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In the last issue I held forth concerning the undesirability of mixing publishing and promotional activities, and the inevitable threat such action poses to a magazine's status as an impartial observer. If you think that manufacturers advertising in a magazine compromises the opinions expressed in its pages, adding the rest of the promotional budget into the equation can only make matters worse.

No sooner had that issue hit the streets than I was informed that Haymarket have taken a 50% interest in the Live 2000 show. Not only does this make any kind of co-promotion with the Hi-Fi News show extremely unlikely, it also displays an almost rapacious interest in the promotional budget of UK Hi-Fi Inc. From a manufacturer's perspective that means that Haymarket Publishing Ltd, which reviews a huge array of products in both What Hi-Fi and Stuff, are in a position to offer advertising, reprints of the reviews they publish, brochures based on the photography from the reviews (as well as the copy, of course), advertising copy (ditto), coverage in the Show Guide, space at the show, and additional promotional tools such as swing tags and certificates based on the Awards that they hand out. Oh, and let's not forget "Best Buy" stickers. All of which you pay for.

If a business relationship between a manufacturer and the publisher of a supposedly impartial magazine is an undesirable tie that binds, then that little lot adds up to a veritable net. And nets can be used to trap people. It's no longer good enough for a magazine to be impartial. It has to be seen to be so. It's no longer sensible for the hi-fi industry to allow magazines to make money out of organising its shows. It's time we all woke up and smelt the stench. The public smelt it long ago.



Roy Gregory

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# Playing The System

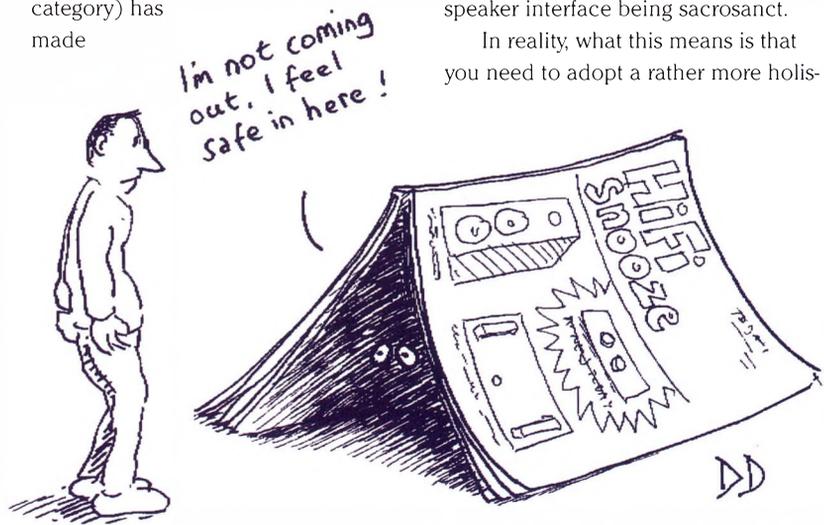
by Roy Gregory

Traditionally, people have tended to think about and discuss hi-fi systems as three part entities; the front end, amps and speakers. And certainly, on technological grounds each is quite distinct, using entirely different engineering principles, different materials, and doing a different job. But if we think about the system in terms of interfacing its components, then a rather different picture emerges.

Clearly, the matching of a cartridge to a phono stage that provides the correct electrical termination is critical to optimising its performance. And if you want to make the most of a digital source, you'll want to make sure that it's not going to overload the pre-amp's line input. Likewise, matching the power amplifier to the speakers involves a far more intimate coupling than is generally realised, and is arguably the most critical interface within the whole set-up. It's not simply a case of the amp bossing the speaker. The recalcitrant transducer gets its say too, in the form of its impedance characteristic and back EMF. It really is essential to consider the amplifier and speaker as a single entity, even if you are buying them one at a time. In other words, choose them together, even if you can't pay for them both. And then stick to the decision. Don't fly off on some flavour of the month fancy. There are plenty of examples of amp and speaker combinations that really click; the Naim 250 and Linn

Sara, the Beard P100 and Magneplanar MG1b, the Spectral amps and Avalons, the Nad 3020 and AR18. Take a little time and consider the real implications of that. Dividing the system into three parts introduces notional boundaries at the very points where we can least afford them.

What is more, the advent of predominantly line level sources (yes, stand alone phono stages mean that even turntables fit that category) has made



source switching considerably easier, and in budget terms, less demanding (no costly phono stage if you don't want one). In fact, what we're seeing is the advent of two part systems, divided into the source and everything to get its signal up to line level; and the power amp and speakers. Where the volume control fits will

depend on the system. If you're using a separate pre-amp or line stage, then it goes with the front end. However, increasingly designers are simply cranking up the input sensitivity of their power amps, adding a volume control and source switching, and calling it a "line-integrated" amp. Not a bad idea, but don't think for an instant that it's a substitute for a decent line stage. Anyway, in this case the split comes at the amp's inputs, the sacred speaker interface being sacrosanct.

In reality, what this means is that you need to adopt a rather more holis-

tic attitude to defining your system. A record player no longer simply consists of the turntable, arm and cartridge, but includes the tonearm cable, phono stage (with appropriate consideration of loading and gain), a support, and any necessary mains cables or filters. Likewise, a CD player will include its cables, mains leads, isolation transformer (if you can afford ►

▶ a good one!) and support.

This might seem horribly complex, but in reality it makes things very much simpler, by making them all inclusive. What you are actually doing is incorporating the mains and signal cabling, as well as the furniture, into the primary decision making process, where they belong. And you get to choose an appropriate phono stage, in terms of price and performance, rather than getting stuck with the one in the pre-amp. Now you see why you need a dealer. If I had a fiver for every thousand pound plus turntable in the UK that's being choked half to death by the crappy stock arm-lead supplied with its tonearm, then I'd be writing this from tax exile. You wouldn't dream of sticking the signal from a £4000 CD player down a £25 lead, but that's exactly what most serious turntable owners are doing, mainly because they never even considered it! More interested in CD? Now you can downsize the turntable without compromising the line stage.

In the same way, you should be matching the second section of your system, the amp and speakers. The examples I used earlier are pertinent, but there are plenty of others. The leg-

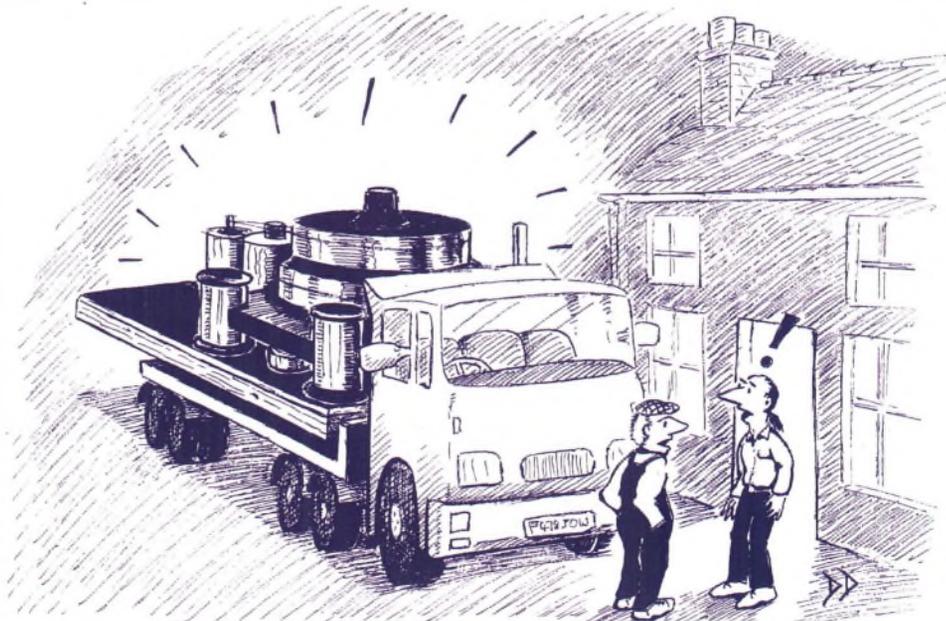
endary transparency of output transformer-less/output capacitor-less (OTL/OCL) valve amps such as the pyrotechnically inclined Futtermans, and other more recent and reliable incarnations, are often only enjoyed with electrostatic speakers. This is because OTLs generally double their rated output into a doubled load impedance, behaviour which is the complete opposite of the theoretical norm (you know, 100watts into 8ohms, 200watts into four, and so on). This suits electrostatics just fine, with their characteristically high impedances. But watch out for hybrids, which tend to the schizophrenic once their moving coil woofer enters the equation! (I have heard it argued that the main reason that OTLs really click with 'statics is the input transformer in the speakers.)

There are plenty of less obvious examples. The Wilson Watts thrive on the high damping factors provided by big Krell or Rowland Research amplifiers. Try the same thing with the superficially similar Ars Acoustica System Max, and you are in for a big disappointment. Despite the apparent similarities Max's bass loading is both unique and totally different to the

Puppy's. Put it in the vice like grip of a monster Krell and you simply crush the life (and weight) out of it.

In fact, there are as many examples as there are products out there. Every speaker has its ideal match, and if you're really lucky then there might be more than one. This is where the theoretically universal amplifier designs come un-glued. By trying to be all things to all speakers, they inevitably include elements that you don't actually need, be it too much power, too much current, low impedance drive capability, or any of a hundred other performance factors. You don't get nothing for nothing, and if it's in the box it's going to effect the sound. Just think about it for a while - you're actually paying extra for something you don't need, and it's actively counter productive.

How do you find your perfect electronic marriage? All together, on three... YOUR DEALER. Your system may only have a front end and a back end, but a bit of sensible advice should get them travelling in the same direction. On the other hand you could grow your own hi-fi equivalent of a push-me-pull-you. There's loads of them out there!



Here's your TNT Mk4 Guv, where do you want it? ...

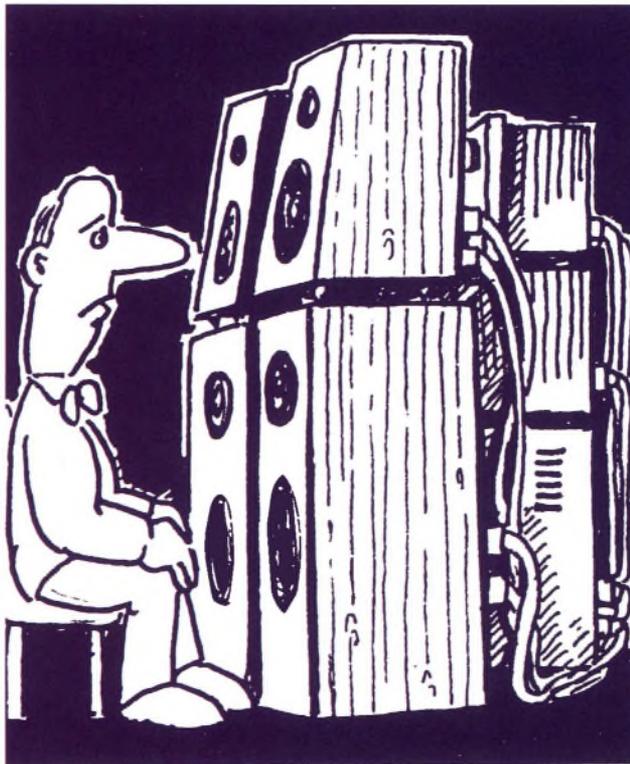
# Home Truths

by James Michael Hughes

We're all searching for that ultimate upgrade that transforms our sound, making it more natural and realistic with increased impact and dynamics. We're all after that extra 'something' that conveys the freshness and immediacy of a good live performance, creating You Are There impact as we listen at home. Many of us spend hundreds if not thousands of pounds in order to get closer to the ultimate hi-fi experience. But what is it that creates lasting long-term satisfaction?

To draw a superficial analogy, it's a bit like wanting a car that goes faster and faster. The faster it goes, the better it gets. In hi-fi terms it's more detail, more clarity, more impact, more attack, more bite, more control - the list is endless. Many think that if we chalk up enough Mores, we'll eventually get enough to fulfil our requirements. And maybe we will... Maybe the 'faster' our hi-fi goes, the more satisfied we'll be with it.

But is this so? The sensation of speed is relative rather than absolute. You can experience a greater feeling of speed on a bicycle at 15mph than a sports car doing 100mph. It's much the same with hi-fi; the subjective impression of impact and dynamics is not determined by the ultimate loud-



ness capability or transient attack of your hi-fi rig. It's more to do with inner dynamics and the constant contrast between loud and soft.

A car constantly shifting between fast and slow speeds gives a greater sensation of speed than one going flat out for long periods. It's acceleration the body registers, not absolute speed. Once conditions stabilise, all sensation of speed is lost. Of course in reality you may well be going fast - the fact that you reach your destination sooner is proof of that. But, in this analogy it's the impression of speed that counts, not its absolute rate.

In case you're wondering what all

this has to do with hi-fi, it's this. A system that's loud and up-front with lots of attack may give the impression of dynamics and power when you first listen. But very quickly the ear adjusts, and the sensation of speed and attack is lost. Often, it's only when the music stops and you turn to speak to someone, that you realise how loud things actually were - your ears are ringing and your voice hardly registers. Is this a truly dynamic sound? Not in my book... Dynamics are a relative thing. The ear responds to variations of loud and soft, and needs frequent reminders of both ends of

the dynamic scale to retain a sense of proportion. It's the sensation of constant dynamic change that's important, not absolute loudness or attack. It's crucial to appreciate this. Suppose you make changes to your system that initially seem to increase impact and dynamics, making everything sound sharper and more up-front. Your immediate judgement is that things sound better - but do they? Will you still feel the same a week later?

The danger here is lowering the subjective contrast between loud and soft. Yes, the sound is more forward and 'dynamic'. Yes, there's superfi- ▶

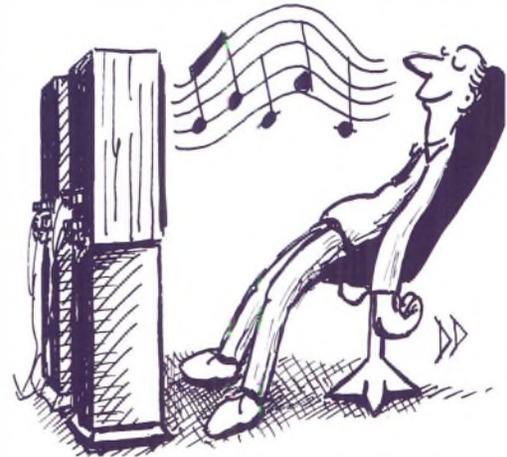
► cially more impact and attack. But because the 'quiet' passages no longer seem as quiet in relation to the loud passages, the music doesn't quite swing between extremes of loud and soft as it once did. The car is going faster, but once it reaches its top speed and stays there for a while, all sensation of speed is lost.

Playing music at a 'natural' volume level is vital too. The ear's sensitivity is not linear but logarithmic, and it's at its most sensitive at low levels. If you play music too loudly, you operate on the part of the ear's sensitivity curve that's starting to flatten out. The ear's ability to register dynamic change reduces as volume levels increase. That's why, when you listen to a loud rock band, things fail to get louder beyond a certain point - sound pressure levels may increase in measured terms, but the ear registers little if any change subjectively.

Of course, listening levels are very much a personal thing, and some like it loud. But many of us are constrained by neighbours, and need to keep levels low. Some hi-fi systems only sound good when played loudly because resolution is limited and music sounds muffled and inarticulate at middle to low levels. A system that has good resolution will still sound crisp and focussed at medium to low volume levels. It will create a 'big' sound without having to be played loudly.

Something I've noticed over the years as my hi-fi system's got better, is the way music more effortlessly fills the listening room but doesn't blast-out the rest of the house. The music sounds focussed and nicely projected in the room, but tails off in terms of volume once you step outside. I'm not sure why, but it's probably because I'm actually playing things less

loudly than I did (say) ten or fifteen years ago. Efficient horn-loaded speakers and a low-powered but subjectively powerful single-ended valve amp create the illusion of a 'big' sound without being massively loud. The subjective impression of loudness and dynamics is very convincing, so I'm not complaining! Progress? I think so...



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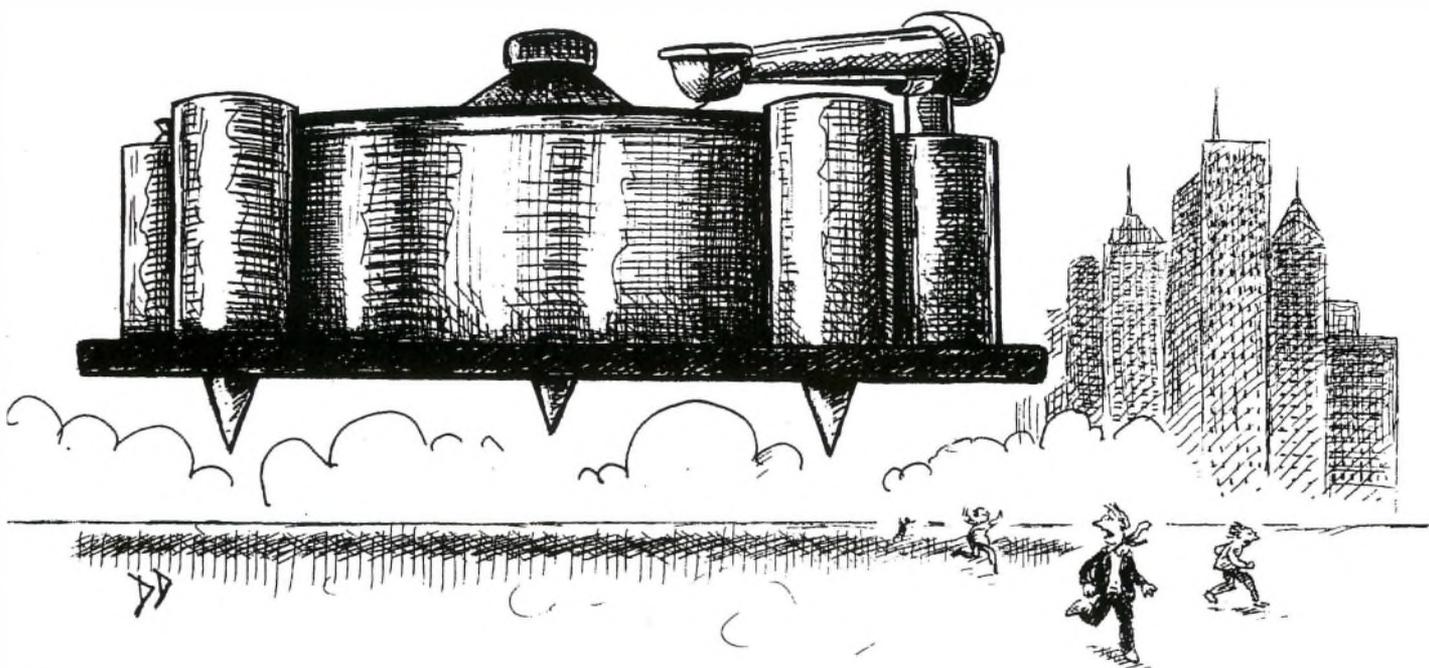
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# "Waiting Around To Die"

(A song from Townes Van Zandt, one of the greatest poets of our century.)

by Wilfried Kress

*Wilfried Kress is Editor/Publisher of the German magazine Hi-Fi and Records, and one of that country's most respected audio commentators. His character profile will appear in the next issue, but in the meantime, he explains the German perspective on the new enhanced digital formats.*



No matter who you talk to, the new high resolution digital formats are the hottest hifi subject right across Europe. Hardly surprising, since we're talking about the future and the progress of sound quality – and of course hopes and expectations are high. But rather than a multi-faceted discussion, a careful consideration of the many arguments, we discover that this "digital future" is reduced to one simple question: *will SACD or DVD-Audio win the race?*

This attention-grabbing "either/or" has unfortunately pushed a number of

other aspects into the background. Even such fundamental questions as whether we really need a system which can reproduce a frequency range of up to 100kHz at a sampling rate of 192kHz have so far not been convincingly answered. We really should be wondering how to make use of the 4.7 gigabyte capacity of the newest discs, rather than subscribing to the motto "bigger is better". To supply two stereo channels with such amounts of data is only one side of the coin – how do you deal with complicated studio recordings using 24 or

even 48 tracks? The first consequence of the data-gigantomania is already foreseeable: initially we will only copy older, analogue master tapes onto the new super-CDs, and a respectable repertoire of pukka high resolution recordings will be a long time in the making.

Another bone of contention is the seemingly ubiquitous idea that CDs will soon be superseded (super-CDed?) by one or other of the new formats (rather as the analogue vinyl disc was marginalised by CD as the main recorded medium). But things are not

happening the same way this time, nor are they planned to. Manufacturers are not so blue-eyed as to believe that CDs are on their way out. Sony, for example, readily affirm that SACD is targeted at a higher quality level than CD, and should be complementary to it rather than replacing it. SACD is thus conceived for a minority market: a recording medium for those audiophiles who, in contrast to the average consumer, are still not satisfied by CDs. This positioning ironically suggests that SACD and DVD-Audio are actually the digital descendants of the analogue vinyl disc!

The sonic qualities of the new systems - which, unlike direct-mastered discs, need new playback decks - and how they differ, has so far been difficult to judge. There is talk of demonstrations in which CDs have sounded better than one of the new formats! Our investigations show that much

would already be gained (sampling rate conversion and word length calculation with the dCS 972) if real 16 bit was put on normal CDs using 24 bit studio technology, and if CD players were boosted by up-sampling. This development is already underway, and following the excellent GT-CDP1, other players with up-sampling are close to launch.

The situation with DVD-Audio is not so advanced, and players will most likely not be on sale until the spring of 2000, not to mention the appropriate software. Even Pioneer used 96kHz recordings for their demonstrations in the International Hifi Exhibition, suggesting that the pathetically small number of 192kHz discs are not necessarily worth exhibiting, given that they don't reference to anything. Sony has the upper hand by a total of 20 to 30 discs and two players, but which system really sounds better can only seriously be

judged when they are tested with identical recordings and peripheral hardware. To date, no one is in a position to undertake such an evaluation.

Considering all these factors together, the benefits of this new generation of equipment will depend mainly on what they sound like playing normal CDs! And so we are experiencing a pan-European paradox: CD players are already treated as a dying generation. The hi-fi community is united in anticipation - but waiting calmly is only possible for those who are already happy with the sound of their CD players. The future of digital hi-fi is currently uncertain, the sticking point being as much the software industry as the consumers (in Germany they have already laid DCC and Minidisc to waste). In the end one thing is certain: he who lives for tomorrow misses out on the present.



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# Incoming!

*At the Novotel show, we were asked many questions over and over again. We thought it would be a good idea to inaugurate our correspondence page with an open letter from the publishers answering those queries.*

## **I've heard about the magazine, but have been unable to get hold of a copy. Where can I buy it?**

Up until this issue, the magazine has been available from selected Hi-Fi dealers, from Tower records in Piccadilly Circus and Birmingham, and on subscription. This issue should see the magazine in the high street newsagents, and with distribution in the USA, Canada, Europe, and the Far East.

## **Who publishes the magazine?**

The magazine is published by Hi-Fi Plus Publications Ltd, which is an independent company whose directors are Fawzy Issa and David Ayers. We are both music and hi-fi enthusiasts who believe that there is a strong demand for an intelligent and well presented magazine which deals with hi-fi from a music lover's point of view.

## **Who are your reviewers?**

We are using a mixture of new and established journalists. We look for three qualities in our writers: their love of music, their ability to understand and get the best from the equipment that they are given, and the quality of their writing.

## **I can predict the results of a review based on the name of the reviewer and the product under review.**

Actually there is a great deal of truth in this, for both music and equipment reviews. Everybody writing for the magazine is a human being saddled with the usual ragbag of likes and dis-

likes, so if a reviewer has a particular penchant for a sound that images strongly with a great deal of ambient information then he will obviously favour the system that tells him the difference between the Albert and Carnegie halls. However, the same system may not impress someone like myself who prefers a bit of blood and thunder. The same principle applies to music reviewing. It's no good expecting me to give a useful opinion on Opera as I don't appreciate it, and I most certainly don't understand it. On the other hand, give me the latest Jethro Tull CD and I know where I stand.

Likewise, nearly all equipment comes with an associated set of ideas which reflect what the designer believes is the best way to get music out of a hi-fi system, and thus dictate the way in which it should be used. There's no point trying to use a flea-powered triode amp in a system built around 350 watt solid-state monoblocks and a pair of low efficiency mini-monitors.

So how do we deal with this at hi-fi? Looking at parallels in the computing world, you would not ask a COBOL expert to write a program in C++ even though the principles of programming are the same whatever the language. It's a case of finding the right person for the job, and this is the approach we take when commissioning reviews.

Dealing with equipment first, as editor Roy is responsible for commissioning the reviews. He knows all of the writers well, including their particular tastes in musical presentation and

their listening rooms. The second point is important. It would be no good giving the KEF Maidstones to someone whose listening room is a mere 12' x 14'; they just won't perform in such a confined space. This way he can ensure that a product is reviewed by someone who will appreciate its virtues. The next part of the process is to ensure that the review describes the sound of the equipment as clearly as possible, pointing out its strengths and weaknesses. This is actually far more important than whether the reviewer likes the product. Every hi-fi component is an engineered set of compromises, and you need to understand where those compromises lie in order to see how well a given component matches your personal preferences.

When it comes to music we take the same care in commissioning reviews. Although our reviewers all have fairly catholic tastes, each has one or two areas of special interest. We ensure that each artist finds an appreciative reviewer. Going back to Jethro Tull, this is a band that has been around for over thirty years and so there are three types of people who are going to read the review:

- the completist who will buy the album whether it is good or bad (me!),
- the people who know the band but only buy the best examples of their work,
- the Tull novices for whom the name is all they know.

It's pointless writing a review for the first group as they will buy the



album anyway. The second Group will want to know how the album compares to the rest of the bands catalogue - 'Is this a must buy or can I leave it?' The final group cannot relate to these comparative references, and need a more descriptive review. I've been raving about the mighty Skunk Anansie for several years now (some would say I've been raving for even longer, but that's another story), but their hard rock style frightens the living daylights out of some of my friends. I don't think they'd have appreciated a blanket recommendation.

Audiophile releases bring their own set of criteria. Many people buying these releases already own the album in one form or another, and they're looking to see if the new version will improve the sound of an old musical friend. Fair enough, but some of this stuff is no longer available in non-audiophile form, so if it's good then why not broadcast it to everyone? All this information in 220 words or less; pity the poor reviewer on some other magazines who has about 100 words to say his piece.

So, to get back to our starting point, there is a definite rationale behind the way we distribute equipment for review. An amplifier from Sludgepump Inc. doesn't automatically go to Montague B Tinear, just because he's mates with the manufacturer. It depends on the nature of the product, and the reviewer's system. If we take a contentious article like the Naim NBL review, this went to Chris Thomas because he's used Naim electronics for years. Initially at least, the majority of people interested in buying the NBL will also be Naim owners, so Chris is uniquely placed to explain how the speaker works in that context, as well as how it differs from the previous models. But one of those differences is the NBL's much higher sensitivity, which makes it far more widely applicable, so don't be surprised to see a follow up article by a different writer,

using the NBL on the end of different systems. We don't play favourites when it comes to review products, we just give them to the person who will generate the most useful information for you, the reader.

### **Are you going to be publishing lists of recommended products, or awarding 'Best Buys'?**

No! A bold statement, and one that needs a little clarification. If you have been reading the magazine from issue one you will see that we consider the particular component to be but a single cog in a system. If you put the same cog in another system, then it may not mesh and you will not get the performance of which it is capable. In fact a component that in absolute terms is actually less able may perform better in the context of the system. A list of recommended components is an invitation to create a shopping list of incompatible items that when connected up will send the cat running for the garden. Use the magazine to get a feel for the sort of components you want, find a dealer that offers some of these items, and let him demonstrate the value of system synergy.

### **Doesn't the fact that the manufacturers advertise in the magazine mean that you won't give their products a bad review?**

This was one of the most commonly asked questions at the show, so the thought of some sort of payola is obviously firmly sited in the zeitgeist. The answer to this problem, and it could be a problem if we didn't pay attention, is really quite simple. Firstly, as explained above, we take a lot of trouble to use writers who understand, and will take the time and effort to get the best out of, the equipment that we request for review. We expect the manufacturers to explain the product, and suggest synergistic ancillary components, and we encourage

them to liaise closely with the reviewer, ensuring that the sound we experience is representative. Where new technology or thinking is involved, we will allow the designer to explain it in an interview. In this way the review process is **co-operative**, with the manufacturer seeing the care that has gone into the process, and so when we publish the review the opinions expressed are respected as being genuine and well thought out. Does that mean that we'll never publish a bad review? You'll note that we choose the products that we write about, and we don't do it blind. We'd rather get it right than get it first (we're not a free developmental aid), so when we select a product for review it's for a reason. There is lots of equipment out there and a limited number of pages in the magazine, so we would rather tell you about the good stuff.

Additionally we have a company policy that equipment offered for review is, without exception, returned to the manufacturer/importer. It is important to us that reviewers own their own system, and if a reviewer wants to purchase something for himself, then the appropriate (trade) price must be paid. Long term loans of equipment can only be negotiated through the magazine, and are extremely rare. In this way we avoid the creation of unhealthy relationships or dependence between suppliers and reviewers. We expect manufacturers to respect our judgements. We have to respect their property, and that means returning it.

However, there are two exceptions. Cables and supports can make or break both the bank and a system, so we work closely with a range of manufacturers to ensure that our reviewers have a number of (otherwise unaffordable) options on hand. Spending money on wire is hard to justify at the best of times. Doing it two or three times over? Work it out for yourselves....



**We like the fact that the magazine does not have too much advertising. Is that situation going to change?**

It is a fact of life that no commercial magazine can survive on sales alone. This is more true of Hi-Fi+ than the competition, as we have a better quality of presentation which of course makes the magazine more expensive to produce. For the magazine to survive long term, we will need to increase the amount of advertising over the next three issues. We are acutely aware that careless placement of advertising will make the magazine less readable, and we are currently exploring ways to ensure that doesn't happen whilst satisfying the needs of the advertisers. A magazine without adverts would not be desirable, as they can be a useful source of information to the reader. We can't report on or review everything that comes on

to the market and adverts are often a good way of getting that information.

**Some items are priced in DM, why is that?**

Despite the traditional UK view, there is a lot of innovative product coming out of mainland Europe, the USA or the far-east. Some of this gear has yet to be imported into the UK, but it's only a matter of time. Travel to Europe is getting easier and easier, and the web makes access to overseas products far simpler. We are writing about hi-fi as a whole, not just buying it. Otherwise we wouldn't cover very expensive equipment which few of you can afford. Therefore it is entirely appropriate to report on interesting equipment that has yet to make it onto the UK market. Frequently a positive review will prompt an importer to check out the item in question leading to increased availability. Any product

that is reviewed but not yet imported into the UK will be priced in its home currency, or Euros where available.

**What about Home Cinema and multi-channel sound?**

We are, first and foremost, a magazine about high-fidelity sound. Increasingly, that is coming to embrace multi-channel and AV equipment. However, we will be approaching these issues from a high-fidelity perspective, which means that we will be looking at what they can bring to your system without compromising its performance. Are £300 surround sound processors capable of hi-fi performance? We don't think so, and until that changes you won't see them gracing our pages.

In the meantime, happy listening

Dave Ayers and Fawsi Issa



# The Three Lions

## Restaurant Review

What do you get when you mix a non-descript country pub with a Michelin starred chef? The Three Lions, that's what. It's always cause for concern when one of your favourite restaurants changes hands, but sensibly, Mike and Jayne Womersley haven't tried to maintain the inimitable style of the former owner, the opulent (in every sense of the word) Mr Wadsack.

In its new guise, the Lions is a leaner, fitter and all together less extravagant experience. The compact menu may be small but it's beautifully formed (ten starters, ten main courses, with fish a speciality), and the wine list is also of manageable size. As a regular visitor, such a short menu could be cause for concern, but each time I cast an eye over that blackboard, I find myself torn re-visiting past pleasures and venturing into pastures new. The

Terrine of Duck and Foie Gras holds a particularly enduring fascination. This is Michelin standard cuisine, but with friendly service, ideal portions, and without the inconsequential fripperies (and their not so inconsequential effect on the bill).

Fifteen minutes due south of Naim Audio, owners of the black stuff now have the perfect excuse to deliver their equipment for that long overdue update. Treat your amps to a service, and then treat yourself at the same time. And for the rest of us? Who needs an excuse anyway! Travellers from further a field can even stay the night. At £25-£30 a head plus wine for three courses, this has to rate as one of the all time great culinary bargains.



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# Novotel Show

by Roy Gregory

The industry gathered at the Hammersmith Novotel for its now traditional September shin-dig, and aside from the new venue, and the headcount to see who was missing, the big story was definitely the enhanced digital formats. This was the official launch of DVD-Audio in the UK, and in the blue corner John Bamford of Pioneer was doing his normal enthusiastic best to introduce the general public to the considerable benefits of 24/192. His structured dems were packed for the whole show, and such was the demand that poor John staggered out of the demonstration studio at the end of each day, looking like an exhausted desert traveller in search of an oasis. The Sony SACD dem was just as popular, and just as hard to get into, with Eric Kingdon seen to do his diplomatic best to prop up the entente cordiale and smooth the frustrations of foreign visitors who'd travelled an awfully long way to see a 'Demonstration Full' sign. The Sony SACD machine sounded just as good as it had done in Frankfurt.

By way of a little light relief we offered industry luminaries the opportunity to offer their very own sound-bites. To prevent confusion we asked them all the same questions:

Why are you here?

What is the most interesting thing that you've brought to or seen at the show?

What is the most interesting product you've seen this year?

The responses make interesting reading.

Meanwhile, stealing a march on the big shots, Marantz' Ken Ishiwata absconded with the Red corner by using an altogether more modest set-up and a hotel bedroom. The system consisted of a Marantz SACD player and five channel amp, driving two and a half pairs of budget Tannoy speakers. Playing a Philips direct to tape, five channel SACD recording of a live classical concert, the sound quality was astonishing. String tone was spot on, while the warmth and humanity in the introductions between pieces was natural and full of humour. Listening, I was struck by the absence of digital artefacts and the uncanny gestalt recognition of that particular quality that makes live music instantly recognisable. Despite the cost of a first generation player, the demonstration was designed to show that you can enjoy the benefits of enhanced digital in even the most modest systems. And if the new formats follow the developmental curve of CD, then the cost of high quality sound could reach an all time low. It's way too early for definite conclusions, and an awful lot will rest on recording quality and record industry take-up, but for the moment the future looks bright, and it doesn't sound orange.

Elsewhere, analogue raised its head with an almost bloody minded indifference to the technological earth tremors going on in the parallel universe. Silvernote [0044(0)1992-620905] appeared with a host of dramatic marble plinthed designs, complete with re-manufactured SME and Rega arms. These were prototypes, with a carbon-fibre model waiting in the wings, but they served as a timely reminder of earlier (and gentler)

times. Loricraft/Garrard [0044(0)1488-72267] also put in an appearance, showing the 501 E.M. Ortofon Royal, complete with the rarely seen Ortofon 309 12" arm and SPU Royal cartridge, and a sophisticated new power supply. And Simon Yorke finally made it to a London show, bringing both the S7 and S9 with him, but more on that later [0044(0)1207-580334].

Dutch company Sphinx Laboratories [www.sphinxlab.com] displayed an impressive array of fully balanced electronics with attractive prices given the beautiful construction and finish. These slim-line amplifiers and CD players are well regarded in the states, but have yet to find distribution in the UK. The attention to detail and sensible engineering (evidenced by the appropriate application of premium parts, and the plethora of separate power supplies) suggests that this may well be one to watch.

Another brand to finally reach these shores is Spectral. Arguably the most consistently respected solid-state amps in the US market, and certainly one of the longest running, these impressed CT so much that he bought a pair! The styling hasn't changed from day one, and the pale aluminium fascias and waisted knobs still look as cool as they did back then. Expect to pay around five thousand a box for the foundation models (including cables). Quality like this never comes cheap. If you've got deep pockets and the long arms to match, speak to RT Services on 0044(0)1235-810455, once you've read the review in this issue.

The good news from c-j is that ART style engineering has filtered down to the almost affordable in the shape of the 4K Premier 17 LS. And it even ▶

# My, what large numbers you've got...

by Jason Hector



Drawing the short straw, yours truly got detailed to check-out the current state of the new digital formats. This is possibly the most interesting and, unfortunately, confusing situation in hi-fi. The problem is the 'formats' part of this. Note the plural. There are two, DVD-A (Digital Versatile Disc - Audio) and SACD (Super Audio Compact Disc). Suffice to say DVD-A uses longer words and faster sampling compared to CD (up to 192kHz and 24 bit) whereas SACD uses a bit-stream system called Direct Stream Digital. Both systems require a new player, although SACD is dual layer, with one layer carrying CD data which is playable on a standard machine (at CD performance levels). Both formats also allow multi channel. It is worth mentioning that the previously released 96kHz / 24bit recordings are not true DVD-A, they just use DVD-V discs for higher bit rate audio. At the Hammersmith show there were several DVD-A and SACD demonstrations along with audio only DVD-V. Because of the differences in system, number of channels and material no direct comparison is possible so the impressions that follow are just that - first impressions.

Put simply, I consistently preferred the SACD

demonstrations to the DVD-A and DVD-V Audio. The DVD based systems (Path Premiere, Pioneer and Technics) were very good at improving on CD, giving increased air and dynamic range, but sonically they remained an extension of CD, and still recognizably digital in character. Using high quality original recordings and transfers, and making use of a new range of high end electronics, Pioneer gave an admirable demonstration of these improvements in less than ideal conditions, with up to 5 channels driven. Path, using 2-channel 24/96 DVD-V also demonstrated some improvement over CD replay. But the DVD formats still lacked substance and left me with that 'something missing' feeling.

The SACD rooms (SONY and Marantz) were excellent demonstrations of the potential of this format. SONY were doing direct comparative demonstrations of CD against SACD, using a dual layer disk and, again, a new high end range of electronics. And realism returned to the music. The SACD improved on the CD in a similar manner to the DVD formats, but without the continued presence of 'digititis'. The combination of improved dynamics and more natural tone and timing gripped the listener, the songs ending all too soon for me.

Even more impressive was the low-key Marantz set-up, using a prototype SACD player to replay special five-channel software through a basic multi-channel amp and budget Tannoy speakers. Ken Ishiwata lived up to his reputation. Despite the genuinely budget approach, the sound was a revelation. Few people that heard it could believe five small and very cheap boxes could produce music with such authority and clarity. Again the natural sound was extremely musical and very enjoyable, allowing a real connection with the performers. For me, it wasn't so much the five channels that impressed but the natural sense of musical coherence and flow.

So what are the conclusions? Both of these formats improve on the standard Red-book CD. But overall, and in the less than ideal conditions, I found myself comfortably preferring the SACD rooms to the DVD rooms. Is SACD the better format? Only time and the software releases will tell, but if I had to decide now it would be SACD all the way.

► looks prettier than the more expensive models! Audiofreaks [0044(0)181-948-4153] used it to good advantage partnered with a solid-state MF 2500 amp from c-j, and Avalon Opus speakers. Front-ends came from Muse and Kuzma, and cabling was from Cardas. The whole system was a welcome pool of tranquillity amidst the heaving mayhem of the corridors, the Avalons sounding better than I've ever heard them before. The sound was spacious and unforced, neutral and dynamic, with a relaxed and mid-hall quality that was just what the doctor ordered after the in-your-face and over the top assault of so many rooms where you had to sit almost on

top of the speakers. The new Kuzma turntable is a monster. All stacked up cylinders it looks like something off of the set of a Fritz Lang movie. The foot high concentric column that makes up the arm pillar incorporates the niftiest LCD read-out for precision VTA adjustment that I've ever come across, while a simple lever allows instant compensation for 180g pressings. Wonderful! Maybe it was the Shun Mook room treatment, but Branko displayed the serene smile of a Balkan Buddha.

Audion [0044(0)1903-750755] launched an interesting zero feedback, transformer coupled, hybrid integrated amplifier. The slim-line casework of the

Platinum puts out a very healthy 30 watts per channel, and costs £1395. At the other end of the scale, Rotel [0044(0)1908-317707] showed the humungous RB-1090 amplifier, big brother to the RB-991. At 380 watts per channel for £1575, it should provide interesting competition for the big NAD. And Bryston showed up in silver finish in the PMC room. Miss Jones, did you let your hair down? Gone is the slightly shabby pro feel, replaced by sleek sophistication. What a difference a finish makes.

Naim ([www.naim-audio.com](http://www.naim-audio.com)) were out in force, reflecting the importance of the new NAP500 power amp. The single finished example of the two- ►

ultimate



▶ box unit had pride of place atop the RackTime equipment supports, while three production prototypes drove the NBLs via a SNAXO active cross-over. Sound quality was promising, getting better as the days went by, and come Sunday I felt the new components were adding low frequency authority and tonal sophistication to the traditional Naim virtues. The new amp will retail for around 10K a copy and should start shipping in December. Styling is a refreshingly sophisticated departure from the Naim norm, following the trend established by the NBL. What price second hand six-packs?

Talking of six-packs, Linn ([www.linn.co.uk](http://www.linn.co.uk)) went two better, playing active Keltiks powered by floor to ceiling panels constructed from eight Klimax power amps and the matching crossovers. The conspicuous consumption continued with the CD12 and an AV5103 System Controller. This was more of a static display which also had a system playing, and it certainly presented the Linn products in an attractive and stylish setting. Expect to see more companies adopting this approach.

At the other end of the active scale, Densen [[www.densen.com](http://www.densen.com)] announced a new, user adjustable active crossover which can be mounted inside their amplifiers. With variable crossover points, slopes and gain this should allow you to mimic the crossover characteristics of almost any speaker, thus allowing active drive. Each board has both high and low pass filters, making it compatible with two or more way speakers. Obviously, more drive units means more boards, each one costing around the £300 mark. A universal active crossover is the rock upon which many a talented designer has foundered. If the Densen unit delivers the goods then it will represent both a major achievement and a versatile upgrade path for Densen users. We await developments with interest. Finally, and arguably of more impor-

tance, Densen were using a production sample of their long awaited CD player. We should, at long last, get to review it, and if it realises the potential of early samples the performance should match the crisp and clean looks.

It was difficult to move for Italian manufacturers, for whom the UK has obviously become the market of choice. (I hope KK can keep up!) Curvaceous wood cladding was everywhere, but one of the most interesting designs came from Strumenti Acustici di Precisione. A plain lab style box with dual mono volume controls, the SAP Anniversary is a line integrated, parallel single ended, triode OTL design. Running four 6AS7G power tubes a side, the designer rates it at 18 watts per channel. Fed by the Simon Yorke S7/Jan Allaertz front end through its



Synthesis Art in Music Naif valve integrated.

own stand alone phono stage, and driving the company's own 94dB/w speakers, the sound was unbelievably open, pure and transparent, with the speed and stability that I've come to associate with the Yorke turntable. Estimated price in the UK? £3300, which could make this the amp of choice for users of old quads. Interested parties should contact SAP on 0039(0)89-250979.

Moving onto speakers, Elac [[www.elac.com](http://www.elac.com)] showed the CL330, a sort of pregnant big sister to the CL310, much beloved by PC. The bulged cabinet and 180mm bass-mid unit extends the already impressive bass of the smaller speaker. Reality bites when you realise that it also bulges the price out to £2500 including

stands. Meanwhile, thrusting new British manufacturer Cura [0044(0)1252-401401] were playing their new five litre CA5. Aimed at the 'LS3/5a with attitude' market, the new model had all the Cura hallmarks (excellent finish, high domestic compatibility, Cliffcon connectors), and a retail price of \$400. Played with a Talk Electronics Cyclone and Thunder CD/Amp combination, this £1500 plus cables set-up was making waves amongst the punters. We got lots of comments on the stand, and when I went to investigate I found one potential customer literally purring with pleasure.

Evet & Shaw ([www.evetandshaw.com](http://www.evetandshaw.com)) were playing examples of the first commercially available speaker to use the Ray Kimber developed DiAural crossover technology. They were running comparisons with a conventional crossover, but unfortunately your reporter was side tracked by what has to be the prettiest power-amp since the Lecson. The Flatte 50 puts out 50 watts a side from its compact dimensions, and retails state-side for \$2K + tax. I want one, and I want it now!!! In fact, make that two, because they do mono-blocks. Expect a review just as soon as we can beg, borrow or steal one (or even two).

Acoustic Solutions ([www.acoustic-solutions.co.uk](http://www.acoustic-solutions.co.uk)) was a new name to me, and their stand-mounted speaker design, the Eight, together with its space frame stand are outwardly pretty ordinary. But what impressed me was how much fun these guys (and gals) were having. Day four and their enthusiasm was still bubbling infectiously. I had to take a closer look. What I found was a beautifully constructed and bevelled, solid oak cabinet, matched to a solidly welded stand. Despite the battleship construction, the end result is actually extremely elegant. And it makes rather excellent music (driven by a modest Sugden set-up). Priced at \$1375 (plus \$179 ▶

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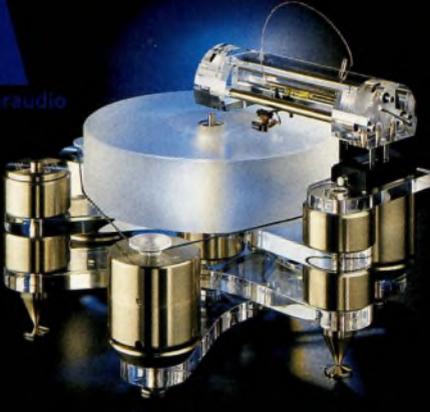
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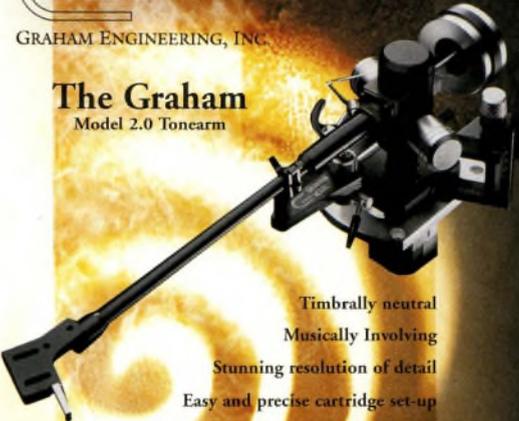
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► for the stands) the Eight isn't a particularly easy load on your amp or wallet, but its performance will reward perseverance. Definitely another one to watch.

Horns were much in evidence too, with GT Audio giving the monster AvantGarde Trios their UK debut. Unfortunately, and in common with the rest of the show, the room simply wouldn't support controlled deep bass. The best sounding rooms were those with small speakers, which must leave people wondering what all the fuss is about. That aside, it was a pleasure just to see the Trios, resplendent in



Acoustic Solutions Eight.

royal blue.

Loth X ([www.lothx.com](http://www.lothx.com)) had an interesting range of designs based around the Stamm driver, a proprietary unit which resembles the familiar Lowther multi cone drivers. Sound was impressive, driven by their own battery powered pre and one and a half watt power amps. The massive clear perspex turntable carried the rarely seen Dynavector DV507 tonearm, and a wood bodied Grado cartridge. The speaker in use (1450mm high, 550mm deep, claimed 104dB and -3dB at 30Hz) would cost around £8.5K, but they're planning a bigger model! ►



Ricardo Franassovich, Absolute Sounds

**WAYH?** To show the very best of high-end, and to do it in a slightly different way this year.

**WMIAS?** For myself, we have the new Krell sub-woofer which is an extraordinary piece, one-off in the world. It has different curves and slopes that you can adjust by remote control, and it will produce about 120dB at 20Hz from a resonance free cabinet. We have new Martin-Logans, including a new model to replace the monolith. It's a little smaller in size and will cost about £9K. There are also new entry level Logans.

**MIPTY?** It has to be the Krell sub-woofer.



Doug Graham, Naim Audio

**WAYH?** To launch the new NAP500 power amp and NBL loudspeakers.

**WMIAS?** Ours!

**MIPTY?** Hi-fi+ magazine.

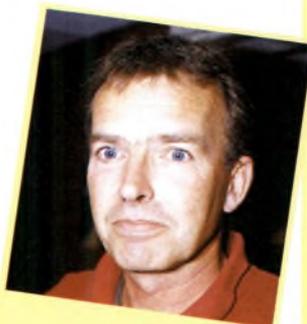


Giuseppe Licciardello, Audio Reference (Italy)

**WAYH?** First, to listen to the new products presented by the manufacturers that we represent, like Michell, Pro-Ac, JPW and Target. Also, I am looking to see if there are new products that I should be interested in.

**WMIAS?** The new Pro-Ac Century One and Two. This is the best sound here.

**MIPTY?** The new DiAural crossover from Ray Kimber.



Phil March, Phonography

**WAYH?** To meet old friends and have a look at new products.

**WMIAS?**

**MIPTY?** That's difficult, but probably the Music Works mains cables.



Craig Milnes, Wilson-Benesch

**WAYH?** Because Chord Electronics wanted to use the Bishop loud-speaker at the show.

**WMIAS?** I haven't got out of the room long enough to look around the show.

**MIPTY?** The Sony SACD player.



Frank Kuzma, c/o Audio Freaks

**WAYH?** We have a new turntable, the Stabi XL, with a 24 Kilo platter, and easy adjustment of VTA.

**WMIAS?** That!

**MIPTY?** It's not really a product, but the battle between the competing digital formats.

Wadia 270



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► In an unusually tweak free show, I was pleased to see my current cause celebre, RDC, making an impact. The Garrard turntables in the Kondo/ Marshall room (see separate news story) were guilty of conspicuous consumption, as were the tube electronics. Reassuring to know that as august a personage as Kondo-san shares my enthusiasm. Expect to hear an awful lot more about this material, both in the form of isolation cones and supports, and in the construction of manufactured sub assemblies. Plans for an RDC bodied cartridge from a major manufacturer are already well advanced, and anybody who doesn't investigate further has only themselves to blame.

For further information, contact Loricraft on the number above.

Which finally brings me to my personal high points of the show. In no particular order, I would draw your attention to:

Synthesis Art In Music (www.synthesis-hi-fi.it), is an Italian company with a complete range of open chassis valve designs that includes everything from a stand alone phono stage, through integrated and pre-amplifiers, to stereo and mono, triode and pentode power amps. Extremely compact and elegant, the red stained woodwork is confined to the chassis frames (where it actually does some good), and I can't avoid the comparison with Leak amps, but ones that went to finishing school

in Milan. However, the *pièce de résistance* was the Naif, a small integrated amp (its footprint fits easily onto the A4 brochure) with Barbi looks, and Barbi colour schemes. Available in orange, purple, yellow, blue and Bianchi green, toned with cream chassis work and valve cages, this is just so darned cute it's almost indecent. Victoria's response to the brochure suggests that the review sample will be followed by an invoice and permanent residence in her study. But the really good bit is the way the Naif combines real Italian style (let's think Alessi or Scarpa here) with the audiophile credibility of dual mono construction and fancy components.

Sugden were making one of ►



George Stanwick, Stanalog Imports

WAYH? I'm here to help Mr van den Hul at the show, and to attend a vdH distributors meeting.  
 WMIAS? With all due modesty, I think that the vdH room has a very interesting presentation of the new van den Hul line of CD's, recorded using the carbon cables, along with a master-tape of the next release.  
 MIPTY? The Sugden Headphone Amplifier.

A.J. van den Hul

WAYH? I am here because of my commitment to audio. When you have been coming for so many years, you cannot stay away. It is like being part of a family.  
 WMIAS? The recordings we have made in digital format, using excellent equipment have brought us very close to the performance. And of course, we are showing our continued commitment to analogue through our range of cartridges.  
 MIPTY? That would definitely be the SACD player from Sony. I am very happy with the sonic results.



Thomas Sillesen, Densen Audio Technologies

WAYH? To sell our products, but also to meet the people that I know in the industry, and hopefully to have a good time and hear some good music.  
 WMIAS? We have brought our new CD player, which is a key product for us.  
 MIPTY? Our CD player. I haven't had the time to look at anything else!



Paul Messenger

WAYH? I've got to write the show up, haven't I.  
 WMIAS? It's got to be the NAP 500 hasn't it.  
 MIPTY? The Veritas Lowthers.



John Bamford, Pioneer

WAYH? To demonstrate prototypes of our new DVD-Audio products which will be available here in the spring.  
 WMIAS? Our DVD-Audio products, and for the first time in the UK, we are showing our DVD-Recorder.  
 MIPTY? Probably our DVD-Audio products, which we are showing for....

▶ the best sounds at the show, using a CD21, A21 amp and Totem Arro speakers. At a shade over £2.5K plus cables, this was an awesome performance. But the real star was next door. The new Class A Head-phone Amplifier/ Pre-Amplifier does exactly what its name suggests, allowing you to switch between three inputs, and control the level of either the superb in-built headphone amp, or a conventional system. What stopped me in my tracks was the gorgeous casework. Casework so cool that it seemed completely incompatible with the £450 price-tag. Who said you can't teach an old dog new tricks. Sugden may have been around under uninter-



J. E. Sugden Class A Headphone Pre-Amplifier.

rupted ownership for longer than any other electronics company in the UK, and they may not have the highest profile, but we've long been hearing rumours from the North-East of outstanding value and sound quality. It looks like the aesthetics just caught up (not forgetting the high-end Masterclass range of course). How long before that casework encompasses a whole range of equally cute little products? Contact Audio Synergy on 0044(0)1924-406016. Definitive Audio [0044(0)1159-733222], newly appointed distributors for the highly regarded Helios CD ▶



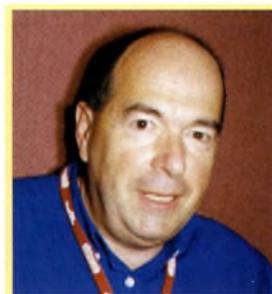
Peter Suchy, ClearAudio

**WAYH?** To support our new distributor, Audio Reference.  
**WMIAS?** Our new stylus gauge and the Victory High Output cartridge.  
**MIPTY?** Oh, give me a break. Ahhh. The ClearAudio spade, a combination spade and 4mm cable termination which is a really neat solution to speaker termination. (Reader be warned - this is a precis of a ten minute eulogy!)



Eric Kingdon, Sony UK Ltd

**WAYH?** We are here to demonstrate Super Audio CD.  
**WMIAS?** We have the new ES series SACD player, ES SACD compatible amplifier and the Prestige range of SACD products.  
**MIPTY?** No comment.



Martin Colloms

**WAYH?** To support my oldest magazine, Hi-Fi News, to see all my friends, and to see what sort of show it is.  
**WMIAS?** A new single-ended pre-amp from Conrad-Johnson, an evolution of the A.R.T, which started at £16K and has now



Nigel and Terry, Loricraft/Garrard

**WAYH?** (Terry) Because if you're not here people think you've gone out of business, so if you turn up, they know you're still about, even if it means coming to this abysmal place.  
**WMIAS?** (Terry) We have a new power supply developed by Nigel here. We've undersold our power

supplies, which are really very clever (Nigel's rather a good engineer!), and it's about time we marketed them properly.  
**MIPTY?** (Terry) The Garrard 501 with Ortofon 12" arm that our German distributor Martina has brought to the show. I've never seen it before. (Nigel) The most interesting thing I've seen is a French Class D amplifier driving a sub-woofer with 3000 watts and motional feedback.



Lucien Pichette, Avalon Acoustics

**WAYH?** We are introducing the new Opus loudspeaker to the UK.  
**WMIAS?** I haven't had a chance to look around.  
**MIPTY?** Definitely DVD.

reached down to the £4K level. But bear in mind that I haven't seen the whole show yet.  
**MIPTY?** The KEF Maidstone. It was difficult to write a review that didn't come across as offensive, but was fair to the product.

▶ players, were making splendid noises via their Living Voice Auditorium Avatar speakers. The big brother to the popular Auditorium comes in two versions; the Avatar, with up-rated drivers and crossover components (£2.4K), and the Avatar OBX-R which adds external crossovers, optimally spaced in their own cabinets, even better components, Scanspeak Revalatortweeters, and triple braced main cabinets (£4K). "Charming, charming, charming. Believable sound on really difficult string tone" said the proprietor. He wasn't far wrong.

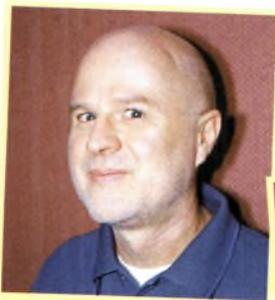
Cymbol Electronics ([www.cymbol.mcmail.com](http://www.cymbol.mcmail.com)) is not a name I'm familiar with, but I was sufficiently impressed by the results they were

getting out of Gradient speakers (one of the few full-range models at the show to do itself justice) to enquire further. Apparently, this is the engineering team that was behind the excellent Onix products, before the company was sold to far-eastern ownership. Smart, full width chrome frontpanels are a world away from the black chocolate box Onix products, but the amps are still suitably minimalist. The HDCD player weighs in at £1349, whilst the remote control amps start at £699. They even offer optional MM/MC phono boards and a Digital Audio Broadcast tuner (as well as a more conventional RDS model). My limited experience with the Gradient speakers has all been good, and the

system here was really singing. Both brands deserve a lot more attention.

And finally, of all the really expensive systems, the one that really impressed was The Path Premiere AV demonstration (I didn't hear the system on music). Hopelessly over the top, with just the Levinson pre-amp costing more than most peoples' systems, the sound quality was exceptional, but even that paled against the picture quality. The Furuja projector is by far the best I've seen, looking more like film than TV. The vivid colours of The Fifth Element had real punch and impact, and there was a fluidity to the action and movement that is rare on non-film systems. Best at show? At a strangely disjointed and claustrophobic

event it has to be the Marantz SACD demonstration, combining as it does the twin images of very real technological advance and the chaos of a format war. If (and that's a big 'if') this is representative of what we can expect from enhanced digital technology within a few years, and in the audio real world, then things are definitely on the up. ▶+



Ray Kimber, Kimber Cables

WAYH? The first licensees for our new DiAural crossover technology, Evett and Shaw, are here, so I'm along to help explain the technology a little bit.

WMIAS? I haven't gotten out of the room yet, so I just don't know.

MIPTY? It would have to be our KS 20-20 single-ended digital interconnect, which has no ground loop through it at all, and reshapes the digital waveform. That and the DiAural circuit, which has restored the enjoyment of listening to music for me.



Martina Schoener, c/o Loricraft/Clearlight

WAYH? To help promote Garrard and RDC products.

WMIAS? The RDC products which we have used in the Kondo room.

MIPTY? The Korean vinyl downstairs. This is fantastic.



Russ Andrews

WAYH? I've been trying to work it out since I got here. Every year I get a year older and I say to myself "Don't do it again!", and every year I make the same mistake.

WMIAS? The Evett and Shaw DiAural loudspeaker.

MIPTY? I refuse to answer that question on the grounds that it might incriminate me, and what's my sex-life got to do with you anyway?



Miles and Lisa Astor, Ultimate Audio Magazine

WAYH? Well, we're here in part to support our magazine Ultimate Audio, and our new distributor, Steven Carr of Vivante. And I fancied visiting London to shop for records. There might even still be some here.

WMIAS? I think the number of US manufacturers debuting products here is interesting. The Madrigal electronics in the Path Premier room are nicely presented, and so are the Inner Sound electrostatics.

MIPTY? Wow. We get so much interesting stuff through our hands that I'd almost have to go by categories. Certainly the Sony SACD player has been one of the most interesting products we've had in the house. I've also been quite taken with the Vienna Acoustics Mahler, and the Conrad-Johnson A.R.T. is still doing it after several years, so that gets a vote too.

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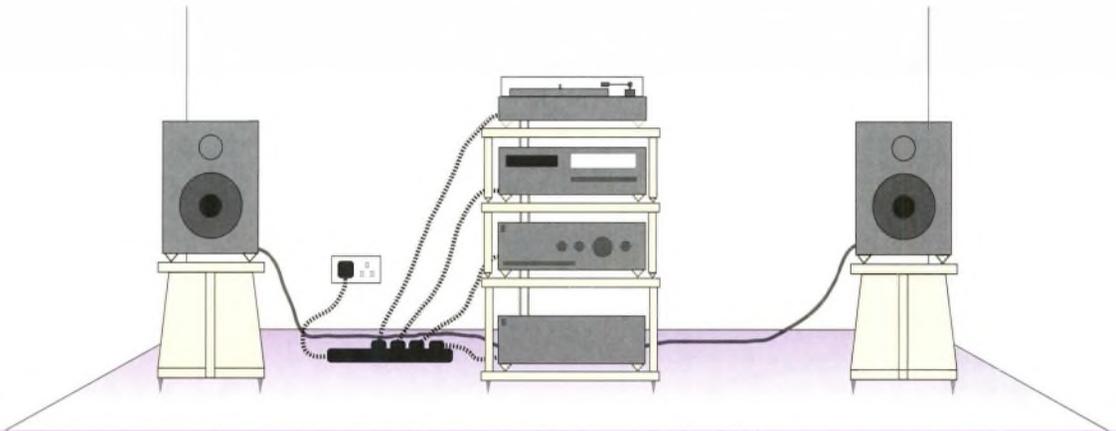


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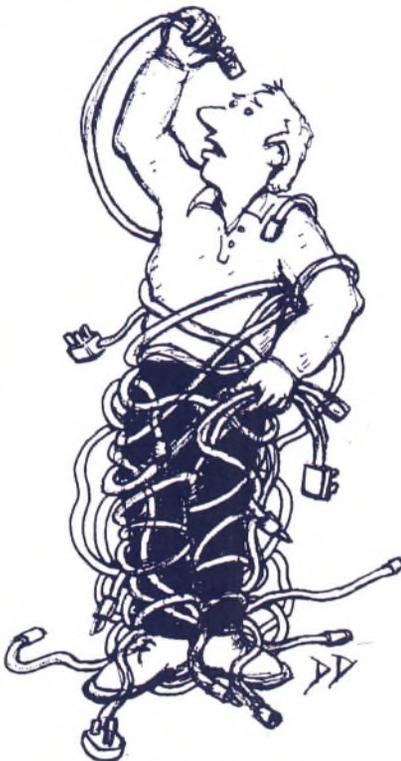
# The Mains, Part II

by Roy Gregory and Jon Marks

Having spent some time discussing what goes on between your electricity meter and your wall sockets, it's time to move onto the question of getting power from the wall and into your equipment. Not exactly a new issue in these pages, this is a chance for a rather more comprehensive over-view of the solutions on offer.

We've tended to divide them up by category as much as possible, although some products cross the boundaries. What becomes apparent is that the nature of the benefits is fairly consistent; all these products are attacking the same basic problem, albeit in different ways. With each successive product group we spend less time on the specific sonic benefits, not because they are less important, but because you don't want to wade through the whole lot all over again. The thing to realise here is that no one product provides all the answers. What is required is a layered defence; the various types of product used together.

Finally, before you go any further, it's essential to understand that this is an environmental issue. No you don't have to join the Green party. What you do have to do is realise that each house and situation is unique, making home experimentation a must. And don't be bowled over by instant results. All these products suffer, to a greater or lesser extent, from charge effects, so they need to be in your system for at least 24 hours before you start drawing conclusions. Believe me, you are going to hear the real effect when you remove them, not when you put them in.



## Mains Leads and Distribution Blocks

One of the more surprising facts to emerge from our listening is the superiority of star earthed distribution blocks over direct connection to that old favourite, multiple wall sockets, a proposal that first graced our pages courtesy of the German Audioplan mains system, but which has received enthusiastic support from the Music Works range of products, extensively covered in Issues 2 and 3. I won't repeat JH's findings here, but it's clearly time to look at a few of the alternatives out there. Division of labour being essential to retain any sort of sanity, I parcelled two readily available cable sets off to JM.

The Kimber 8TC and Sonic Link S-Gold and LAT International Mains Blocks and Leads.

A mains lead is a mains lead is a mains lead, at least until you look inside. Not only do they vary enormously in construction, but they offer very different sonic characteristics as well. Whereas the 8TC High-Current Powerkords from Kimber rely on a multi-conductor RF defeating woven construction to do their thing, Sonic Link's S-Gold consists of three silver-plated conductors hidden away beneath a yellow sheath of silicone rubber. Differentiating the more expensive Hard-Link version from the standard cable is the rhodium plating on its pins and connectors, which raises the price from £70 for a 1.25m stretch to £125. A Hardlink mains block was also supplied for review, this fairly mundane looking black plastic four-way coming in at \$240 with two metres of trailing lead. A red neon signals that it's hooked up to the mains.

Lining up alongside the Sonic Links were the aforementioned 8TC High-Current Powerkords (£125 for 5ft. lengths) and a six-way Kimber distribution block (\$223.95). This had a trailing lead of 8TC, was wired internally with Kimber TCX and came fitted with a SuperClamp to protect against spikes and surges. While the cheaper 4TC leads rely on four-strand conductors for Live and Neutral, the 8TC features - no prizes for guessing - eight a side.





The earth, however, is actually a non-woven,

heavy-gauge multi-strand cable.

Having spent some time with both the Sonic Links and Kimbers in the past, and in a variety of set-ups, I had a fair idea of what each was likely to do when supplying my review equipment (Trio L-07D turntable/SME V arm/Cartridge Man Music Maker; T+A CD 1210 R CD player; battery-powered DPA 50S pre; Trio L-08M monoblocs; Jamo Concert 8 loudspeakers). In spite of the question of system compatibility, both manufacturers' products performed pretty much as expected.

Delivering the juice as Bonny Raitt's *Luck Of The Draw* album (Capitol CDEST 2145) was playing, the array of Sonic Link leads was characterised by a powerful, meaty bottom-end and a midrange and treble that were a touch dry. These twin traits were particularly obvious on some of the more bump-'n'-grind tracks like 'Tangled And Dark' and 'Slow Ride', whose bass guitar and drums certainly weren't short of weight. Vocals and cymbals, on the other hand, lost a smidgen of their natural tonal colour and detail. The Jamo's aren't the most inherently rich or warm speakers anyway, but the S-Gold and Hardlinks were playing a role in this too.

Natacha Atlas' *Gedida* CD (Mantra MNTCD 1014) is packed full of addictive Arabian rhythms. Here, these cables' bias towards the bass turned out to be a bit of a double-edged

sword: there was nothing wrong with the quantity, but the quality could have been firmer. As it was, a lack of grip and speed in the lowest couple of octaves gave the Sonic Links an almost 'hesitant' manner when it came to pace and musicality. For example, the loping bass line that underpins 'Bastet' dropped a notch or two on the odometer, and faster songs ('The Righteous Path' and 'Mahlabeya') slowed slightly.

In terms of amplification, a better match was a modified Mission Cyrus One. This 25watter doesn't pack sufficient current to give the Jamos' mid/bass units a real work-out below 100Hz, so the extra oomph provided by the Sonic Links worked nicely.



Swapping over to the

Kimbers offered a very different perspective on things. The six-way block and Powerkords opened up the sound stage, sharpened imaging and generally yielded a faster, more musical sound with a far quieter background.

Returning to Natacha Atlas and Bonnie Raitt, there was greater immediacy and scale to both albums. Dancier discs like Presence's *All Systems Gone* (Pagan Records CD1010) possessed more of that vital 'boogie factor' as well. The Kimbers cut a real niche for themselves on one of Opus 3's HDCD recordings, the Scandinavian Jazz (mmm, nice!) of Cirrus' *Land's End* (Opus 3 CD 19803). The Powerkords smoothness and well-balanced tonality did a fine job of rendering Ari Haraldsson's sax and Peter Nilsson's

acoustic guitar. It was another set of cables, the green AC-2 leads and matching six-way extension block from American outfit LAT International, which allowed me to put the performance of the Kimbers and



Sonic Links in perspective. These heavy-gauge, silver-clad conductors in their Teflon insulation and woven RF shielding have spent the last six or seven months in my system. Pulling them out and replacing them with the Powerkords, I felt that, in spite of their superior smoothness and transparency, the Kimbers couldn't match the LATs in the foot-tapping stakes. Where the latter seemed to concentrate more on individual instrumental strands, the former preferred the big picture.



It was a similar story as far as this month's other reviewee went. The S-Golds had a more finely-etched presentation than the LATs, which was easiest to pin down on cymbal crashes - the delicacy and control of the yellow cables made the greens sound slightly brash by comparison. However, the tables were turned in the rhythm department again, the LATs swifter and more enjoyable at the bottom-end. Which of these three wiring set-ups you choose will depend very much on what you want from your system. The Sonic Links are an effective way of fleshing out a lean bass and adding some high-frequency sparkle. The Kimbers' main strengths lie in freedom from background 'mush' and overall lucidity. The LATs (which will cost you £89 for 5ft. runs and £179 for the block) prize musicality over absolute clarity and insight.

### The Einstein Octopus and Audioplan PowerStar Distribution Blocks

More exotic than the familiar Kimber and Sonic Link products, both these hail from Germany, a country which has been taking the whole issue of mains far more seriously than us for years. The Einstein Octopus is an exceptionally neat eight way distribution block built into a triangular section ▶

chassis. For those of you who find the chrome a bit gaudy, it's also available in regulation black. It has an IEC mains input rather than a hard wired lead, and two banks of four 13amp sockets, the red ones being intended for digital products, the black for analogue. This is where the product boundaries start to blur, the red sockets incorporating a degree of filtering designed to isolate the digital products from the outside



world, and the analogue ones from the digital. Even without that, the Octopus stands out as an extremely neat solution to the horny problem of supplying enough sockets for a hi-fi system. The IEC input also means that it's easy to optimise both the trailing lead length, and to unify your choice of mains leads throughout the system. Very sano. Incidentally, in its native market the octopus is fitted with German style sockets. These use fuse-less, reversible plugs that allow you to optimise the mains phase of each piece of equipment in the system. They also sound better than their UK counterparts. I'm sure that importer Midland Audio Exchange could special order you a German version, but make sure you've got a ready supply of continental mains plugs.

In use, the octopus was an immediate success. It provided a far sweeter treble balance, improved dynamics and far more dimensional images. I used it mainly with the Meracus/AudioPhysic Virgo system, and started off by plugging both the CD player and the integrated amp into the 'analogue' sockets. The benefits were obvious, especially in the improved low level detail and musical subtlety. Power leads aren't just about more wallop. Swapping the CD player to the 'digital'

sockets brought further improvements, vindicating the design approach. Timing improved appreciably, and music was tonally more natural, even nylon strung guitars sounding less synthetic and more like themselves! Standard touchstone for much of the listening was Nanci Griffith's 'Listen To The Radio' (*Storms* MCADMCG 6066), and with the Einstein wired up as intended, but with standard leads, the musical benefits were clear to hear, compared to a good quality extension lead. Suddenly the backing singer stage left was properly separated and his contribution apparent. The piano took up a proper supporting role, and the focus and separation of each voice and instrument across the soundstage was miles better, especially Nanci's characteristic lead vocal.

Adopting a rather different approach to the same problem, Audioplan's modular mains system is built around the seven socket, circular and star earthed, PowerStar 'G' distribution block (DM 398 - \$1 =c .DM 3).



Fixings in its base allow for wall mounting. This comes with a metre of Audioplan's PowerCord mains lead, and as you can see from the picture, uses the aforementioned continental connections, each socket being colour coded for correct mains polarity. In keeping with their modular approach, the filter element is optional and external, in the form of the FineFilter II. This

is covered in the appropriate section.

Used with both standard moulded leads and Audioplan's PowerCords (DM 180), the PowerStar excelled at the retrieval of ambient information and low-level detail. Especially when used with its own power leads, dynamics were wider, and more carefully delineated, although this was less immediately obvious than with the Einstein, as the improved acoustic space also tended to move the players back into the more coherent soundstage. This, and the overall smoothness, could leave you with an impression of a softening or rounding of edges, but prolonged listening and comparisons show that this isn't the case.

Audioplan also make the more expensive S range of mains products. The PowerStar S (DM 798) strives to eliminate all extraneous metal from its structure, making extensive use of graphite and polymer based

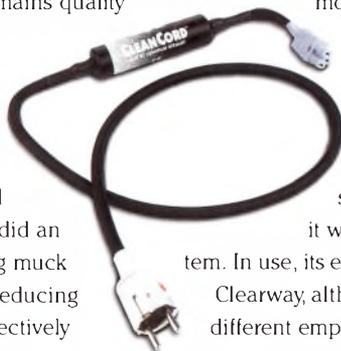
materials as well as extensive internal mechanical braces. It is supplied with a metre of PowerCord S - a mechanically damped version of the standard lead - and three AntiSpike polymer feet, complete with Sicomin Secrets to stand on.

Compared to the standard PowerStar, the S version is significantly more open and less grainy. It allows music to breath in a far more natural way, and has a broader tonal palette. It brings pace and dynamics to the

music, which becomes far more immediate, expressive and sophisticated as a result. The S leads (DM 300) add even greater transparency and dynamic range, building even further on the natural perspective and rhythmic ease of the standard set-up. With the full-on S combination of leads and block, the music was even more natural, both tonally and structurally, rhythmic nuances becoming far more apparent and the whole sound less mechanical. 'Radio Fragile' was really dramatic, the opening bass having power, depth and texture. Whilst not cheap, both the Audioplan ranges more than justify their price in terms of musical results. Build from a PowerStar, the S version if you can afford it, because the block really is at the centre of the improvements, the foundation of the system.

### Filters

Generally speaking, mains filters have developed a pretty poor reputation over the years. The general complaint is that they remove nastiness from the mains at the same time as they remove any sense of power or rhythmic drive from the system. My own experience bears this out, and several filters arrived for this review which have no place in a hi-fi system. Having said that, like most generalisations, there are also exceptions. Whether it's the fact that mains bourne RF is on the increase, or simply that we now have far more pieces of electronics throwing muck back down their earths, mains quality is definitely on the slide. The various power companies even use the national grid to transmit high frequency data! I discovered several products which actually did an excellent job of removing muck from the mains without reducing the flow to a trickle, subjectively



at least. And believe me, it's easier to list the ones that work than the ones that don't. It also needs to be pointed out that filters, more than any other element in the mains chain, are both circumstance and equipment dependent, so you'll have to experiment at home.

In Issue 3, I noted that the Chord Company had taken the plunge and launched a mains filter called the Clearway. To me this is significant because Chord's customer base sits firmly with the group of dealers who have been most vocal in their rejection of filters. At \$200, the Clearway is a small, inline filter with an IEC input and a 13 amp socket output. It is also current limited, and is really intended to run CD players and solid state pre-amps. You might just get away with a small integrated amp in the short term, but as soon as you turn the volume up you'll literally run out of go.

In use, you'll notice an immediate improvement in detail and reduction in grain. The sound is cleaner and clearer, and difficult vocals are far easier to understand. But it's rhythmically that the real benefits appear. Nigel from Chord reckons that "it grooves like a bastard", a colourful description with which I can only concur. Rhythmically, things really gell, so that the music takes on a whole new life and momentum. Indeed, a whole new groove. This is far more noticeable when the whole system runs from the filter. Fortunately, there are plans for a higher current

model, unfortunately, it's still some way off.

The AudioPlan FineFilter II (DM 898 in the 'S' version) will run a constant current of 10A, so it will run a complete system. In use, its effects are similar to the Clearway, although with a slightly different emphasis. The German



product retrieves more ambient and spatial information than the Chord, and whilst it too introduces new levels of rhythmic sophistication, it's not nearly as upfront about it. The groove is there, but it's not right under your nose. It's almost as if the Audioplan draws you in while the Chord propels you along. Note also that this is in step with the sound of the other Audioplan products. If you've got deep pockets, then Audioplan also offer the CleanCords (DM 498 for the 'G', DM 898 for the 'S'), mains leads with individual filters built in and placed as close to the equipment as possible, thus preventing the cabling after a central filter acting as an aerial. Yes, they are even better than the Fine Filter, and have noticeably crisper leading edges.

Finally, Yamamura offers the M-Tubes, small sleeves which you slide over standard IEC plugs. Made from a semi-conductive cloth, they cost \$15 each and provide a reduction in grain and improvement in tonal and harmonic quality. The strummed guitars on 'Listen To The Radio' being an obvious beneficiary. Less effective with one of the other filters in line, you could still hear them working.



### Isolation Transformers

Isolation transformers do two things: they improve the sound of a component by preventing grunge reaching it, and they prevent that component from polluting the earths of the rest of the system. Thus, the first place you use them is on digital electronics.

One of the first units available in this country was the EC Audio Pandora. Designer Tom Evans, currently at Acoustic Precision, now offers the Black Box. Plug your CD player into it and you'll hear a far quieter back-



ground, a wider and more focused sound-stage, and much better attack and bass definition. And that's from your turntable! Mind you, your CD player gains a similar set of benefits too.

Once again, Audioplan take the whole thing a stage further with a range of PowerPlants capable of providing anything up to 1kVA, and recommended for use with anything except really big class A/B power amps. Again, you get all the benefits of the Black Box, but improved further with each additional unit. Is there any benefit in running a bigger transformer than you need? In some circumstances, yes, but the gains are so small as to prevent it being cost effective. First target after digital electronics, definitely the turntable, followed by the phono-stage, pre-amp etc.

PowerPlant 100 'G'	DM 598
PowerPlant 300 'G'	DM 1090
PowerPlant 500 'G'	DM 1590
PowerPlant 1000 'G'	DM 1990

*Note: these are heavy, 23 kilos for the 1000vA model, so shipping gets expensive.*

### Integrated Systems

By now it will be obvious that some companies take this whole subject more seriously than others. Audioplan offer a complete modular system that you can mix and match to your requirements. Yamamura/Churchill offer a similar if rather less complex arrangement, built into the Ciabatta distribution box (for price details see the system review which starts on pg 58). This is designed to combat distortion inherent to the mains supply, although the actual method is cloaked in mystery. What isn't cloaked at all is the effect, which is enormous. It seemed sensible to compare the two complete systems, again on a simple, single source system.

The comparison is fascinating. Yamamura's set-up provides a bold and sweeping version of events, full of drama and tonal colour. Its treatment of voice is superb; solid, rich and natural. The soundstage is wide and deep, although images are rounded and a shade diffuse. Just like a good single-ended valve system in fact.

The Audioplan 'S' set-up is more restrained and laid back. Leaner and more focused, it offers better definition of inner detail and ambient information. The sound is extremely unforced, with an ease and grace to timing and flow. Music breathes naturally. On 'Listen To The Radio' the Audioplan picks out the backing vocals better, locating them in space, the Yamamura gives them greater body. The Audioplan gives greater insight into the harmonic structure of the strummed guitar chords, the Yamamura renders them bigger and bolder.

In fact, the differences are like a larger and more complete version of the Audioplan/Chord filter comparison; the Audioplan seduces while the Yamamura/Churchill sweeps you off your feet. Which you prefer will depend on the kind of gal you are. But what is really shocking is returning to standard leads plugged straight into the wall; two dimensional, disjointed, grey and grainy. Anybody who takes mains cabling this far owes it to themselves to listen again *au naturelle*. You will be shocked! ▶

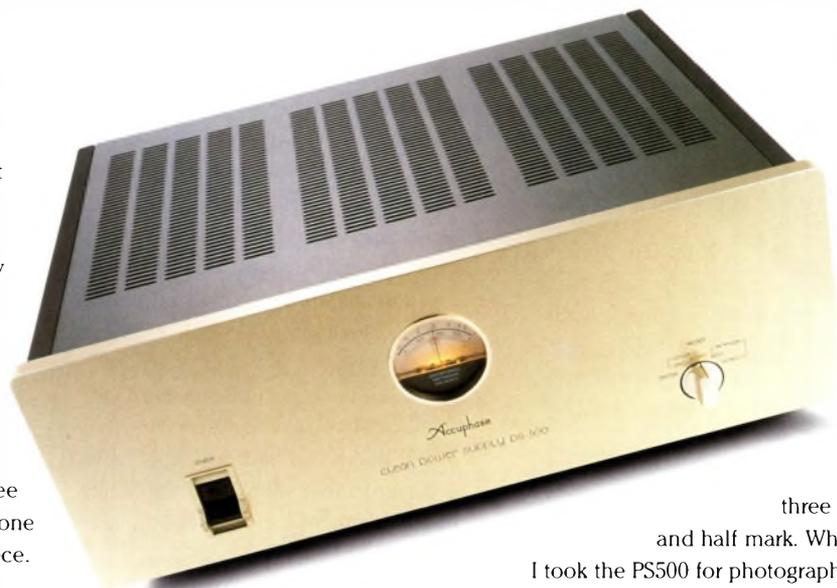


## Mains Re-Generators

Not happy with the 50Hz you get out of the wall. Why not re-create it in a finer form? Whilst mains re-generation is not a new idea, it is extremely costly and bulky to do well. Indeed, some of the Mark Levinson Reference products incorporate it into their internal power supplies. However, what I am interested in is external, strap-on units that can run part or all of a system. There are three on offer here, ranging in price from one to over three thousand pounds a piece.

Let's start at the top with the Accuphase PS500. This large and beautifully finished box, with gold fascia and large central meter could easily be mistaken for a classy, high-powered monoblock amplifier. Which is hardly surprising as that is precisely what it is, albeit one that only produces a 50Hz sign wave at the output. (Or 60Hz if that is what you feed it on.) It literally re-generates the mains power that it receives, by converting it to DC and then using this to drive a frequency generator and power amplifier to produce your 50Hz in a cleaned up and more nearly perfect form. A bit like having your own electricity sub station, just a little, no, let's make that a lot, smaller. Accuphase refer to the PS500 as a 'clean power supply', which sums up the intention pretty well.

What you get is a large chassis which sports a chunky on/off switch come circuit breaker and a multi-mode meter on the front panel, and a single IEC input along with four outputs on the back panel. And this is where things start to get weird on you. The outputs consist of two earthed and two un-earthed sockets, all of the continental round-pin variety. Now this doesn't worry me, because I use the circular, earthed

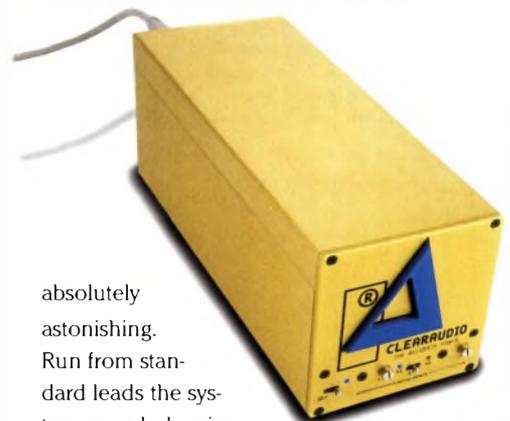


continental plugs anyway, but it is going to mean most people re-terminating their leads, or fitting a continental plug to an extension block. The upside of this equation is that you get reversible plugs, which means that you can optimise the mains phase for each piece of equipment or block that you attach.

Despite its considerable size, the PS500 will only support a power consumption of 500VA, and a constant current of 3A, although it manages a peak capacity of 30A (6A and 60A in 120V countries). You aren't going to be connecting a complete, high-powered system to it. You might just get away with an integrated amp connected to reasonably benign speakers, but for most of us, it's going to be source components and pre-amp. The meter on the front panel tells you what the electrical load is, the mains voltage in and out, and the percentage distortion of the waveform in and out. The distortion on the input is scary. My rustic idyll rated just one percent at three in the afternoon; by six o'clock it was hovering around the

three and half mark. When I took the PS500 for photography, the meter hit the end-stop in Simon's studio. Not that you need the meter to tell you that the Accuphase is doing its job.

The first system that I used it with was the Meracus/Audiophysic combination reviewed in this issue. The benefits over standard good quality mains cables (not the Yamamura ones supplied) were



absolutely astonishing. Run from standard leads the system sounded grainy and dynamically two dimensional. The inter-instrumental space was hazy and polluted, and the whole sound took on a grey metallic quality. Running the system off of the Accuphase via Audioplan mains cables absolutely transformed it. Unfortunately hi-fi journalists have taken hyperbole to new heights, often in describing minor differences or improvements, so let's get this clear. The differences heard with the PS500 are neither small nor unimportant. They are absolutely

fundamental to a convincing musical performance, and I don't know many other ways to get them. They are as follows.

Firstly, you are going to see a huge drop in background noise. Not the noise of the system without any music playing, but the noise that is behind the music. The grain that hangs between the instruments and contaminates the soundstage. You might have thought that the musical background was black, with the Accuphase doing its thing it's not just black, it's obviously silent. That's right. The difference is so big that you simply can't miss it. The effect on instrumental focus and overall transparency is difficult to exaggerate, but one thing you'll notice is smaller, more compact images. That's because they're no longer bleeding and wandering all over the place.

Next up is horizontal precision, by which I mean the spacing of notes, and more importantly, the spaces between them. Suddenly you can hear the rhythmic choices made by the players. Instead of a simple stream of notes, you get a sense of the musicians placing their notes for maximum effect. I discussed this when I reviewed the Final Music battery amps in Issue 2, and it would be worth you reading over that description. The Accuphase gives you the benefit without the limitations inherent in battery power.

You also get similar improvements in vertical spacing, or pitch definition if you want to be correct. It's remarkable how much confusion in absolute pitch we can tolerate. But not having to tolerate it is just so much better. And so much more musically satisfying.

That ghostly background does wonders for harmonic development and tonal shading. The whole musical picture becomes more natural and each instrument is more readily identifiable. And dynamics are scaled far more precisely too.

In essence the whole sound becomes more organised and the

music's shapes and patterns more obvious. It's easier to understand, and far more dramatic and enjoyable as a result. The end result is so much more musically convincing that you wonder how you tolerated the system before. The truth, of course, is that I didn't. It arrived for review with its own £2500 worth of mains cabling and filtering, and if you read the article you'll see that it was money well spent. It also topped the listings in our listening to passive set-ups. What was fascinating were the sonic characters of the two differing approaches. The Yamamura set-up couldn't match the transparency, focus and sheer insight of the Accuphase, but it was dynamically more robust and if anything even better tonally. It was almost as if the PS500 lent the system the strengths of exceptional solid state amplification, while the Ciabatta brought the best of valves. Understandable in the case of the Accuphase, but both impressive and perplexing in the case of Be Yamamura's design.

The two smaller re-generators follow this theme. Designed as turntable power supplies they will drive other equipment, and the ClearAudio Accurate Power Generator actually sports three outputs, a current capacity of 4.5A and a peak of 60watts. Used as intended, both the ClearAudio (£1000) and the Tron Disc Drive (£1300) do an excellent job (though neither is in the same class as the Accuphase). Again, the ClearAudio enjoys the precision and clarity that you associate with solid state designs, the Tron is more robust, which rather suits the Garrard turntables that are seen as its natural partners. Both offer precise speed control and either more than justifies its cost (although I'll admit that the anachrophile in me has always craved a valve turntable power supply). Also note that there's no point in relying on a mains powered strobe. Along with



the disc drive GT Audio supplied the smartest strobe come record weight I've ever seen. Used one way up it is a simple aluminium drum, designed to mass load the record. Turn it over, and the ring of LEDs starts to flash at exactly 50Hz, powered by an internal battery. Smart, effective, and as Nigel from the Chord Co. commented, it's impossible to ignore the fact that some countries seem to have more fun with their hi-fi than us. The Gyroscope is made by LYS Electronique in France, and I want one!

Where things get scary is when you realise that the APG gives you control over its output frequency up to a limit of 144Hz. What's more, they actively encourage you to use a higher frequency to drive things like CD players. Increasing the frequency will increase the efficiency of a power supply, so if you've got a very basic one, then this could well help. However, there are other considerations, and I'm going to save this for another day, chatting about it to a few manufacturers in the meantime. More later on this one. 

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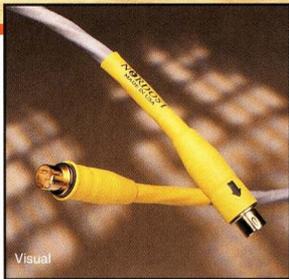
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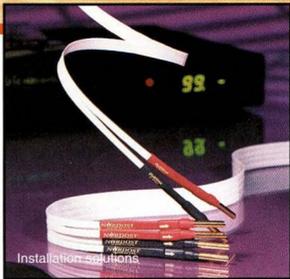
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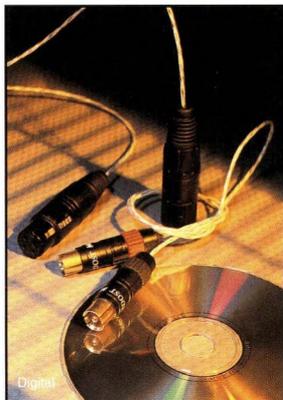
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# What's In A Naim?

## Julian Vereker of Naim Audio

by Paul Messenger

The main man at Naim Audio and engineer par excellence, Julian Vereker's enormous influence on British hi-fi was formally recognised by an MBE for export in 1995. Paul Messenger talks to him about the inception of the NAP250, how the company and industry has changed, and where the future might be taking us.

Julian Vereker didn't start out as an audio engineer, and while Naim Audio is the largest and most successful of his various enterprises, he didn't particularly set out to build a classic amplifier, or even a hi-fi company. Alongside Naim he's been involved in plastics mouldings, folding bicycles, and is currently putting most of his energies into getting a very advanced and rapid cruising yacht into production. Indeed, the prize money won by his radical 'breathing' and high-revving racing engine, which cleaned up a number of 850cc Mini motor racing championships in the late 1960s, bought him the time to learn and explore the world of electronics, and investigate the

potentials of new electronic devices which were coming onto the market.

**PM. Let's start at the beginning. How did you first get into building amplifiers?**

**JV.** I'd always been into music, and used to hear a lot of it live in the late 1960s. A friend had this truly dramatic sounding Ovation guitar, and I was really impressed by the difference between that and other guitars. About the same time I bought a tape recorder, and was amazed to find that you couldn't hear the difference between these instruments when you played back a recording.

So I bought a better tape recorder

and microphones, designed and built a mixing desk, and upgraded the amplifier and speakers. The key bit came when I got the 'better amplifier'. The Quad 303, which the advert called 'the closest approach to the original sound', had just come out. 'Great', I thought, as I took it home, only to discover that it sounded staggeringly worse than what I was already using. At the time that was a Sinclair kit amp, for which I'd built a large power supply. I'd got hold of a very substantial transformer, spent some time thinking about the capacitors, found some mammoth car alternator diodes, and put them all into a large box. The Sinclair modules went pop quite often, but it still sounded much better than the Quad.

'That's very interesting', I thought, 'so amplifiers are not all the same. And not only are they not the same, but it's unbelievably easy to screw the whole thing up. If Quad can advertise that as the 'closest approach to the original sound', there must be a little gap somewhere in there for me. . . .'

Around 1970 I started making professional audio equipment. The first Naim Audio product was actually a small M10.2 mixing desk, and I was involved in studio tape recorders

▶ and loudspeakers too, the latter with small built-in amplifiers. A mixer customer liked the sound of my own (NAP160) amp and ordered some, but it was probably meeting Ivor (Tiefenbrun, of Linn Products) in 1974 that introduced me to the hi-fi sector.

**PM. If the NAP250 design was finished in 1974, what changes have you made since then?**

**JV.** Early on, the biggest performance improvement came after I discovered how important the mechanical mounting of the power transistors was - the earliest 250s tended to go 'soft' rather quickly, especially if they were driven hard. When we went over to the extruded casework in 1980, we redesigned the boards to what they are

**If there's any particular secret to Naim CD players, it's making sure that the environment in which the DAC operates is as clean as possible.**

now, but the actual component values are still basically the same.

In the very early years, the actual transistor types did vary, but the planar type Motorola pre-drivers and the Ferranti drivers are still the same as those we used in '74. The input pair hasn't changed either, and these have to be very closely matched, because this is where the feedback meets the signal. There are no circuit configuration changes of any sort.

The power transistors changed too in the early years, basically because what I really wanted simply wasn't available. The early Solitrons were, quite frankly, too fragile, and things got better first with the BDY56s, and

then the BDY58s. I wanted a transistor which was very fast (rather than necessarily linear), without any storage time especially at low currents, and I wanted it to turn off at low currents. A year went by and I tested loads of samples, most of which seemed to get progressively worse. Then one day some unmarked transistors turned up, and looked promising when I put them in the test jig. We put them into an amplifier and bingo, that was it! We've been using these NA001 transistors ever since, exclusively, although the next generation of power amps, like the new NAP500, adopt a rather different approach

**PM. How do you think the industry has changed over the past twenty five years?**

**JV.** In one sense at least I'm not sure that all that much has really changed. I didn't get into this business because it's an industry, but because I wanted to listen to music at home, and (perhaps arrogantly) sort of assumed that the kit which made me happy

would make other people happy too. I reckon that the attitudes of the Quads, KEFs and B&Ws of the 1970s were quite similar to where Naim is now. They were primarily enthusiastic about music, and about taking care of their customers, and from that point of view I don't see we're doing anything very different. The fact that so much of the rest has turned to dust is just sad.

There is one small but significant thing that disappoints me. There's a serious problem with a lot of switched-mode power supply equipment, if it's used in any system which is mains-sensitive. Everybody seems to think that compliance with CE EMC

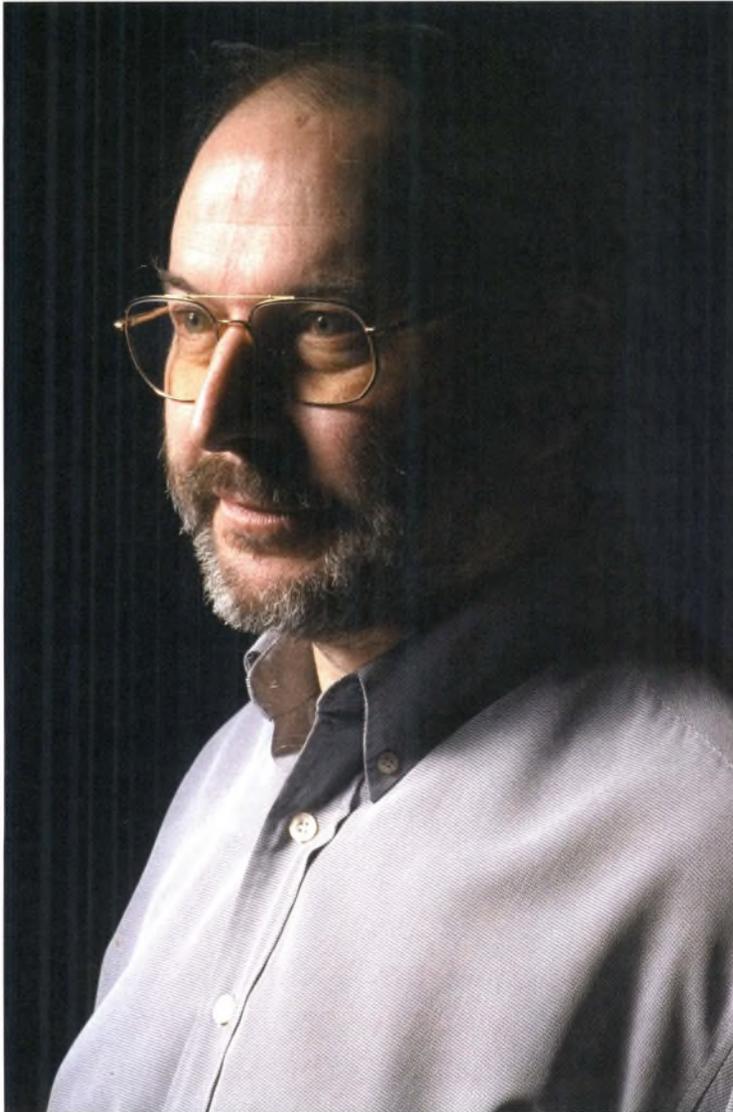
**There are still swathes of people out there that just want to listen to and enjoy music.**

regulations is a level playing field, but because somebody somewhere really wanted switched-mode power supplies to be a possibility (probably because they use less energy resources), the standard only prohibits feeding emissions back into the mains above 150kHz. Below 150kHz you can do what you like, so all the switched-mode supplies carefully put their great big noisy peaks under 150kHz.

If you look at the (mains interference) outputs of any of our equipment, at the various frequencies above 150kHz where they do make noise, they're just underneath the permitted standard. Big transformers and the diode switching spikes are a real devil to control - but you need them to make the thing work. Sure you can go and put a capacitor across them and the spikes will go away, but so will the music too!

If you happen to use a switched-mode approach, you can have ten times that level of interference at 130kHz and nobody cares. But you're putting all that noise onto the mains which can upset other things, unless you put in filters which slow the whole thing down, increase the output impedance and so on. You end up with a hi-tech solution which is a disaster, limiting overall performance because it's basically noisy.

If the mains have got more problematic over time, at least the RF environment is hugely better than it was 25 years ago, mainly because ▶



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▶ the high power black and white TV transmitters are no longer being used. There may be many more transmitters around today, but they're always much lower power devices.

The biggest change we've gone through has of course been the CD takeover. Vinyl components (ARO tonearms, input cards, Prefix phono stages and Armageddon power supplies) are now only around 0.1 per cent of our business, whereas

CD accounts for roughly half the total today.

It was very important that we got into CD when we did (in 1991), because the next year (1991-2) saw vinyl shrink from 24 per cent to around 3 per cent. However, becoming a CD player manufacturer brought its own set of headaches. We've managed to develop a pretty good working relationship with Philips as a major supplier, and have made our own

contributions to the technology, but two such different size companies must be working to very different basic agendas, and problems are bound to arise.

We don't want or need to keep changing our products, never mind the costs involved, but only last week we heard that one of the key OEM components we use is being discontinued. We have to place 'last orders' for it this month, and have so far only seen one example of the new one, and that was enough to realise that it's very very different in use.

### **PM. Why do they keep changing them?**

**JV.** Mainly because they're looking for greater versatility and lower prices. For us this is a complete pain, so we've ordered a huge quantity of the existing parts. By the same token Pacific Microsonics are now stopping making the HDCC chips we use. Instead you now have to license software from them and load this into a DSP chip, but that represents another potential re-design, so we've had to buy a lot of chips sets too. If we hadn't built up our resources, we wouldn't be able to make such large stock investments.

But that's what manufacturing is all about. In a way it gets more difficult, because there are less of us around using the specialist parts. More and more will be accomplished in software, and more and more things will happen on the latest clever microprocessors. We've recently put a lot of time and resources into writing our own software, and this is used throughout the CDS II and our other CD players, covering error correction, all the servos, all the laser optimisation and so on. ▶

## A key maxim in any design process is that it doesn't matter how good the good bits are, it only matters how bad the bad bits are.

### ▶ **PM. How do you see the hi-fi scene today?**

**JV.** I have long felt and still believe that the specialist hi-fi press adversely affects the long term stability of the industry. It sets a 'flavour of the month' type of agenda, and this strongly influences a lot of dealers, who simply take the line of least resistance. Today you'll find a lot of people saying it's all multi-room and/or A/V, but that's just not true. There are still swathes of people out there that just want to listen to and enjoy music. One current challenge is finding how to get through our particular customers: keeping them, making them feel wanted and cared for, and working to make the products they're going to want in the future. To do that, often without magazine or dealer support, we're doing focus groups, collating registration documents, using the Internet, and so on.

Technically speaking, one of the crucial things for hi-fi in the future will be about getting digital signals from A to B, and being able to recreate them sufficiently accurately when you've done that. People have had a go at us in the past about putting the DACs in the same box as the disc mechanisms, but we do that because it's actually really, really difficult to take a digital signal from one place to another and not lose the time - not make it noisy, basically. (When people talk about jitter, it's essentially just noise on the signal.)

Some may say 'it's really easy, just

put the signal into a FIFO (first in/first out memory) and you can just clock it out', but if the FIFO is in a noisy environment, the data will come out noisy. In theory it sounds wonderful,

but in practice you've still got to have a really clean environment. Some chips are quite good at doing those things; others are terrible. If there's any particular secret to Naim CD players, it's making sure that the environment in which the DAC operates is as clean as possible.

We've looked into the various proposals for transporting digital signals, such as Firewire, but it turns out they're not appropriate to a company of Naim's size. There are too many big players involved, and it turns out that a key issue for them is figuring how little data can you move in order to recreate something that 90 per cent of the market will find acceptable - all the lossy technologies like MP3, ATRAC, Dolby Digital, DAB radio etc. It's so disappointing to see, day after day in the newspapers and on TV: 'it's digital; it's perfect, it'll copy perfectly'. Which is just complete, total twaddle.

### **PM. What sort of role do you see A/V and multi-room playing?**

**JV.** There's a lot of talk, but as far as we can make out, there are still as many people out there who want to buy hi-fi for playing music as ever there was. On our website forum, which typically has a hundred posts a day, there's been just one thread in

the past six months or so about television, and literally hundreds about records and music, turntable tuning, and other hi-fi things. If you look at our registration cards too, people aren't talking about A/V at all.

As far as multi-room is concerned, we simply don't yet have the technology to transport digital signals around and re-create them so that the result is effectively indistinguishable from a CDS II. I'm sure one day we'll figure it out, but you have to be able to know how to do it; it's not a chance thing.

### **PM. You seem pretty confident of finding a solution, but how do you go about that?**

I'm sure some day one of us will notice somebody's attempt at something like that. It's not so much getting a sudden flash of inspiration, rather it's recognising something in someone else's huge amount of work,

## Which meant that this was not a rigid digital 'perfect sound forever' format - this was a heap of crap which needed to be knocked into shape!

as a clue to your problem. If I look back to the early days again, key moments came when I noticed what someone else had done. They'd found something that worked, and it slotted into my picture of what I was trying to do.

Back when I was trying desperately to get the NAP200/250 to work, I remember someone showing me a modular American amplifier - Spectrasonics, I think it was called. I looked at the circuit and noticed ▶

▶ a couple of resistors and capacitors which seemed to be different from anything I'd seen in other designs. This got me thinking, and then I realised that of course the positive half of the amplifier and the negative half of the amplifier are bound to be different, but they share a common feedback loop, so you have to get the two halves accurate in terms of phase gain, or you'll never make the design stable - and there were these little phase-correcting networks doing just that. I can recall other similar instances, and it's very easy to suck in those little bits if you have a clear overall picture of what you're trying to do.

Don't waste time or effort worrying about the bits you can do, but figure out what's going to be the serious glitch. Keeping an amplifier stable when driving loudspeakers is an absolute essential. If it isn't stable at all times, then it's broken!

When we started tackling CD, the first breakthrough came when John Honeyball brought his bits down. It didn't matter that the thing didn't work that well; the crucial bit was that you could easily alter the way it sounded. Which meant that this was not a rigid digital 'perfect sound forever' format - this was a heap of crap which needed to be knocked into shape! And somebody needed to understand how it actually worked,

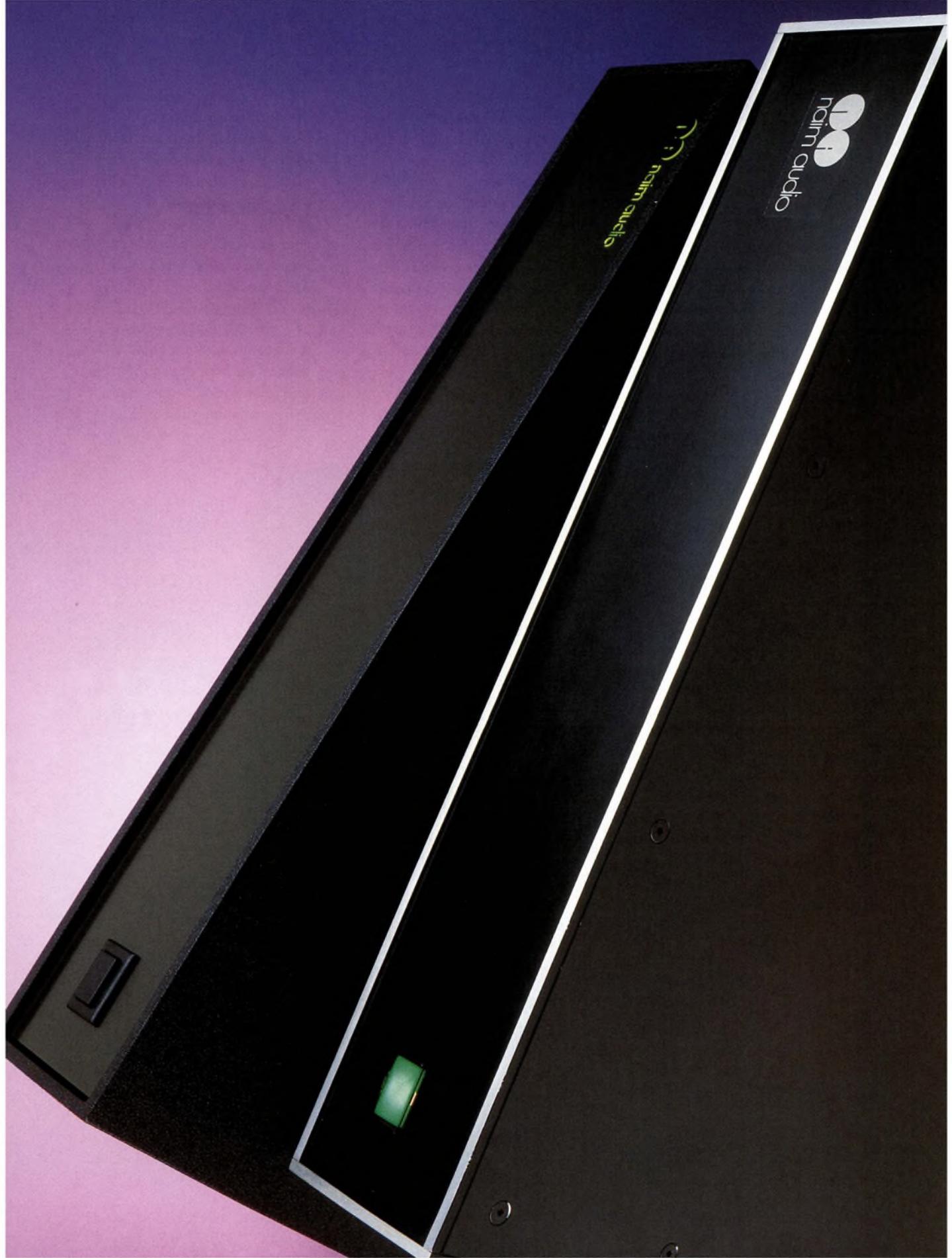
because there was no information in the Philips documentation on how to make it sound good. Jitter wasn't even on the agenda.

It finally became clear that the information is stored in terms of time, and time is the element that has to be accurate during replay. Once you understand that, the whole thing becomes relatively easy, though it has striking implications. It means that digital power supplies have to be absolutely as quiet as possible, and every bit as good as analogue supplies, or you put noise into the system in the wrong place.

**Whatever the thought processes and influences, and whatever field he's operating in, Julian has an uncanny knack of asking the right questions rather than the obvious ones, and coming up with startlingly original engineering as a result. Designing the NAP250 amplifier took a year's work by one man and his slide rule, yet it's still going strong 25 years on. The new NAP500 has also taken a year, but with a team of seven backed up by a dozen Pentiums and oodles of software. The prospect is mouthwatering. ▶+**



I have long felt and still believe that the specialist hi-fi press adversely affects the long term stability of the industry.



naim audio

naim audio



# Naim NAP 250 Power Amplifier

## The Original and Still the Best?

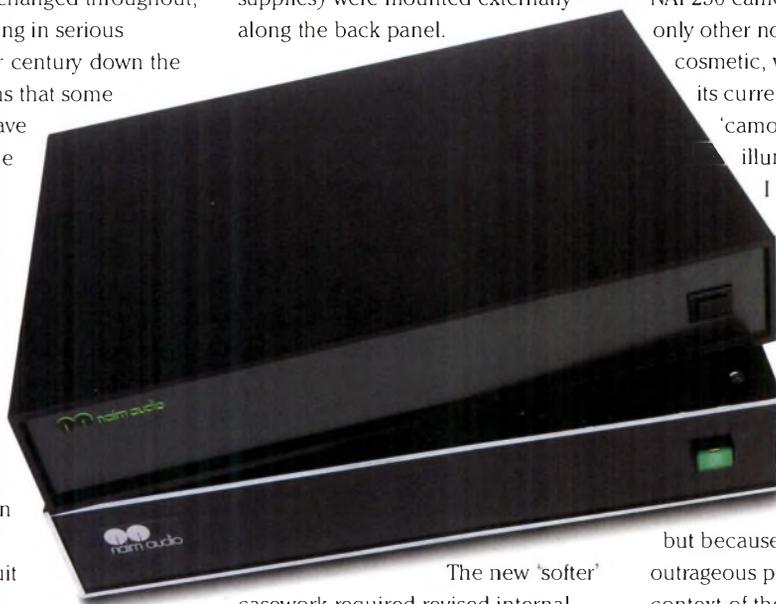
by Paul Messenger

Not many hi-fi components get to celebrate their 25th Silver Jubilee anniversaries, and few of those that do can claim to have remained fundamentally unchanged throughout, and to be still selling in serious numbers a quarter century down the road. Naim reckons that some 10,000 NAP250s have been sold since the power amp first appeared in 1974, and is still making and selling 4-500 examples of this venerable component every year.

The current 250 does differ from the original in a number of ways, but the basic circuit configuration has remained the same throughout - and is actually the same as that used in the fan-cooled monoblock NAP 135 (which first appeared in 1984). A number of the key components have remained unchanged throughout - the driver and pre-driver transistors, and a very carefully matched input pair.

The most obvious of those changes which have taken place is a different means of constructing the casework. Early NAP 250s had a case built up from flat alloy sheets bolted together, whereas later examples (after 1980) adopted a more conventional arrangement with the amplifier built into a 'tray' which was then fitted inside an extruded alloy 'sleeve'. The

old ones had particularly sharp corners and a glossy black finish, and the eight matching power transistors (four for signal, four for power supplies) were mounted externally along the back panel.



The new 'softer' casework required revised internal PCB layouts, and at around the same time the original pro-style Canon mains input was changed for the familiar (and now ubiquitous) IEC 'kettle' socket. The 4mm speaker binding posts were replaced by 4mm sockets, and the amplifier now comes supplied with matching twin 4mm plugs primarily intended for use with Naim's NAC-A5 speaker cable.

More significant from a performance perspective was the eventual finalisation of the output power transistors, in 1981. Early NAP250s tended to be rather temperamental, because of limitations in the speed, stability and current delivery capability of the output devices that were

available at the time. It was only after the NA001 transistor was designed, which provided the right combination of characteristics, that the current NAP250 came fully into being. The only other notable change was cosmetic, when Naim brought in its current olive green/brown 'camouflage' fascias with illuminated logos in 1989.

I first encountered Naim amps when I visited a hi-fi show in the mid-1970s, some time before I started working in the industry, and they made a striking impression. Not through demonstration, I should add, since it was a static display,

but because they seemed such an outrageous proposition in the market context of the time. In the hi-fi lexicon of 1975, the concept of amplifier sound quality was largely non-existent, or at least mythical, and amplifiers were evaluated purely in terms of features, power output and brand reputation against price.

Naim's kit flew arrogantly and defiantly in the face of all orthodoxy. Pre/power combos like the Quad 33/303 cost around £200, whereas a Naim NAC12/NAP250 was more like three times that figure - the more so since you had to buy an external NAPS to power the NAC12. Indeed, from the outside at least, the NAC12 pre-amp was even more radical than the '250. Even ignoring that serious pricetag, the idea of using an external power

▶ supply for a pre-amp was entirely alien (though Naim softened the blow a little by building one into its cheaper NAP160 power amp). And the complete omission of tone controls and filters was a blatant heresy. Viewed with a quarter century of hindsight, Naim was just a decade or two ahead of its time - nowadays the omission of tone controls is a deliberate part of attaining serious audiophile credibility, and external supplies are no longer unusual.



A few years later, however (after a transition from Quad 33/303 to the thermionic Radford SC22/STA25), I found myself buying a NAC12/NAP160, and soon after that upgrading to NAP250 (plus NAPS, then SNAPs, then HiCAP etc. . . .). Even though I've had plenty of opportunities to try all sorts of

alternatives, my personal preference for Naim amps continues to this day, a NAC52 and two NAP135s forming the core of my current system, and this long term relationship has always been underpinned by peerless reliability and fine service backup.

To the best of my recollection, that early '250 cost around £500. A new one today will set you back \$1,750, an increase which is significantly less than the twenty-something years of inflationary devaluation. It's still an expensive power amp, to be sure,

but it's also now a genuine classic.

Moreover, there are thousands of them out there, and existing '250 owners are easily tempted to trade up to NAP135 monoblocks, so a very active and healthy secondhand market provides a much lower potential entry price. I don't have much knowledge of electronic circuitry, but those who do have sometimes criticised Naim amplifiers for crudeness and lack of originality. The most effective response is simply to point to the amp's remarkable long term commercial survival and success, but Naim's Julian Vereker freely acknowledges that the basic circuitry comes from generic 'application note' sources. Indeed, he deliberately kept it simple to facilitate analysing its behaviour under complex 'real world' conditions, and stresses that the fine detail of the specific application is more important than the overall configuration.

Julian dismisses the conventional view of an amplifier as a series of gain blocks, preferring to regard it as a 'tap' which determines how the power supply drives the loudspeaker. And it's

the power supply side of the NAP250 which not only helps account for its high price, but also most distinguishes it from rivals, then and now. Indeed, the only substantial difference between the 'domestic' NAP160 and the 'professional' NAP250 lay in the power supplies - a simple, unregulated one for the '160, against a larger transformer and four separately regulated power supplies (each using the same super-fast power transistors as the signal output) on the '250. Sit down and compare how the two amps play music, however, and you'll soon appreciate the importance of power supplies.

Old and new NAP250s might only differ in the fine detail, but that fine detail has considerable subjective consequences. For the purposes of this review I borrowed two NAP250s from Naim Audio - one brand new, hot off the production line and carrying the serial number 157741, the other a truly old example from 1974, No 1155.

I gave both a good initial run-in (usually important with Naim kit), and then put the new 250 on in place of my regular, ten year old NAP135s. The difference was less than I'd expected, the '250 sounding tighter, tauter, a little 'smaller', and just a touch 'fiercer'. The guys at Naim immediately suggested I should ship the 135s back for a well overdue service (and general 'tautening up').

The next step was to try the 'old' '250, and this time the result was a bit surprising. First reaction was a lovely wave of nostalgia - a good friend in the industry still swears by his 'old' 250, steadfastly refusing to have it updated, and I immediately saw his point of view. With my innately rather 'fierce' Rehdeko RK175 loudspeakers, the oldie was simply a more pleasant and relaxing listening experience, even if it was also a little soft and soggy.

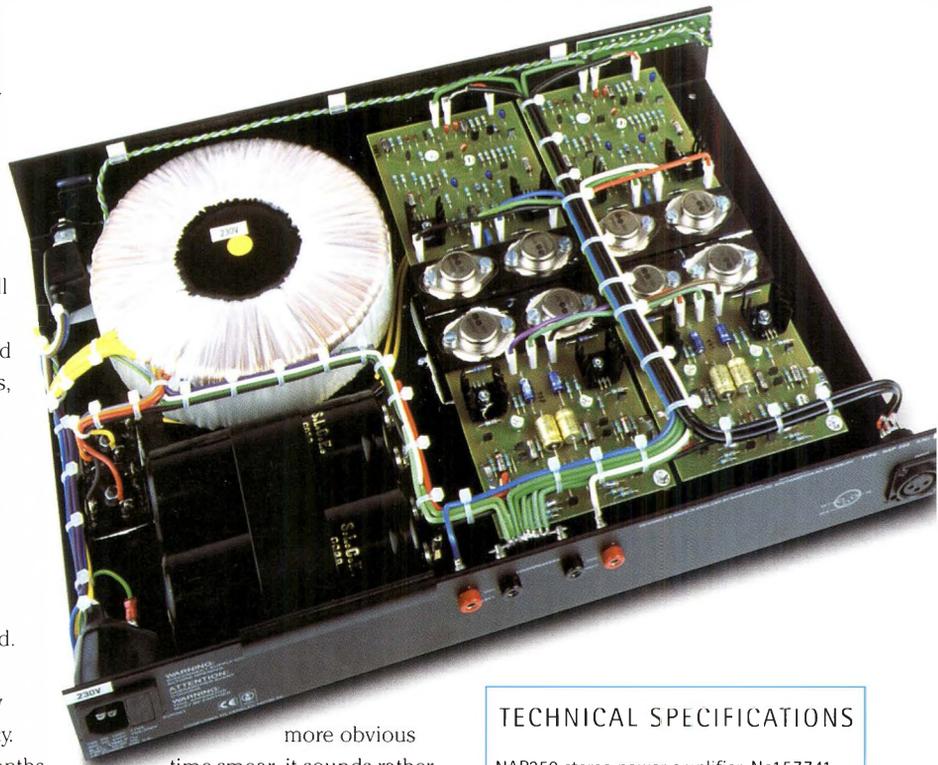
I puzzled over this initial reaction for a while, if only because the new 250 ought to have blitzed its

▶ ancestor. Then the penny dropped. With heavy heart and subsequently sore knees, I spent an immensely tedious two hours dismantling the whole equipment stack in order to get at the mains sockets behind. Dust flew everywhere (but mostly up my nose) as I carefully fettled all the plugs and sockets, re-tightening all the connections and making and breaking any switches several times, right back to the consumer unit.

I was in a pretty foul temper by the time all this was done, the equipment back in place and all the leads connected up. My mood changed dramatically about one second after hitting 'play'. The transformation was dramatic indeed. Where there had previously been hash and harshness, there was now sweetness, light, clarity and delicacy. (A shame I hadn't done it a few months previously!) I've been a little disappointed by a number of recent music releases, and while I still don't think Gomez' new *Liquid Skin* album quite matches the more spontaneous excellence of *Bring it On*, it was now making a lot more sense and starting to seduce me.

The differences between the three power amps were now much more clearly audible. The new '250 now sounded quite wonderful, my 135s certainly do need to go back for service, while the old '250 sounded warm, romantic and nostalgic, but in a rather sleepy and laid back sort of way.

In truth I was a wee bit staggered at how good the new 250 sounded, and have been having loads of fun playing all sorts of music, on the Rehdekos and a pair of JMLab Mezzo Utopias. The ever-amazing Captain Beefheart's wonderful *Strictly Personal* highlighted its ability to hang to the most complex rhythms with a vice-like grip, where the old model occasionally found itself struggling. Compared to the new one it clearly lacked tautness, tension and dynamic range, and because it also has



more obvious time-smear, it sounds rather more coloured and a touch shut in through the voice band.

The sheer lack of time-smear is what really sets the current 250 apart from most rivals, but actually to describe the sound it makes is quite difficult. To these ears it's essentially neutral, and surprisingly transparent to across a very wide dynamic range, and a fairly broad bandwidth. I wouldn't call it 'sweet' exactly, but nor is it harsh or edgy. It just is, effortlessly, communicative.

The bottom line is that the current NAP250 still sounds surprisingly fresh and up to date, despite its long history. The caveat is that it's a sensitive flower that subscribes to the GIGO principle - garbage in, garbage out, and that includes the quality of the mains. I'd therefore be very cautious about using it with anything other than a Naim pre-amp, but would stress that when all the conditions are working in its favour, it has a remarkable ability to let you forget all about the sound it makes, and instead get into the music it makes. Here's to the next 25 years, and a Golden Jubilee!

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

NAP250 stereo power amplifier, No157741

Rated o/p 4 and 8 ohms 70W/8ohms, 125W/4ohms

Connections in and out (and power)

3-pin XLR (balanced/pro type, used unbalanced stereo input)  
4mm sockets (plug supplied)

2xspeaker out

3-pin IEC ('kettle') mains plus earth

Dimensions (HxWxD) 76x430x300 mm

Weight 11.7kg

Cost £1,755

NAP250 stereo power amplifier, No 1155

Rated o/p 4 and 8 ohms 70W/8ohms, 125W/4ohms

Connections in and out (and power)

3-pin XLR (balanced/pro type, used unbalanced) stereo input  
4mm socket/biamping posts

2xspeaker out

Canon/XLR mains plus earth

Dimensions (HxWxD) 76x430x300 mm

Weight 5.3kg

Naim Audio Ltd, Southampton Road, Salisbury, SP1 2LH

Tel 0044(0)1722 332266

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# Keeping On Keeping On. Richard Fryer Of Spectral Audio

by Roy Gregory

Despite being a new name to many hi-fi enthusiasts in the UK, Spectral were one of the founding fathers of the American high-end, and have remained consistently at the forefront of solid-state design for nearly 25 years. In several important respects, their company history bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Naim Audio, although in many ways the products themselves are diametrically opposed. Both the company and its electronics command immense respect across the world. In fact, their influence extends far beyond their own electronics, and whilst you may not know the name, there's a fair chance that you are already enjoying their expertise. To put CT's review of their 'foundation' models, the DMC12/DMA100S, into the proper context, I asked Richard Fryer to give me the company background.

**RF.** Spectral was incorporated in 1975, with product shipping a little over a year later. We started out with pre-amplifiers, but over the years we've added the rest of the electronics to create a complete system. Our first product was the MS1, a high performance, instrumentation oriented, stereo pre-amplifier, which was briefly available in the UK, but I think it was too radical, and certainly too expensive for the British market at that time. It was a two box, card-cage design which was inspired by our work

in reviewing equipment for Sound Advice Magazine in the early 70's, and developed from our experience in designing computer, instrumentation and recording equipment. That first product was really the offspring of a unit we had built as a stable reference, or tool to help with reviewing high-end pre-amps.

**If you have an existing client base who you've supplied and worked with over the years, then you have to respect and honour those people, and that means that you don't make changes for change's sake.**

**RG. What products followed the MS1?**

**RF.** Only very few considering the time span. We introduce a new product very rarely, and when we do we expect it to enjoy a very long production life. If you consider the man years of design, research and development, and fine tuning that goes into this kind of low volume, hand crafted instrumentation product, then it is impossible to recoup the design and engineering costs in the short term. Spectral components will typically remain in series production for eight to ten years. We distilled the design of the MS1 (a high speed, instrumentation grade, DC coupled, fast settling pre-

amp) into a more affordable product called the DMC 10, which remained in production for twelve years. In fact, the DMC 12 that you are reviewing is a straight development of the 10.

**RG. It's certainly outwardly indistinguishable.**

**RF.** It's a funny thing about appearance. If you have an existing client base who you've supplied and worked with over the years, then you have to respect and honour those people, and that means that you don't make changes for change's sake. If you are producing products of this calibre and you expect them to have a long working life,

then fashion isn't your aesthetic focus. I feel that Spectral products possess a sober and timeless appearance which is designed not to date, rather than to impress on a physical basis. I think that honest and straight forward sums up what they're about, and you are right, you can barely tell a DMC 12 from a ten year old DMC 10. Some people like that, and others don't, but the focus of these products is totally on listening and music. It is very obvious what each product does and how it does it, so we see no reason to change the overall layout.

**RG. Over the years, Spectral has become the core around which a whole group of**



► **companies has assembled. I'm thinking specifically of Reference Recordings, MIT, Pacific Microsonics, and, to a lesser extent Avalon Acoustics. How do those companies interrelate?**

**RF.** If you look at the goal of recording and reproducing music to the highest possible standard, the task becomes a monumental engineering project that would challenge an industrial giant like Sony. Therefore I think it follows that it's no longer possible for any one specialist high end company to push forward the state-of-the-art in many areas.

On the other hand, people have dreams that they want to realise, and in our case, those dreams are multi-disciplinary, so we want to see advances in a number of fields. At Spectral, our area of interest is high performance music playback, so clearly the standard and techniques of music recording have a profound effect on how well our designs can function. Whether we like it or not, we have to

develop or access proficiency in other areas so that we are not trying to work in a vacuum. It's very easy, if you design an audio component, to see it as a black box, existing in a world of its own. But it's not. It actually exists in a whole world of variables, not just the associated equipment and cables that it's connected to, but all the variables that effect the recording process itself, and the playback environment. All these factors must be considered if you are to produce a well designed component.

We are located in silicon valley, right in the heart of the microwave and computer industries. Although we work on what are to these people, low frequency electronics, much of the

technology and practice that we apply are standard procedure to them. We have shown that if it matters in the MHz region, then it probably matters when you are thinking KHz. And whilst much of what we do has been considered controversial, no-one here even bats an eye. The things that you need to do in high tech, high frequency applications are just as relevant to us in audio applications. It's not just Spectral who have demonstrated this, in fact permeates all the companies that we work with. A good example would be Bruce Brisson's MIT cables. These are precision analogue transfer systems that act as transmission lines. This is not a new concept. In the radar or microwave fields this is what you have

**We have demonstrated that certain of these things are critical to retaining the musical integrity of a signal when you amplify it. It's up to other people to decide whether they want that, or whether it's important in a marketing sense.**

to do. If you are matching an amplifier to an antenna, you provide it with a precision terminated transmission line. Fifteen or twenty years ago we were considered to be out of our minds, but now there's a few companies working in this way. The reason that the audio industry has tended to ignore these engineering practises is that they are time consuming to implement, and the parts are costly. So conveniently, people assume that such considerations aren't important. The question of course is, important to who? We have demonstrated that certain of these things are critical to retaining the musical integrity of a signal when you amplify it. It's up to other people to decide whether they want that, or

whether it's important in a marketing sense. We're not saying that this is the only way to do it, but we do feel that our specific approach, developed by Keith Johnson, has real benefits in terms of accuracy. And we back that up with the recordings that Keith makes.

**RG. People in the UK tend to associate Keith Johnson (the Spectral designer) with Reference Recordings and possibly Pacific Microsonics, rather than his hi-fi designs. Has Professor Johnson been part of Spectral from the start?**

**RF.** Basically, yes. Reference Recordings is of an identical age to Spectral, and is run by friends and associates of ours. Except for the very earliest examples, Keith has traditionally been their recording engineer. Certainly, for the last fifteen years, he has also had complete control over, and responsibility for, each and every detail of all Spectral products. He is a detail oriented man, and will take whatever time is

necessary to complete a project to the point where he considers that every aspect is valid and correct. If it takes three or four years, he'll take that time. And I think you also see that in what he calls his 'hand-made' recordings. Reference recordings need him at recording sessions, but day to day he's needed at Spectral. It can take literally man years to develop a new product, and the critical areas cannot be delegated. Keith feels very strongly that every aspect of a design should be the responsibility of the envisioning designer. He has help, of course, but his designs are very unusual, idiosyncratic, and often complex and difficult to implement. This makes his complete oversight of each and

# It is the unstated goal of marketing to take things out of context.

▶ every stage essential. This approach is mirrored in the production of the best instrumentation and recording equipment.

## **RG. How big a company is Spectral?**

**RF.** Well, at this stage I guess we could say that we are one of the oldest and biggest companies in the American high-end. There's been no particular impetus for growth on our part. Saul Marantz (among others) suggested that specialist companies tend to enjoy a 'golden period' when they are particularly prolific and inspired. Those periods tend to be fairly short, but one of our goals at Spectral is to do this successfully for a very long time. That's hard to do in the face of market forces and fashion. It's not unusual to see specialist hi-fi companies suffer a decline in their fortunes, or even pass through the hands of several different owners.

This is something which we feel very strongly about, and which we've actively opposed at Spectral. There is a tendency which accompanies success, to lose or dilute the inspiration and design passion that accompanied the founding of the company.

## **RG. What are the guiding principals behind the Spectral designs?**

**RF.** Commercial considerations take something of a back seat. Our goal is to create and secure an environment in which we can support a small number of extremely talented design engineers, to the extent that they can achieve results that simply wouldn't be possible elsewhere. Their requirements have shaped the company, which means that things like marketing tend to become secondary. Extending the reproduction of recorded music is what we are interested in, and it's what our designers enjoy.

There is a tendency to focus on one aspect of technology or another, and present that as the sole reason for a complete unit's state-of-the-art performance. It is the unstated goal of marketing to take things out of context. This product succeeds because of mechanical grounding. Or plateau biasing, etc,etc. This is essentially untrue. Although we are associated with specific technological solutions (ultra wide bandwidth, fully symmetrical, DC coupled, high speed and fast settling) real advances in performance are the product of broad refinement and balanced performance. The best product, as far as we are concerned, is the one with minimal weaknesses and the fewest compromises.

## **RG. Could you clarify Keith's involvement in the development of HDCD?**

**RF.** He is the co-inventor of the system. Because of our interest in recording technology, which dates back in Keith's case to his work at Ampex in the early 60's, we have

always had a three track recorder to serve as an analogue reference. This is the machine that Keith uses for his recordings. With the advent of digital he set out to develop an equivalent capability using that technology. That work eventually led to HDCD, the conjugate correction filter element of which first appeared in our SDR 1000 Digital Reference CD playback system. But in order to have any relevance, the encoding technology needed to reach the recording industry, and Spectral decided that it didn't want to cross-over into the pro-field, and risk diluting its efforts. So a separate company was established, Pacific Microsonics, to handle the development and support of HDCD technology in the professional and wider audio fields.

The success of the HDCD filter in

## Our goal is to create and secure an environment in which we can support a small number of extremely talented design engineers, to the extent that they can achieve results that simply wouldn't be possible elsewhere.

the audio industry reflects two things. Firstly that this is a very high end technology which has been made available to them in its pure form, rather than watered down. Secondly, the sound quality of the filter set, even on discs that don't employ HDCD encoding suggests the validity of the fundamental principles that Keith has applied in developing the technology. Which is kind of reassuring from where we stand. ▶+



DMC-

aux 2  
aux 1 /  
phono

power on

SPECTRAL MEGAHERTZ POWER AMPLIFIER

tape  
source

input

mute

off

# Spectral DMC-12 Preamplifier and DMA-100S Power Amplifier

by Chris Thomas

The seeds of this review were sown earlier, in the summer, when I had the offer of several days with a Spectral pre/power amplifier. At this stage, my only knowledge of these esoteric electronics was through dealer ads in the American Hi-Fi 'Bible' *Stereophile*. The company's profile in the U.K was virtually non-existent, due to the fact that they chose not to have an agent here. Many have tried to import it, but Spectral, as I have since discovered, are not a company who supply their wares to just anyone. In the whole of the U.S for instance, they have only 20 dealers and each of those have had to satisfy Spectral of their understanding of their products, and their ability to demonstrate them to the very highest standards. Most, if not all, of these will have a room dedicated to Spectral equipment where the electronics will be demonstrated and sold, as a system, often through Avalon speakers, and always with matching speakers. Each of these dealers though, and they are among the most prestigious in the States, will tell you that Spectral make the best amplifiers on the planet.

All this was completely unknown to me as I unpacked the boxes and got my first taste of what was to come. Somewhat unusually, Spectral amplifiers come supplied with a complete set of cabling. Signal leads, interconnects and speaker cables are from MIT, manufactured to Spectral specifications, and specifically designed to be used with the amplifiers. This made a lot of sense, and I have often wondered why more companies do not do the same. I was a

little disappointed that the pre-amp was not remote (laziness really!), and slightly surprised to find that it only offered single-ended outputs to the power amplifier. I could immediately see that externally they were well built; though there was no obviously complex or heavy-duty casework announcing their presence as an expensive piece of top-end audio.

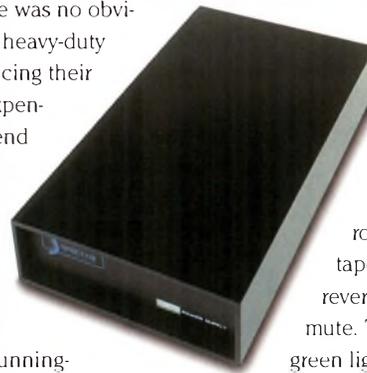
Normally an amplifier, new and straight from the box as the Spectral was, is going to need running-in and I certainly would not expect it to be giving anywhere near its best for a few days. This, I confess, was my first underestimation of a product that, within an hour, had me dragging my jaw from the floor in admiration, and by the end of the day had me feverishly trying to work out how I could get one into my life.

The combination I had tried was the DMC-12 preamplifier and the DMA-100S power amplifier (both solid-state designs), collectively known as the Foundation Series. There is also a Reference Series of products but, for now, only the Foundation is available in the UK. It is not uncommon for a Spectral product to be in production for a decade or more (the company was founded in the 70's) and the DMC-12 has been delighting Americans for around 6 years. It superceded the DMC-10 and though I have not seen one of these I am assured that it looks exactly the same kind of 'retro'.

Available as a line-level unit or equipped with a phono-stage it is externally powered by the DMS-12 power supply, and offers 4 or 5 line inputs, including tape, depending on whether the phono module has been supplied. It has a simple uncluttered layout. Three beautifully weighted rotary knobs control stepped volume, balance and source selection, while a row of switches provide tape monitoring, channel reversal, mono and a 20dB mute. The two slightly shrill green lights show power on and that the protection circuitry is in operation. All input connections are by RCA/Phono.

The DMA-100S power amplifier has been released only recently, and draws on aspects of the Reference Series thinking and electronics. Its rated power is 100 watts. If this is the case then it's the mightiest and meatiest 100 watts I have ever heard, and more than enough for the vast majority of situations. Allow me to borrow a phrase from Rolls Royce and say that power is 'adequate'. Once again, a simple, understated appearance with just an on/off rocker switch on the front panel and a single pair of speaker connections, plus inputs for balanced or single-ended leads. There is no standby mode.

Both of these products are beautifully constructed and finished, both externally and internally, where the craftsmanship is as good as it gets. Spectral has firm views on all



▶ aspects of amplifier design, and the more I researched the company the more I realised how much thought and development work have gone into these amplifiers regarding how they respond to real recorded music, and the enormous problems that it's transient nature poses. They are also very hot on time-based



distortions, which is a niggling aspect of much Hi-Fi that has bothered me for 20 years.

Spectral is high-speed/wide bandwidth amplification with frequency responses from DC to megahertz, and the nature of its operation means that interconnects and speaker cabling must be accurately specified if the amplifier is to work safely and correctly. Such a broad bandwidth can broadcast like a transmitter, producing megahertz oscillations that, in turn introduce distortions. In the boxes, close to the terminations of the Spectral/MIT cables there are tuned networks which function like low-pass filters, making them an ideal match for the amplifier. These cables are supplied at the time of purchase and use of them is mandatory, if you want a valid warranty.

Many amplifiers seem to take an age to come up to speed from a cold power-up, sometimes several hours. Often they are left permanently on, or they have a standby switch fitted, which keeps the primary gain stages warm and reduces warm-up times considerably. The Spectral though, has been designed to reach



optimum performance from switch-on much more quickly, and does not need to be left continuously powered. Quite surprisingly, it begins to really 'kick-in' after only about 15-20 minutes and grows slowly but progressively better for the next couple of hours. The whole compact package is stamped with the legacy of designer Keith Johnson's experience of suffering the burden of huge or temperamental amplifiers while location monitoring with

Reference Recordings.

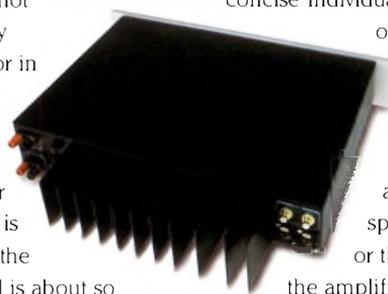
So how does this very different amplifier sound? Well, this is where it gets difficult, as I am not sure that it has any 'sound' of its own at all.

Trying to categorise the Spectral, using the usual terms of reference, is impossible. I could not describe it as tonally bright, warm, dull, or in any other way. It is certainly fast, in fact it is the fastest amplifier I have ever used, but this alone is a very small part of the story, as the Spectral is about so much more. So if I cannot describe how it sounds, let me try to explain what it does.

Many very fast amplifiers are all about speed and shuddering transients. But they often snatch at the leading edge and make little of the rate of decay, length of sustain and eventual release of the note. They can also sound hard and somewhat sterile, as if they do not have time to devote to the tone and colour of the instrument before the next transient. The

Spectral makes more of each and every note than I have ever heard before. It not only shows you the full attack, volume and leading edge detail, but its sense of transient recovery as it moves into the

heart of the note is amazingly controlled and realistic. Notes seem entirely accurate, natural and tonally stunning. Quite how it seems to find the time to shape each note so beautifully, yet still remain so amazingly fleet of foot is truly remarkable. Remember that we glean an enormous percentage of instrumental recognition from the information contained in the leading edge of each note. If, using a sampler, I recorded a few notes played by both a violin and a guitar, then, using an editor, I manipulated each note by removing the sound of the plectrum and the bow from the front of the waveform, you would be amazed at how difficult it would be to tell the difference between them. So, to me, concise individual control of the whole



of the note is one of the keys to the Spectral's brilliance. But do not get the idea that this amplifier is about speed and nothing else, or that this would make the amplifier more suitable for playing rock music than classical.

Nothing could be further from the truth. This awesome technical ability has absolutely as much relevance to any music you might ask it to play. *The Guitar Trio* (Verve 533215-2) brings together the mighty talents of Paco De Lucia, Al DiMeola and John McLaughlin. Three musicians, different in style and technique, playing very different guitars, but with a unity of purpose and total sympathy for the compositions they play. I thought I knew this CD very well indeed. Back on that first afternoon that I tried the Spectral I was proved wrong as, from the first track, it seemed I was hearing a totally new CD, full of new performances. The purity and character of each individual instrument was what first grabbed me. I had simply never heard the vast tonal differences of each guitar expressed in such

▶ a vibrant and realistic way. The verve and dynamics of the playing was equally



impressive but the rhythmic elements of the music had me reaching for the cover to confirm I was listening to the right CD. Without a noted timekeeper, like a drummer, the trio create all of their own rhythms, taking turns each to sit below the soloist and, in each of their individual ways, steer the music through time. One of the great beauties of this disc is the contrasting rhythmic colour, flavour and 'feel' that each player conjures up and the Spectral's greatest attribute is that it allows all of this to be savoured by becoming totally subservient to the music itself.

Rhythmically also the Spectral is a tour de force. On Lee Ritenours *This Is Love CD* (i.e. music 314-557-29-2) he does a great version of Sonny Rollins 'Alfies theme'. Whoever said 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing' could have been talking about this track. Drummer Sonny Emory was obviously born to swing and it's not just the tempo or the way he rides that cymbal, but the way he just leans off the actual beat that makes the feel so beautiful. There is so much clarity of musical progression to be heard here that the Spectral puts you in direct contact with the music, on an emotional level, and you listen with your heart and not your head. At this pitch of quality it is those small musical

hooks that keep drawing you back. Suddenly the walking bass line seems so much more relevant to the cymbal pattern, the stabbing Hammond organ chords make the song sit up with their unique sound, and it is all so easy to enjoy. I don't find the Spectral remotely analytical

but I have never heard an amplifier that makes each and every instrument so easy to follow right the way through the track. Nor have I experienced quite the same balance between low frequency power and delicacy. This amplifier certainly seems to have it all.

Since I first got interested in audio, more than 20 years ago, I have heard much superb Hi-Fi, but there have been only three or four products that have really changed my mind about what is actually possible from an audio system. Unlike the writers on *Stereophile* I have unfortunately been unable to find a new reference product every month, and when I do I inevitably end up buying it. To me this Spectral amplifier transcends arguments over things like tube versus solid-state. It combines the best of both of these, and other philosophies, into a single amplifier, and though this is something that designers have been claiming for years,

the Spectral really does manage

it. I have bought one, and having used it for the past few months I can

find no down-side whatsoever. I have tried it with

many speakers,

and played it to many friends, and I recognise the same blank look of astonishment on their faces as I had when I first heard it. I am not claiming it is cheap but, in the real world, when you look at the cost of other quality amplifier combinations, then include the really top quality cabling, I think it

is remarkable value. It is, in fact, the best amplifier I have ever heard. What does the Spectral sound like? It is the sound of music. ▶+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### DMC-12 High Resolution Preamplifier and DMS 12 Power Supply

#### Dimensions (HxWxD)

6.35x15.23x26.65cm

Inputs 5 inputs (cr 4 if optional phono boards fitted)

Outputs 2 (1 main and 1 tape).

Weights DMC-12 12lbs, DMS-12 7lbs

Price £4250-line only £4750 inc.phono stage

### DMA-100S Power Amplifier

#### Dimensions (HxWxD)

48.3x1C.1x39.4 cm

Power output 100 watts RMS (8 ohms) (quoted figures) (continuous)

159 watts RMS (8 ohms at clipping)

Inputs 1 pair balanced, 1 pair single-ended

Outputs 1 set ( binding posts)

Weight 32 lbs.

Price £4250

Cables, which are supplied at time of purchase, will vary with length requirements but approximately £1500 should be allowed for a set comprising 1 set of input, 1 set of interconnects and 1 set of speaker leads

#### Distributor R.T. Services

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#### Manufacturer

Spectral Audio Inc.

PO Box 4475

Mountain View

CA 94040

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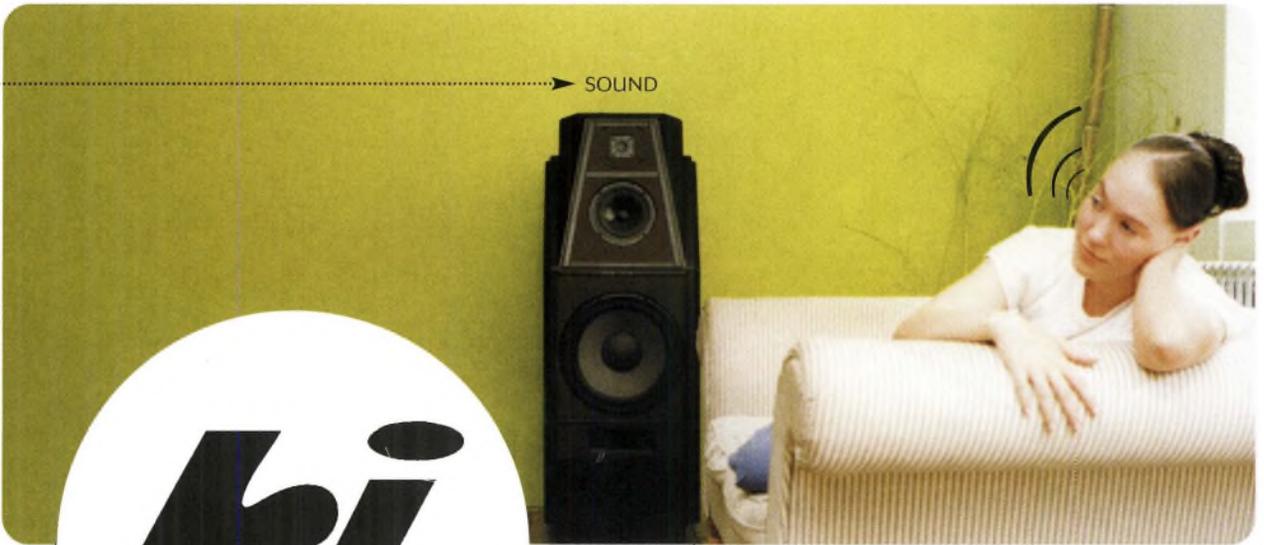
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# Audio Physic Virgo System

by Roy Gregory and Dave Davies

The Audio Physic Virgo is that rarest of beasts, a German speaker that has achieved more than a cult following in the UK. In fact, it has been greeted with almost universal acclaim, and enjoys an enviable reputation for transparency and the quality of its stereo imagery. It is a genuine exponent of the "disappearing box" trick which you hear so much about, but which is rarely convincing in practice. Unfortunately, it is also adept at making your hard earned pound notes disappear too - 3400 times. And if we follow conventional thinking that puts the Virgo in the rarefied company of ten thousand pounds worth of electronics and suitably expensive ancillaries. Not too many people are going to get to enjoy its considerable charms.

Unless we bend the rules, that is. Basic electronics have come on leaps and bounds in recent years (witness the rise and rise of the thousand pound one-box CD player), whilst the general increase in speaker sensitivity has eased the load on amplifiers. Has the ground shifted enough to re-write the front-end-first rule book? The Virgo seems like the perfect candidate for a little exploration on the subject, so we asked Audio Physic importer Bill Huston to put together a basic system worthy of his popular speaker. This is what he came up with.

But lets start at the end, shall we? The Virgo has a tall, and unusually slim cabinet which results in a contoured

baffle only just wide enough to accommodate the 100mm doped paper midrange driver. The narrow frontal aspect makes for a very deep box, and the Virgo's proportions make it stand out from the crowd. Interestingly, it also shares some thinking with the Audioplan Kontrast, another German speaker that we reviewed in Issue 3. The tweeter is decoupled, mounted on three elastomer blocks, and the path from

woofers' mechanical output. The driver material has been chosen because of the tonally natural sound that it produces, but considerable effort has gone into controlling the cones, resulting in a midrange driver that is flat to 10KHz, allowing Audio Physic to push the upper crossover point to 3.5KHz, leaving the aluminium domed 19mm tweeter to fill in overtones rather than supplying fundamentals. A large plinth bass aids lateral stability, and is threaded for nice butch M8 spikes and lock nuts.

The Virgo uses a hard wired crossover, but only a single set of binding posts. Sensitivity is a shade below the current average of 90dB, and load is a flat four Ohms. So, a sensible electrical load and reasonable efficiency make the Virgo an ideal

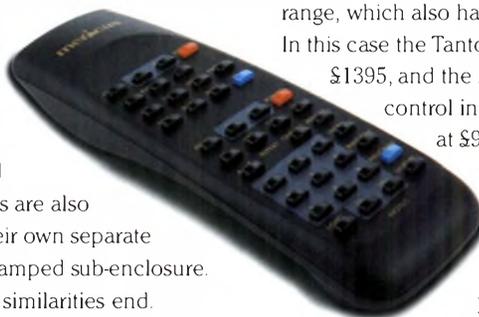
candidate for downsized electronics. Bill chose to use his own Meracus range, which also hails from Germany. In this case the Tanto CD player at £1395, and the Intrare remote control integrated amp at £995. At a total of £2390 this is hardly the sort of electronics package that you'd associate with a pair of three and a half grand loudspeakers, so we are well and truly following the brief.

The Meracus units share clean, simple styling, with thick perspex



the bass drivers to the reflex port is subdivided into a series of chambers to help break up standing waves. The midrange and tweeter drivers are also isolated in their own separate and heavily damped sub-enclosure.

There the similarities end. The Virgo is a true three-way design, employing a pair of 150mm doped paper bass drivers, placed on either side and towards the front of the cabinet. This opposed placing should help cancel at least some of the



▶ front panels and round, chromed controls. Functions on the electronics themselves are kept to a workable minimum, with a comprehensive, and for once, well laid out system remote handling everything else. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there's more to Meracus than meets the eye. The Tanto CD player uses a rubber sprung suspension to isolate its transport, which is in turn, run from a constant temperature master clock. The digital output uses a BNC connector, which demonstrates unusual attention to detail. The power supplies for the digital and class A analogue stages are independent, and

Meracus write their own system control software, thus completing the checklist of Desirable Design Elements Part One; CD Players.

The Intrare employs microprocessors to adjust both volume and source switching, eliminating the volume potentiometer and any mechanical switches from the signal path, which is kept deliberately short. Relays are used to mute the output, meaning that once connected to the mains, the unit will stay warm, even when powered down from the front panel. Input sensitivity can be individually set, and a phono stage is available as an optional extra. The only thing you need to watch out for is that you need to turn the amp off before making or breaking connections to it. That's good practice anyway, but whereas failure to do so will result in the odd whistle or thump, in the case of the Meracus electronics, permanent damage may occur. The latest models correct this. You have been warned.

One other thing to bear in mind is the lack of bi-wiring on the speakers or a Pre-Out on the amplifier. This rules out the increasingly common bi-amp upgrade path and means that the system stands or falls as it is.

Furniture for the system took the form of a Stands Unique equipment rack, chosen to match the wood finish on the Virgos. The octagonal wooden poles

support the toughened glass shelves on carbon-fibre isolators, and Bill takes a further step to eliminate resonance within the shelves themselves by sitting another sheet of glass between them and the equipment. Altogether a rather more considered approach than the average steel/spike/ glass combination, the stand is easy to build, although levelling the individual shelves is a bit of a bind. Sound quality suffers badly if the bottom sleeve nuts aren't tight, and the supplied spanner was too small in terms of fit and mechanical efficiency. Do yourself a favour and use a proper job! Aesthetics are in the eye of the beholder, and whilst I'm not a fan, that normally indicates widespread public approval.

The final element in the system is, of course, the cabling, and in a direct echo of the Copland/JM Labs/Nordost set-up that we examined, first glance suggests irrational extravagance. The entire cable loom comes from Yamamura Churchill, and consists of M4000 interconnects, loud-speaker and mains cables, the latter being fed from the M Ciabatta mains block and a top of the range Quantum mains cable. This little lot weighs in at £1270 for the signal cabling, and a whopping £2570 for the mains distribution. Worth it? You'll need to read on.

Aside from their appearance, the other distinctly different aspect of the Virgos is their preferred positioning. Audio Physic suggest that the speakers should be placed to fire across





▶ the room and far further out than normal. The reasoning is both complex and persuasive, but not as persuasive as the sonic results. Starting as directed with the speakers

eight feet apart and each baffle six feet from me (think about that) it was surprisingly simple to dial in the sound. Forward and back for bass weight, laterally for overall warmth, and finally toe-in to achieve perfect image focus. Audio Physic supply instructions that are a model of clarity and brevity, so I won't labour the point, but what you are going to end up with is speakers that are far further apart and much closer to you than seems natural. Trust me, it works. The first person to discover just how well was DD.



## The System

Meracus Tanto CD Player	£1395
Meracus Intrare Amplifier	£995
Audio Physic Virgo	£3399
Stands Unique SS500	£329
Carbon Fibre Shelf Supports /Set	£25
Isolation Feet; Short Set	£17
Tall Set	£27
<b>Yamamura Churchill Cables</b>	
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3.0m M4000 Speaker Cable	£920
1.0m M4000 Mains Cable	£249
1.5m M4000 Mains Cable	£324
M Ciabatta A/C Block	£995
2.0m Quantum Mains Cable	£995

## Part 2 Killing Giants

by Dave Davies

Here's another system selected on the basis of delivering fine performance via careful attention to synergy. Like last Issue's Copland/JM Labs/Nordost system, this represents an unusual component cost weighting. Yup, another system where a large chunk of the cost is for the associated cables and mains devices, although in this case the equipment costs are out of kilter as well. As became clear in that last review, if the system delivers the goods the relative cost of each component is unimportant. Let's see if history can repeat itself here.

First, there's that added twist to the relative costs because the most expensive components by some margin are the speakers, at an overdraft enhancing £3399, closely followed by the cables and mains device, which collectively add up to £3835. Trailing at the almost laughably inexpensive end are the CD player at £1395 and amp at

a mere £995. No one setting out to apportion a system budget from scratch would come up with this peculiar mix. They wouldn't dream of powering such costly and demanding speakers with a relatively humble integrated amp. Nor would they consider spending three times the cost of the amp on mains and signal cabling. What warped logic could come up with such a scheme? Step forward Bill from anvil audio; no, don't bow, let's decide whether you've earned that later.

The amp and CD player are pretty conventional looking designs, clean, simple and business like. Well, they're German after all. Silver control buttons and knobs set against gloss-black acrylic fascias make for a very room friendly appearance. That said, the CD drawer cutout isn't particularly even and there's a slightly cheap feel to the amp's volume control knob. These components have none of the

precision feel and solidity of the similarly priced Helics CD players for example. The amp and CD are accompanied by a button intensive but logically laid out remote that handles all the usual functions along with a few you probably haven't thought of.

The most visually distinctive designs here are the Audio Physic speakers. Standing 41" high, they're also quite deep at 16" but, and here's the critical part, a mere 6" wide. There are no grilles which makes for a starkly attractive baffle which contrasts nicely with the beautifully veneered side panels. A swift rap on the speaker cabinet immediately told me two things; they're very solidly built and I had very sore knuckles.

The Yamamura Churchill mains and interconnect cables are extraordinarily chunky cloth wrapped devices with mains connected via the appetisingly named Ciabatta A/C box. The latter is housed in a sculpted wooden case so nicely finished it wouldn't look out of place in a gallery, and utilises US type mains sockets and plugs. The electronics were mounted in an attractive glass and ▶

▶ wood rack from Stands Unique.

Set up for the table, mains and electronics was simplicity itself. The speakers are a little more demanding if they're to give of their best. Logic and the average less than palatial British room size might dictate that you'd get away with these unobtrusively slim speakers taking advantage of some rear wall loading but no, they need lots of space and very specific space at that. As RG has described, ideally sited they need to fire across the room, well into it with the listener against the back wall. This clearly dictates that domestic acceptability has to take a step back in favour of the sonic goods. Fortunately I happen to have my usual system set up in roughly this way. The main difference is that the Audio Physics were 4' into the room and felt uncomfortably close to me. A process of very careful and precise positioning and toe-in ensued before the speakers were set up to Bill's satisfaction. The speakers stayed 4' from the rear wall, 7' apart and 6' from the listening position, aimed at an apex approximately a foot behind my head.

On firing the system up for the first serious listen the reason for the unusual speaker positioning immediately made sense. I was rewarded with the best soundstage I've experienced in my listening room. For once (at least aurally) the speakers just disappeared to be replaced by staging that was simply right whatever software was fed to the system. Whether in the relatively cavernous acoustic of the Minneapolis Orchestra Hall (Mahler, *Song of the Earth*, RR-88CD), or in much more intimate settings such as the studio bound *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman*, MFSL UDCCD 740, the sense of space and correctly proportioned imagery

was tangibly there, time after time.

The other great and immediately apparent quality of this system was its power of resolution. Fine details that had previously been buried in familiar recordings were now obvious, and recordings that I'd overlooked were seen in a new light. A prime example is Dylan's last album *Time Out Of Mind*. Praised far and wide on its release, I just didn't get it. I found the Daniel Lanois production murky and indistinct with Dylan's reedy vocals



buried in the mix. I'd tried the CD on my own and a couple of other systems but had given up on it and the album languished on my shelves virtually unplayed. This system worked miracles. Suddenly the entire production made absolute sense. From the first notes individual instruments were clearly defined with Dylan's voice centre stage, well in front of the rolling bass and percussion. Great stuff, full of emotion and fine playing. Now the album lived up to the plaudits it received on release.

Moving on to punchier stuff, 'Cold, Cold, Cold' from the Little Feat tribute album *Rock and Roll Doctor* proved the system had dynamics and real drive; from chopping guitar breaks to the thunderous percussion, everything was handled with ease. And I was entirely unaware of speaker cabinets between me and the music. Fingers on steel guitar strings rang true as did the

impact and decay of hard struck drums. In common with the Dylan, it was like hearing this album for the first time.

The Heifetz/ Reiner Brahms and Tchaikovsky *Violin Concerto's* were more real, even on the mid-price CD version, than I've experienced before. The amount of fine detail the system was able to draw from these long in the tooth but extraordinarily fine performances was remarkable. From the layering of the woodwinds, to the emotional intensity of Heifetz's playing, I haven't enjoyed this CD so much.

So is the system perfect?

Of course not, nothing's perfect and that's as true of hi-fi as anything else. Whilst the system does an amazing job in all the areas I've discussed, there is something missing and that's the sheer body that comes from a deeper,

fuller bass presentation. That's not to say that the Audio Physics don't deliver bass, they manage to produce a remarkable amount of tightly defined bass for the cabinet size. It's just that certain recordings lack a little of the 'oomph' I know is there. An example is the



Hanson 'Song of Democracy' (RR 49-CD) where the closing stages call for a vocal, from the massed ranks of the Turtle Creek Chorale, and orchestral crescendo which should, along with loosening a few fillings send shivers down your spine. ▶



► The system does a fine job up until this point, nicely differentiating the ranks of vocalists and setting them and the orchestra in a suitably wide and deep soundstage. The system also keeps tight control throughout with no hint of break-up, the imagery remaining rock-solid right through the climax. So what am I whinging about? Simply that as the crescendo gathers pace, I'm just that bit more aware of the lack

of deep bass which has the effect of making the system seem a little brighter, tilting its balance forward as the crescendo gathers pace.

It's a lightness which undermines nearly all of the larger scale repertoire at one point or another.

Whether this is a characteristic of the speakers or of the amp isn't really the remit here, I'm reviewing a system after all, although I suspect it could be the latter. If so, it's still doing a thoroughly creditable job when you consider its relatively low price.

Operationally the system is near faultless. A very minor niggle is that the volume operation is a bit constraining in that it moves from really quite quiet to very loud between 10 and 12

o'clock. A gentler curve here would allow much more control.

I've found this system remarkable: remarkably capable of creating a tangible soundstage, remarkably able to place performers 'in the room', and remarkable in that it's doing this care of some relatively small speakers and modestly priced electronics. I suspect that the Yamamura Churchill components also have a lot to do with the sheer capability of the system, which I'll let RG examine further. I feel that with this system Bill has assembled something of a giant killer.

This is particularly so if you have the space to ideally site the speakers and don't exclusively favour large-scale orchestral works. Go on Bill, you've earned it. Take that bow!



## Part 3

Once you've got this system properly set-up, and you settle down to some serious listening you are going to be impressed by its stereo performance. Even hardened Naim listeners, for whom 'stereo' is generally used as an expletive, were left open mouthed in astonishment. In fact, the imaging is so impressive that it's easy to be blown away by it, and miss the rest of the performance off the critical ticket. The problem of course, is that a perfect holographic incarnation of Missy Elliot is a lot less impressive if you can't make sense of what she's saying (Having said that, Missy Elliot is pretty impressive, even with her mouth shut!)

You need to get past the 'sonic spectacle' stage, (and for the moment let's neatly side-step the whole 'Stereo Imagery - Right or Wrong' thing, which I'll return to later). Instead let's start as normal with the system's musical performance. Let's not allow the cosmet-

ics to obscure the fundamentals.

My room is rather better suited to the positional dictates of the Virgos than DD's. I could get them a good foot further apart, and they had more space to either side. This gave me a lot

more latitude when it came to fine tuning, and ultimately I felt that I got an extra level of performance out of the system. The issue you have to



▶ address is the balance of tonal warmth and bass weight. Push the speakers back and you certainly get more bass. The problem is that it starts to clog up the pristine clarity of the midrange. Definitely not a good thing. Likewise, get the lateral spacing wrong and the sound leans to the lean, if you get my drift. Personally I was happy to tinker with the tonal balance, rather than trying to produce extra weight that really wasn't there. The Virgos are another example of that strange phenomenon, hi-fi that looks exactly the way it sounds. Tall, slim, elegant, and with hidden depths, this is definitely a finesse speaker rather than a pounding heavyweight. It actually goes surprisingly low, in terms of information, but if you want to rattle rib-cages then look elsewhere. There are two sides to this argument, but I have to say that I tend to the view that the Virgos' lighter balance has rather more to do with reality than the hi-fi spectacular bass thunder of some of their competition.

Why dwell on this? Because, as DD suspected, one of the major compromises inherent in this system as a whole, is the ability of the amplifier to generate low frequency wallop from the expensive Audio Physic speakers. Driven by suitable, costly amplification such as the Lavardin MAP monoblocks, it would be churlish to complain about the fast, tactile bass quality that results. The Intrare isn't in that league, which just goes to prove that there's no such thing as a free lunch. Bi-amping might provide a solution, but neither the amp or speakers allow for the possibility.

The other danger in mixing expensive speakers with cheaper electronics is that you learn all too much about the corners you've cut in the black box department. In absolute terms, this system lacks resolution, especially

when you are familiar with the Virgos' phenomenal capabilities in this regard. But here the compromise is extremely clever, and in fact, unless you listen to (much) more expensive electronics you'll probably remain blissfully unaware of what is missing.

The Stands Unique Carbon Fibre Isolators really help here, screwing the last ounce of information out of the Meracus products.

However, that's the shortcomings dealt with. In almost every other respect this is an enjoyable, impressive and engaging system. The sound is wonderfully solid, and really bounces along. 'Listen To The Radio' (Nanci Griffith *Storms*

MCA DMC6066) tumbles along with guitar, piano and bass lines weaving in and out of each other, propelled by a hitch kick rhythm. The Meracus/Audio Physic system keeps the whole thing together, while sorting out the individual strands.

The bass drum's propulsive kicks are right on the rhythm and Nanci's voice is wonderfully natural, both in terms of tone and phrasing. The wide open sound stage just makes it easier to hear what each player is doing.

This musically holistic quality is what makes the system gel, and creates rather more than the sum of its parts. Rhythmically it's spot on, but more importantly, the timing extends coherently from top to bottom. Which is where the whole imaging thing comes in. If a system can provide a coherent and accurately presented image of the musical event then it tends to suggest that it's parcelling out its information at the right time and in the right place.

Note, more is not necessarily better. What we are looking for here is correct proportions.

The Delmoni / Burgess recording *Music For Violin And Guitar* (Sonora SACC 102) has uncannily accurate soundstaging. Via the Meracus and Virgos the two players appeared life size before me, clearly separated in height, David Burgess seated slightly in front of Arturo Delmoni. The instrumental balance was perfect, the guitar's subtle continuo never getting swamped by the vivacious violin. Despite its small scale, and perhaps because of its astonishingly natural presentation, this is a difficult disc to reproduce. But in this case it played straight to the system's strengths, and the results were both beautiful and astonishing.

The combination of clarity and separation with solid, substantial images is rare, and to achieve it from such modest electronics is impressive indeed. Which begs the question, just how much are the various cables contributing? My investigation centred on the mains cabling. Whilst the signal loom is expensive, it's far from over the top in the context of today's market

place and our recent discoveries concerning the influence of cables on system sound quality. The mains cables, on the other hand, are certainly extravagant. When you consider that all we need to do is power two boxes, isn't the four way block and its associated lead a bit unnecessary? Why not just plug the fancy M4000 mains leads straight into the wall?

Sadly, from a financial point of view, the answer to these two questions is "no", and "because it'll sound worse". \$2000 worse? You'd better believe it. Despite the Virgos' stellar performance, the most impressive



▶ bit of kit in this system was the M Ciabatta and its associated leads! You can read more in the mains survey, but replacing the Yamamura products with good quality standard leads destroyed the system's performance. Gone was the solidity and natural tonal shading. Gone too was the transparency, replaced by a grainy greyness and electronic haze. The get up and go had got up and gone, and taken any sense of pace and organisation with it. The RF filtering provided by the Ciabatta was clearly doing a crucial job in allowing the elements of the system to work together. The heavily screened signal and speaker leads weren't doing any harm either.

As I've already discussed, the problem with any system that turns budgetary logic on its head is to try and

balance the insight the loudspeakers are capable of against revealing the flaws in the driving electronics. Here we have a carefully considered system which is arguably the cheapest way of enjoying the benefits of Audio Physic's popular Virgo loudspeaker. It maximises the performance of the fundamentally well balanced electronics by protecting them with high quality ancillaries. Could you achieve the same benefits by spending themoney on a more expensive CD player and amp? You'd gain bandwidth, and perhaps resolution, but

you'd lose the musical coherence and tonal sophistication that actually make this system special. Whether you appreciate its strengths or suffer its weaknesses will be decided by whether you view the musical cup as half full or half empty. Stentorian bass is not on the agenda, and it doesn't have the widest dynamic range.

But: it is wonderfully persuasive and immediate, placing musical performances right in front of you. Yes, it images like crazy, but it does so much more as well. Half full? If you favour smaller scale music, particularly if it's acoustic, then you might find your cup runneth over. ▶+



### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

#### Meracus Tanto CD Player

Analogue Output Level	1.27V
Digital Output	BNC
DAC Type	
Crystal '20 bit' Bitstream	
Display Off	Yes
Weight	6 kg
Dimensions (WxHxD)	435x110x270 mm
Price	£1395

#### Meracus Intrare Amplifier

Inputs	7 x Line
Phono Input	
Optional MM/MC	
Input sensitivity	
Independently Adjustable Via remote	
Balance	
Via Remote	
Power output	60 w (8 ohms) 80 w (4 ohms)
Weight	8 kg
Dimensions (WxHxD)	435x85x315mm
Price	£995

#### Audio Physic Virgo 2

Type	Three-Way Loudspeaker
Drivers	19mm Aluminum Dome Tweeter 100mm Doped Paper Bass
Paper Midrange	2 x 150mm Doped Paper Bass
Bass Loading	Multi-Chamber Reflex
Frequency Response	34Hz - 21kHz (±3dB)
Efficiency	90dB
Impedance	4 ohms
Weight	26 kg Each
Dimensions (WxHxD)	160x1000x415mm
Bi-Wire	No
Finishes	Black Ash, Birdseye Maple, Cherry, Rosenut
Price	£3399

#### Contacts

Meracus, Audio Physic, Yamamura/Churchill:

**aanvil audio**  
Woodvale  
Heath Rd  
Woolpit  
Bury St Edmunds  
Suffolk  
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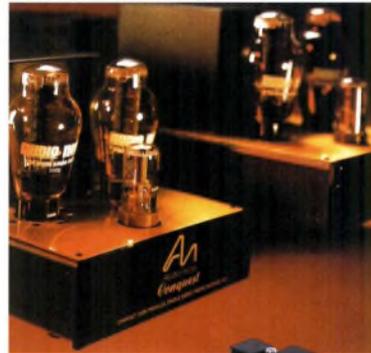
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# Convergent Audio Technology

## SL1 Ultimate

by Roy Gregory

Deep down, we're all either dog people or cat people. If you want that predictable, servile loyalty, the comfort zone of the familiar, the steady state emotional response, get a dog. But if you value independence, intelligence and the challenge and stimulation that comes from a relationship of equals, you need a cat. Likewise, when you listen to music, are you after the fact of the notes or the sense of the performance? Are you in control, or open to suggestion? These attitudes are at the heart of the battle between music and hi-fi. Battle? You'd better believe it. We're getting so darned good at dissecting hi-fi that we are in danger of defining music out of the equation. The problem is that once the music's gone, all we are left with is increasingly expensive noise generators.

All of which is by way of a convoluted introduction to the Convergent Audio Technology pre-amplifier, cat by nature, CAT by name. The original SL1 set new standards when it first appeared some fifteen years ago, supplanting the similarly priced Audio Research SP11 as the current audiophile darling. It was a handsome, if rather plain unit with a small external power supply permanently attached by a thick umbilical. With a grand total of three inputs, volume, balance and a tape loop it was critically challenged in the control department, and like most pre-amps at the time, it offered an internal phono

stage. Well, fifteen years and four incarnations later, *plus ca change*.

Whilst the opposition has gone on to produce ever more complex products, loaded with inputs and processor loops, remote control and balanced options, but devoid of even a moving-magnet stage, and with stratospheric price tags to convince prospective purchasers of their obvious quality, Convergent have been quietly refining their

£750 cheaper than the original SL1!

Over the years, designer Ken Stevens has worked to reduce the noise levels in the CAT to the point where it challenges the best solid state designs. At the same time, he has worked to maintain, and even extend the musical flow that put the original SL1 at the top of the class. As well as the substantially damped casework, he has further refined the power supply regulation (based on experience gained in developing the JLI mono-blocks), massively increased the

reservoir capacitance (the Ultimate carries twenty-six times the capacitance of the original, and four times the Signature), employed the latest

low-loss circuit board materials, and changed the

tube complement. Instead of using a pair of 12AU7's at the line inputs, he now uses much quieter Sovtek 6922's.

Set up is fairly straight forward, hampered only by the considerable weight of the control unit, and its ungainly connection to the smaller, but seemingly equally heavy, power supply. This means that you either have to feed them into your rack from behind, and then move the whole lot into position, or pass the power supply through from the front first, followed by the head unit. I've had three CATs through my hands now, and I still haven't managed to install one without ricking my neck or turning the air blue. That aside, everything's a doddle. Socketry is all phono, clearly



original concept. The latest SL1 Ultimate is still a clean and simple two-box unit, with the same three inputs and captive power supply. It still offers a high quality valve based moving-coil input, capable of handling all but the lowest output cartridges. Along the way it's gained a lot of weight, mainly from its beefed up chassis, and the insides have been honed to a musical cutting edge. And it's still at the forefront of pre-amp performance. And it's still the same price. In fact, in the UK, the Ultimate is

▶ labeled and widely spaced, and hook-up is a cinch. You want to watch what you sit it on (like any pre-amp), but the Clearlight RDC rack and RDC4 feet worked a treat. It's also a good idea to check the isolation of the power supply, and if necessary sit it separately on the floor. Other than that, you need to choose the correct loading for your cartridge by inserting the appropriate plugs in the sockets provided, and away you go.

But before we get carried away, one quick word of warning. Those lovely switches that grace the front panel. Outwardly identical to the ones used by Audio Research, amongst others, these are just as fragile. The long lever and Gwyneth Paltrow neck make any sort of inadvertent contact potentially fatal, and their positioning at either end of the control panel increases their vulnerability. Be real careful when moving the unit around, especially when wrestling it into a rack (don't lean against it), and never, ever leave it unattended on the floor, or Sod's law will make you regret it.

I can't comment on burn-in times but warm up is a case of the longer the better. I left the review unit permanently powered, and felt that it really reached peak performance after something like ten days. It's not that it sounded bad before that, it's just that the longer it was on, the further the pre-amp itself receded into the background, becoming ever less obtrusive as the music gained more and more life and vibrance.

CAT by name, cat by nature. It's this lack of a musical fingerprint that makes the SL1 such an enduring product. If you want a great lolloping puppy of a system, wagging its tail and slobbering all over you, then look elsewhere. The CAT is all about feline grace, passing the signal without you even noticing, always there but never in your face. But just like the family pet, which shares your space without intruding, you are going to get the odd

timely reminder of its presence: sometimes that it's cute and cuddly, other times that there's a killer lurking inside. When it needs to, the SL1 flexes its muscles and reacts with lightning speed. You don't get to take musical liberties. Ignore what's playing at your peril, the CAT allows the music to command your attention.

The incredibly quiet noise floor and excellent micro dynamics provide a near perfect model of a note's complex structure, allowing it to bloom naturally into the acoustic space of the recording. This doesn't just ensure that each note's character is correct, but also its shape and sense of purpose. But more than that, the consistent harmonic structure of the notes welds them into coherent instrumental lines. This ability to separate the contribution of each instrument whilst keeping the music as a whole intact, allows tremendous insight into musical structures, opening out pieces that are often considered difficult. The excellent Speakers' Corner re-issue of Pollini playing *Chopin Etudes* (DG Stereo 2530 291) reviewed in the audiophile music section is a case in point. The piano sound is constructed from layer upon layer of fundamentals and harmonics, yet the subtle rhythmic prompts of the left hand in Op.10 No2 remain distinct in tone and tempo from the skittering melody. Likewise, the stately dynamism of No3 doesn't obscure the contrasting contributions of left and right hands. And for sheer energy and intensity it's hard to beat Martha Argerich's Prokofiev from the same box-set (DG SLPM 139 349). The power and drive of her performance is given full rein by the CAT, which manages to keep both piano and orchestra under control without limiting or crushing the vitality of either. The chaotic, extravagant nature of the music, full of instrumental and dynamic contrasts, retains its vivacity without itself descending



into chaos.

But back to the plot. This way with the internals of musical structure makes listening to the formal compositions of the classical repertoire an absolute joy. Sonatas, trios or quartets, Beethoven, Mozart or Mendelssohn, the music unfolds before you. The Mozart *Quintette K.515* (The Heifetz- Piatigorsky Concerts RCA LSC3048) with its paired violins and violas comes across beautifully, the individual instruments being effortlessly separated, not just violin from viola but Heifetz' violin from Israel Baker's.

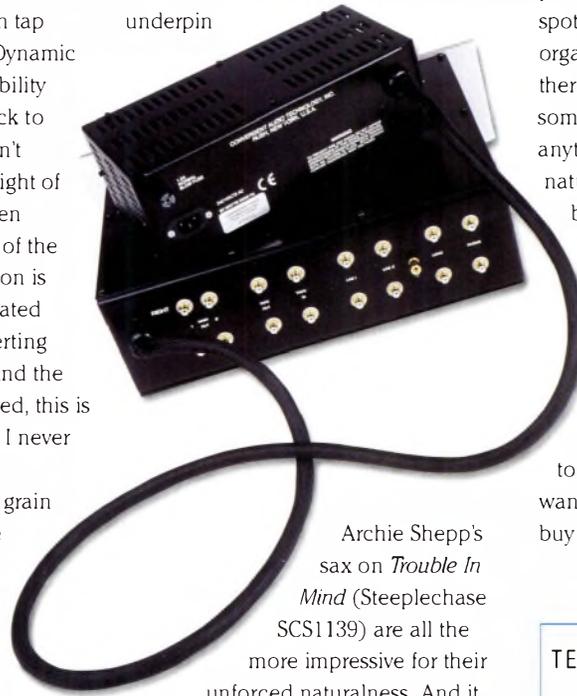
All this talk of records brings us to the subject of the CAT's phono stage. Moving coil capable in the true sense, the Ultimate's phono inputs are exceptionally quiet for a valve design (no transformers here). Claimed to be compatible with signal levels as low as 0.25mV, Ken Stevens points out that such specifications will in practise be influenced by the sensitivity of the system as a whole, and how hard the pre-amp ends up working. He's not wrong, and 0.3mV seems like a safer threshold. It's not a noise problem, but has more to do with drive. Trying the very low output of the ClearAudio Victory into the CAT was a fascinating but ultimately frustrating experience. With a paltry 0.2 mV on offer, noise was actually acceptable, while the astonishing delicacy and timbral qualities of the cartridge were a perfect match for the CAT. Until the going ▶

got tough. Then the soundstage, normally a CAT highlight, simply collapsed and the band became a softened and ill defined scrum between the speakers, only to revert, magically, to their former well spaced glory as soon as things quietened down. It's all a bit like being in a bar when the free food arrives.

Changing to the Victory-H with a positively Niagaran 0.6mV on tap changed things dramatically. Dynamic peaks scaled with aplomb, stability assured, the system settled back to its unobtrusive best. It just didn't have the transparency and insight of the lower output cartridge when things were at the gentler end of the scale. Careful cartridge selection is going to be crucial here. I cheated by using the big stick and reverting to the ClearAudio Accurate - and the best of both worlds. Properly fed, this is one hell of a phono stage, but I never managed to achieve the same transparency and total lack of grain that I got consistently from the line stage. Recent exposure to Tom Evans' Groove has heightened my expectations in this regard, and given the reversion of most pre-amps to line-only status, the CAT's vinyl performance is a significant bonus. It's just that advances in its line stage have outstripped it, possibly pushing the phono stage up against the boundaries of what's possible from valves handling such low level signals. It will still give most of the competition a serious run for their money, it's just that the goalposts got moved.

Used with line level sources, there is a sinuous grace and clarity to the music's purpose and progression. When fireworks are demanded they arrive with a gratifying crash which is sufficiently dramatic to make you sit up and take notice, but the CAT succeeds in preventing such overt displays from swamping the less demonstrative members of the orchestra. Lower

registers are solid and, just like the rest of the range, properly weighted, which allows the bass to both float and breath, without the emasculated, over damped, and defined to death travesty that passes for bass in so many high-end designs. The combination of easy, walking bass notes and sonorous textures from Horace Parlan's left hand, that underpin



Archie Shepp's sax on *Trouble In Mind* (Steeplechase SCS1139) are all the more impressive for their unforced naturalness. And it is this naturalness of the pacing, the ease of the phrasing, that pushes the music to the fore (and the electronics into the background). It just becomes so easy to listen.

In its latest (I hesitate to say Ultimate) form, the CAT has become a musically more articulate and engaging performer. Essentially neutral, it is free of the sogginess or cloying warmth that many people associate with valve electronics. Its also free of glare and grain, although the latter creeps up on the phono stage. It is quiet, with excellent high and low level dynamics, and superb timbral definition. It is fuss free, and happy to play with the other kids. In fact, cartridges aside, it performed faultlessly with a whole variety of sources, and power amps

solid state and valve. The line stage is certainly amongst the best available, and if the phono stage isn't quite up to the same standard, you only really notice in the light of the formers excellence. Once again we see a product that succeeds by dint of its evenness and top to toe coherence. There are no lumps or bumps in its performance, no magic bands or sweet spots. The CAT does its thing from organ pedals up to piccolos, and whilst there may be other kit that will do something better, I've yet to hear anything that is consistently more natural. Just look how often I've come back to piano recordings in describing its performance. That alone should tell you something. Given the price of the line only competition, that makes the SL1 Ultimate something of a bargain, especially when you factor in the phono stage. If you want your hi-fi to do tricks, buy a dog. But if you want intelligent and stimulating music, buy a CAT.



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Product Type	Valve Pre-Amplifier
Valve Complement	6 $\times$ Sovtek 6922(ECC88) 4 $\times$ ECC83
Inputs	MC Phono, 2 $\times$ Line, Tape
Outputs	2 $\times$ Main, Tape
Phono Loading	User Variable
Phono Sensitivity	0.25mV+
Dimensions (HxWxD)	142 x 480 x 314mm PSU, 115 x 310 x150mm
Finish	Black or Silver
Price	£5750 (£5250 Line Only)

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# Marantz CD-7 CD Player

by Paul Messenger

Marantz has long been a CD player market leader in the UK, thanks to the company's close association with the Philips technology base, combined with intelligent marketing strategies and its historical credibility as a specialist hi-fi brand. The company has also enjoyed considerable success with its 'special edition' models, many of which have publicised the involvement of in-house hi-fi guru Ken Ishiwata in the process of tuning and tweaking of otherwise relatively mundane machinery to appeal to refined 'audiophile' tastes. This \$3,500 CD-7, however, represents the apotheosis of that relationship, taking 'tuning and tweaking' to new heights in the quest to create the ultimate CD player.

The number 7 holds particular magic in the Marantz mythology, dating back to the legendary Model 7 pre-amplifier from the 1950s. It has therefore always been strictly reserved for the company's greatest achievements, and has never previously appeared on a CD player. As far as Marantz is concerned then, the CD-7 is very much the d's b's, with true state-of-the-art aspirations. It may be expensive compared to mass market players, but it's also considerably cheaper than many other state-of-art pretenders, and merely to feel the weight of the thing is enough to make you realise that this is one very serious piece of kit.

'Limited Edition' and its LE abbreviation has become as much of a marketing cliché as GT, GTi, SE and so on - so much so that one wonders just how limited the edition might be if demand proves stronger than anticipated! That's certainly not going

to be the case with the CD-7. This is a truly limited edition, total production being restricted to 750 examples, simply because it uses the last remaining stock of the 'old' Double Gold Crown 16-bit 4x oversampling TD1541A Philips digital-to-analogue converter chip sets, doubled up in dual-differential mode for better linearity.

Students of digital audio technology will doubtless recall that this 'multi-bit' approach to D/A conversion technology was the only game in town when CD first appeared. In the late-1980s, however, the first 'low-bit'/'bitstream' converters started arriving, which were cheaper and easier to use from a manufacturing perspective. These quickly took over at the mass market end of things, but some enthusiasts, including myself (and Ken Ishiwata), always felt we lost something in the changeover. 'Bitstream' converters might have tended to sound smoother and sweeter at the top end of the audio band, but they also seemed to lack some of the dynamic drive and timing precision of players which used the 'multi-bit' approach. (Ken reckons its something to do with moving over to lower-voltage/current CMOS semiconductor technology.)

The 'classic' TD1541A multi-bit converter chips might be the most surprising feature of the CD-7, but they're only one element in the whole mix. Another crucial factor is the digital filtering, and those original multi-bit players were invariably used with the long since obsolete SAA7220

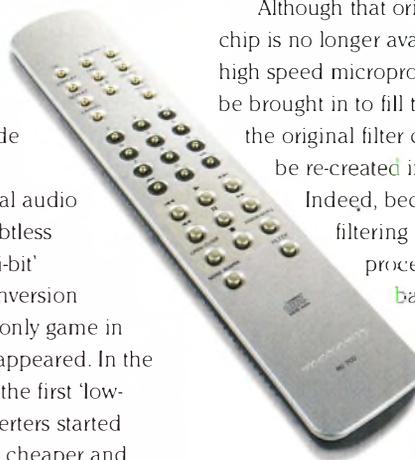
digital filter chip - a device which perhaps offered a slightly weaker strict technical performance than some of its more severe contemporaries, but which was usually reckoned to sound rather better.

Although that original digital filter chip is no longer available, modern high speed microprocessors can now be brought in to fill the gap, allowing the original filter characteristics to be re-created in computer code.

Indeed, because the digital filtering is now micro-processor/software based, the CD-7 is able to offer a choice of three different selectable filters, each with subtly different

characteristics, and available with or without additional 'noise-shaping'. All such steep anti-aliasing filters involve a measure of compromise, as the designer trades between amplitude and phase linearity and seeks to avoid 'ringing'. The CD-7 at least gives the customer a measure of choice, providing two alternatives alongside the '7220 replica' setting, and these are easily selectable via the handset while the music's playing, with just a second or so's muting as the filter mode changes.

The transport mechanism is a bit special too, being based on a Philips type CDM12.3 industrial mechanism, used with a finely finished in-house sled mechanism. Discrete component 'HDAM' amplifier modules developed specifically by Ken Ishiwata to give superior audio performance to regular op-amps, are used extensively



throughout, and the internals have copious copper shielding and 'audiophile' grade components.

Operating as a drawer/front-loader, the player as a whole is an imposing bit of kit. Taller than most, and finished in a shiny 'champagne gold' finish on copper-plated feet, it's no shrinking violet, and will stand forth as a visual as well as a sonic statement in all but the most ornate domestic environments. The display provides comprehensive information on tracks, timings and so forth, but may be switched off if desired. Indeed, from a strict audiophile perspective, given the modern fashion for minimalism, it all maybe looks just a little fussy and 'busy'.



Display apart, the fascia is relatively simple, with just five main operating buttons, plus five tiny ones. The handset is similarly gilded in colour, and is slim enough to hold and operate easily in one hand, but it's full functionality makes it quite a busy affair with a lot of small buttons and tiny lettering.

The rear panel is quite a busy affair too. Fixed level analogue stereo outputs are available on either balanced or unbalanced connectors. Three digital outputs are fitted - two electrical (phonos) and one optical - so the player can be used as a transport, plus two digital inputs, one electrical, the other switchable between electrical and optical, so the unit can function as a DAC. Two-pin IEC mains connection leaves the earth floating.

I must admit I was a little surprised to find this complexity and versatility in a single-box player. The last few

years have seen a pronounced shift away from the separate transport-and-DAC combination, and towards the simplicity of the all-in-one single-box player. While the CD-7 clearly adopts the more fashionable latter approach, the provision of such a cornucopia of socketry suggests a bit of fence-sitting, and perhaps a little too much enthusiasm to be all things to all men.

Delicious was the first word that came to mind when I sat down to sum up the CD-7's sound quality, simply because that was the first reaction that came to my lips each time I re-connected the machine and hit 'play'.

Having tried several Marantz models down the years, I was expecting a bright and open balance. What I was not expecting was that the brightness would also sound quite so sweet, clean, and free from hash. That is the most obvious and immediately noticeable of its charms, and goes a long way towards getting the seduction process underway.

I started off by simply inserting the player in my normal Naim-amplified system, using phono-to-DIN interconnects from Nordost and The Chord Company, experience slightly favouring the latter. While the CD-7 doesn't have quite the low level detail clarity and cleanness or the dynamic range of the (much more expensive, two-box) Naim CDS II that I regularly use, its fine timing and rhythmic poise, excellent dynamic drive and lovely upper range transparency all made for a very enjoyable experience.

At one point I moved the player off the Mana equipment rack I generally



use, and put it down temporarily on top of an amplifier. Interestingly, the sound seemed largely unaffected, indicating perhaps that the 'battleship' construction offers good basic immunity from environmental vibration.

Mindful that Naim amps are not noted for their top end delicacy and sweetness, I substituted the Lavardin IT integrated amplifier, and this seemed better able to bring out the Marantz' charms - especially so when I plugged in Lavardin's own interconnects. Now the JMLab Mezzo Utopias really started to sing, their very classy tweeters coming into their own in reproducing the sort of air and transparency rarely associated with solid state equipment.

The gorgeous midband brought a real 'tingle factor' to familiar recordings, especially those with female voices and acoustic instruments. But even seriously synthetic material, such as the Chemical Brothers' *Surrender*, seemed to gain a certain extra texture and delicacy from the top end transparency, even though a little of the expected warmth and weight seemed to be lacking.

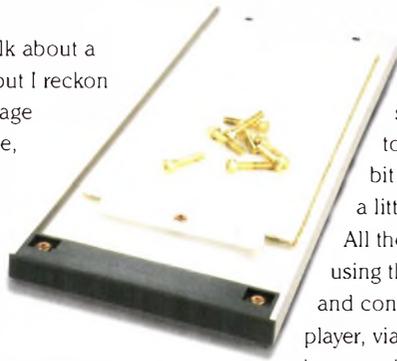
In isolation both the Marantz and the Lavardin have characters which tend towards the dry and thin, while the Mezzo Utopias are a little warm and rich, so the whole system came together very well, especially when I brought some Nordost SPM speaker cable into the equation to sharpen up the midband focus - though to be frank the much cheaper NAC-A5 I normally use still worked perfectly adequately. I'm never exactly sure what people

mean when they talk about a 'High End sound', but I reckon this particular package must get pretty close, regularly making it difficult to pen my thoughts as I become distracted by the music that's playing.

I spent some time fiddling with the different digital filter settings and the noise shaper, only to find myself becoming a little confused. Small differences were audible between the settings, though how significant these really are I'm not sure. The player defaults to 'filter 1' when powered up, and I was happy enough to carry on with that setting, though occasionally 'filter 3' (the recreation of the original 7220) provided stiff competition.

As a general rule I preferred to avoid the noise shaping option, which seemed to smooth out the top end a little, dynamics and all. And as a second general rule, I think I'd rather not have had the options. It's not that they aren't interesting, and they do represent valid alternatives to the difficult technical problems involved in any sharp roll-off filtering, but they're also a distraction, and it's quite difficult to avoid the temptation to fiddle around instead of settling back and enjoying the music.

A few weeks living with the CD-7 has done much to confirm my suspicion that hi-fi was the loser when the technologists decided to take us along the bitstream route. Every time I hear a multi-bit player (yes, they do still exist!), I hear a vividness and vivacity that low-bit conversion somehow fails



to achieve, just as the CD-7's 'noise shaper' switch tended to bland-out this multi-bit players presentation a little.

All the listening was done using the CD-7 as a straight and conventional one-box CD player, via the unbalanced phono socket analogue outputs.

I can't see a lot of point in using such an elegantly coherent design as either a standalone transport or DAC, and I've never been persuaded that the complexities of balanced connection make sense in a domestic context with short connecting cables (and therefore have no balanced amplification available to try the option!).

I don't get to review enough CD players to put the CD-7 into a proper and meaningful marketplace context, but can state quite unequivocally that it's one of the finest CD players I've ever heard, and as such the £3,500 asking price seems surprisingly reasonable.



If I do have a criticism, it's perhaps that the player tries a little too hard to be all things to all men, as I suspect that including all the various filter options and the veritable plethora of inputs and outputs must involve some element of sonic compromise, and might help explain why the dynamic range is a little constrained. That aside, its rhythmic poise and dynamic drive is as good

as any and a lot better than most, and a positive vindication for adopting the single-box, multi-bit approach.

During 1999, sales of mass market standalone CD players have started to be adversely affected by the new wave of DVD-Video machines, which purport to offer a versatile one-box solution to both movie and music replay, but which invariably carry out the latter with some indifference and lack of commitment. I contrast the Marantz CD-7 is the very embodiment of the standalone CD player, whose only task is to extract the maximum musical enjoyment from your probably now quite substantial collection of silver music discs. If music is your first priority, this is one CD player that definitely deserves the closest attention - especially as stocks are not inexhaustible. As we move towards the compromises of a Digital Versatile era, the CD-7 is very likely to be one of the last truly great CD players. 

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Marantz CD-7 CD player

Conversion Rate	16bit 4 x oversampling
Connections:	2x 3-pin XLR balanced stereo analogue output
	2x phono unbalanced stereo analogue output
	2x phono digital output
	1x optical digital output
	1x phono digital input
	1x optical digital input
Power	2-pin figure-eight IEC
Dimensions (HxWxD)	140x454x340mm
Weight	17kg
Cost	£3,500

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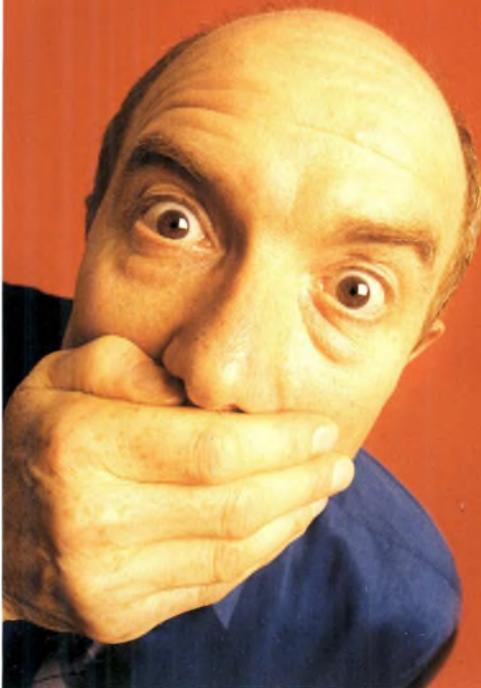
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# Revel Ultima Studio

by Chris Thomas

A couple of issues ago I raved about the Revel Ultima Gem, a small, expensive stand mounted speaker of quite breathtaking potential when used with the right equipment. The only downside was that they had limited bandwidth for such a pricey component, and although I never found this to be a problem, I could understand that for many people, and for such an outlay, extended low frequency ability would be mandatory.

So impressed was I by the Gems that I was wondering whether I would ever get excited about a full range speaker again. The speed and generally acrobatic performance of that little marvel had left me with reduced appetite for the slower and more ponderous musical portrayals of bigger boxes and I had been seriously considering the purchase of a pair for several weeks.

But Kevin Voecks, Revel's chief designer, proved to me with the Gems

that he understands cabinet behaviour and driver compression like few others, so I was delighted to be given the opportunity of living with the Gems bigger brother, the Studio. I reckoned that if anyone could design a speaker that went down to below 30Hz with a really fast sense of command and control then it would be him.

Did I say that they were the Gems bigger brothers? Make that their far bigger brothers, for the Studio is a large object indeed, especially after the Gem. It stands 44

inches tall almost 13

inches wide and is 19 inches deep.

It also weighs in at 164 lbs, making it a two-man job to move. At first they may seem an odd amalgam of curves and angles, but after a few days these seem to melt into one another to give the Studio a solid but soft-edged form and presence. The finish, on objects of this size will be all-important. The review pair came in high gloss black with rosewood sides and a black grille and in this finish they are elegant but perhaps somewhat heavy looking in a

small room. I prefer the aluminium sides and light Grey grille myself, as it seems to visually reduce the bulk of the cabinet somewhat, making it less intrusive. In the States these speakers are thought of as mid-sized, but then their living rooms are the size of tennis courts.

This is a three-way design that uses five drive units in two separate but attached cabinets. The bottom cabinet contains two 8 inch drivers, while the smaller top enclosure houses the midrange unit and twin tweeters. One of the great advantages from Voecks point of view is that every single component for the Revel range of speakers could be designed and manufactured from scratch, to exactly the specification he wanted, for exclusive use in the Revel range. So he did not have to rely on any bought-in components at all, and the drive-units are firm and tangible evidence of this. Each of the bass units has mica and carbon-filled co-polymer cones, which give great stiffness and very low mass. They have enormous voice coils and, like other Revel drivers, are wound with long lengths of flat aluminium wire for improved heat dissipation. To the rear of the bottom box is a very large, flared port and bi-wired/bi-amped connection posts. There is also provision to alter the level of both tweeters independently through two individual precision controls. The top box houses the 5 inch midrange driver, which has a titanium dome and a neodymium motor. Again this is an enormously stiff unit that, according to Revel, remains truly pistonic throughout its bandwidth and at very high levels. The front and rear mounted tweeters are different, ▶



▶ the front one is a 1.1 inch aluminium alloy domed design, while the rear is a 0.75 inch design that reinforces the main unit for an improved in-room response and improvements in image.

Cabinet resonances and colourations are clearly anathema to Revel's engineers, and they go to great lengths to ensure that the drivers sing their own song, unaccompanied by the boxes. Laser interferometry is used to measure the cabinets resonant behavior and brace the boxes internally, but just for good measure they bolt hefty side panels to their speakers to further mass damp the cabinets. These are cunningly incorporated in to the aesthetics of the design and, along with the curved grille, give the Revel range their particular look. As with the Gem these cheeks play an enormous part in the way the speaker both works and sounds. The quality of finish and standard of construction of the Studio is absolutely first-class, and as good as any loudspeaker I have encountered.

Precise siting of the Studio proved to be a prolonged process that took place over several days, largely because their weight and spiked footprint make them so difficult to move. My living room also has a wooden floor, which makes the use of floor protectors essential and this does nothing to help with their ease of movement. On carpeted floors it is easier to voice them initially with the spikes removed, though their inspired bass performance carries one or two requirements which are well worth mentioning. They must be used away from all walls. Revel make great play of their off-axis response and I agree that it is very lively indeed, particularly in the midband. Wall reflections do nothing but blur their performance. Also the distance from rear and side walls

should be as different as possible to avoid standing wave problems. The Studio is as tight and concise as any full-range speaker I have heard, but I just do not see them working at their optimum in small rooms. Nor do I think they sound remotely near their best if you sit too close to them. That midrange is a killer alright, but the bass seems to need room to focus.

Also a word about amplification is necessary. Their impedance curve would seem to illustrate that at a



nominal 6 ohm, falling to a minimum of 3 ohms, the speaker is not particularly difficult to drive (!?Ed.). Their 87-dB sensitivity means that they are of average efficiency and do not need enormously high inputs to realise a healthy volume level, but this, as always, tells only part of the story. The Mark Levinson amplification range is an obvious choice, as both Revel and ML fall under the auspices of parent company Harman International. ML electronics were also extensively used in the design of the entire Revel range. But I was never totally convinced that my No.380 pre and No.331 power amp were really up to the job, and would say that, in the case of ML, the extra resolution of a No.380S and the extra strength and control of a No.335 would yield tremendous

dividends. Think of whatever amplifier you consider to be the best around and that's the one you ought to strive for to use with the Studio. Reading between the lines should tell you that the Revel Studio is a loudspeaker of absolutely enormous potential, which will only be realised by the very best in both source and amplification components. Take it from me, nothing less will do.

Initially there are undoubted similarities to the Gem mainly in their speed and dynamic clarity. But where the Gem is light and has a fun element to it, the Studio is a more profound and far more serious proposition altogether. Their balance might seem slightly cool to some but I hear it as a lack of cabinet intrusion, and an almost unique ability to remain in total control of the lean bass, right the way down to the bottom of their response.

Most speakers with serious low frequency aspirations stay tight ▶

▶ most of the way down but then gradually and progressively lose control until they loosen their grip and get a bit out of shape at the frequency extremes. The Studio does not. It has simply amazing tautness and never, ever booms or flaps about in any way, and if the system does, it will certainly be the room or the amplification that is responsible. This feeling of the speaker being in command of the music extends right across the whole bandwidth too. The midrange can be astonishing. It is broad, expansive and unendingly detailed regardless of whatever feats the amplifier is asking it to perform. It never, ever gets flustered, nor does it harden up or grow shrill even at levels where my room acoustics were crying "enough". And the way it integrates with the wonderfully open and detailed tweeter and bass drivers is absolutely top class.

But, as with all Hi-Fi it is the way in which these fine attributes are integrated into the playing of real music that really matters and the Revel Studio goes some way toward rewriting the rule book here. Any speaker that is this fast, this detailed and this precise stands a good chance of being over analytical and musically sterile. Now this might well be impressive, especially in a dealer's listening-room, but very often the result is that you end up listening to the systems frilly attributes and not the music. And once you are fed-up with the system, the music does not have that magic that keeps dragging you back for more. The Studio involves you in the music immediately. Performances literally flow from them. The sound is never thrust at you, though it has the power, strength and energy to physically involve and enthrall. It does everything so easily and naturally and yet totally avoids being remotely lazy. In fact it behaves like a much smaller speaker being astonishingly fast and supremely agile. There is real musical

tension here as they do not hold onto a note for a millisecond longer than the amplifier tells them to and this speed of response lets you right into all aspects of the musicianship. Fourplay's CD *Elixir* (WB 45922-2) is a good case in point. This was recorded, mixed and mastered in the analogue domain and sounds it. It is quite warmly balanced with a full bottom end that can sound distinctly "tubby" on most systems. But it features a level of musicianship from some of the top men in their respective fields that is totally brilliant. The arrangements that this four-piece band work through are subtly complex though the quality of the players make it all seem so simple, easy even. The relationship between drummer Harvey Mason's kick bass drum, and bass player Nathan East is a total thing in itself. Surely you cannot rehearse this quality of interplay, there has to be something telepathic in it. The Revels revealed this in a way I have never heard before and I sat and listened for practically the whole of the CD, totally transfixed by the way that the two operated together. Down here, in the engine-room of the band the Studio shows where the momentum for the arrangements comes from, by totally separating the two instruments and not bundling them together as practically every other system does. The shape of the bass and the drum notes are very different indeed, and hearing exactly what they are each doing, while appreciating the quality of their togetherness, gave me a whole new perspective on the music. What also makes the musical experience so accessible is the perspectives that the Studio offers. Often stereo imagery is an attractive but artificial embellishment, but here it offers a direct look into the mix. The Studio, and particularly that marvellous midrange unit, can produce some of the most stable soundstages I have ever heard from a speaker. There is layer upon layer of recorded detail, being

held totally rock-solid in mid-air in front of you, giving each and every piece of music you play a totally original and different identity.

The Studio is a superb loudspeaker. It's tonally about as neutral as any moving-coil speaker I have heard. It's a big speaker that behaves like a small one, being enormously fast, totally controlled, endlessly detailed and focused and.... well I could go on about it forever. And try though I may, I can find nothing I really don't like about it. Its size could possibly be a problem for some U.K living rooms, and it of course requires a hefty outlay in electronics to allow it to fulfil its promise. But you can get into a pair from £7995, which is the same price as a pair of Ultima Gems in their top finish, and I think, for the quality on offer, that makes them a bargain. ▶+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Revel Ultima Studio Loudspeakers	
Impedance	Nominal 6 Ohms
Sensitivity	87dB
Size (HxWxD)	1114 x 324 x 492 mm
Weight	164 lbs. (74.4Kg each carton - shipping weight)
Finishes available	Body Colours- Midnight Blue, Piano Black, Hesther Grey, Revel Red, Forest Green. Panel Colours- Rosewood, Light Oak, Aluminium Black Ash.
Prices	£7995-£8995.
Distributor	
Path Premier	
Tel 01494 441736	
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Email premier@path.co.uk	



# Myryad T Series Electronics

by Pete Christie

A few years back, a new company rang up to book an appointment at the shop. They wanted to play us their new amplifier, the Myryad MI 120. They turned up with a rather smart and beautifully built remote control integrated amp that competed head-on with our best selling mid-price amp, the Arcam Delta 290, not to mention the Audiolab 8000A. 'That's brave!' I thought, as I settled down for a listen. It turns out that the designer behind the Myryad amplifier was a one-time Arcam employee, and that he'd come up with a design that could definitely hold its own. In fact, it sounded slightly better than the 290, a bit crisper and cleaner without losing that cuddly warmth that set the Arcam amplifier apart from the competition. So I bought a load for stock, and a new star was born? Not exactly. There's more to stocking (or buying) a product than just the way it sounds. The Delta 290 was the keystone in a complete range of matching products. It had a nice parallel set of cheaper units to act as stepping stones on the upgrade path (Or ideal for adding a cheap tuner to a system without upsetting the looks, the wife or the budget. I sometimes wonder whether Arcam's popularity is helped by the fact that the uninitiated

can barely tell them apart, especially now that they're all Alphas. 'Different amplifier love? You must be imagining it!'). It also came from a company with a long and illustrious history, bags full of critical acclaim, and an enviable reputation for reliability



and customer service. I stuck with the Arcam, confident that they'd still be around four years on.

And so are Myryad. The MI 120 is now the keystone in a complete range of matching products, and, you guessed it, there's a cheaper range too. Have the Myryads returned to haunt me? Yes, except that 'haunt' suggests an unpleasant experience, and the T series were never that. In fact, we've picked up exactly where we left off, with Myryad shaping up for a go at Arcam. Only this time the MI 120 has

brought his mates.

So what have we got here then? The T series is definitely comprehensive, consisting of two CD players, an FM tuner, integrated amp, stereo power amp, surround sound processor and a five channel power amp. These guys have gone from using a target rifle to a scatter gun!

Everything is available in black or, like the review system, in silver. And it's all remote control.

The bits that arrived for review were the cheapest CD player, the integrated amp with its matching power amp, and the radio. That's T-10, T-40, T-60 and T-30 to you.

And no they didn't call the home cinema processor the T-2, although perhaps they should have done.

First impressions were 'Oh Lord, it's the seventies again'. All that acreage of brushed aluminium, even if the buttons are black. Now normally I go for the current crop of silver finishes, but this time round, if it was my money I'd go for the black. That's just me though, and it's nice to have the option. Fit and finish were okay, rather than excellent, the un-recessed volume and balance controls on the amp looking distinctly cheap in this day and age. On the other hand, the positive click of the push buttons was nice, and the green LEDs were suitably subtle. Round the back, everything is also pretty



▶ standard, with basic gold phono sockets and speaker binding posts. All pretty standard stuff for four hundred sheets a box. One thing that doesn't show is the products' weight. Pick them up and the Myryads are surprisingly heavy, even the CD player. There are no surprises when it comes to inputs and outputs, so I'll leave the numbers to the tech panel at the end of the review. The amps are rated at 50 watts a side, and the T40 integrated includes a moving-magnet phono stage as standard. Otherwise, everything is exactly as you'd expect in 'serious hi-fi' land, with no nasty tone controls or extraneous facilities.

Having run the whole lot in

for a couple of weeks, I sat down for a play and quickly realised two things.

These products work fine individually, but they're better as a team. They also have a very particular character which makes speaker choice critical, and the speakers they work with demand the extra dynamic range, separation and stereo focus that come with the extra power amp. I'm not saying you can't get good results out of the CD player and

integrated amp on their own, but you are going to have to take some time over selecting your speakers and cables. Being as I had the additional amp to hand it seemed a shame not to use it.

Speaker wise I worked my way through a few options before I finally hit gold. In combination with the Audio Vector C10s the results were just too thin and bright, tipping over the edge from openness and clarity into

glare. The Crestas sounded muddy and sat on, whilst the Missions were just wrong from the start. What's needed is something that is essentially neutral, but with good dynamics and no upper mid suck-out. Wheel in the B&W CDM2s. Cable the system with Chord Chameleon interconnects and Ortofon SPK200 speaker cables and it suddenly all falls into place.

What's going on here is a very careful balancing act. It's almost as if Myryad have pinched and tweaked the frequency response of the system a bit like a body builder contorting himself to display this muscle group, or that one round the back. Suck it in hear for a bit more space and definition, push it out



there for a bit of extra weight. Now, don't get me wrong. This is not major surgery we're talking here, but if it happens to coincide with a similar dip or lump in a speaker's frequency response, the result isn't so much over egged as egg all over your face. Of course, a careful balancing act is exactly what trying to 'downsize' an existing range is all about. Given the

musical performance and the evidence of the externals, I'd have to say that Myryad have done an excellent job of keeping as much of the guts as possible without totally destroying the appearance. There are a few rough edges, but overall I don't see the customer being too worried, and especially not once he's heard the benefits.

And the benefits are well worthwhile. Once you've sorted out the slight upper mid hollow, and made sure that the gentle midbass bulge isn't too apparent, the music simply flows. The combination of a weighty balance and good dynamics alongside good clarity and separation gives you a nice sense of life without ever being too obvious.

Playing the Windham Hill track

'Wishing Well' by

Schoenherz and

Scott, I was amazed

by the bass detail. You could here the deep synthesiser notes taking a moment to focus, almost like blooming in reverse. And yes it is intentional.

The percussion detail on 'Penguins' (Lyle Lovett *I Love*

*Everybody*) was crisp and clear, and right on the snap of the beat. The

brightness of the recording, and the brass in particular, was still there, but it didn't rip your ears off the way it had with the C10s in the system. In fact, it was really very nice.

Moving onto another favourite, I played 'Theme From Missing' by Vangelis (*Themes* Polydor POL 900).

This track relies on the creative application of skip loads of reverb to create its atmosphere, and the Myryads delivered both the reverb and the atmosphere right on cue. Even original instruments classical recordings ▶



loved the midband openness without ever screeching more than they should. In fact, one of the Myrads greatest strengths is the way it handles music so evenly. Nothing sticks out to disturb the music as a whole. We're back to that balance word again. Think of a crisper, cleaner Arcam and you've got the sound of the Myrads. Better? Possibly, but probably it's mainly different.

What makes me say that? The fact that it's not all sweetness and light. Play bad recordings and the Myrads let you know all about the problems if they happen to coincide with one of their own little tonal deviations. Bright, congested studio production sounds just the way it is, the sound glazing over, rapidly followed by my eyes. Muddy and muddled recordings aren't sorted out quite as well as they might be either. Don't get me wrong. The music never sends you diving for the stop button, but the chosen balance (there's that word again) certainly favours cleaner recordings. I'm sure Myriad would say that you are just hearing what's on the disc, but I reckon that there's a bit more to it than that. The T series seems to make more of the differences than it should. On the plus side, as I said earlier, even the worst sounding recordings are still perfectly listenable, it's just that the Myrads

really click with better discs.

Incidentally, the tuner, which has been a bit left out up 'til now, was a bit of a revelation. Simple to use, give it a good aerial (and that applies to all radios, regardless of price) and you will get hours of enjoyable free entertainment over the airwaves. Its slightly warm character suits the system, and makes sure that even when the weather's lousy, the sound never becomes scratchy and thin. Feed it a bad signal, and you'll have wasted your money. It's as simple as that. This is a smart, full width separates system that can offer both versatility and good music.

It never sounds less than nice, and it spends most of the time sounding really rather good. It's house style means that most people will end up buying it as a system, and that's how it works best. I wish they'd make the lettering bigger on the front panels, but maybe that's just me going blind. Otherwise this is a remarkably good all-rounder. It's one of those systems that people buy and then live with for a good long time. Choose your speakers with care, and make sure it's properly installed, and look forward to a long and happy life, playing music rather than worrying about your hi-fi. Time for a car analogy? Oh, if I must. The Myriad T series reminds of a Ford Mondeo. It may not be glamorous or make a statement, but someone has put a lot of thought into making sure that it does exactly what it sets out to do, really well. The Myriad isn't just another range of mid-price hi-fi. There's obviously a lot more care than that behind this sort of performance.

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### T-10 CD Player

D to A Conversion	20bit Delta -Sigma
Power Supply	7 independently regulated.
Configuration	regulated.
Output Level	2.5 V
Digital O/P	1 x RCA phono
Dimensions (HxWxD)	94 x 436 x 286mm
Weight	5.0kg
Finishes	Black or Silver
Price	£400

### T-40 Integrated Amplifier

Power O/P (8 ohms)	50 watts/ch
Inputs	M/M phono + 5 x line
Outputs	Pre-out + 2 x tape
Headphone Socket	Yes
Dimensions (HxWxD)	94 x 436 x 316mm
Weight	6.5kg
Finishes	Black or Silver
Price	£400

### T-60 Power Amp

Power O/P (8 ohms)	50 watts/ch
I/P Sensitivity	700mV
I/P Impedance	120k-ohms
Dimensions (HxWxD)	94 x 436 x 305mm
Weight	6.0kg
Finishes	Black or Silver
Price	£350

### T-30 Tuner

Sensitivity	0.0015mV
Signal/Noise Ratio	74dB (stereo)
Stereo Separation	45dB
Dimensions (HxWxD)	94 x 436 x 300mm
Weight	5.0kg
Finishes	Black or Silver
Price	£400

### Manufacturer:

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**Christopher Breunig** (*Hi-Fi News & Record Review, November 1997*)

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£179, £209. Analogue interconnects, IC-50, IC-80, IC 100, IC 200. - refer to What Hi Fi for review ratings. Hi Fi World Sep 99 - IC-50 "this months bargain" Speaker cable - SS800, BIWIRE and SS1C00

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*Gershman Acoustics*

Avante Garde RX20 - a mere 36 tall and 12 x 12 at the base - Absolute Sound review - a true torture test with a bass line thats big, super fast and continuous - the Gershmans handled it beautifully, servo driven Infinity RS1 towers have more power but are way too slow. the Magnepan MG3.5/Rs cant match the low bass impact of the Avant Grade's, only the Thiel 3.6s can handle this track with aplomb and even they dont sound quite as fast. Unquestionably, the Avant Garde's are a tremendously musical loudspeakers. X-1, Specter, Enigma 500-X, GAP- 520X

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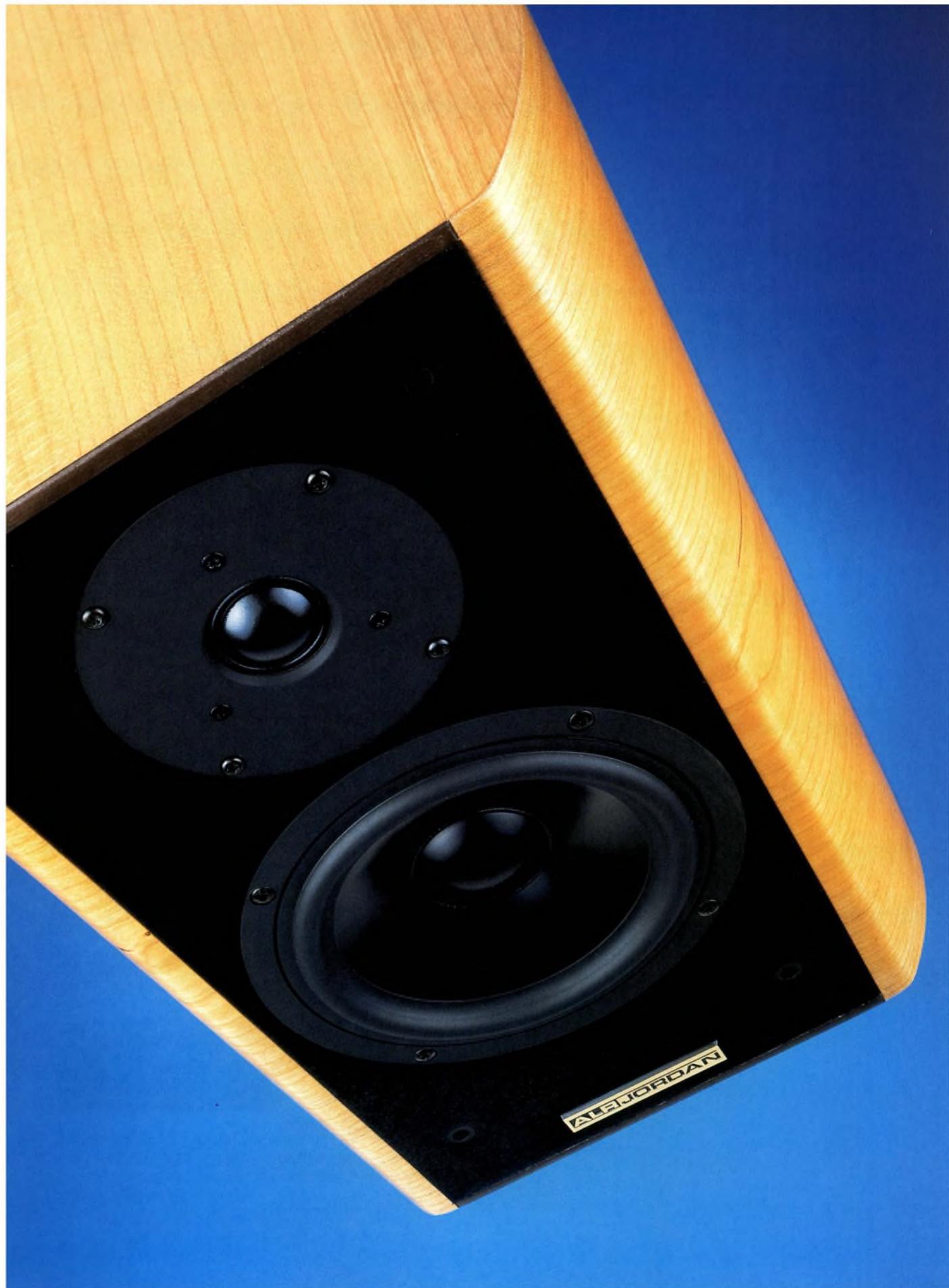
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# ALR Jordan Note 3 Loudspeaker

by Chris Binns

Big sound from small boxes. For many years one of the preoccupations of loudspeaker designers has been the challenge of getting a small loudspeaker to sound like a big one. Let's face it, most other hi-fi components can and have been successfully miniaturised when necessary, and indeed, this seems to have been a prime motivation for the electronics industry for quite some time. Loudspeakers would appear to be an obvious candidate for this treatment because, unlike the equipment that powers them, they cannot be easily hidden away. As the final interface between music and listener they make demands on living space which are difficult to compromise. So, all else being equal, most people would be happier with smaller loudspeakers; easier to position, less conspicuous and ultimately responsible for far less domestic upheaval.

Unfortunately, the laws of physics don't see it this way. To produce sound you have to move air, and lots of it if you want high volumes with plenty of bass. This means large drive units and even larger boxes to accommodate them. Put another way, size does matter. For this purpose a good large one is always going to be better than a good small one. With any given size of enclosure there are three conflicting elements continually tugging at one another: size, efficiency and bass extension. Take your pick. Whichever one is your priority will take its place at the expense of the other two. So if you want good bass extension you either make your loudspeaker large or you sacrifice efficiency and hence require more power to achieve the

desired listening level. To complicate matters further, there is also a limit to the maximum available sound pressure level, particularly from a small drive unit – you may be able to reproduce low bass notes but there is little point unless this can be achieved at realistic volumes.

When more powerful amplification became available in the late sixties and seventies, speaker manufacturers seized the opportunity to design smaller products which capitalised on the increased power available. As efficiency was no longer a top priority, they managed to achieve respectable levels of bass performance using smaller cabinets. The bookshelf loudspeaker had arrived, and apart from winning points on the domestic acceptability front also utilised its near wall location to reinforce the bottom end even further. The term 'bookshelf' was commonly used but seemed to be wide open to interpretation; for example when Ira Gale designed the stunning GS401 he obviously didn't shop at B&Q – each loudspeaker weighed in at 24 kgs.

It is ironic that changes in hi-fi fashion later dictated that your speakers had to be better positioned and be driven by lower power amplification because of its more natural sound. Suddenly all small loudspeakers had to sit on stands and efficiency was again crucial. Round and round we go. So speakers started getting bigger again, the popular argument being that if you are going to have a speaker on a stand why not use

the space underneath: it to make a floorstander with the same footprint. Well, yes and no. I still think that a stand mounted loudspeaker looks a lot less conspicuous than the dreaded black ash coffin, and there is generally a popular fascination for a small, well engineered object... there; small is beautiful – and there are some real advantages as well. A little box might not be able to rock the foundations with seismic bass, but where it does score is with cabinet coloration, or rather the lack of it. There is no such thing as an inert enclosure. Typically, a large cabinet might have around forty times the surface area of an average

midrange driver, and although we hopefully can't see the panels moving, they are. Even the smallest vibration is significant when it comes to colouring or smearing the sound from the main units. Reduce the cabinet size and you reduce your problem. There is also a production cost advantage in that it is cheaper to produce a small cabinet, and it's inherently more rigid, reducing its dependence on complex and costly bracing.

But what about the bass? If we can't change the laws of physics let's at least push them around a bit and see if we can get them to bend in our favour. Reflex loading (or porting) a cabinet is a long established method of increasing bass efficiency and, although it might have its detractors, in a well implemented design it does just that. But things start to



▶ look less encouraging with smaller cabinets because, unfortunately, the smaller they become the less well a reflex system works. In this situation, getting your port to resonate at frequencies that are both desirable and in phase means it needs to be very long. That in itself introduces all sorts of problems, such as turbulence, and in the long run will prove to be so ineffective that it makes the exercise less than worthwhile. Bring on the auxiliary bass radiator, or ABR as it is (thankfully) known. In practice this works in a similar way to a port, the difference being that the resonating slug of air is replaced by a diaphragm that can vibrate in sympathy and (hopefully) in phase with the main bass unit. In the same way that the mass of air in a port can be tuned to complement the bass response, so the weight of the ABR can be made to set the resonance to a suitable point.

ABR's were first seen commercially in designs such as the Celestion Ditton 25 and 15, and a little later in the KEF 104. It is fair to say they were not to everyone's taste. It was felt that the bass performance of these loudspeakers was somewhat underdamped and lacking in definition and control. But before we write off this method of bass loading just bear in mind that around about 1974 speakers were usually sat on a floor, against a wall and connected to inadequate amplifiers by very thin cable – we (should) know better now. Since then ABR's have been out of fashion with very few production models reaching the market. This fact alone arouses interest in the arrival of a new speaker which makes use of the technique.

The ALR Jordan Note 3 is a compact two-way loudspeaker with an ABR. Visually the product distinguishes itself from other smallish designs by having curved sides tapered from front to back which, in conjunction with the beech veneer, creates a rather nice

'organic' look. Black and cherry wood finishes are also available at the same price. Build quality is to a high standard, the cabinets being reassuringly solid with an excellent finish.

Removing the front grill (which you should for serious listening) reveals the front of the cabinet finished with a black velvet which not only looks good but serves to reduce diffraction effects at higher frequencies. Mounted on this are two fairly conventional looking drivers; a 1 inch doped fabric high frequency unit complemented by a 6 inch bass/mid unit, the latter looking far more ordinary than it actually is. The diaphragm assembly is made of aluminium and driven by a relatively large 32mm voice coil, energised by a presumably large magnet. I say presumably because all the drive units are bolted and glued into the cabinets, discouraging further investigation.



The back panel sports four good quality binding posts to allow for bi-wiring. Jumpers are supplied for single wiring, but the UK distributor advocates the former option where possible. They also suggest that the speaker works best on a medium to heavyweight stand, and supply some foreign equivalent of Blu-tak to couple them together.

ALR's pièce de résistance is to be found lurking underneath a discrete grille at the rear. It's a relatively large ABR, designated a 'race track' design, but only because it looks like one. It comes complete with user adjustable weights for altering the moving mass, and it really looks the part.

Although the ALR is a two-way

design, I believe it is more fitting to think of it as a three-way because of its extended response which affects the way it needs to be set up. There are some (very good) small loudspeakers that you can more or less plonk down on a stand, connect up and they'll sound half decent. This is not one of them. Not only does the ABR give you another variable, along with stands, positioning, cable etc., but it can also totally change the sound of the loudspeaker. Let me restate that – it can actually make or break the performance. These factors, combined with the choice of amplifier, not only alter the bass response dramatically but effect massive changes with the mid and top, either by ruthlessly drowning them out, or by leaving them stranded high and dry.

This is not so strange if you bear in mind that utilising an ABR in a design presents some unusual problems for the main bass unit. Sure you can get extra bass extension, but in most cases (and certainly in this one) the relatively small unit is trying to control an ABR which may be twice its size and five times its weight. It's a little bit like running an egg and spoon race with a rubber spoon... and an ostrich egg. So how well the amplifier controls the driving cone will have a major influence on the way the loudspeaker sounds. By comparison, a sealed cabinet is far more predictable if a little less adventurous.

Another thing – the type of stand and interface to the cabinet have a more marked effect on the performance than in a conventional design. Energy is transmitted to the ABR, not only by the air inside the cabinet, but also by the cabinet itself. The degree of this structural transmission effectively depends on how much vibration is absorbed or reflected back into the system. I could go on, but I don't want this technical stuff to put you off. I'm just trying to illustrate why these loudspeakers ▶

► might require a different approach to set up.

Is this type of design really worthwhile? In a word, yes. My main system when not reviewing utilises relatively small loudspeakers with a good bandwidth, so the ALR's were substituted with only minor upheaval. Bi-wired with Chord Co. Double Odyssey to the Primary amplifiers, and sitting on Target heavyweight stands, the initial results were very favourable. All the attributes that you would expect from a small loudspeaker were there: good imaging and depth, combined with



a tactile quality to the sound and the ability to disappear. All the things I really like about small loudspeakers. Tonal balance tended to be a little forward but this levelled out as the Jordans warmed up; they also became more coherent.

I gave them time to settle down before experimenting with some different stands. Moving from the heavy Targets to an open frame type (Linn Kan) design allowed the midrange performance to shine through. Although the bass had lost a degree of coherence, removing some of the weighting from the ABR snapped the bottom end back into line at the expense of a little bass extension. Further experimentation suggested that depending on the room, positioning and stand mount, the available adjustment offers a trade-off between bandwidth and speed which translates

into how well the bass blends in with the mid and top. Configured for the best bass extension the quality becomes rather plummy and out of time with everything else. Step the weights down gradually and you are rewarded with coherence and integration.

Their use with a large amplifier proved to be beneficial, not so much in terms of volume but in helping to keep things tidy at the bass end. As well as the Primaries, I also used the Naim 250 power amplifier, and this turned out to be a successful combination, gracing the performance with its rhythm and dynamics. Musically the Jordans were not shy of most material that I played through them. Thick, glutinous productions such as Macey Gray... On how life is were handled with a confidence which belied the ALR's size. Providing I didn't go really mad with the volume control they conveyed the dance influenced bass lines with good weight and timing – essential to the enjoyment of this music.

Orchestral music was reproduced with satisfying weight and precision, the tonal balance and position of individual instruments convincingly portrayed. To present the ALR's with an extreme case, I used a recording made in Liverpool cathedral of the Poulenc *Concerto for Organ*, timpani and strings (and probably several other large noisy objects). The sound is vast and the building has a reverberation time of 8 seconds, which in conjunction with 32 ft organ pipes (and I suspect the odd 64) results in an incredible amount of bass swimming around. This is not normally the territory for small loudspeakers but the Jordans coped admirably without damage, conveying the weight and atmosphere of the performance well.

By now, there should be no doubt in your mind that these speakers are good. They are not giant killers capable of AV style, bowel loosening bass, but I don't think they were ever

intended to be. I believe the objective was to produce a high quality compact and articulate loudspeaker with low coloration, but more than this has been achieved. These units are also capable of producing the sort of solid, deep bass response which is vital in delivering the full impact of so much music. It is this fundamental element which has the effect of underpinning the Note 3's other considerable attributes, and which is largely responsible for their seriously appealing performance. ➤+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Drive Units	25mm Polyester Dome Tweeter 150mm Ceramic Coated Aluminium Coned Bass- Mid Mass Tuneable ABR
Bandwidth	45Hz-30kHz ±3dB
Impedance	6 ohms
Sensitivity	90dB
Power Handling	80 watts, 120 watts music
Filter Type	24dB/oct Linkwitz-Riley
Dimensions (HxWxD):	370 x 245 x 315mm
Weight	Surprisingly Lumpy
Finishes	Black, Beech, Cherry
Price	£1000

### Distributor:

Audio Plus  
Tel. 0044(0)181-642-4436  
Fax. 0044(0)181-661-1176  
E-mail. [steve@audioplus.co.uk](mailto:steve@audioplus.co.uk)

### Manufacturer:

ALR Jordan GmbH  
Postfach 130146  
45291 Essen  
Germany  
Tel. 0049(0)201-554208  
Fax. 0049(0)201-557715  
E-mail. [info@alr-jordan.com](mailto:info@alr-jordan.com)  
Net. [www.alr-jordan.com](http://www.alr-jordan.com)



*Tom Evans Audio Design*

*The Groove*

# Shh . . . Ten Years After Tom Evans Audio Design 'The Groove' Phono Stage

by Roy Gregory

Sometimes a product appears and you can immediately recognise it as the vanguard of a whole new category. Sometimes it takes the wonders of 20/20 hindsight. Sometimes it represents a genuinely new concept and the competition scramble for a slice of its success. Sometimes it's just the first example of a historically inevitable trend. Which of course begs the question, what would Marx and Engels have made of the KAV 300i?

Back in 1989, the phono stages fitted to integrated amps were already feeling the effects of their declining status within the design budget. Amplifiers like the Pioneer A400 received rave reviews for their performance with CD sources, but the moving-magnet input was lamentable, and the coil stage was worse. The answer was to create an affordable stand alone moving-coil to line stage for those vinyl die-hards who wanted to take advantage of the new super integrated amps. As an A400 fan, the task fell to Tom Evans, and eventually matured as the Michell Iso. Whilst it wasn't the first such device (that honour goes to John Curl's Vendetta Research), it was the first that penetrated the public consciousness. And how!

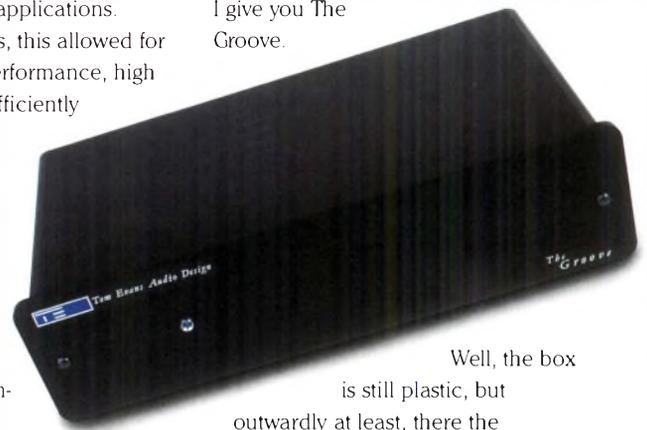
Despite the inflexibility of Tom's perfectionist tendencies pushing the price of the Iso beyond the cost of the integrated amp it was designed to partner, it was definitely a piece of work. In fact, at the relatively modest price of \$400, it actually set new standards in several areas of phono performance, and was balanced

enough to embarrass the moving-coil stages in some 'state of the art' pre-amps. No, let's make that most 'state of the art' pre-amps. And like most such giant steps, this one was the culmination or coincidence of a number of small ones that all happened at the same time.

The Iso represented the flowering and combination of several separate (yet ultimately mutually supporting) technological trends. The circuit was based on the same phase corrective technology and high performance op-amps package that had appeared in the Finestra pre-amplifier, but here modified for phono applications. Amongst other things, this allowed for low enough noise performance, high enough gain, and sufficiently accurate RIAA equalisation to extract the performance potential of the new very low output moving-coils appearing from the likes of Ortofon, Scan-Tec (Lyra) and Immutable Music (Transfiguration). Those ultra low output signals also dictated the use of fixed gain and loading values, optimised for each cartridge, which further elevated the Iso's performance above its adjustable brethren. The plastic casework was a natural carryover, learnt from the work of Denis Morecroft and Peter Sanhen. The fit and finish came from John Michell.

Tom was to work on a whole range

of Michell electronics before graduating to the Pioneer Precision models, along the way creating the Trichord clock and the discrete component Lithos regulation circuit. But the Iso has always remained close to his heart. Over the years it evolved through surface mount technology, superior op-amps, larger external transformers, and ultimately, the higher resolution HR model. Finally, ten years after the Iso first appeared, and after a reality check in the world of digital, the Tom Evans phono stage has been dusted off and brought bang up to date. Laydeeeez and gennelmeeen, I give you The Groove.



Well, the box is still plastic, but outwardly at least, there the similarities end. The Groove is getting on for four times the size of an Iso, and it all comes in a single case. Yup, no external power supply. It also runs hotter than the Iso, despite the extra enclosed volume. The ventilation slots in the base and rear panel are not for show. The front panel sports a single blue LED to let you know that it's awake, and stick-on labels to tell you what you've just paid \$1500 for. Oh, I forgot. Four times the size and

▶ three times the current price.

Now, with the best will in the world, I can't say that this looks like value for money. Plastic box, light weight, and nothing more than a single set of inputs and outputs, plus an earth post on the back panel. And stick on labels! Inside, construction is most charitably described as "hand-built". This thing better sound good, I thought to myself, as I surveyed the unconvincing ingredients.

And it does. It most certainly, and emphatically, does. The Groove is a direct linear descendent of the HR Iso (but don't for a moment confuse the performance or character of the two). That's why you got the history lesson at the beginning of the article. It still uses op-amps, and it's still a fixed input parameter design. The stack of four boards on the left of the chassis (looking from the back) is actually a sandwich constructed around a filling of what are, basically, two Iso boards, each dedicated to a single channel. To the right are a pair of tiny transformers, again one for each channel. Why so small, especially given the enormous transformers used with the various Isos? Because the necessary low impedance power supply, once chased by oversizing the transformer in an attempt to

overcome the shortcomings of the regulators, is now dictated by the two Lithos boards tucked away like pickled gherkins spicing up the sandwich. Each consists of fifty discrete components, and is fifty times faster and a thousand times quieter than the Linear Technology 337/317s used in the Iso. The componentry used in the Lithos circuit has to be specially imported from the US, as nobody in this country stocks it. It is hideously expensive, but represents the cutting edge of op-amp technology and tolerancing, and counts amongst its number the quietest control amplifier currently available. Anywhere. The whole Lithos board constitutes a tiny class A power amp. Hence the heat. And although the basic phono circuit is identical to an Iso, the componentry has been drawn from the same source as the Lithos parts. We're ten years on in time, but we're ten years on in technology too.

The two outer layers of the sandwich are double sided, edge plated copper circuit boards. The conductive connectors in the stack tie the earth planes of the circuit boards to the outer layers, creating a Faraday cage, and shielding the entire signal path. Copper is the most effective protection against electro magnetic energy. This isn't exactly news, but given a choice of any material they liked, and an unlimited budget, the Americans still laminated copper mesh into their stealth aircraft. It works. And

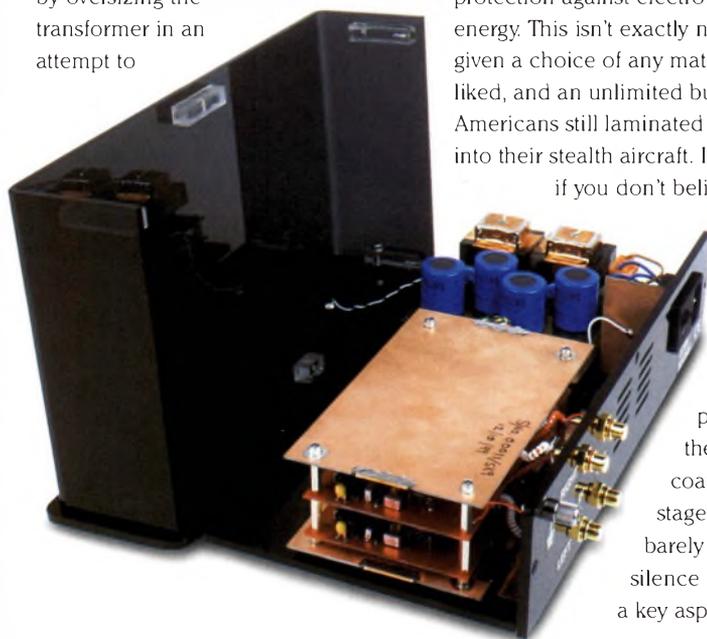
if you don't believe me, listen

to The Groove. Sat between the C.A.T. pre-amp and its hefty power supply, the plastic coated phono stage produced barely a hum. This silence is a key aspect of

its performance.

Normally, when you listen to a hi-fi system the musical performance happens in a distinct and separate acoustic space. You are here, and the performers are over there. Called the recorded acoustic, this space reflects the different acoustic environment in which the recording was made, be it a church, concert hall or sound booths in a studio. Different that is, to your listening room. But there's more to it than that. The reproduced space is different in other important ways. For one, it has a totally different noise floor. And secondly, sounds are propagated in a different fashion, governed by the system's limitations. If someone plucks a guitar string in the room with you, and you play a recording of the same guitar, it will sound different due to the system's inability to accurately mimic the precise rise time, dynamic range and harmonic development of the note. Close, but not close enough to fool the ear. The subtly different quality, the different mechanical rules, imposed on recorded music by the limitations of the reproduction system also separate its acoustic space from our own.

Now listen to the Alto Argenta Edition pressing of the Rodrigo *Concierto De Aranjuez* (AA006) through The Groove. Narcisco Yepes' guitar is right there in front of you. Not thrown in your lap, but still where it should be in the soundstage. It's just that there's now no discernible difference between your space and the recorded acoustic. You are included in. The strummed chords that open the second movement are beautifully structured. The stuttering, skittish notes of the plucked melody no longer sound as if the player is struggling to keep up. The phono stage is now so fast that you can appreciate Yepes placing his notes, and pacing their delivery. His playing is at once a model of expression and precision, the incidentals of technique and vibrato a natural extension of ▶



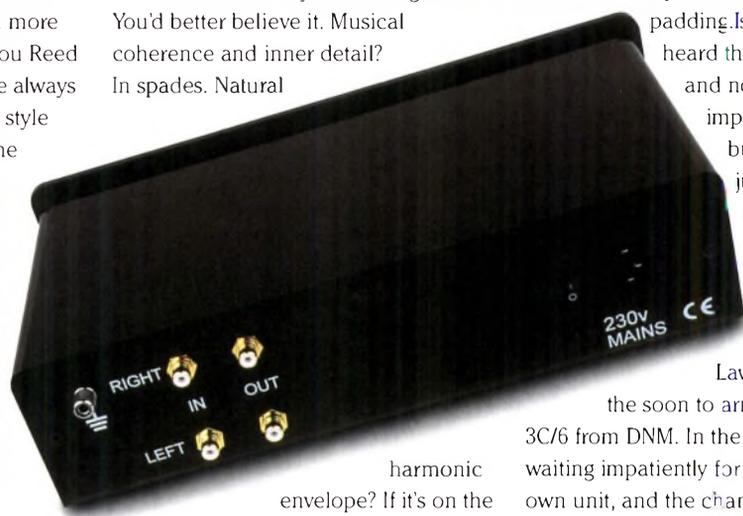
► the instrument's body and strings and the artist's fingering. Each string has a readily identifiable harmonic structure and defined harmonic relationship with the instrument's body. I have never heard a guitar's lower registers so naturally reproduced, or an orchestral accompaniment so vividly convincing. It is easy to understand why this was Rodrigo's favourite recording.

Which is all very well, the Argenta being an audiophile darling and all. What about something a little more real world? Well you don't get much more real world than 'Perfect Day' (Lou Reed *Transformer* RCA NL 83806). I've always assumed that the languid vocal style was intended to complement the rather plodding tempo to create a lazy, relaxing whole. I couldn't have been more wrong. The incredible low-level retrieval and textural qualities of *The Groove* reveal a vocal delivery that is a model of controlled restraint, set against a dramatic, incisive and complex backing. The piano in particular is transformed, becoming the insistent driving force propelling the melody. The result is a whole new (and far more effective) song.

And just to prove that recording quality isn't an issue, let's play that glorious sprawling mess 'Piece Of My Heart' (Big Brother and the Holding Company *Cheap Thrills* CBS 63392), a track which I've witnessed turning grown systems into snivelling shadows of their former selves. *The Groove* doesn't just sort it out, it sucks you in and impresses the hell out of you with just how good these guys really are, and how hard they're pushing each other. If you've always wondered why people rave about Janis Joplin, this is the best answer I've come across.

Treat it right (you'll be impressed from cold, but give it at least three days of power before you draw any conclusions, two weeks before it really

does its thing) and *The Groove* will rewrite what you think is possible from vinyl. The phono stage happens so early in the process that it forms a gate that defines the performance of the entire system. What I'd assumed were the much trumpeted shortcomings of vinyl were actually limitations in the phono circuits we've all been using. *The Groove* doesn't just open the gate, it takes it off its hinges, flattens the posts, tramples the walls and sets free the livestock. Dynamic range? You'd better believe it. Musical coherence and inner detail? In spades. Natural



harmonic envelope? If it's on the recording. In fact, limitations in the recording start to outweigh the limitations in the system; each and every track becomes a distinct and separate occasion. So choking is the influence of the average phono stage that I was shocked to discover *The Groove* redefined the performance potential of not just the whole system, but my record collection as well.

"Accurate" has become a euphemism for equipment that errs on the subtractive side of natural, not adding anything, but falling short of whole. In the same way "musical" has come to represent those products which aren't above a little paint by numbers enhancement of the hi-fi message. The original Iso was firmly in the first group, and wore its heart on its sleeve. You paid for its transparency and coherence with a lean overall balance based on a diet of under

nourished harmonics. *The Groove* represents a massive shift toward the natural ideal. The review period was shorter than I'd like, due to customer demand, but to date I'm still struggling to identify a character that is defined at a lower level than the characteristic qualities of the recordings I'm playing. The very real increase in speed and decrease in noise have opened the harmonic and dynamic window wide, allowing notes to bloom and giving crescendos impact without excess padding. Is it the best? I've heard the competition and nothing has impressed me more, but such personal judgements (which is all they are) will have to wait for a return match with the Lavardin PO and the soon to arrive T-networked 3C/6 from DNM. In the meantime, I'm waiting impatiently for the arrival of my own unit, and the chance to investigate further. Whatever the outcome, it's cheaper than the competition. Ever wanted a whole new system and record collection for fifteen hundred quid? Get into *The Groove*. ➤

#### TECHNICAL PANEL

Gain and Loading	Individually set to user requirements
MM or MC as specified	
Inputs	Phono Sockets
Outputs	Phono Sockets
Dimensions (WxHxD)	330 x 85 x 180mm
Price	£1500
Tom Evans Audio Design	
Unit 40	
Boen Industrial Estate	
Aberbargoed	
Mid Glamorgan	
CF81-9EP	
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Arcam Alpha 10 Power Amp	£600	£449
Arcam Zeta One Int Av Amp (Ex-dem)	£999	£499
Arion Adonis Int Valve Amp	£899	£499
Arion Tycho Power Amp + Passive Pre	£1800	£959
Audiolab 8000 PPA Phono Stage	£900	£699
Audiolab 8000 Q Pre Amp	£1200	£799
Audio Innovations Series 700 Int Amp		£699
Audio Research BL1 - SE lo		
Bal Converter (Ex-dem)	£799	£549
Audio Research LS5 Mk 1 Pre-Amp (Ex-dem)	£5995	£2999
AVI 2000 MP Pre Amp	£1100	£679
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Conrad Johnson Premier 10 Pre Amp	£3500	£2399
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Counterpoint Solid One Power Amp	£1495	£599
Craft Series 3 OTL Power Amp		£799
Cyrus 1 Int Amp		£158
Cyrus 2 Int Amp		£178
Cyrus Pre-Amp	£650	£399
Denon PMA 450 Int Amp	£350	£199
DNM Pre 2-PA1 Pre-Power	£2800	£1099
DPA Renaissance Int Amp (Ex-demo)	£599	£450
EAR 519 Mono Power Amp 100wpc	£4600	£1899
EAR 802 Pre (One owner from new) vgc	£2200	£1299
Edison Technology HFA12 Power Amp		£Please Call
Fisher 440 Solid State Receiver (1960's Classic)		£159
Gamma Aeon 20w SE-Triode Monos	£4999	£2899
Hofler DH101 Pre Amp		£149
Harmon Kardon AVP1A Processor	£2000	£459
Harmon Kardon Citation 17 Pre Amp		£199
Kenwood KA3020se Int Amp	£199	£119
Leak 1800 Receiver		£99
Leak Delta 30 Int Amp		£79
Leak Delta 70 Int Amp		£99
Linn Kairn Phono Pre	£1850	£999
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Lumley Megavox 75 Valve Monos		£1179
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Marantz CD 80 CD Player		£229
Meridian 206 CD Player	£999	£449
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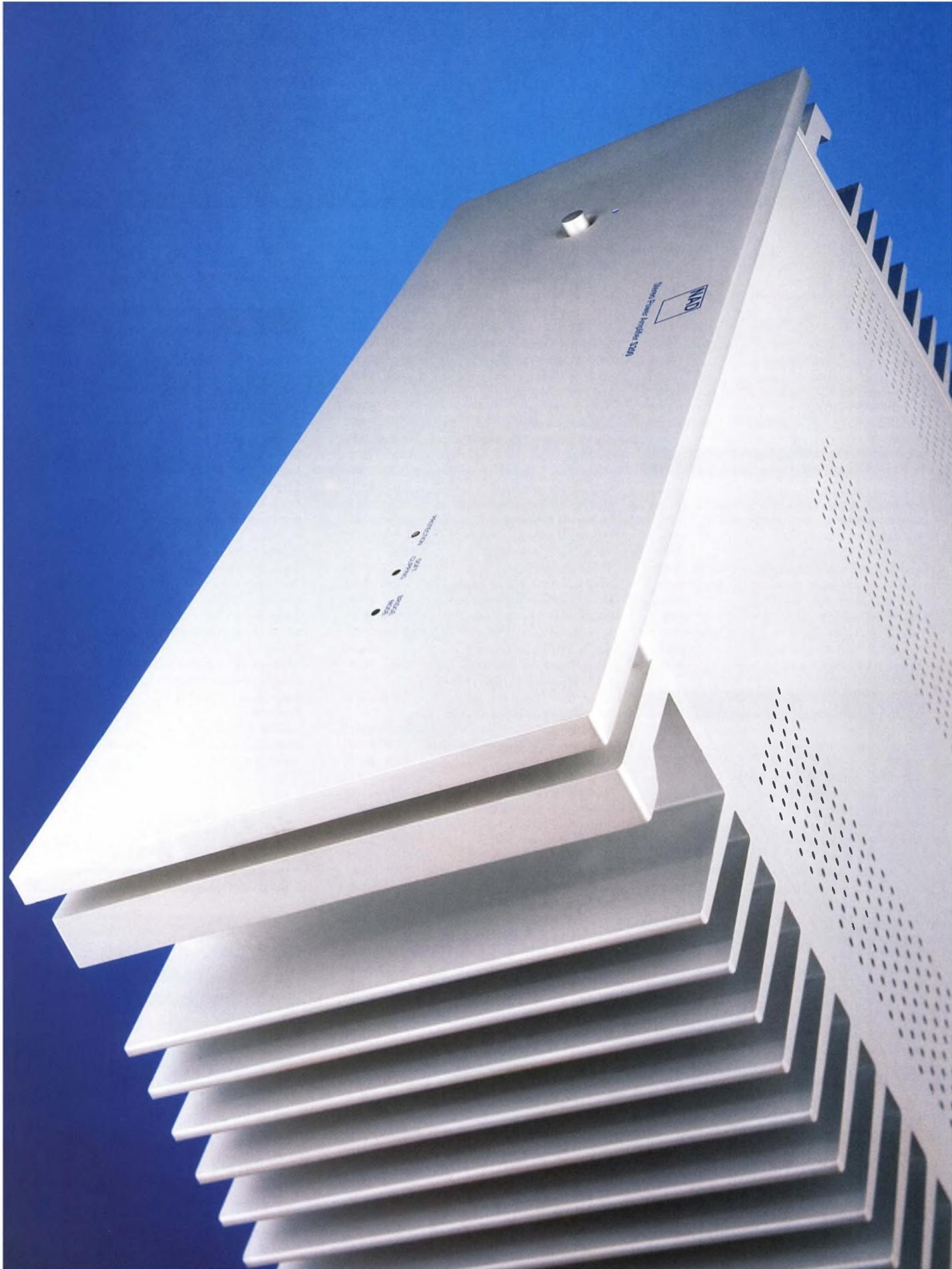
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# NAD S200 Power Amplifier

by Chris Binns

It is now well over twenty years since the hi-fi world was turned upside down by two fundamental changes in attitudes towards systems. One was mass recognition of the 'garbage in, garbage out' logic which stated that a hi-fi system was only as good as its source, which for most people, as we are talking pre-compact disc, meant the turntable. The other was the displacement of technical

world. At the more esoteric end of the market this was less of a difficulty as there was at least some good equipment available that performed well both in the living room and on the test bench. The problem was also successfully addressed in the medium price bracket by a

another in swift succession. They continued to ship a whole series of new models which flaunted more and more flashing lights and totally useless features, combined with specifications that looked great on paper but sadly failed to deliver sonically.

This unsatisfactory situation finally changed with the arrival of a somewhat understated newcomer from a relatively young company, NAD, or New Acoustic Dimension as they were occasionally referred to

around that time. The NAD 3020 was designed in England and manufactured in the Far East. This integrated amplifier very quickly established itself as the budget amp to have. Rated at a mere 20 watts per channel, it proved the point by going far louder than most of the competition which was rated at twice the output and, more importantly, it sounded great. A good turntable combined with the NAD 3020 and a pair of AR 18's or their equivalent and you were well away. It would not be an overstatement to say that this notable amplifier set a precedent that most other Japanese

manufacturers were quick to follow. Since then NAD have continued to be extremely successful in the budget sector, with everything from turntables to loudspeakers although their mainstay continues to be amplification. Many of their later amplifiers follow a design approach which is similar to the 3020 with the emphasis being on dynamic power in real life conditions rather than on test



specifications from their position of paramount importance in component selection as buyers began to be guided instead by..... the actual sound of the product. This seems like common sense now, but at that time more equipment was sold on the printed results of test measurements than by any other means.

One consequence of all this upheaval was that as people began to listen first and read the printed specification later, a worryingly large gap began to appear. Nowhere was this more obvious than with amplifiers. It became alarmingly clear that one hundred watts on a test bench in the laboratory often bore very little relation to the way they behaved when connected to loudspeakers in the real

number of small British companies. For example, A&R Cambridge produced the now classic A60 which sold by the truck load and won many converts, primarily because it was well engineered and sounded good – its specifications on paper were relatively unimportant.

But all was not well at the budget end of the market. Anyone with limited means who was looking to buy a hi-fi system was being urged to go for the best possible source component, namely a very expensive turntable, and spend next to nothing on amplification and loudspeakers. This may have been a reasonable course to follow, but the Japanese still insisted on showering us with a never ending stream of cheap amplifiers, one after



► bench performance. To the best of my knowledge most of the equipment is still designed in the UK and manufactured in the East, enabling them to offer good value for money in terms of components and construction.

The Silverline pre and power amplifier represent NAD's offering to the more rarefied market, an area in which they have yet to make any real impact. The S200 power amplifier weighs in at £1600, while its partnering pre-amp (which is not covered by this review) costs £800. Both of these products enter a sector of the market which is already fairly well populated and that means there is some stiff competition around.

There is no mistaking the fact that the S200 is a power amplifier. In fact it's something of a heavyweight beast. If its sheer size and scale does not give the game away, then the full heat sinking down both sides probably will. The considerable bulk of the unit is alleviated, visually at least, by the use of a light grey/silver finish which also helps to avoid the black box syndrome so common in products of this type, but which I personally dislike.

The front panel of the S200 is plain except for the on/off switch and four status indicators to show power on, bridge mode, soft clipping and protection.

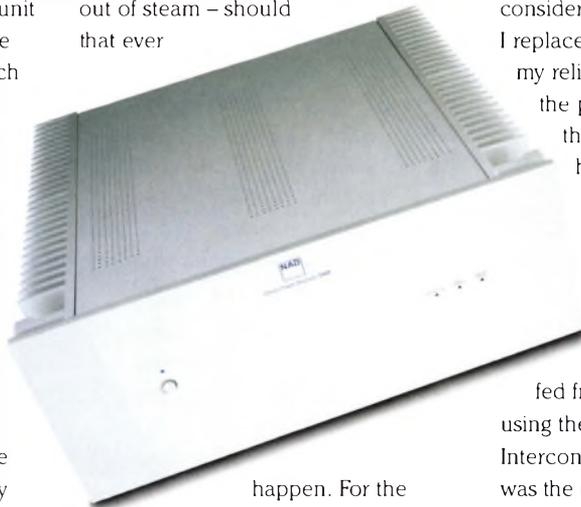
As its model number suggests, the S200 is Rated at 200 watts per channel. It comes with the promise of genuine high current delivery by doubling its power into four ohms. So difficult loads should not present a problem. All connections are situated on the rear panel. Balanced and unbalanced operation is available via XLR and gold plated phono sockets with the required mode being selected by a small slide switch. Speaker

connection is via a single set of CE approved but practical binding posts. Their construction quality ensures good contact and bi-wiring is not a problem as each post will comfortably accept two 4mm plugs.

Also on the



back panel is the small switch which is used to engage NAD's proprietary 'soft clip' technology. As its name suggests, the idea of this additional circuitry is to round off a square, i.e. clipped, waveform to minimise distortion produced by the amplifier as it runs out of steam – should that ever



happen. For the genuine megalomaniac there is also provision for bridging the S200. In this configuration it is capable of delivering a staggering 1kw into 8 ohms but then of course you will need two units for stereo (...or five for AV!).

Internally, the circuitry is laid out on four reasonable quality printed

circuit boards comprising two main amps, an input board and the power supply. Star attraction is the massive toroidal mains transformer centrally situated behind the front panel, making the unit front heavy. The weight of this gives something of an indication to the power reserves on tap. Circuitry in general appears to be comprised of discrete components, whilst the output stage is of fully complementary design utilising eight substantial output devices per channel. Judging by the quiescent temperature of the heat sinks these are run in class AB1 and therefore this is a cool running amplifier.

That's about it for the guided tour. Overall the amplifier is both constructed and finished to a good standard, although I do have one minor quibble: there is no soft start circuitry with the S200 which means that the lights dim on switch on... and it blew a 13 Amp fuse the second time I used it. To be fair I suspect that the fuse was old and stressed but it was with a considerable degree of trepidation that I replaced it and switched on. Much to my relief there was no recurrence of the problem. On an amplifier of this size, I feel that limiting the high inrush current with a slow start would be desirable.

Although the unit was not brand new, I still left it to run for a few days on its own prior to installing it in my main system, where it was

fed from the Primary line stage using the unbalanced inputs. Interconnect and loudspeaker cable was the new Chord Co. Anthem and Double Odyssey respectively. My first real exposure to the S200 was expected to be a well ordered experience but as it happened the session coincided with an empty house...

Civilised, mature, grown up. That's me. Unless there's a big power amp in the house, and everybody's out. ►

▶ Then I get (just a slight) temptation to behave like an overgrown adolescent again and play music LOUD. Taste goes right out of the window and those records that no one knows I still own come out to be played.

The NAD certainly performs well in the one area that you would expect it to – power delivery. The Primary monitors are designed with one ear on the recording studio and thus have the ability to play loud. Although not that inefficient, they can and will present quite a nasty load to an amplifier. It was apparent from this first rather undisciplined listening session that the S200 did not have a problem under these conditions – there was absolutely no evidence of clipping or unruly behaviour. Over two hours later when I was more than ready to give up the unit was still pretty cool but with the music I'd been playing, the same could not be said for me. God, I hope no one else was listening. Score one for the NAD.

Another day, another life.... Apart from the evidence on the floor (did I really play that last night?) everything was back to normal. The NAD had proved itself as a powerful amplifier by refusing to curl up and die. It was time to use it with more consideration to the environment. In its delivery of Vaughan Williams' Pastoral symphony, the S200 certainly exerted firm control on the full orchestra, with no shortage of power, but it wasn't entirely convincing in the musical dynamics department. The reproduction was leaning towards the mechanical – the original EMI LP with Sir Adrian Boult is an impassioned performance with plenty of drama and tension in the music. Unfortunately the NAD was having the effect of 'dumbing down' the playing. To be fair, I find this tendency with many large amplifiers; although they have plenty of muscle they somehow manage to constrict the musical dynamics of a performance. For me this is the very essence of so

much music that these days I will happily trade power for the more subtle emotional impact of the music.

Moving from one extreme to the other, a complete change of musical style... The S200 can use its power reserves to provide a vice like grip on bass and drums and this attribute in itself is really quite thrilling. A nostalgic bout of Talking Heads – 'Remain in light' – proved to be good fun. I find



there are two options when listening to this record: Option one: listen at a reasonable level and let the rhythm and percussion wash over you, developing a dark tension complimented by David Byrnes' idiosyncratic singing. Option two: wind it up and generally be bludgeoned to death by the sheer force of the music and Brian Eno's weighty production. Guess which one the NAD favoured?

The matching S100 pre-amplifier (£800) had been supplied along with the S200. I decided to explore the balanced outputs from this pre-amp to see whether or not this would produce a positive change in the reproduction of the musical dynamics. There could also be no possibility of a mismatch should the input impedance of the power amplifier have been troubling the Primary line stage. The differences I did hear were not to my taste. If anything, the character of the performance became even darker and what space there had been around instruments or voices was reduced. There was more precision to the sound but I felt that this was taking things in the wrong direction and the combination of the S100 and S200

lacked the openness that allows access to music of a more gentle nature. Still, it had to be tried.

No power amplifier can be all things to all men. For me, the S200 lacks some of the qualities essential to fully rewarding reproduction of acoustic recordings such as small scale orchestral works or voice and piano.

It doesn't quite manage to develop the magic of a performance to the extent that some distinguished small amplifiers can. What it is capable of, is delivering massive amounts of grunt and for that reason alone its suitability for use in AV systems is unquestionable. It also proved unflappable with difficult loudspeakers at high listening levels, something that is not easily achieved. Under these conditions and if your musical tastes tend towards head banging, then seriously consider the NAD. ▶+

#### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Power Output (8ohms)	200w/ch Stereo
Power Output (4ohms)	400w/ch Stereo
Damping Factor	>100
Input Impedance	48kohms
Input sensitivity	1.4V
Dimensions (HxWXD)	180 x 450 x 400mm
Weight	27kg
Price	£1600

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# Wadia 860x CD Player

by Roy Gregory

Listening late one night, and confronted by the slowly counting displays of several one-box CD players warming up awaiting review, I decided, like you do, that it was time for an impromptu progress report. So saying, we went through the time honoured ritual of ABA-ing a trio of 1 to 1.5K players. Right at the end I swapped again, to the Wadia 860x. We sat transfixed by the musical intensity, the cavernous acoustic and deep solid bass of 'Requiem aeternam' (Jocelyn Pook, Flood CDVE 944 7243-8-48150-2-8). As the music died away I was just trying to frame a response when Victoria beat me to it. "Heavy-weight big bastard" she breathed, in an awed whisper.

Which sums the Wadia up pretty darn well. There is a current tendency to regard the current batch of 1K-1Box players as so good that there's no need to spend more. Especially given the uncertainty over future enhanced digital formats. Anybody who subscribes to that point of view should witness the way the Wadia tramples on thousand pound players, like Jonah Lomu swatting aside so many Austin Healeys on his unstoppable path to the try line. There's no denying its power speed and dynamism. Or its musical capabilities either.

Heavy-weight? And how. The 860x is built into the now familiar Wadia case work, and as befits the most expensive single box player in the range, it's close to a two man lift. 20+ kilos to be precise, and big and awkward with it. At 17" wide, 16" deep and 7" high, it's an imposing bulk, and one that will literally fill the available space in the majority of racks. Does it need to

be so big? A quick look inside tells you that the answer is definitely yes. A bit of air over the TEAC transport mechanism is all that passes for spare room. And for such a bluff and featureless box I kind of like the way it looks. The mechanically elegant construction, based around the corner columns, lends the player a sense of quiet purpose and solidity in keeping with the stellar price tag. It also comes with really sensible cup and cone feet, and the best instruction manual I've seen for a very long time. Impressed? You bet. Impress your mates? Probably not, but anybody who spends this kind of money just to do that is sad indeed.

I haven't had a Wadia product at home for something like ten years, and brief exposure in between times (mainly at shows) has left me with the impression of a solid but rather clumsy and rhythmically earth-bound sound, a view echoed in a number of reviews.



Fortunately, I can put that one to bed, along with the reasons behind it. This player takes a minimum of a week to warm up, and not just from cold. Move it from one side of the room to the other, five

minutes at most, and you're looking at another week before it comes back on song. Cold, it sounds thin and gutless, and although it fills out tonally as the days go by, this merely adds to the sense of lethargy and lack of drive which doesn't really change at all until day six when, suddenly, everything kicks into place. Kind of like an adrenaline injection, and damn nearly as sudden. Wadia must breed little people to sit inside the 860, and six days after power-up they throw a switch which tells the player to start working properly, the change really is that big. Now the deep and solid bass becomes a vibrant, responsive foundation on which the rest of the music sits, driving when it has to, caressing when necessary, or simply there, supporting the soundstage. It doesn't just charge on regardless the way that some players do, pounding out a metronome rhythm that has little if anything to do with musical expression. The wonderful thing about the Wadia's bass is its potential. It gives you just what the recording demands, no more and no less. If it needs to get down and get dirty then it will, but it numbers subtlety and texture amongst its attributes too. In fact, this is the first player I've used that really delivers on the promise of CD's much vaunted bass performance.

The trouble is, given the equipment merry-go-round that constitutes the average dealer's or reviewer's listening room, how often is a player like the Wadia going to remain undisturbed for a week? And the really insidious thing is that the tonal development convinces you that the player's warmed up!

The answer, of course, is



▶ simple. If you are serious about the Wadia, you'll need to borrow it for at least a week. Having said that, anybody who drops this sort of dosh on any piece of hi-fi without living with it first isn't just sad, they're stupid. And any dealer who expects you to buy it without an extended loan (backed up by appropriate security) doesn't deserve your business. Take the 860x home and have some patience. It will be rewarded in the end.

Once fired up and ready to go, the 860x is going to surprise you. Whilst it's easy to get carried away with the big things, the Wadia's real strengths are even more apparent when you listen to small scale recordings. The cavernous soundstage on Testament (Reference Recordings RR-49CD) is to be expected, even if the staggering intensity, power and definition of the climax to 'The God Who Gave Us Life' takes the breath away. What is less expected is the rock solid and expansive acoustic space that surrounds Arturo Delmoni and David Burgess (Music for Violin and Guitar Sonora SACC 102). This disc is unusual for its life size images. To get a life size acoustic, independent of the listening room boundaries is really spooky. And the players, or rather their instruments, are absolutely stable within that space, and beautifully defined. Delmoni's fiddle is devoid of glare or edge, his controlled technique immediately apparent. He doesn't throw himself at musical phrases the way a Ricci does. Could that be the player holding things back? Listen to

the Du Pre, Elgar Cello Concerto (EMI CDC7 47329 2) and the answer is clearly no. And while you are about it, make a note of the deeper, blacker soundstage that gives this old war-horse a new lease of dramatic life. Du Pre's Cello is just as big and over voiced as ever, but the LSO's added sense of scale and solidity at least lessens the slope of the playing field.

But back to Delmoni and Burgess, and you'll notice how convincingly three dimensional the guitar is, its vibrant body held in space. And the way the player's movements, the incidental

noises of his fingers and clothes are suddenly obvious without being intrusive. In exactly the same way that the 860 keeps track of the mayhem of an orchestral finale, not just separating the instruments but maintaining each ones identity and contribution, it does the same trick with the tiniest of sounds, the quietest notes, the softest decay. The infamous kicked music stand, right rear in the

opening passage of the Du Pre (he was an only child!) is both crisper and more obviously rattley metal. Somehow, instead of an indistinct clank, you can identify its structure.

It is definitely a music stand. The good news is that instruments get the same degree of individual definition. When Jan Gabarek's sax finally blurts its intrusion into the subtly layered textures of 'Zakir' (Making Music ECM 1349) it sounds downright boorish. And so it should. The speed and dynamic delicacy of the guitar, close mic-ed flute and tabla are so well integrated that you don't even notice the contribution of each individual performance attribute. They just create a natural whole, which is, not surprisingly, upset by the arrival of a hob-nailed tenor sax. Percussion thrives in the same way, whether it's the nail your ribcage drum beats at the start of 'Play For Today' (The Cure, Seventeen Seconds Fiction 825354-2) or the stabbed interjection of a backing piano.

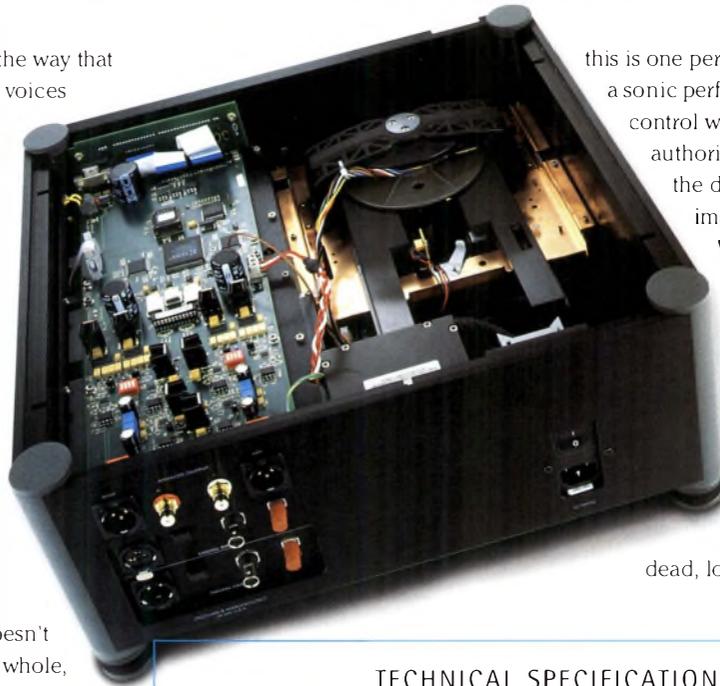
Potentially difficult voices are a breeze, the Wadia's iron grip over dynamic shadings and steps allowing voices to grow in intensity without ▶



▶ glare or 'whiting out'. And the way that singers work and vary their voices becomes immediately apparent. Track 6 of that Jocelyn Pook album *Flood* features a Katherine Ferrier sample, set against a host of modern voices. The strange thing is how readily the 860x separates the different textural qualities of the old and new recordings. I'm not talking tape hiss here, but a totally different, almost creamy quality to Ferrier's voice, as opposed to the crystalline clarity of the contemporary singers. It doesn't detract or distract from the whole, and in fact the contrast underlines the opposing part structure of the piece. It's just another example of this player supplying seemingly trivial details that, en masse, enhance the understanding and enjoyment of the music.

The wonderful thing about the Wadia is that the Wadia's a wonderful thing.

The 860x isn't perfect, and compared to a top flight turntable it lacks transparency and a certain vibrant immediacy. There's also a slight greyness to the tonal palette, one that overlays the acoustic space as well. But the very fact that I'm comparing it to vinyl says a huge amount about how far this player takes CD performance. Given that there is absolutely no guarantee that future digital formats will be optimised for CD replay, and given a large existing CD collection, a top flight CD player remains an essential element in any serious hi-fi system. Add the versatility and control options available with the 860x, its future proof software driven converter/filter package, and the fact that you can get the benefit of that seriously expensive bit of hardware with all your digital sources, current and future, and



this is one persuasive package. With a sonic performance that offers control without constriction, and authority without deadening the dynamic and rhythmic impetus of the music, the Wadia 860x has delivered the most convincing CD replay that I've ever enjoyed at home. It's also impressed the hell out of more than one visiting digphobe. And I'm really going to miss it. CD is dead, long live CD. ▶+

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Decoding Software	Proprietary 32x Re-Sampling DigiMaster
Digital Processing Capability	24 bits
Digital Resolution	21 bits
Digital Inputs	1 x Glass Optic (ST) 1 x AES/EBU (XLR) 1 x SP/DIF (BNC) 1 x Plastic Optical (Toslink)
Digital Outputs	1 x Glass Optic (ST) 1 x AES/EBU (XLR) 1 x SP/DIF (BNC) 1 x Plastic Optical (Toslink)
Analogue Outputs	1 pr Balanced XLR 1 pr Un-Balanced RCA (Both can be connected simultaneously)
Output Impedance	Less Than 15 ohms
Dimensions (HxWxD)	17" x 16" x 7" (including feet)
Weight	48 lbs
Price	£7450

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RUARK

epilogue

# Ruark Epilogue R Speakers

## Small, but perfectly formed?

by Dave Davies

The baby of Ruark's three year old Contemporary Series, the tiny Epilogue is the junior of a family of six speakers headed by the Prologue. Within the Epilogue range, the new 'R' version is essentially the 'super' version of the standard Epilogue, which retails at some £170 less. The Epilogue line-up now looks like this:

'Standard' which is essentially the 'old' cabinet design with a conventional cloth grille, and is now available in black vinyl finish only.

'V' which is the first of the 'Contemporary series designs offering an all wood veneered cabinet and curved plastic grille.

'R' the beast reviewed here, which is available with the option of an anodised aluminium front baffle.

The 'R' has been designed to both expand choice within the Epilogue range and to offer the highest performance within a tightly defined cost band. Complete with the aluminium faceplate the 'R' retails at £417 against the entry level 'Standard' at £249. Although it uses the same drivers, crossover components have been upgraded, and the 'R' uses a thicker MDF cabinet. The aluminium front baffle also provides a tad more rigidity in what was already a pretty chunky little box. Beefier all metal terminals have also replaced the standard models plastic cased originals. The 'R' should therefore offer significant improvements over the standard Epilogue, itself no slouch, so let's see.

Aside from the improvements, the Contemporary Series as the name might suggest, are designed to look much more up to date than the standard models. Gone are the usual conventional cloth baffles, as are the familiar Ruark veneered side panels and black top plate. The new speakers certainly look different: The grille is still removable but this shouldn't be so necessary since it now consists of a frameless bowed plastic mesh which slots into the sides of the baffle and stands a good 2cm clear of the centre of each drive unit. The speakers are constructed of chunky 18mm MDF (the Standard cabinet is 15mm), and as I've come to expect from Ruark, are

beautifully veneered. The optional anodised aluminium baffle contributes to the distinctly 'un-Ruark' look as does the 'Epilogue' name, which is now lasered onto the top panel of each speaker. This is strictly a personal, subjective view, but I feel that these speakers, in particular with the aluminium baffles, look a lot less contemporary than the standard Epilogues. They actually have a retro 70's feel to them which is fine if that's what you like, but for me it ain't contemporary. I also feel that the lasered names 'cheapen' the speakers a bit. If I had to guess, judging purely on appearance, I'd say that the standard Epilogues, at least in the old wood veneered option, were the more expensive speaker. That said, I understand that the lasered name was heartily endorsed by Ruark's distributors and that the design has generally been well accepted, so what do I know! And of course, it's what they do that counts, so let's have a listen.

First, to gauge the difference between the basic Epilogue and the R's I kicked off with a pair of Standard Epilogues. They proved relatively simple to set up, the best sitting - mounted on chunky double column Partington stands - was 3' into the room and well clear of side walls. Wired up to my Orca/ Stereo Alectos's and Gyrodec, I was immediately impressed with how much these little beasts can deliver from a small cabinet. Low bass is of course absent, and thankfully these speakers don't try and pretend it's there with an



▶ overblown, pumped up mid bass. For the price they do a good job of pulling the essential detail from the music, and although stage depth is less cavernous than I'd like, with this exception they do a fine job of re-creating tangible soundstages. They also play pretty loud and can take a deal of punishment before any noticeable stress kicks in: 'Geronimo's Free' from Ted Sirota's *Rebel Souls* as featured on the excellent new Naim *Sampler 2*, was punched out with the requisite kick and momentum. The treble is mildly splashy but pretty good within this price bracket. It was of course essential that the conventional fabric and wood-framed grilles were removed for any serious listening.

The little speakers coped pretty well with whatever I chose to throw at them from The Stone Roses, to Nick Cave, to Bartok, to Charlie Rowse. And, crucially I didn't long to return to my bigger, more expensive speakers. A sure sign that musically they were doing things right.

Moving to the 'R's (Oh dear, it doesn't work in the plural, does it!), it quickly became apparent what the extra £'s are helping deliver. It was immediately obvious that resolution was much improved, with fine details that were far from obvious with the Standards now clearly in place: On the Ted Sirota track there was more 'swish' to the cymbals, more bite to the horns. I was that crucial bit more aware of what each instrument was doing in the mix. The soundstage had opened out considerably. Stage depth was also a bit less restricted, gaining a foot or two

over the standard models, and the dynamic headroom had increased allowing the music to flow with more ease. This improved headroom also brought another quality into play: These little buggers love to be played loud. It's not that they can't handle lower levels and 'quieter' music, they can (see below). It's just that they seem to love a bit of punishment

(maybe a leather and rubber trim would make



them really contemporary?!), and they really start to sing and open up when driven hard. At levels where the standard Epilogues would start to cry mercy, the R's were begging for more!

Bass was not noticeably deeper, in fact it was much less obvious than with the standard Epilogues, and at first listen the R's could sound superficially bright in comparison. Familiarity quickly dispensed with most of this impression though: the bass is simply a lot cleaner and better defined than with the Standard Epilogue, and against this tighter performance, the 'brightness' can largely be put down to improved resolution across the range.

There is still a trace of splash in the treble, and this was most noticeable

where bass is a critical component of a sound. An example is the splendid Arc Choir *Walk with Me* (Mapleshade 04132) where in the opening number 'Shady Green Pastures' the spread of the 30 voices, and range from bass on up is well captured. But as the music builds and the choir starts clapping, there was a brittleness to the hand-claps that is just too bright, too sharp and unnatural, and is missing that critical 'low end' component. This doesn't destroy what is otherwise a convincingly reproduced, enthralling performance;

it's merely a pointer to the Achilles heel of a fine little speaker. Moving to classical music, Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin Suite*, Decca SXL 6111, opens with a hectic mix of percussion and brass symbolising a bustling city street scene.

This is coupled with the strings and woodwind belting out a rhythmic, scurrying figure. Here there was far less suggestion of brightness. The layering of the string section, the bite of the brass, the sheer sense of urgency of this opening section is very well conveyed, and I was immediately drawn into the music. So much so, that I sat through the whole piece rather than simply listening to the opening, a sure sign that something was right. This carried over to another favourite classical piece, the Vaughan Williams *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis*, HMV ASD 521, which from the gentle opening notes was the magical experience it should be. Lower strings had a reasonable degree of body and the

▶ sense of large forces at work, physical – a full orchestra and a double string quartet – and emotional, was obvious and properly involving.

Cannonball Adderley's *Quintet in Chicago* LP (Mercury SR 60134), cut in '59 when the band were working as Miles Davis' sidemen, was put across with real authority. Adderley's Alto had just the right breathy intonation, pairing superbly with Coltrane's Tenor in 'Grand Central', whilst Paul Chamber's bass and Jimmy Cobb's drums were allowed to do their job of driving the music ahead without hindrance. This helped prove that the R's were no slouches when it came to conveying the essential drive and rhythm in a piece, the key structure of the music.

The speakers also did a great job of capturing one of my favourite albums of the year, Taj Mahal and Touman Diabate's *Kulanjan*. From the warmth of Mahal's voice, the soaring tones of the Mailinese singer's vocals, and the percussive attack of Diabate's kora, the speaker's simply disappeared, and the atmosphere so well captured from that Athens, Georgia session takes over. The sense of a group of musicians pooling ideas across two different but linked musical cultures, and thoroughly enjoying the experience, their sheer joy in the music making, is put across with conviction. The opening track, 'Queen Bee', starts with Mahal's guitar and for a millisecond sounds like a conventional number, then the kora shimmers in stage right, followed by Ramatou Diakite's vocals which lift the music to a different plane. Soon she and Mahal are trading phrases whilst the guitar and kora do likewise stage left and right. This track brought out the best in the speakers which caught the very different character of each instrument and made the most of their interplay, whilst conveying the dynamic shadings of each singer.

Simpler material like Shinobu Sato's *Red Dragonfly* (Flying Fish FF476), particularly in the opening duet of

'Three Shamisen Pieces', puts across the alternate flurries of notes between the guitar and mandolin where a real tension between the two players is felt as they fight to keep the beat. Again the speakers were again able to clearly differentiate between the two instruments, which this time are much closer in character than in the Mahal album, another sign of good resolution.

Bonnie Raitt and Little Feat performing 'Cold, Cold, Cold' from the Lowell George tribute album *Rock and Roll Doctor* (a Japanese pressed CD, Kalgan KGCW-24), was a bit more telling of the speakers diminutive stature. They delivered plenty of slam and attack, but there wasn't quite the bass weight required to realise this number with the proper authority. That said, I can't think of another speaker at anywhere near this price bracket and size that would be up to the job, and what the Ruarks did they did well and without complaint.

The plastic grilles were very transparent in use and whilst the music suffered none of the penalties of leaving the grilles in place on the standard Epilogues, there was a very slight increase in transparency with the grilles removed. There was also an added benefit in that the aluminium fronted speakers suddenly looking a lot more attractive!

All in all the 'R' is a fine speaker for the money, and for most applications well worth the upgrade over the Standard model. However, if you have or are considering a relatively modest front end and amplification, I'd recommend that you audition both the standard Epilogues and the 'R': The standard models might just prove to be less critical, and therefore more enjoyable in simpler systems.

Ruark will be manufacturing custom stands for these speakers – the prototypes I saw looked intriguing, three cylindrical mass-loadable steel legs on a curved metal base, but weren't ready for audition. They should

now be completed, and whilst the Partingtons proved fine, you should also audition the Ruarks on their own stands. The Epilogues R's, carefully matched, will deliver a great deal of highly enjoyable sound for a modest outlay. They work well across a very broad range of music, and as long as you're not seeking stygian bass levels and have a room smaller than Chartres Cathedral, will be a worthy member of any caring souls shortlist. 

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Ruark Epilogue R

System type:	Bass reflex, 2 way
Drive units:	tweeter 19mm fabric dome Bass/mid 140mm treated NRSC paper cone
Frequency	
Response:	58Hz - 20KHz +/-3dB
Nominal	
Impedance:	8 ohms
Recommended	
Amplifier	
Output:	25/ 120/ watts
Sensitivity:	87dB/ watt
Dimensions	
(HxWxD):	290x170x245mm
Weight (each):	6Kg
Finishes:	Natural Oak Natural Cherry Rosewood Walnut Black Oak
Options:	Anodised aluminium baffle upgrade: £37.90
Epilogue R stand:	£199
Price:	£379 (£416.90 with aluminium baffle)

### Manufacturer:

Ruark Acoustics Ltd  
59 Tailor's Ct  
Temple Farm Ind. Est.  
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# The Real Deal Part II

## Denon TU260L Mk II Tuner and Kef Cresta II Loudspeaker

by Pete Christie

Having stared the quest for identifying real hi-fi for an affordable budget in the last issue with a look at the Pioneer PDS507 CD player and the Rotel RA931 amplifier, I am continuing here with a tuner that seems to have been around for ever, and a pair of speakers which, though relatively still 'wet behind the ears', are currently 'making a lot of noise' in the hi-fi press.

Denon TU260L Mk II Tuner and KEF Cresta 2 Loudspeakers.

The Denon TU260L Mk II Tuner is, quite possibly, one of the finest single pieces of affordable hi-fi equipment to have ever come out of the land of the rising sun.

In my opinion, this diminutive, understated tuner deservedly occupies a place in the hi-fi hall of fame. Since its arrival on the market way back in 1990, it has consistently out-sold all its rivals, and given machines costing twice as much a very good run for their money: How? - by being very, very good at its job. Whether you are listening to a sparkling Shostakovich from the Festival Hall on Radio 3, or a scratchy Test Match Special from Trinidad on Radio 4 long wave, the sound is presented honestly and with an inherent richness. On FM, stereo imaging is excellent. Speech is clear and natural, and music reproduction is surprisingly lively without sounding at all forced. It handles over-compressed

pop channels with ease, managing to convey a believable sense of cohesion. Radio 3 is clean and clear, making a thoroughly credible 'front-end' source component.

I'm not going to get too involved in Medium Wave or Long Wave, suffice to say that the TU260 easily does as good a job as the rivals on Medium Wave, and as most of them don't bother with Long Wave, anyway, the Denon obviously beats them hands down!

It aesthetically blends into just about any similarly coloured (black) system, and being quite skinny, it has the ability to squeeze into a very small gap. And, to cap it all, at £130.00, it is a veritable bargain.

The secret of its success is, and always was, its simplicity. Indeed,

Denon have only just incorporated RDS on the recently introduced Mk II version having managed quite well without this facility on the TU260 for over 9 years. Indeed, though the TU215 offered this feature at a comparable price point, and is more popular in mainland Europe, the TU260 has

remained the best-selling benchmark

budget model, and a firm favourite with the UK public at large.

The tuning and memorising of up to 40 stations is totally Granny-friendly.

Just press the scan button, let it find the station and then give it the number you want. If only they made video programming this simple! The display is neat, discrete, and easy to understand. You'll find no garish colours or gimmicky flashing lights here, the

information you are given is the information you need, and no more. ▶



▶ Signal strength, the fly in the ointment of most tuners, has never been a big problem. In fact, I can clearly remember answering a customer query regarding this subject by removing the aerial during a demonstration, and shoving my finger in its place, immediately achieving a strength 9 stereo signal, albeit on a local station. Now that's impressive! In fact, it sucks in a signal better than a Dyson sucks dirt off a carpet.

You may think that I am on some sort of commission from Denon here. I can assure you (unfortunately) that I am not. I can only say that in my experience in the hi-fi business, I have never known any one item that has maintained such a consistent level of sales, and, more importantly, remains within customers' systems regardless of any upgrades they subsequently make to their other equipment. They never come back broken and they never come back second-hand. The conclusion is obvious. This is as much tuner as most people will ever need. And that's not because we don't care about the radio - it's still the most cost effective way of listening to music, as well as opinion, the news, satirical comedy and the Archers. In fact, it's the only way of listening to the Archers. That Tommy, eh.....

OK, we all know the digital radio revolution is here. Pretty soon, no doubt, the inevitable reduction of equipment cost and increased



they are not the smallest loudspeaker choice on the market, and at 14' in height they are certainly not one for the bookshelf, either in terms of size or proximity to the wall! Speaker stands are a definite requirement, as is a good foot of space behind them. I have recently been experimenting

availability of signal will make all but the best analogue tuners redundant.

However, until that time arrives, the TU260 still represents the best budget hi-fi tuner available, and one that you should definitely put on your list for audition - the radio might surprise you.

### KEF Cresta 2 Loudspeakers.

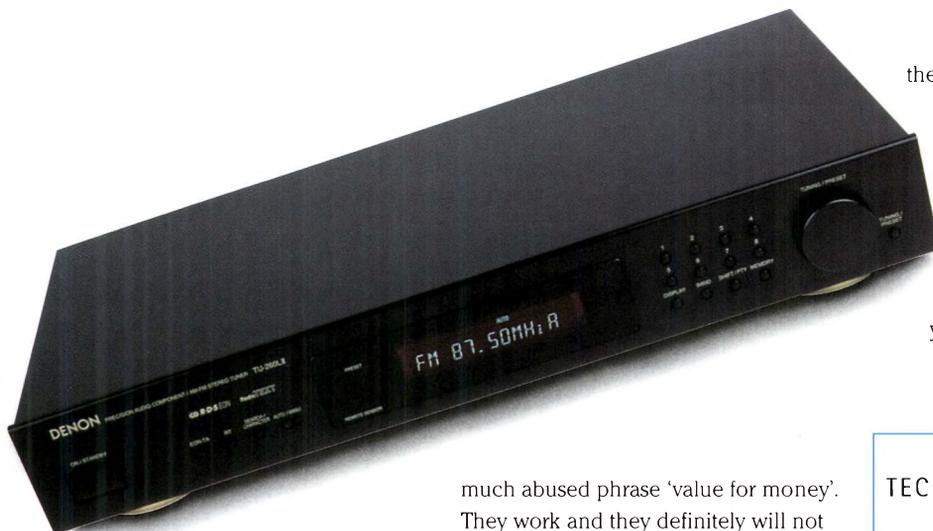
As I previously mentioned, the Cresta 2's are a fairly new addition to the KEF product range, and appear to be seriously challenging the established array of budget loudspeakers. So far, the general reaction from the press and the public has been extremely favourable, and it is fairly easy to see why. At £150.00 a pair, they are a lot of box for not a lot of money.

Available in black or cherry finishes, I found that the black pair I was supplied with were somewhat 'retro' in appearance, reminding me of the old 1980's Tannoy Mercury in overall dimensions and style. The Cherry pair that we got to photograph are much prettier, which probably explains why they are in such short supply. Compared to the competition,

with a varied selection of loudspeaker cabling and bi-wiring configurations to ascertain whether it pays to dispense with the bi-wire capability in favour of a better quality single run cable (eg. a £5.00/metre bi-wire cable versus a £5.00/metre single cable). This exercise will no doubt appear in full in a forthcoming issue, but I can recommend using the bi-wire facility in the case of the Crestas - I found it made an appreciable difference.

The finer points of design and components were admirably described by RG in his introductory piece in issue 3, so I don't feel I need to go into too much detail here. The purpose of the 'Real Deal' is to identify performance above and beyond the call of budget.

So how do they perform? The easiest way I can answer that question is to quote from a recent demonstration that we gave to a couple of 19 year old customers. Having trawled their way through the usual budget candidates using various vinyl house/trance pieces, their reaction upon hearing the Crestas was total disbelief at such a high quality sound being available at such an affordable price. The



▶ overwhelming opinion was that, at last, the bass was, and I quote, 'fat'. I pressed them for further information, and in plain terms, the Crestas seemed to be able to handle everything thrown at them with ease, and to prove the point, we made the sale.

We continued auditioning after the satisfied customer had left, and we threw a varied selection of music at the system. After all, once you get to my advanced years, there is only so much Leftfield you can take. From Lyle Lovett to Gustav Holst, it was abundantly clear that KEF have cracked the budget speaker market open with the Cresta 2. My mate Karl summed it up quite succinctly when he said: 'It's like singing in the bathroom – It always sounds good!' I can't attest to his vocal qualities, but I think I understand what he is saying. Curiously, the overall sound is relaxed, but the constituent parts, particularly the bass, is solid and well defined. So well defined that in certain extreme conditions such as heavy reggae, I needed to turn the volume down. Must be my age!

Now, I can wax lyrical on the advantages of cabinet rigidity, the finer points of crossover capabilities, and frequency response till the cows come home, but that would be missing the point. The proof of the Crestas is firmly rooted in the price point. It's that old,

much abused phrase 'value for money'. They work and they definitely will not break the bank. They are not the best loudspeakers in the world. They aren't supposed to be. They are however, going to be hard to beat at £150.00, and are more than worthy candidates for the 'Real Deal'. They are astonishingly refined for the price, and as experiment has proved, they can grow with a system without letting the side down. In fact, the only major criticism that I can come up with is that they need to be treated like a far more expensive product. Don't run them in? Sluggish bass and splashy treble. Dodgy stands or poor positioning? More bass than you'll know what to do with. Well, at least it will still be fat - in every sense of the word. Don't take liberties and they should reward you with a long and enjoyable life. If you need speakers and £150 really is the limit, this is where the buck will probably stop. If you can stretch, then the B&W 601 is a more open but less meaty alternative for another fifty sheets. Listen to both, it's probably your music that will decide. And if you're not in the market for a pair of cheap speakers but are sad enough - I mean enthusiastic enough - to have read this far, give them an audition just for fun – you will be impressed!

So, if you put all the components that I have covered so far in both 'Real Deal' reviews together, you end up with a stunning hi-fi system for the princely sum of \$655.00. Take out the tuner, and

the basic system of Rotel RA931 MkII, Pioneer PDS 507 CD, and Crestas, will set you back £525.00 tops.

It is possible to achieve hi-fi performance for midi system money. These babies have proved it. Try them out for yourselves and see!!



## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Denon TU 260L MkII Stereo Tuner

FM Section	
THD	(stereo) 0.8% (mono) 0.5%
Signal to Noise Ratio	(stereo) 76dB (mono) 82dB
Frequency Response	20Hz – 15 kHz (+5dB –1.0dB)
Stereo Separation	40dB (1kHz)
Station Presets	40
RDS Services	EON-TA, PS, PTY, CT
Dimensions (W x H x D)	434 x 75 x 239 mm
Weight	2.5 kg
Price	£130.00

### KEF Cresta 2 Loudspeakers

Design	two way bookshelf
Drive Units	HF: 25mm (1") soft dome tweeter LF: 130mm (5") pp coated cone
Frequency Response	48Hz–20kHz (±3dB)
Crossover	3kHz
Amplifier Requirements	10 – 100W
Sensitivity	30dB
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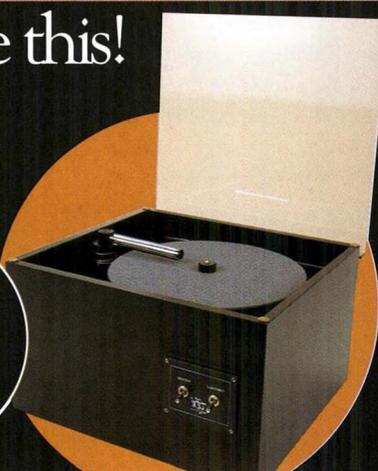
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# The Hutter-Racktime Furniture System

by Jason Hector

It is no longer a question of if Hi Fi racks or tables are necessary, everyone now accepts that they are an essential element in exploiting the potential of your system. The question now is which rack to choose? There are as many racks as there are ways to build them, but one thing has remained pretty consistent. They are all ugly. Too ugly to win that all important 'partner acceptance'.

Recently a couple of companies have been scoring hits with some much more attractive purpose designed equipment which also sounds good. The Quadraspire system, along with Projekt and the Russ Andrews Torlyte system, uses little or no ferrous materials in its construction, and does away with all that ringing smoked glass. As a generalization, they seem to allow equipment to produce a much more natural sound. I chose myself an example from Quadraspire. Recently at the Novotel show, Naim were demonstrating their electronics on a new Austrian stand system from Hutter; the Racktime system. Having spoken to the Naim guys, they were obviously impressed, so much so that the editor decided a review was called for, and as I use Naim muggins got the call.

Hutter have been making real furniture for 50 years, and as a keen audiophile Armin Hutter wanted to make a hi-fi table which achieved four



specific aims. The system had to be:

- good looking
- easy to set up
- flexible and, most importantly
- excellent sounding.

Has he achieved any or all of these aims with his Racktime range?

Racktime is a modular system, so you can make a stand as tall and as wide as you want, with a variety of shelf spacings. Unusually, and exploiting their furniture-making expertise, the system incorporates some storage sections. There's a CD drawer and record shelves which allow you to create a whole range of stands from a few basic components; bases, two types of shelf and the storage units.

Yep, they are flexible.

The shelves are wooden and are constructed in three parts, a center section with vertical end cheeks. Each part is constructed from three sheets of spruce (no MDF here). The sheets are cross-plyed, and each has a different thickness. The sections are then veneered with three layers, again of different thickness and cross-plyed. All this care results in shelving which has a diffuse resonant behavior. The shelves are then varnished, and here we see further evidence of the attention to detail.

The varnish itself is identical to that used by the Austrian piano maker 'Bösendorfer', and for similar acoustic reasons. The quality of the finish is simply superb, and the assembled table is pleasing to the eye in a purposeful way. The shelves are available in a variety of real wood veneers, so everyone should be able to find something to suit. Aesthetics are in the eye of the beholder, and whilst the Hutter is decidedly different from most hi-fi furniture, it is definitely more furniture than hi-fi. They've really grown on me, so I guess I can give them a tick in the 'good looking' column, but they are also big, and will become a feature of most rooms.

Shelves are held in place by a two part aluminium spacer consisting of an inner solid rod and an outer sleeve. The rods locate into the top and bottom of the shelf cheeks, and the

▶ tubes provide the spacing. These linking pieces are available in a variety of lengths to allow different spacing between the shelves. Using a two part structure again reduces the vibrational interaction between adjacent shelves by eliminating resonance in the supports. Two bases are available, the basic base being a one piece slab with adjustable feet. The 'Hi-Fi Base' a two part system with isolation spikes between the slabs. The first set of spacers locates in holes in these bases, further shelves can then be simply added in turn. You can also link the bases horizontally. So yep, they are easy to setup. So far so good, but how does it all sound?

My first exposure in a controlled environment (rather than at a noisy show!) was at my dealers shop. Roy had dropped the rack there, so we thought we'd try it out. Assembling a table with the Hi-Fi base, the CD drawer (which holds 75 CD's) and three shelves, a Naim CDX/ XPS CD player was placed on the top. The rest of the system, Naim 82/180 and a pair of Shahinian Arcs, completed a familiar line up. The first thing that strikes you about the sound is the scale, it simply becomes 'bigger' and more naturally powerful, without the sluggish tendencies which often afflict racks which do this. On the contrary, the changes with the Hutter were entirely positive. Now to get it home. A word of advice; if you own a small sports car, get somebody to deliver it or you will be making a lot of trips. Boxed, the Racktime table filled the back of my Golf and weighed a ton! Flatpack is a relative term.

The first tests once I got it centered on the LP12 and its paraphernalia (Armageddon and Prefix). This I thought would be the sternest test of all, what with the Linn being such a

fussy record player, and being known for working best on light rigid stands. The Hutter flies in the face of this tradition. With the number of shelves (5 basic, plus the Hi-Fi base) and the spacers provided the whole stand was tall, approaching 4.5 feet in height. Despite the height, this isn't a rack which sways in the breeze. When assembled the close tolerance



manufacture results in a solid piece of furniture.

From the moment music started playing I realized I had nothing to worry about here. The first thing that struck me, as it had in Phonography, was the scale of the sound. Everything seemed bigger. Not in an over blown fashion, just a larger scale with correspondingly wider dynamics, the performance becoming life-size rather than the usual smaller rendition from hi-fi. As I transferred further sections of my system, similar gains were heard, each component gaining from the transition between Quadraspire and Hutter. Interestingly, the NAP250

power amp seeming to benefit the most of the non-source components.

What else did the Hutter do? Well it certainly helped to increase the resolution, allowing a hear-through, transparent quality, with instruments better able to display their distinct voices. Nowhere was this more apparent than with drums. Now drums are some of the most difficult sounds to reproduce, covering a wide frequency spectrum with very strong

transients. My system has always done well here, but the Racktime system really outshone my Quadraspire rack in bringing out the best. Playing Greetings From Timbuk3 drums gained the required force, and had increased definition, so that the evolution of the strike was palpable, whereas previously it was slightly amorphous. I put this down to better harmonic retrieval and delivery. The Quadraspire tables have always made for an expressive system, but the Hutter allowed new depth and insight into the workings of the band.

The intended timing of music, the way the players stretch or shorten the pacing, is vital to the message being presented. Again the Hutter communicates this more clearly than the Quadraspire, so that interplay and shifts of tempo are present in the room, not lost in transit to the speakers. This was demonstrated with the first Gomez album *Bring It On*. Gomez have a rare grasp of how to use variations in timing to their musical advantage, and now my system was better able to keep track of this, keeping me listening to records. With the Quadraspire it was easier to keep my reviewer hat on and be objective, with the Racktime I just ended up listening to the music, playing several tracks when one would have done. Is there a bigger recommendation?

Listening to the Fun Lovin' ▶

► Criminals Come Find Yourself, I was struck again by how funky these guys are, and how obvious it was with the Hutter system. A tidying up at the edges of the sounds and the improved timing led to a new appreciation of their abilities. With more acoustic sounds it became obvious that the Racktime system had increased the dynamic range of the system through a reduction in distortion and the noise floor. Maddy Prior's Ravenchild demonstrated that instrumental phrasing and timbre were improved, and this moved the result another step closer to the ideal, with nuances in her voice easier to hear. Again the overwhelming impression is of improved musicality, and a reduction in listener fatigue encouraging further listening.

Towards the end of the review period I managed to get hold of an extra base unit, allowing me to stretch the rack sideways into a two tier unit,

incorporating the excellent (and extremely solid) CD storage drawer. This elicited further improvements, extending the already impressive performance. The Hutter Racktime system is a definite step in the right direction for audio furniture, further

improving on the natural presentation of the other wood based stands, whilst injecting greater clarity and even better rhythmic integrity. I can confidently say that Armin Hutter has met all his design goals. The Racktime has taken up residence chez Hector. ►+

**Finishes:**

Various wood finishes are available including maple, cherry and black ash. The metal supports are also available in matt aluminium, nickel and brass metallic shades.

**Size:**

The rack used for the review has a depth of 475mm and width of 600mm. Spacers are available in 50mm, 90mm and 190mm lengths. 90mm is typical for shelves, and 50mm for drawers, although these can be mixed and matched. Shelves are available in a variety of sizes, and custom dimensions can be produced, priced as per the next size up.

**Cost:**

The Hi-Fi base costs £137.45, a shelf as shown is £112.45 and the drawer ranges from £263.95 to £337.35 depending on the insert

**Contact details:**

Hi-Fi Holz Hutter  
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Email: [office@hutter.co.at](mailto:office@hutter.co.at)

# The Complete Guide to High-End Audio

It's dangerous having an editor in the family, you can talk yourself into all kinds of trouble. All I did was notice a rather lurid book sitting on his dining table. 'Who on earth would want to read that?' I asked (I thought ) rhetorically. 'Why don't you!' came the challenge, 'and let me know what you think of it.'

So a few days later, wishing I had kept my opinions to myself, and with my prejudice now firmly entrenched, I picked up the tome. Robert Harley is the ex long time technical editor of US magazines Stereophile and Fi. His thoughts on the subject occupy some 550 pages of dense text in a format the size of this magazine. With only a few black and white pictures and some illustrations,

surely this had to be one dry read?

But I was mistaken. What struck me first was that this was a book for music lovers not anoraks. The emphasis is on helping you to make informed decisions, with strong encouragement to trust your own ears and exploit the knowledge of an experienced retailer. Although most of the book is devoted to hardware, the first 124 pages deal with definition and philosophy, choosing a system, becoming a better listener, and getting the best from your room. This really is informative, no nonsense advice, presented in an enthusiastic, accessible and authoritative manner. I liked the recognition that there are female as well as male audiophiles,

and I was encouraged to read the clear distinction drawn between critical listening and listening for pleasure or, as it was put, the difference between listening to boxes and listening to the music. In passing it occurred to me that in the interest of consistency, the section on sonic descriptions and their meanings (coherence, dynamics, musicality, etc) should be required reading for all equipment reviewers!

The treatment of hardware is similarly accessible and runs through preamplifiers, power amplifiers, loudspeakers, the digital front end (including SACD and DVD), the LP playback system, tuners, cables, interconnects, accessories, and audio for home

▷ theatre. Each section starts at a simple technical level and builds from there, accompanied by honest advice to skip forward if you reach your technical interest tolerance. If you want to know how a moving-coil cartridge works, or what a brick wall filter does for CD, then it's all clearly explained, and in considerable depth. The treatment is comprehensive, and thankfully there are no product recommendations here to cloud your thinking. Particular models are only used by way of illustration, and it's refreshing to see the emphasis on value for money rather than heedless extravagance. (Audio journalists can develop a rather blasé attitude to products that would cost

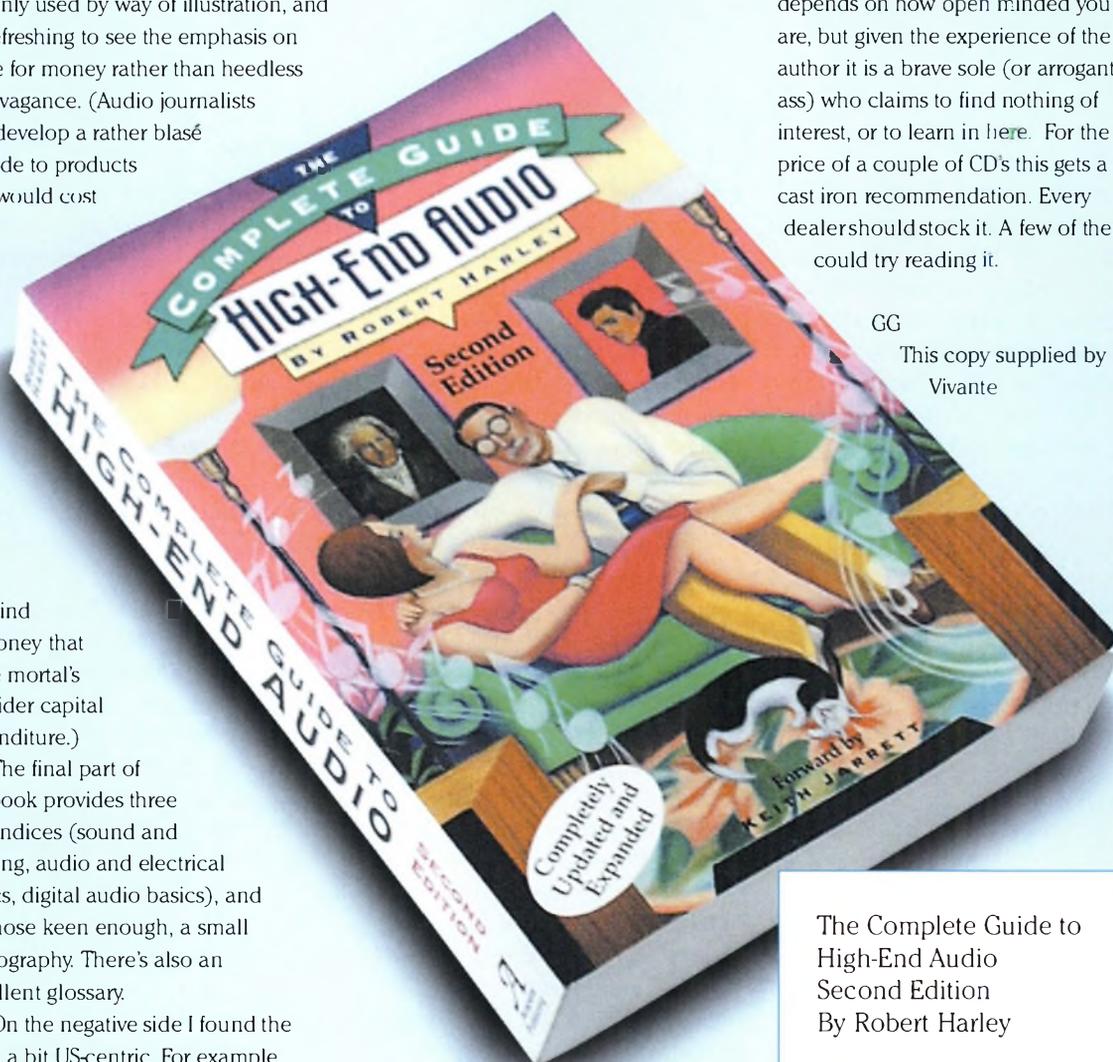
seems to be that your house is big enough to have a dedicated listening room, insulated from family pressures. For example, the section on common room problems and how to treat them made no mention of the absorptive properties of randomly distributed Lego and strategically placed Beanie Babies!

So does it stand up to its billing as the complete guide for beginners and experienced listeners alike? It is certainly comprehensive and up to date,

and because the presentation of the information takes nothing for granted it does work for the entry level audiophile. For someone like me who has some experience as a 'listener' but can never remember the difference between bi-wiring and bi-amping (and don't really care!) it is an invaluable reference source for those occasions when I need to understand rather than just have fun. For those who consider themselves 'experienced listeners' I guess it depends on how open minded you are, but given the experience of the author it is a brave sole (or arrogant ass) who claims to find nothing of interest, or to learn in here. For the price of a couple of CD's this gets a cast iron recommendation. Every dealer should stock it. A few of them could try reading it. ▶+

GG

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the kind of money that mere mortals consider capital expenditure.)

The final part of the book provides three appendices (sound and hearing, audio and electrical basics, digital audio basics), and for those keen enough, a small bibliography. There's also an excellent glossary.

On the negative side I found the book a bit US-centric. For example where there are equipment references US models dominate, and you come away with a feeling that high-end audio means American audio. There is also little consideration given to domestic convenience, the general assumption

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Second Edition  
By Robert Harley

£25

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# Cetech AV

## - Vibration Control Sandwich Isolation Board

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by Jason Hector

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So you've found a nice rack for your hi-fi, but is it getting the best out of your system? It may match the Ikea coffee table, but does it provide that optimized mechanical termination? There's a fair few companies that clearly believe it doesn't, and offer the extra layers of additional isolation that could turn your seaside donkey of a system back into the thoroughbred stallion you bought. Enter the Cetech AV Vibration Control Sandwich Isolation Board.

This device uses the Tomorrows World favorite; Carbon fibre. In this application the carbon fibre is used as a skin on a composite honeycomb to produce an extremely lightweight board which according to the literature '... achieves its affect by resonance control, not brute force absorption.' The board also uses the editor's current favorite; RDC cones. Three of these are provided which are stuck to the underside of the board and are touted as complementary to the VCS structure. The appearance of the board has been enhanced by a wood surround, allowing a degree of matching to your existing décor. Don't worry, it also comes in black! On an aesthetic note, it's a shame that the carbon fibre is hidden by

the equipment, as it always looks good to me.

So does the vibrational control work? Does it improve the sound quality over bare shelves? As usual when looking at this sort of equipment it depends very much on the system you are using it in. I rang the changes as much as possible, using my own system with two different tables, and co-opting my brother's rather more modest set-up - but then he's a music lover rather than a hi-fi freak.

In essence, the Cetech shelf cleans up the sound, removing those thickening bands of stodginess where your equipment has consumed too many burgers... I mean stored unwanted energy. With the shelf between my Prefixed LP12 and the Hutter rack the slightly swollen bass went on an instant diet, resulting in an immediate increase in clarity. The problem was that rather like a see-saw, the reduction in bass weight tilted the balance towards the treble. With the Cetech timing seemed quicker, and this coupled with the increased output at the top made the system a little too forward. I didn't want the bass removed and I was more than happy with the treble output the way it was. After

listening for several days with the shelf, it was a pleasant return to the bare Hutter rack. The system seemed slower, but it was much more involving and musical, notes regained power and depth, along with what I can only describe as body. Was the Cetech LP12 more accurate? Probably, but it was definitely less enjoyable. Did it make a difference? And how! The question is, does your system need the differences on offer?

I tried the shelf under the Naim kit as well, where the pre-amp really didn't like it, losing all sense of rhythmic integrity, and the power amp and power supplies didn't seem to notice. The Micromega CD player uses a ground spike to sink energy out of the transport, so that was definitely a big no-no.

The next step was to see what effect the Cetech had between the LP12 and the Quadraspire. Here the result was even more clear cut. The Cetech makes a big difference in overall clarity, but the Quadraspire lacks the Hutter's presence and solidity to start with, which leaves the overall balance even more threadbare. I could see someone valuing the contribution it made to the Hutter, but not the



▼ Quadraspire, where it simply upset the overall balance of my system.

After the poor results I'd experienced with my equipment, I wasn't looking forward to writing this one up. Fortunately, persistence paid off, and the results when we placed the Cetech under my brother's Rotel CD player were all that the company claimed. Now we only perceived gains in sound quality, the improvement demonstrating yet again what good players the Rotel 965's were. Increased transparency was the most obvious benefit, and the rhythmic ability also improved. Music flowed effortlessly into the room, placing the machine up with players costing at least twice as much. Ambient sounds, which weren't recovered pre-Cetech, were presented

with a flourish belying the system's cost, bringing the musicians into the room with you. Paying £200 for the Cetech shelf in this system is a no-brainer, offering much better value than buying a new player. In fact, as soon as this review is over, my music loving and tweak hating brother is writing the cheque which will allow this particular sample to take up permanent residence. In the meantime, CB is trying it in his valve based system, where he uses an Aerolam board under his LP12, which should prove interesting.

Which just goes to show that in hi-fi, one man's meat really is another man's poison. The Cetech shelf is an extremely effective device; so much so that it could upset the balance of a well sorted or carefully considered system. The interlocking strengths of a Naim set-up are therefore probably not the best place to use it. But when circumstances allow it to 'accentuate

the positive, eliminate the negative' then it really comes into its own. If you are suffering from sluggish performance or poor support (sounds like a Gossard advert!) this could be just the ticket. Or, conversely, it could deconstruct a carefully balanced system as happened to me. In fact, it's just like a Wonder Bra - great in the right circumstances, but can be altogether too much of a good thing. Make sure you try it on before you buy. If it fits, the results could be out of all proportion to the cost.

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# Incognito Rega Tonearm Rewiring Kit

by Roy Gregory

Under normal circumstances I'd have to say that the inside of the average tonearm has an awful lot in common with what our transatlantic cousins euphemistically call the 'Ladies' Comfort Station'. They are both unfamiliar, full of secrets, and entry inevitably leads to humiliation. Not surprisingly, I look forward to rewiring tonearms with that special loathing I reserve for tea with my sister-in-law. So when chirpy chappy Mike Harris rings up all full of beans and tells me that I've just got to try this new £115 Rega rewiring kit, you can imagine the tenor of my response. Except that I had a rather unfortunate accident with my stand-by RB300 the other day. Soldering on the umpteenth replacement cartridge tags the head-shell wiring just came away in my hand, honest guv!

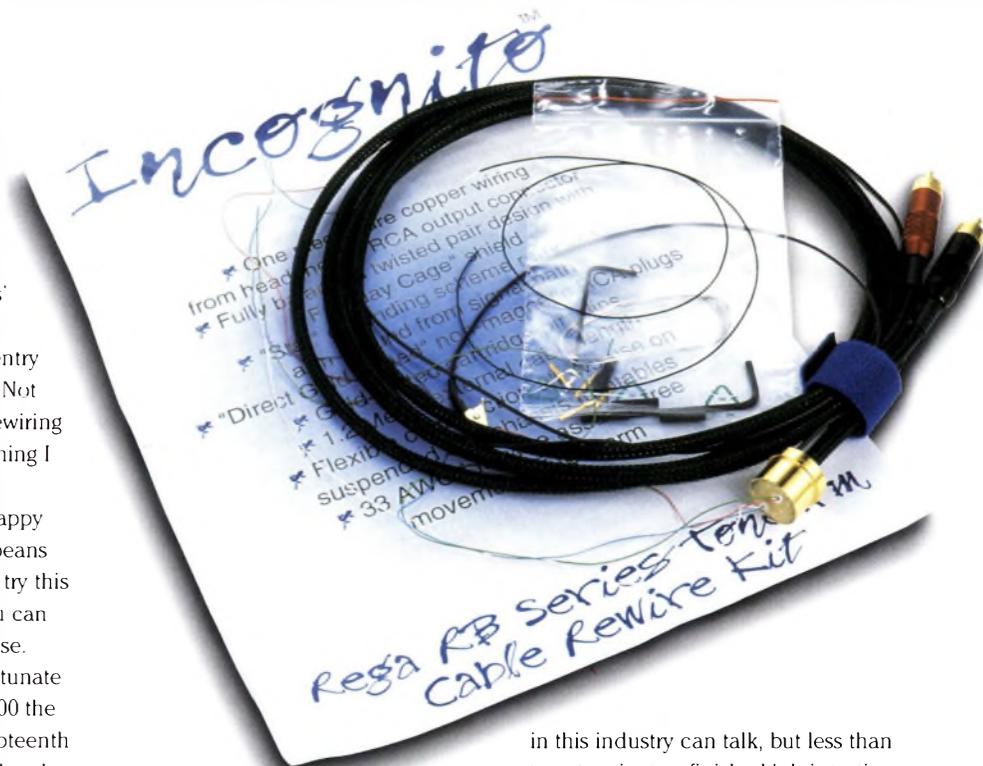
I awaited the arrival of the Incognito kit with trepidation, despite all Mike's assurances about the ease of installation. When it arrived I was reassured to see a really well made lead which carries unbroken conductors from the cartridge tags to the non-magnetic phono plugs at the other end. The arm base plug is machined from brass, and the leads run out to 1.2metres. I was even more relieved to see the comprehensive and easy to follow instructions and complete set of parts, down to allen keys, solder,

and a spare bit of cable to practice on. And best of all, some really nice sprung bucket cartridge tags to replace the little horrors that Rega use. The cable itself goes unidentified, but bears a striking resemblance to Cardas. Methinks the product's name is no coincidence.

Installation was a breeze. No sooner had I started than the phone rang, so I answered it and carried on. I finished the tonearm (all except the cartridge tags) before I finished the phone call. Now I know that people

in this industry can talk, but less than twenty minutes, finished job is testimony to a well presented product and excellent instructions. The latter are a model of clarity, the process itself as easy as shelling peas. If you are still not convinced then your dealer (or failing that, Moth) will do it for you for a grand total of £128 all in. The full sonic lowdown will have to wait for the next issue, but in the meantime, interested parties should contact Moth on:

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# ClearAudio Victory-H Moving-Coil cartridge

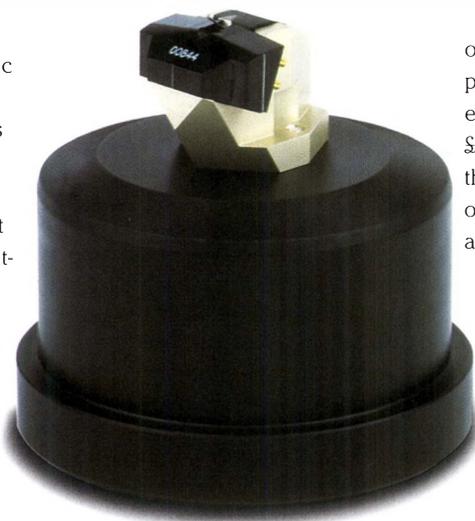
by Roy Gregory

In Issue 3, I gave the all new ClearAudio Victory cartridge an enthusiastic welcome, marvelling at its speed, delicacy and transparency. Downsides were limited to a precise bass performance, long on information but short on weight, and a ruinously low output of only 0.2mV. To what extent the 'light-n-low' bass character helps the astonishing transparency is open to conjecture. On the other hand, if you've got the gain then there's no ignoring the quality of the Victory, so it's low output seems to be the only thing standing between it and a commanding presence in the all important

£1000 'as much as I could ever justify spending on a cartridge' market. No sooner had I put that review to bed, than Peter Suchy of ClearAudio promptly announced a higher output version of the Victory. Not pseudo moving-magnet level you understand. Just a bit more than the original.

The arrival of the Victory-H coincided with the review of the Convergent Audio Technology SL1 Ultimate pre-amp, with its valve moving-coil stage. What could be a more appropriate partner? The new cartridge is outwardly indistinguishable from the old, using the same business-like, faceted and threaded alloy body. But whereas the original design went to great lengths to minimise its moving mass (hence the low output), the H carries turns for an extremely healthy 0.6mV. The only set-up peculiarity is the pronounced tail down angle which leaves the top of the cartridge's body way out of parallel with the record surface, but which is essential for correct VTA. SME owners beware! The question is, what performance price are you paying for that extra output?

Unfortunately, the answer is a high



one. Taken in isolation the H is a perfectly acceptable cartridge, but compared to its racing snake twin brother, there's no comparison. Gone is the intimacy and instrumental vibrance. Gone too is the rhythmic agility that make a player's phrasing so apparent. The Alto pressing of the Argenta Rodrigo is a perfect example. The low output cartridge revels in the poise and delicacy, the sophisticated tightrope, of Yepes' performance as he hangs one note before skittering surefooted through the flurry of the next phrase. The H reveals a different picture, making the playing sound slightly stilted and clumsy, as if the soloist is at the limits of his ability.

That's the downside. The upside is the sense of solidity and bass power that have become something of a ClearAudio trade mark. The H leaves the original sounding a little ethereal on occasion. In the context of the CAT there really was no contest, as the lower output cartridge simply wouldn't drive the phono stage properly. Which suggests that Herr Suchy has been rather canny, and wound up with the best of both worlds. The low

output Victory offers a sensational performance at the price of an excellent phono stage (figure around £1000 for something along the lines of the Michell Delphini or ClearAudio's own Reference). Few if any integrated amps or basic pre-amps will be able to cope. They might have the gain, they won't have the quality. This makes the straight Victory a more expensive cartridge than its price suggests, although its performance is well up to the mark. The Victory H is a worthy contender for the other thousand pound offerings, and is an interesting and more refined alternative to ClearAudio's cheaper and more fiery Gamma S.

If, on the other hand, you already have a high class phono stage, and you value subtlety over rib-rattling power, then the low output Victory looks like one hell of a bargain. 

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Design Principle	Low output moving-coil
Weight	8g
Cantilever	Boron
Stylus Tip	Trigon II
Compliance	15cu
Tracking Force	2.4 - 2.8g
Recommended Loading	80 - 100 Ohms
Output Level	0.6 mV
Price	£960

### Distributor

Audio Reference  
Tel. (44)(0)1252-702705  
Fax. (44)(0)1483-301412

### Manufacturer

ClearAudio Electronic GmbH  
E-mail. clearaudio@t-online.de

# Clearlight Audio RDC Rack

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by Roy Gregory

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The road to hi-fi enlightenment goes through many towns, and they're all called Damascus. My latest on the road experience involves a rather clever material called RDC, developed by Clearlight Audio in Germany. You can mold it, machine it and tailor its properties; use it for cones, as a structural element and even for driver baskets. In fact, about the only thing you can't do with it is sniff it. Why bother? Because it has the all too rare ability to pass energy in an almost totally linear fashion, and that means no resonant character.

Furniture seems to have come to the fore just recently, what with JH waxing lyrical on the subject of the Hutter racks, and my own experiences with the outstanding Townshend Seismic Stand in Issue 3. Max' stand floats the entire system on an air suspension which acts as a very steep low pass filter. Around 2Hz in fact. But much as I admire the performance, it has certain practical considerations which render it problematic for me. The side access to equipment is non-existent, and cabling has to be dressed away from walls to prevent it short-circuiting the suspension. But worst of all is the need to level the stand each and every time you move or change

a piece of equipment, or even a cable. As a reviewer I just can't be doing with it. The problem is, that having lived with its performance, it's hard to do without.

But it looks like I have found an alternative. Clearlight Audio produce a rack, based around the application of RDC to the problems of energy dispersal. I've tried it and I love it. Let me tell you why.

The RDC rack's initial appeal is from an engineering point of view. It's a tripod structure which eliminates stability as an issue. What is more, by placing the rear leg at the apex of an equilateral triangular footprint, and using conventional rectangular shelves, you not only get great access to the rear of equipment, the rear leg is a major help in dressing and separating mains and signal cabling.

Secondly, I really like the symmetrical simplicity of its structure. It consists of three 'gates', each cut from a sheet of MDF and held together by hardwood end strips. The whole thing is held together using Allen bolts. The gates provide support for three shelves and a top plate, and although the intention is to place the widest gap at the bottom (for a power amp), you can assemble it the other way round, which I did in order to give

added ventilation to a series of valve pre-amps that are due through the house. The basic structure is sensibly proportioned with very good width, and builds into a light and surprisingly rigid framework. The well-spaced shelves separate the equipment, which is a good thing, and the rack is virtually devoid of metal, which is even better.

But what about the RDC? The three legs have holes in their bottoms (now there's a thing) which accept M8 threaded posts, onto which you spin RDC cones, allowing you to precisely level the rack. The shelves each consist of a sheet of MDF which has had a spiral groove cut from its underside and filled with RDC (see Issue 3's Audio Smorgasbord for more on this). This prevents standing waves developing in the shelves, and feeds energy out into the frame in a linear fashion. The generous top plate consists of two spiral shelves glued face to face so that the spirals travel in opposite directions.

The end result is an extremely practical rack which will accommodate all but the largest power amps and monster turntables. Clearlight make a special version of the top plate with compliantly mounted brass feet for the former, and even larger boards for the latter. Simple ▶



▶ to assemble, and easy to work with or move about, the RDC rack is the answer to my storage prayers.

But how does it sound? Wonderful. If memory serves then I don't think that it can quite match the Seismic Stand's retrieval of low level and ambient information, but it gets close. And its star turn is in the area of rhythm and timing; the music's energy management if you like. The absence of resonant smearing allows the music to flow in an open, communicative and unforced manner. It's a bit like tracing distortion in

a tonearm. You don't notice it until it's gone. Then you wonder how you ever tolerated it. With the system running on the Clearlight rack, shifts in tempo, stretched rhythms, the way a player sustains or damps a note, all come across so naturally and integrally to the music that you find yourself doing a double take. Hey, is that the same track? The guitarist learnt how to play!

Bass linearity is also a huge plus. The absence of thickened bands so apparent with the Townshend is shared by the Clearlight. The effect

is to free the bass notes from the speaker cabinets, allowing them to float in space, supporting the soundstage, allowing the music to breathe. The natural balance of the extended bass runs on *This One's For Blanton* (the superb Analogue Productions 180g re-issue) will make you realise how earth bound and congested the instrument can be made to sound. On the RDC rack the notes bounce with attack and energy, a world away from the dull thud that so many systems produce. This is the sound of big strings and the effort it takes to make them move. The beauty of the RDC rack is not what it does, but what it removes. The furniture from the equation.

At the moment it's a case of one size fits all, but other gates are planned, offering more and differently spaced shelves. You also have the option of the double spiral shelves throughout, which I've just got to try. At an all in price of £468, the Clearlight is also about half the price of the Townshend. Sonic memory is dodgy at best, and Max has promised a new version of the Seismic Stand which should be more amenable to my penchant for passive parallel tracking tonearms. I await the comparison with glee. It's a nice change to have a glut of truly outstanding equipment supports.

#### Distributor:

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# The Clash

## Raking Over The Cinders

by Jon Maple

It is such a long time ago now and those who survived the blood, gob and snot of the punk wars have grown plump and middle-aged. As we sit here, pipe and slippers at the ready, contemplating our expensive hi-fi equipment over a glass of Amarone del Valpolicella - or something similarly bourgeois - we have a tendency to reminisce, to conjure-up rose-tinted visions of a youth spent in bondage strides. Then we realise, to our considerable horror, that we have become 'boring old farts' ourselves.... It is just as well then, that Sony, in conjunction with Simply Vinyl, have recently re-released The Clash back catalogue on CD and 180 gram vinyl. Now we may relive our misspent youth in the comfort of our own homes. Although our ageing bodies no longer can sustain the amphetamine abuse, we may even venture a quick pogo on the Axminster, just for old times sake.

Let us then journey back to that dark time. The country was in deep recession, unemployment was running at 2.5 million, the public sector was on



strike, the currency was toppling and inflation was out of control. It seemed as if the social and political consensus that had governed post-war life had irretrievably broken down. The pop musical accompaniment to this socio-political decay was split between the jaded glam of the singles charts and the pompous, prog-rock of such as ELP, Jethro Tull and Yes in the stadiums. Apart from being utterly inimical to the spirit of the times, these rock dinosaurs were - adopts nasal Sarf Lahndahn whine - completely BOORIIING.

Then, like a ripe fart at a Grammar school assembly on Remembrance

Day, came punk. Other than The Damned's apolitical party-time decadence, first generation English punk consisted of The Sex Pistols - whose 'No Future' worship of chavs has been much dissected - and The Clash. In retrospect it seems as if The Clash represented the constructivist, revolutionary side of the Sex Pistols' nihilist coin. A seminal British punk

band was the London SS which, in 1975, contained Tony James (later of The Damned), Mick Jones, Topper Headon and Paul Simonon among a sometime cast of thousands including Chrissie Hynde. According to James they were "long-haired, a London New York Dolls, with girls shoes". Joe Strummer meanwhile was singing rock'n'roll standards with Chiswick Record's finest pub-rockers The 101ers. Aided and abetted (some would say 'groomed') by Bernie Rhodes, art-school chum and rival of Malcolm McLaren - he wanted a punk band of his own - The Clash was assembled. The line up was Jones (lead guitar, vocals), Strummer (rhythm guitar, lead vocals), ▶

▶ Simonon (bass and vocals) and Terry Chimes (aka Tory Crimes), soon to be replaced by Topper Headon, (drums).

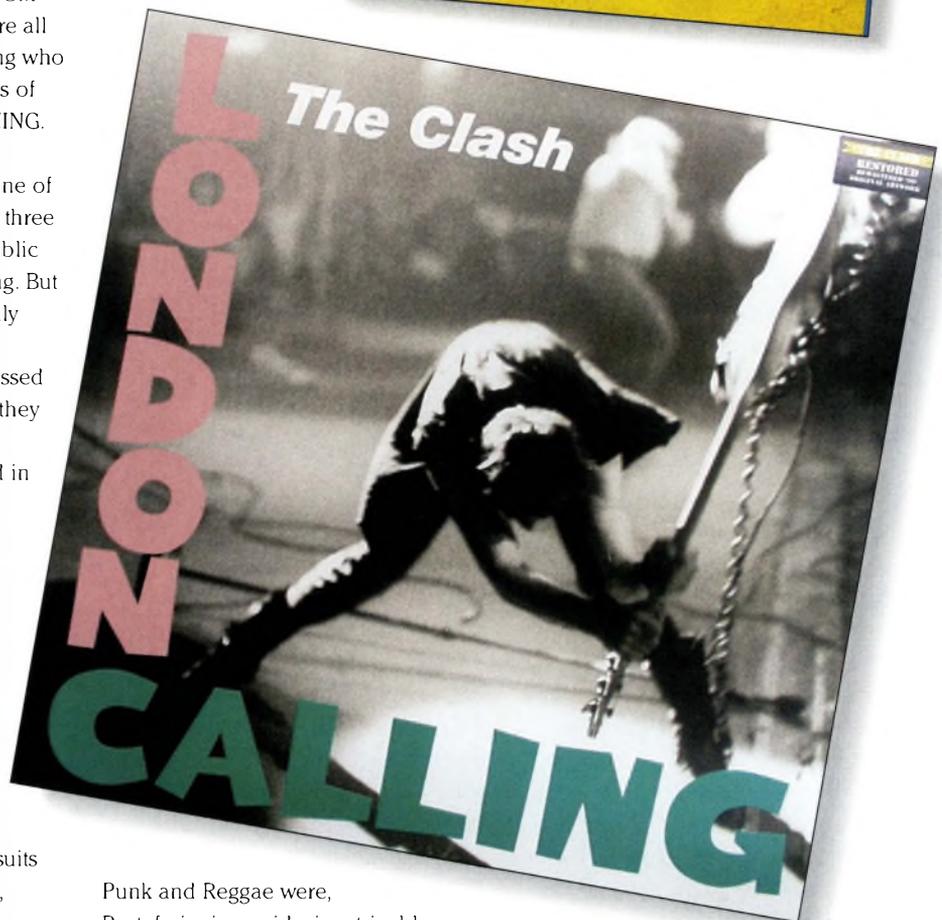
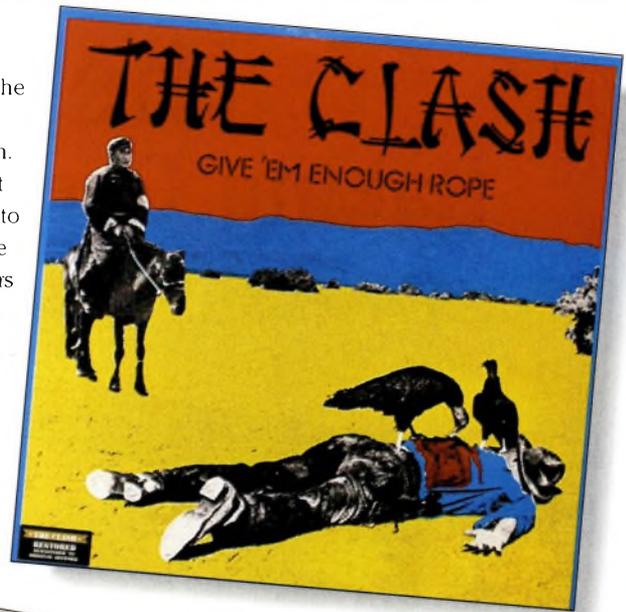
The Clash were perceived as having an authenticity and integrity which sat very well with the Marxist/Stalinist branch of rock criticism then espoused by The NME and a growing army of fanzines. In a December 1977 piece for the NME, American cult writer Lester Bangs commented, "Its just too goddamn easy to slap on a dog collar and black leather jacket and start puking all over the room about how you're gonna sniff some glue and stab some backs. Punk had repeated the very attitudes it copped (BOREDOM and INDIFFERENCE) and we were all waiting for a group to come along who at least went through the motions of GIVING A DAMN about SOMETHING. Ergo, The Clash".

Given the doctrinaire party line of punk, the Clash's background as three former art students and an ex-public schoolboy did not look promising. But other than Strummer, occasionally derided as a 'fake' by the more dogmatic and class-warfare obsessed practitioners of critical thought, they managed to get away with it. Luckily Mick Jones's granny lived in a tower block overlooking the Westway which the band so famously celebrated, and that obviously helped. It was the sheer vitriol of their stage performances and brutal conviction of their early recordings, however, which really won out. They preached revolution but they also, one way or another, were seen to live it. They wore boiler suits daubed with Situationist slogans, Mondrian-prints and abstract expressionist paint explosions and they also rocked.

The concept of "integrity" or "righteousness" within rock music seems pretty thin in these times of global corporatism, but it was crucial

in 76/77 and its first English exponent (the Americans had The MC5) was The Clash.

One of the most "authentic" sounds to be heard at the time was the roots rockers and dub reggae pouring out of the Jamaican studios in the wake of Bob Marley's rise to stardom.



Punk and Reggae were, Rastafarianism aside, inextricably linked in Britain. The symbolism of oppression and revolution vividly utilised in both forms was a part of this but it was the Clash who most successfully took the reggae influence and applied it to the making of punk

music. Many of their early songs used the dub technique of 'drop-out' where everything was taken down to bass and drums or vocal chant and drums for a few bars before the full ▶

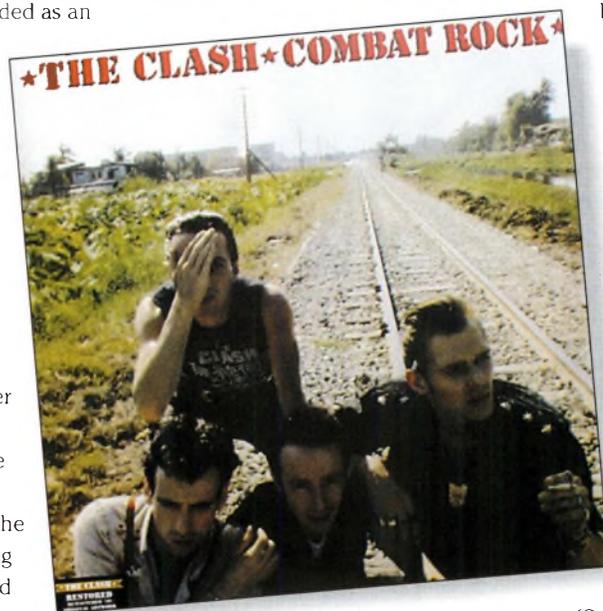
▶ band crashed in once more. In covers of Junior Murvin's 'Police and Thieves' and songs like '(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais' and many others, they proved themselves to be one of the very few bands before or since to have played white reggae with credibility intact.

The idea of The Clash's eponymously-titled debut LP (Columbia 495344 1), or, for that matter, any of its close punk counterparts, becoming an object of analysis by audiophiles strikes me, at the very least, as rather odd. Its lack of sophistication is surely part of the point. Designed and recorded as an urgent, vitriolic document of protest and rebellion, the album's value is its very immediacy, honesty and commitment, not its production values. You might as well judge Samizdat literature on the quality of its typesetting. Bashed down over three weekends in London under the auspices of sound engineer Mickey Foote, the album is a direct and at times breathless cry from the heart. On its release Rolling Stone magazine recognised it as 'the definitive punk album' and in many ways

this still remains true. They managed to distil all the anger, depression and manic energy of the times into these fourteen songs. That would not have been enough if they hadn't allied their bullish, football-chant delivery to some very strong pop tunes. The hook-filled songs, embellished by some of the finest one-note guitar-solos known to punk, involved incisive sloganeering - 'I'm So Bored With The USA', 'Career Opportunities' ("...the ones that never knock."), 'Hate & War' and - most telling of all - 'White Riot'. This is the one which sums it all up. If you were

given three minutes to explain punk rock to a Martian all you would need to do was play 'White Riot' at a high volume.

It was written as a response to the Notting Hill carnival riots of 1976. Having observed that "Black man got a lot of problems/And he don't mind throwing a brick/White people go to school/where they teach you to be thick.." we are into the thundering chorus "White riot, I wanna riot/White riot, a riot of my own..." with guitars screeching like police sirens and all manner of carnage kicking off. This is hardly the sort of thing to be

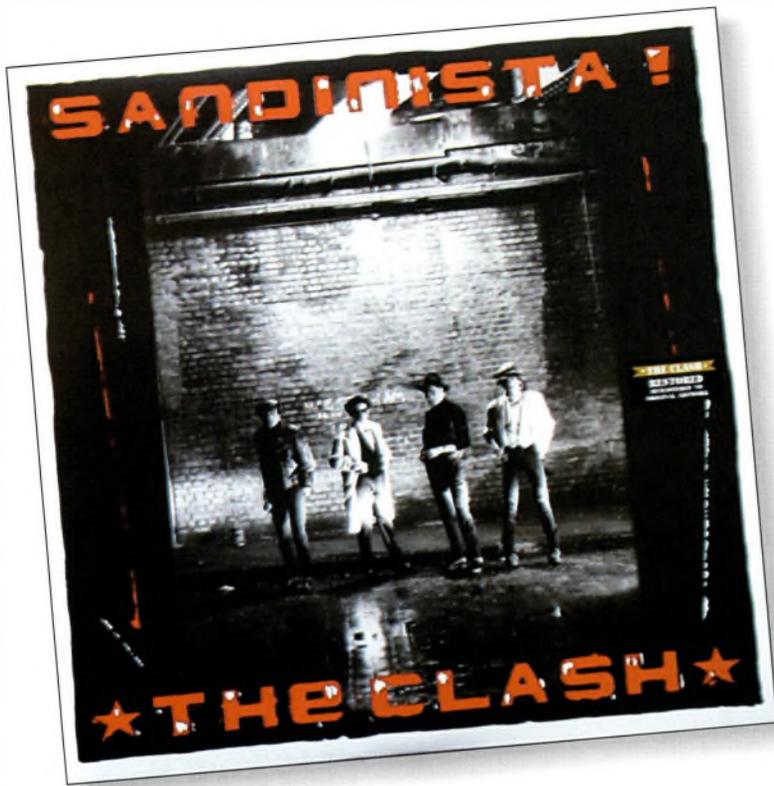


contemplated from the vantage point of an armchair. 'Police and Thieves', the Junior Murvin cover, is perhaps the only song here which suffers from the lack of production, sounding as it does, rather thin and weedy to ears conditioned by the forceful bottom-end of dub reggae.

The, as they said at the time "aptly-titled", *Give 'Em Enough Rope* (Columbia 495346-1) appears at first to be more of the same. As they crash into the fervent 'Safe European Home' "Just got back and I wish I'd never left now..." all the punk indicators set down in the

previous record remain in place. But now we have Sandy Pearlman on hand to smooth out the rough edges and give the songs a production-sheen "acceptable" to the American mass-market. (Its worth noting that the first album was only released in the USA in bowdlerised form sometime later). On its release the LP was viewed in critical quarters as something of a sell-out of the band's hitherto unimpeachable "punk ethic". A production job, the very notion! In retrospect however, the record shows the kind of development of forms and ideas which would have been highly praised in a young band's second album today. It seems likely that it was Pearlman's crime of being the founder and main perpetrator of stadium rock dinosaurs The Blue Oyster Cult, rather than any objective view of *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, which coloured the fashionably Stalinist critical response. It remains a fine rock album which, in songs like 'Cheapskates' and 'Stay Free', shows a new, calmer, sadder analysis of the teen zeitgeist which would be reiterated by Madness, The Specials and others in the coming Two-Tone movement.

For the ambitious double-album *London Calling* (Columbia 495347-1), the eccentric cult figure Guy Stevens was enlisted as producer. It is clear now that this was no longer punk rock in either conception or practice. Saxophones, brass arrangements, blues, rockabilly, jazz - this was a record which, despite its title, looked to American folk forms for much of its inspiration. The rest was down, more characteristically, to reggae, the storming Toots & The Maytals-derived 'Rudie Can't Fail' being a case in point. (The 'Guns of Brixton', another reggae tune from the album, can currently be found, sampled, chopped and generally dubbed-up accompanying an otherwise ▶

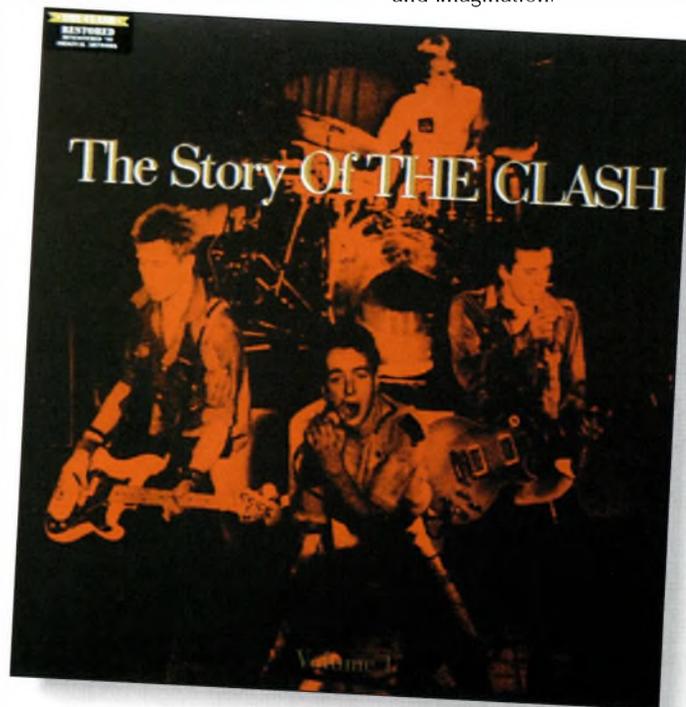


virtually none of which could not have been honed and improved by a self-respecting producer. Having said all that, Sandinista does have its plus points. One such is that the album makes considerably more sense now - in the light of hip-hop, triphop, drum'n'bass and other contemporary dance styles - than it did at the time of its release. Whether we can credit The Clash, or an accident of musical history, for this state of affairs is debatable. But among its somewhat self-conscious artiness and confused stylistic devices - the gospel, the proto-rap and the sampling - is a mastery of the dynamics of dub reggae which would influence such diverse 80s and 90s outfits as The Bush Chemists, Dub Syndicate, Leftfield and the many and various projects of London dub-master Adrian Sherwood. However, the notion of Sandinista! as a pioneer recording of the avant-garde is not one which holds much water when you consider Public Image Ltd's seminal *The Metal Box* which predated it by a year and covered the whole art/dub trip with rather more ingenuity and imagination.

▶ unmemorable TV advertisement. Whither the "punk ethic" now?) *London Calling* was hailed by some as a masterpiece and it certainly shows a versatility of style and a depth of musical imagination which might have seemed inconceivable of the rough and ready band which made *The Clash* album two years previously.

Towards the end of 'The Magnificent Seven', the opening track of *Sandinista!* (Columbia 495348 1), Mick Jones may be heard to observe, over the throbbing dub of the bass and drum coda, "Gor, fuckin' long, innit?". Anyone who has managed to get through this monster 36-song triple album in one sitting would surely be forced to concur. It is difficult to imagine what they thought they were doing. Surely the idea of a triple-album was the ultimate symbol of pre-punk boring old fartdom. Why didn't they go the whole hog and produce a Rick Wakeman-style stage show, a *Sandinista* on Ice? It is self-produced and that is the key to its self-indulgence. Like just

about any triple-album ever made, it would have made a passable double or a pretty good single LP. Instead we have this vast sprawling sketch book of vague and largely tuneless ideas,



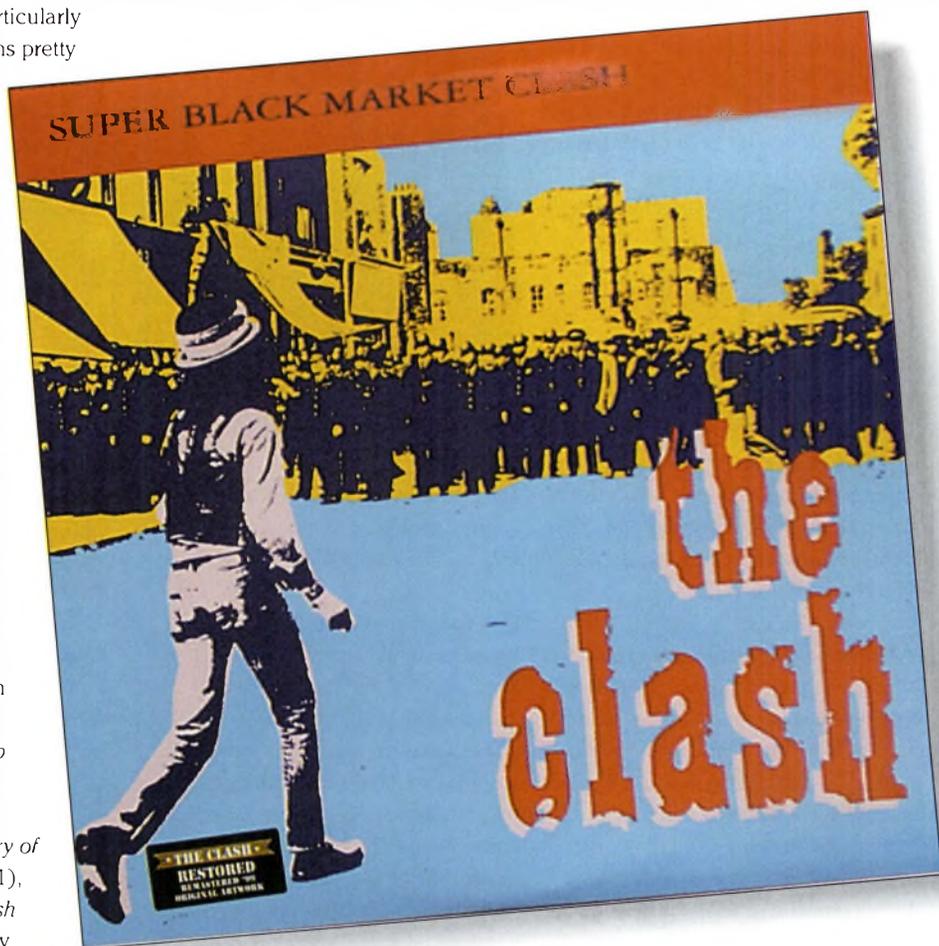
▶ Far more centred and distilled is *Combat Rock* (Columbia 495349 1) whose main contributions to the sum of human knowledge are the brilliantly simple blues-rock gem, 'Should I Stay Or I Should I Go?', the slightly cheesy, undeniably catchy, hit single 'Rock The Casbah' and the Shane McGowan-esque Spaghetti Western theme 'Straight To Hell'. There are no other particularly outstanding cuts and it seems pretty clear that The Clash's ability to write memorable tunes had begun to dissipate long before they recorded this, their fifth album. "Establishment" producer Glynn Johns does a crisp and functional rather than artistic job, which is exactly what was required post-Sandinista! The Clash as we knew them dissolved, Mick Jones forming the funky dance-orientated outfit Big Audio Dynamite with DJ and filmmaker Don Letts. Strummer continued with replacement musicians and released the final album (for some reason not re-released here), *Cut The Crap* in 1985.

Alongside the above re-issues, the compilations *Story of The Clash* (Columbia 495351), and *Super Black Market Clash* (Columbia 495352 previously released only in the States) are also available, as is the American edition (with various cuts and popular additions) of the debut album (Columbia 495345 1). As a colourful vision in triple ten-inch vinyl - apart from any other considerations like the storming cover of The Maytals' 'Pressure Drop' - *Super Black Market...* is a must-have for the collector. The *Story...* double album meanwhile, succeeds as a convincing if sometimes eccentrically sequenced trawl through

the back catalogue. It contains a fair sprinkling - '(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais', 'Complete Control', 'Guns of Brixton', 'Bank-robber' - of their best work and tells the story as well as any such record might.

Listening to all this material again after a period of twenty-odd years during which almost everything has

phenomenon, lo-fi, Britpop and the all the rest of it, The Clash somehow still seem relevant. You might, if you like, view the sloganeering and general stance of the lyrical concerns as quaint beyond redemption. But the optimist looking for signs that the human spirit will eventually overcome the forces



changed, musically, socially and politically - and by no means all of it for the better - has been a curious experience. (Did I really used to pogo to that? What?...Dressed like that? Blimey etc.)

Despite the dark, dread years of Thatcher - and her demon children, the yuppies - the New Romantics, the clubbing revolution and its myriad musical subcultures, hardcore punk, thrash-metal, grunge, the unplugged

of Babylon may take inspiration - in these cynical, international corporatist times - from the honesty, integrity and utter righteous-ness on offer. Musically it's more cut and dried. The Clash have been and remain vastly influential. From the punk/ska of the Two Tone generation which followed, through the avant-dub soundscapes of ambient techno, from the funk/punk of The Red Hot Chili Peppers and Jane's Addiction to the cut-up art-rock and rap of The Beastie Boys, Beck and their ▶

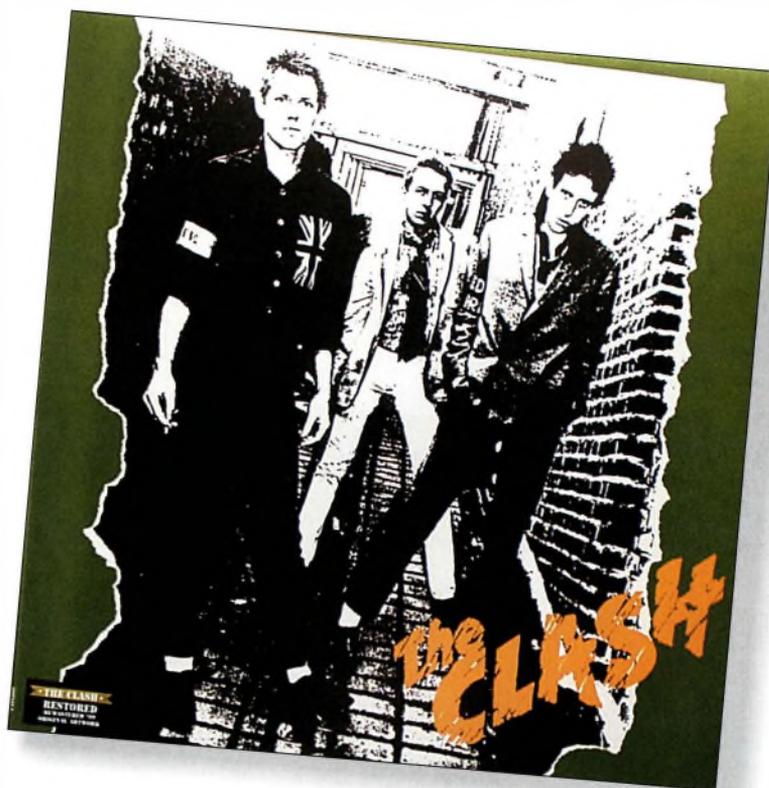
peers, there are ever to be found, distinctive and heavily-reverbed, echoes of The Clash.

### And On Vinyl Too....

Whilst, as Jon points out, audiophile editions of punk albums are conceptually a little hard to get ones head round, it would be a mistake to miss the wider significance of what's going on here. Sony, Mr Digital Technology himself, are not only licensing 180g vinyl versions of their newly re-mastered historical releases, they are actually co-promoting them. Thus, not only are they servicing the vinyl market, they're actively letting people know that they're doing it. Ah, I see you think, porcine ex-art student ad-executives reliving their spotty youth, surface noise and all - it's the nostalgia market. Get out your old copies of *London Calling* and shake out the roaches. Sniff the unmistakable odour of student living and then drop a wad on shiny new versions to play on your expensive turntable. Maybe so, but The Clash retain their musical relevance and the new pressings are significantly better than my dire and partied originals, with a far meatier sound and greater musical thrust. But even this isn't the point.

All of a sudden, record labels, even the really big ones, who couldn't give a stuff about anything except money, have discovered a way of making their releases available on vinyl, without getting their hands dirty themselves. License the release to one of the specialist re-issue houses. And let's face it, what that means is that the re-issue brigade are prepared to pay for the privilege. And not just on historical recordings. Immediately before the Sony Clash splurge, Simply Vinyl released a 180g version of The Tindersticks latest album *Simple Pleasures*.

What all this suggests is that we are looking at increased availability of current titles on vinyl, and with the



added bonus that release through small volume specialist suppliers should lead to a general rise in pressing quality.

Don't get carried away with the 180g record weight. It's getting hard to press anything else, and sheer weight doesn't guarantee an audiophile pressing. That comes down to tape quality and attention to detail. You can only work with what you're given. Likewise, how far and wide this trend will extend remains to be seen. But as yet another indicator of rude health in the analogue corpse, I welcome it with open arms.

In the meantime, and to celebrate the seminal Clash re-issue, Simply Vinyl have offered five lucky readers of hi-fi+ the chance to win ten albums from their 160 record catalogue. That's enough to scoop The Clash en masse, or you can mix and match from everything from Pulp Fiction to Iggy and the Stooges. And for those of a less nihilistic bent, there's plenty of less apocalyptic titles.

RG

## Competition

All you need to do is answer the following question:

**Which well-known Reggae artist produced 'Complete Control' for The Clash?**

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B72-1LY

Closing date is 31st December '99, and the competition is open to everyone who doesn't write for Hi-Fi+. I haven't excluded the photographer 'cos I just know that he's a huge Clash fan, and I was lucky to escape from his studio with body and review samples intact.



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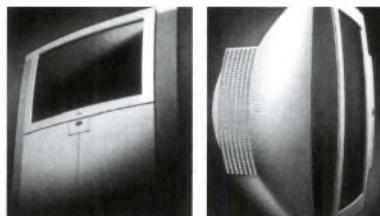


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### Marantz / KEF



Marantz CD630K1 Signature CD Player	£400
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KEF Q35 Loudspeakers	£350
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# Music Mill

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**How To Read The Record Reviews**

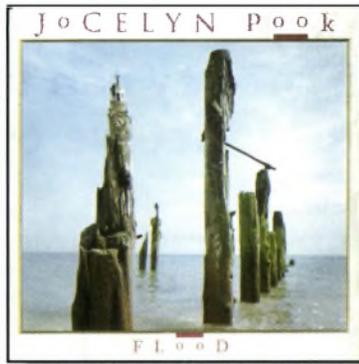
The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

**Key to Icons**

-  CD
-  Gold CD
-  HDCD
-  XRCD
-  Double Disc
-  MD
-  120g LP
-  150g LP
-  180g LP
-  Availability As S/H LP
-  Vinyl Double Album

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

The reviewers are identified by their initials. They are:- Chris Binns, Pete Christie, Dave Davies, Roy Gregory, Jason Hector, James Michael Hughes, Jon Maple, Reuben Parry.



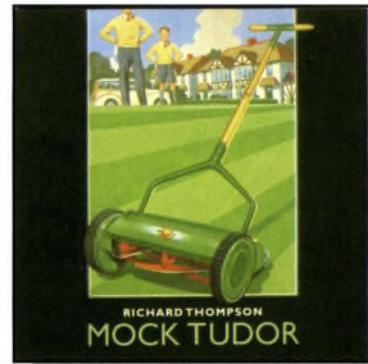
**Jocelyn Pook**

**Flood**

Virgin Records CDVE 7243-8-48150-2-8 

Jocelyn Pook may be flavour of the month, what with her contribution of original music to Kubrick's last cinematic outing, *Eyes Wide Shut*, but her thoughtful and original style deserves longer term appreciation. Whilst *Flood* seems destined to perform as aural wallpaper at the smartest Islington dinner parties, it deserves a better fate than five minutes of fame amongst the intellectually risqué (the ones who decry pornography but get all the 'art' they can). Hers is a music of pattern and texture, woven from the diverse sources of the middle eastern and Indian oral traditions, the medieval church, and English classical string music from the early twentieth century. For cement she's not afraid to turn to electronic keyboards, along-side psaltery and renaissance percussion. And if the songs eschew the dynamic shifts and rhythmic insistence that typify modern pop, their constantly shifting surface draws you in, washing your mind the way their religious donors intended. Whether this is simply clever, or contains a deeper intelligence only time will tell, but there's a lot more here than the remains of Sticky Toffee Pudding and sly fantasies about Nicole Kidman's bits. Rather like the film, a lot of people will buy this for the wrong reasons. Perhaps it will convert a few.

RG



**Mock Tudor**

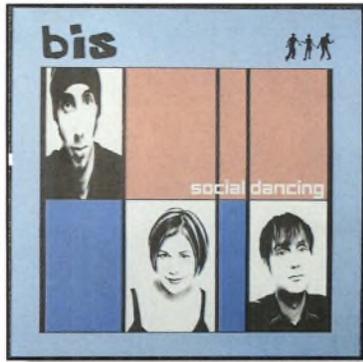
**Richard Thompson**

Capitol 7243 4 98860 2 5 

Richard's albums should come with the following warning stickers: 'Beware genius at work' and 'Budding guitarists despair'. To paraphrase Bowie, "Boy, can he play guitar", only you're not going to find some big-haired axe-god twiddling away for ten minutes at a time. Every interjection or solo is carefully concise. Less is more and for Richard the tune is the thing. Rating alongside *Shoot Out The Lights* as some of his best work since leaving Fairport Convention, *Mock Tudor* is a chance to spit venom at suburbia and the way it disenfranchises the soul. I know a lot of people find it hard to get to grips with Thompson's singing, yet his is one of the most expressive male voices in rock today, and well worth the effort. On 'Sights And Sounds Of London Town' the production brings him into your living room, making you his confidante. That the seamy underbelly of Ralph McTell's 'Streets Of London' should seem to be sung right next to you on your sofa simply adds to the chilling effect. With so many standout moments on the CD I simply don't have the space to describe them all. Buy the CD and if you can, see him live while he's still touring with the band. Essential.

DA





BIS

### Social Dancing

Wiiija Records WIGLP1058  

If you were being harsh you would describe this album as bubble gum pop and dismiss it out of hand. That would be making a mistake. This album is good clean(ish) fun. Pop-punk for the thinking person.

No band ever suffered for having an attractive female front-person(?), and in this case she alternates the vocal delivery with the two guys, not just song to song, but verse to chorus or verse to verse. Largely electronic with a smattering of orchestral shading, it all adds up to a pleasing result with abundant hooks and tunes, and a real sense of performance. Production is clean clear and straight forward, which suits the songs, preventing their overt simplicity getting lost in the mix.

Lyricaly they are deeper than a cursory listen implies. For example, what at first seems to be a song about shopping is a dark description of a woman who is allowed no free will in a totally possessive relationship. That superficial naivety wanes as the album progresses, leaving you with a darker and more complex, almost Portishead feel. These slower songs bear deeper listening, but don't let that put you off. Go on, have some fun. Give it a go.

JH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Everything But The Girl

### Temperamental

VIRGIN CDV 2892 

Ben and Tracey have come a long way since their youthful emergence on the Cherry Red Label back in 1981, and (to those of us who've travelled with them) this latest album confirms that the movement towards song-based dance is now complete. Todd Terry's 1994 remix of 'Missing' on *Amplified Heart* may well have been the unexpected hit that started it all, but its Thorn's distinctive, often haunting, lead vocals which make her such a success in the role of simmering clubland Diva.

Older fans (alas, me included) could have problems with these extremely formulaic, bigger-sounding, beat/bass textures (and for that matter the dance steps to go with them!) yet the duo's songwriting remains as strong as ever. Its focal point is still Tracey's voice and her ability to clothe a lyric in emotion: "Soho in the high tide of the day and for a while I'm swept away... inside out in the daytime, wrong at the right time, Outside in the night time, right at the wrong time... when you're down troubled you don't tell your friends" ('Low Tide of the Night') might be too wordy for the clubs? But then she is so well served by editing, mixing, recording and overall production values that *Temperamental* stands up well to the closer scrutiny of home.

RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Apollo Four Forty

### Getting High On Your Own Supply

Epic SSX3440CD 

Last year's *Lost In Space* soundtrack was an absolute belter, and the theme tune, reworked from the third season of the TV series, was one of the outstanding tracks. 'Lost In Space (Theme)' reappears on this CD, as does the recent hit 'Stop The Rock!'. The latter, based around a Status Quo guitar riff, features Mary Mary on vocal duties. Whilst not the greatest singer in the world, his contribution here and on a number of other tracks provides the band with a much needed focus. Couple this with the increased amount of rock guitar, and the band gains an edge over previous outings. 'Cold Rock The Mic' sounds like it has sampled Jimmy Page circa Houses Of The Holy for the guitar motif, and is as down and dirty as Apollo 440 get. Throughout the length of the CD, the tracks move from space rock to space dub, and thence to the chillout room, which is to say it starts with a bang but fades away at the end. If Ozric Tentacles were Hawkwind for the dance generation, then Apollo 440 are millennium Hawkwind, and much like the current Doctor Who, they may not be the same but it's good to know there out there.

DA

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Paula Cole

This Fire

Warner Bros 9362-46424-2 (HD)

Vocalist on Peter Gabriel's Secret World Live Tour; a seven-time Grammy nominee with 'This Fire', and the 1998 winner of the "Best New Artist" award, Paula Cole has a devastating talent. Many will recognise the successful; single 'Where Have all The Cowboys Gone?', but what really excites me are the jazz-based improvisation techniques used in this remarkable blend of rock, folk and pop. It's clear from songs like 'Mississippi' and 'Throwing Stones' that Cole's voice has tremendous elasticity. Her rapid changes of pace, the shifts in tone, pitch, key and weight of emphasis can capture the imagination as effectively as the hardest-hitting lyric.... "I've got a piece of my heart on the sole of your shoe" (Mississippi) or "So call me a bitch in heat and I'll call you a motherfucker!" (Throwing Stones) are fiery and passionate. Yet, one moment the delivery is angry and full-blooded, the next, it's a breathless extemporisation stripping away at the words. Quite the contrast to a gentle, intoxicating love song like 'Carmen' which separates these two tracks.

There's slick support playing by Jay Bellerose (drums), Tony Levin (bass), Greg Leisz and Gerry Leonard (guitars), plus it's a nice touch having Gabriel as the guest vocalist on 'hush, hush, hush'. The recording of all eleven songs is very good, with a heavy emphasis on that amazing larynx.

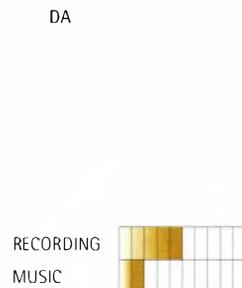


Jethro Tull

Dot Com

Roadrunner Records RR 8615-2 (CD)

Oh deary deary me, what are you doing guys? Can this really be the same group that produced *Stand Up, Aqualung, or Broadsword And The Beast*. I find this CD very frustrating. There's potential lurking under the surface of most of the songs here, but no fire, and no enthusiasm. If Spinal Tap played with their amps at eleven "cos it's one louder than ten", then Tull are stuck on one. Nothing on *Dot Com* would frighten a hamster, let alone the neighbours. Take 'El Niño', which for me is the best track here. Lead guitarist Martin Barre is having a go - riffing away like a good 'un, but he's so far down in the mix that all the impact is lost. I don't subscribe to the 'Too Old To Rock And Roll, Too Young To Die' point of view, but on the evidence of this album Ian Anderson has been listening to this 70's song of his a little too much. Tull's previous outing *Roots To Branches*, although fairly considered, had a lot to recommend it. What a pity I cannot say the same about *Dot Com*. My girlfriend said 'it's quite pleasant', something that should make Tull ashamed. Celine Tull anyone?



Vika & Linda

Two Wings

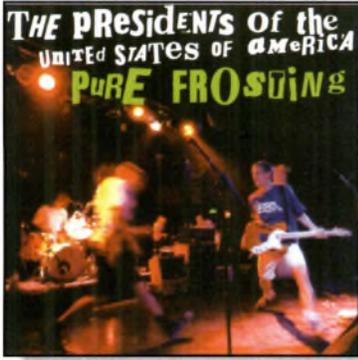
Mushroom MUSH332342 (CD)

Now, it's not everyday you get to review an album by a couple of Tongan sisters - mind you, I have to say that in this instance it's very much my pleasure.

Vika and Linda Bull cut their musical teeth as backing singers with the Black Sorrows, a fabulous Van Morrison influenced Australian band led by the multi-talented Joe Camilleri. There they stayed for six years, garnering rave reviews for their passionate gospel tinged singing, often taking over the lead vocals from Camilleri and giving The Sorrows another dimension to their music.

*Two Wings* is the third album by the sisters and their finest yet. The album kicks off with a cover of Mahalia Jackson's 'I'm on my way', Vika and Linda's vocals melting together beautifully on this lovely gospel number. The Solomon Burke classic 'Home in your heart' is given a faithful rendition by the sisters before we reach one of the album's highlights, 'Gods Little Birds'. Vika gives this one all she's got, with a vocal to match any of Etta James' finest moments. Archie Roache's 'Reach For You' is given the torch song treatment from Linda. Every time I hear this song I'm reminded of how at home it would sound on KD Lang's marvellous 'Shadowland' album. There you have it - conclusive evidence that Tonga has much more to offer than just a bunch of muscle-laden rugby players.





## The Presidents of the USA

### Pure Frosting

COLUMBIA 489 702 6 

What a fitting epitaph to these crazy punk-influenced rockers who after four years in the White House felt that a second term was well beyond them, and so chose to disband, instead. That was back in December '97, and by then they'd proved it was possible to build a career around eccentricity and inanity. To that end this "posthumous" disc - a compilation of live, single and b-sides - is symbolic. Bristling with energy, *Pure Frosting* develops an unpretentious, wry sense of humour from the banalest of topics. Don't bother looking for "higher truths" or "deeper meanings", there are none. There simply is no subtext. The mundane is dignified by writing and recording an album about it. That's the joke. Play it for laughs - the Presidents did for years.

'Love Delicatessen', with its obvious food/sex theme and threadbare innuendo, is probably the band's intellectual high point, while a tambourine/guitar parody of born-again Christianity in 'Sunshine', coupled with the happy-clappy refrain of "Your the One ..... Your the sunshine", might just be an all-time low!

Recording quality, as expected, varies throughout. Live tracks like 'Lump' are acceptable; the studio mixes including: 'Love Deli', 'Teenage Girl' and a terrific (if rather meaningless) riff-laden cover of 'Video Killed The Radio Star' are a whole lot better.

RP

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Lynyrd Skynyrd

### Street Survivors

MCA MCAD 11535  4

During the 70's, there were a host of fine, guitar-driven southern bands around - The Allmans, The Outlaws, Molly Hatchet - but out on their own were Lynyrd Skynyrd, the greatest, wildest and hardest livin' band of them all. What Skynyrd had in abundance were great songs.

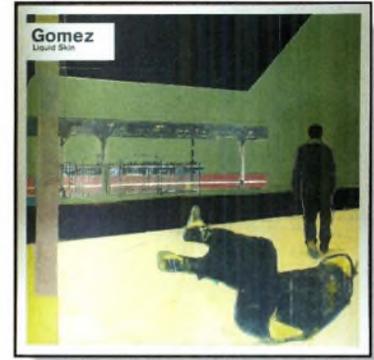
For many, *Street Survivors* was their finest studio album but sadly, also their last. Whilst out promoting the album, the plane taking the band to their next gig crashed in the Florida swamps, killing singer Ronnie Van Zandt, recent acquisition Steve Gaines and his sister Cassie.

Gaines' contribution to *Street Survivors* was a revelation, his songwriting skills and fluid, bluesy guitar playing giving a new dimension to Skynyrd's sound. Many of the highlights on the album were written or co-written by Gaines, from the country honky tonk of 'I Know a Little' to the full on boogie of 'You Got That Right', but the best track is the album's closer, the sadly prophetic 'Ain't No Good Life, where Gaines' lyrics were to take on a whole new meaning. They hit home hard, Gaines snarling 'I'm gonna get myself together / gonna try a dying attempt'.

Skynyrd left a legacy of great albums but none were as consistently brilliant as *Street Survivors*, a five star feast of the finest southern rock n' roll your money can buy.

AH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



## Gomez

### Liquid Skin

Virgin HUTDLP54  120g

Gomez' *Bring it on* won the Mercury prize and went straight into my top-ten LP list. It won't surprise you that this was a very eagerly awaited second album. Does it live up to the expectation? YES, and how.

The new LP is a predictably strange mix of sounds and influences from all over, using more synthesisers than the first, and it's a bit funkier. If you try to analyse this album you'll wonder how on earth it works, but boy does it. Full of complexity, they have a style of their own simply because they embrace so many others.

Pace is varied and the band show a superb sense of musical timing that allows this all to work. Cuts and overlays act as a bit of a shock, but they always add more to a song. After listening to this album you begin to think they are the only original performers around at the moment. Quite a heavily produced LP it still retains the close band feel that Gomez create so well, and sound quality is high.

If this band continue like this they could become a major influence, and that would be the very best thing that could happen.

A MUST BUY

JH

RECORDING   
MUSIC 



Pavement

Terror Twilight

Domino Records WIGLP66

Pavement are oft cited by Damon Albarn of Blur as his biggest influence... no wait ... come back... they really are good.

A guitar and drums band, they are characterised by excellent songwriting and an awful singing voice, the rarely rhyming lyrics always being complex. They can rock with the best but they seem to prefer to prowling around the edges of orthodoxy.

This, their fifth album, is the most accessible to date, but never get the idea this is easy listening. The band frequently explodes into distortion and drums, or weird samples and random noise with no rhyme or reason. Its like they are continually trying new sounds and one day something amazing will happen, just not quite yet.

Production and mixing is much more complex than their norm (they even used a desk!) and this has reduced the impact and watered down the extremes. Many people will prefer this, but not me, as I particularly enjoyed the edgy live feel of the previous albums.

In many ways this LP marks maturation for Pavement, and will be their most economically successful to date. I like it a lot so check this (and their back catalogue) out.

JH



Mark Lanegan

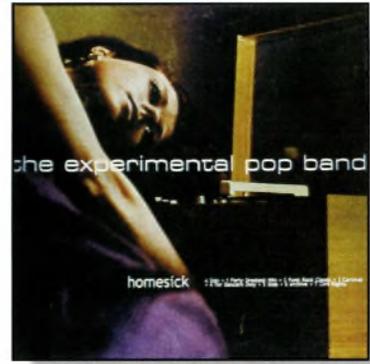
I'll Take Care Of You

Beggars Banquet/Sub Pop BBQCD 215

For his fourth solo outing, Mark Lanegan, former lead singer with Seattle miserabilists, The Screaming Trees - and erstwhile buddy of Kurt Cobain - embarks on that mainstay sabbatical of the singer/songwriter, the cover versions album. As with other such efforts - David Bowie's *Pin Ups*, Nick Cave's *Kicking Against The Pricks* - *I'll Take Care of You* can be read as a catalogue of influence and inspiration for the artist concerned. But unlike those two albums - and as befits the US indie/alternative archetype - the songs covered are largely uncelebrated examples of the obscure songwriters art. So Lanegan the cult figure interprets the songs of other cult figures. Which is apt, at the very least.

We open with Jeffrey Lee Pierce's (The Gun Club) 'Carry Home' (nothing to do with takeaway beer) reduced to exquisitely picked acoustic guitar and vocal, and end with Tim Rose's (best known as the writer of 'Hey Joe') 'Boogie Boogie'. In between, accompanied by tasteful, spare arrangements, Lanegan's lugubriously atmospheric baritone wraps itself round a fine selection of country, blues and gospel-tinged narratives of love, loss and redemption. Especially recommended to admirers of Mssrs Cave, Cohen and Waits.

JM



The Experimental Pop Band

Homesick

City Slang 08721-11

This is the second album from this Bristol band. Fronted by ex-Brit Popper Davey Woodward, they have realised that jingly-jangly guitars just aren't enough for success or respect in the late 90's (to be honest only the music press ever thought they were).

A four man band, they make use of synthesisers and acoustic instruments with effects added to a familiar spoken vocal that has an almost Beat poem feel. Lyrically they are observationalists and not a little pessimistic (the glass would always be half empty). They make the lyrics and the music work well together though, providing plenty of atmosphere.

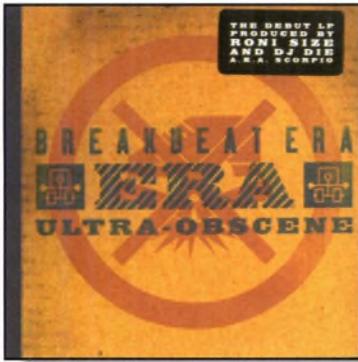
Songs aren't all of a single beat, but are rhythmically complex with plenty of gently trippy sounds underpinned with a strong bass line.

The many instruments individually repeat simple tunes and riffs, but through layering and clever shifts in tempo and position, a complex whole is produced. These songs often reminded me of Herbie Hancock's output and his complex instrumental soundscapes. I can only assume he was a big influence.

All in all a well-produced album with fine sound quality, they are experimental enough to be interesting and this album is definitely worth buying.

JH





## Breakbeat Era

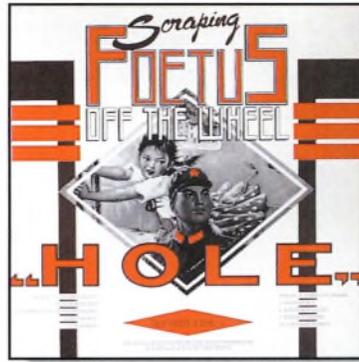
### Ultra Obscene

XL Recordings XLCD130 

Ever since the base metal of Jungle transmuted into the silver of Drum'n'Bass, it has become either blander and more "coffee table", or more sophisticated and subtle, depending on your point of view. The meandering jazz-lite of Roni Size/Reprazent's Mercury Award-winning New Forms exemplified the progression. Perhaps realising that, if this technique progressed any further the music would become so evanescent as to disappear altogether, Size has changed tack. In collaboration with fellow Bristol scene figures DJ Die and singer Lennie Laws, he now brings us Breakbeat Era. For all intents and purposes a return to Jungle, *Ultra Obscene* is a hard and funky album, as close in spirit to punk as Reprazent was to jazz. The origins of Jungle as a chemically, rather than herborally, induced dub reggae can be followed here, too. Massive, rib-rattling frequencies form into looped dub basslines to drive the songs. The percussion - which in early jungle tended to sound like somebody kicking an abandoned shopping trolley down a heavily-graffiti'd concrete staircase in Tower Hamlets - is calmer, more direct, but the Breakbeats retain a funky complexity. The analogue synth and sparse, effective, samples combine with Lennie's breathy, punk-diva vocal in caverns of dub-style reverb and we are carried away.

JM

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel

### Hole

SOME BIZZARE/SELFIMMOLATION  **3**  
WOMB FDL3 LP

The post-apocalyptic punk nightmare.... a world of pain, distress, deformity and hatred. Twisted humanity and humanity twisted. 'Water Torture', 'Sick-Man'. Incisive words (and songs) that cut to the viciousness and worst excesses in a Century of failed ideologies now numbered in rotting corpses - six million of them in 'I'll Meet You in Poland, Baby'.

Hole is a charnel-house, but this album is simply not just another horror-flick shocker painting a picture in bodies and blood. Instead, there's something of the B-Movie classic about it. J.G. Thirlwell's ironic and intelligent songs (dare I say it) possess a depth of humour which given their context may seem incongruous. Lines like 'I'm knock, knock, knock, knockin' on death's door, do you remember where you've seen this cadaver before' ('Satan Place') are backed by the band in a wild parody of Beach Boys harmonies!

Scrapie's vision is still *The Waste Land* inhabited by disease-ridden creatures "overcome by waves of lechery" (Sick-Man) whose "Profile of neanderthal/leaves his debris in the hall. His victim screams - he has a ball" has an unnerving echo of Eliot's *Sweeney Erect*. A deeply troubled and troubling landscape, then, that's definitely not one for the squeamish. Yet, of its kind, Hole is shockingly effective.

RP

RECORDING  
MUSIC



## Gorky's Zygotic Mynci Spanish Dance Troupe

### Mantra Recordings

MNTCD 1015 

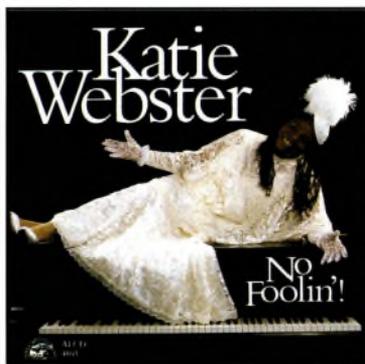
The unpronounceable in full pursuit of the ineffable, Gorky's Zygotic Mynci have been regaling us with their peculiar Welsh psychedelia since 1993. Things were going quite well until Mercury dumped them last year for the heinous crime of showing a bit of imagination. (This merely tells us what we already knew about major record labels' preference for the simpering cash cow over the artist of flair and originality. Maybe this is not the place to discuss the shameful iniquities of the music business in these times of rampant capitalism, but there you have it.)

So, free to do as they wished, they recorded their sixth album - ironically enough - their most commercial to date, and released it independently. A collection of songs which seem to find inspiration in the Van Dyke Parks/Brian Wilson sphere of American curiosity. Lilted, twanging odes perhaps best described as 'organic/futurist' give way to C&W style statements, innocent piano ballads, brass band arrangements, lachrymose violin and Mariachi horn sections, with lyrics for the most part telling plaintively of lost love. The most extraordinary item here is 'Poodle Rockin'', a parodic glam-fest which sounds like The Butthole Surfers rewritten by Chinn & Chapman and is horribly, grotesquely beautiful.

JM

RECORDING  
MUSIC





Katie Webster

No Foolin'!

Alligator ALCD 4803

Katie has been affectionately described as 'an innuendo laced barrelhouse pianist', a truly saucy performer with a two fist ed boogie woogie style and a larger than life persona. In her early years she caught the ear of a young Otis Redding. Impressed by what he heard, Otis made her his opening act for 3 straight years, Katie playing keyboards in his band and duetting with him on live versions of 'Tramp'.

The innuendo side of her character is very much in evidence on album opener 'A Little Meat On The Side', as is her fabulous rambling piano style. C.J. Chenier's accordion blends perfectly with Katie's boogie woogie piano to create a distinctly Mardi Gras feel to 'Zydeco Shoes And California Blues', while Katie shows a healthy appetite for sex on the rather naughty 'Hard Lovin' Mama'.

Webster proves herself to be a fine, soulful singer especially on the plaintive 'It's Mighty Hard', a song about trying to get through this life all alone, and her band get all funky on 'Tangled In Your Web', the superb horn section fattening the sound considerably and guitarist Vasti Jackson digging out the earthiest of solos.

Sadly, Katie Webster died from heart related problems on September 5th of this year, aged 63. She was one of the blues most colourful and exuberant characters and will be greatly missed.

AH



Supergrass

Supergrass

Parlophone 7243 5 22056 1 5

When most people think of Supergrass its probably that famous lyric, "we are young, we are free, keep our teeth nice and clean ..." and that the lead singer is pretty simian in appearance, but they are better than this, and with this album they have proved it.

Typical pop-rock instruments plus a few strings produce plenty of hooks and it's all easy to sing along with, like all the best pop music. A varied album, appropriately Monkey-esque at times, it has shades of Crowded House and further back, the Beach boys or *Sgt Pepper* era Beatles, all influencing the outcome, although where Pink Floyd come in I'm not entirely sure! Thankfully the swirling hypnotic sections don't meander as far or for as long as the Floyd's excesses.

Pace is also varied. They can slow it down for effect without losing the plot, and this allows another dimension in depth and power to be created.

Not the greatest recording, due to the compression the sound turns into a wall of noise when things get too busy, but this is par the course.

Some will inevitably compare Supergrass to the Beatles which is unfair. They succeed by being fresh and different enough while acknowledging and using plenty of good quality influences. Good luck to them I say.

JH



Leftfield

Rhythm & Stealth

Hard Hands/Higher Ground HAND4CD

Rhythmical? Beyond question. Stealthy? Well... something which contains any amount of banging, four-to-the-floor hardcore techno could hardly be described as stealthy, really. However, we pay Leftfield for their sonic mastery rather than their accuracy with English and they seem to have earned their wedge this time around. They took their time. It's four years since Leftfield's debut, *Leftism* - recently declared 'Greatest Dance Album of All Time' in a poll of top DJs - took the world by storm.

It's said that this delay was due in part to their being 'wracked with doubt' as to their ability to follow *Leftism* with reputations intact. Unsurprisingly, *Rhythm & Stealth* is not as fresh, immediate and original as it's predecessor - how could it be, when we heard the other one first? They continue to plough a furrow which is broad enough to allow them to get away with it. The Leftfield mission statement, if they had one, might read, "Interpreting disparate dance selections with the aid of interesting vocalists, transcending fashion and turning up the bass." But the sound has been pared down, there is far less grandiosity and no pretensions toward being "a Pink Floyd for the 90s". The dub/hiphop/ambient/hardcore/techno/jungle/hard house is clean and direct. The "cathedrals of sound" have become Methodist chapels.

JM





Patti Smith

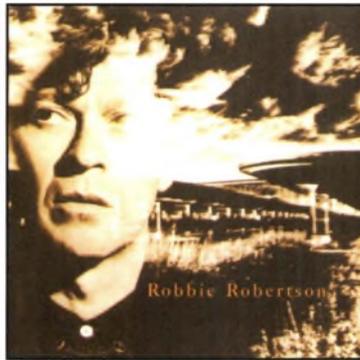
### Horses

Arista 07822 188272    
 (20-Bit digital re-master)

Horses is generally regarded as one of the finest rock albums ever. When Patti Smith landed among the mid-seventies milieu of tired, raddled glam and bloated, decaying pomp-rock, she was an extraordinary presence. In her own words, "a human alarm clock, shouting Wake up! Wake up!". Produced, with characteristic artistry by John Cale, and recorded, for symbolic reasons, at Electric Ladyland, her debut collection finds Patti transformed from New York Art-loft poetess to rock'n'roll singer. The opener 'Gloria (In Excelsis Deo)', a rewrite of the Them classic, is an example of the way Patti elaborated upon and gave new resonances to past standards. It was jazz reasoning applied to punk instrumentation and style. Later, after the epic Land trilogy, featuring a reworking of the 'Land of a Thousand Dances' - where bubblegum is transmuted into art - comes the short plaintive, 'Elegy' (to Jimi Hendrix). Between these gateways of the soul are a series of shamanistic exorcisms in song form. Multi-tracked, she declaims two lines simultaneously, sings of private demons in slurred tones of possession. The garage guitar of Lenny Kaye scratches, scrapes and chimes and the distinctive bebop piano of Richard Sohl provides a melodic backdrop for her marvellous, obsessive lyricism.

JM

RECORDING   
 MUSIC 



Robbie Robertson

### Robbie Robertson

Geffen Records 924160-2  

For this celebrated debut solo album by the enigmatic guitarist from The Band, Robbie Robertson assembled some of the most respected musicians in the world.

A single heartbeat is the intro to album opener 'Fallen Angel', a beautiful tribute to the memory of ex-Band member Richard Manuel and featuring Peter Gabriel on keyboards and backing vocals. Robertson has a whispered vocal style (imagine a singing version of Radio 2's Bob Harris and you're getting close), and it's this voice along with Daniel Lanois' superb production that gives this album a lovely ethereal quality. Perfect examples of this are 'Broken Arrow' and the half-spoken / half-sung 'Somewhere Down The Crazy River', the album's tour-de-force, where Robertson uses the recording studio to paint glorious scenes of escapism and hot sweaty nights with his haunting vocal, ably assisted by Daniel Lanois' restrained guitar and Manu Katche's rhythmic drumming. U2 lend their considerable weight to 'Sweet Fire Of Love' and the gospel tinged 'Testimony', whilst 'American Roulette' receives heavyweight backing vocals from the Bodeans and Maria McKeen.

Add first class recording quality and a street price of under a tenner to all of the above and you've got yourself one mother of an album and an absolute bargain to boot.

AH

RECORDING   
 MUSIC 



Sandy Dillon

### Electric Chair

One Little Indian TPLP205 

Sandy Dillon, an American chanteuse living and working in London is a self-styled purveyor of "modern blues". She studied jazz and classical composition at the renowned Berklee School of Music and paid her dues - as they used to say but don't seem to anymore - performing in the 52nd Street piano bars of New York City whilst residing (of course) at the legendary Chelsea Hotel. She later played both Janis Joplin and the chainsaw-wielding punk goddess Wendy O. Williams in the same Broadway musical. She therefore has pedigree.

Beneath a cover shot which makes her look like a nun recovering from a bout of demonic possession in Ken Russell's movie *The Devils*, we find a strange and eerie music. It is blues, Jim, but not as we know it. Not unless we listen hard to Tom Waits' more recent recordings, anyway. Whilst there is an obvious debt to Waits in the scraping, clanking percussion and sinister desert atmospherics, there are also shades of Morricone, Beefheart, Polly Harvey and Diamanda Galas in these songs. From fractured field-holler to ambient blues moan - taking in a convincing Bessie Smith homage on the way - this is an organic sound, grown from demon seed planted in the body of a rusted-out Dobro guitar.

JM

RECORDING   
 MUSIC 

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The Absolute Sound, July 1998.

**Quiet, full-bodied, apparent dc to light extension, extreme high resolution, wonderful spatial qualities, these cables let the Jadis amplifiers be all they might.**

Jonathan Scull, Stereophile, March 1996.

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Clement Perry, The Audiophile Voice, Volume 3, Issue 2.



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# Small Mercies; The Convoluted Career Of Martin Stephenson

by Reuben Parry

A biting wind whipping in off the North Sea; gnawed finger nails as finals approached; the girlfriend who eight years later became an ex-wife, and a local band's long-awaited first album are some of my strongest recollections of 1985. Mostly sepia-coloured and anecdotal moments, its true, that (with the exception of Martin Stephenson and the Daintees' *Boat to Bolivia*) have faded through the passing years. Yet, this remarkable debut LP of intimate and often moving songs remains as sharply focused as ever. Its stylish, rootsy pop numbers - from folk rock to ragtime - are snapshots in the life of their front man. None of these exposures, no matter how deeply personal, appear self-indulgent or pretentious, although the songs (as their album sleeve footnotes suggest) take you well beyond the usual interaction of a musician and his audience. When drawing upon and sharing experiences like a cousin's miscarriage, 'Caroline', or the phoney grief of relatives after his grandmother's funeral, 'Crocodile Cryer', we are brought much closer to the singer/songwriter in a relationship that, as it develops, perhaps has a good deal more in common with the reader and a modern-day poet. The substance is there in the simple and beautifully worded 'Rain', where the rhythmic patterns, lyricism and understatement



offer a fresh, colloquial perspective on a thundery summer downpour.

"Between lightning and thunder  
three seconds the gap  
A warm candle glow  
keeps this wood room from black  
My cat, she sleeps  
on an old clippy mat  
Purring out echoes  
of faint pitter-pat."

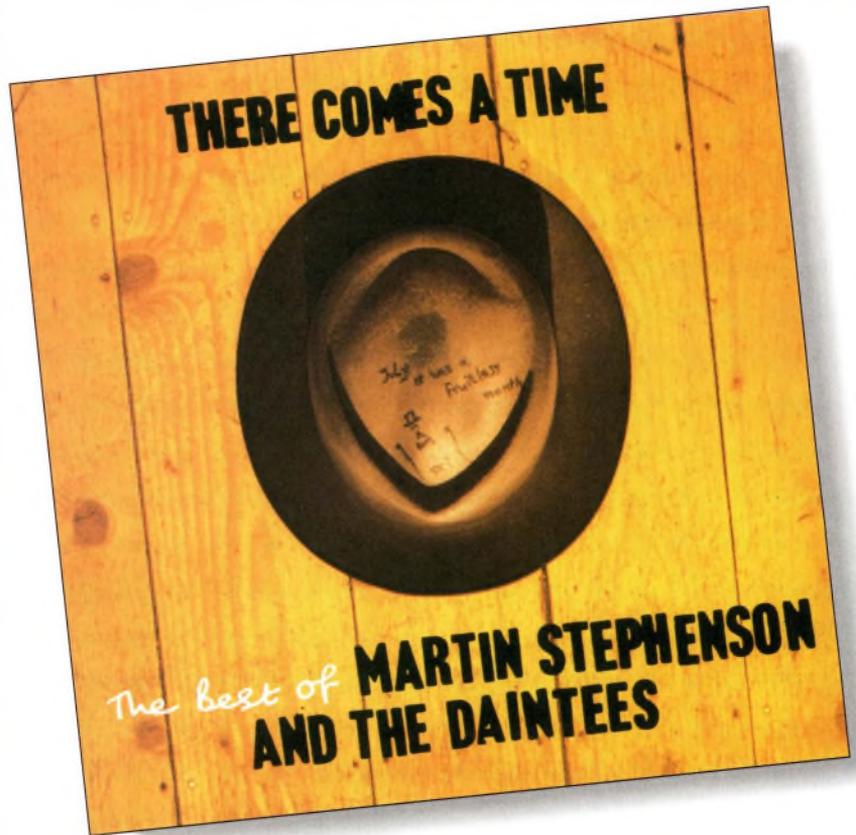
However, this record is only a stanza in the career of an outstanding individual whose music (with the latest release due in the New Year) will have spanned three decades. Behind it all is a complex personality who eventually found the creative constraints imposed by success to be so great that he left the Daintees in pursuit of a personal agenda just when, together, they were on the

▷ threshold of broad popular acclaim.

Poets and songwriters, alike, no matter how ethereal, have their beginnings, middles and ends. And whilst Martin is far from ready to take those final curtain-calls, I'm certain that his County Durham roots shed more than a little light on a man who eventually turned away from the glossy London scene in favour of an idyllic, contemplative life on a wild Scottish coastline.

Born on the 27th July 1961, Martin George Stephenson was brought up on the same street as Bryan Ferry (Gainsborough Avenue, Washington) in one of those close-knit communities which had largely disappeared once Thatcherism deconstructed British Industry. Musical influences during those early days included Motown and Zappa, but it was the Punk explosion of the mid 1970s that spurred him into playing in a band - although its hard to imagine him at the local youth club doing covers of 'Tommy Gun' and 'London's Burning' - they were clearly part of an inevitable process towards finding a distinctive voice of his own.

By the early Eighties he was fronting for the Daintees and, in 1982, they were one of the first bands to sign with the



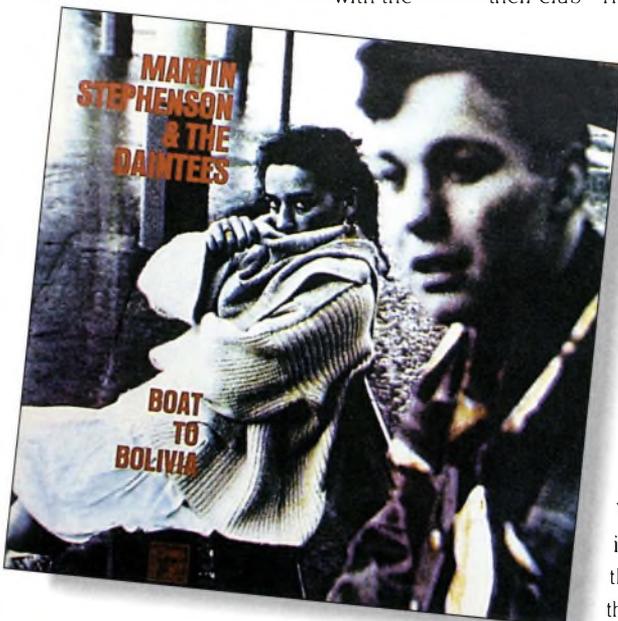
independent Newcastle-upon-Tyne based company, Kitchenware Records. Kitchenware, the brainchild of Phil Mitchel, Keith Armstrong and Paul Ludford, acted as the recording arm for their club - The Soul Kitchen - which

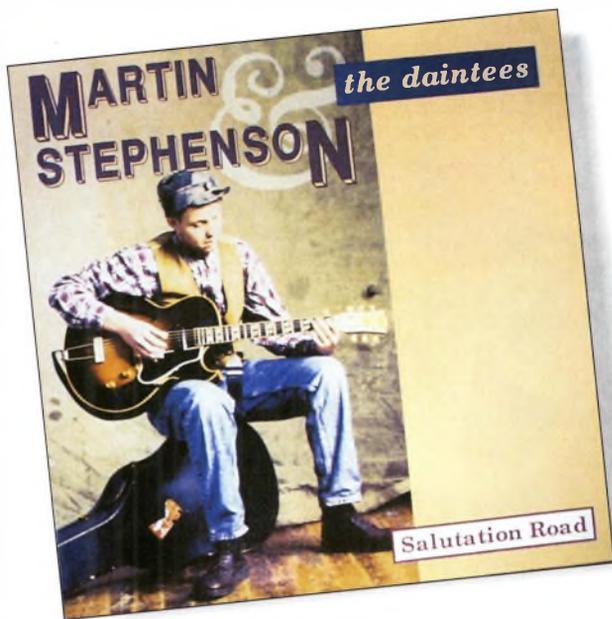
was a popular venue that attracted bands like New Order and Aztec Camera to the City. Rumour has it that Martin Stephenson was 'discovered' one day as he busked outside Keith and Phil's record shop. Either way he and the Daintees became part of a cast that eventually boasted Prefab Sprout, The Kane Gang and Hurrah!

When you listen to Martin its easy to appreciate why they thought they'd found themselves a young Ry

Cooder. His mainly finger style acoustic and electric guitar work was a revelation. The intelligence, wit and dynamism across an electric range of music was complemented by a voice which could have been mistaken for that of a grizzled old blues man. Some going when you're in your early twenties.

Cutting their first single was another of those "it could only happen in the music business" moments. 'Roll On Summertime' was an upbeat tune that got them noticed, especially among student residences around Newcastle, Sunderland and Durham. What made it all the more extraordinary was that the drummer was nine years old and the girl singer just ten! A growing reputation as a live act and the obligatory appearance on The Tube followed, leaving those of us in love with the band impatiently craving an album release. It was a long time coming, but when it arrived I was





▶ stunned by the quality and versatility. I recall that one of the first things I did was phone RG (yes I've known our erstwhile editor for almost longer than I'd care to remember) and got him to buy a copy of *Boat to Bolivia*. What I didn't know was how his fellow squatters in Rotherhithe felt about the Daintees blasting through an enormous pair of Maggies to all hours. But Roy was smitten. Not surprising when you consider the maturity and ingenuity of songs written between 1981 and 1985. The obvious care with which they were chosen is matched by sound man Gil Norton (of Pixies, Bunnymen and James fame) who produced and engineered the LP for Kitchenware/London Records.

The fluid nature of the band saw Gary Dunn (lead and rhythm guitar) join Anthony Dunn (electric bass) on the follow up release, *Gladsome Humour & Blue* (1987), where line up changes also included Mike Watson on keyboards replacing John Steel. There's a noticeable stylistic shift and added sophistication in the arrangements. 'The Wait' and 'Even the Night' place the violins of Anne Stephenson and Caroline Barnes, or Virginia Astley's flute and Caroline Lavelle on cello, ▶

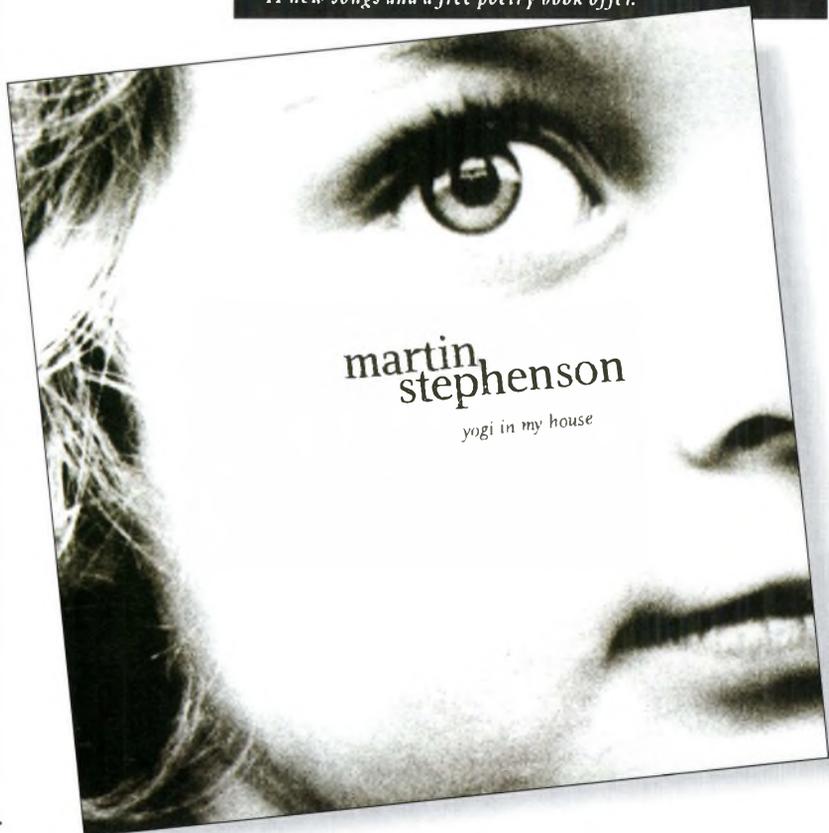
**The Players:** MARTIN STEPHENSON AND THE DAINTEES  
**The Album:** GLADSOME HUMOUR & BLUE



**The Tour:** APRIL  
 13. DUBLIN  
 14. BELFAST  
 18. BIRMINGHAM, HUMMING BIRD  
 19. LONDON, TOWN & COUNTRY CLUB  
 20. BRISTOL, BIERKELLER  
 21. CAMBRIDGE, CORN EXCHANGE  
 23. LIVERPOOL, UNI  
 24. LEEDS, POLY  
 25. NOTTINGHAM, ROCK CITY  
 26. NEWCASTLE, CITY HALL  
 28. LEICESTER, POLY  
 29. SHEFFIELD, POLY  
 30. MANCHESTER, INTERNATIONAL  
 MAY  
 1. EDINBURGH, QUEENS HALL

**The Label:** KITCHENWARE  
**The End:** SEE YOU THERE...

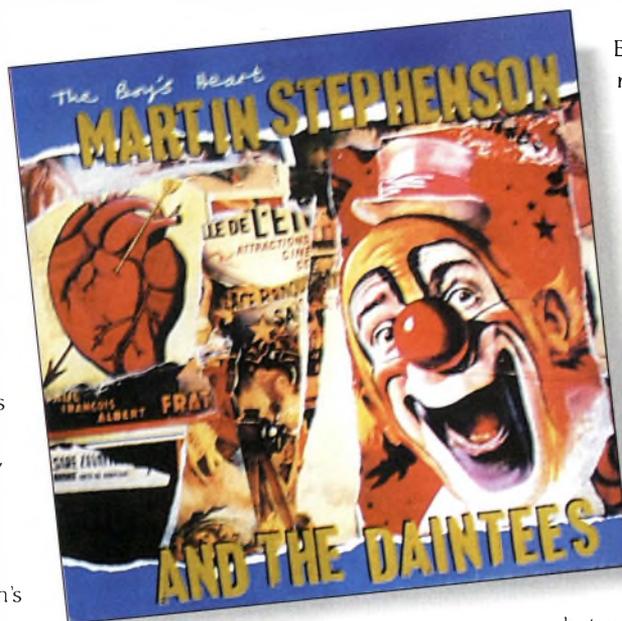
GLADSOME HUMOUR & BLUE  
 From Monday 4th April  
 ON LP (KWLP8) CASSETTE (KWCB) & COMPACT DISC (8280512)  
 ...The long awaited follow-up to  
**BOAT TO BOLIVIA**  
 11 new songs and a free poetry book offer.



▶ to the fore, in an album that tones down the experimentalism of *Boat to Bolivia* in favour of a darker mood that's self-analytical and more spiritual in nature. The recording, again, is excellent throughout despite the eleven tracks being farmed amongst three different engineers at studios in London, Surrey and Bath.

Side-two opener, 'Wholly Humble Heart', exudes personality as the sensual voices of Sheryl and Sheila Parker vie with Pandit Dinesh's percussive punctuations for space left by the prominently recorded Stephenson guitar/vocals. Its lovely, subtle, contrasting textures, paradoxically, possess sparks of intensity as the words "I share a friend who is a gay boy / She tells me he is full of love / no matter how many you've managed to fool / for the first bite makes the deepest teeth marks" finally strike home. There's also a wicked sense of fun at play, too, in the sweetest juxtaposition of a song title/theme 'Slaughterman' which is then sung as a ballad!

A third album, in 1989, was produced by American Pete Anderson. *Salutation Road* has a jazzy-rock setting that picks up the tempo using sax, horns and backing vocals on many of the tracks. Flashy. Mainstream. Less dependant on Martin's lead. Though, as ever, he is a crucial presence - particularly with songs like 'Long Hard Road' that have a definite commercial feel - where he instils a bit of backbone and integrity from which to hang the production values.



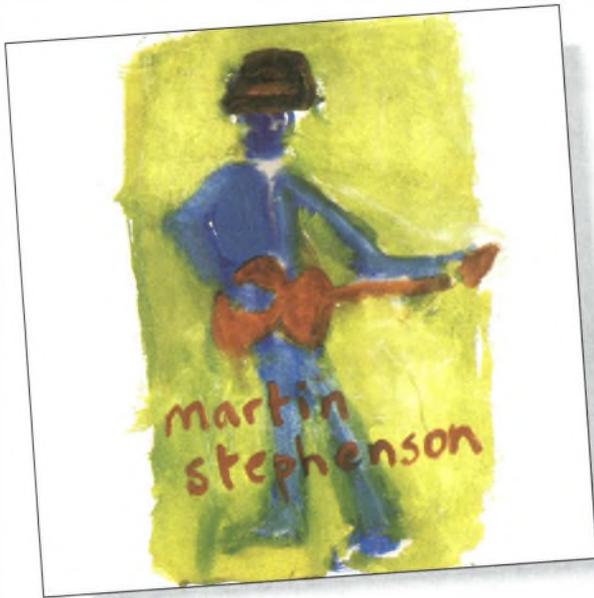
The push for an elusive hit single from this LP is apparent. The fact that the driving force behind the band instinctively wanted nothing of the kind is indicative of the conflict that existed between Martin, London Records, and the Kitchenware management team. His response to those commercial pressures was typical Stephenson - touring Highland folk clubs and pubs was both an honest search for musical appreciation and a convenient stick with which to beat the eponymous men in suits.



By the time *The Boys Heart* was released in 1992 Celtic rockabilly influences had surfaced in a big way. Its title track, with a slow Irish drum intro, and the swinging 'We can Roll' or 'The Ballad of the English Rose' (that has protest song echoes) make this LP the most ethnic-sounding and least commercial of the London/Kitchenware releases. Within a year Martin Stephenson and the Daintees split. Any number of reasons could be cited for a divorce from the band and his Kitchenware management,

but as Martin says 'When I thought the Daintees were getting big, I didn't want it to get any bigger - Even from the age of twenty-two, I knew what I would have to do. It was a slow process of actually breaking away and veering off and getting back on the more sensitive path'.

A move as a solo artist to the West London-based indie outfit, Demon Records, followed and their association lasted until the label was sold in 1998. The three albums cut for the West-End boys - *Yogi In My House* (1995), *Sweet Misdemeanour* (1996), and *Beyond the Leap, Beyond the Law* (1997) gave Martin a much greater licence to explore that 'more sensitive' side. The contemplative, ascetic tone of *Yogi*, for example, is achieved through a veritable collage of musical styles. Folk. Country. Rock. Blues. And occasionally you can even detect an echo of The Clash or Elvis Costello in quick-draw lyrics "for love is like a fallen flame its fire always draws me in I'd sooner be in a fire than be out of your game". A musical odyssey by a restless troubadour was to culminate in the egalitarian, *Beyond the* ▶



Cork and get such a buzz from the gathering troupe of musicians that you cut the disc with Paddy McNichol at Connolly's. Simply an everyday tale of music-folk. What occurred was a spontaneous acoustic session dripping with atmosphere and good feeling. Sweet harmonies on 'Carry My Friend'. Tremendous gentle, slow tempo, folk-rock

Martin Stephenson - unplugged. Songs that he felt to be unsympathetically recorded first time around are dusted-down and given a transfusion. They include a rip-rocking cut of 'Look Down Look Down', the funkiest 'Slaughterman' and a beautifully simple acoustic version of 'The Wait'. All, are graced by the mesmerising ensemble work of electric lead guitarist, Andy Gunn, drummer Greg Drysdale and bassist Frank Gibbon. There's a wonderful immediacy and presence on a disc made at Dalmore House in Ross-Shire, using a Hilton Mobile recording facility, and then mixed at London's Snake Ranch, though, the old original *Bolivia* tracks (especially) will always hold fond memories for the devotees.

*Leap, Beyond the Law* CD. Here, kindred spirits: The Devlins, Gypsy Dave Smith, The McClusky Brothers, Brendan O'Regan and Emmet Tinley (Prayerboat) feature in an altruistic rendition of a dozen Stephenson compositions. The story behind this meeting of musically like-minded figures is about as bizarre as it comes. Take a Vauxhall Chevette replete with moose antlers tied to the bonnet. Add Martin and a few mates. Throw in a tour of Ireland. Await fate to show her fickle hand. Pull into Leap, County

accompanied by superb electric, acoustic and bass guitar jamming (and notable brilliant flashes of zither, mandolin, bouzouki and five string fiddle playing) make it the epitome of Martin's desire to "be social with music and release good, organic albums." Well, its without question a rootsy affair that achieves those aims.

The more traditional period of touring followed in 1998, along with another CD, *When It's Gone, It's Gone*, which was recorded back on Tyneside for the, Get Rhythm crew.

Which conveniently brings me to the present and Martin's new label, Floating World, where there is a tempting, self-titled, album reworking thirteen of his songs, from the early days of the Daintees - through to that marvellous Irish escapade of 1997. Artists from every discipline seem unable to resist these siren-like calls from their past, a few are even dashed upon egotistical rocks, but not

The future, what does it hold? A promise of more imaginative and fertile songs with a twelfth album, *The Lilac Tree*, imminent. Word on the street says it will be another juicy acoustic CD crammed with lyrical twists and turns, wit and charm. Like the old days, I crave this release. ➤+



## Album Discography

- 1985 Boat to Bolivia (London Records) 7
- 1987 Gladsome Humour Et Blue (London Records) 7
- 1989 Salutation Road (London Records) 7
- 1991 High Bells Ring Thin (Kitchenware Records) 3
- 1991 There Comes a Time - The Best of Martin Stephenson Et The Daintees (London Records) CD
- 1992 The Boy's Heart (London Records) 4
- 1995 Yogi in My House (Demon Records) CD
- 1996 Sweet Misdemeanour (Demon Records) CD
- 1997 Beyond the Leap, Beyond the Law (Demon Records) CD
- 1998 When It's Gone, It's Gone (Get Rhythm) CD
- 1999 Martin Stephenson (Floating World) CD
- 2000 The Lilac Tree (Floating World) CD



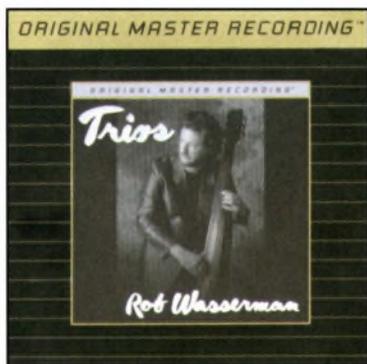
**John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman**

Mobile Fidelity MFSL UDCD 740

Recorded in '63 with McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones, this is Coltrane's only recording with a vocalist. Hartman was very much Coltrane's choice, and the 'big voiced crooner' brings out the lush romantic side of 'Trane's playing. Hartman has a particularly big-toned, velvety texture to his voice, like Nat King Cole on steroids, which with strings would be just too much. Fortunately 'Trane's toughness comes across and brings a balance to the whole experience, the one setting off the other perfectly, that makes this a very special recording. Featuring six standards, the performances are so consistent that there are no standout tracks. Everything is of equally high calibre. If pushed, I'd choose 'Lush Life' as my favourite, but that's just because I love the song anyway. Three tracks including 'Lush Life' feature sax phrases overdubbed by 'Trane at a later date, although this isn't obvious.

Recorded by Rudy Van Gelder, originally for Impulse, Hartman's centre stage with good presence, with McCoy Tyner stage left and Coltrane right. Stage depth is a tad restricted but otherwise it's an excellent recording. The only drawback is the paltry running time at under 32 minutes.

Supplier: Vivante  
DD



**Rob Wasserman**

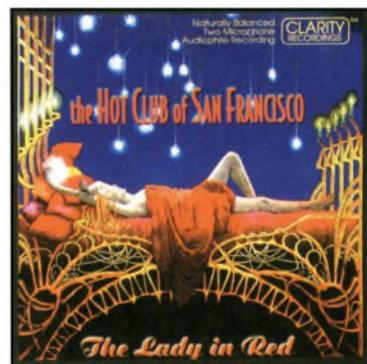
**Trios**

Mobile Fidelity MFSL UDCD 752

The follow-up to *Duos* (available from Alto on 180g vinyl) this album again assembles an eclectic mix of star guests to team up with Wasserman's acoustic and electric bass. The guest list ranges from Brian Wilson to Neil Young to Branford Marsalis to Elvis Costello (that is, it's not that eclectic!). I can't imagine that this line up will appeal equally to all, which means that most of us will be dusting off the skip function on our remotes. That said, when it's good it's very good. There's a great throwaway Costello number 'Put your big toe in the milk of human kindness', a bizarre number from Willie Dixon 'Dustin' off the bass featuring Dixon on electric upright string bass sparring with Wasserman. 'Fantasy is Reality/ Bells of Madness' features fine vocals from Carnie Wilson backed by her dear old dad who can still cut it in the chorus department. Throw in a few instrumentals, a so-so version of 'Easy Answers' featuring Neil Young and Bob Weir, and a god awful improvisation with Edie Brickell & Gerry Garcia whose title says it all: 'American Popsicle', and that's about it.

Recording quality is fine, warm toned with (surprisingly enough) the basses portrayed with real body and presence.

Supplier: Vivante  
DD



**The Hot Club of San Francisco**

**'The Lady in Red'**

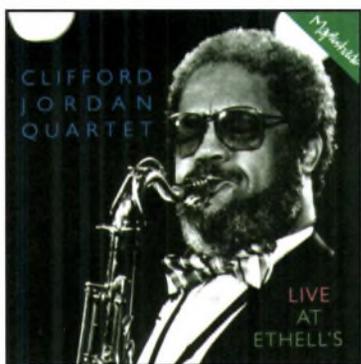
Clarity Recordings CCD-1019

Put all thoughts of Chris de Burgh out of your head, it's not that sanity threatening abomination. Now consider whether you like the music of the Hot Club of France. Yes? You'll love this album. No? Well, how about the very wonderful Dan Hicks and His Hot Licks, yes? You'll love this album. If relaxed swing with a wry sense of humour appeals, this is for you. With laid back vocals, which include Maria Muldaur in very fine form on 'Lover Man, and an even more splendid Mr Hicks in the aptly chosen 'Everything Happens to Me', the album is guaranteed to warm the cockles of any caring soul's heart.

A 'live to two track' recording captured on a Tim de Paravicini modified Ampex MR-70, the sound is very natural and unprocessed. Vocals, which aside from the aforementioned two include Barbara Dane, are particularly real and 'in the room'. Fine details such as sax fingerwork and fingers on guitar frets are nicely captured, and this, along with the unforced feel of a real room acoustic, makes the whole experience very enjoyable. A perfect 'Sunday morning' album and I mean that as a compliment!

Supplier: Vivante  
DD





Clifford Jordan

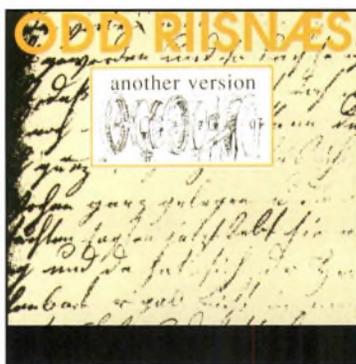
Live at Ethell's

Mapleshade 56292

This is the first Mapleshade release that's come my way, and what a treat it is. There's an unforced musicality to this recording that, more perfectly than most, captures the feeling of a live performance. I guess, to be strictly correct, I should say 'live performances' since the album was recorded over three nights in Baltimore in '87. The album runs through a number of standards, and includes Jordan's surprise vocal recording debut, when to the dismay of the engineer and the delight of the audience, he picks up the sax mike to sing 'Lush Life'. I'm delighted this was included since it simply adds to the spontaneity and 'you are there' effect of the very natural, spacious recording. The band are tight as a wild fowls sphincter and every nuance of their playing, from whispery quiet passages to straight ahead blowing is nicely captured. So too are spontaneous shouts of encouragement from the audience which on at least one occasion made me look around to see who'd joined me in the listening room. With the exception of one or two slightly over-extended drum solos (i.e. over 10 seconds!), this is a beautifully played very nicely recorded album, and deserves a place in any true jazz lovers collection.

Supplier: Vivante

DD



Odd Riisnæs

Another Version

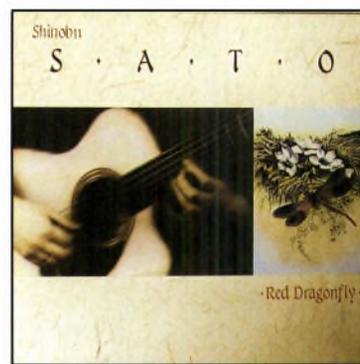
Gemini/ Taurus TRCD 831

Norwegian jazz, hmm? When Bill of aanvill audio thrust this into my hand I was a bit sceptical, but actually it's pretty good stuff. Odd's (what a fine name) third album of mostly original compositions, Cole Porter's 'I Love You' being the exception, is a well-played, very nicely recorded set. Odd leads a quintet including Steinar Larsen, guitar, Iver Kleive, keyboards, Terje Gewalt, bass and Tom Olstad, drums. Standout number is 'Ab 1.01', the first section of a four part suite which opens with Odd's Soprano sax floating over a church organ, along with a lovely sense of acoustic from the Helgerud church - very ECM, very Jan Garbarek - followed by guitar. The effect is a little less clinical than Garbarek and all the better for it. Actually, there's such a consistent feel to the entire album that the whole thing could be termed a suite. One number flows seamlessly into the next without, and here's the vital ingredient, the soporific qualities of other bands I can think of. What was that German label again?

None of the music on this album is particularly challenging, at times it verges on 'jazz-lite', but it is all very listenable, and somehow the standard of playing, the cohesion of the whole album and the fine recording make it a very enjoyable experience.

Supplier: aanvill audio

DD



Shinobu Sato

Red Dragonfly

Flying Fish Records FF476

This is one of those albums that's very difficult to categorise, so I won't bother. Suffice it to say that it's a nicely captured set of solo and accompanied acoustic music. It features Shinobu Sato on guitar, with on a few tracks Stuart Rosenberg, mandolin and Collins Trier, hammered dulcimer. The track choices are nothing if not wide ranging, spanning from traditional tunes like 'Simple Gifts', tunes transcribed for guitar like the Japanese pieces originally composed for the shamisen, and the Irish harp tune 'Si Bheag, Si Mhor'. There's even a version of 'Grandfather's Clock' although this is probably the only number which, however well played, evokes distant memories of 'Listen with Mother' and somewhat buggers up the feel of the surrounding tracks. The Japanese numbers come over best, in particular the 'Sakura Variations' and the beautiful title track. There's also an excellent transcription of Gershwin's 'Prelude #2' that comes over surprisingly well on guitar. The recording is very clean and nicely detailed although the old failing of the '7 foot wide guitar' presents itself again. Pressing quality, albeit on 120g vinyl, is good and clean, with no errant pops and clicks. A highly unusual and enjoyable album.

Supplier: The Cherished Record Company

DD







# VINYLL HOLD-OUT

by Dave Davis

## Miles Davis - Kind of Brilliant?

The nearest parallel to a 'Picasso' in the world of Jazz, Davis was a true giant who throughout his life was an innovator, always impatient with accepted forms. Throughout his long career he was a leading influence on the way jazz was played, and several times helping to significantly change it's course.

Born in 1926, the son of a middle class East St Louis family, Davis' father was a dentist who as a sideline raised pedigree hogs (not a lot of people know that). Davis started early learning the trumpet at 13. By the time he was 16 he was already playing professionally at local gigs. At 18 he moved to New York, ostensibly to study classical music at Julliard, but actually to fuel his growing obsession with the music of Charlie Parker. Tracking Parker round many clubs, Davis was soon hanging out with him, and within a couple of days was rooming with him. Before he turned 19, Davis had cut his first records in Herbie Fields' band accompanying Rubberlegs Williams. By now he was socialising with key members of the emerging bebop movement, amongst them Dizzy

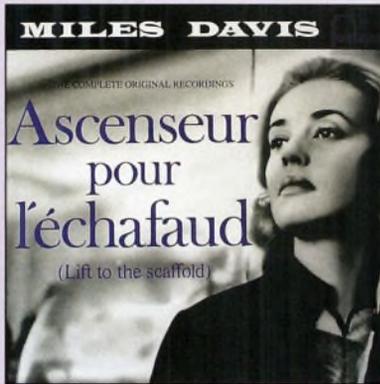
Gillespie, Max Roach and Thelonius Monk and before long had replaced the somewhat unreliable Gillespie in Parker's band. He cut his first numbers with Parker in '47 going on to record with other bebop groups led by Charles Mingus, Billy Eckstine and others.

His first date as a leader and the first of his collaborations with Gil Evans came in 1949 when at the age of 23 with a nine piece band that included Gerry Mulligan and Lee Konitz, he cut *Birth of the Cool*. This fine band performed rarely and throughout the early '50's although he recorded with a number of small groups, Davis was struggling with a growing heroin dependence. He eventually managed to kick the habit and made a spectacular comeback in '55 at the Newport Jazz Festival after which he had the impetus to set up a working band. His main partner was a young tenor



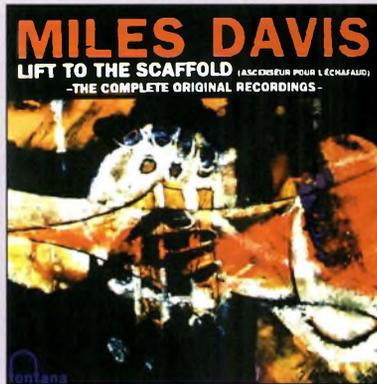
player, John Coltrane, another star in the ascendant. Coupled with pianist Red Garland, drummer Philly Joe Jones and bassist Paul Chambers. This band played with a new sense of freedom and cut a number of classics including *Cookin', Relaxin', Workin'* and *Steamin'*.

However fine this music was, Davis was becoming impatient with it and began to take on a new



**Lift to the Scaffold  
(Ascenseur pour l'échafaud)**

Fontana 0660213

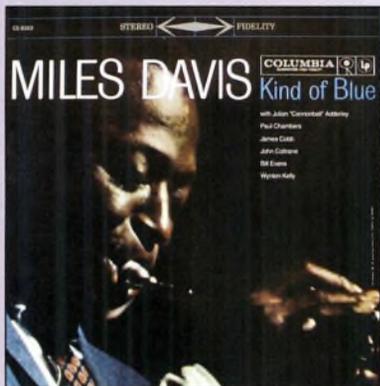


Something of a curiosity this and one that most review books dismiss out of hand. It's certainly not up there with his best work, for a start the album is essentially a series of fragmentary recordings. These were produced

in '57 for the eponymous film which starred Jeane Moreau. The tracks have never been released in this form before. And due entirely to the rough stops (often with Davis whistling to indicate a cut, generally just as a real groove is being established), and starts along with the way that multiple takes are preserved, the improvisational nature comes across clearly. Thankfully, the heavy echo that was added to a number of tracks in the film has here been removed.

Being a contrary old bugger, I love it. Sound quality too is excellent very clean, with the breathy tone of Davis's playing nicely captured and pressing quality up there with the best.

RECORDING 8.5  
PERFORMANCE 7



**Kind of Blue**

Columbia CS 8163 (Classic Records and Absolute Analogue re-issues)

For anyone starting a Davis collection this is the place to due so and since original copies to quote Rays Jazz are 'as rare as hens teeth' the Classic records re-issue is the one to have. From start to finish this is one of the most beautiful and influential albums in the history of recorded jazz. Recorded in '59 there's not a misplaced note on the album. In many ways it's the perfect realisation of Davis at his most laid back. Coupled with a group to die for – Cannonball Adderley, Bill Evans, John

Coltrane, Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and James Cobb – you're drawn in from the opening notes of 'So What' and the spell isn't broken but for a rapid flipover 'til the last notes of 'Flamenco Sketches'. The album is a towering achievement in improvisational playing and thoroughly deserves its 'best of the best' reputation. The Classic re-issue corrects a problem that occurred and was sustained for years following the original release:

The tape machine used to record side one of the original album was running approximately 1% slow. This meant that when it was played back at 15 inches per second for transfer to the production master the pitch was too fast. This isn't really a problem since generations, me included, have grown up listening to and loving the 'too fast' versions. Classic however have corrected the problem and issued their set as a double with the side one numbers available on side three of the two disc set at the correct transfer speed. Side four offers another bonus in an unreleased take this time pressed at 45rpm of 'Flamenco Sketches', whilst the first album contains the full original album.

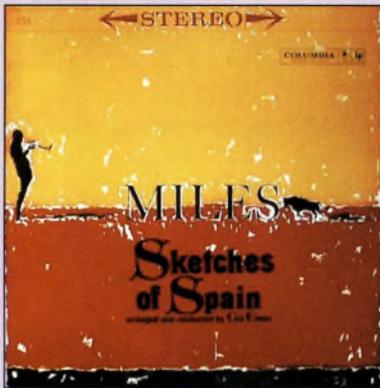
Recording quality is good, not great there's a slightly ill-defined bass and the dynamics

seem a tiny bit curtailed, but the music making is so fine that this really isn't of much importance. Classic have done a fine job: Beautifully pressed 180g albums with hardly a 'tic' to disturb the music, the heavy card gatefold sleeve too is a model of its kind, and as soon as you pick this up you just know it's going to be expensive. Which it is

A more reasonably priced alternative is available from Absolute Analogue, without the corrected speed or additional track. A straight rendition of the familiar version, this offers better width, separation and bass definition than the Classic version; and less stereo depth and overall warmth. Probably a reflection of the solid state as opposed to tube electronics in the cutting chain. The aforementioned Nimbus crops up occasionally second-hand, and is worth considering, but either of the 180g versions sounds better.

RECORDING 8  
PERFORMANCE 10





## Sketches of Spain

Columbia CS 8271 (Classic Records re-issue)

Recorded in 1959, this follows *Kind of Blue* in Davis's catalogue and completes a trilogy of 'orchestrated' albums in collaboration with Gil Evans. Whilst arguably it's not as powerful an album as *Porgy and Bess*, it's nevertheless a fascinating and rewarding piece of music making. Inspired by a recording of Rodrigo's *Concerto de Aranjuez* the first piece is based on the middle section of that concerto. With Davis seated centre stage and backed by a trio of trumpet, trombone and flute along with a substantial orchestra, the densely scored music never seems overburdened and remains highly atmospheric throughout. Davis, using both trumpet and flugelhorn, is the only soloist and delivers telling,

personal statements on the various themes.

The recording quality is a step up from 'Kind of Blue', with excellent dynamic contrasts between Davis and the trio, and the full orchestra kicking in quite startlingly at times. Staging is good as well, wide and deep. Pressing quality, as seems to be the norm for Classic, is exemplary.

Once again, there's an Absolute Analogue alternative, but here the Classic is clearly superior. The American cover's nicer too.

RECORDING 8.5  
PERFORMANCE 9



## Amandla

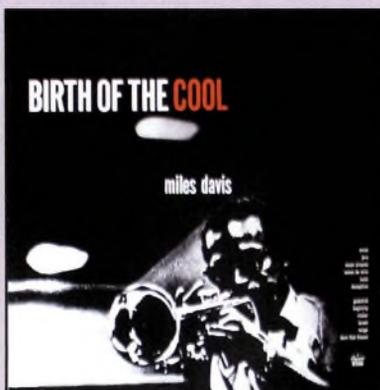
Warner Bros 925873-1

Recorded in '89, this was Miles' last album of any real substance. Hampered a little by some overtly 'funky' and somewhat dated electric bass playing, there's very strong playing throughout from the whole band. It does speak though for the superior quality of *Bitches Brew* in that that album hasn't dated at all.

Written and arranged by Marcus Miller, along with George Duke one one track, and John Bigham/ Marcus Miller on another, the album is mastered by Doug Sax. The bass is suitably tight and deep, and the sound is dynamic and suitably punchy with Davis's muted

horn crisp and clear centre stage. Sounding at times a little like Weather Report, there's even a track dedicated to Jaco Pastorius, it remains Davis' own. Pressing quality on my bog standard 120g release is fine, which is why I included it here. One to search for in the second-hand racks. The sleeve, incidentally, features Davis in a fine collection of bizarre clothing and in particular some shoes, which make him look as though he has cloven hoofs. This could be intentional, who knows!

RECORDING 8  
PERFORMANCE 7



## Birth of the Cool

Capitol Jazz 'Good Buy' 2 F671045

The first of Davis's ground-breaking albums and originally released on Capitol in 1950 this album helped establish Davis as a leader. Recorded with Gerry Mulligan, Lee Konitz and Max Roach as parts of a nine man group, the album surprised listeners with both its expanded instrumentation – tuba and French horn – and for its more structured written arrangements with no space for expanded solos. Many fine tunes were introduced here and the ensemble playing is extraordinarily tight.

My re-issued copy (picked up if I remember correctly on a trip to Paris, thank you FNAC) is nicely pressed in living mono on 180g vinyl. The lack of stereo is no great drawback since the instruments are so well captured with appropriate warmth, perhaps a tad too much warmth but nicely captured all the same. The tubas grumble in the background with appropriate weight whilst the lead horns sing out above them and the percussion drives things ahead.

RECORDING 7  
PERFORMANCE 8

► musical direction in which improvisation rather than being based on chord progressions was modal. This allowed soloists to stretch their improvisation and ultimately displaced hard bop. This was first realised in *Milestones* and in '59 by what many people regard (me included), as the finest jazz album bar none: *Kind of Blue*. The same year saw the last of Davis' three orchestral albums in collaboration with Gil Evans *Sketches of Spain* which had been preceded in '57 by *Miles Ahead* and '58 by the what is generally acknowledged as the best of the three 'Porgy and Bess'.

By the early sixties the 'free jazz' movement led by Ornette Coleman had taken hold. Davis, true to form, rejected this and continued to cut a path of his own. Teaming with

musicians of a like mind, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and Tony Williams, he now led what is generally considered to be one of jazz's finest rhythm sections which can be heard to good effect on a series of live albums.

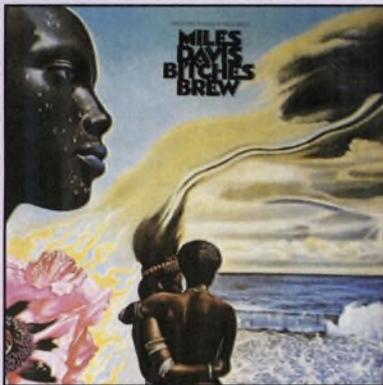
The band can also be heard at something approaching their peak in the fine '66 album *Miles Smiles*. This ultimately led the way to Davis moving from small group music and starting to dabble with rock influences with players such as John McLaughlin, Joe Zawinul, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett and Billy Cobham. Between '69 and '70 Davis recorded intensively producing two classic albums *In a Silent Way* and the ground-breaking *Bitches Brew*. Most would agree that this marked a close to Davis' phases of real innovation. Although he would

until his death in '91 continue to produce a series of at the very least interesting albums, albeit with occasional flashes of brilliance such as *We Want Miles* '81, *Tutu* '86, and *Amandla* '89, his greatest works were behind him. For over four decades he had been, and remains one of the most influential and innovative figures that jazz has produced. His music from his extraordinarily well-documented career will live on, moving and entertaining generations to come.

Not surprisingly, his albums have been top of the 180g re-issue list from day one (the *Nimbus Kind of Blue* was way ahead of its time).

Suppliers:

Vivante and own collection



## Bitches Brew

Columbia 66236

Another major stage in Davis' career, this double album along with 'In a Silent Way' also released in 1969 pretty much launched jazz rock. Davis leads a large ensemble including Wayne Shorter, John McLaughlin and Chick Corea in an extended set of heavy, brooding music much influenced by contemporary (West Coast) rock music. In some ways this music feels like a heavily textured, electronic update of his Gil Evans collaborations. And, although it misses a little of the deftness, the lightness of touch of his earlier albums unlike much of that rock music that influenced this album, it has a drive and unity that prevents

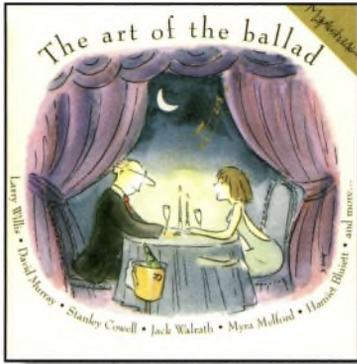
the music from dating. Its influence can still be heard in many of today's bands.



The sound quality in my bog standard reissue copy is slightly muddy – loose, ill defined bass – along with slightly restricted dynamics and stage depth (if the latter was ever there in the first place). A prime candidate for a Classic re-issue if ever there was one!

RECORDING 7

PERFORMANCE 8



Various artists

The Art of the Ballad

Mapleshade 06132

The first in a 'The Best of Mapleshade' series, this collection forms an excellent introduction to a fascinating new (to me) label. Mapleshade claim that 'their studio has warm, natural acoustics... musicians decide when they want to play and when they want to stop. There are never any time limits...artists take more chances and play with more fire'. All Mapleshade CD's are recorded live to 2-track analogue with no added EQ, reverb, overdubbing or noise filtering, and this is certainly born out on every one of the samples on this CD. Whether in the delicacy of the Rebecca Kane Sextet, the big, breathy 'Websteresque' sax of Hamiet Bluiett, or the woody tones of Warren Smiths marimba from the intriguingly titled 'Some Cats Are Stealing My \$Hit'.

None of the music is particularly challenging, but it is real music making, sensitively recorded and light years away from the awful audiophile horrors that other labels have inflicted on an all too gullible public in years gone by.

On my copy, the track listing is somewhat shuffled from the sleeve notes, but who cares this is an unusually consistent selection which, as intended, forms a great introduction to a fine label.

Supplier: Vivante  
DD



ANTILL : Corroboree  
GINASTERA : Panambi

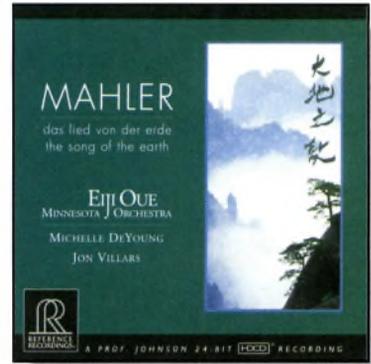
Goosens, LSO

CLASSIC/EVEREST SDBR - 3003

Classic's finally gone native, continent hopping through Aboriginal dance ceremonies and the primitive tribal themes of South American Indian legends with this unusual and demanding repertoire. For many these Ballet Suites will be a step into the unknown instead of a familiar prouette. Being lead by the hand amongst the animism and spirits of the Southern Hemisphere could be an uncertain and disconcerting experience, which is my main bone of contention. While releasing esoteric works is praiseworthy, I think that the motives here were probably audiophile dictated as opposed to music driven. The lure of so many percussive instruments, especially in *Corroboree* with its thunder sheets, bull roarer, gongs, trora sticks, Chinese temple clocks and tom-toms was just too great. The clarity and precise, pinpoint location of these images across a massive soundstage is irresistible to the sonic-obsessive. Yes, Witchetty Grub men, a Rain Dance and the Fire Ceremony's mimicry of Cockatoo, Lace Lizard and Honey Ant are expressive and entertaining, but perhaps not enduring. Attention always returns to the "special effects".

By comparison Ginastera's orchestral colours are more traditional and far less dayglo. His scoring is imaginative - brass and percussion only for the Invocation - its an atmospheric rather than sensational composition. Goosens and the LSO give agreeable performances of both works and, even though I carp, part of me hankers to hear an Australian orchestra play the Antill.

Supplier: Vivante  
RP



Mahler  
das lied von der erde

Eiji Oue Minnesota Orchestra  
Michelle De Young, Jon Villars

REFERENCE RR-88

Each successive Reference release has proved more satisfying than the last, and 'das lied von der erde' (the song of the earth) is no exception.

However, this interpretation of Mahler's demanding, richly poetic and complex score, shows Eiji Oue's growing maturity as a conductor.

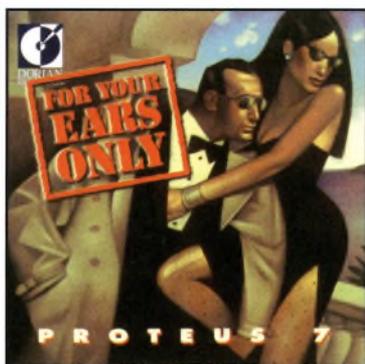
He handles the epic symphonic scheme through a remarkable self-control and sensitivity. It's needed, because orchestral patterns criss-cross between contrasting and connecting tones, and rapid mood swings and discordant outbursts bed-down together. Though he does not yet possess the stature of seasoned Mahlerians like his mentor, Leonard Bernstein, this is a performance good enough to enhance reputations all-round.

Refreshingly expressive soloists, Michelle De Young (contralto) and Jon Villars (tenor), are beautifully reproduced - their emotional and musical impact perfectly weighted. Keith O. Johnson's familiarity with both the acoustic properties of Orchestra Hall Minneapolis and the HDCD format make this a compelling recording. Expect smart dynamic shifts; sweet midrange strings; powerful extended bass notes; transparency; detail, and a top end where the upper vocal register and percussive splashes just keep going.

Supplier: Vivante  
RP







**Proteus 7**

**For Your Ears Only**

Dorian xCD-90258

This is a very silly album. Very silly and something of a surprise from the normally polite Dorian. The debut album from the Proteus 7, it is for want of a better description, a strange marriage of wind septet and blow the cat out of the back door sound effects. Opening with a thunderstorm by way of a mild introduction before things get REALLY loud you are quickly launched into the Bond themed opening section complete with helicopters, terrorist attacks, and laughably cheesy vocals. The whole effect is pretty strange to say the least, partly due to the wincingly awful spoken word sections: breathy girls intoning 'Oh James' from left and right speakers followed by a laugh from 'James' that belongs in a Victorian pantomime.

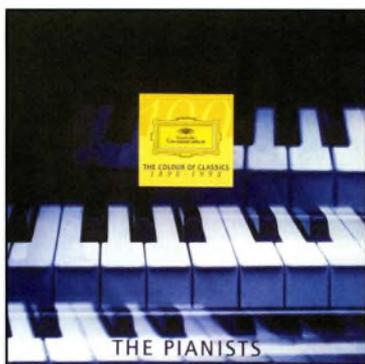
In addition to the Bond themed pieces, the album also takes in (takes on?) the Pink Panther theme, the Mission Impossible theme and others.

It's a bizarre experience and although the playing is very competent and the recording suitably cat bothering, I can't imagine any sane being sitting through the whole thing. Best considered as a sort of modern day 'Bob and Ray.' I'm sure it'll crop up in more than a few demo's. But, like the label warns 'exercise extreme caution when listening to protect your hearing and equipment' I'd add 'brain' to this list.

Supplier: Vivante

DD

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



**The Pianists**

**Prokofieff, Piano Concerto No 3 in C Major**  
**Ravel, Piano Concerto in G major**  
**Martha Argerich, Abbado, BPO**

SPEAKERS CORNER DG SLPM 139 349

**Chopin, Etudes Op.10 and Op.25**  
**Maurizio Pollini, Piano**

SPEAKERS CORNER DG 2530 291

**Beethoven, Piano Concerto No 1**  
**Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli**  
**Giulini, VSO**

SPEAKERS CORNER DG 2531 302

This is the third in a series of releases, collaborations between respected audiophile record label Speakers Corner and Universal Music. First we had Conductors, then Violinists, and now Pianists. The re-issued recordings are drawn from the extensive Deutsche Grammophon analogue back catalogue, and whilst they might not be the sonic equals of the Decca SXL's that are more normally associated with Speakers Corner, they certainly don't lack musical interest. But what sets these box-sets apart from the re-issue crowd, is the full weight of Universal's marketing department behind the packaging and presentation. The sleeves, multi-lingual booklet and outer box are sumptuous - akin to an original RCA Soria, rather than the insipid efforts made to copy them. These boxes are so far ahead of anything else produced by the re-issue industry that it's hard to believe they come from the same source.

Underneath the wrapping, you'll find pristine and perfectly flat 180g pressings, and for anybody



brought up amongst the Dodgy Grungaphon jokes of the seventies, surprisingly good sonics. The choice of repertoire is hard to fault, and the Pollini in particular is beautifully recorded. His Chopin *Etudes* has long been a standard recommendation, bringing exceptional range and expression to these most complex and demanding pieces. His faultless combination of precision and delicacy is under-pinned by his mastery of the contrasting contributions of the left and right hands. Op.10 Nos 2 and 3 are highlights, but the whole performance is close to perfection.

Less familiar is Michelangeli's individualistic Beethoven, but again the quality of both the playing and the orchestral accompaniment lift the performance above the 'showpiece' recordings made by so many other artists. Which brings us to the Argerich disc, and her monumental performance of the Prokofieff. You want fire and dynamic contrast, look no further. Argerich's legendary intensity brings both these works to life.

These limited edition box-sets have been extremely popular, and sell out quickly. By the time you read this, *The Pianists* will have been available for a month already. Don't even think about hesitating. This is gorgeous.

Supplier: Vivante

RG

RECORDING	
MUSIC	



# When "Damage" Is More Than Skin Deep

— by James Michael Hughes —

All LP collectors know the difficulty (impossibility sometimes) of getting an absolutely clean fault-free copy of a particular disc. It comes with the territory. I don't just mean a nice quiet pressing; I'm thinking of LPs with really annoying faults; break-up during loud climaxes, pitch waver, hum, hiss, rumble. The difficulty is knowing whether the problem is something that occurred during the cutting process, or whether it's there on the original master tape. If it's the latter, there's little or nothing that can be done - the fault is inherent. If it's the former, there's always hope that another copy of the disc (perhaps one pressed earlier or later, or manufactured in a different country) will be free of problems - all you've got to do is track down that elusive 'perfect' copy!

The clever bit is knowing which category the fault falls into so you can

avoid wild goose chases and wasted money. One of the less predictable benefits of CD has been the way it's allowed us access to recordings without the

sample recordings that were problematic on LP - only to find that the problems were there all along on the master tape! So the search for that 'perfect' LP transfer was a complete waste of time...

Of course, it's not possible to generalise. Some old recordings are carefully re-mastered for CD issue and faults that plagued all vinyl editions are eliminated. Sometimes the original multi-track tapes are digitally re-mixed, or perhaps the original masters are used for the first time - all previous transfers having been made from copy tapes. Sophisticated noise reduction systems like Cedar and NoNoise may be

used to clean-up old tapes, and digital editing can improve bumpy tape splices. So the CD/LP comparison isn't always a fair one.

Despite this, it's been my experience that LPs on the whole



carrying medium imposing its own noise and peak level distortion limitations. As the vast back-catalogue of analogue titles are transferred to CD, it's been possible to

► provide a remarkably accurate facsimile of the original master tape - warts and all. However, because the whole LP transfer, pressing, and replay process is so easily contaminated, the LP is often blamed for faults that actually occurred much earlier in the recording chain. Certain classical record companies, notably Decca, would sail very close to the wind sometimes, pushing every part of the record/replay chain close to (and sometimes beyond) its limits.

Going back nearly thirty years, one LP that quietly drove me mad was Decca's 1969 blockbuster recording of Dvorak's Requiem mass conducted by Istvan Kertez. In the first part of the 'Dies Irae' (disc 1, side 1) there's a big fat organ pedal that shakes the room, then massed choral forces enter - and the sound becomes distinctly edgy and uncomfortable with severe intermodulation. When I first heard this LP in 1970 or thereabouts, I thought my pickup was mistracking and experimented endlessly with playing weight, anti-skating force, and alignment. All to no avail; the distortion remained.

To make matters worse Angus McKenzie, writing about the recording in Hi-Fi News, declared that the LP was trackable - all you needed was a Shure V-15 cartridge! So now I was certain my record-playing equipment was at fault. It was only some years later, with more

experience of how different types of distortion sound according to the cause, that I began to suspect the congestion was on the original master tape. My guess is the Decca engineers had the mixer's gain set too high, so the microphones overloaded

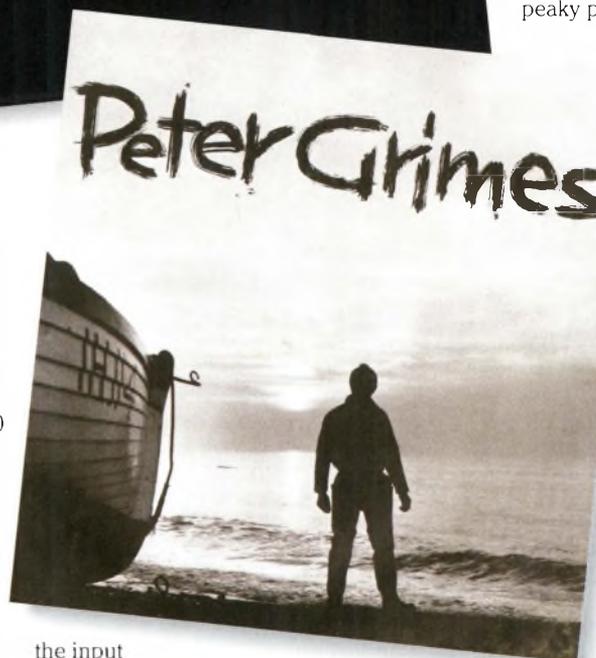
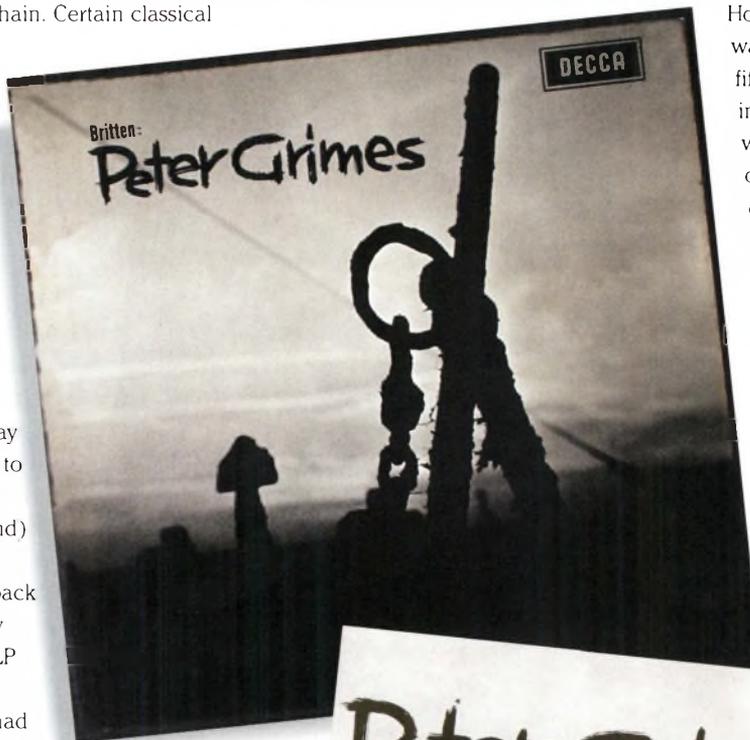
famous 1959 Decca/Britten recording of Peter Grimes on CD confirmed that sound quality is not absolutely consistent throughout. Tape noise varies slightly, and some sections are cleaner and more crisply focussed than others - faults discernible on LP. However, because my set of records was pressed in the mid-'70s, some fifteen years after the original recording was first issued, I'd always wondered (needlessly, as it turned out) if these inconsistencies were due to some sides of this three record set being less well cut than others - faults that would hopefully be absent on an early pressing. But I was hoping in vain...

Also, some 'faults' are natural. Edgy violins; a throaty rattle when the tenor hits a high note; excessive sibilance on female voice; pitch waver on pipe organ (due to curious intermodulation effects); boomy low frequencies on plucked double bass; shrill peaky piccolos; coarse raucous

brass - the list is endless. These things can happen naturally. You can hear all kinds of 'faults' with live acoustic music you'd swear were caused by equipment/recording problems if you were listening to hi-fi. A lot of so-called 'pressing rumble' is air conditioning noise, or perhaps the sound of distant traffic on a busy main road - you can hear the noise fade down between tracks,

proving it's on the master tape.

On the other hand, some LPs are immaculately engineered but very demanding - perhaps cut at a high ►



the input causing severe peak distortion. Sure enough, when the recording was issued on CD, the distortion was still clearly audible - it was on the master tape.

In a similar fashion, hearing the

► level and difficult to reproduce, needing very good equipment able to cope with wide extremes. For years I thought Carlos Kleiber's 1976 DG recording of Beethoven's seventh symphony was untrackable at the end of side two - no cartridge I owned during the '70s and early '80s could reproduce the last couple of minutes without spluttering. But, with the advent of better MC pickups in the past ten years or so, it's been possible to play right to the end of side without the sound breaking up. So the LP was okay all along.

How do you tell the likely causes of different types of fault? Only by experience. Each problem has its own distinct sonic signature - even if the end result is a rough dirty sound. Mistracking distortion is usually quite violent and harsh - as might be expected from a stylus being buffeted about by groove walls it's trying in vain to follow. Tape saturation distortion tends to be 'softer'; coarse and congested, rather than brittle and harsh. And with it comes a sense of compression as the music tries to expand in terms of loudness and the tape limits this. Electronics overloading tends to be quite nasty-sounding, especially if the recording was made using transistorised mixing equipment or tape recorders. However, tape saturation limits 'hard clipping', making the distortion less violent than cartridge mistracking.

Something else that can't be ruled out with secondhand LPs which mistrack and distort is that they're worn - perhaps damaged by a blunt stylus, or by having been played too many times with a pickup unable to cleanly track the loudest passages. If we're talking about 'original' stereo LPs from the late '50s or early '60s, they may've been played on crude all-in-one record players fitted with

passages and adds its own discomfort to the roughness that's already there. So, although cleaning won't repair damaged grooves, it can and often will make the effects of any damage subjectively less annoying.

A good phono stage with excellent high-frequency overload helps greatly; the distortion peaks produced by severe mistracking are very sharp and fast, and can upset poorly-designed electronics. A good turntable is vital too. In this context, it's surprising how things like the quality of the turntable motor's power supply can subjectively reduce the annoyance value of distortion and breakup - even on LPs that are definitely worn and faulty. Also, products like QR Developments Ringmat seem to lower some kinds of LP distortion, reducing congestion and intermodulation, especially towards



ceramic pickups. At that period it was not unusual for cartridges to be fitted with sapphire styli that wore out after 100 hours or less.

If an LP is physically damaged by a blunt or worn stylus, there's no way of saving it - though you may find that careful wet cleaning makes the distortion smoother and less violent. There's a difference between the sound of a worn LP being played by a cartridge able to track every modulation perfectly, and one that loses control on the loud difficult

end of side.

Subjectively, distortion seems to be cumulative. Hi-fi systems have a tendency to magnify and exaggerate the seriousness of any distortion that may be present. In a worst-case scenario, a slight degree of roughness or congestion at source eventually assumes huge proportions as each link in the chain adds its own grunge. Some components do this more than others, possibly because of design defects and limitations. Yet it's an elusive problem to isolate; before passing judgement ► one has to make a subjective

▶ assessment of what constitutes exaggeration.

Suppose you compare two amplifiers, and one sounds much rougher and harsher on a congested recording. Is the 'harsh' amplifier simply revealing what's there, or is the 'cleaner' amplifier hiding faults? Only you can say - it's your choice. After all, you're the one who has to live with the consequences! But, whatever you decide, the importance of good source components that reproduce records as cleanly as possible is paramount - it ensures fewer problems later on. Given a good turntable and arm, and a pickup that tracks cleanly, even the limitations of worn/damaged LPs won't be too exaggerated. The damage itself may be something absolute, but its subjective annoyance value is anything

but fixed, and may vary enormously from system to system.

Speaking personally, I'm very suspicious of hi-fi components that are hyper-sensitive to faults. To me, it's an indication of design problems. I want to be able to play music, and enjoy it regardless of limitations in recording quality. At the same time, I want the sound to be crisp, detailed, and focussed, so that every voice and instrument is audible. Although it perhaps sounds like having your cake and eating it, I don't think these two things are mutually incompatible. If it's possible to have a system that's mercilessly revealing of technical flaws and faults without being revealing musically, it's possible to have the opposite!

About eight ago I bought some

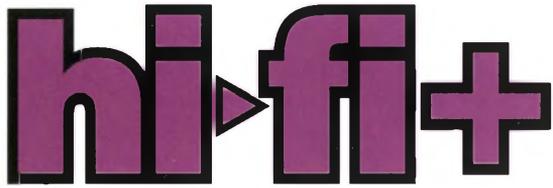
lovely vintage Shirley Bassey stereo LPs dating from 1959 and 1960 off a market stall. But, although the discs and sleeves appeared immaculate and had clearly been looked after, there was some roughness and breakup towards side-ends. I'm virtually certain these LPs have suffered groove damage - probably by having been played on a cheap record player or radiogram. Yet it's been interesting to periodically play these records again as I've made improvements to my system. Although side ends still aren't absolutely clean, and probably never will be, subjectively there's definitely less breakup compared to the roughness I heard originally. Moreover, the breakup has a smoother more controlled quality, which makes it subjectively less annoying. I call that progress. ▶+

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