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TAV

The Audiophile Voice

Vol. 15, No. 2; \$5.95 US; \$8.50 Can

Equipment Reviews:

Sony AR-1 Speakers

Bryston BDP-1 File Player

HiFiMan HE-400 Headphones

George Harrison:
Early Takes - Amazing!



Profile:

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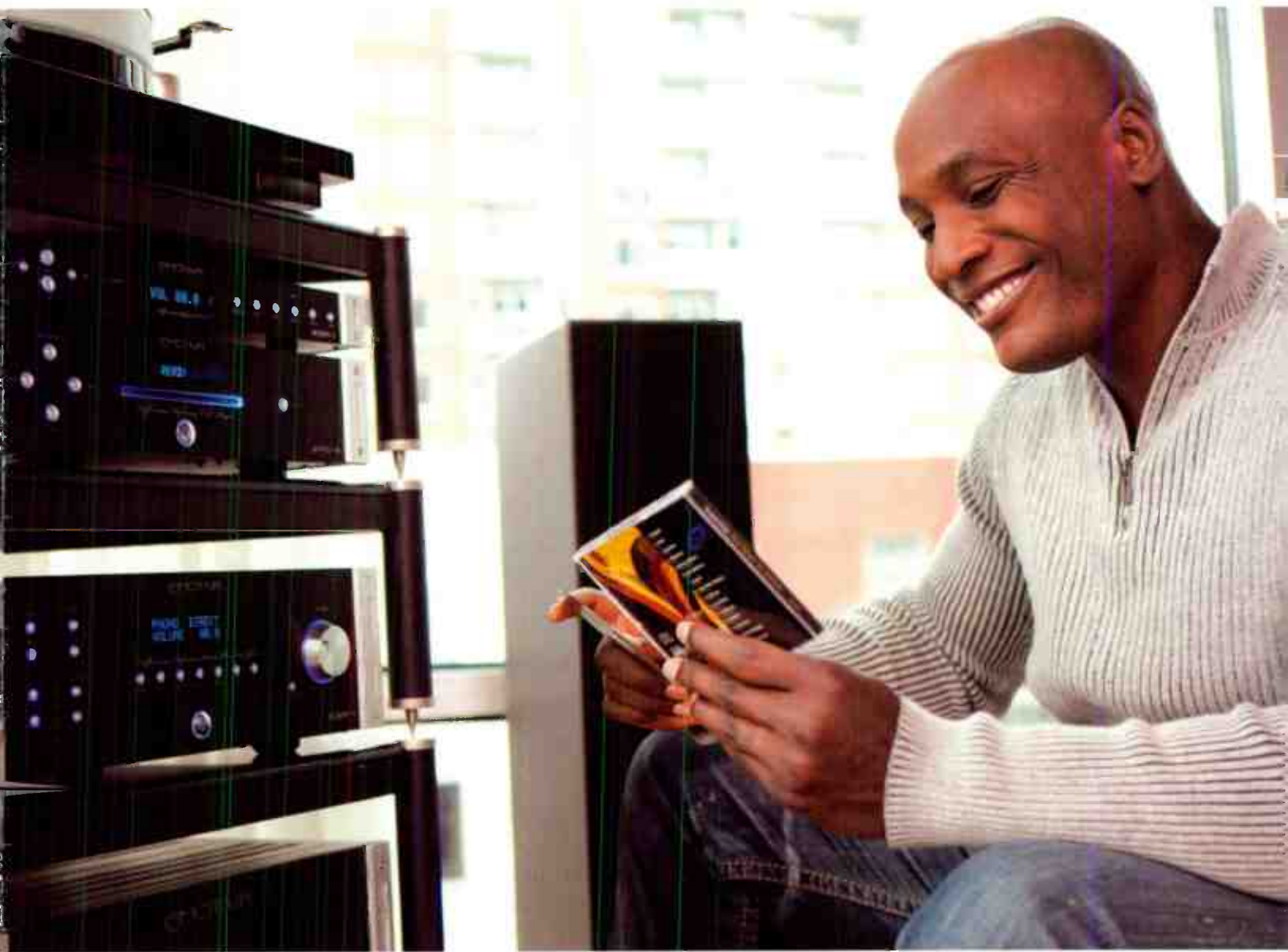
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— Brent Butterworth, Sound + Vision, www.soundandvisionmag.com. February 2011

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Chuck Bruce

WITH OVERALL attendance pegged at 153,000 by show management, CES 2012 was one of the largest business conventions ever despite a lackluster economy in the U.S. It thus appears that there is still some pent-up demand for consumer electronics. As usual, the high-end audio displays were split between the official CES venue, the Venetian Towers, and The Home Entertainment Show run independently at the Flamingo. The overall size of the crowd at these two venues was respectable, though a bit thin on the last day, Sunday, the traditional "go-home" day. I split my time almost equally between the two venues, and heard many pieces of remarkable equipment and music playback over four tiring but interesting days. The exhibitors themselves are much of the reason I attend these shows. The opportunity to meet industry leaders and discuss any topic you like at firsthand is priceless. One minute you might be listening to presentations by such as Ray Kimber or sharing a lunch snack with John Curl, Dr. Roger West or the legendary James Bongiorno all at one table, and then later on, just down the hall you bump into Tomlinson Holman and TAV Editor Gene Pitts chatting away. For audio groupies like me, it just doesn't get any better!

More and more we seeing that much of the music in many rooms was being played via "computer" audio

gear (and files) consisting of laptops, tablets, USB drives, wireless servers and other devices. This is not a fad or future wave, but the here and now. It's not likely long before conventional storefront hard media retailers will only be a memory and internet downloading will be our music store, with mail order as our LP sources.

Standouts for 2012

Both Editor Pitts and I were quite enthralled by the modular three-way Talon Phoenix (from Rives Audio), an all-new system featuring four top-quality ceramic drivers, including one 1-inch tweeter, one 5-inch midrange, and pair of 11-inch woofers in a very pretty black piano-finish tower of advanced design. Richard Rives Bird uses a three-band parametric crossover with sub-PARC technology to tailor bass response to any room. There is a 500-watt dedicated amp for the bass in the active version (\$95k per pair); the \$72k passive version of the Phoenix uses the same crossover technology. Main amps used by Talon at the Show were VAC Statement Series 450S and VAC 15/30 amps with signals from a Dr. Feickert Firebird turntable, which was my favorite one-unit performer of the show. Pat Barber's Modern Cool LP was about as stunningly realistic a jazz vocal presentation as anything I heard at the show. From first-hand experience with a number of brands

over the years, most any loudspeaker that incorporates ceramic drivers, especially a full complement thereof, is nearly always of extremely high sonic merit, whatever the price considerations.

The Reference One and Compact Reference loudspeakers from the TAD division of Pioneer Corp. typically wow Show attendees especially when presented by the knowledgeable and personable director of loudspeaker engineering Andrew Jones. This year signaled the launch of their new Evolution Series E 1 loudspeaker, a mid-scale tower said to offer many of the upper model attributes at a considerably lower price, \$29,800 per pair. Their performance was impressive, dynamic and engaging in a pairing with TAD's new companion Evolution Series electronics, the C2000 preamplifier and the M2500 and M4300 power amplifiers. TAD's current Reference C600 preamp and M600 mono power amps and a companion D600 CD player also had the room rockin' with the Reference One loudspeakers. The Bill Schnee recordings (www.bravurarecords.com) played at TAD were quite engaging and fun.

Peachtree Audio was showcasing their Grand Pre 24/192 DAC / Preamp which comes in one integrated enclosure that was paired with Peachtree's Design 5 mini-loudspeakers. Grand Pre performance was amazing at \$2,999 as it offered about as much satisfaction as anything heard at the show in this price range. Peachtree has become an industry visionary in compact, desktop audio and continues to offer new products ranging from stand-alone DACs to integrated amps and mini-loudspeakers. This year Peachtree's innovation work was centered on their Decco 65, a 65-watt integrated unit using the 24/192 Sabre DACs, with USB and S/PDIF connections. With a set of Design 5 mini-speakers, the price was \$1,600. Performance was highly musical, flexible with a compact footprint with full support of computer audio.

April Music paired Exius S1 compact solid-state amps with Wilson Sasha loudspeakers and the outcome was most engaging, and big smiles were common in this room. This attractive stereo amp with brushed aluminum casework is rated at 125 watts stereo into 8

ohms and 500 watts in mono into 8 ohms via switched bridging. Price is \$2,495. A companion DP-1 preamp that includes an up-sampling DAC is quoted at \$3,000. This compact electronics pairing offered belly-slammng bass to spare using signals from either CD or LP.

The new Dali Epicon 6 from Denmark features 100 per cent in-house designed and manufactured loudspeaker systems featuring linear-drive magnet structures for the drivers. The tweeter is a two-element hybrid design comprised of ribbon and soft dome elements. The pair of six-inch wood-fiber cone woofers is mounted within their own sub-structure in the mid-height floor-standing tower. All in all, the Epicon 6s were first-rate performers presenting dynamic sound-staging with tight, well-controlled bass. This first-rate presentation was, no doubt, aided by the use of Primare electronics, also of Scandinavia manufacture. Overall, it was a most pleasurable, memorable listening experience.

Sweden's Marten introduced their Django, a tower loudspeaker featuring a ceramic 1-inch tweeter and a ceramic 6-inch midrange driver. The lower frequencies are covered by three 8-inch Seas aluminum-composite bass drivers. Marten was also showcasing their new and powerful Class-D solid-state mono power amps, each offering 500 watts into 8 ohms or 1000 watts into 4 ohms; price was quoted as \$40,000 per pair. The Django offers earth-shaking bass with upper register refinement from the hyper-fast ceramic drivers for a sound that almost belies its \$15,000 cost per pair. In an alternate room, I especially liked Django performance with the EAR equipment, 912 Pre, Acute-III 24/192 up-sampling CD player, and 890 70-watt stereo power amp. Famed EAR designer Tim de Paravicini was on hand from England to give away his design secrets (no, just kidding) but Tim's really fun to be around, as he freely offers many audio and historical insights.

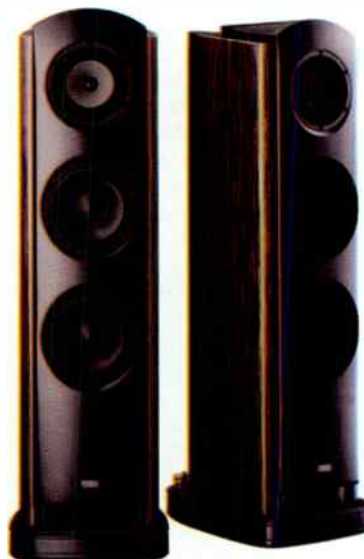
Vandersteen Audio launched their time-coherent Tréo, a four-driver tower loudspeaker priced at \$5,995. The system incorporates an 8-inch, flat cone, acoustic-coupled subwoofer with an operating range of 32 to 80 Hz and a one-inch dual-chamber, ceramic-coated alloy

dome tweeter. Based on what I heard, it's a winner, offering much of the firm's upper tier performance, classy design, a modest footprint, and a competitive price.

Another room where LP was spinning in full glory was with Zesto Audio where the principals were showcasing their hand-crafted Andros PS-1 phono preamp, along with Lindemann electronics from Germany, TAD Compact Reference loudspeakers, an AVID turntable with Dynavector XV-1S MC cartridge and WyWires cabling. This was a "stick around and enjoy" presentation, indeed quite rewarding.



Talon Phoenix from Rives Audio.



TAD Evolution E-1.

3-D Sound @ CES

Gene Pitts

THERE IS ALWAYS too much to see and do at the Consumer Electronics Shows, so an editor who has been around for too many decades (like me) has to learn to pick and choose which presentations and displays are truly “must-see” for the sake of his publication, for his readers, and his legs. While the average audio buff might think we Head Honchos would get to go to our pick of the conferences and rooms, more nearly we have to go to everything. If some brand-new start-up firm invites “someone from the magazine,” we’re elected. If the magazine has a staff of, say, five writers at a CES, then four of them will have been assigned particular stories on definite beats, and the Chief Editor has to do the running to “unscheduled events” and do the “glad-handing.”

Once in a while, a CES will have a group of new or unusually interesting displays, and I lucked out at this past CES, for there were three presentations of new technology for three-dimensional sound. The reason I say “lucked out” is that I really like listening to such systems, trying to figure out how they do what they do on ear-evidence alone, and trying to ask the presenters tough questions about patents and circuitry. Here, I have to tip my cap to Bob Berkowitz, an excellent scientist and researcher who was working at Acoustic Research when he demonstrated what I recall was a 10-channel system to me. Certainly tamed that room! I was recently greatly saddened to learn Bob had gone to that Great Listening Room in the Sky.

One of the “nu-tech” firms this year, Sonic Emotion, was on the floor of the Las Vegas Convention Center’s South Hall, and I did get a good amount of time to listen to their Absolute 3D consumer application, which they call Headquake, an app for enhancement of an iTunes library. It was demonstrated via speakers, maybe a soundbar, and I have to say that there was so MUCH background noise from the crowds and displays, I do not fully trust my judgments of this presentation. While my physical listening area was fairly small, because of where the speakers were located, I believe it can be scaled up easily. It definitely sounded MUCH larger. The demo was all music and of the “switched-in, switched-out” style and I found that its main features were pretty easy to spot. The sound field moved toward me and around my sides when engaged, but it did not get around to the back. Part of the field came up over my head, pretty well straight up, though again not to the

back. Instead of the listening space being “over there and having such and so characteristics,” I felt as if I were right at the edge of the space, which was definitely trying to “capture me.” It was as if I had stuck my head into a window or door of a room where music was being played. There was no sweet spot either, so I could move around, side to side. Sonic Emotion says features of Headquake include 3D sound, ambience and position transitions, player integration and personalization of headphones. The most appropriate applications beyond music seem to me to be computer games or music from smallish bookshelf-type speaker systems. I can see it for movies where the plot or visual lines need to present space in a certain way; Headquake would help that. The firm is offering its Headquake 3D app for 99 cents through iTunes.

Another Nu-Tech firm at CES 2012 and one I’ve known of for about 30 years is SRS Labs; I “commissioned” an interview of the founder/developer Art Klaiman by *Audio Magazine* staff editor/writer Len Feldman back when as I wanted to get Klaiman to tell my magazine’s readership what research and which scientists had inspired him. In the end, we published a bibliography that took up a full page. Some of the articles and books were so esoteric that they could no longer be found; others were already in my office book shelves. As I recall, Klaiman was working for Hughes Aircraft as a consultant, and what they came out with was a stand-alone Sound Retrieval System (SRS) processor. Their by-appointment-only presentation at CES 2012 was a fairly big deal, at a suite in the Trump, with lots of people performing narrow but important tasks. The new SDS Multi-Dimensional Audio (MDA) platform and specification was demonstrated on three basic systems, which is to say they had one system using a dozen speakers equally distributed in space in front and in back of the listening position. That was the most successful demo. Next they turned off the “back half” of the speaker array, and while the imaging and positioning did collapse forward, it was still pretty good. Images were out beside me and above me, as well as scattered all about the front hemisphere. Lastly, SRS had the system do a two-speaker, two-channel demo, which frankly was disappointing relative to the other two; I have gotten better from my home video system using a music-oriented Blu-Ray disc. Their eye-grabber was a sort of animation of wolves chasing a young guy into a cabin; the ear-

grabber was the wolves' howls moving around at odd angles. The just-in-front demo didn't work for me. Most of my localization of sources had to do with speakers being in a specific location. Their ideas for marketing can be intuited from the following quotes from their pre-show press release: "*Multi-Dimensional Audio (MDA)*, developed by SRS Labs, is a revolutionary end-to-end audio platform, built on a foundation of object-based audio, designed to deliver true three-dimensional surround sound to consumers in a wide variety of playback environments and devices... *MDA Creator* is a software plug-in designed to work seamlessly within all commonly used digital audio workstation (DAW) environments including Pro Tools, Digital Performer, Logic, Cubase and Nuendo. MDA allows content creators to create, maintain and deliver three-dimensional positional data with soundtrack elements in a multi-dimensional audio space that includes height, depth and width, rather than standard planar (2D) speaker configurations such as 5.1 and 7.1. Since MDA is not channel based, there is no restriction or mandate on the number of speakers that can be used to represent the resolution of a multi-dimensional audio soundscape. Yet, MDA program playback easily maps to any number of speakers in any configuration a listener may have, from stereo, to 11.1 and beyond."

Technically, the presentation most interesting to me was in a private suite at the Venetian Towers, and I was fortunate enough to be given more than my share of time, solo, by the company brass from GenAudio, Jerry Mahabub, Chairman & CEO, and Matt Martin, Sr. Audio Engineer. Their patent (US2010/0246831 A1) talks about using "Head-Related Transfer Functions" to move the localization of sounds; this is the sort of thing that Bob Carver talked about when he was presenting his Sonic Holography. Carver basically used two speakers, as I recall, and there was a "head in a vice" requirement for good sound localization. It was pretty well the same idea set with the Sennheiser dummy head for three-dimensional recordings.

While the GenAudio system was demo-ed on as few as two speakers, I also heard it from a soundbar and what was described as a full-scale home audio system. This last was both the best sounding and the best performing. Seated on a sofa, about 10-12 feet from the soundbar (just below where the TV screen would be), the full-scale system was not visible to me. Initially to me, in the GenAudio presentation, it seemed like the movement of the specific "sonics of interest" (SOI) or imaging centers was because of coordinated loudness changes between two speakers. Which is to say, it seemed like a balance control was being used. Then the images or SOI moved from the front corner, down the side walls at the level of my head. When they were beside me, at head height, they moved up the side walls, so that they were at ceiling height and still beside me. They then moved to the front wall. It seemed that any path along the side walls could be followed and any angle desired could be chosen. In addition, the patent talks about Doppler simulation and changing the apparent size of the image. I also believe that some manipulation of phase was being done. Startling but very natural. While I can see immediate use in the movie industry, I would think that new music with new notions about space would be needed for best use of the GenAudio system for iTunes or CD.



The Sonic Emotion booth, with lots of headphone demo stations, was on the main floor of the Convention Center.



The Multi-Dimensional Audio platform from SRS allows movement to the rear of the audience.



GenAudio's Jerry Mahabub at the controls, with Matt Martin looking on.. I apologize to Matt for my sloppy camera work.



PROFILE

Ramblin' Jack Elliott

The Last Singing Cowboy Lays Out his Legacy

Don Wilcock

"I GOT THIS ROLODEX in my brain. It takes about an hour to go around," says Ramblin' Jack Elliott who at 81 (on August 1, 2012) has to be the most ubiquitous folksinger alive. Woody Guthrie taught him and he taught Dylan, calling him his son from the stage when he performed Dylan songs in the '70s. He spins stories about everyone from Jack Kerouac to Mick Jagger, Lead Belly to Tom Waits. If he can get through his Rolodex in an hour, those cards must be spinning off the roll.

"I never have sung a lullaby," says this grandfather of two. "My songs are mainly for waking up although I have put some people to sleep with my story telling."

"Jack as a historian himself is probably the most unlikely and outrageous link between what went down and what's going down," wrote Woody Guthrie's son Arlo in the liner notes of Elliott's 1970 album *Bull Durham Sacks & Railroad Tracks*. He's one of the last professional Ramblers. That is why Ramblin' is Jack's first name. But Jack's ramblin' is by no means confined to geography. He has been more places and seen more people doing more unbelievable things than any 10 men I know."

Today, after a hip replacement and heart surgery, he still tours the world and releases albums like *A Stranger Here*, his 2009 Anti-CD with covers of Depression-era blues anthems like "Death Don't Have No Mercy" and "Soul of a Man."

"I can't remember anything about 'the folk scene,'" He claims. "I hardly remember that there was a 'scene' other than Sunday afternoons playing in the park, hanging out with one or two friends of mine that played music."

Woody Guthrie is today considered the Godfather of folk. Guthrie became ill with Huntington's Disease when his son Arlo was still a child, and Arlo learned

many of his dad's songs – and his story telling – from Ramblin' Jack. "We all have the capacity to become nobody, but very few of us have the ability to be everybody or anybody," Arlo wrote. "Jack not only has the ability, but the stubborn will to live the lives of all men, and he's picked some good men to live."

Ramblin' Jack was born Elliot Charles Adnopoz on August 1, 1931. His father was a Brooklyn surgeon who expected his son to follow in his footsteps. Instead Jack ran away to join a rodeo when he was 15. "I didn't like the smell of ether, I didn't like the sound of babies crying, I didn't like anything at all about being a doctor."

Jack never bothered to tell his parents where he'd gone. "Well, they found me. I'd been gone for three months and hadn't even notified them that I was alive which is pretty stupid, but I guess I was a teenager. I guess for the first 50 years of my life, I denied ever having been a teenager. Ha, ha. I didn't have pimples, but that was a dumb thing, to cause so much worry and grief for my parents. They thought I might be dead. They were terribly worried about it, and they were sure glad to find out I was alive, and they came and visited the ranch where I was working up in Waverly, New York, The J.E. Ranch."

Elliott's dad offered to take his son back if he'd finish high school. "This clown took me aside and gave me a cigar. My first cigar was a King Edward. That was about a 25 cent cigar, and he said, 'You know you can stay here and be a cowboy, and you might make a pretty good hand, and you might like it, but if you go back to high school to get your diploma, you can do anything in the world you wanna do including cowboying. Get your diploma first.' And I thought, 'Yeah.' I wrote my parents a letter and told 'em I was gonna come home. So they put me on a bus to New York City, and I went



back and finished up high school and started playing guitar."

I had always assumed Elliott got his nickname as much for his troubadouring as his for his story telling. We certainly did ramble in our interview. Talking to him is like peeling away the layers of an onion. The deeper you go, the more layers are revealed, and the conversation trails off in unpredictable directions.

One of those loose string anecdotes about his relationship with blues guitarist Roy Rogers led to a story

car.' You couldn't hear the brakes coming at you like you can when you're outside a freight train.

"You know, when they hit the brakes on a freight train, if you're not in the train, you're out on the ground somewhere, you hear the brakes from one car to the next go (makes a rumbling noise) down the train as the air goes from one car to the next. But in the car you couldn't hear it coming because the noise of the wheels is so loud."

Another surprising revelation is that in spite of almost 50 albums recorded, Elliott claims to have only written four songs in his life.

"Yeah, I have a terrible mental block about sitting down, picking up a pencil and writing. It bothers me greatly. I'm always buying ink and pencils and pens and notebooks and sketch pads and stuff. I can draw. I draw freely on any napkin or placemat that's in front of me. I feel a tremendous gnawing kind of lack of my inability to get going on a project of writing.

"It bothers me, and I think I've always had it ever since I was 10 years old when I had a sort of self-image, dreamlike image of myself later in life, the picture of the author sitting at the typewriter like Ernest Hemmingway. I didn't have a beard, and I was wearing a tweed jacket, and I had a pipe in my mouth, and I was I typing away at the typewriter."

In a life filled with iconic moments that range from winning Presidential Medal of Arts from President

Ramblin' Jack Elliott is just one of those amazing guys who really did know everyone and do everything.

about a Bonnie and Clyde film he was in that never got released and on to the revelation that this ramblin' man has only ridden the rails once in his life. "And I was pretty scared when I rode the boxcar. There wasn't anybody else around. I was riding through Arkansas, but if I've always had a romantic idea about ridin' freights, that one boxcar ride cured me of that. Never wanted to ride a freight train again.

"The brakes were ferociously scary. Whenever they'd hit the brakes, I was on a suitcase and sort of riding – straddling the suitcase instead of riding on the floor, but I thought, 'Gee, if that engineer hit those brakes a little harder, I'm gonna go right through the end of the box-

Clinton to performing with the Rolling Stones and the Grateful Dead, Elliott's pivotal moment in terms of its impact on American musical history would have to be the day after he returned from Europe in 1961 and went to visit Woody Guthrie in the hospital and was introduced to Bob Dylan.

"I didn't see any bed in the room where Woody was. He was standing up and walking around when he was in that horrible place in Jersey, but there was this very quiet young fellow there named Bob Dylan who wore a funny little cap, kind of a black corduroy cap and kind of a fuzzy tan jacket with a fur collar, and it was a November afternoon.

I don't know exactly what date it was, but it was one day after I got off a ship from England, and Bob was real keen. Our visit after about an hour with Woody had gotten to be pretty exhausting to try and carry on a conversation because he couldn't speak clearly owing to his disease. You had to ask him to repeat everything he said, and that's hard work.

"So after visiting Woody for about an hour, Bob suggested we go over to visit the family named Gleason who I had been communicating with by mail. Mostly my wife handled the correspondence, and they were writing to us back and forth and telling us news about how Woody was and how all these friends who lived in the City would go out there on Sunday to visit Woody at their home in East Orange, New Jersey, the Gleasons, Bob and Sue Gleason.

Photo: John Cohen



"So, he took me over to their house to meet them briefly and then we rode into Manhattan on another bus. But I was a little surprised that the Gleasons had never mentioned Bob Dylan to me at all. I guess they probably were afraid that it might be a worry for me to think somebody was hanging out with Woody so intensely. They didn't think it was a good idea to even mention it. Ha, ha.

"I was pretty amused and delighted to meet this kid. He was a very interesting young man. He told me that he had all of my English recordings, and he named all of them off and said which of the songs he liked the best and all that. Of course, he didn't tell me he'd stolen them."

Elliott has a quality shared with a select few who are so iconic and comfortable in that role that they find no need to sing their own praises. They talk to you about experiences with other pivotal artists who have shaped musical history in a manner so casual that you almost forget that you're not deciding with them whether to buy bananas or strawberries at the grocery store.

"Once you win a Grammy," he says, "I don't think about winning another one although I won two Grammys, and I know there are people who have won numerous times. It's such an unusual thing. I don't think of it as being anything real or a part of my life or anything like I'm a Grammy winner, and I'm gonna go and try and win another one. It's a lot of fun going to the Grammys. I've been five times now, and I don't think I would miss it if I didn't get to go again. It's gotten to be – it's like a clothes parade."

And then he says something that reminds you that no matter how high in the echelon you may go, there's always somebody above you. He recalls the time in



1998 when he was awarded the National Medal of Arts from President Clinton.


"There I was and took a picture smiling, and I thought, 'Well, there's Bill and Hillary and me.' Sat down, and the next person to receive the award was Frank Gehry, the architect who turned out to be an old buddy of a pal of mine in California. So we had stuff to chat about. We were getting chummy, and after us some guy, I can't remember who it was, received the award, and he gave Hillary a peck on the cheek when they were photographing after winning the award.


"So that set a precedent, and then the next person and the next person all gave Hillary a peck on the cheek. So I feel this hit on my elbow. Frank had reached over and hit me on the elbow and said, 'We didn't get to kiss her.' (I said to him,) 'Don't worry about it, Frank. We'll do it next time.'

"As if there was gonna be a next time."

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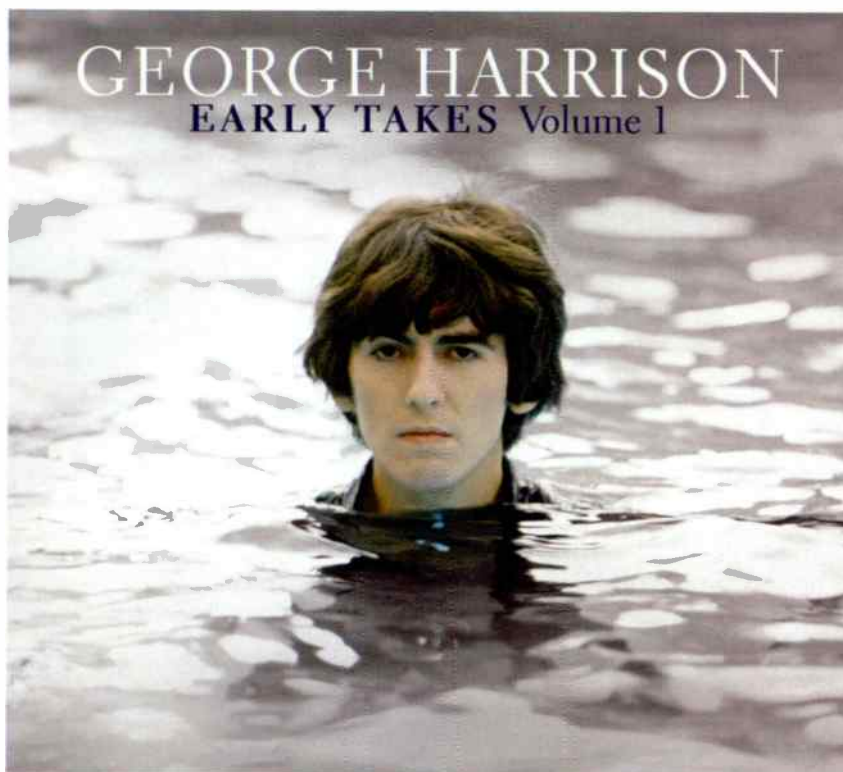
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Jon Tiven

Rock

George Harrison Early Takes, Vol. 1
Universal UMe 799042

WOULDn'T IT BE WONDERFUL if the next step in musical technology was that instead of just having access to a mixed recording, we would get individual tracks that we could tinker with in our homes so we could create a sonic picture of our own choosing? If you have a Protools setup and some friends with good connections, that is not entirely impossible these days, but for most records we are saddled with one mix only, the one the record company gives us.

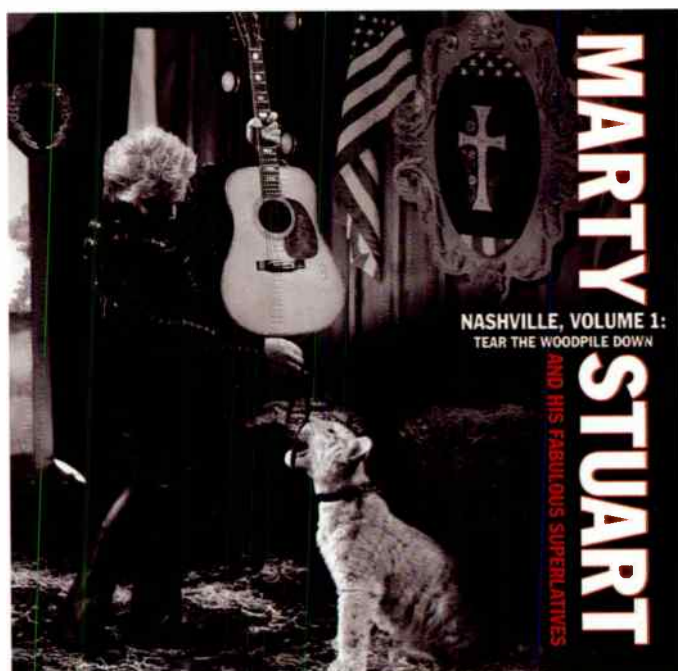
However, these days the biggest artists with the most ardent fan bases find their music remixed, stripped down, and the tracks which were left on the cutting room floor now have great value. As The Beatles are top of that list, the individual members' solo works are often now remixed for re-release to new audiences. Since George Harrison's classic *All Things Must Pass* is one of his best sellers, it is no surprise to find it reconfigured. Originally a record that sailed to the top of the charts courtesy of producer Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, this current incarnation of the record finds the massive overdubs, string/horn sections, and gigantic choruses done away with entirely. The record is now as humble as George himself, and the result is a very appealing and sweet musical treat that doesn't serve to replace the original so much as reveal that beneath all those Big Deal arrangements were a series of very strong songs sung and played with all of George's heart.

"Awaiting On You All" is a quiet revelation, the groove on this early take is much simpler, and you

don't have to strain to hear him sing "The Pope owns 51 percent of General Motors/And the stock exchange is the only thing he's qualified to quote us." This was a quite shocking lyric in its day, but nobody really heard it through the castanets, horns, and zillions of musicians/singers blowing. Early demos of "My Sweet Lord," "Behind That Locked Door," "The Light That Has Lighted the World," and "All Things Must Pass" have a nice charm to them as well, although I don't expect that anyone will prefer these to the official versions. There are early takes of "I'd Have You Anytime" and "Woman, Don't You Cry For Me," very listenable and not as sonically overwhelming as the originals.

The real prizes on the album as far as I'm concerned are versions of Bob Dylan's "Mama, You Been On My Mind" and the Everly's "Let It Be Me" that have never made official release before, and although neither could be called polished, they are beautiful in their imperfection.

You may look upon George Harrison as just a guitarist/singer in a pop group, and the vast majority of pop/rock music fans do not consider him the most "important" member. But his musical contributions, both as a Beatles and as Solo George, were every bit as soul-stirring as what his partners came up with, and this little gem (even if it was only meant as an accompanying soundtrack to a DVD documentary about him) furthers the argument that there were no "lesser" Beatles.



THIS ALBUM KIND of notes that it's the 40th anniversary of Marty Stuart first arriving in Nashville on a Greyhound from Philadelphia, Mississippi. He was not yet 14 when Roland White invited him up. Yet with White's aid, Marty almost immediately secured a job in Lester Flatt's band and held it until the band dissolved in 1978 as Lester's health was failing.

In the early '80s, Stuart landed in Johnny Cash's band for a five-year stint, and he married Johnny's daughter to boot. In the early '90s, beginning with "Hillbilly Rock," he had a great string of hits, playing a hard version of country laced with honky tonk, rockabilly and rock & roll. With this album, Marty has circled back to that thrilling brew which still is just as renegade as when he first did it. Hell, the 20-year-old "Hillbilly Rock" would nestle among this set's songs easily and comfortably.

Marty Stuart is nothing if not brash, and when he is on his game, he makes some of the most fun, most irresistible sounds coming out of Nashville. Suffice to say, he is solidly on top of it here.

Nashville, Volume 1 is short, not quite 32 minutes, but it is power packed end to end. The Fabulous Superlatives band includes guitarist Kenny Vaughan, drummer Harry Stinson, and bassist/keyboardist Paul Martin. Guests include guitarists Gary Carter and Robby Turner, fiddlers Kenny Lovelace and Hank Singer, plus Buck Trent on electric banjo.

They burst out of the gate with "Tear The Woodpile Down," the first of six Stuart original songs here and an in-your-face shot of pure country at its best. David Warwick's "Sundown in Nashville" seems to invoke the Nashville that 14-year-old Marty found when he stepped off the bus Stuart describes in his liner notes. It's a honky tonk, rocking waltz about how "they sweep broken hearts off the street." "A Matter of Time," a deli-

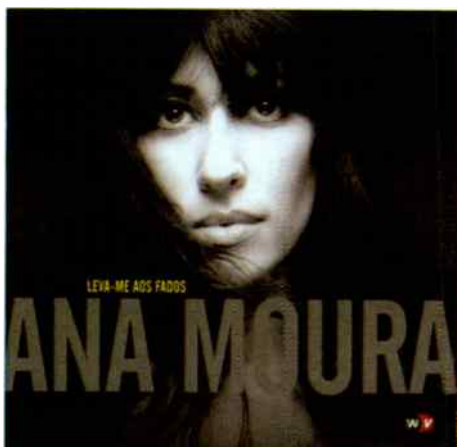
cious slow one, is a caution about an unfaithful woman, a classic C&W theme. "Hollywood Boogie" is an open-throttle instrumental that gives Marty and his Superlatives a showcase to rip on.

Jerry Chesnut's "Holding On to Nothing" and Marty's "Truck Driver's Blues," "Going, Going, Gone," and "The Lonely Kind" all have the sound and feel of vintage country songs which could have come from a long time back. However, they are fresh, new things played with verve and utter commitment.

The final two are essentially tributes to keystones of the country world. Marty duets on "A Song of Sadness" with Lorrie Carter Bennett who, as daughter of Anita Carter and granddaughter of Mother Maybelle Carter, is in the third generation of one of country's founding families. While it is played as hard country, it's a song the original Carter Family could have sung in the 1930s. Hank Williams' grim "Picture of Life's Other Side" closes the show as Marty duets with Hank III, Hank Williams' grandson. It's a gentle finale for an otherwise all-out set, but it is truly fitting as it invokes country's acoustic origins as well as the thread of gospel that has never been very far from the surface.

Yes, the album rushes by. Its 32 minutes are gone in a flash, but *Nashville, Volume 1: Tear The Woodpile Down* is an album I've been comfy with playing over and over, so far not tiring of it. Marty Stuart is a terrific performer, a charismatic singer and an excellent musician, really fleet on guitar and mandolin as well as a fine writer of true country songs.

Production and sound are sure and solid. I think this is his 17th album, and it is one of his best. If you love your country music true and bracing, the kind of stuff they hardly ever make anymore, you're gonna love Marty Stuart's *Nashville, Volume 1: Tear The Woodpile Down*. It is the real thing.



Ana Moura Leva-me aos Fados
World Village 468099

Alfred Fredel

IMAGINE A SMOKY café where the spirits flow freely and are served with a side dish of melancholy. Yes, we are in Portugal at a place where *fado*, the Portuguese equivalent of the American blues, explores the same universal themes as lost love, separation, and longing. If you ever venture to that country, you will find this music being performed to adoring fans.

One of these fans was "looking for the real deal" in Lisbon and was taken to where Ana Moura was performing that evening. This fan happened to be one of rock and roll's elder statesmen, his Royal Highness Sir Mick Jagger. Enthralled by the passion and emotion that are part of this musical form, Jagger was captivated by Moura's performance and asked to meet this young lady. He soon invited her to dinner and to the Rolling Stones concert, but little did she know that Sir Mick actually had intended for her to be part of the show in front of 30,000 Portuguese Rolling Stones fans. Sounds like a fantasy or a script for a movie? It sure does, but it actually happened to this popular *fadista*.

Ana Moura has not always been an inside member of the *fado* clan. With her supple and sensuous contralto voice, she started off as a rock singer, but the sound of *fado* kept calling her back to her native Portugal. Listening to *fado* while growing up, it had always been calling to her subconscious until she at last decided to make it hers. Her way of getting inside the music was by devoting herself to the idiom but making or including a few up-dates and language or attitude changes consistent with the current times.

Her new album, *Leva-me aos Fados*, is a reflection of the great pull that *fado* has had on her life and psyche. The CD includes some modernized interpretations that make her *fado* performances more relevant to today's world. She states that the lyrics of yesterday are beautiful, but sometimes they are outdated and she is unable to react to them. "Back in those days, women were more submissive. Now we are not; we're independent. We have our jobs and freedom. In manners of the heart, we face our feelings in different ways and the way we

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tell our stories is different.” Elegantly and tastefully executed, this recording is a significant addition to the growing catalog of artists reawakening and reworking Portugal’s melancholy brew.

Moura was discovered by legendary Portuguese singer Maria de Fe who fell in love with her voice and invited her to sing at her club, *Sr. Vinho Fado*. There, Moura was noticed by musician and composer Jorge Fernando, one of the biggest names associated with Amália Rodrigues. Moura and Fernando have developed a musical relationship that has been unique and fundamental to Ana’s rise in the fado world. She has recorded four albums starting with *Guarda-ma a vida na mão* in February, 2005; *Aconteceu* in October, 2006; *Para Além da Saudade* in November, 2007, and now continues her relationship with Fernando on *Leva-me aos Fados*, her fourth recording.

The traditional sound at the core of this album is unmistakable, and much credit must go to Fernando for many of the arrangements. In addition, he deserves credit for the fantastic trio that accompanies her which includes Custódio Castelo, Portuguese guitar; Jorge Fernando, guitar, and Filipe Larsen on bass guitar; Moura has created a work that is both balanced and innovative.

On the title track, Moura presents a very straightforward story about mistakes, misery and a love lost. Her only request after all this is that she be taken to a *fado* house where she can be comforted and lose herself. The delivery of this Fernando song is on point and filled with emotion that any listener can relate to, even without a bit of knowledge of the Portuguese language. Her vocal phrasing in the refrain clearly echoes with great effect the longing that is so much a part of these lyrics.

This song is simple, passionate and elegant, a good way to start off this very organic recording.

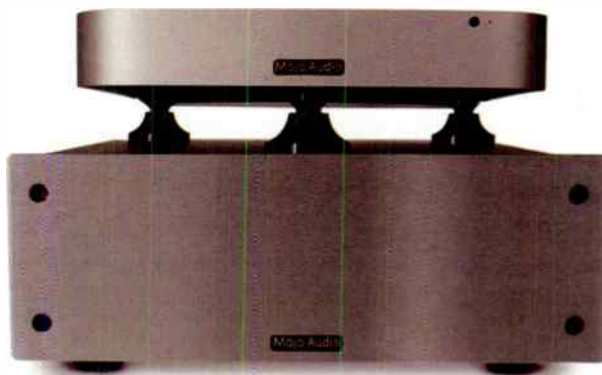
The traditional song “*Critica da razão pura*” (Critique of Pure Reason) is a criticism on how we try to understand everything and do not allow things to just happen. In Moura’s hands, it becomes a potent argument against overanalyzing a relationship; it is also expertly complemented by Fernando and the other musicians. The guitar and *guitarra portuguesa* work is impeccable, with each run accenting Moura’s powerful phrasing and sound that can instantly beguile any listener with her deep and sensuous voice.

Finally, the piece on this recording that most grabbed me and would not let go is “*Que dizer de nós*” (What to say about us), a gut-wrenching lament about a relationship falling apart. There is such sadness and pain in Moura’s voice that it is hard to believe anyone could not be profoundly affected by this four-minute ballad that consists of beautiful yet painful torture. Castelo’s solo on the *guitarra* on this track is played with pure emotion, echoing Moura’s phrasing almost as a response to her anguish over the impending loss of the relationship. This song, penned by Fernando and Moura, clearly goes beyond the typical melancholy of *fado* to a much deeper place.

I really enjoy this recording and to my ears it is among the cream of the offerings by the new generation of fadistas. This album has the feel of the old and the classic but offers a few surprises. It does not astonish me that Ana Moura has been embraced by the older generation of fado musicians. She definitely has this music in her soul, and as is said about the best blues singers here in America, she was born to sing *fado*. Take a listen to *Leva-me aos Fados* by Ana Moura ... you’ll be glad you did.

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Audioengine P4 Speaker and N22 Amplifier

David Nemzer



GUILTY AS CHARGED! Yes, I have committed the cardinal sin of reviewing. In fact, I have broken the first commandment of reviewing. I have sat on a review for the longest time in my life. I have ducked the sort-of-patient editor for longer than I care to admit. AND, not because of the product we are writing up, the Audioengine P4 Speaker and the accompanying N22 Desktop Amplifier.

But first my defense. This has been a difficult audio year for many reasons. First, my main or basic system kept failing, and I was constantly borrowing equipment while mine was being repaired. That meant I had to often listen to solid-state gear. I was not happy on both accounts. I'm still a vinyl and CD guy, and the reproduction by solid-state equipment, especially playing vinyl, is for me lacking in many areas, stage, ambience, air, etc. I listen to no rock music except when people bring it to meetings of the audio society I help run. The rock I do listen to is age-appropriate, which for me means from the '60s, some from the '70s and little else.

The second reason is the coming of age of digital downloads and server listening. Don't get me wrong and don't accuse me of being a Luddite. I think Chesky's HDtracks are usually terrific. I think servers and those that are computer-focused for their music are the next wave, but this is just not my ocean. Almost every person I know who down-

loads NEVER talks about the music and usually listens to totally unrelated cuts, and never to whole albums. They spend more time talking about storage numbers and hard drives or flash memory and "look at the pictures" but never discuss the music!

For my high-end tastes, computer audio is not hands-on audio. I realize that this is an age-focused argument but listening to music through speakers in a room, sometimes with other people, is what it's about. The self-isolation of the computer/internet/iPod generation may be good for part of the industry but not it is not audio in the true sense. So what's a reviewer, an older reviewer to do to help?

For me, the best place to look is a great company with their head in the right place to re-energize young, and not so young, listeners. Which brings us to this company and its under-celebrated products.

Audioengine has been around for about a half dozen years and I believe they have set their sights on an approach that will get people back to real listening. One of their first products was their Audioengine 2, a very small, self-powered speaker system built to a quality level that few believed could sell for a mere \$199.00. It was a great product that I and others reviewed in past years. Then came the larger Audioengine 5, priced at \$349.00 and offering quality to match many products costing much more, very much more. Riding this wave, the com-

pany continues to produce products catering to not only the traditional speaker listener but to the iPod set as well.

This past year they developed a passive version of the 5 and came out with the Audioengine P4, pricing it at \$249.00, and to power the P4, they now have a desktop, class AB amp, the N22, at \$199.00. Now, because of these rather low prices, it's probable that the last thing you would expect is high quality sound, with the punch and detail this combination produces. The speakers have Kevlar mid/woofers and silk dome tweeters, and the system reproduces all kinds of music very well. The highs will not cut out your ear drums and the woofers will give you remarkable bass, both fast and tight. Vocals are excellent, natural, and very size correct. Rob Wasserman's *Duets* (on vinyl) has an assortment of excellent vocals by well-known performers, ones highly regarded by audiophiles. The perspectives produced by the P4s are excellent. Be considerate about level when playing Mahler and you'll have a system that is perfect for good listening. No, don't push them past what they were designed to do and you will be more than satisfied and even surprised at what they reproduce. By the way, another golden rule of listening to any speaker is DON'T EVER exceed their limits or the limits of your room. Doing so will falsely label a product with faults they do not deserve. Pay little attention to the claimed limits of speakers that tell you how low they can go. Those measurements are never made under real and normal listening conditions.

So, having made the above statement on "limits," what happens to this combination of Audioengine products if you, say, greatly exceed their expected limits of source data coming into them. Check out my "Associated Equipment" in the "Notes" box and you'll see about \$25K of what I feel is reference equipment. If you use stuff like this with the Audioengine gear reviewed here, what you'll hear is easily a large improvement in sonics all around. Clearly, Audioengine is giving the listener a product you can consider upgrading. So if you are of the generation which uses an iPod (I used one) or computer as a source, you'll be quite satisfied. Put the P4 in your path using the N22 amp for power, and you'll be in for a really interesting experience and a moment of audio reality testing.

The N22 amp is a 22-watt AB design, not one of the new digital types, and it peaks out at 40 watts. On paper, that's easy to dismiss but listening to this system set up its soundstage and filling a good-sized room, you'd sit there and wonder "Do I really need more power?" The amp has standard RCA jack and mini jack inputs; there is a pair of RCA output jacks at line level. It's powered by a plug-in wall-wart operating at 17.5 V, 2.3 A. There is also a USB plug used to charge or power gear like Audioengine's W3 wireless adapter. Speaker wire and interconnects are included! Totally recommended for more uses than you thought of when considering this purchase. This is a great "off to college" gift, and at home, these excellent speakers are a fine way to by-pass those flat-screen TV speakers. As a bonus the amp is an excellent way to by-pass the weak amp in your TV.

This review has a specific point and direction that should be easy to grasp. You can spend a great deal more money for sound that is about as listenable as what the P4/N22 produces. Maybe even a little better. But you'd be spending a lot more! Furthermore, this

NOTES

Audioengine P4 Speaker and N22 Amplifier, \$249.00 and \$199.00 respectively. Audioengine Corp., Room 703, Kowloon Building, 555 Nathan Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong. U.S. phone 877/853-4447; Web www.audioengineusa.com; e-mail support@audioengineusa.com.

Associated Equipment

VPI Super scoutmaster Reference turntable, VPI JMW 10.5 Reference tonearm, VPI SDS speed control, Transfiguration Orpheus phono cartridge, Melos 333 Reference phono section (balanced and RCA outputs), Melos 333 Reference line stage (fully balanced in/out; RCA in/out), Melos MAT 1000 mono tube amps, QSC Pro bass amp, Cayin CD/SACD tube output CD player, Melos DAC-tube output factory upgraded to 24/96, Pipedream loudspeakers, Arum Cantus pre-production speaker, Dynastrand RCA interconnects, Dayton Hi-Definition speaker wire, Symposium Acoustic Rollerblocks, Symposium Acoustic Rollerblock Juniors, and Goldman Tip Toes.

combination of Audioengine products is, in my mind, the perfect introduction to better sound for those getting their first exposure to that area. For all your rack stereo friends, this is a giant step forward but not in cost.

Audioengine is ready to power itself into your home, your kid's dorm, or wherever you think of. Bravo!



Bryston BDP-1 File Player

Bascom H. King



FIRST HEARD about the BDP-1 from a Bryston press release sent to me by TAV's Editor, Gene Pitts. At first, I didn't really understand what it was and did. Shortly after, when I went to the Bryston web site, the explanation of the unit's capabilities suddenly made sense. I was interested in experiencing such a device and strongly encouraged Gene to get one for review. For whatever reasons, a review unit wasn't forthcoming and a number of months went by before I decided to simply buy a unit to satisfy my own curiosity and to measure its performance and listen to it – and hence the opportunity to now review it for TAV.

So what is this BDP-1? Think of it as a digital disc player like a CD transport for CDs, both needing an external DAC to play out the audio. Except in the case of the BDP-1, it accepts music WAV, FLAC, and AIFF files from USB thumb and HD drives. Further, and unlike a CD player or transport, the BDP-1 has the ability to navigate the file structures of the drives loaded in to get to the albums and songs one wants to hear. One can do this navigation with the front panel controls or from various remote applications. For these, one has to connect the unit with a wired Ethernet cable to one's home network router or connected network switch or hub. Alternately, one can use a wireless router for an arrangement isolated from other local networks. Also, I thought that a gaming adapter like a Link Sys WGA600n might work as a wireless connection to the local network's wireless router with the WGA600n being near the BDP-1 and with a short Ethernet cable

connecting them. And, in fact, I have one of these and it did work seamlessly right off the bat. Bryston has created two remote applications, one called MAX for running on large screens like a computers', and another named MINI for running on smaller devices like iPhone/iTouch/iPad and Android OS screens. Other programs which are more graphically endowed include Minion, an add-on for the Firefox browser; MPoD, a free Apple app for iTouch/iPhone/iPad, and Gnome Music Player Client, GMPC. These programs utilize a MPD (music player daemon) program running on the BDP-1. The Bryston MAX and MINI programs are not MPD-driven but are Perl Script programs running on the browsers. What some of these players look like can be seen in screen shots in Figures 1, 2, & 3 of MAX, Minion, and GMPC respectively.

The physical layout of the BDP-1 is simple and logical. On the front panel, from right to left are two USB ports, an infra-red sensor for controlling the unit from a Bryston BR2 remote, a centrally located small dot matrix screen for viewing file and other information, a set of navigating buttons, and the usual function keys for a player, and at the right-hand end of the panel is the power switch and LED indicator. Note that the BR2 remote only controls the basic drive functions. The rear panel, going from left to right, had a group of three connectors, a RS232, two USB connectors located vertically over each other, and an Ethernet connector. In the middle is a BNC connector for SP/DIF and a XLR connector for AES/EBU digital outputs. To the right is a pair



of trigger connectors and to the very right is the IEC a.c. power connector.

Inside the BDP-1, we find an industrial quality fan-less computer board running an embedded version of the Linux operating system that only utilizes a small

killer sounding THX album at 24/96. At first listen, I thought that things were a bit thin and not quite up to what some of this material sounds like when played as WAV files on my PS Audio PWT into the DAC-2. I left it on overnight and the next day, things sounded more

Take some time to learn what Bryston has done with its BDP-1, as many of its features are very new.

fraction of its computer power. Things are arranged to separate the data management function or storage and handling from the digital processing function of playing music files. The music data is sent to a Bryston-modified 24/192 ESI Juli sound card the digital output of which is sent to the AES/EBU and BNC SP/DIF output connectors. Bryston has incorporated electronic isolation of all audio components from computer components within the unit and has employed galvanic isolation to prevent charge-carrying particles from migrating within.

At first glance, the manual looked well-written and comprehensive. As to initial setup, the instructions were simple. One plugs it in, waits a few minutes for it to initialize, and then it is ready to go. Of course, the digital output of the BDP-1 has to be connected to a DAC and then into one's system. I used my Wyred4Sound DAC-2, a very good-sounding unit. Bryston supplied a nice little USB thumb drive with some Chesky hi-res files on it. Plugging that drive into one of the front panel USB ports and navigating with the front panel controls had the first song in the folder on the drive playing in no time. I then copied some material of interest on one of my 2-GB USB thumb drives. This consisted of a few tracks from the Equinox album from Soundkeeper Recordings at 24/192 resolution and a few from the

correct. It's not surprising to me that this purely digital device needed some break in as everything else does.

When I wanted to control the BDP-1 with my computers and iTouch, it became clear that the manual was lacking some basic information. I had the BDP-1 connected to a wired connection to my network router. The



Fig. 2 - The Bryston Minion is intended as an add-on for use with Firefox.

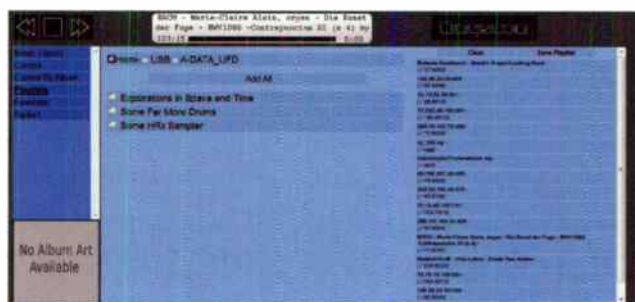


Fig. 1 - Screen shot of the Bryston MAX program running on Bryston's Music Player Daemon or MPD.



Fig. 3 - The Gnome Music Player Client or GMPC also uses the MPD running on the Bryston BDP-1.



manual indicates that to address the unit with a web browser, one uses the address "bryston-BDP-1.local". Well, that absolutely did not work with several browsers and computers. I was messing with the display on the unit and found out what network address was assigned to it. Further, there was a choice to enable DHCP addressing which I did. Regarding this, subsequent conversations with Bryston indicated that DHCP was sup-

e-mailed James Tanner of Bryston and asked for the password and user names, which were both "bryston" in lower case. That got the MAX app responding, but there was a large blue patch in the program window that covered up essential information. Turns out the IE 9, which I had installed on the Windows 7 machine wasn't supported. When I brought the program up with Firefox, it now looked proper and worked. I had already

Okay, the Bryston BDP-1 can be tough to set up, but the unit also offers broad abilities for handling songs.

posed to be the default network mode for the BDP-1. Now, with the numeric address assigned to the BDP-1, my browsers did connect to the unit. Ah, success. The first thing I did was to try to start the Bryston MAX program on my Windows 7 laptop. That came up but didn't work. There was a settings choice on the application and when I went to that, it asked for a user name and password. Well, what might those be? At this point, I

previously installed the MPoD app on my iTouch and had no clue how to set it up. A phone call to James Tanner at Bryston got me to Chris Rice, the programmer for the BDP-1. He walked me through setting up the MpoD app and, with some difficulty, we got that working. Part of the problem was putting in the numerical address for the BDP-1. Using that bryston-bdp-1.local string made it work. An earlier problem was that the MPoD had become corrupted and I had to reinstall it. I was told that additional information on these issues will be posted on the Bryston web site to handle items not covered in the manual. Further, the manual will be updated to cover them.

I then connected a 0.5 TB drive on which I had numerous CD files along with higher resolution 24/88, 24/96, 24/176, and 24/192 files on it. It took a number of minutes with the front panel display indicating "updating" before it was ready to use. Now, however, I could create play lists and play all the hi-rez stuff on this drive. As I have said before, this is way cool!

I found the MAX & MINI programs to be useable and OK, but I did have some trouble trying to figure out how to use them. These programs along with the navigation on the front panel of the BDP-1 are folder-based, meaning that all song selection starts with a folder and then goes within it. In contrast, the Minion, MPoD, and GMPC programs offer more selection possibilities like artist, song, genre, etc. I did use the GMPC and MPoD programs a lot and found them a lot more intuitive and easy to use. Despite all efforts, and help from Bryston, I was unable to ever get the Minion program to connect to the BDP-1. I ended up using the Gnome and MPoD

N O T E S

Bryston BDP-1, \$2,100.50. Bryston Ltd., 677 Neal Dr., Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7Y4 Canada. Phone 705/742-5325 or 800-632-8217; fax 705-742-0882; Email contact@bryston.com; web site: www.bryston.ca.

Associated Equipment

Genesis 6.1 Speakers, DSPeaker anti-mode 8033 room EQ units for the Genesis active servo woofers, Lector Zoe tube preamp, Constellation Audio prototype 250W/ch power amp, PS Audio PWT, PS Audio PWD, PS Audio Bridge for the PWD, Apple iTouch, Dell Inspiration Windows 7 laptop.

programs the most and used the MAX program to control the streaming radio program. Despite what Bryston says about the Ethernet connection being used only for controlling the playing of files of connected USB drives, they offer an option of playing streaming radio called RADIO 1. This function is somewhat limited as opposed to other systems as the programs are selected and loaded by Bryston and the music is played out somehow from their website. They were nice enough to put the URLs of five of my favorite stations on the site. I had been using my PWD and bridge to access streaming

controller programs. Another main point of this: No computer, like a PC or Mac, is involved with the processing of the signal before it gets to some external DAC to play it out.

I decided to compare WAV files put on to DVD data discs played on the PWT vs. the same files put on USB memory sticks for sonic comparisons. That seems to me to be comparing apples to apples with two different digital streams running into the same DAC. Along with other favorite material, I used a few of the 24/176 files on the HRx sampler, namely track 2, the *Susato Dance*

I must give high marks to the BDP-1 for its sonic transparency in head-to-head listening tests.

Internet radio and was particularly fond of a classical guitar station, <http://38.107.220.224:8020>, as I play that instrument.

I thought that I had a good portion of the best classical guitar music on records or CD but after listening to this station a lot, I found a good deal of music that I had not even heard of and was thus motivated to learn some of the tunes. After I got that station put in the Radio 1 source, I found myself listening with the BDP-1 a lot. But from a technical perspective, make no mistake about how this works in that it is definitely streaming music from the Internet and into the BDP-1. If this works, it would seem that it would also be possible with suitable software for the BDP-1 to also play music from other servers on the local network. Perhaps we will see such applications in the future.

Another situation that I feel that I should report was when I took the BDP-1 over to a friend's house to try it out. This person is really into playing files from a Mac Mini into his system via a USB output into a USB to SP/DIF converter and into his Wyred4Sound DAC-1. He has an 8TB network attached storage with TONS of music files on it. Even though his network had assigned an address to the BDP-1, no amount of trying various things would get either the MAX program or the MPoD programs to connect to the BDP-1. It was a most frustrating and rather embarrassing experience!

Now to some essential considerations about how the files played back on the BDP-1 sound compared to the same files on a DVD disc played into the DAC-2 from my PS Audio PWT (Perfect Wave Transport) or the same files on the same HDD connected to my desktop computer and fed out via the Twonky server into my Ethernet network and a wired connection to the PS Audio PWD (Perfect Wave DAC) via the Bridge accessory. I also can play the files on the HD drives connected to my desktop computer from the SP/DIF output of the M Audio Audiophile 2496 soundcard through a long digital cable across the room into my DACs.

One thing is clear. Of these other ways I have of playing files, only the BDP-1 is a stand-alone player. That's its reason for being. Plug in the USB device, and it plays into your system like a CD player without computers or networks involved, unless you want to control the BDP-1 with some of the above mentioned external

outtake, track 6, Weill's *Threepenny Opera Overture*, Track 9, *Yerba Buena Bounce*, and track 10, Mike Garson Trio *Blues* outtake. I also used a few tracks from an up-sampled to 24/96 CD of The Robert Hohner Percussion Ensemble CD *Far More Drums*. A note on the connections of the BDP-1 and PWT to the Wyred4Sound DAC: From the BDP-1, I used a NBS Monitor 0 AES/EBU balanced cable and for the PWT, I used a non-distinguished generic HDMI cable into one of the two HDMI ports. The DAC-2 utilizes HDMI connectors and the use of HDMI cables to transmit 192S data into it as two of its selectable inputs. Well, sonically, it really turned out to be a toss-up as it was hard for me to really tell much difference if any. This is a good thing as far as I am concerned and I therefore give high marks to the BDP-1 for its sonic transparency.

Being the audio engineer, designer, reviewer, and measurer that I am, I finally took the BDP-1 out to my lab to see how good the played back digital data was. I had recorded on the aforementioned 0.5 TB drive a number of Audio Precision test files in various sample rates and resolutions. Right away, playback of a full scale 24/96 1 kHz test signal had the same THD+N as the measurement of the AP's digital generator at about -141 dBFS.

The THD+N residual at 24/192 of the AP system is not as good as the lower sample rates and is about -133 dBFS. Playback from the BDP-1 of a full scale 24/192 file measured the same. This is all typical of things I have measured in the digital domain when they are as they should be and the BDP-1 qualified as one of them.

In conclusion, the BDP-1 is one of the first of what is sure to be more examples of this new form of playing digital music. Despite the initial difficulties I had in connecting to the BDP-1 for remote operation, I was able to overcome these with help from Bryston.

No doubt the updated manual along with more web site support will be forthcoming so customers that buy the BDP-1 will have an easier time making it work in their setups. As I said, I tried all the other control applications that I could and liked controlling the BDP-1 best with my iPod and the CMPC app. I must say that I really enjoy listening to music with the BDP-1 and enthusiastically recommend it to those whose desire to play music files this way.

HiFiMan HE-400 Headphones



George Graves

OKAY! I HAVE TO admit it. I am a closet Stax man. Ever since I first heard a pair of Stax electrostatic headphones, I have wanted a pair. Unfortunately, all of the Stax models after which I have lusted (SR7, SR9), have always been just out of my reach, financially (roughly \$3K and \$6k, respectively). I've heard a number of them at shows, in stores and in other people's stereo systems, but I've never owned a pair myself. The reason was not just that the 'phones themselves were expensive, but they always needed that pesky external power-supply/driver amplifier to sound their best (a further \$2.5K for the tube version – SRM-007T II), and that was almost as expensive as the 'phones themselves. The closest this reviewer ever came to owning Stax electrostatic 'phones was a pair of Koss ESP-9 electrostatics that I had in the late '70s. They had the drawback that

one's speaker terminals on one's power amplifier powered the audio and the box resided between the power amp and the speakers. To switch between one and the other, one had to switch the headphone box in and out of the circuit with the "speakers/phones" switch on the front panel. The box also plugged into the a.c. line to derive the high voltage to operate the 'phones. The quality of reproduction you got depended upon the quality of the amp you used. The ESP-9's themselves didn't like tube amps (the high-impedance of the output transformers caused the frequency response of the headphones to fall-off severely at both frequency extremes) and most solid-state amps in the late '70s weren't the best sounding amps available. Hence, I was never very pleased with system performance using Koss 'phones. Add to that the fact the Koss ESP-9's weren't

all that reliable, and because of their proprietary connector, cord length could not be easily extended, and the result was that you had an "also-ran" substitute for a pair of Stax "ear speakers".

In the late '80s, I found a decent compromise in the form of a pair of AKG K-340 hybrid electrostatic/dynamic headphones. These used a small electret to power the electrostatic drivers in the 'phones and a normal dynamic driver for the mids and lows. (An electret is a permanently charged electrostatic element that is manufactured with the charge already in place. Normally used for inexpensive microphones, the AKG K-340s are the only headphone application I've ever encountered with this technology.) Some 25 years later, I still own

electrostatic headphones their characteristic fast transients and smooth frequency response.

The HiFiMan HE-400 headphones also have a Mylar diaphragm very similar to the ones in the above described electrostatic 'phones. The major difference is there is no high voltage. Instead of a sputtered metallic coating, the diaphragm has a very thin voice "grid" either etched upon it or glued to it. When an audio signal is applied to the voice grid, it creates a varying magnetic field on the diaphragm that is proportional to the audio signal applied to it. The stator plates on the HiFiMan headphones have rows of permanent magnets that cover the entire diaphragm area. Thus, when the audio signal is applied to the voice grid on the

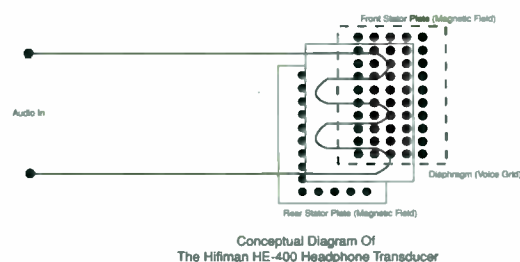
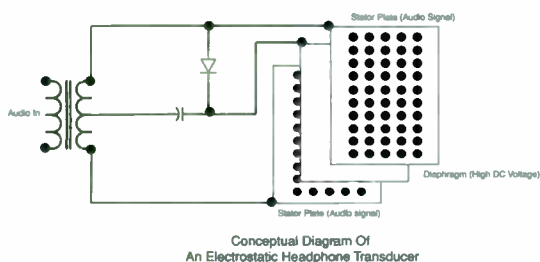
**These phones are so accurate I took them
on a recording date to use as monitors.**

the AKGs and they still sound fine. Unfortunately, the headband and ear-cup suspension have seen better days and the 'phones no longer clamp to my head adequately, although they are still usable.

This last summer at the San Francisco Area Hi-Fi show, I found a display for a brand of high-end headphones from China called HiFiMan. These headphones interested me for several reasons. First of all, the large ear cup is "circumaural," which means that the 'phone cup sits on your head and not against your ear. In fact, nothing touches the ear at all when the 'phones are worn. This makes these headphones extremely comfortable for long-term listening. Secondly, the HiFiMan headphones are of a design that is essentially a magnetic analogy of an electrostatic 'phone. Electrostatic headphones, such as the Stax or the Koss ESP-9s, work by stretching a very thin plastic diaphragm between two "stator" plates that are perforated to allow the sound to pass through them. The diaphragm is usually sputtered with a thin metallic coating which has a high-voltage d.c. polarizing potential applied to it. The stator plates on either side of the diaphragm have the audio signal applied to them. This causes the diaphragm, by virtue of its electrostatic charge, to either be attracted to, or repelled by, the stator plates. By setting the diaphragm in motion, sound is produced. Because Mylar, the material from which most diaphragms of this type are made, is very thin and has very little mass, the 'phones can respond quickly to any applied audio signal. This gives

diaphragm, it is alternately attracted to, and repelled by, the magnets on the stator plates, and just as in the case of the electrostatic 'phones, sound is produced. The way these 'phones operated immediately caught my attention at the show because it meant that one could have an electrostatic "like" headphone without having to generate the high-energizing voltage required by most electrostatics. It also meant, without the need for a polarizing power supply, the headphones could be plugged directly into practically any normal headphone jack. This is not true of most electrostatics, which needed a high-impedance source to drive them as well as a polarizing power supply. The voice grid on the HE-400s, being merely a length of wire wrapped upon itself, has the characteristic of being pretty much purely resistive in nature. When it became apparent that HiFiMan was getting ready to introduce in the United States a new set of mid-priced headphones using this principle (known as isodynamics, orthodynamics, or isoplanar) called the HE-400, I undertook steps to obtain a pair.

The HE-400s consist of two large circular ear cups of about 4 inches in diameter and an inch-and-a-half thick. Each cup is covered with a cushion made of very fine, soft leather-like material. Each cup is connected to the headband by way of a semicircular yoke of what seems like steel and is pivoted where it meets the cup. The headband is of a fairly normal construction consisting of a piece of spring steel covered again with the fine



leather-like cushion. The headphone cable on the HE-400s is unique. Usually, in most hi-fi headphones, the cable is permanently connected to only the left earpiece and the right earpiece is connected to the main lead by a length of cable that goes across the top of the headband to connect both ear cups together. On the HE-400s, the rather long 3-meter cable is connected to each headphone cup separately. That is to say that the cable makes a "Y" about one meter below each ear cup. On each headphone cable end, there is a standard, screw-on, RP-SMA connector (the same type generally used to attach the short stub-antennas to most house-

Now they sounded better than my AKG K-340s, and not by a small amount either. The fast transients were still there, but seemed to have taken on an added sparkle. That translated as a much better high-frequency extension. The low end, however, benefited most from the break-in period. When thin Mylar diaphragms are employed as transducers, they have to be stretched over a frame and the tension must be uniform all-around the periphery to insure linear response over the entire diaphragm area. This means that usually, the diaphragms are a little *too* tight to move as freely as they need to move to produce adequate sound. A

I was delighted to find that the HE-400s were sensitive enough to be driven from an iPod Touch.

hold Wi-Fi routers), which means, of course, that the cord can be removed from the headphones. I have seen this feature on higher priced headphones, but never on one in this price range and never using an industry standard connector. It is a most welcomed addition. The other end of the cable is terminated with a 1/8-inch mini-stereo headphone connector. This plugs into a larger standard 1/4-inch phone adapter, allowing the headphones to be used with either full-size stereo equipment or portable units such as iPods. All connectors are gold plated.

When the headphones arrived, I was very eager to try them out. I connected them to the headphone jack on the front of my Harman Kardon HK990 amplifier and sat myself down for listening session. I cannot tell you how disappointed I was when I found that not only were these headphones seemingly extremely inefficient, but also rather mediocre sounding. I thought that my trusty old AKG K-340s sounded much better. Then I recalled that owning a number of Magneplanar speakers over the years taught me to always "break-in" a new pair before giving them a serious listen. Maggie speakers are also, very often mediocre sounding when they first come out of the box. Remembering that, I took a pillow and clamped the Hifiman headphones over it, and tuned the stereo to a suitable Internet radio station and let it play continuously for a week. When the week was out, I went back and gave them another listen. Lo and behold, the break-in period had transformed these headphones from mediocre to outstanding.

"break-in" period stretches the Mylar minutely and evenly allowing the diaphragm to develop more excursion making it both louder and, if it's designed properly, smoother and more extended in its frequency response.

As for the HE-400's low efficiency, that turned out to be "pilot error." I am using an integrated amplifier to power my system these days, and frankly, I had never connected a pair of headphones to it before the HiFiMan HE-400s. It seemed to me that I had to turn the volume control way up on the amp to get decent headphone level. I was wrong, plugging in both my AKGs and my Sony MDR-6 to the same headphone jack showed them all to be of about equal sensitivity. Harman Kardon has merely padded the headphone outputs down to avoid ear damage.

That meant that these phones just *might* work on a portable unit such as an iPod. That night, after retiring, I put the HE-400s on, and selected some suitable music from my iPod Touch while I read Stuart Woods' latest novel on the iPod's screen using the Amazon Kindle app. I was delighted to find that not only is the level at which the 'phones are driven more than adequate, but that the iPod (playing Apple Lossless Compression files) has never sounded better!

These phones are so accurate that I took them with me to use as monitors while I recorded a jazz sextet live in a bar/restaurant setting. Unfortunately, after a few minutes I had to resort to my trusty (but not great sounding) Koss Pro-4As. As good as the HifiMan 'phones sounded, they did not, alas, have enough isolation for a live recording session where I'm in the same room as the musicians and the audience. They would be great monitors, however if I could set-up in another room so perhaps I'll get to record with them yet.

Conclusion

Here then is a pair of mid-priced headphones featuring electrostatic-like performance in a versatile, comfortable and beautifully made package. They require a bit of "running-in" as the Brits would say, before performing at their best, but once that is done, I think that you will find, as I have, that these headphones deliver the kind of sound for which Stax would charge you lots more.

N O T E S

HiFiMan HE-400 Headphones, \$399.00. HiFiMan Electronics, 41-70 Main street, #3-326, Flushing, NY 11355; phone, 347/475-7673; e-mail help, technicalsupport@hifiman.com; web site, www.hifiman.com.

Sony AR1 Speaker System

Tom Nousaine

SONY'S SS-AR1 is a straight-forward, floor-standing loud-speaker meant to be used in a stereo pair. The design format goes back to earlier times when use of two relatively tall speaker systems was considered the "only right way" to reproduce any sort of music in the home. Even the model number, AR1, takes us back to the '50s; some of the older readers will remember that Acoustic Research had somewhat similar model designations. (Editor's Note: Tom, make that "more experienced readers," instead of "older," please.) The review system came in a piano black gloss finish which was quite exciting visually. Both the woofer system and the midrange are ported with exits through the rear of the cabinet.

Sony points out in its literature that the AR1 should be noted for its construction. The front panel is quite thick, to keep vibrations to a minimum, and made from special Japanese hardwood, while the remainder of the box is Finnish birch. The interior is incredibly well braced. Furthermore, the enclosure is said to be so well machined that it is assembled without any fasteners. (Editor's Note: I am reminded here of a traditional Japanese handicraft, origami, where astonishing three-dimensional objects are made via a sort of ability to see how to transform two dimensions into three and thus make, for example, a cat or a crane from a flat piece of paper.) The gloss of the finish is spectacular, as I mentioned above, and the system is delivered with a special, washable cleaning cloth. As with all gloss finishes, you should be ready to see fingerprints during set-up and installation. Fortunately, they clean off easily.

While the system is not over-powering visually, the 126-pound weight may be tough to deal with if your listening room is on a second floor or downstairs in a basement. The system also has four "pointy" spikes to allow stable operation on thick carpets. The input terminals are placed too far apart for standard dual banana jacks to be successfully used, however the terminals themselves are well made and easy to use.

Sony suggests that at least the initial set up be performed with the speakers angled or toed in toward the listening position. The listener's seat should be at least 40 inches from the wall behind the listener, with the speakers at least 20 inches from the side walls or wall behind the speakers. However, because the speakers are not magnetically shielded, you may have to be careful about the location of a nearby TV or computer monitor. I found it easy to accommodate Sony's suggested speaker arrangement in my normal multi-channel home theater environment. This was because I use an acoustically transparent projection screen rather than a CRT monitor, and the speakers could be placed wherever I desired, alongside in this case. I found the Sony AR1s fit just perfectly 30 inches



from the rear wall and the eight-foot "speaker width" was also just perfect. I drove the speakers with a Bryston 2B power amplifier (which delivers 100 watts into four ohms). The amplifier had no difficulty with the impedance even though the AR1 drops below three ohms at around 250 Hz. Signals were delivered from a Denon CD player and the volume controls on the power amplifier adjusted levels. I took some measurements with an OmniMic System with the speaker system at least 10

The AR1 sounds quite neutral over most of its range, though initially to me, it had a somewhat bass heavy character. Not the "too heavy" 30 to 40 Hz bass but the relatively "boomier" 100-Hz type. However, after several hours of critical listening, this quality tended to fade away. I don't think it's because the speaker was breaking in, as it had been used elsewhere before I got it. It may simply be that I was adapting myself to the sound. I comprehensively investigated speaker "break in" in the

Male and female voices are among the toughest things to reproduce accurately, and the Sony AR1 did very well with them.

feet from any walls. Because the AR1 loudspeaker system is "floor-standing," a carpeted floor does enter the low end of the measurement, and thus it is not anechoic.

Because the AR1 is intended to be used as a pair of loudspeakers in a two-channel stereo system, I used the two-channel program material that I've used to test most all other stereo systems I've reviewed over the past 20 years. Actually, I should note that over my career, I have tested well over a thousand audio systems including ones for standard two-channel home stereo, multi-channel home theater, and car audio. Virtually all of them include individual loudspeaker driver units that could be used in mono, stereo, or multichannel systems. The "best" of these individual systems can be effective at nearly any audio function except subwoofer. Indeed, I have two set-ups in my home, each using the best loudspeaker systems I've found over the years, the Paradigm Active 20 and the JBL LSR6325p. I have also found that many typical floor-standing speakers are not the best-performing systems because practically all of them have front panel woofers located far enough above the floor to cause a lower midrange cancellation in the 150-400 Hz range. I frequently prefer to use a multi-channel set-up to deal with the room placement difficulties I encounter with a speaker system where there's been insufficient consideration of staging or boundary problems during design.

'80s and '90s and found that most loudspeakers really do not break in. See my web-site (www.nousaine.com) for the details of my experiments. On the other hand, humans do adapt themselves to acoustic inputs of all kinds. In my opinion, talking about break-in is too often just a technique developed by salesmen, dealers and manufacturers to offset Buyer's Remorse.

That said, I found the frequency response of the AR1 to offer correct timbre. Male and female voices and acoustical instruments all sounded natural. Details of individual choir voices were cleanly presented when available on good recordings. Bass was good, just not tremendously low in frequency (it measures -6 dB at 35 Hz). Which is to say that acoustic bass was presented in a natural fashion, but bass-fanatics should not expect great reproduction of the very deepest bass present on some recordings of pedal organ or other recordings intended for bass nuts. Yes, I know that most bass-head recordings don't have music in the truly deep bass but some of them do have output below 20 Hz. The Sony will not be satisfactory for those who insist on that kind of low frequency performance where one's pants legs flap. Those folks will need a subwoofer but for the large majority of listeners, as well as those primarily focusing on music, the AR1s will be perfectly OK.

Dynamic performance was also quite good. The pair of AR1s can play loudly enough to be satisfactory for all the recordings I used. As mentioned above, the imped-

S P E C S

Three-way, four-driver bass reflex system; two 8-Inch (200 mm) woofers; 1 5.25-inch (130-mm) midrange; one 1-inch (25-mm) tweeter; 4-ohm impedance; 88 dB SPL output for 2.83 V (sensitivity); 28 Hz to 60 kHz, frequency response; 400 Hz, and 4000 Hz crossover frequencies; 200 watts maximum input power; 12-5/8 inch width; 42-5/8 inch height; 19-3/8 depth; 126 pounds weight, and 5 year warranty.

N O T E S

Sony AR1 Loudspeakers, \$27,000.00. Sony Corporation of America, 16530 Via Esprillo, San Diego, CA 92127. Informative web site <https://dealersource.sel.sony.com/dsweb/p/ar1/>, e-mail info@sony.com.

Associated Equipment

Bryston 2B power amplifier, Denon Model ADV-1000 CD/DVD player section

ance never bothered the Bryston, although I might hesitate to use a small receiver that didn't have a good, strong power supply or wasn't specifically designed to handle low impedance loads.

So far, so good. But the key question is whether Sony's AR1 speaker worth \$27,000 a pair? Indeed, is

say the AR1 outright won this race, Sony intends it to be among the leaders. At this price level, you really must go listen for yourself.

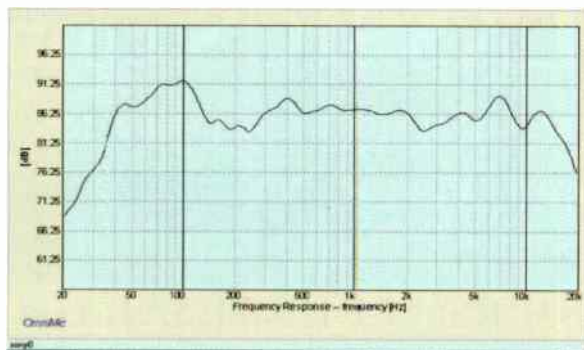
TAV's Editor suggests that The TAD R-1 Reference Loudspeaker, another floor-stander, also demonstrated at the most recent CES, will be considered by many to

The AR1's dynamic performance was quite good, as was the instrumental timbre.

any pair of speakers worth that price? One of the things you need to do to grapple with this question is look at what the competition is and what sorts of price tags they carry. And, too, are you after ultimate speaker performance, price no barrier, or simply a good value per dollar spent? For almost everyone, professional reviewer or home hi-fi enthusiast, there is a "knee" or point of inflection where, at least for high-priced speaker systems, spending more becomes less reasonable. That is, the amount of speaker quality obtained per dollar spent starts to go down. While I suspect my "knee" is lower down on this curve than most all reviewers of high-end speaker systems, there are also reviewers who do not exhibit such any such change in judgment. Their "quality per dollar spent" curve is a straight line.

At the most recent CES, these Sony speakers were being used in the Kimber demonstrations of their new cello recordings by Viktor Uzur made with the Kimber iso-Mike System. (Editor's Note: This magazine ran an article about the Iso-Mike technique written by George Graves in the Vol. 13, No. 4 issue and we intend to review this fine CD.) In addition to Ray Kimber and his company liking the AR1 well enough to use it to put their best foot forward, Chad Cassem of Acoustic Sounds is quoted in the Sony ads, saying "They blew me away." Kal Robinson in his Stereophile review called the speaker one of Sony's "statement products, such that it tended to define a new product category." Robert Greene of TAS wrote that "for me there were many moments of absolute musical magic with the Sony AR1s, far more than with most speakers." Those are fairly strong comments and while I do not think I'd

Approximately 4 dB of raised response between 80 and 110 Hz. Followed by a 2-3 dB dip between 150 and 300 Hz possibly a function of the woofer floor bounce. The fall-off at 20 kHz is a function of the frequency response of the ACER sound card in my computer.



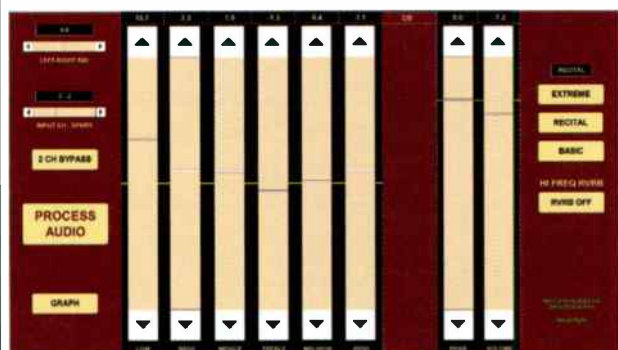
be a strong head-to-head competitor for the Sony. The R-1 is priced at \$78,000 the pair. Another very strong entry in the "cost no object" speaker category shown in Vegas is the Talon Phoenix three-way floor-stander, which comes in at \$95,000 in its active configuration, using an active crossover together with a dedicated 500-watt amp. In the end, over and against speaker systems with price tags three and nearly four times higher, the Sony AR1 does carry its own weight in a quality per dollar spent judgment. The real question is whether your wallet is thick enough. So, would I spend in excess of 25K to buy a wonderfully built loudspeaker? Probably not. However, if putting out that amount of the money isn't a difficulty for you, then take a good, close listen to the AR1.

Test Discs

R. Running: Opus 3, Depth of Image, "Tiden Bara Gar"
 Oscar Peterson Trio: We Get Requests, "You Look Good to Me"
 Harry James: The King James Version, "More Splutie, Please"
 Suzanne Vega: Solitude Standing, "Tom's Diner"
 Joan Baez: Classics, Volume 8, "Diamonds and Rust"
 Jennifer Warnes: Famous Blue Raincoat, "Famous Blue Raincoat"
 Eugene Ormandy: Saint-Saens Symphony No.3, Organ, "Poco Adagio"
 Prosonus Studio Reference Disc, "88-Note Piano Scale"
 Bass Connection: Drivin' Bass, "Pure and Perfect Bass"
 Eminem: Marshall Mathers, "Remember Me"
 Peter, Paul & Mary: Peter, Paul & Mommy, "I Have a Song To Sing, O!"
 Joe Williams & Friends: I Just Want to Sing, "Dimples"
 ZZ Top: The Best of ZZ Top, "La Grange"



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Photos Never Lie!

No Comment!

I would like to credit whomever was ingenious enough to come up with these ersatz saddlebags for puppies. Must be British, I think, from the "wif" in the inserted caption. However, it is from a series of funny photos which change daily and doesn't give credits. Gene Pitts, Editor.

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