use in any way and on any equipment you want. No restrictions. Early iTunes selections were often restricted by DRM, but the Apple store has also moved away from this, and like many or most others, offers its music without DRM restrictions.

One of the most appealing things about downloading music from HDtracks, I must say, is the availability of the original album artwork as part of the purchase. Liner notes are simply downloaded as a PDF. This is a nice touch, and one that really personalizes the whole process, and something I found to be a true added value.



How is HDtracks doing?

Announced as "The Web's Premier High Resolution Music Store" in the company's inaugural press release in April 2008, HDtracks currently has over 200 labels on its web-site store. David's response was a surprised, and surprising, "Wow, I didn't know that!" when I told him I had actually personally counted the number. Norman, his brother, certainly would have known. While David is the musical conscience of their company, it is Norman who has functioned as business manager, playing a major role in establishing these relationships and engaging labels.

HDtracks has over 1,000 albums and tens of thousands of tracks available from various artists in 24-bit high definition! Not to mention titles in CD-quality AIFF, and more still in MP-3, 320 mbps. Its selection spans a broad range of musical genres, from folk, rock, country, blues to big band, jazz, and classical. It is the proverbial candy shop for those ageless kids with a sweet tooth for quality music in the highest quality musical formats.

If HDtracks is the iTunes of high-end downloads, an online music store with a selection of music offered in the highest resolution formats possible with today's technology, "If music be the food of love, play on." I used to think Dick's Sporting Goods was the best store in the universe. I love everything about it, and could easily spend my each and every paycheck there. I now elevate HDtracks to this same level of personal rever-



ence. And, hey, it's for a noble cause. What better mission than to address a market and offer products "for the love of music."

Bottom line, HDtracks is doing very well. It has met and, according to David Chesky, continues to meet its business objectives and the musical objectives of its users.

The "Hi-Res Store" in the HDtracks site starts off both new and experienced visitors with essential details presented in a manner that is easy to understand.

HDtracks®

96khz/24bit Store
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88.2 kHz/24 bit

Welcome to the HDtracks high resolution audiophile store. This section of our site offers high resolution audiophile FLAC downloads in 88 kHz/24 bit and 96 kHz/24 bit.

Please note that some of the preview audio for the Hi-Res store is in 48 kHz/16 bit. If your computer's sound card does not support this sampling rate, the previews may not play properly or they may sound distorted. Please be assured that the actual Hi-Res files are perfectly fine and we are working to replace all the previews with 44.1kHz / 16 bit samples.

Please keep in mind that you will need a media player that is compatible with both the FLAC format and 88/24 or 96/24 resolution files. We suggest a media player such as MediaMonkey which is available here: <http://www.mediamonkey.com/>. In addition, you will also need a D/A converter that supports 88/24 or 96/24 audio.

If you are looking for CD quality files, please browse our selection of regular high quality 44 kHz/16 bit files available here. Otherwise, welcome to the Hi-Res store!



2011 California Audio Show

7/15 - 7/17
Crowne Plaza San Francisco International Airport



George Graves

THE SECOND ANNUAL California Audio Show put on by Dagogo High-End Audio Review (dagogo.com) was held in Burlingame at the Crowne Plaza Hotel just south of the San Francisco International Airport, on the 15th through the 17th of July. The weather was mild (70 degrees with low humidity) and sunny all three days of the show and one couldn't have asked for better weather. I was unable to attend until Sunday, the last day of the show due to other commitments, but I was eager enough to be at the Show soon after it opened on Sunday morning.

Unlike most hi-fi shows that I have attended recently, this one was, at least on Sunday, fairly sparsely attended. I don't know how many people were there on Friday or Saturday, but from an attendee's perspective, it was very nice to be able to amble down the halls of the five floors of exhibits without any pushing or bumping. The best thing was to be nearly guaranteed a good seat in a demo room.

On the lobby floor next to the registration desk, **Audio Image** had a large room featuring **Audio**

Research electronics and **Magico's** Q5 big speaker. The sound was enthralling. The room was large enough to allow the prodigious bass of the Magicos to fully bloom. They sound smooth with great top end extension.

But next door was what I considered, ultimately, the best sound of the show. The German company **MBL** was filling their largish ballroom-sized suite with the sounds of their MBL-101 MkII loudspeakers (\$70,500 the pair) in arctic white! These speakers were being driven by a pair of new MBL-9011 power amps that are (and I'm only exaggerating a little bit) as big as a Mini-Cooper! At least 34 inches deep by 19 inches wide, by 13 inches tall, they are huge. I tried to pick one up and couldn't (OK, I didn't try THAT hard). Later, I found out that these weigh an astounding 200 pounds each. They produce 440 watts each into 8 ohms and 130 watts each into 8 ohms in pure class "A" operation. They need TWO IEC power cords to power them! These amps too were in arctic white, like the speakers. Needless to say, the sound in this demo was incredible, easily the best at the show.

In another room, I heard the small Magico Mini-2 speakers. These unassuming little boxes-on-stands sound astounding for their size. I had never heard such bass extension from so small a speaker. It's a two-way design with what looks to be a 6 -inch bass driver and a 1-inch dome tweeter. I could certainly live very happily with these if my circumstances were reduced to where I needed to down-size everything.

Dan D'agustino was showing his company's fancy new monoblock power amp called the Momentum. These \$42,000 per pair amps have stylish copper accents and front-mounted retro styled round power meters; they sounded great through a pair of Wilson Audio Sasha loudspeakers. The room was small and crowded, standing room only actually, which certainly attests to the interest in the lovely amps.

Sony was showing their new flagship speaker the SS-AR1. This \$27,000/pair floor-stander is made from exotic woods and put together in a novel fashion in order to damp cabinet resonances. I found the speaker not terribly outstanding, though I realize that a show is no place to judge sound critically. It may also be because the show's overall sonic standards were so high.

A Singapore-based company named **Light Harmonic** was demonstrating its DaVinci 384K digital-to-analog converter. This 55-pound behemoth measures almost 19 inches square by close to 8 inches tall. It is unusual in that the top portion of the case rotates by 45 degrees when switched on to bring the unusual, beveled corner display panel around to the front of the unit. It sports two inputs, a USB port and an SPDIF port. It comes with software for either Mac or Linux (no PC!??) which allows the device to transfer up 384 Kbps at up to 32-bits from the computer to the DAC without errors. The sound was impressive, but I don't know whether it was because of the DAC or the marvelous sounding Vivid V1.5 speakers that they were using to audition. These small, free-standing Vivids are very organic looking and the stands are part of the speaker, I was impressed with both their lack of coloration and smooth frequency response (Vivid claims 45 to 30,000 Hz +/- 2 dB on axis with less than 0.5% total harmonic distortion).

Next door, **MSB** was demonstrating their \$14,000 DAC IV. In a complete MSB system consisting of their Universal Media Transport, their DAC IV and their M202 200 Watt Class "A" monoblocks. MSB's new line is gorgeous in its blue and silver livery (if a bit on the "industrial" side) and is stunningly put together. MSB uses four discrete component DACs in their DAC IV in a proprietary configuration that they call a "Ladder DAC." The sound was, as expected, superb.

One trend I saw in great profusion at this show was the use of music servers to supply demo material. Though there was the occasional CD deck or even a turntable or two in evidence, almost everybody, from speaker manufacturers and amplifier demo folks to purveyors of purely digital solutions, all were using laptops (controlled by iPads) as the source for their music. I've never encountered this before.

One thing I did notice is that almost every demo sounded splendid. I don't know if the reason was because the bar has been raised on the industry as a whole, or whether the suites in this hotel (all the rooms were exactly alike) were just better suited for audio demos than most have been in the past. Whatever the reason, it was a damn fine show.



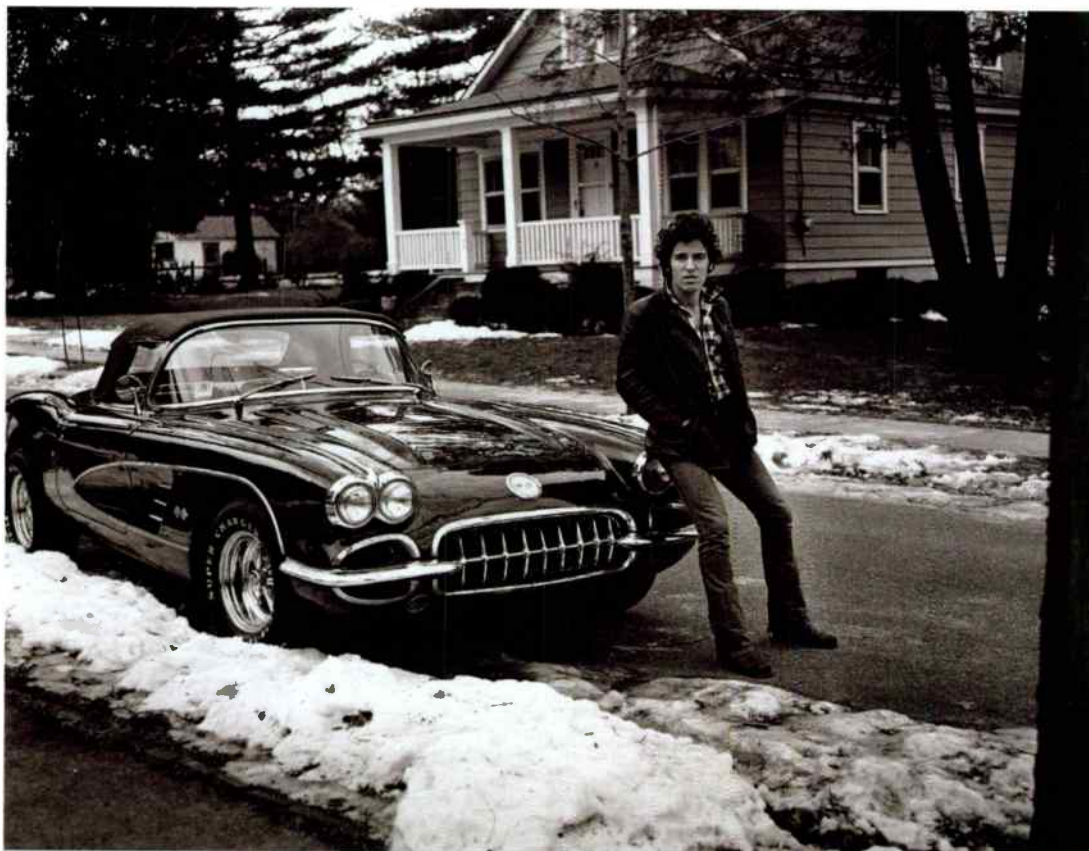
MBL's 101 MkII speaker and MBL-9011 amp.



Dan D'Agustino's Momentum mono-block amp.



MSB's DAC IV.



Michael Tearson

Rock

Bruce Springsteen *The Promise*
Columbia two CDs, 88967-76177-2
Bruce Springsteen *The Promise: The Darkness on the Edge of Town Story*
Columbia three CDs and three DVDs; 88697-76525-2

THE *PROMISE* IS a two-CD set of 21 Bruce Springsteen songs recorded during the three years of sessions for *Darkness on the Edge of Town* but which didn't make the cut there or his subsequent double album *The River*. Several of these tunes have surfaced over the years, either done by other songsters or in alternate live versions by Springsteen. Amazingly, none of them has been released in their original form before. A couple of these are early versions of songs that did eventually appear on *Darkness*.

The deluxe version adds a CD of *Darkness* freshly remastered plus three DVDs. One is a terrific 90 minute making of documentary which HBO aired. The other two are concert discs, one a full three-hour 1978 show from Houston. The other combines a live 2009 Asbury Park performance of the *Darkness* album in sequence plus 12 concert and rehearsal performances culled from 1976-1978. The deluxe set's packaging is spectacular as it reproduces pages of a notebook Bruce used at the time to polish lyrics and work on variations of the sequence of the nascent *Darkness*.

The meat is certainly the two CDs of *The Promise*. How so many terrific songs from such a short period of

time, an entire missing link, could have remained unmined in the archives over 30 years is astonishing. Especially when you remember the 1998 boxed set *Tracks* has already served up 66 archive gems. Nobody outside Bob Dylan has released this number of unused archive songs.

It's important to recall what was going on in Springsteen's turbulent world when he was having such a creative explosion. In 1975 his third album *Born to Run* had exploded, making him a superstar for keeps. But success wrought big trouble at home as Bruce and manager Mike Appel had a brutal falling out that led to lawsuits from both sides. These legalities, in turn, kept Bruce and the E Street Band out of the studio for several years. They had to tour like demons to make a living.

Still, Bruce was working away on what would become *Darkness*, and a theme gradually emerged. In stark contrast to the joyous sense of escape that rings throughout *Born to Run*, the *Darkness* songs evolved as a darker cycle about working people trapped by the circumstances of their lives. The exuberance of "Jungleland," "Backstreets" and "Born to Run" gave way to a flatter, less flashy and

more sober performance style, a downer which put me off at the time. Actually, I prefer the newly remastered *Darkness* of the deluxe set. It adds some punch and sizzle, but it is a completely different animal than *Born to Run*.

The Promise opens with an early version of the majestic "Racing in the Streets." The story's

Other *Promise* songs we already know are the Patti Smith collaboration "Because the Night," "Rendezvous" with which Greg Kihn got a hit, "Fire" with which both Robert Gordon and the Pointer Sisters had success, and "Talk to Me" which became a standard for Southside Johnny and the Jukes.

The remaining *Promise* songs are truly vintage Springsteen, but it's not

vintage "new" songs is one hell of a lagniappe, a boon nobody could have predicted. It instantly becomes a vital addition to one of the most celebrated oeuvres in all of rock. It harks back to "Thunder Road" and is something of a sequel to "The Promise," a towering song. At the same time, the song foreshadows "Darlington County" on *Born in the USA*.

**For any of Springsteen's legion of fans,
The Promise is a must, in one version or the other.**

the same as are most of the lyrics, but some details are different. It's a '32 Ford, not a '69 Chevy, but the girl's despair is the same. Sonny who helped "built her straight outta scratch" becomes a recurring character in the Orbison-esque "Breakaway." The "Racing" on *The Promise* is a little slower and darker than the *Darkness* take, and it is a revealing look into the Boss' creative process. So, too, is "Candy's Boy," an early draft of "Candy's Room," but from a different point of view, slower and mournful.

too hard to see why these missed the list on *Darkness* and *River*. That most simply weren't dark enough for the *Darkness* theme or didn't advance it well enough does not mean they're not fine songs. Many of the *River* songs, in fact, are leftovers from the *Darkness*. And that album divides into two groups of songs, the dark and the bright. Only with *The Promise* do we really begin to get a full sense of the riches Bruce was creating during this time.

For Springsteen fans *The Promise* is an absolute must. Twenty-one

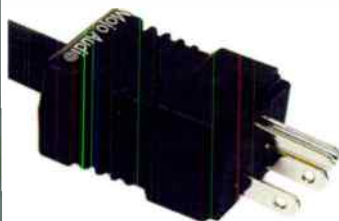
The basic two-CD set of *The Promise* is beautifully packaged. Eric Meola's gorgeous black & white period photography helps define the songs' milieu. But the deluxe edition really is something special. It is very pricey, over \$100 most places you can find it. But for the devotee, it will be worth it. Those three DVDs are a feast of about six hours of material, all new. Sure hope Columbia and Springsteen find a way to eventually make them available for the less well-heeled rest of us.

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- Roy Harris, *Audiophilia*, Oct. 2011



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chris bergson band

imitate the sun



Blues

Chris Bergson *Imitate The Sun*
2 Shirts Records CD1004

FOR THOSE of you who are looking for a bridge that takes you from the 1970s to the 21st Century, Chris Bergson's *Imitate The Sun* is a very good start. Note that he does all the chores here, writer, producer, vocals and guitars. This analog album is aided by well-selected session players, a good recording facility, highly competent engineers (Excello Recording by Hugh Pool assisted by Nathan Rosborough), and mastered at one of my favorite places, Sterling Sound (Chris Gehringer). The source influences range from The Allman Bros. interpretation and The Band's innovation to Otis Redding's spirit and O.V. Wright's soul.

"Goin' Home" (4:19) is an instant tell tale to this listener why a luminary such as Levon Helm (in whose studio Bergson has recorded and at whose "Midnight Rambles" Chris performed recently) is interested in Bergson.

The title track "Imitate The Sun" comes jammin' out of the gate. Albeit sounding a little bit hot level-wise like some others, it's a wonderful song to get up and D.Y.A.O. to! The (6:10) play length may limit its radio rotation, but it will be a fantastic live song with Jay Collins's sax (also horn arrangements throughout the LP) and Bruce Katz's keyboards (organ, Wurlitzer organ, and piano throughout the LP).

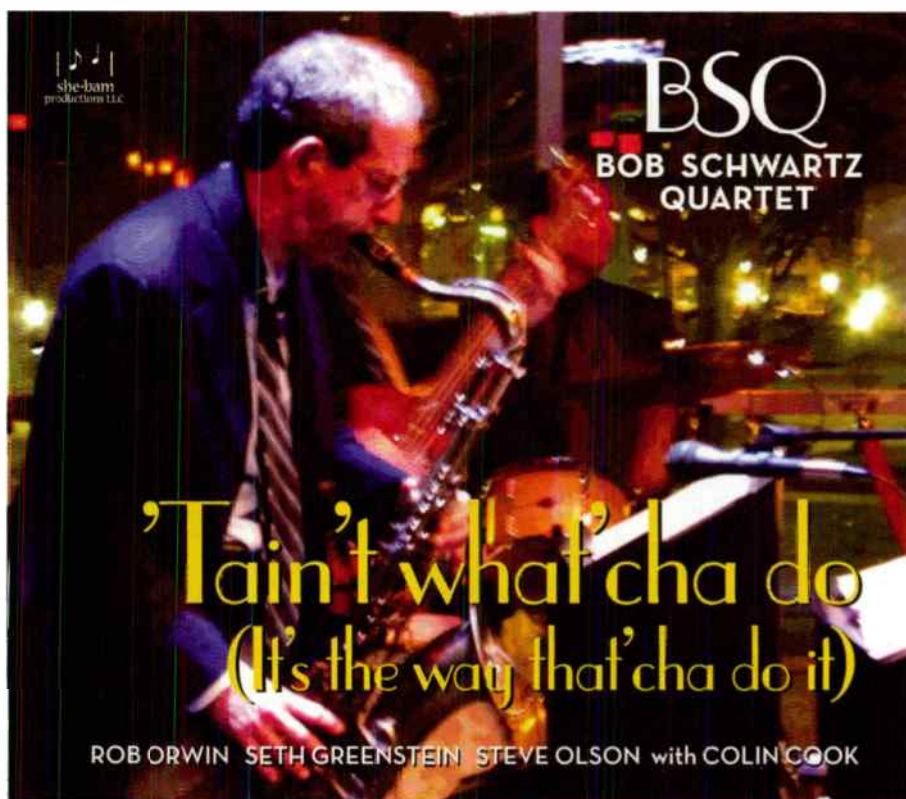
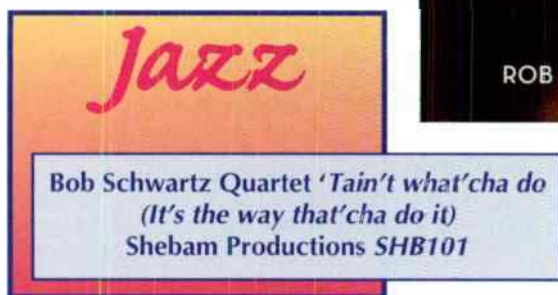
"Hello Bertha" (3:54) and "Mr. Jackson" (3:51) are the tribute to The Memphis Horn sound with Collins horn playing and arrangements passing the test with the assistance of Kenny Rampton (trumpet) and Chris Karlic (baritone sax). Katz keeps raising the spirit on the keys, while Tony Leone (drums and percussion) holds the line in both songs as well as the others throughout the LP).

The covers on this album: "Down In The Bottom," "You've Been a Good Old Wagon," "Dust My Broom" and "Standing in The Doorway" were 1. Great and uncommon white boy calls, 2. Well played and sung, and 3. Anchor this as a blues album for a top-drawer singer/songwriter artist.

All songs on this album were produced by Chris Bergson and written/published by Chris Bergson and Kate Ross, except "Down In The Bottom" (Willie Dixon), "You've Been A Good Old Wagon" (John Henry), "Dust My Broom" (Elmore James and Robert Johnson), and "Standing In The Doorway" (Bob Dylan).

Chris Bergson is a Yankee in clever Delta disguise. He presents us with songs which are familiar but new, a rare event in this day of digitally multi-tracked copies with true creative invention and master musicianship rarely found these days.

Jim Keenan



TAIN'T WHAT'CHA do is a lively and swinging outing which pays respect to but has fun with a bevy of jazz and songbook standards, including some rarities, and originals in a similar vein. The performing BSQ is led by Bob Schwartz, who appeared as producer in my previous reviews of cds by David Berger's big band playing Harry Warren tunes. Bob has also appeared in TAV as a jazz record reviewer.

On the 'Tain't album Bob plays tenor sax and flutes, Rob Orwin plays piano and keyboards, Seth Greenstein handles electric bass and Steve Olson is BSQ's drummer. On half the tunes, the teenage (!) Colin Cook joins in on guitar. The quartet regularly plays in the Washington DC area, and has a very integrated sound and evident love of this style of music. To that is added a rich portion of invention and wit, making for the fun I mentioned above.

The CD kicks off uptempo on Frank Loesser's *On a Slow Boat to*

China, with Bob leading on his spirited and muscular tenor through theme and variations. Rob displays serious chops on an extended piano solo and Seth has a brief but tuneful bass solo. I would have preferred the woodier sound of an upright bass, but the electric bass was more than OK.

I Found a Million Dollar Baby, *I'm Sorry* and *Double Trouble* are all Harry Warren songs. In *Baby*, Bob is featured on flute, played with breathy energy, and he alternates with Rob's piano and Colin's guitar. The latter, though the kid of the group, shows very good technique and imagination in his solo. In *Sorry*, piano opens in a pensive mood, followed by an effects-laden guitar solo, and then tenor jumps in uptempo maybe to show that they're not too repentant. In *Trouble*, all pile on at speed, with tenor and piano solos before an ensemble final chorus.

Brownian Motion is a Bob Schwartz original and one of my

favorites on this CD. The title recalls the great trumpeter Clifford Brown, and Bob on alto flute evokes easy, loping swinging motion in close partnership with piano, which then alternates with guitar, all contributing to a rich and extended development of the theme. I also liked *Centerpiece*, a very unusual airing of this old Lambert, Hendricks and Ross anthem, played here also in an easy swinging manner. Another handful of tunes are also handled well.

The album closes with the title tune, done with great good humor by the boys in the band singing the lyrics after a strong group entry and inspired, joyful playing by all. This will leave you smiling!

This CD deserves special mention for production values, including a fine and well varied selection of material, excellent liner notes by David Berger, and an eight-page gatefold case with the notes and several photos. The recording is quite clear and well balanced.

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— Brent Butterworth, Sound + Vision,
www.soundandvisionmag.com,
February 2011

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If this sequence (Space Shuttle launch) on your present system doesn't induce panic about a subwoofer-induced-damage clause in your home owner's insurance, you need a better sub. Like the Hsu.

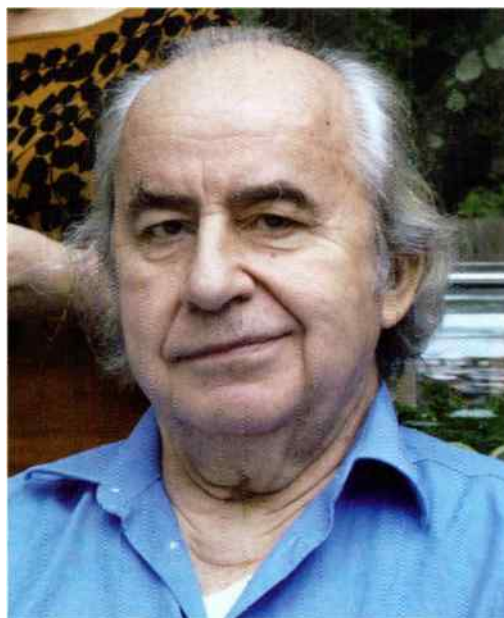
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— Tom Norton, Home Theater Magazine,
December 2011

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JOHN MAROVSKIS, designer of the Janis subwoofer, passed away November 3, 2011, at the age of 71 after a brief bout with an undisclosed illness.

A trained chemist as well as physicist and disciplined audiophile, John Marovskis was pursuing a doctorate at New York's Columbia University when he was sidetracked by a growing interest in accurate bass reproduction. This led to his founding Janis Audio Associates in the early 1970s. After completing research for the then-novel slot-loaded subwoofer, John Marovskis, who was also a skilled cabinet maker, began producing units in his Bronx garage to fill orders resulting from a stellar review in *Audio Magazine* written by the ultra-critical Bert Whyte and other favorable reviews that followed. Eventually, a less expensive W-2 and even more affordable W-3 joined the signature W-1 to bring the same performance levels to even more customers.

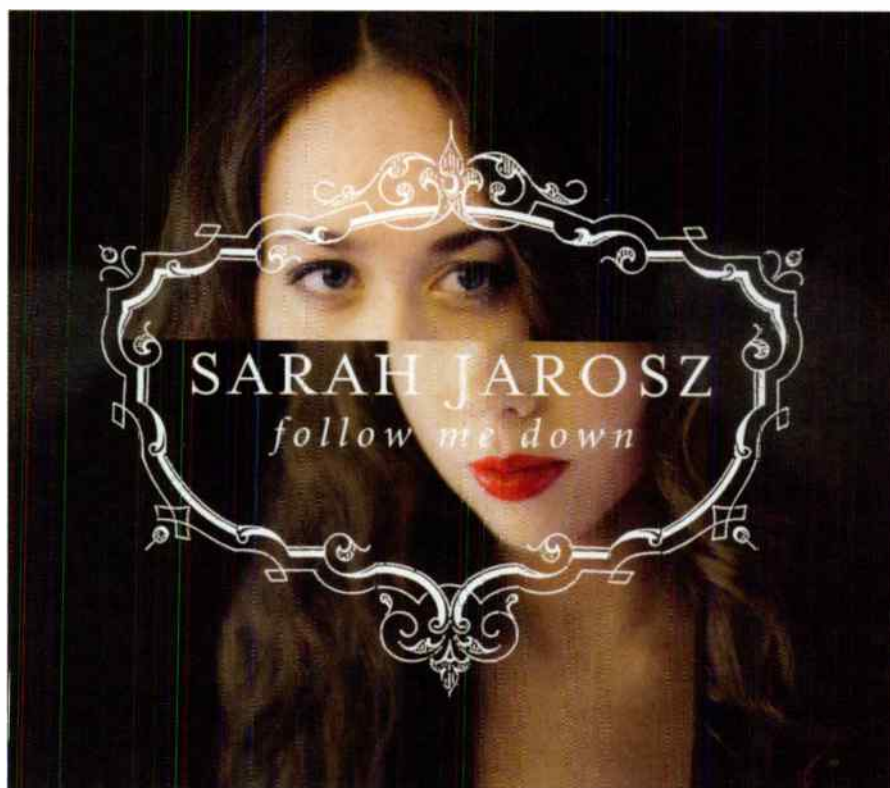
His most innovative thinking, however, centered on his system-wide approach to accurate bass reproduction. He envisioned a "black box and brown box" solution. The Janis Interphase 1 (his "black box") was a single-chassis integration of an electronic crossover and a power amplifier

specifically configured for the demands of low frequency reproduction. Among its innovations, the Interphase 1 featured a continuously adjustable phase control that affected the crossover's low-pass output. This was the first example of a now-common solution to proper sub/wide range integration. (The subwoofers themselves were the "brown box" component in his solution.) Although admittedly more expensive than traditional passive crossovers, this active design paid large aural dividends in lower distortion and greater power handling capacity for the entire loudspeaker array.

Prior to founding Janis, John Marovskis developed a unique experimental approach to rear channel time delay (precursor to today's surround sound technologies) by mounting two phono cartridges head-to-head in a single radial-tracking tonearm he modified to increase or decrease the apparent depth of a soundfield by varying the distance between the cartridges' styli. Although he never marketed this approach, he did market the MIT-1 phono cartridge (MIT for "mirror image transducer"), one of the first with a van den Hul stylus.

John Marovskis is survived by his wife Ilze and daughter Laura, his sister and 3 nieces. — Len Schneider

Michael Tearson



TEXAS NATIVE Sarah Jarosz turned 20 just as *Follow Me Down*, her second album, was released, but you'd never guess that listening to her. She sounds wise and experienced far beyond her years, both as a songwriter and a guitar picker. And, better yet, she's an extremely beguiling vocalist!

Of the 11 selections here, Sarah wrote or co-wrote seven songs, and on top of that, she wrote the set's two instrumentals by herself. She covers two songs, Bob Dylan's spiritually uplifting "Ring Them Bells" and Radiohead's "The Tourist." The opener "Run Away" is a tempting invitation to slip away with her. "Come Around" is an itchy statement of possible cracks in a relationship the singer is trying to hold together. "The Muse" is a dance to try to coax help from that elusive inspirational force. "Here Nor There" and "Gypsy" are seeking songs, most appropriate for one so young and still reaping experience to use for inspiration or plain old fodder. Her songs are all strong pieces.

Sarah plays various guitars, claw hammer banjo, mandolins, and (just for fun) a toy piano. She has gath-

ered stellar pickers to help realize her vision for the album, fiddlers Stuart Duncan, Casey Driessen, Viktor Krauss and Mark Schatz; Bela Fleck on banjo; John Levanthal on guitar, and Jerry Douglas on lap steel, Weissenborn guitar and Dobro. Harmony vocalists include Shawn Colvin, Darrell Scott, Dan Tyminski of Alison Krauss' Union Station (as is Douglas), Vince Gill, and Sarah Siskind.

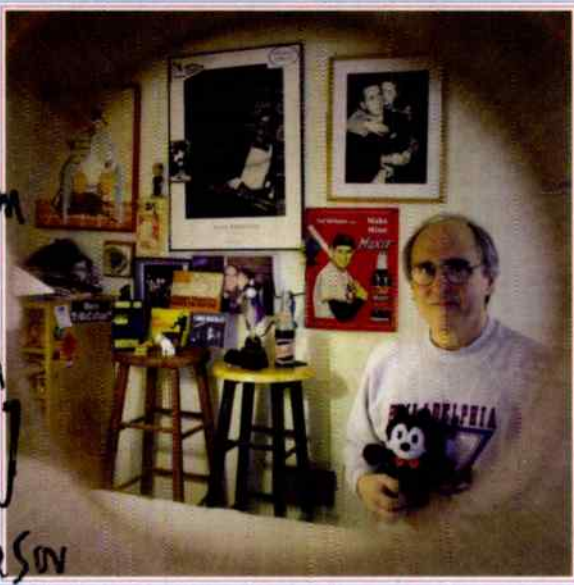
Classy names all, and all of them contribute most sympathetically, the exhilaration of performance and the challenge of Sarah's songs glowing as the tracks play. They and Sarah make *Follow Me Down* a heady experience.

Yes, Sarah Jarosz is still very young, but she is already something very special. Her first album was mostly a rootsy affair close to bluegrass, while *Follow Me Down* is most adventurous stylistically. Clearly, Sarah is growing most rapidly as she is evolving into a thoroughly original artist whose work really sounds like nobody else's. Her future is unlimited, and her present is brilliant.

MICHAEL TEARSON

STUFF THAT WORKS

for
Gene,
One of
most
w/whom
I've
would
not be
Michael
Tearson



Blues

Michael Tearson *Stuff That Works*
Juniper Beach 513 @ CDBaby.com

"**S**TUFF THAT WORKS" – what's that mean? I've been considering that question, and deeply, ever since I drew the assignment from Editor Gene to review this CD.

Michael Tearson has been associated with this magazine as a reviewer and consultant for about 15 years, fulfilling much the same special relationship to Gene that he had for an earlier 25 years at Audio Magazine. Tearson is a kind of legend in the rock music world of the New Jersey, Philadelphia and Maryland area. A long time DJ on FM stations in Philly, South Jersey,

and Maryland, which includes over 35 years at WMMR, Philly's BIG-DEAL station, he went through several careers as a "personality before the rock music world" (think *underground radio* – he just about invented it) in these parts of the USA. These days, he does shows on Sirius/XM satellite radio and online at radiothatdoesntsuck.com.

But, like so many, he longed to be a rock star. Or at least to make an album.

He's done it. *Stuff That Works* offers 13 tracks of covers of known-item rock songs penned by famous

or important writers including Bob Dylan, John Mellencamp, and Neil Diamond.

To appreciate this CD, you also have to appreciate the fact that Tearson, like most of us, has had a bumpy time of it in life. His career has not exactly been a straight line in an upwards direction. Like so many in the pop-rock area of radio, he was on the air one week and off the next. More gravely, he lost his wife Lynne at the age of 37 to cancer in 1995. And his good friend Robert Hazard (who wrote the Cyndi Lauper hit *Girls Just Wanna*

Have Fun) died, also of cancer, in 2008.

Philadelphia *Daily News* staff writer Frank Dougherty wrote a short but touching memorial to "Lynne Pedersen Esterson, a woman who was so much in love with her husband and life itself that she turned her battle against cancer into an epic struggle. ... 'We hit it off fast, a good thing because we didn't have a lot of time,' said husband Michael Esterson, better known as Michael Tearson to listeners of Philadelphia FM radio. 'The year we spent before Lynne's illness manifested itself was the best year of our lives.'"

Tearson has stated that Hazard's passing was the catalyst for this CD.

Symphony under Fritz Reiner, an LP my mother gave me when I was 10 years old and which I still have. There are also some sides by Bill Evans. Editor Pitts had an 18-year-old son, Stefan, taken from him on 9/6/2001 – on the Thursday before the 9/11 Tuesday, which was the day he and his wife later scheduled the memorial home visit. The lead song on the compilation CD that played in the background at the memorial home was *Rollin' and Tumblin'*, a Muddy Waters' tune sung in this 1950 Parkway version by Baby Face Leroy Foster and taken from Vol. 2 of Rhino's Blues Masters collection, "Postwar Chicago Blues." Gene will say, if

than Michael's, but I have to say that Michael's act of ripping his guts out and throwing them onto the stage in front of us will catch all of your attention.

That the Working Stuffs play so well is a good thing, because Tearson's voice is not the main musical attraction here. He does not have a good one, and lacks the stylistics to overcome the dearth of chops. Think Bob Dylan without his gift for phrasing. In the end, however, Michael's intensity carries the day. Thus, overall, given the excellence of the backup combo and the emotional ambience created by the Aging Man's Nostalgia ("the pain of *not being able to go home?*"), the album works. Most of it, anyway.

The middle of the night can be a tough time to get the aches for a relative who God's called.

I think he might just as well have said that "all of the hard knocks of his life" were the catalyst.

And that's the adult appeal of the thing. You get to a certain stage in life (I certainly have) and those losses and hard knocks start to consume an ever-increasing part of your stream of consciousness. It gets to be late at night, and the loneliness and aches creep in, and you start looking for *Stuff That Works*. Editor Gene suggests that such stuff would make it into Kris Kristofferson's *Help Me Make It Through The Night*. Kris' song is like a bucket list for lovers who have lost; Michael's CD comprises his suggestions for Grief Ointment. It's not exactly an alternative to melatonin, something to put you back to sleep when you're up in the middle of the night from what isn't a bad dream so much as the lost one trying to talk to you.

In such times, you need good and old friends. And perhaps some effective remedies. For many of us, that set of friends and fixes includes works of music. That may be why we read magazines like *The Audiophile Voice*. For me, one of the good pieces of music is the Brahms B-flat piano Concerto in the version by Van Cliburn and the Chicago

pressed, that one line in the song always tears at him, "*All I had was gone.*" Stefan, like his older brother Gene IV, was an Eagle Scout and had just returned from his fourth year at Philmont Scout Ranch where he'd been teaching leadership skills. Earlier in the year, he'd been awarded the Joe Walsh Award at the local high school; Walsh was an early and important member of The Eagles and is still active in rock music. The awards committee said Stefan was the template for their choices of later recipients.

The 13 songs on Michael's CD are, I think, Tearson's old friends, in long use as Grief Ointment. As are his band mates, string virtuoso (genius?) Tom Hampton, drummer and keyboardist Andy Kravitz, and bassist Fran Smith Jr. These three guys are just phenomenal ... as good a rock music ensemble as I think you are likely to hear anytime soon. Tearson calls them his Working Stuffs, and "a pretty great band." He's underselling them, by a very great margin. Like Pitts, these guys are his friends and they can be said to be working at helping Michael honor lost wife Lynne and honor his love for her. They are better musicians, with better chops

The very few songs that don't cut it – for example, Neil Diamond's *Solitary Man*, which was just plain pitched too high for Tearson's voice – are painful. But those that do – *St. Louis County Fair* and *Old Friends*, plus *Buy for Me the Rain* and several others – will sting you in the heart and press your "60s & 70s & 80s" nostalgia button pretty hard.

Chances are, especially if you're in an over-40 demographic group, like me and Gene Pitts, you'll start to think of this CD, and the man who made it, as *Old Friends Who Understand*. AKA *Stuff That Works*.

And when the hour grows late and the loneliness or grief comes on, you may well reach for this disc ... because you *need to*.





Seth Greenstein

Jazz

Chick Corea and Stefano Bollani *Orvieto*
ECM 2222

AT THE TURN of the new year 2010, Chick Corea and Stefano Bollani continued their young musical encounter in concert at the Teatro Mancinelli in Orvieto, Italy. From these concerts come the first recorded fruits of their truly stunning live collaboration and Corea's first recording for ECM in a quarter century.

Orvieto displays the shared sensibilities of two piano giants in perfect harmony. Corea, now nearing 70 years old, is well known for his precise, intricate and percussive playing. Bollani, not yet 40, is establishing a solid reputation as a young jazz piano virtuoso. Together, they are two of a single mind. Their playing displays individual technical mastery, but always in synch — reminiscent of the finest

simpatico jazz duets of Gerry Mulligan and Paul Desmond, or Bill Evans's *Conversations With Myself*.

Leaning heavily on Brazilian music and the American songbook, *Orvieto* is at turns playful, as on Corea's Spanish-infused "Tirititan" and "Armando's Rhumba," or sweetly pensive as on Bollani's composition "A Valsa da Paula," or emotionally evocative as on the standards "If I Should Lose You" and "Darn That Dream." The set includes two abstract improvisations that reveal the depth of their aesthetic connection. On "Improvisation No. 2," the duo progress organically together from an ethereal mood to dramatic rhythms and precise rapid-fire runs by each pianist, never getting in each other's way yet never cabined

within a narrow territory. Similarly, the moody, abstract "Improvisation No.1" which opens the set evolves seamlessly from a simple repeated phrase into the melody and bossa rhythm of Jobim's classic "Portrait in Black and White."

But the genius of this duo shines through brightest when they trade improvisations on "Jitterbug Waltz," or four-bar phrases on the delightful "Doralice." The melodic ideas joyfully bounce between the two pianos, building dynamically with a natural and remarkable unity. Like two old friends, Corea and Bollani finish each others' sentences without striving to impress each other with their taste, technique, intellect, or rapport. Those of us listening in to their musical conversation cannot help but be impressed by *Orvieto*.

Acoustic Fields Sound Absorbers & Sound Diffusers

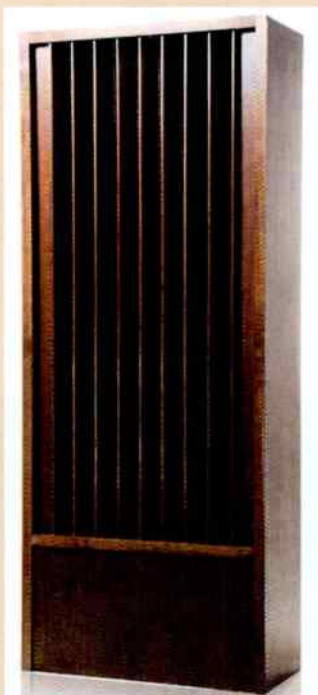
Gene Pitts



RIGHT HERE at the top of this review, I need to perform an appropriate amount of public disclosure, that *The Audiophile Voice* is trading advertising space for product samples to be used in the home listening room of the editor, Gene Pitts. This present review would have been done whether the firm had placed ads and regardless of method of payment for ad space.

There is a poorly recognized bit of audio knowledge, i.e. that the biggest single source of audio distortion isn't in any of the gear or media brought into the listening room. In fact, almost all the forms of gear you may buy will not help you deal with this difficulty. That distortion source literally is your listening room. You should work on it. Its irregular frequency response,

QDA Diffusers



In Acoustic Fields' lingo, QDA stands for quadratic diffusor absorber. The bottom of the unit directly below the diffusor incorporates their 30 Hz - 50 Hz, low-frequency absorption technology using activated carbon filters inside. They take 35 pounds of activated carbon and arrange individual filters inside the bottom cavity which is designed like their individual, low-frequency absorber called the ACDA-12. Inside and directly behind the deepest trough in the diffusor section are two more activated carbon filters which cause the diffusor to not only diffuse but absorb a broader band of absorption which is the same as their ACDA-10, 30 Hz - 100 Hz.

Thus, a user can choose to have quadratic diffusion from about 300 Hz on up to 3,500 Hz. This can do wonders for perceived accuracy of midrange (vocals), sound stage presentation and instrumental separation (air), particularly when coupled with low frequency absorption from 30 Hz - 100 Hz. I believe that this arrangement of middle and high frequency diffusion and broad-band low frequency absorption has never been done before in a commercially available product.

The photo above is two vertical units with a horizontal unit below the two vertical units. A vertical diffusor diffuses sound in a horizontal, fan-like, energy array. A horizontal diffusor diffuses energy in a vertical, fan like, energy array. Thus, one can create two dimensions of diffusion in a room. It is an extraordinary experience, akin to listening to a concert in, say, the best hall in Boston or Chicago or Vienna. *Gene Pitts*

which echoes different instruments unevenly, is difficult to tame, harder still to make into a friend of music. It is the essence of the reason why ancient Greek open-air theaters are still used and why the good current acousticians are paid huge sums to design major products and far too often still get it wrong. It is why most all major halls for classical music use amplified public address speakers to "help" the musicians. It is why there is a highly trained person on the house sound board who equalizes the signal going into the hall. I asked one why the knobs couldn't just be set and left the same from night to night, and he told me that it was because the audience in the hall was different each night.

Consider. What we all are trying to do is a form of time-space transport, of magic, of illusion – to move musicians from the recording venue to our listening room (or vice-versa). Both recording engineers and audiophiles commonly concentrate on the timbre of the instruments, of voices, of gear for reproduction, and too-frequently ignore the characteristic sound of the original recording venue over and against that individual sound in the place of reproduction.

There is an assumption that the "original place" will come along and be there during reproduction. Not so. What this leads to are complaints of "Doesn't sound right!" about important performance arenas such as Carnegie Hall and Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City. I remember going to an evening concert by Bob Dylan and The Grateful Dead at Giants Stadium in the Meadowlands, and hating the fact that I couldn't understand the lyrics at all. Too much echo, too much reverb, and that stuff wasn't being added by the sound reinforcement guys at the stadium. It was what sound does naturally in that place.

In my own home listening room, which is 33 feet long and seven high while ranging from 12 to 14 feet wide, I had some pieces of two-inch thick egg-crate foam "melt" down from the ceiling the summer of 2010. It had been tacked up there to catch the first reflection from my loudspeakers and thus fool my ear-brain sonic computer into thinking that there was an additional space down there beyond the end wall. It had done a good job for at least a decade. After the foam came down, the "how big?" of my room collapsed toward my usual listening spot at about the middle of the room. There was also an unfortunate shrillness added on many recordings.

Just about that time, as I was wondering where to buy some more foam, I was reunited via e-mails with the principal of Acoustic Fields. Back in the middle of 2008, we'd corresponded about subscription rates and he'd asked what I thought about the commercial viability of sonic treatments for recording studios and other pro sound places. So, given my current need, I asked for more information and one thing led to another, with this review as one of the out-comes.

The foam on my listening room is considered "semi-permanent" as my wife and I are in a long, slow downsizing which is what empty-nesters do. I am certain other audiophiles of the Classic Era will empathize. My notion is that the new foam needed to be easy to stick up on a wood ceiling made of pine wood. That was not my wife's notion, and when she saw photos like the lead pic for this review, I realized how far the raw foam was from the "good stuff" Acoustic Fields usually sells. As much as a four or five to one difference in Wife

Acceptance Factor. I had used graphic arts push-pins on the earlier foam; the new foam from Acoustic Fields was rather denser and heavier and, more importantly, too thick for the standard push-pins to work. I wound up using some super-sized push pins, about five times larger, and these worked well.

What I should have done was follow the standard or more-permanent technique which has the foam inside a sort of window frame, with a sonically transparent scrim covering, something like a speaker grille cloth. The

plays a big part, and if you think about it, you'll probably be able to quickly understand why walls and ceilings can "pump" when pushed by even a medium kettle drum "thunk."

You don't have to have your whole listening room covered with foam panels. You do need to put it in the right spots, so that it catches the first reflection. There are some room treatments which are intended to be placed in specific locations out in the listening room. The Acoustic Field's panels are made with a different

What you hear when using foam absorbers, such as these from Acoustic Fields, is MUCH less distortion and MUCH more of the original recording venue.

whole would be attached to wall or ceiling. Both my friend at Acoustic Fields and I thought this would be somewhat too heavy to attach to my listening room ceiling, and since I do not envision a permanent placement of the echo catcher, I chose to go with the large push-pins. At least, the stuff is where it can work.

However, take a look at the photos of the more finished versions from Acoustic Fields. I believe they will achieve the highest "Décor Score" yet recorded, and thus can be placed in all but the toughest rooms in, say, "Architectural Digest." For those locations, one needs to think about having these panels being built into the appropriate part of the walls and ceiling. The panels will be there, but they do not have to be obtrusive.

What I am surprised about, surprised and very pleased, is that the Acoustic Field's foam seems to work over a wider range of relevant frequencies than the older foam did. There seems to be more absorption, too, so that the apparent "hall" being reproduced pushes the listening room wall behind the speakers further away. (Yeah, I know that is strange talk, but that is pretty close to what I hear.) I think, too, that the tones soaked up by the Acoustic Fields' foam are taken up pretty evenly, that is all at about the same rate. There does seem to my ears to be some fall-off of this echo-grabbing at the top and bottom of the audible spectrum. Both of these were characteristics of the previous foam.

This seems to make sense according to the guys I regard as the best technically. Dig around in Michael Dickreiter's "Tonmeister Technology" from Temmer Enterprises (you'll probably have to look for a used copy), Jens Blauert's "Spectral Hearing" from MIT Press, "Recording Studio Design" by Philip Newell from Focal, Don Davis' "Sound System Engineering," and Glen Ballou's Handbook for Sound Engineers: The new Audio Cyclopedia" from Howard W. Sams. These can be heavy, heavy reading, and I remember slogging through Blauert at a best-rate of a page per session. It's worth the effort.

One of the things that surprised me most about listening rooms was that the wall and ceiling materials made SO much difference in the resulting room sound. Frequently, the sound at the main listening position is influenced more by whether the walls are of wood or sheet-rock or glass (as from a window) than by the room's dimensions. How strongly the walls are braced

idea in mind, to catch that initial bounce, and I think this method is easier to live with over the long term and their products easier get placed properly.

Now, I know you may not initially buy into the idea of your room being the main source of distortion in your listening system, but you may wish to look closely at the notion. Maybe 30-40 years ago, there was a guy named Bob Berkowitz at Acoustic Research who had 10 channels of sound amped into the listening room, using suitable delays. It was something like the current 5.1 systems but had a second level of speakers up at ceiling height. Tom Holman's THX system brought multi-channel theater systems into the home listening room, again using delays for the sides and rear. So did SACD and DVD-A. In the middle 1970's, the quadraphonic systems from Columbia and RCA and Denon all tried to get more sound sources into the listening room. In my not-so-humble opinion, the main idea for each of these systems was to overcome the home listening room's inherent distortions. In addition, the multi-channel systems provide the listener's ear-brain computer with directional clues that are hard to "fake" in any other way. If the listening room is getting in the way, by fooling the ear with false sound bounces and wrong frequency information, there is little or no way such distortion can be overcome.

It is simply best to grab it and snuff it with absorbent foam like that Acoustic Fields offers. Check it out. I think it is extremely cost-effective.



The Editor's trial run at putting up the basic foam in his listening room. It failed to achieve a high enough Décor Score.



Mike Driscoll
and Gene Pitts

Phase Technology PC-9.5 Speaker & WL-12 Subwoofer

RIGHT HERE at the top of this review, we TAV writers need to stop and do a proper acknowledgment of how this dual by-line review is being done. Basically, the physical description of the two speaker systems and listening portions are being done by Mike Driscoll, long-time member of the The Audiophile Society, which has membership in New York City, northern New Jersey, and Connecticut. Gene, of course, is the editor and publisher of *The Audiophile Voice*, having purchased it from The Audiophile Society after he left *Audio Magazine* in 1995. Gene will do some of the physical description, but also will write about the history of Phase Technology.

Phase-Tech, as the firm is affectionately known these days, is part of the MSE group, which is located in Overland Park, KS. MSE also includes Induction Dynamics, another speaker maker but which tends to concentrate more on custom installations rather than speakers for standard stereo pair use. This should not be construed to mean the Phase-Tech doesn't do custom install products; it does. In fact, almost all speaker makers these days have to pay attention to that market segment and understand the variations that run from whole house sound to home theater and sometimes wind up in specialty installations such as a state-of-the-art multi-channel surround for movies or a stage system for the rock'n'roll kid in the family. Other firms in the MSE group include Rockustics, Solid/Drive, and SoundTube.

Begun in 1981, Phase-Tech has a long history and is the current incarnation of United Speaker Systems, which was started in 1955 by Bill Hecht who earlier had worked for General Projection in New York installing projectors and sound systems during the early part of the 1950s.

When General Projection went on strike in 1955, Hecht began making loudspeaker systems for home use, incorporating some of his pro-side knowledge. These early speakers were made one at a time and exhibited at local hi-fi shows and sold via a NYC radio and hi-fi dealer. United's ads and literature had a great promotional line – "Theater sound for the home." Indeed, the whole story points at how the knowledge and technique, hard won in the professional area in the years following WW II, were transferring themselves to the consumer side.

One of the most interesting results of this cross-pollination came when Avery Fisher read some glowing reviews of Hecht's speakers and contracted with United to design and build the first loudspeakers to carry a Fisher brand. (Yes, *that* Avery Fisher, the one who lent his name to Fisher Radio and Fisher Hall in Lincoln Center, New York City.) These speakers included the famous Fisher XP-1 bookshelf system which, together with Fisher electronics, established that company in the home audio field. And Hecht, who had been making his own speakers one at a time by hand in his garage, ramped up to 10,000 during the first year of working for Fisher.

During the next decade or so, United Speaker continued primarily as an original equipment maker (o.e.m.), which is to say that they made speaker systems for other firms, though they did design and market systems with their own brand. This gave Bill Hecht the time and financial backing to develop some very important speaker components. Perhaps the most important was the 1967 development of the soft-dome tweeter, for

which he received U.S. Patent #3,328,537, and which became what is probably the single most-used speaker driver.

Not only did Hecht patent the idea and design, United started making them for use in their own systems as well as for use by other firms. The editor has heard one of his predecessors at *Audio Magazine* say that the soft-dome tweeter was one of the most important audio developments of the era after WW II. That may stretch things some, given the importance of solid-state amplification and signal handling, as well as the move from analog records and recording to digital. But one must also consider that the soft-dome tweeter is still in use some 35 years later, in an era where "new and better" seems to come every month.

Bill Hecht has four other important and interesting patents. One is for a woofer voice coil that is self-damping. Another is for a process to manufacture solid, flat-piston drivers. Hecht came up with a way to inject silicone into drivers so that resonances are damped. He got one for a basketless mounting system for woofer/midrange units (non specialists will probably not get that, but it's a good thing). Bill's last patent was for the making the RPF flat-piston drivers. United was the first U.S.-based speaker maker to use expensive, high-performance neodymium magnets in tweeters so that the speakers would have very linear output with very low distortion.

Editor Gene can remember visiting the United/Phase Tech facility which was located about 20 minutes drive from the current TAV offices prior to the firm's move to Florida. One thing in particular that stood out during that period was the manufacture of the soft-dome tweeter. He may have been lucky to see a "trade secret." As Gene remembers it, a two-inch "dot" or circle of loose-weave cloth was clamped around its circumference. Next, a hemi-sphere was shaped in the cloth by pushing up into it from the bottom with a smoothly rounded

NOTES

Phase Technology PC9.5, \$1775.00 each, **Phase Technology WL-12**, \$1775.00 each. Phase Technology, 6400 Youngerman Circle, Jacksonville, FL 32244, Phone: 888-PHASE-TK, Fax: 913-663-9790, replacement parts and service: 913-663-9770; e-mail: sales@phasetech.com.

Associated Equipment

Primaluna Prologue Three preamplifier, Primaluna Prologue Five amplifier, VPI HW 19 jr. turntable, Audioquest AQ5 tonearm, Sumiko Blue Point Special cartridge, Denon DVD 2900 universal disc player, Monitor Audio BR 7 loudspeakers, Discovery 1 2 3 speaker cable, Kimber PBJ interconnects, and assorted acoustic fixes, footers, cones, points, etc. scattered near a shrine to St. Phoebus, patron saint of audiophiles.

dowel. The cloth was next sent to a "spinner" stage where the clamped assembly was turned several times per second while some white substance rather like Elmer's Glue in consistency was slowly drizzled onto the dome, starting at the apex and then down to near the clamp. The "drizzled" domes were sent off for drying or baking, and were later attached to voice coils and the balance of the speaker. Definitely, an "Ah, ha!" moment. While another process mastered by the firm

audio system." The PC-9.5 should be considered as the company's top-of-the-line system and intended for use as the main pair in a stereo or multi-channel surround set-up.

All systems in the Premier Collection use the Phase-Tech soft-dome tweeter, the firm's patented flat-piston RPF drivers and their proprietary Absolute Phase crossover. The intent of the crossover design is to create a deep and balanced soundstage over a very large lis-

The PC-9.5 is the best system in the Phase Technology Premier Collection; the WL-12 sub only makes it better.

wasn't "eligible" for a U.S. patent, United Speaker was one of the first speaker makers in the country to wind its own voice-coils. This can save big money in manufacturing speaker drivers, offers greater precision and accuracy, and running design changes can be implemented more easily.

What Have We Here?

Phase-Tech offers seven systems in its Premier Collection, the firm's high-performance series aimed at the discriminating audiophile. A couple of years ago, Ron Nagle and editor Gene reviewed the PC-1.5 in Vol. 13, No. 4; it's second from the bottom. We thought that at \$495 each, it was "more than merely reasonable" and that it "could be the starting point for a very decent

listening area. Finishes are either a real wood furniture-grade cherry veneer or nine-layer, high-gloss piano black.

We will frequently refer to the speakers under review collectively as the PC-9.5s but you should understand that the Phase Tech WL-12 subwoofer was a main part of the listening system. Good addition, but not essential as the PC-9.5 can stand alone. They are, in short, a wonderful-sounding pair of loudspeakers. The driver complement includes a 1-inch soft-dome tweeter, a 1.5-inch midrange driver, and 6.5-inch RDF solid-piston woofers. The WL-12 subwoofer adds a 12-inch low frequency driver driven by an internal 300-watt, solid-state amplifier. The rated frequency response for the PC-9.5 is 32 Hz to 22 kHz, with the WL-12 sub's response specified as 22 to 200 Hz. The impedance is 4 ohms nominal, and the efficiency is said to be 91 dB.

In general, what you want a subwoofer like this one to do is fill out the bottom end, particularly if you like organ music or BIG thunks on symphonic tympani. And remember those Japanese kodo drummers on that early Sheffield CD, *Heartbeat Drummers of Japan*? To get proper bass response, down deep enough and with a big enough initial PUSH of air on the front edge of a drum whack, you really need a large, well-designed sub, pretty well something like the WL-12. In addition to letting the whole system play louder and lower, the extra driver covering the very low bass takes a lot of distortion out of the mid-range. It is usually a surprise to the novice when he notices that there's less distortion in the middle, and he sometimes thinks he's hearing things. Not so, however, as properly done bass keeps all sorts of distortion from appearing in the output of the other drivers.

When Driscoll set the PC-9.5s up, the first thing he found was that the bottom plate, which must be attached to the speaker with four bolts, was a high gloss black, while the speakers themselves were in a cherry finish. This is an unusual combination, but the guys at Phase Tech say they like the visual contrast. As Driscoll lived with them for awhile, the contrasting finishes kind of grew on him, and he began to like the contrast. The second thing we found is something that seems to happen with far too many high end products lately, an owner's manual that gives the new owner little or no information about the product. No specs, no driver complement, just a wiring diagram explaining how to connect the speakers to the amp.

S p e c s

Notes on the PC-9.5
Tweeter: One-inch, soft dome.
Midrange: 1.5-inch, soft dome.
Woofer: 6.5-inch RPF solid-piston.
Frequency Response: 32 Hz to 22 kHz.
Sensitivity: 91 dB SPL.
Impedance: 4 ohms, nominal.
Inputs: Bi-wireable.
Recommended Amplifier Power: 20 to 250 watts per channel.
Outside Dimensions: 14¾ inches deep by 9 inches deep by 45½ inches tall.
Shipping Weight: 67 lbs. each.

Notes on the WL-12
300-watt average, 900-watt peak power internal amplifier, signal-sensing auto turn on/off, gain control, phase switch, variable crossover, wireless 2.4 GHz uncompressed audio streaming, line/lfe input, ultra long excursion woofers and passive radiators, servo-controlled amplifier, which monitors and adjusts output for dynamic and undistorted response.

That those are our only gripes says a lot about the overall quality and performance of these speakers, product with lots of thinking behind it, thinking done by experienced speaker makers.

Set-Up and Sound

Driscoll bi-wired them to his Primaluna Prologue tube amp (36 watts nominal) and began to listen. The first CD Mike auditioned was *Eric Clapton Unplugged*, and he

enhanced low frequencies greatly. Holst's "The Planets," for example, became a true, large-scale symphonic event in his listening room. The soundstage opened up, and Mike found he, too, was IN the concert hall. All classical music checked also benefited from the sub, but a few rock discs did also. The Cowboy Junkies *Trinity Sessions*, for example, showed a far more realistic sense of the church where the recording took place with the subwoofer than without it. "Way Down Deep"

It is very unusual these days to find a speaker company who actually makes the speakers; it helps!

initially found that the balance between the mids and highs was not really quite right. The speaker didn't sound as if the two were integrated into a whole or into a single singer-guitarist presentation. Fortunately, this was easily solved with these loudspeakers, because the tweeters are mounted so they can be swiveled to aim them in the direction where they sound most integrated with the other drivers into a whole. A little experimentation and all was right with the world. The attack and decay of Eric's guitar was as good as he had ever heard, midrange was crisp and clear as a bell. Bass was there where it should be, with no hint of artifacts or distortions.

Blues music and these speakers were just made for one another. *Muddy Waters Folk Singer* is a good case in point, and of the many great songs on that album, "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl" stands out as sounding as clear and clean as he had ever heard it. (As an aside, if Muddy released that song these days, he would end up on some pedophile list. Great song, anyway.)

These first few trial tracks were auditioned using the PC-9.5s alone, without the sub. Mike wanted to hear the difference when the main system was used both with and without the added bass from the WL-12. What he found, at least initially, was that the 9.5s do quite well on their own for most rock and pop music.

Hooking up the sub gave Driscoll a real surprise. While rock and acoustic music didn't really need it, classical and a few rock discs benefited from the

from Jennifer Warnes' *The Hunter* also benefited from the sub, as that track contains a lot of low-frequency energy.

The final conclusion Driscoll finally came to was that music with lots of low end, as well as music recorded in a live acoustic space and having extended lows, did indeed sound far superior when reproduced using the subwoofer. When he played DVDs through the system, the sub really shone. Any movie, which had explosions, car crashes, or any such mayhem was greatly enhanced by the WL-12 subwoofer.

Summing Up

This, however, is a magazine about audio, not movies, so what was the final score on this speaker system? Well, it did everything most audiophiles would ask of a speaker system, and did it well. If a person's main focus were on studio-recorded rock and pop, the PC-9.5s alone would be all he or she could ask for. If, however, that audiophile listens to a lot of classical music, or jazz, rock, and pop with a lot of low frequency content, then our advice would be to go for the sub. Also, if a system serves a dual purpose, as a music and home theatre system, also go for the sub.

One way or another find a dealer and have a listen to these great loudspeakers. You'll be glad you did. If only for the education of your taste in quality speaker systems.



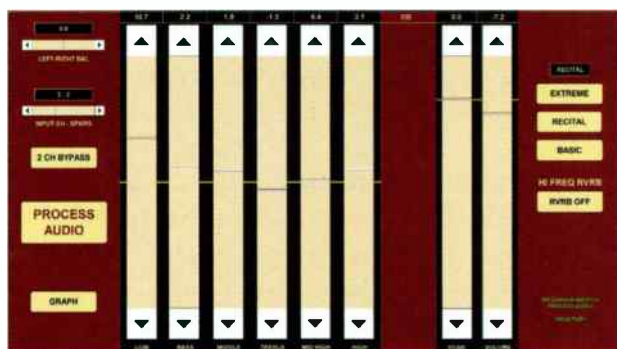
Most all of the speaker parts manufacture and driver assembly is done in house at Phase Technology, an unusual occurrence.



Bill and Ken Hecht, father and son, second generation speaker builders at Phase Technology, about their voice coils.



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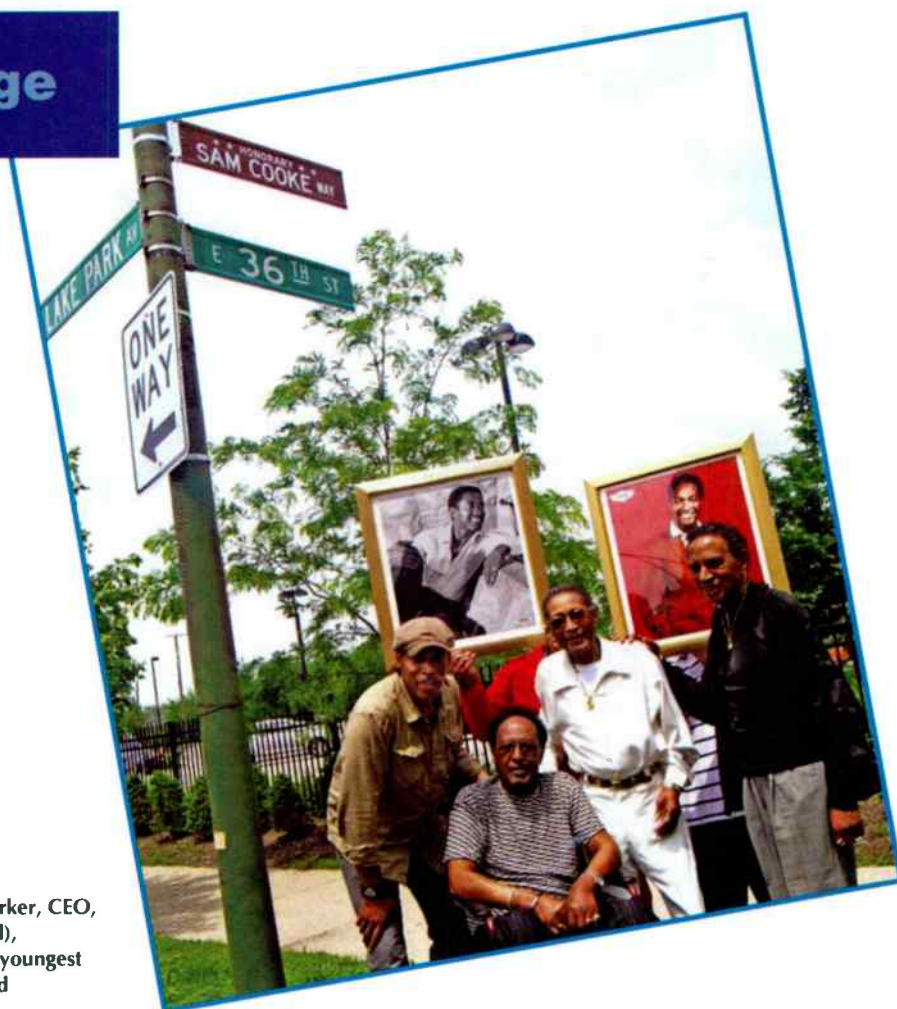


Photo: Stefanie Mielke From left: Gregg Parker, CEO, Chicago Blues Museum; L.C. Cooke (seated), Sam Cooke's brother; David Cooke, Sam's youngest brother, and Jerry Blake, a childhood friend of the Cooke kids growing up.

Photos Never Lie!

Sam Cooke Gets His Way!

Legendary recording artist and Chicago native Sam Cooke was honored last June 18 by having a Chicago street renamed after him. Sam Cooke Way is the new name of 36th Street which is in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood and where the Cooke family settled after migrating from Clarksdale, MS., in the early 1930s. The family had initially resided at 3527 Cottage Grove Ave. before moving to 724 East 36th Street. Had he lived, Cooke would have turned 80 in January 2011.

The unveiling of the new Sam Cooke Way street sign took place with the participation of the office of 4th Ward Alderman Will Burns, 3rd Ward Alderman Pat Dowell, Sam Cooke's younger brothers L.C. and David Cooke as well as other Cooke family members, legendary radio personality and "Mayor of Bronzeville" Herb Kent, Cook County Commissioner Jerry Butler (himself a soul music legend, who proclaimed June 18, 2011 as Sam Cooke Day in conjunction with the street naming ceremony), Chicago Blues Museum CEO Gregg Parker, and well over 400 Sam Cooke fans and fellow musicians.

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coupled with hand-crafted Induction Dynamics speakers, available in any desired finish and with a choice of 63 different grille cloth colors.

This 5.1 to 7.2 surround system begins with the new three-way S1.8Td tower speaker. The S1.8Td uses a high-power 1.125" soft dome tweeter with a high-power 3" soft dome midrange which covers most of the vocal region. Together these two drivers produce an incredibly uniform on- and off-axis frequency response. It also has two 8" Kevlar woofers for up to 400 watts of power handling. The S1.8Td is available as a free-standing tower, and later this year as an on-wall or in-wall. (This speaker is also available in a non-dARTS configuration as the S1.8T.) The center channel is provided by the C1.8d, incorporating the same 8" drivers, 3" soft dome midrange and 1.125" high-power soft dome tweeter.

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