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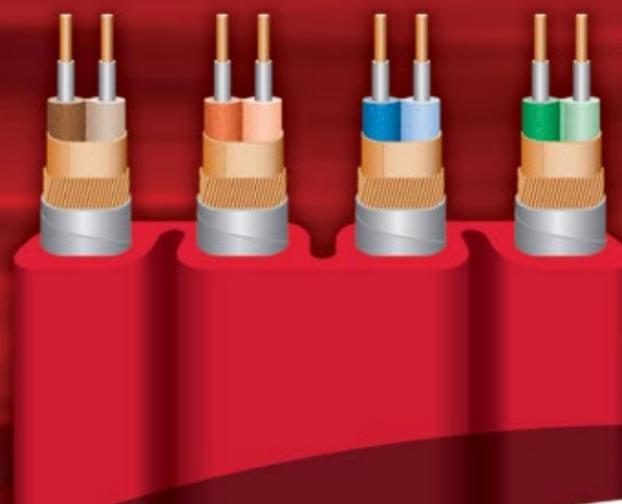
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Awards Issue. No.80 2016



TONE's Two Overall Product of the Year Choices from PrimaLuna and Simaudio

In-Depth Reviews of New Albums from John Scofield, Lambchop, Pretenders, Lemon Twigs, and More

Keith Jarrett's A Multitude of Angels Box Set: Delicacy, Expressionism, Catharsis, and Transcendence

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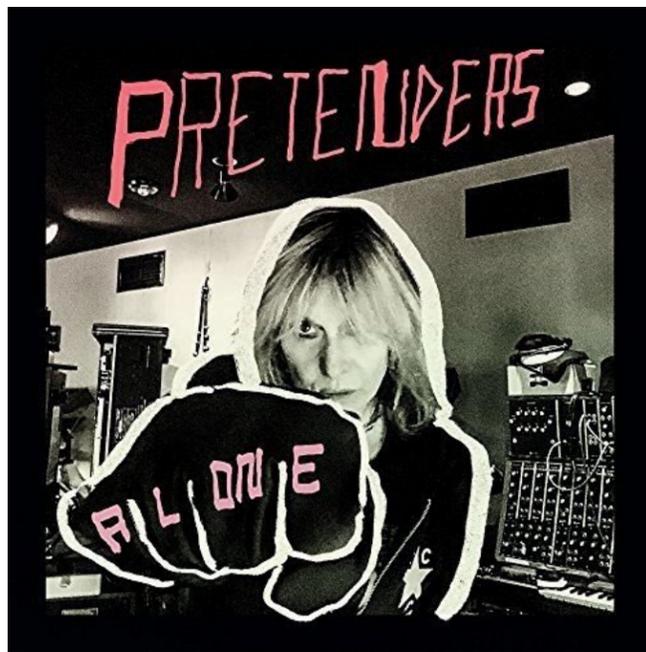
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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



It's that time of the year when we turn our attention to "the awards." If you are new to *TONEAudio*, you might notice that we neither grade things by class, nor do we hand a trophy to everyone that shows up to soccer practice. However, in keeping with my directive that we carry ourselves more as a concierge than the ultimate authorities on everything, I don't even want to review a component that I feel is not outstanding.

You don't walk up to the concierge desk when visiting a new city and ask the person at the desk where six dreadful restaurants are, do you?

Everyone likes awards and that last little bit of validation and/or bragging rights. The Product of the Year was a particularly tough choice this year, because we had two items that not only offered so much value for the price asked, they were both incredibly cool, yet come from opposite sides of the fence. To acknowledge one and not the other would have been completely unfair, so for the first time in *TONE's* history, we have two products of the year: the MOON by Simaudio ACE integrated amplifier and the PrimaLuna Prologue HP integrated amplifier.

While we are dividing this award into categories for "solid-state" and "vacuum tube," they are both so different, I'm taking the liberty of guessing that if you were interested in one, you probably would not be interested in the other. The PrimaLuna reminds me of the current Dodge Hemi Challenger – a true modern classic, combining old school style and heritage, yet built with today's technology delivering more than the old classic ever could. A look under the hood of the HP Integrated reveals parts quality and attention to detail that you would expect from a component with another zero on the end of the price tag. But it's a vacuum tube integrated through and through – no DAC or phonostage included. And it offers sonic performance that is tough to beat for under five figures.

Simaudio's ACE is a similar exercise in excellence, yet this integrated reminds me of the latest Honda Civic Si. Super high performance out of a small motor, and every bit of current tech in the cabin. The Ace features a 50 watt per channel power amplifier that has a ton of current drive, able to drive nearly any speaker you can throw at it, along with incorporating Simaudio's MiND streaming technology, a high res DAC and a MM phonostage all on one chassis for \$3,500. Like the 430HA that was our digital component of the year last year, the amount of sheer quality that the ACE packs inside that chassis makes it a solid foundation for any hi-fi system.

As cool as the mega five- and six-figure components are to live with and write about, it's exciting to see such attention to build and sonic quality at this level. These are components that anyone striving for a great music system can get their hands on now. They both make such great anchors; you could start with an inexpensive (but high quality) pair of speakers to begin your audio journey and upgrade everything else tremendously before you'd ever want to think about trading them in. Conversely, I would have no problem living with either of these and my favorite pair of speakers, and calling it a day for good.

As always, feel free to discuss/argue amongst yourselves about our choices on the rest, and check out the wonderful preamplifiers we have in this issue. There's an equally incredible amount of excitement up on the pricier end of the scale as well. No matter what your level of budget or interest, it's a very good time to be interested in high-end audio.

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"I'd invite you in, but my record collection is a mess."



McIntosh MC225 Power Amplifier

A Revered Legend

Text and photos by Jerome Wanono

A few years ago, a French technician was sent to my home to pick up one of my McIntosh MC2301 power amplifiers that was making a strange noise upon turn-on. As a McIntosh employee in his younger days, he had a lot of interesting input about the brand. He was quick to remark about my 2301s saying, “Have you ever listened to an MC225? Try to find one; they are *really* something.” This was my first contact, and the flame was ignited. A quick web search revealed that many of my fellow Frenchmen also considered the MC225 the best amplifier ever made by the Binghamton, NY, company.



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FEATURE

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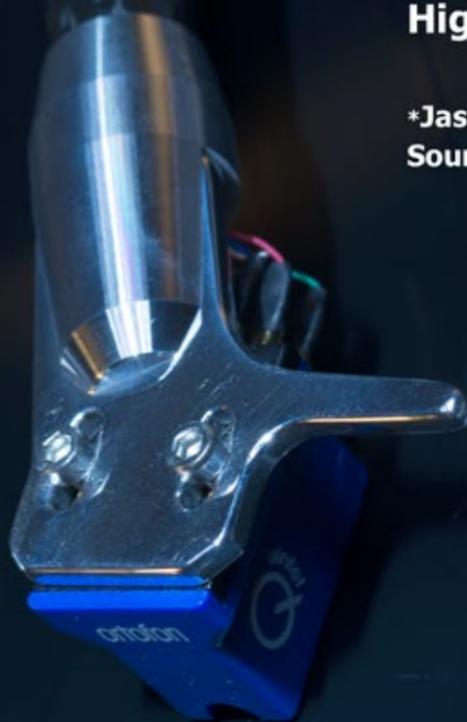
Exceptional Value Award Winner

Jeff Dorgay
Tone Audio

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still obviously a luxury
product.... a winner and a
wonderful component.

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And they were not all using this 25 watt-per-channel amplifier with vintage, high efficiency speakers either. I thought it might be a joke, but my curiosity was burning and I had to get one! I did not even know where or how I would use it, but it was audiophile fever at its best! A year later, I found a nice example, fully restored by a famous McIntosh dealer, so I took the plunge.

While waiting for the amp to cross the ocean, I had a meeting with the late Jean Constant Verdier, father of the famous Verdier turntables, considered by many to be one of the top experts in tube audio to discuss amplifiers. As it turns out he was a huge McIntosh fan since the beginning of his hifi journey. The gothic type on his products was chosen to honor McIntosh. Lurking in his

huge collection of audio gear was a nice MC225, so I mentioned I was waiting for one of my own. He replied, "The 225 is the absolute reference for any tube amplifier designer. The simplicity of the circuit is absolutely unique, and the sound this amplifier produces is also unique. The 240 is more powerful, but the circuit is not as wise as the 225, and uses one more stage." (continued)

FEATURE

I did not ask for more explanations. I am not a technical man. But now that Mr. Verdier is no longer among us, I sincerely regret I did not inquire further.

The MC225 owner's manual describes fairly well the main strength of the McIntosh amplification design: the bifilar output transformer, with its primary windings perfectly wound side by side. It is the absolute art and knowledge of transformer production that leads to the "Unity Coupled Circuit," allowing McIntosh to design a Class B amplifier with intermodulation distortion as close as Class A designs. But the efficiency of the Class B is around 70%. Moreover, in the 225, the output stage is driven very gently. Hence, it is not rare to find a MC225 today still using the original McIntosh-labeled (made by Westinghouse) 7591 tubes testing strong after 50 years! Produced between 1961 and 1967, the unit that arrived to my home was in better shape than I, born in 1972!

So how does it sound ?

My unit arrived with old original/ NOS input tubes, but the 7591 power tubes are the new Electro Harmonix version. Some fans of the MC225 might call you an absolute heretic for not using NOS 7591 tubes, but I will return to this point. I placed the amplifier in my secondary system consisting of a McIntosh C48 preamplifier and Rega RS10 speakers. Sources are the Rega P9 turntable with Denon DL103 Expert Stylus Co. cart and Auditorium 23 SUT, and a SqueezeBox connected in coaxial to the C48s onboard DAC.



FEATURE

It only took a few minutes to get a great first impression. The MC225 plays it straight; completely flat from deep bass to uppermost treble, not emphasizing any part of the audio spectrum. This is also a very agile amplifier, easily flying over the music with excellent transient speed and convincing dynamics, denying the notion that all vintage gear sounds warm, soft or mellow. The reference of J.C. Verier is all about neutrality. McIntosh claims an "unconditional stability into any load," and this is easily verified with the MC225. While Rega emphasizes the use of high power amplifier with their top-of-the-line RS10 speakers, the 225 never runs out of juice, with speaker control on par with much bigger amplifiers, like the stunning Rega Osiris in my possession at the time.

It is hard to believe that you are listening to a 2 x 25 W amplifier. The stereo image is absolutely stunning and holographic: very wide and deep, completely hanging between the speakers that seem to disappear. The weight and presence of the notes is fair compared to a modern Mac like the MC275 or MC2301, but again, the feeling of agility prevails. A few degrees of resolution is also lost in translation, but it still holds its own with modern units. While my Nagra MSA renders more fine detail, nothing seems lacking when playing the MC225.

Hours of listening later, I've lost my critical mind and common vocabulary. *(continued)*

FEATURE



The neutrality of this amplifier comes with a sense of life in the music and a rare richness and truth of timbre. It's the perfect cocktail to forget about analyzing sound in traditional audiophile terms. You just throw yourself into the music. Better yet, dive deeply into it and your connection with the performance is complete. Very few components are able to create this feeling, even among the most jaded audiophiles. And this feeling is shared by everyone experiencing the 225 on my various systems. "Beautiful" is the word coming from their lips again and again. Over the last few years, the MC225 has done duty in multiple systems, always shining, whether the program material is

classical hard rock or anything in between. It's easy to see why this American classic has so many French fans.

In the end

While many of those fans seek out super rare NOS 7591 output tubes from Sylvania, RCA, Westinghouse and the like, I've experienced so much wonder with the modern (and inexpensive) EH tubes; I prefer to keep things simple. The McIntosh MC225 amplifier is a very special piece – an amplifier of a lifetime. These do not show up on the used market often, so if you are intrigued, do not hesitate if you get the chance. If you are lucky enough to grab one, you'd better keep it. You'll see what I mean! ●

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NEW RELEASES

A

Nashville band, Lambchop has long existed on the orbital lines of country music rather than at its center.

Led by Kurt Wagner, who possesses the sort of deep, droll, and melancholic voice that's as fit for a ballad as it

is a funeral, Lambchop may just be the perfect house band for a Tennessee dive bar. A little twangy, a tad soulful, and more experimental than first appearances suggest, the collective can sting like Leonard Cohen and also waltz like Nashville greats. It can dress up—Lambchop works well with an orchestra—or dress down and come off as a lounge act.

So, no more surprises, right?

On *FLOTUS*, which comes about a dozen albums and two decades into Lambchop's career, Wagner and his revolving door of collaborators look far beyond the mystical take on Americana that marks much of the ensemble's catalog. This time, one can argue Kanye West stole Lambchop's heart. Or maybe even Shabazz Palaces, the left-of-center Pacific Northwest hip-hop act Wagner name-checked in the past.



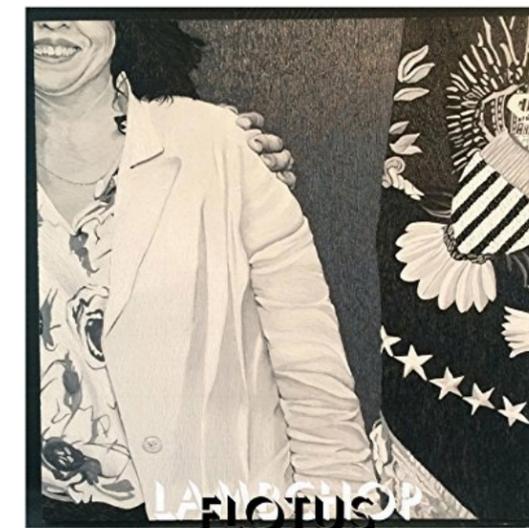
©Photo by Elise Tyler

FLOTUS is a beat-driven record, one where digital effects and Auto Tune-like tricks obscure the sounds to create a downtrodden digital symphony. While *FLOTUS* features a bloated run time of more than an hour, the sonic accouterments never feel like a gimmick. The work remains rooted in Wagner's heartland tales. Only now, they all feel more programmed.

Working primarily with drummer Scott Martin, guitarist Ryan Norris, and pianist Tony Crow—fluid descriptions, considering the amount of instrument swapping—*FLOTUS* comes across as relatively minimal. It possesses a candlelight tone, and Wagner appears more interested in how electronic influences can fit into the Lambchop world rather than reshape it. Listen carefully, and a clarinet or a saxophone worms its way through the computerized briar patch. Wagner's voice is tweaked, making it at once softer and warmer, but also more difficult to discern. The record is built on atmospheres rather than statements, the equivalent of a technologically enhanced and solemn daydream.

FLOTUS, a made-up acronym of “for love often turns us still,” proves reassuring from the start. Its strongest moment arrives at the opening via the sprawling “In Care of 8675309.” Life's small moments—a bug flying through a window, a porch light left on—contrast with local dramas, such as a mayor irate about the late start of a Christmas parade, for instance. We view time and aging through the lifespan of a beloved pet, and a tenderly strummed guitar and lightly glowing synthesizers create a lullaby vibe. More impressive is Wagner's studio-enhanced voice. It functions as the connecting thread. Sometimes gruff in the past, it's now kinder, more familiar but also alien.

Wagner sports a manipulated falsetto for the skittering “Directions to the Can,” where jazzy drumming and nightclub-cool piano

**Lambchop***FLOTUS*

Merge Records, 2LP or CD

notes run up against a woodpecker-worthy beat. The title track, a hardly-there ballad, becomes grander with studio effects. Barely audible doo-wop harmonies ghost around the verses, and the sparkling pop of the beats creates a soft landing for Wagner as he looks forward and back with wistfulness.

Some of the attempts feel like exercises—see the patient voice and clattering groove of “JFK “ or nearly vintage-sounding synths of the nearly 20-minute “The Hustler”—but they're never less than pleasant, even at their darkest. “Now we walk with the weather most uncertain,” Wagner sings on the ominous “Writer,” on which a digital heartbeat shares time with spring-boarding horns.

On *FLOTUS*, Lambchop may lace its songs with modern technology, but it's not a move to get with the times. Instead, the tact serves as an attempt to slow time down.

—**Todd Martens**



Paul Cauthen

My Gospel

Lightning Rod Records, LP or CD

A

mericana music is currently a bountiful place. It's teeming with young artists that frequently sound like far older souls—think Jason Isbell, BJ Barham, and Lindi Ortega. Now add to that list Lone Star native Paul Cauthen, whose heavily weathered baritone carries the patina of a man with years of honky-tonk miles under his belt.

The singer-songwriter first nabbed attention in the band Sons of Fathers. On his full-length solo debut *My Gospel*, Cauthen builds on the bones of vintage country, traditional gospel, and first-wave rock n' roll. Under the adventurous production aesthetic of Beau Bedford, a number of songs are artfully arranged with shivering layers of reverb and echo. It's a dazzling and subtle mix of old and new elements.

The influence of a slew of country titans marbles this song-cycle through and through. With his deep voice and impassioned delivery, Cauthen at times seems a doppelganger for Elvis Presley—circa the King's brilliant 1968 comeback.

©Photo by Jody Domingue



MUSIC

Of course, a fine line exists between having influences and being overwhelmed by them. As much as Cauthen draws from hallowed elders, he is never cowed by the legends he emulates. He brings his own modern sensibility to the material, creating a slightly psychedelic, evolutionary country sound that honors its roots while extending the tradition. No mean feat, that.

My Gospel opens with the country-funk groove of "Still Drivin'." With its chicken-pickin' guitar and Cauthen's rumbling vocals, the number recalls Waylon Jennings' cheeky classic "Only Daddy That'll Walk the Line." Cauthen also explores a number of country's most fascinating tributaries. The foot-tapping "I'll Be the One" recalls the odd, joyful country-disco experiments of hard-country crooner Vern Gosdin. "Saddle" echoes the mystical fare Marty Robbins used to make, an ethereal sound steeped in prairie lore. Near the end of the song, the howling strings of a steel guitar and cries of a ghostly chorus summon the spirits of the plains. Similarly, "Marfa Lights" acknowledges the supernatural vibe of the vast Texas sky.

Cauthen's songs are packed with narrators that hit the road, dream big, make mistakes, fight demons, ride trails, hop trains, and chase setting suns. Along the way, they alternately find themselves with torn hearts, swaggering hips, and troubled minds. These are men filled with equal parts bravado and doubt.

"If we never even try, we'll be asking ourselves why our dreams never came along," Cauthen sings on the yearning "Once You're Gone." The vocalist takes his own advice. He has tried and handily succeeded at making a genuinely stunning album. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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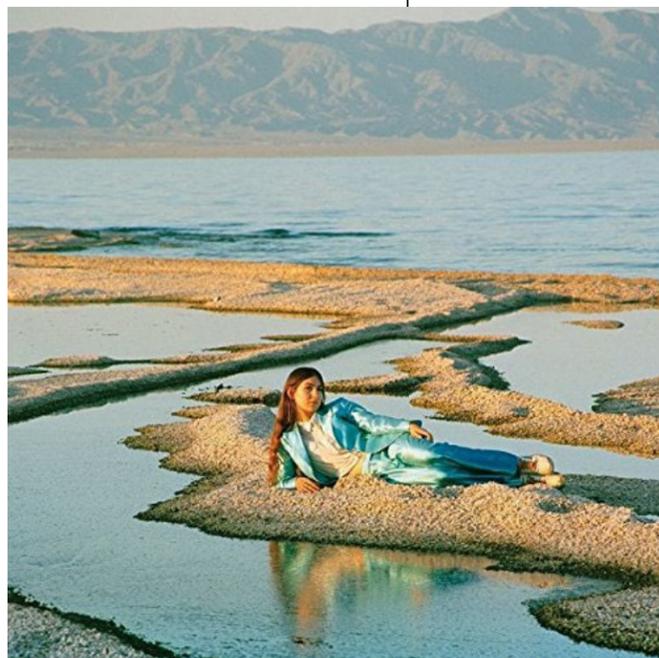


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Weyes Blood

Front Row Seat to Earth
Mexican Summer, LP or CD

Folk music that often sounds like spirituals, *Front Row Seat to Earth* is a mysterious, forlorn work. A gentle collection primarily centered around lost or unrequited love, the album, Natalie Mering's fourth as Weyes Blood, raises a question and then doesn't let it go: Where has all the intimacy gone?

Closeness and romance are framed as much as issues of generational divide as they are challenges to be achieved. Pastoral synthesizers and patient pianos create a backdrop built for contemplation—an attempt to slow the world down when it doesn't want to cooperate. “You can buy into that dream, waiting for true love to seem real,” Mering sings on “Away Above,” a song that starts as a seaside hymn but soon becomes graced with a tenderly plucked guitar and hopeful digital effects. When topics regard matters of the heart, *Front Row Seat to Earth* argues we're our own worst enemy.

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MUSIC

A bold statement? No, of course not, but *Front Row Seat to Earth* succeeds because it steps back and takes a grander, cultural view of human relationships. It does so even as Mering draws the listener closer, the album a soft orchestral mix of moonlit melancholy. Take, for instance, "Generation Why," where church-like harmonies shift around a guitar so bright it may as well be a harpsichord. Mering transforms a millennial battle cry—"YOLO"—and turns it into a plea to reconnect with the things that are truly important. As she stares into her phone, she realizes, "it's not the past that scares me." Chimes chirp in the background like a text-message alert, and the tune gradually dissolves into a choral-like breeze.

"Diary" is lonelier, the music stark, piano-driven elegance about one's own dead-end attempts to change. Mering often sings as if she's at a recital. Her songs occasionally possess the angelic weightlessness of, say, Bat for Lashes or the slower tunes of Florence and the Machine. Yet her vocal approach remains that of a reassuring narrator. "Used to Be" stops just shy of heartache theatrics, the firm melody acting as a pick-me-up. "Can't Go Home" struggles with a sense of place and does so while voices from the heavens sound as if they're extending a hand.

All told, *Front Row Seat to Earth* emerges as an album about disconnecting more than it is one concerned with reconnecting. A new-agey tone appears here and there, especially on "Can't Go Home" or "Seven Words." One also gets the impression that Mering thinks rather highly of nature. "In time," she sings on "Seven Words," "we'll both be free from this ball and chain."

Is it love to which we're shackled, or modern life? *Front Row Seat to Earth* may drift toward ambiguity, but it provides a clear answer. The work finds solace in the serene.
—Todd Martens



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Hope Sandoval & the Warm Inventions

Until the Hunter

Tendrils Tales, 2LP or CD

The third time proves the charm for Hope Sandoval & the Warm Inventions. Not to say the project's prior two albums—2001's *Bavarian Fruit Bread* and 2010's *Through the Devil Softly*—fall short. But *Until the Hunter*, the latest from the duo of Sandoval (Mazzy Star) and Colm Ó Cíosóig (Mazzy Star, My Bloody Valentine) shows a decidedly forward progression. If the first two efforts witness the pair setting up shop in a somber sonic comfort zone, the new record illustrates how they have redecorated.

Hope Sandoval & the Warm Inventions formed as an offshoot of the alt-rock band Mazzy Star, in which Sandoval serves as lead vocalist and Ó Cíosóig as a multi-instrumentalist. Mazzy Star rose to fame with the 90s classic "Fade Into You"—a lovely, laidback tune that has become so engrained in pop culture, *Vulture* even published a piece called "Is Mazzy Star's 'Fade Into You' the Most Overused Song in Film and TV?" The duo's side project is fairly far removed from mainstream attention, however, especially considering its sleepy songs and soft-spoken vocals remain easy to overlook.



Much like the tandem's last album, during which every song slithers out of the speakers in a slow and moody manner, a majority of *Until the Hunter* deploys similar tactics. "The Peasant," "Day Disguise," and "Treasure" sound as if they have been plucked from previous studio sessions. "A Wonderful Seed" could have fallen victim to the approach, too, due to the familiar flutters of an acoustic guitar. Yet Sandoval's winding vocals result in a track coated in inviting mystique. "Nobody could keep this lady their own," she sings, perhaps talking about herself.

Even on "The Hiking Song," during which Sandoval sings of

an omnipresent "you"—"Why do you do the things you do?"—it sounds as though she is rattling off her innermost thoughts, questioning her own actions rather than those of another. The album's final three surprisingly lively songs create further topical disconnect but also reveal a new side of Sandoval and Ó Cíosóig's artistic partnership.

"Isn't It True," "I Took A Slip," and "Liquid Lady" claim more vivacious beats and lush layers of production that contrast the singular acoustic strumming heard elsewhere. The closing "Liquid Lady" especially sounds as if it crept its way onto the album by mistake. Sandoval compares herself to

a hurricane, sedately pledging "I'll hush you, keep you warm/ Like a hurricane into a storm"—an unexpected simile from an introvert.

Yet the song that really captures the juxtaposition of the familiar and new sound of Hope Sandoval & the Warm Intentions arrives courtesy of the Kurt Vile-assisted "Let Me Get There." Featuring the accompaniment of Vile's deep, raspy vocals and twangy guitar hooks, the track stands as the album's most well balanced offering. "It's all in the groove," Vile and Sandoval sing on the chorus. Here, it appears Sandoval and Ó Cíosóig have found theirs.

—*Lindsey Havens*



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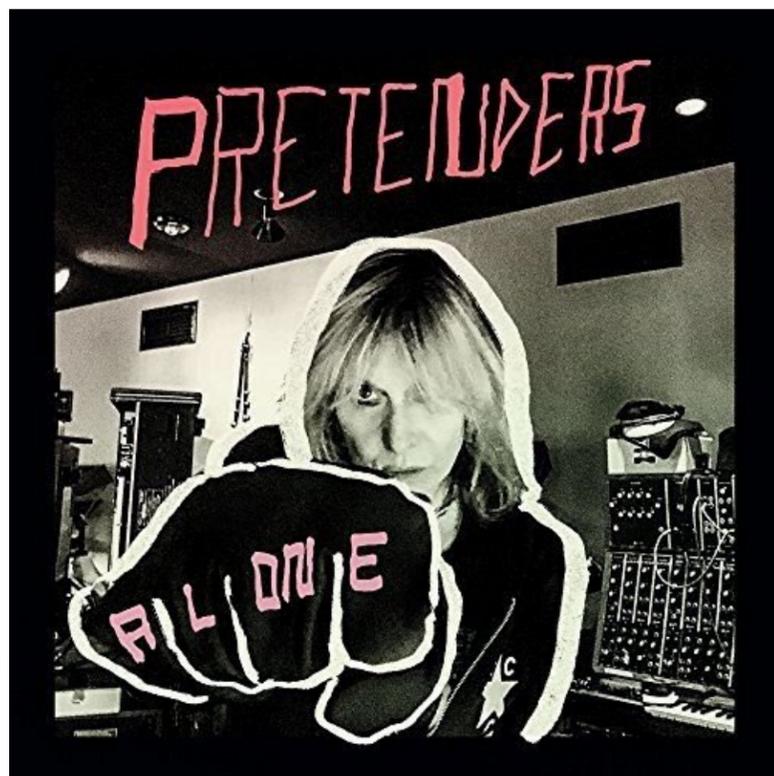
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Pretenders

Alone

BMG, LP or CD

Chrissie Hynde will always shoulder the burden of living up to her own mighty legend. She first exploded onto the scene as lead singer and rhythm guitarist of the Pretenders. The band's self-titled 1980 debut arrived just as punk was giving way to new wave and, from top to bottom, still stands as one of the era's fiercest albums.

While Hynde has carried on with the band name through the years, the iconic original lineup is long gone. Guitarist James Honeyman-Scott and bassist Pete Farndon died in the early 1980s.



©Photo by Jill Furmanovsky

Drummer Martin Chambers has been an on-again/off-again collaborator. In essence, the Pretenders as a band—or, brand—is strictly Hynde surrounded by a rotating cast of hired guns. On *Alone*, the group's latest iteration includes Nashville pedal-steel session player Russ Pahl, the Black Keys' Dan Auerbach (who also serves as producer), and cohorts from Auerbach's side band, the Arcs. Guitar legend Duane Eddy chimes in for a cameo.

Admittedly, these are all stellar players. But especially after the release of her first solo album in 2014, it seems ridiculous for Hynde to carry on with the

Pretenders' name. She, and no one else, remains the *raison d'être* for this project, which begs the question of truth in advertising.

Throughout her career, Hynde has shown two striking sides in song. On one hand, she inhabits the role of a rock n' roll badass skilled with the withering kiss-off. On the other, she plays a vulnerable loner confessing her weaknesses and desires. In both cases, she makes for a powerful force of nature when the material is up to snuff. The latter happens about half the time on *Alone*. The best songs step out of the garage and into 1960s pop territory. *(continued)*



©Photo by Jill Furmanovsky

"Never Be Together" is filled with slinky guitar and the distant rumble of timpani drum. The evocative "Let's Get Lost" begins with the sound of a revving motorcycle before swaying along via tambourine surrounded by a wash of strummed guitars. It emerges as a loving homage to the Shangri-Las, the iconic girl group that presaged Hynde's own leather-booted tough-and-tender approach.

Hynde's upbeat, rock-centered material doesn't fare as well. The album opens with the title track, a crunchy albeit non-descript garage nugget featuring a stilted recitation. "Chord Lord" comes across as trudging hard rock with a generic melody, while "Gotta Wait" picks up the tempo in banging and blunt fashion.

The quieter material more compellingly showcases Hynde's supple, distinct alto. For example, the gentle "Blue Eyed Sky" unfolds slowly against brushed drums and understated guitar. "The Man You Are" serves as pretty, pensive dream pop that finds the singer's defenses stripped bare.

Taken as a whole, *Alone* features several likable and, at times, emotionally moving tracks. Hynde is still a welcome presence. But at this late date, saddling this release with the Pretenders' name only serves to invite difficult comparisons to past glories of a legendary band that no longer exists. For better or worse, this is truly her show—and hers alone. —**Chrissie Dickinson**

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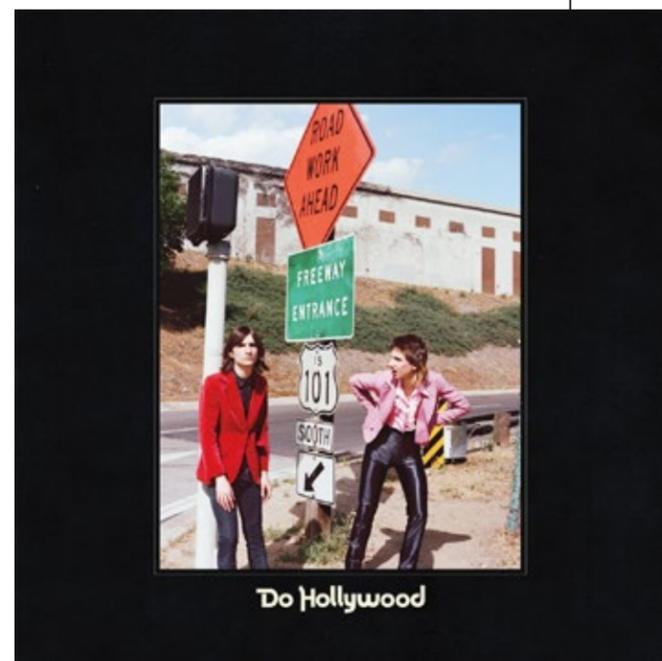


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Truth in Sound



The Lemon Twigs
Do Hollywood
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Classic rock is all the rage. Bob Dylan is now a Poet Laureate. The Rolling Stones have a new album on the way. Roger Waters is staging a massive tour in 2017. And, in case you missed it amidst the Boomer noise, New Jersey's the Lemon Twigs are one of the fall's most-buzzed-about bands.

The brothers Brian and Michael D'Addario wear the 1960s as if the decade has become the latest fashion trend. They look as if they've stepped out of a party at Andy Warhol's The Factory and sound like a mash-up of some of the era's most important acts. A little Beach Boys, a bit of Velvet Underground, quite a lot Syd Barrett and Frank Zappa, and definitely a tinge of the Beatles during their *White Album* era. Is this imitation or are these millennials—Brian is 19 and Michael 17—essentially remixing the period's sounds for more modern tastes?

The answer lies somewhere in the middle. If anything, the songs are too busy, a little too off-the-wall. Is that a keyboard or a kazoo? Rather than tap into a groove-based psychedelic-rock vibe, the Lemon Twigs sometimes seem more like they're playing with toys rather than aiming for trippiness. Yet the duo also proves that charm can go a long way. The Lemon Twigs pack their music with enough sonic shifts—melodies emerge and disappear as if to constantly misdirect the arrangements—that *Do Hollywood* more often than not feels like a celebration of rock history.

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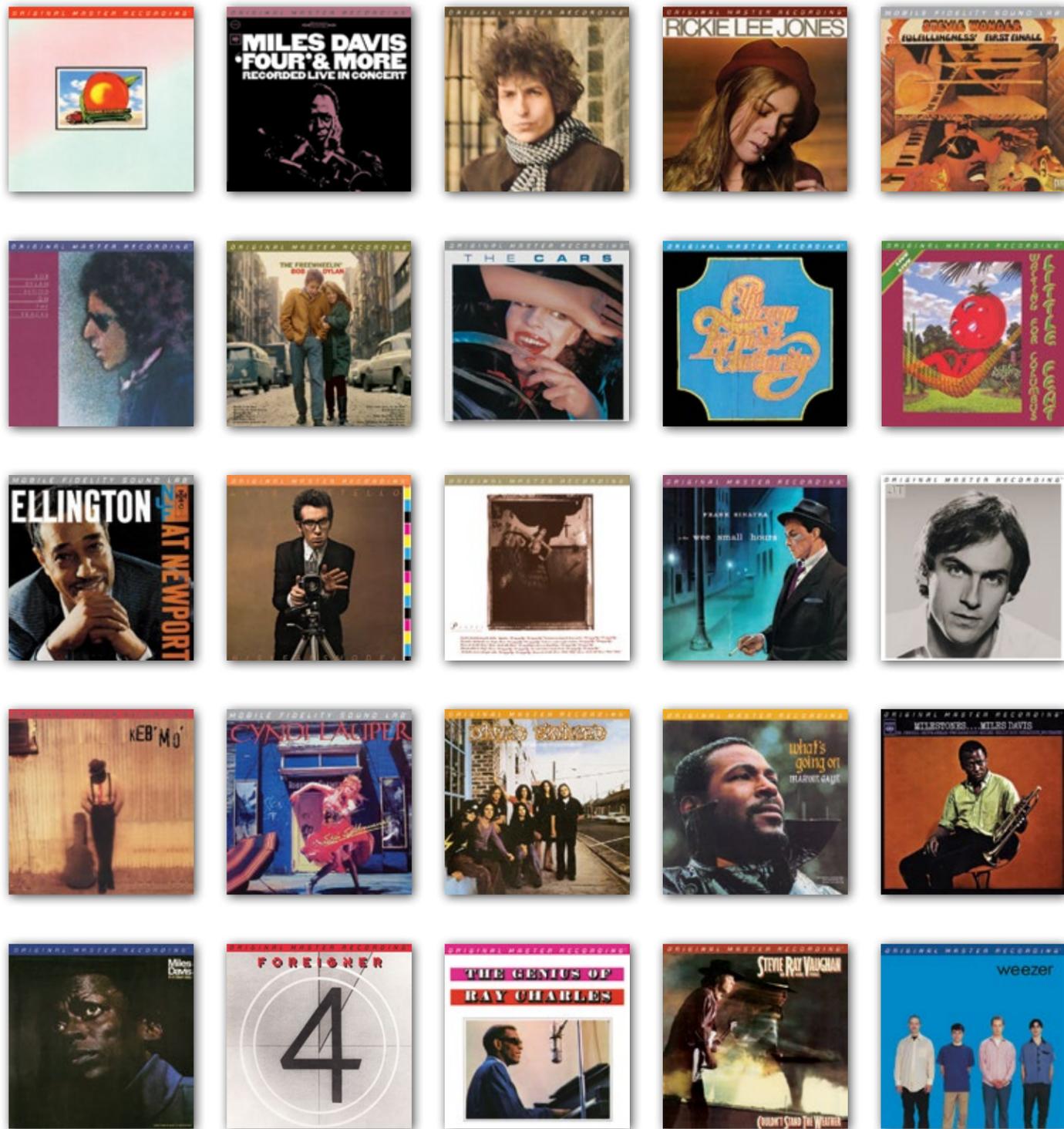
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MUSIC



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Or, more accurately, a goofy, wide-eyed mix tape. *Do Hollywood* isn't exactly deep. These are tunes about girls. But the mood falls somewhere between naïve and lascivious. You'll have to forgive the siblings for posing without shirts in the press photos. But when it comes to lyrics, the guys just wanna hug—they're too gentlemanly to say they crave more in a song. Maybe, the brothers sing on "A Great Snake," a lonely mutant or a vagrant hobo is controlling them, hoping such outlandishness may help explain an unexplainable crush. The song matches the lighthearted nature of the lyrics. A guitar coasts but

the keyboard stops, starts, and churns as if it mimics a broken music box.

Earlier, the piano ballad "How Lucky Am I?" arrives as the sort of gooey, wistful tune many a lovesick teen no doubt wishes he/she could gift to a dream prom date. Its swooning, *Pet Sounds*-like harmonies are only a bonus. Then there's the cosmic "Hi + Lo," which starts slow and ends frantic, all the while channeling the nervous anticipation of trying to fool around when the parents are home. Synthesizer lines ooze into the spirited guitar riffs, bleeding together like colors on a tie-dyed shirt.

Produced by Jonathan Rado of the like-minded Foxygen, *Do Hollywood* exudes a loose and zany tone that serves as a statement of the brothers' musical expansiveness and leaves cohesiveness to the side. "Haroomata," for instance, sounds like a Queen-fueled Tilt-a-Whirl at a neighborhood carnival. "Frank" clings to a demented, candy-bright hook and "These Words" gets an extended intro anchored by a passionate, blue-eyed soul groove. The latter works because of the high energy. A little more polish, and the Lemon Twigs may start to sound like Chicago. For now, the boys are too young to know any better.
—Todd Martens

Peachtree Audio's Nova 150 Amp/DAC

All You Need under One Hood

By Rob Johnson

Starting in 2007 with its Decco integrated amplifier, Peachtree Audio has continually focused its engineering talent toward development of high performance products at a price every music lover can afford. Its latest addition to the stable, the Nova 150 Integrated Amplifier, is another winner. Combining a linestage, MM phono stage, 150 watt per channel amplifier, DAC and a headphone amplifier in a single box for \$1,599, the Nova 150 provides everything an audio fan needs – just add sources and speakers of your choice.



FEATURE



Shine On

The familiar rounded case of past Peachtree products is here with the Nova, but what is missing is the small window showing off the vacuum tube buffer. Cool as this has been, offering the option of a slightly mellower sound, the new Nova is so much quieter than past Peachtree designs – they’ve cast the coolness of the tube away in the quest of better performance. This elegant case now has a dark grey, somewhat pewter finish instead of the silver used before, with piano black or the ebony mocha of our test sample.

Weighing in at a modest 15 pounds, it’s amazing that Peachtree is able to pack so much functionality under the hood. Its petite footprint of 4.37 inches high x 14.02 inches wide and 13.25 inches deep makes it at home anywhere. There is no equipment rack too small for the Nova, and it will fit on almost any shelf or countertop with ease. Though there are vents on the top of the case, the Nova rarely got more than slightly warm, even at high volume, so an enclosed cabinet is not out of the question with modest ventilation. But it’s so stylish, you’re going to want to show it off.

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FEATURE



Everything but the kitchen sink

The rear panel offers room to connect virtually any source with ease. In addition to connections and a grounding plug required for an MM phono input, two single ended “Aux” inputs, two optical inputs, and a coax digital input, there’s little left to desire. But wait... there’s more!

A type-A USB input reveals the Nova’s Apple-ready options to physically connect iPhones, iPads and iTouch – as long as those devices are new enough to output from a lightning port. A separate USB type-B input allows connections from a computer source, like a Mac Mini. This input accepts digital file resolutions up to 32-bit/384kHz PCM and 5.6MHz DSD from a computer, decoding it through the industry leading ESS Reference 9018K2M Sabre DAC. This capability to render such high resolution digital audio files makes the Nova 150 highly future-proof for now. Exciting as this is, the Nova does a fantastic job with standard, CD Quality, 16 bit/44.1 kHz files too.

A tape loop input and output adds analog flexibility, offering the option for a tube buffer, equalizer or tape deck. Considering the reel-to-reel craze, why not? Subwoofer fans will appreciate the line level output and the Aux 2 input’s ability to double as a home theater bypass. Also included is a 12v trigger output and settings for an optional WiFi module. It doesn’t get any better than this.

Peachtree is to be applauded for all this versatility, but there are a few limitations. The safety-conscious speaker binding posts which meet international requirements can accommodate only banana terminations or bare wire speaker cable connections. Peachtree has informed us that there will be a running change on the Nova, and this issue will be addressed in future models. Unless an owner takes the non-recommended approach of putting half a spade in the bare wire hole and cranking down the post, there’s no way to connect them. The quest for compactness has forced all of the RCA inputs rather close together as well, so choose your cables carefully with the Nova.

FEATURE





Around front, the Nova has a very streamlined interface. Dime-sized buttons control source selection, each with a small LED above it to indicate usage, and a large knob toward the right edge of the faceplate controls volume. The only other item interrupting an otherwise smooth façade is the Nova's headphone ¼ inch output jack. Those wishing to enjoy headphones equipped with a mini-jack will need an adapter.

A plastic remote control with 3mm aluminum top panel comes standard with the Nova, allowing the user control over most of the Nova's feature set from the comfort of a listening seat. Well-placed buttons across the remote's real estate make power, mute, and volume adjustments easy, even in the dark. When volume is adjusted, the Nova com-

mandeers all the LEDs above the source selection buttons, temporarily making them into a meter showing the relative volume level. One LED lit above the first source represents low volume, with other LEDs coming to life as volume increases. If all eight LEDs are lit, you'll want to watch your ears. The Nova's 150 watts into eight ohms offers more than enough power to rock!

Listen up!

With so much functionality in such a small box, the Nova delivers a lot of sonic surprises and no weak spots. It's clearly evident how much time was taken to voice this component for maximum sonic synergy. Playing digital files via the internal DAC, the overall sound is smooth, relaxed and slightly warm, merely polishing

the edges of the music, without sanding off too much fine detail. It resolves a much higher level than you might expect a component at this price to muster, without goosing the high end of the register, to offer a false sense of resolution.

The Nova paints a wide left-to-right soundstage, adeptly extending music beyond the speaker boundaries, while keeping the perceived image of centered vocalists "human sized" and not overblown. Listening first without the subwoofers engaged, the Nova delivers robust bass through my GamuT RS3i reference speakers, and taking advantage of the variable outputs, the subwoofers reveal the full frequency range this amplifier is truly capable of. The Nova does an excellent job for its price, giving

"Way of Life" by Kick-Bong plenty of punch and resolution, and it's easy to get lost in the sound rather than to nitpick it.

The headphone section is excellent, and using the Nova with a variety of headphones on hand never fails to intrigue. While the headphone amplifier is separate from the onboard power amplifier, the sonic signature through headphones mirrors that which is projected through the speakers. It's fatigue-free and well-rendered. Headphone listeners seeking crushing bass punch through the cans might find the Nova's presentation a touch to the polite side, yet the voicing chosen will be excellent for the majority of users. Considering how much functionality is within this integrated amplifier, a

headphone amplifier is a marvelous bonus.

A Price-Performance King

Peachtree has engineered a winner with the Nova 150. At \$1,599, it represents a real bargain for all the functionality it offers. Its new owner gets a 150-watt amplifier, a DAC, a linestage, a headphone amp, and a phono stage all neatly packed under a single hood. In the world of hi-fi, it's easy to spend five times that on a single component. If you need more power, also consider the Nova 300 with – you guessed it – 300 watts per channel at the ready. If you are in the market for an integrated amp in the Peachtree Nova's price range, do yourself a favor and audition one at your local dealer. You'll be glad you did.



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FEATURE

Additional Listening *by Jeff Dorgay*

Considering we have a preamplifier, power amplifier, DAC and headphone amplifier already sharing the Nova's circuit board, the fact that they could even make room for a phono stage, too, is pretty impressive. Much like a Volkswagen GTi, the key to the Nova's success is the balance it brings to the table. While the age-old cliché of being more than the sum of its parts applies here, none of the individual components outshine each other either.

The same can be said for the internal phono stage. Spinning a variety of LPs with the new Rega Planar 3 and its supplied Elys 2 cartridge (\$295) and the new Vasari Gold Note MM (\$500) shows the Nova's phono stage to be incredibly capable, quiet and tuneful. Going up a notch to the high output Sumiko Blackbird 2 (\$1,195) still proves the Nova incredibly competent and speaks volumes for the level of performance at your disposal.

Good as the phono stage is, this analog die-hard loves pairing the Nova with my MacBook Pro, serving up some high res digital files via Roon and calling it a day. Mating the Nova with a pair of Vandersteen 1Ci speakers made for the most audio fun I've ever had for well under three grand. The Nova did an equally great job driving the Quad 2812s, as well as my ancient Acoustat 2+2s and a pair of Magnepans, so it should have no problem with whatever you choose to pair it with.

If you are new to the world of hifi, put the Peachtree Nova on your holiday gift list. You need one. Resistance is futile; there's no easier way to get into high-end audio, and no way you'll find a combination offering more performance. Awarding the Nova one of our last Exceptional Value Awards for 2016 is our pleasure.

www.peachtreeaudio.com
MSRP: \$1,599



BMW i3 (gen two)

\$39,995 www.bmwusa.com



As cars get more automated and more electrified, they are becoming more like smartphones and laptops in the sense that upgrades always seem to be right around the corner. The first generation of BMW's i3, launched a few years ago, was quirky from top to bottom, with some incredibly wacky color and interior choices. No residual value data meant they were leasing out for an ungodly \$799 per month. And at that price, you can buy a lot of petrol. The unfriendliest part of the original i3 was its paltry 80-mile charge range, limiting this vehicle's "utility" pretty severely.

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DYNAUDIO

TO NE STYLE



Corner most any electric-vehicle owner and they all have tales of “battery anxiety,” lamenting more than a few nail-biting driving sessions with the charge meter on zero. One of our publisher’s favorite phrases when driving the Smart ED is that “we can probably push it home from here.”

One of BMW’s biggest claims for the i3 is that “it feels like a BMW,” and they have certainly succeeded here. The doors clunk with the same weight as a 3 or 5 series, and aside from a flat panel display where the dash resides in a BMW with a combustion engine, the rest of the controls fall right into place, along with a slightly abbreviated version of the current iDrive system.

Moving out onto the road for a drive reveals the spunkiness of a seven-second 0–60 time; (Car and Driver recorded 6.5 sec) the instant torque and no shifting makes the i3 feel a lot faster than it is. That torque comes in handy in real-world driving, with 30–60 coming up nearly instantaneously. Those wanting the specs take note, the i3 delivers 170 hp and 184 foot pounds of torque in an approximately 2900 pound car. By comparison, a late-’80s E30 325i weighed about the same; its 2.5 liter, six cylinder gasoline engine producing 168 hp and 163 foot pounds of torque, propelling it from 0–60 in just over 8 seconds. *(continued)*



Just as with audio components, specs don't tell the whole story. While the i3 doesn't pull near the g's as a new M-Car, thanks to tires not much wider than those fitted to a mountain bike, it still does, in fact, feel like a BMW. Play Station steering feel of previous electric assisted BMWs a thing of the past, the steering is now nicely weighted with a definite performance feel and a nearly 50/50 weight balance, along with traction control, keeps this buggy planted. Those who haven't had the electric drive experience will be amazed by the silky-smooth transmission of power.

Smartphone users will love the app accompanying the car, which keeps you posted on the state of battery charge, remaining range, where you last parked, navigation and more. Apple watch owners can have this info right at their fingertips, or wrist, so if you choose to be smug, you can tell your gas guzzling, bro-truck driving friends just how much CO2 you're saving the environment from. Perhaps being a little

careful sharing this data will be the better part of valor.

The only disappointment in our test vehicle was the wimpy audio system. Of course, every watt is precious with a battery operated car, but considering the current state of class D amplifier technology, and how spooky quiet the i3's cabin is, it begs for a better sound system. Even without hearing it, we'd suggest the Harmon Kardon multimedia update. Or you could contact the folks at Bavsound (www.bavsound.com) for a plug-and-play speaker upgrade kit. Could be a future article, should an i3 join the *TONEAudio* fleet.

Best of all, the well thought-out rear compartment, with seats folded down and the doors opening in an opposing manner without center pillar is an audiophile's dream come true. You can fit a pair of giant Burmester amps or a Gotham subwoofer in with ease. There's no stopping you at the next audio jumble when you need to get your goodies home.

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ONE STYLE



Stache Labbit

\$34.95 www.kidrobot.com

We're huge fans of the Kozik Smorkin Labbit, and he's been featured in a lot of our Facebook posts. This quirky, cuddly, anti-social, chain-smoking pink bunny now has a friendlier companion in black or white. Also available as a plush toy, we feel that the soft plastic model is the way to go. As it says on the Kid Robot website, "The Smorkin Labbit should be in every home!"

LSR Silicone Strap for Apple Watch

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One of the more fun aspects of watch collecting is changing the band/bracelet to suit your mood, décor or dress, right? Nomad's black LSR silicone strap looks cool, is incredibly sturdy and humanizes the look of the Borg-like Apple timepiece.

Silver or black hardware models get matching accents, so you always stay in style, and the LSR silicone is claimed to be stronger, more water resistant and, best of all, hypoallergenic compared to standard-issue silicone products.



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Sammy Hagar

Are We Having Any Fun Yet?
The Cooking & Partying Handbook

\$19.95 www.amazon.com

After reading this book cover to cover, you have to wonder if there is anything Sammy Hagar can't do and how large he would be if he didn't front a rock band. The boy loves to cook as much as he loves to eat. Most of Hagar's selections center around shrimp, clams and lobster, but if you are shellfish-averse, fear not, there are still plenty of things to enjoy inside the pages of this book.

Turns out the amicable red rocker is quite the chef in his spare time, and unlike Martha Stewart, his recipes are not only pretty easy to follow, the results are damn good. Much of the story centers around Hagar's building the now famous Cabo Wabo restaurant, and how much he likes to hang out with celebrity chefs. No less than Emeril writes the forward and pays Hagar a long list of compliments.

Written in the same fairly humble, with just the right amount of rock star name dropping thrown in as his 2011 autobiography, Hagar gives us plenty of advice on drinking, partying, fighting hangovers and how to find the best ingredients for the table and our lives. All in all a great read and a great way to sharpen your skills for cooking some kick-ass Mexican dishes.



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This one, thin enough to easily fit in your wallet, or Velcro on to your favorite remote provides the same tracking functionality. You'll be surprised at how much easier it makes to keep track of potentially often misplaced items. Or surprise the hell out of your kids by putting one somewhere they might least likely suspect it would beep when you trigger it with your smartphone.

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Versa Watch Winder

\$39.95 www.amazon.com

Those of us with more *analog* timepieces need to keep the damn things wound on a daily, or they stop ticking. It's Physics 101, bodies at rest tend to stay at rest. Granted, there are much fancier watch winders than the Versa, but this is a very utilitarian item, and at this price, easy to grab one for all the watches in your collection. Wouldn't you rather spend that money on records anyway?



Omaker W4 Pocket Speaker

\$16.95 www.amazon.com

Keychain speaker is more like it. While the friendly folks assured me that the W4 “would blow me away,” it did not. Seriously, how much sound can you expect from a 2-inch driver and 3 watts of non-SET power?

However, it’s a fun conversation piece that connects via Bluetooth and plays louder than the speaker in an iPhone 6+. It’s unfortunate that you can’t program two of them for stereo operation; that – and a wider color palette – would make these small speakers a lot more fun.



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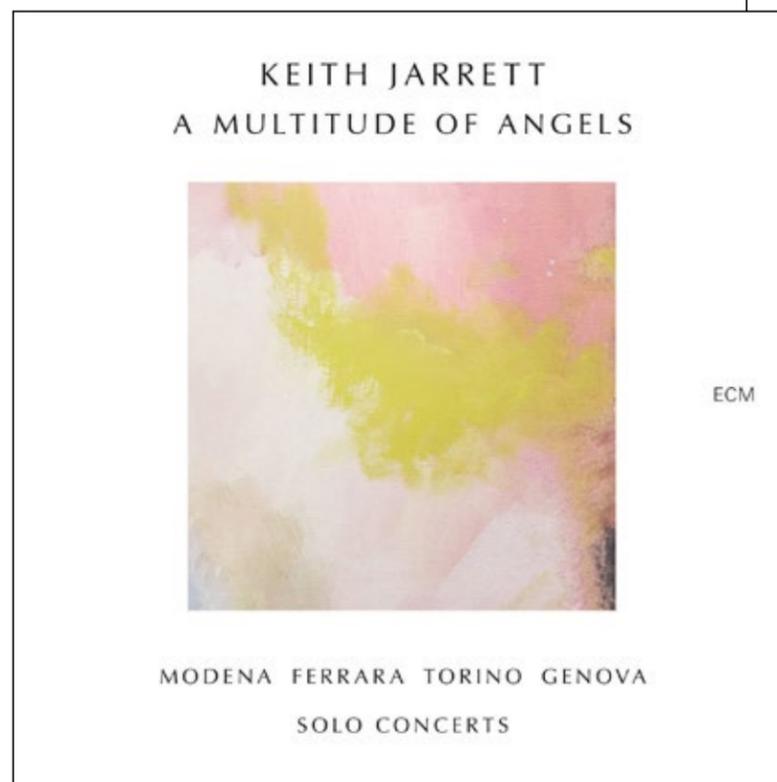


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JAZZ & BLUES

**Keith Jarrett**

A Multitude of Angels
ECM, 4CD box set

A spontaneous notion is enough to get things going—just a gaggle of notes, really. In his fully improvised solo work, Keith Jarrett doesn't need much more than a sketchy vamp or a hint of a riff to ignite the ever-shifting parade of melodies he inevitably conjures. It's a babbling brook approach. The water is essential, sure, but once it's moving, the momentum provides the most inviting aspect of the experience. Where's it going to wind up? Splashing rocks, soaking leaves, eddying into a pool created from pure fluid force? Possibilities abound. Over the course of more than 15 solo albums since his 1971 recital debut *Facing You*, Jarrett has become uniquely eloquent at concocting themes from his rich imagination and—perhaps more importantly—connecting them in rhapsodic episodes. In a word: flow.



©Photo by Henry Leutwyler

A Multitude of Angels catches the pianist in both a place of vulnerability and strength. Comprised of four CDs from four concerts in four Italian cities, these unedited 1996 improvisations were recorded right before a major career break due to the musician's extended bout with chronic fatigue syndrome. Jarrett bounced back from its pernicious clutches a few years later, but these days, he chooses to break his virtuosic solo sets into discrete sections rather than sustain the uninterrupted sense of adventure that earned him a global rep via live masterpieces such as *Bremen/Lausanne* and *The Köln Concert*.

This current approach hasn't played havoc with the key elements of Jarrett's aesthetic boilerplate, however. Comparatively recent discs such as *Rio* and *Paris/London: Testament* brim with passages that range from two-fisted frenzy to one-fingered poignancy. Using the entire instrument to voice the details of his overtly emotional music remains a Jarrett forte. A full blush of broad strokes and nuances comprise his work on *A Multitude of Angels*, so I thought it might be helpful to list a few of the maestro's cornerstone artistic elements and point out their agency here. (continued)



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DELICACY: Jarrett sat down in Torino, Italy and, at a courageously limpid tempo, began to sketch an extended musing that consistently folded inward with enough commitment to be deemed a public meditation. By the time he whittled away his need for the middle register and headed up to trillville, he'd reached the kind of composure that only needs a note or three to speak its mind. His music has long been built on sensitivity. At its most dubious, far too much so. But as his right hand ekes out a series of exquisite glisses that prove a pivot point to the feistier ardor to come, he reminds us just how much terrain he can convincingly traverse while illustrating the power of grace.

EXPRESSIONISM: Frenetics aren't a Jarrett staple but he's certainly a fan of the high-flying vigor that reaches out and grabs an audience. His second improv in Modena takes off with a small storm of action that dodges the dissonance but tips a hat to the cagey delirium Cecil Taylor judiciously employed in the 1960s. As his fragmented phrases land on top of each other and the pianist determines the architectural logic in real time, a

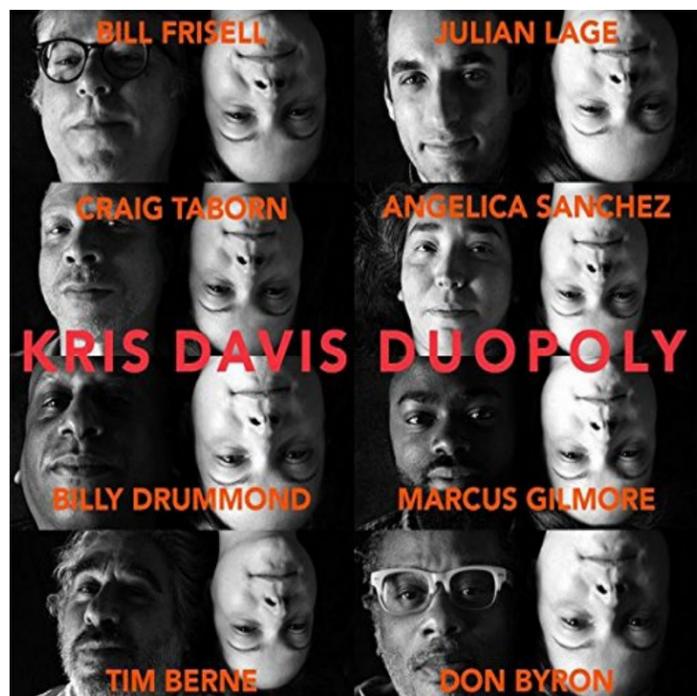
hurtling momentum arises. This skyscraper may be built on shards, but its integrity is obvious.

CATHARSIS: Repeat a riff or lick with just the right volition and there's a good chance you're going to enhance its meaning with every new go-round. Blues musicians know all about it. About 10 minutes into "Verona 2," Jarrett reaches a point where his Morse code repetition of one note starts to blossom into a left-hand motif that brings a hammer-head force front and center. A few more minutes and it's a Steve Reich barrelhouse scenario: spilling, building, intensifying. The pianist takes it farther than others might. For a moment or two, it seems like the soundtrack to an OCD episode. Yet, by the conclusion, the extended pounding makes way for a breakthrough. Like Van Morrison throttling the phrase "streamline promenade" during hell-raising live performances of "Moonshine Whiskey," Jarrett wallops the instrument until the mountaintop has been reached.

TRANSCENDENCE: Jarrett poured out the passion in two extended

Ferrara pieces, but the pith of this untitled encore speaks volumes. Touch counts as a Jarrett hallmark. He can have a single note resonate in a variety of ways, and this bittersweet sign-off has the feel of a drone. He feathers the keyboard, and with one note bleeding into the next, it almost sounds like a horn player is center stage. An abstract spiritual with a folkish, vaguely Celtic, aura.

In his notes for the box set, Jarrett—who once said he slept under the first real piano he got for his birthday as a child because he was so smitten with its possibilities—reports the "angels" of the album title are many: The audiences, instruments, concert halls, and energy that got him through these shows all aligned to help him reach what he deems a "pinnacle" of his career. Jarrett's high points are many, so as far as pinnacles go, maybe it is, maybe it's not. But a couple things seem irrefutable. The resourcefulness and vision of this music is obvious, and these luminous excursions repeatedly cut right to the heart of the matter, even when they take the long way 'round. —*Jim Macnie*



Kris Davis

Duopoly
Pyroclastic, CD+DVD

Pianist Kris Davis and producer David Breskin hatched the plan for *Duopoly* while taking a walk. They didn't overthink it. A set of duets with players from outside her circle, two by two by two—one composition and one improvisation with each of two guitarists (Bill Frisell and Julian Lage), drummers (Billy Drummond, Marcus Gilmore), reed players (Tim Berne, Don Byron), and fellow pianists Craig Taborn and Angelica Sanchez. They didn't rehearse the pieces, but might do more than one take. Then came the overthinking. The sequencing is quixotic. All the pieces, paired by instrumentation, are followed by all the improvisations, the players now in reverse order—an arrangement so schematic you're all but instructed to hit “shuffle” play.

Although she works in some knockabout free settings, Davis plays with disarming economy and clarity—Monkish qualities that in her hands don't sound like Monk, not even on his “Eronel.” She draws the melancholy forth from the melody, referring back to it often enough to keep it in front of our ears. Drummond remains the old-school swinger among the mostly younger players. Here, he takes his cues from the pianist, knowing when to slip into a groove, when to slide out of it only to circle back, and when to step into full-throttle dialogue with his snare and bass drum doing the talking.

On the improvisations, Davis is good at setting the tone and temperature for her partner. Her low-volume romantic spackling and sympathetic commentary coax Byron's excitable clarinet down into his warmer lower register. She gives his line harmonic direction and bathes his sound in flattering moonlight. Davis is also unafraid of quiet. At times on either duet with Taborn, the pair barely touches the pianos, and four hands can sound like one mind. But on her “Fox Fire,” she and Taborn slowly build to a fireworks display recalling Conlon Nancarrow's player-piano studies in multiple clashing rhythms. (This is the duo that toured behind the album—its flagship combination.)

Davis is quick. When Lage spikes high harmonics on acoustic guitar, she instantly finds the top of the keyboard, intensifying the effect. She likes crinkly, music-boxy figures up there. And she

has a few pet tacks. As accompanist, she may linger on some thuddy bass chord in syncopated rhythm, like she's the drummer. She's also fond of what we might call live looping. She'll grab a short phrase or fragment and repeat it note for note with the same inflection in steady time, creating a holding pattern whose circularity can be infectious. On her improvisation with alto saxist Berne, the latter's use of keypad percussion, plosive attacks, altissimo squeaks, and breath-long phrases make him sound oddly Evan Parker-like. Davis' “Trip

Dance for Tim” bends toward his sleek curvy style in the way “Prairie Eyes” aims at Frisell's twangy comfort zone.

The mood stays highly cooperative throughout. Playing Sanchez's “Beneath the Leaves,” the pianists take turns playing repeating figures behind each other solos in mutually supportive fashion before moving on to a ratcheting mechanical phrase they play in ghostly unison. Improvising with the drummers, Davis goes for her own jabbing percussive moves mid-keyboard, but she's not a slammer. She doesn't need to shout to get our attention.

The accompanying DVD doubles the program yet again: The same takes in the same order, filmed with two cameras, one on each musician, presented in split-screen. That lets us sort out which pianist plays what, but the shots aren't always ideally framed. In performance, hands convey more information than faces. But we do see Gilmore's tabla-like bare-hand moves at the traps, and view how closely Drummond listens while waiting to pounce—intense listening being the key to *Duopoly's* success. There's a lot of variety and little groping around. —**Kevin Whitehead**



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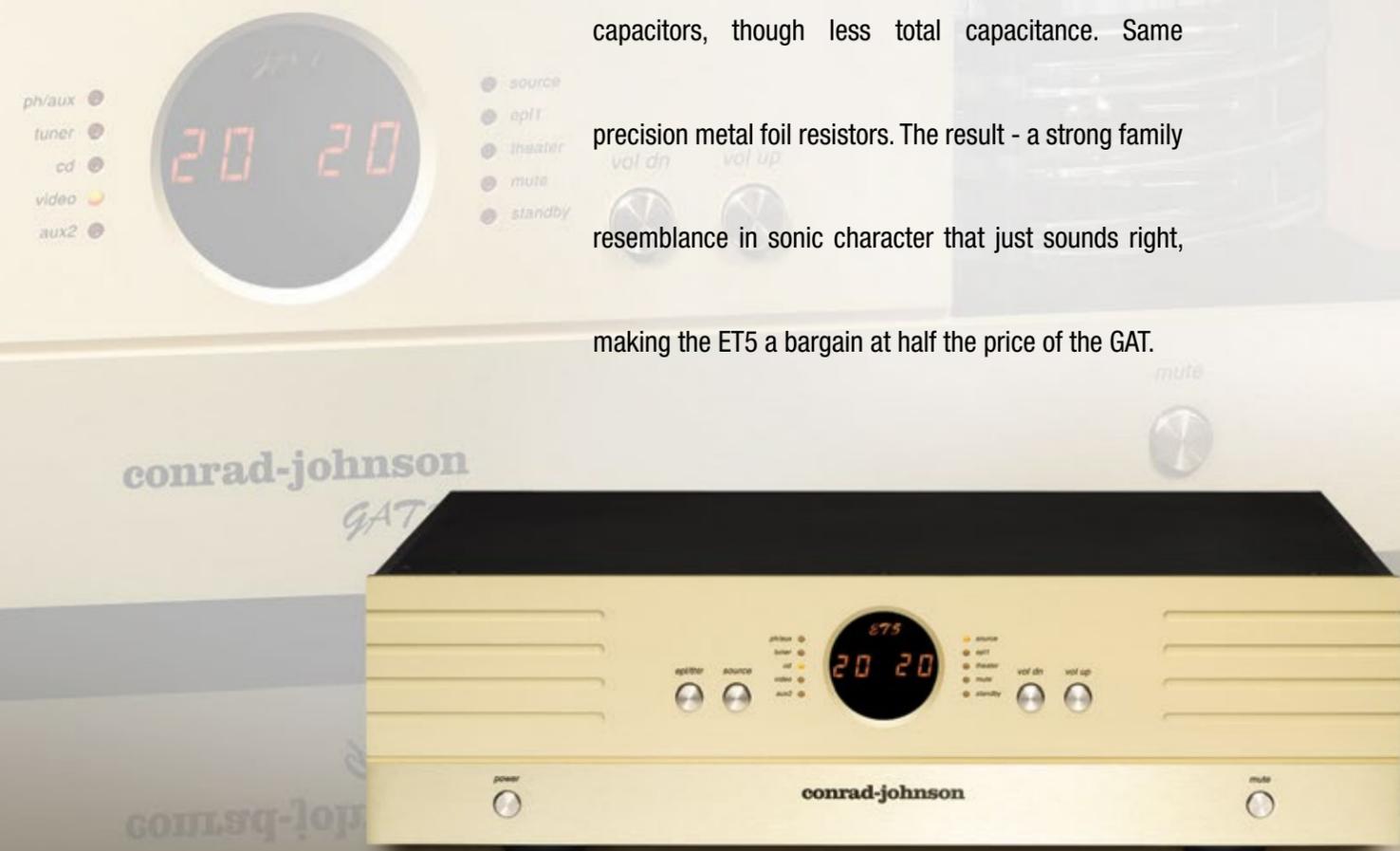
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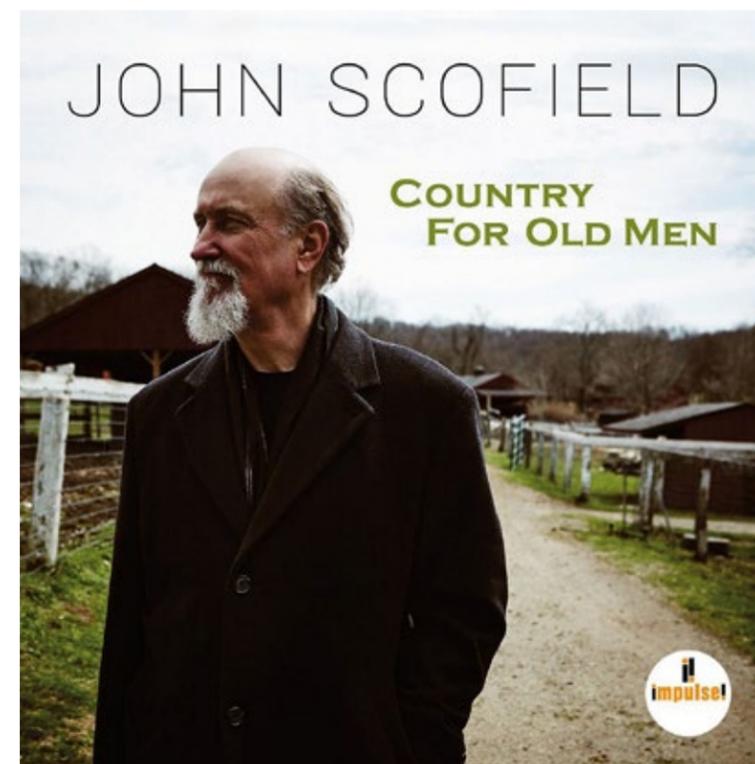
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John Scofield

Country for Old Men
Impulse, CD

There's no lack of great guitarists in country music. Start with Merle Travis, veer over to Chet Atkins, make way for Speedy West and Jimmy Bryant, and you'll still have plenty of killer string-players left to discover. From grace and nuance to speed and authority, their pickin' usually brings out the lyrical character of the song at hand while helping sell its emotional clout. Absorb what Atkins does with James P. Johnson's "Carolina Shout" and you'll hear how a delicate statement of melody—flecked with a handful of witty fills—can be tied up in a swinging little package.

It probably won't surprise long-time fans, but John Scofield has a way with twang, too. The opinion continuously unfolds on *Country for Old Men*, a romp through tunes associated with Hank, hollers, and honky tonks. Somewhere in the middle of "Mama Tried," the 64-year-old bandleader reminds us that prioritizing lyricism is a forever-winning approach when it comes to broaching eloquence—and that pacing is an expert's game.

In the first verse, Scofield starts off shadowing Merle Haggard's melody, and from "doin' life without parole" to "her pleading I denied," he makes it seem like he's happy to color inside the lines. Then, ka-boom, it's lift-off time. As drummer Bill Stewart, bassist Steve Swallow, and keyboardist Larry Goldings flip Hag's steady clip-clop rhythm into something much sleeker, Scofield roams the back 40, blowing a string of idiosyncratic phrases and adroitly linking 'em together. Hag loved to swing, too—he was a Bob Wills freak, after all—and a legit nexus appears being forged between the two as the guitarist messes around with the singer's melody.

This all works because Scofield remains a song guy. From his earliest albums on, originals such as "Holidays" and "Fat Dancer" served as the kind of improv vehicles that were easy to hum. As the decades flew by, that skill sharpened. *Quiet's* "Away With Words" and *Works for Me's* "Not You Again" are ear-worms par excellence. (continued)

MUSIC



©Photo by Nicolas Sutti

By the time Scofield started putting his spin on Ray Charles (check his heart-on-sleeve “Crying Time”) and the African-American gospel canon (see the bouncy prayer of “I’ll Fly Away”), an approach had been sketched out. Country music had danced in his head for a while, too. In 2007, he added extra a dollop of grace to Charlie Rich’s “Behind Closed Doors.” Personally, I wanted to hear more Nashville notions from him right then and there.

Scofield’s known as burner. In the last 15 years, he’s spent time reinvigorating the jam-band formula and proving how cogent some psychedelic explorations can be. *Country for Old Men*

is flecked with firecrackers. It counts a “Red River Valley” that conjures Booker T & the MG’s playing at CBGB, a straight-up frantic “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” and an “Wildwood Flower that might give A.P. Carter heart palpitations. Hard-driving stuff, to be certain. But as he did on Rich’s chart-topping ode to lust, he also shows us just how strong his ballad game sounds. *Country for Old Men* finds him on a George Jones jag, racking up three gorgeous tearjerkers by the country icon.

“A Girl I Used To Know,” approximates Possum’s jukebox melisma, deploying all those swoops and slurs in the “I won’t be-ah-egg you not to go” line.

As “Mr. Fool” closes out, the guitarist alludes to Freddie King and launches single-note exclamations everywhere. And you can literally feel the shot ‘n’ beer woe at the heart of “Bartender’s Blues,” the gin-mill waltz James Taylor laid on Jones’ plate in the late 70s. Mix this old-school beauty with the drama Scofield brings to Dolly Parton’s “Jolene” and the cunning of his flow on Shania Twain’s “Still The One,” and a through-line emerges: Lilt and whimsy are essential to his toolbox these days. No wonder he closes with a 30-second tintype refraction of “I’m An Old Cowhand” that manages nods to both Sonny Rollins and Roy Rogers. —**Jim Macnie**



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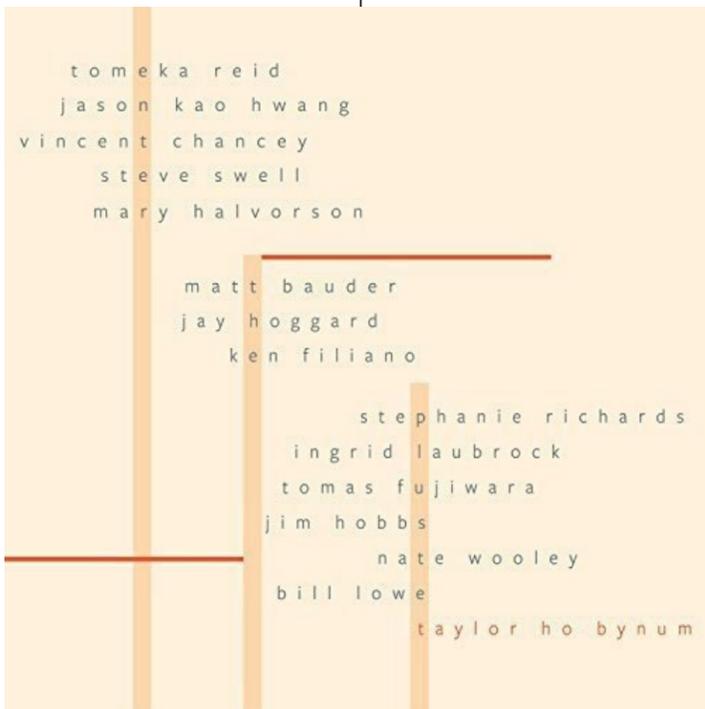
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Taylor Ho Bynum
Enter the PlusTet
 Firehouse 12, CD

Cornetist and composer Taylor Ho Bynum is at once an independent, a prominent follower, and a strong leader. The independent: In 2014 he mounted a month-long bicycle tour, pedaling from Vancouver to the Mexican border, playing gigs with local players along the way. Prominent follower: Bynum, an ex-student of Anthony Braxton, administers the latter's Tri-Centric Foundation and helps him mount and conduct large-scale works. Working for Braxton and others has taught him how to corral large groups himself, quietly stepping up to impose order when things threaten to fall apart.

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On *Enter the PlusTet*, all those strains converge. The 15-piece lineup wouldn't have been so out of place in Count Basie's *Kansas City*, allowing for a few substitutions—Jay Hoggard's vibes in for piano, Vincent Chancey's French horn in for third trombone—and adding a mini-string section of Jason Kao Hwang on violin and viola and Tomeka Reid on cello. Following his epic trip, Bynum set out to make orchestral music “that celebrates the unexpected discoveries of a digressive journey,” a music of movement between fixed points—the very

themes that crop up amidst the improvisations on the album's three long tracks.

From Braxton, Bynum also learned about pacing a set, alternating the tight and loose, and yoking together diverse material in convincing ways. He does it without sounding like his angularly zigzagging mentor, not even with a march during the album's first four minutes. It occurs on “*Sleeping Giant*,” where, over the course of 21 minutes, Bynum pulls everything out of his bag. Instant-conducted staccato hits on the razzzy air-raid opening;

that chipper march, underpinned by vibes in the glockenspiel role, with swooping harmonized melodies and unruly solos over the top; a line he sketches in the air for the players to follow, when backing Ingrid Laubrock's soprano saxophone solo; the cornetist's rousing big ballad, what any other leader would position as a triumphant closing theme. Bynum lets that catchy tune teeter on the edge of chaos, as a bevy of horns weave rude variations around it, and then lets it melt like a cake left out in purple rain. At the close he provides one

more theme for the players to coalesce around—a way to call them all home.

Something similar happens on “*That Which Only...Never Before*.” Bynum builds to a big wall-of-sound melody on which anyone else would dwell, and rolls off it in favor of a final pastorate, coasting toward silence. Somewhere in there, altoist Jim Hobbs serves as the band's Johnny Hodges, sliding up on key pitches from below, one sign Duke Ellington is in the PlusTet's DNA. Good soloists emerge in every section, including trum-

peter Nate Wooley and trombonist Steve Swell. Everyone gets a moment in the solo spotlight. Hoggard, one of Bynum's early mentors, has rarely been so well showcased on record since the 1980s.

Bynum wrote “*Three*” for James Jabbo Ware's eccentric New York orchestra, but its central deep bluesy theme, with slinky saxes in the lead, bows low to esteemed composer Muhal Richard Abrams, who also likes kaleidoscopic shifts in texture. This one starts with a brief melody for a kind of sum-

mer-bandshell quartet, though a minute later we're submerged in Mary Halvorson's effects-laden guitar howl. Still, as in a dream, Bynum proceeds by segues, not hard cuts. Transitions are important to his music, and here we may detect a bicyclist's progress again, the way one is constantly readjusting legs and lungs to a road's changing angle of ascent or descent. How you'll wheeze uphill one minute and *whee* downhill minutes later, with corresponding transitions in tempo. It's the kind of pacing Bynum knows in his bones.

—Kevin Whitehead

FEATURE

Record Doctor V

Keeping 'em clean without breaking the bank

By Andre Marc

Keeping your records clean is an essential part of enjoying analog playback. Otherwise, the listener is not hearing what the artist intended, which does not mean noise and other nonmusical artifacts. Vinyl enthusiasts use every conceivable DIY method ranging from soap and water to elaborate mechanical contraptions. There is no denying that noisy vinyl playback sucks, and experience tells us that a dedicated, purpose built and designed device for cleaning your platters is best.



FEATURE

There are numerous products marketed to vinyl lovers to help keep their records clean. Aside from brushes, solutions, and sprays, there are mechanical devices that essentially do most of the work for you. These products range in price from highly affordable, to wallet busting. Some use dry methods, some use wet methods, and many use a hybrid. The bottom line is they all clean the grooves for improved playback.

One such device, which has stood the test of time, combining manual and mechanical functions, is the \$199 Record Doctor, now in its fifth iteration. Shopping for a record cleaning device can be confusing. It is important to avoid those that have the potential to damage your albums, and those that not well made enough to stand up to heavy duty use. The Record Doctor V is very well made and is 100% safe for even your most precious LPs.



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Chris Martens, Hi-Fi+, September 2015

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Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio - THE SHOW, Newport 2015

"The (RS3) speaker proved so wonderfully descriptive of the textures and timbres of acoustic and electronic sounds that it was never anything other than wholly captivating."

John Bamford, HiFi news, 2014



FEATURE

The Record Doctor V mounts your record safely and securely, requiring you to manually spin it with a clamp while you clean it with the supplied brush and solution. That is just the first step. Like many other wet process machines, the Record Doctor V uses a vacuum to dry the record and suck out any remaining grime, so you can play it immediately; the whole process takes less than 3 minutes!. You will need to plug the Record Doctor V in the power source to use the vacuum function, and the power cord is plenty long enough to make that stress free.

Comparing the Record Doctor V to other similarly priced solutions puts it at the top of the heap. It simply works as advertised, and not having to wait for your albums to dry before playing them makes it that much more fun. A quick before and after listening session of Traffic's classic, *Shoot Out At The Fantasy Factory*, and their self-titled second album, along with some other recent eBay finds, proves telling. There is so much more music after the cleaning; even the most casual listener will notice.

No cleaning machine will work miracles, so if you can

think the Record Doctor V will make your ratty, heavily scratched thrift store find of *Rumours* sound like a shrink wrapped copy, think again. But if fingerprints, oil, dust, and other debris are the issue, look no further. What makes the Record Doctor V even more practical is you can clean one record, or a dozen, your choice. Some record cleaning machines force you into a batch cleaning situation, not so here. Overall, the Record Doctor V is a pain-free, efficient, and cost-effective way to clean vinyl without the inconvenience. ●





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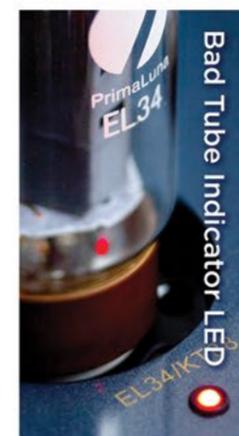
The GS75i packs a lot into a single chassis. Borrowing heavily from the company's technology bin, on top of the 75 watt per channel power amplifier section, utilizing four KT150 tubes, it

retains a similar sonic signature. Add a full functioning preamp, (albeit all single ended RCA inputs here) an excellent MM phono stage an upsampling DAC and the same headphone stage from the GS Pre, makes makes for an interesting package. Especially for someone wanting the ARC pedigree, but not an entire rack full of it.

With everything you need except a streamer, think of all the money you'll save on power cords and interconnect cables! Full review in process.

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Graham Audio Chartwell LS3/5

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Right on the heels of the LS5/9 review we finished, the mini marvel from Graham Audio, their version of the Chartwell LS3/5 (no “a” in their designation) is equally enticing. A fully licensed BBC edition, it builds on the strengths of the old and takes it into the 21st century with style and grace.

While a bit on the expensive side, Graham is paying a healthy sum for BBC licensing, and for the care taken in building these entirely in the UK. Forget the other knock offs, these are the real deal. There might be a touch more sweetness in one of the vintage models, but if you lose your mind one night and blow a tweeter, it’s all over. Like a mint Austin Healy Sprite, save those for a gentle ride on a summer afternoon. Make these your daily driver and you won’t regret it.

Watch for our review shortly.

Sonus faber Lilium

Burning Rubber!

By Greg Petan

I love the phrase “Where the rubber meets the road,” defining that no-nonsense point where it – whatever “it” is – either shows up and beats expectations or packs it in and heads back to where it began. In my experience, it is the speaker that embodies this axiom to a greater degree than any other component in the chain. Converting electrical energy into physical energy is a process rife with challenges and extremely difficult to get right, and the Sonus faber Lilium gets it right.





Aesthetically, one cannot overstate the high level of craftsmanship involved in creating the Lilium – photos simply do not do it justice. The simple act of unboxing the Lilium leaves me breathless. Nearly six feet tall and weighing a hefty 227 lbs. per side demands your A-game and a few brawny friends when unpacking and setting the Lilium up. Our review pair ended up 6 feet from the front wall in my cavernous 33' x 60' x 14' listening room. Once the lighting is adjusted, the deep, lustrous flecked metallic black finish is flawless from every angle. The glass plate revealing the top-mounted 10" upward-firing passive woofer is the perfect treat for the audiophile voyeur. Separate enclosures divide the bass section from the mid-tweeter housing that runs the entire length of the speaker connecting the top and bottom plates, with no physical contact between the two, ensuring acoustic isolation between all of the drivers.

There is not a corner of the Lilium that isn't stunning. The scalloped front reveals a 1-inch tweeter, a 7-inch midrange and three 7-inch mid-woofers. A 92dB/1 watt sensitivity rating and 4-ohm impedance indicates a fairly easy load for an amplifier to drive, yet the more power on tap, the more it comes alive. Frequency response is 20Hz to 35kHz.

Not quite the girl I remember

Having reviewed the Sonus faber Stradivari Homage some years ago, I thought I had a vision of what to expect with the Lilium. The Stradivari Homage was as enjoyable as a cruise in a vintage Rolls Royce on a Sunday drive in Central Park. Inviting, enveloping and possessing a particular character, Sonus faber built an empire on this point of view. Warm, slightly rolled off on top and awash with texture, the Stradivari imbues a cast of welcome color to everything it touches. *(continued)*

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REVIEW

With these impressions still fresh in my mind, I was a bit shocked when I first heard the Liliu. Far more neutral and lacking any of the pleasant yet distinctive colorations of past designs, the Liliu is cut from another cloth. Forget Rolls Royce; the Liliu is Ferrari F1 all the way.

The Liliu, like the F1 car, converts all the input directed to the drivers with little wasted energy. There is so little of the low-level distortion often taken for granted in speakers of any price. Gone are subtle and often not-so-subtle distortions attributed to cabinet resonance, crossover anomalies or driver non-linearities. The result is a level of clarity, speed and overall honesty I have rarely experienced in 25 years of listening to speakers. The Liliu's ability to seamlessly blend all seven drivers per side leaves a coherent soundstage and a balanced presentation that is endlessly entertaining.

Out of the pits and onto the track

Four different sources offer great insight into the Liliu's ability to get out of the way of the components in the reproduction chain, whatever they might be. The Triangle Art Signature turntable with the Ortofon Cadenza Black Cartridge and the Audio Research REF 3 phono reveals the most music through the Italian beauties. PS Audio's DirectStream DAC fed by the Macintosh MB 50 Streamer proves head-scratchingly good for its \$2,000 price. Adding the PS Audio PerfectWave transport into it ups the game further, with the D'Agostino Master Audio MLife Integrated Streamer/DAC offering incredible transparency through the entire range and an elusive musicality that nearly equals the sweetness of the analog selections. *(continued)*



The Liliu comes with solid metal jumpers as they tri-wire capable. Throw them out immediately and either use tri-wire speaker wire, or do as I did and procure jumpers from your chosen wire manufacturer. The inclusion of the MIT Oracle jumpers to the MIT ACC168 speaker wire takes the performance of the Liliu much further, eliminating a bit of flat, slightly brittle coloration in the high frequencies and upper mid-band glare that you don't realize is there until the jumpers are replaced. Once you experience the additional depth and ease, there is no turning back.

Once the wiring configuration was settled, listening to the differences in amplifiers at my disposal became much easier. Compared to the ultra-transparent D'Agostino, the Pass Labs XA200.5 mono blocks and the XP-20 preamp shift the tonal balance down towards the mid-bass. The warm, full tonal character of the Pass gear fleshes out the Liliu giving it a mid-bass warmth, greater overall weight and a more expansive sonic image. The D'Agostino gear is slightly more transparent, and both amplifiers provide tremendous grip in the lower registers. Bottom line: the Liliu will reveal the tonal character of whatever amplification chain you choose.

Listening to *Stanley Clarke, Larry Carlton, Billy Cobham, Deron Johnson & Najee Live at the Greek*, Stanley drops the first bass note after the intro section on "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat" with any doubts surrounding the low frequencies are instantly put to rest. A quick spin of "I'm Home Africa" from East River Side Drive seconds the motion. Pulse pounding, ultra clean, and controlled, the Liliu keeps the bass right where it belongs, never creeping up the frequency range into the lower mid-band. The Liliu adds zero upper bass warmth – if that is what you are looking for, look elsewhere. If the Liliu does err, it is on the side of the bass being slightly over-damped. *(continued)*



Appearances can be deceptive.

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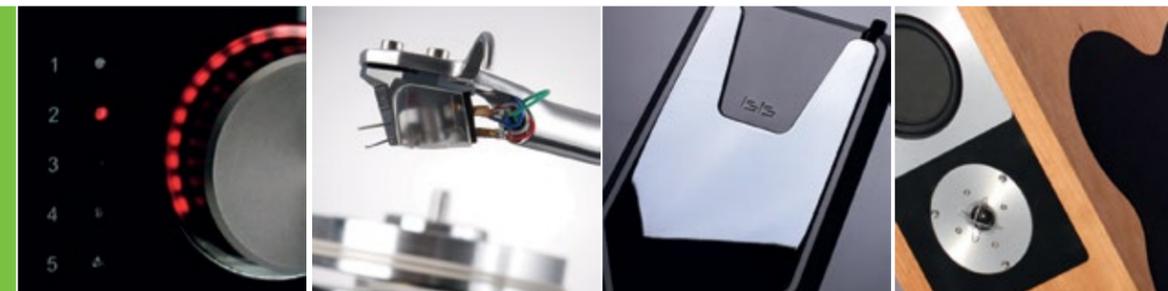
Quite simply, if it doesn't sound better, it doesn't happen. (If it does sound better, but is considered 'impossible,' they'll figure out how to do it anyway. There's a very good reason the company's named Rega Research).

Rega's view is that hifi's simply a tool for listening to your music.

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Despite its control and accurate display of power, I would prefer a bit more sheer wallop when called upon, though this may be a function of having a massive room. Perhaps one more suited to the top-of-the-range Aida?

Vocals tell a significant part of a speaker's story. Margo Timmons' performance throughout Cowboy Junkies' *Lay It Down* is handled with such great resolution and speed, offering a convincing illusion of a live performance rather than a reproduction. These are incredible songs written with pathos, great insight and heart; the Sonus faber speakers provide a perfect conduit. Sultry and demure, Margo's voice hovers between the speakers with a perfect blend of focus and bloom. My reference Lansche 4.1 are excellent in this regard, but not this great.

The final step

In addition to exceptional soundstaging, these speakers masterfully recreate minute details, bringing fresh insight into old chestnuts, like one of my favorites, *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman*. This jazz classic, effortlessly rendered by the Liliium, paints a stereo image creating a level of interest, spontaneity and a seamless coherent reality that few speakers ever quite manage.

Even when streaming internet radio and TIDAL, the Liliiums still reveal a plethora of information, making these speakers that you can enjoy peak performance with, without being limited to a few

audiophile-grade pressings. Nuanced when need be, explosive when the time is right, music always comes together perfectly through the Liliium. The overall experience is both satisfying and surprising, no matter what the volume level. Thanks to an extraordinarily low noise floor and a finely shaded dynamic range, there is a huge difference between music just getting soft or quiet and the system being able to make the music sound like it's being played more softly. It's easy to feel the restraint when a horn player holds back a little or a drummer is bringing down the energy as displayed on *Verdandi*. Quiet takes on a whole new level of meaning. For the very same reasons late-night listening is very rewarding. Low-level dynamic contrasts and finely rendered transients particularly due to the Sonus faber Tweeter, the Arrow Point DAD (Damped Apex Dome). The tweeter at low levels remains expressive and easily discernible maintaining the same sense of life and energy delivered in spades at higher volumes.

This is what a \$65,000 pair of loudspeakers brings to the table: a level of aesthetic and audible purity that you don't get further down on the food chain. It also includes a world-class sales, service, and support network. The Liliium has expanded my musical universe in all directions and for me, that is where the rubber meets the road. ●



Sonus faber Liliium
MSRP: 65,000/pair

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D'Agostino Master Audio
systems MLife Integrated
Amplifier Streamer DAC,
Krell Connect Streamer

Phonostage
Audio Research REF3
Phono

Preamplifier
Pass Labs XP-20

Power Amplifier
Pass Labs XA200.5
monoblocks

Cable
MIT Oracle MA-X SHD
Interconnects and ACC
168 Speaker wire and
Jumpers, MIT Z Power II
power Chords



The Coincident Statement Linestage

Nothing but Performance

By Jeff Dorgay

As the grungy lead guitar riff of the Drive-By Truckers' latest album *American Band* fills the room, it's clear that the Coincident Statement Linestage is a cut above. Way above what you'd expect from a \$5,499 line stage. In some circles, you can't even buy a power cord for five grand, let alone a line stage that holds its own with some of the world's finest by the known brands. Gorgeously shiny, this two chassis masterpiece from Canada is just as stunning as the Statement Phonostage we reviewed a few years ago. Coincident's founder, Israel Blume, makes it a point to tell me that the chassis is *not* chrome plated, but high grade stainless steel, highly polished, which has multiple benefits. "The polished stainless is much more labor intensive, and unlike chrome plating, will never pit or peel. And, the non-magnetic nature of stainless steel provides a significant sonic benefit by eliminating any electromagnetic interaction with the transformers and audio circuitry." After many hours of listening, it only gets better.



In the day of world-class components having serious five-figure price tags it's refreshing to hear a line stage that reveals as much music as the Coincident Statement. There's nothing on the market for \$10k that will touch the \$5,000 Statement regarding sheer musical performance, but it comes with a small caveat. There are only two inputs, balanced XLR or single ended RCA, and no remote control. For those who can commit to a single pair of outputs, those wanting a third RCA input can order this option for an additional \$100. Blume mentions that for a while there was a remote control version offered, with motorized volume potentiometers, but to him the subtle degradation in performance was deemed not worth it, and was ultimately discontinued.

Fortunately, a flip of two switches lets you integrate balanced and single ended inputs and outputs quickly. There was no difficulty mixing or matching opposing source and amplifiers and using equal runs of Cardas Clear cable, no sonic difference could be detected through the Pass Xs 300 monoblocks. You can rest assured there is no compromise whatever path you choose. Source components are selected by a simple flip of a toggle switch.

If you don't mind walking over to the rack to adjust listening levels, you can have state-of-the-art preamplifier performance for just over five grand. It's like walking into the Porsche dealership and the salesman saying that you can have a new GT3 for twenty grand. *That*

dream may not be a reality, but if you've lusted after more than one \$30–50 thousand preamp, you can have the Statement right now. And, the NOS 101 triode tubes won't wear out nearly as fast as a pair of Michelin Pilot Super Sports. Mr. Blume claims a 5,000–10,000 hour lifespan as typical, and you can buy a replacement set of 101-D tubes that have been measured and matched directly from Coincident for about \$200 a pair. A bargain in itself. Those in search of even more performance can get a pair of premium 101-Ds for \$750/pair. We will be investigating this option and will report back later in the year with a long term analysis. Still compared to 300B and some other tubes, this isn't crazy money. *(continued)*

Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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Simple, elegant, shiny

The beautiful chrome-plated dual chassis design of the Statement reminds me of some of my favorite components from Burmester. When I used to ask my good friend, the late Dieter Burmester, how to keep his gear looking its best, he laughed and said, "Don't touch them." Fortunately, with the front panel of the Statement being a standard machined finish, you won't have that problem, but use gloves or a microfiber towel to set it into place on your rack, so those shiny chassis stay pristine.

Once those big, bulbous 101 triode tubes are inserted into their suspended sockets and the enormous, 42-pound external power supply attached via the supplied umbilical cord, sit back, relax and enjoy this line stage audibly and visibly. Coincident suggests keeping the two chassis at least a few inches apart to minimize noise, hum, and interaction. Transformer coupled, with no capacitors in the signal path, the Statement is magnificently quiet. As in "stick your ear right up to the tweeter" quiet. Even with the highly revealing beryllium tweeters used in the Focal Sopra no.3s now on review, there's nothing in the background. The Statement is so quiet, if it didn't have those two big tubes poking out, you'd think it just might be a solid-state preamplifier. Classical music aficionados will love the incredibly silent auditory canvas from which even the softest acoustic instruments unfold.



The dual volume controls are somewhat coarse in adjustment, though extremely accurate from channel to channel. Where the \$30,000 Robert Koda preamplifier remains coarse throughout the range (no remote either), it is particularly annoying as you get to the top of the volume range. The Statement's saving grace is that it has a relatively coarse adjustment at the bottom of the range, but delivers a smoother gradation from the middle to the top of the volume range – much more useful day to day.

Both the power supply and the line stage are hardwired for maximum longevity, and the power supply uses some of the most expensive HEXFRED diodes and all polypropylene capacitors instead of electrolytic capacitors. Coincident puts the money where it does the most good: the parts contributing to mechanical and electrical longevity. As Blume tells me, "The Statement will outlive you or me," and I know he means it.

Inside Job

Directly from the shipping carton, the Statement captivates, but after about 50 hours, once those big power supply capacitors have bedded in, it draws you into the music even further. The Statement gently rises out of a gentle fog as it warms up. In 30 minutes, it disappears completely. *(continued)*

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For our readers too young to be familiar with Todd Rundgren, I suggest downloading his more obscure *A Capella* album on Tidal (or you can pick one up at your local record store for about two bucks) and listen to the delicacy of Rundgren singing with up to 14 additional backing tracks. Should this be a little too old school, try the latest from Jack White, featuring stripped, acoustic versions of most of his catalog. The more delicate the music, the more the Statement shines; these two triodes are a fantastic conduit for low-level detail. Tracking through Radiohead's new release, *A Moon Shaped Pool*, reveals another aspect of the Statement – the massive three-dimensional soundstage it paints. This recording has left me a bit cold on occasion, but it comes alive through the Statement, with minute musical details everywhere.

Don't think for a second that delicacy is the only card the Statement can play, though. When called upon to produce huge dynamic swings, it delivers the goods – whether reproducing the cannons at the end of the *1812 Overture* or the beginning of "For Those About to Rock, We Salute You." Robust and defined bass is the rule here, again thanks to that massive power supply. Another aspect of what makes this preamplifier world class is the way it reproduces the lower registers with so much control, authority, and texture. Bassheads will be thrilled with the slam offered on their favorite EDM tracks, and classical lovers will be amazed at the lifelike rendition of a cello. It's all good here.
(continued)

REVIEW





The bottom line

Thanks to a manufacturer direct model, Coincident offers top-shelf performance for an incredibly reasonable price. Even if the Statement were sold via a traditional “dealer markup” model, and cost \$10,000 or more, it would still be in competition with the world’s finest preamplifiers at any price. What makes it even more impressive is that this preamplifier accomplishes its task by distilling things down to the basics and implementing them at an exceptionally high level.

There are no unobtainium parts under the hood, no proprietary anything, just a simple circuit that is well executed and built to an incredibly high standard. Israel Blume is a man that builds an awesome product and sells it for a fair price. If you need more inputs and outputs, have to have that remote control, or just want the bragging rights of a \$30,000 preamplifier, I won’t call you out on it.

However, if you are a true music lover that wants a pre-amplifier built like a tank delivering the sonic goods of the mega-expensive preamplifiers, the Coincident Statement is the one you want. That’s why it’s our Preamplifier of the Year. I’m buying one for our long-term test fleet, and I’m getting my ass to the gym so I can see if my preamplifier will indeed outlive me. ●

**Coincident Statement
Preamplifier**
\$5,499

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PERIPHERALS

Analog Source
Brinkmann Bardo Turntable
w/Koetsu Onyx Platinum

Phonostage
Pass Xs Phono, Audio
Research REF Phono 3

Digital Source
Gryphon Kalliope DAC

Speakers
Gamut RS5i, Focal Sopra
no.2, MartinLogan Neolith

Cable
Tellurium Q Silver Diamond,
Cardas Clear

Amazing in Three Letters: GAT!

The GAT Series 2 from Conrad Johnson

By Jeff Dorgay

\$24,000 is a lot of money to spend on a preamplifier. So, if this freaks you out, don't read the next six pages. With most phonostages and DACs having an output level of two to four volts, and most power amplifiers only needing about one to achieve full output, you'd think a simple attenuator would do the job. But it never seems to work that way. We've tried a few great passive models, and they don't deliver the goods; the sonic impact is always lacking. And a few of those have price tags close to the GAT 2.

Conrad Johnson's GAT series 2 is worth every penny they ask, for a number of reasons. Still with me? My main requirement of any component with this kind of price tag should have major visual excitement: build quality and aesthetics should be stunning. The GAT 2 delivers on both of these promises. If you're not a fan of the gold, get over it; C-J doesn't make 'em any other color.

conrad-johnson
GAT Preamplifier

Yet the execution of this preamplifier is outstanding, from the quality of the faceplate to the clear acrylic tube protectors. Whenever I look at the GAT 2 it reminds me of the Guggenheim in New York City. Maybe Conrad and Johnson were architects in another life. But this preamp is a beauty, and it looks like a statement product.

Being visually stunning alone isn't enough to command the big price tag. A component this expensive should floor you sonically; again the GAT 2 delivers. We can argue about tubes versus solid-state forever, but if there ever was a case for the glowing bottles, it's this preamplifier. Much fun as all my favorite rock and electronic tracks are, 30 seconds into something with acoustic instruments will have you fully under the spell of the GAT 2. Brad Mehldau's recent album, *Blues and Ballads*, is a perfect place to start. His gentle and complex playing is chock-full of nuance and overtones. If the rest of your system is up to the task, it feels like you've got a piano in your living room. Yes, it does.

It's in the details

The highest of high-end components are all about subtlety. There are plenty of great preamps for a couple thousand dollars that play music and sound pretty good. C-J even makes one: the Classic, and it's excellent. However the better your recordings are and the more capable the rest of your system is, the more you will appreciate the GAT 2. Listening to the GAT 2 in my second system, which consists of the Conrad Johnson LP125sa+, a Simaudio MOON 780D DAC and a pair of Focal Sopra no.1 speakers, cabled together with Cardas Clear cable, keeps me glued to the couch for hours on end. But that's only scratching the surface of what the GAT 2 can do. *(continued)*





Swapping a few different preamplifiers in and out of this system instantly reveals what the GAT 2 offers that is not available in a lesser model. Where a few others at my disposal do well with the fundamentals, the GAT 2 follows where the world's absolute best components are going. It offers a sound that is nearly non-existent, in and of itself, merely being a conduit for the music.

Yet, there is still something magic that a couple of tubes still seem to add to the mix; there's a life, a presence, a degree of dimension that I've only heard accomplished by a couple of solid-state preamplifiers. Where a lesser tube preamplifier can entice you with its "tubiness," i.e. warmth and body, they don't deliver the subtle shadings, musical textures and tonal contrast that the GAT 2 does. It's the same on the other side of the fence: lesser solid-state preamplifiers can grab you with complete silence, that inky black

background that we reviewers like to wax poetic about, and a bit more dynamic slam or impact, but again, the subtlety falls by the wayside.

Thanks to using the two vintage Philips PCC88 tubes for amplification and a pair of FETs as output buffers, we get the best of both worlds – this preamplifier is super quiet in addition to being a sonic delicacy. Bill Conrad assures me that he has "good stock" of this tube, so retubing down the road will be no problem. Like the previous GAT, that FET buffer will drive *long* runs of cable and there were no problems at all driving a 20 foot pair of Cardas Clear interconnects.

Fondly remembering

It's often said that no one remembers the second man on the moon, or the second of anything. However, the second high-end preamplifier I bought was a Conrad Johnson. A PV-1. Yeah, I'm that old. *(continued)*



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That little gold-faced preamplifier that did not go with the rest of my black components changed my perception forever. The music pouring from my 8 foot tall Acoustats, powered by a Threshold 400A power amplifier was beyond anything I'd experienced up till then. That was 1981.

35 years later history repeats itself. The ESLs on tap are now the Quad 2812s, and yet plugging the GAT 2 into a pair of Pass Labs Xs300 monoblocks again raises the bar to somewhere I've never been before – a much bigger feat in 2016. And after all these years, I've grown to like the gold. As much as I like the click, click, click of the GAT's attenua-

tor, it's always a friendly reminder that I've always loved since the day of my ACT2. It adjusts the output level in .7dB steps, where most other manufacturers do it with 1dB steps. The CJ way feels smoother and less obtrusive.

Listening to Rusty Anderson's "Damaged Goods," a relatively compressed track that's never grabbed me sonically, though the music is lovely, now unfolds between my speakers with way more depth and delicacy than a 16/44.1 TIDAL track has the right to. In the past, Sir Paul McCartney's bass line was buried in the muck, but through the GAT 2, it not only comes alive, it jumps out from the mix

with authority. The GAT 2 has so much dynamic range and subtle tonal contrast, you'll find yourself digging through the "not so great" bin a lot, reclaiming a lot of treasure you might have thought lost forever.

Though electronic music won't tell you much about timbre, most of the genre is an air-moving, low-frequency torture test. Tracking through some favorites from Deadmau5, Skrillex, SBTRKT and Caspar reveals weight and grip I didn't realize my system had. For those not so inclined to wear the mouse hat, a healthy dose of Mahler, Shostakovich or Bax should bring the same smile to your face.

Track after familiar track feel brand new again, with an airiness and sense of space that feels like one of the world's best pairs of headphones, yet retaining all the jump factor of a great pair of speakers. Moving back from the Quads to the hybrid GamuT RS5is/JL Audio Fathom IWS system proves shocking. Once acclimated to the sound again, going direct from the dCS Rossini DAC/Rossini Clock to the Xs300s vs. the GAT 2, is no contest. Adding a linestage to the mix *shouldn't* reveal more music, yet it does to a staggering degree. Low-level musical bits and fine spatial detail that was impossible to hear going direct is now available. It's creepy good. *(continued)*



No electrolytic capacitors inside

Removing the bottom panel of the GAT 2 reveals massive CJD Teflon caps everywhere, even the power supply, instead of the usual electrolytic capacitors in nearly every other preamplifier on the market. These are incredibly expensive capacitors, and their contribution to the sound is an exquisite one. The longevity of film capacitors is also much better than electrolytics – if you're 30 or older, chances are the GAT 2 will outlive you. However, you will have to wait a couple hundred hours to hear what this preamplifier is fully capable of.

Like the ACT and ART preamplifiers owned and reviewed

over the last decade, the massive CJD Teflon caps take a while to form completely. The GAT 2 is better out of the box than past CJ models, but it still takes a few hundred hours to be all it can be. Should you not have a second GAT 2 to leave in a box with zero hours on the clock to compare, if you can make a habit of starting your listening day with the same track for the break-in period, you will be astonished at how much more liquid and effortless the GAT 2 becomes after a month or two.

Going Full CJ

At times, a full chain of tube gear can be too much of a good thing. Adding the TEA-1s2 phonostage (also in for review) and the LP-

125sa+ power amplifier (a personal reference component) to the rest of the system proves a fantastic combination. All three of these components are so extended, dynamic, and transparent, the resulting presentation takes on a life of its own.

I bristle at using the B-word, because I don't ever want my readers to think their purchases are less than, just because we've discovered a new darling. And in the 12-year history of the magazine, I've resisted temptation after temptation to make this claim. I've heard a lot of truly great preamplifiers, but the Conrad Johnson GAT2 is the best preamplifier I've experienced. It reveals more music, more tonal contrast, gradation and nuance than anything else

I've yet heard. And no, I haven't heard *every single great preamplifier ever made*, so on one level this is provisional.

The K-10 from Robert Koda and the Xs Pre from Pass Labs both come within close proximity, and they are both solid state – an amazing accomplishment right there. And, these two solid-state preamplifiers that serve as my daily workhorses do so because of the consistency of the solid-state design (i.e. no change in sound when swapping tubes) and the fact that they both offer balanced and single ended inputs and outputs – a must for a preamplifier that also has to serve as a tool. But this damn GAT 2 has just a little bit more in terms of palpability and we are

splitting fine hairs.

Another aspect of greatness is longevity. Bill Conrad and Lew Johnson are two of the brainiest guys I've ever met (Both have Ph.Ds from MIT and Washington State, respectively) and they've been building great gear for almost 40 years now. I've owned quite a few of their preamplifiers. Since *TONE* began, I've used the ACT 2, ACT 2 series 2, as well as the original GAT as reference components here. The only reason I moved away from the CJ was the need to have a linestage with balanced and single-ended inputs for reviewing purposes. Now, with another listening room available, I will be building a separate system around the GAT 2.

The GAT 2 gives you everything. After hundreds of hours listening and taking notes – and playing the best, worst, and most difficult records in my collection – the word “but” never enters my thought process. No compromise or regret is what you write the \$24,000 check for, and as I said at the beginning of this review, the GAT 2 is worth every penny asked.

For this reason, the GAT 2 series 2 receives one of our Publisher's Choice awards for 2016. I would never dream of expecting you to spend \$24,000 because I say so. But until I get that mind control helmet sorted out, I urge you to book a listening session with the GAT 2 series 2 if you are looking for your final destination preamplifier. ●



Conrad-Johnson
GAT series 2 Preamplifier
MSRP: \$24,000

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 Conrad-Johnson

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www.conradjohnson.com

PERIPHERALS

Analog Source
 AVID Acutus REF SP/SME
 V/Lyra Atlas, Brinkmann
 Bardo/10.1/Koetsu Onyx
 Platinum

Phonostage
 Pass XS Phono, Conrad-
 Johnson TEA-1s2, Simaudio
 MOON LP610

Digital Source
 dCS Rossini DAC & Clock,
 Gryphon Kalliope DAC

Power amplifiers
 Pass XS 300 monoblocks,
 Pass XA30.8, Conrad
 Johnson LP125 sa+, Audio
 Research GS150, Nagra 300i

Speakers
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THE PASS XS PHONO

TOP OF THE ANALOG MOUNTAIN

By Jeff Dorgay

If I were to sum up this entire review in a sentence, I'd say "just go buy one." That's a tough call from my listening chair with your 45 thousand dollars, isn't it? I've been living with Pass Xs components for a long time now, and they are the best of the best. All three of these components have taken me somewhere sonically that I've never been before, and that's the primary requirement for a high dollar item in my book. For me to think of asking you to consider audio products that cost more than what my parents paid for their house 35 years ago, they have to provide performance way beyond what you'd expect, and hopefully way beyond what you've experienced.

Keeping that in mind, enjoyable aesthetics, quality and reliability beyond reproach are also big factors to consider. I've heard some good things produced in minute quality, but in order for you to plunk down your hard-earned cash, you should be getting service, support, and secondary market value as well, because now and then you might want to trade that Ferrari in on an Aston Martin and you shouldn't have to lose your whole wardrobe to do it. Your shirt, maybe, but not the whole closet. The Pass Xs Phono accomplishes all of these goals, flawlessly.





Listening to an old Go West album from the '80s (The days of big hair and shoulder pads to the rest of you) the Pass Xs Phono exceeds anything I've yet heard regarding analog playback. Insert whatever audiophile cliché you'd like, the Xs Phono is in another galaxy entirely. It is a phonostage without compromise.

Whatever parameter of sound reproduction I can think of, the Xs Phono handles it way better than anything I've ever experienced. Quieter – yep. More jump factor – by a long shot, smooth and extended – that too. Micro, macro and whatever other dynamics you can think of, the Xs Phono has buckets. The Xs Phono is brilliant even on the shittiest records I own. That's what makes a premium component stand out for this reviewer – something you can enjoy playing every record in your music collection, not just a handful of audiophile standards.

Making the jump to well-recorded albums is nothing short of a revelation. Tracking through familiar audiophile classics and well-recorded daily drivers again uncloaks detail after detail that's never quite made it to the forefront, no matter the cartridge. And with nearly a dozen cartridges on tap from the \$95 Shure M97 all the way up to the mighty \$10k Koetsu Onyx Platinum, all deliver the most incredible performances of their tenures here.

Where the Koetsu often has a tendency to sound slightly warm, mellow and even a touch rounded off in the area of finest details, it becomes a different animal when presented by the Xs Phono. It's like putting the best gas you can get your hands on in a turbocharged car; the Xs Phono has more horsepower. The Koetsu, with a sound I thought I was intimately familiar with takes on an entirely different meaning with this phonostage; it's now more extended with deeper and more substantial bass response than ever before, yet it still has all the yummy midrange these cartridges are known for. *(continued)*

REVIEW

Details, details, details

There are a few great phono stages on the rack here, all fantastic for the MSRP, from some of the usual players, but the Xs Phono surpasses the sound quality of what we're familiar with and takes an all-out assault on what a premium phono stage should be for the analog maniac. And if you are one of those maniacs, you know what I mean. Even down to the grounding lugs.

No other manufacturer I've seen has addressed (yet) offers a separate ground lug for each one of its three inputs. This may seem like a wacky first-world issue, but hey, if you've got the scratch for three primo turntables and a phono stage to match, your hierarchy-of-needs pyramid gets tilted off of its axis by stuff like this. It's so convenient and cool that the Pass team has not overlooked even this smallest of details in the quest for analog perfection.

The only thing you might be annoyed with is the lack of balanced inputs or an EQ button for early Decca and Columbia pressings. Selfishly, I have no records requiring this, so it wasn't an issue. A quick inquiry to Pass Labs' Desmond Harrington confirms what I thought. Harrington mentions that they didn't feel the balanced inputs were much of a big deal because "until they put center taps on cartridge coils they aren't truly balanced," and that adding different EQ would have added more complexity (i.e. noise, etc.) to the circuit.
(continued)



THE SOURCE

AUDIO VIDEO DESIGN GROUP

THE ART OF DESIGN



1-310-534-9900



THESOURCEAV.COM

Before you press the angry button on your computer's keyboard (a great F10 shortcut in the latest version of Word) here's where a big part of the Xs Phono's cost is derived. Yes, it is an enormous dual chassis preamplifier tethered by a pair of massive cables to a power supply bigger with more capacity than all the surround sound receivers in your average Best Buy store, but it doesn't stop there. The Pass Xs Phono isn't just a dual mono design; it's a triple dual mono design!

Because each phono input has its own discrete gain section, what we might perceive as input selection is just selecting which gain path to use. This is a big part of why the Xs Phono costs what it does; it's actually like getting three separate phono stages in the same chassis. This avoids any switching involved with the delicate cartridge signal. Choose the optimal gain, loading, and capacitance settings, and press the "save" button to keep everything in check. Then you can switch between tables at will.

With settings firmly in place, experimenting with different loading options or different cartridges is incredibly easy; moving the settings around for a particular setup can be used while listening, yet if not saved will get you right back to where you were. As you can imagine, this is the perfect phono stage for someone evaluating cartridges on a regular basis!

Still... you turn me on

The Xs Phono stays powered up, drawing minimal power from the AC line. (Unlike the Xs 300s which draw

1,000 watts each) Loading settings at 30, 50, 75, 100, 140, 160, 250, 330, 500, 1k and 47k ohms, should leave no stone unturned when combined with capacitance settings of 100, 200, 320, 430, 530, and 750pf. Ditto for three gain settings: 56dB, 66dB, and 76dB. Did I tell you how quiet the Xs Phono is? It's so quiet; it's Vantablack. For those of you too busy to Google it, Vantablack is now the blackest thing there is. Even more incredible than that blacker than you've ever experienced black background, the tonal gradation that the Xs Phono delivers is wide. The smoothness at which the music fades to black is astonishing.

Before you pooh-pooh the 47k setting, here are two things to keep in mind: you've never heard just how damn good a \$95 Shure M97 sounds till you hear it through the Xs Phono, and the Grado Statement 2 moving iron cartridge. It's \$3,500, and though it loads at 47k like an MM cart, it has a 1mv output.

Much as I love the Koetsu sound, this analog miracle from Brooklyn has such a lovely, delicate, yet full-bodied sound, this has quickly become my go-to cartridge with the Xs Phono. Thanks to Harry Weisfeld at VPI, the Shure M97 with a Jico MR stylus combined with the Technics SL-1200 featuring ZuAudio and TimeStep mods, combined with a Rega RB-301 tonearm makes for a stunning daily driver through this preamplifier. It's perfect for bargain basement finds, and a beautiful way to check those budget discs after they've been thoroughly cleaned before trusting them to one of the big-bucks cartridges. *(continued)*





Quick, Quiet and More

We've established the super quiet background by which analog sounds are delicately and effortlessly rendered via the Xs Phono. It's also dynamic as hell. No matter what cartridges you possess, the Xs packs a wallop. Going all the way back to my collection of Sheffield and JVC direct to disc LPs, and spinning Dave Grusin's *Discovered Again!* it's impossible to ignore how much sheer slam this phonostage can provide.

In combination with the Xs Phono's zippy transient response, it also accelerates and decelerates on musical notes with the voracity of an F1 car hitting pit lane and going from about 160mph to pit speed instantly. This lack of overshoot at the beginning and end of musical notes makes for an incredibly open portrayal of music while eliminating fatigue. The Xs Phono has all the "airiness" that vacuum tubes are famous for, yet none of the slight smear that nearly all tube preamplifiers seem to have in comparison. The final result is a pureness of tone that inspires wonderment every time you sit down to play records.

Don't fall in love; she's a beauty

If you are a crazed analog enthusiast with multiple turntables, tonearms and premium phono cartridges, I know you've got the dough to afford the Pass Xs Phono. So, what are you waiting for? Buy one. Right now. It's

so good, you can't afford not to have one in your record playing arsenal. And it will sound this good forever.

I was flabbergasted at the sonic purity this phonostage delivered the first time I lowered the tonearm on a record, the day the Xs Phono was unboxed. Nearly a thousand LP sides later, this phonostage is just as astonishing every single day. That's what justifies the big price tag. If you only have one tonearm and cartridge, the price may be a bit overkill for a single cartridge; yet to the Xs Phono's defense, I've heard more than one phonostage with a higher MSRP, not delivering the sonic goods that the Xs Phono does.

Should you have multiple turntables, the Xs will probably feel like a bargain, offering the same amount of musicality to everything at your disposal. If you happen to add an Xs Phono to your system and don't have multiple turntables, you will before you know it.

You've probably guessed that I like the Pass Xs Phono. A lot. Should your investigation reveal the same qualities I have here and the same level of enthusiasm, you can safely tell your spouse and friends that "this is the last phonostage, honest," and not have to cross your fingers behind your back.

I couldn't be happier to award the Pass Xs Phono one of my Publisher's Choice awards for 2016. It's a teacher's pet. ●

Pass Labs Xs Phono
MSRP: \$45,000

MANUFACTURER
Pass Laboratories, Inc.

CONTACT
www.passlabs.com

Analog Source
AVID Acutus REF SP/SME V, Brinkmann Bardo/Bardo 10.1, Feickert Blackbird/Ortofon and Jelco arms

Cartridges
Lyra Atlas, Koetsu Onyx Platinum, Grado Statement 2

Preamplifier
Pass Xs Pre

Amplifier
Pass Xs 300 monoblocks

Cable
Cardas Clear and Tellurium Q Silver Diamond

Speakers
MartinLogan Neolith, GamuT RS5i, Focal Sopra no. 3, Quad 2812

MORE THAN ONE STEP BEYOND

Audio Research Reference 6 Linestage

By Rob Johnson

With a lineage stretching back to 1970 Audio Research, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota has built their reputation on constant, engineering based improvements to their products. Their Reference linestage preamplifier line remains a coveted commodity among ARC enthusiasts, and the Reference 6 linestage preamplifier solidly continues this tradition. Based heavily on what was learned creating the two chassis, Reference 10 flagship, makes for a major jump in performance over the outgoing REF 5/5SE, an award winning linestage in its own right.





More than a pretty face

On the outside, the REF 6 sports some eye-catching changes. ARC's new chassis design was engineered for two reasons. First, ARC is updating the aesthetic of the Ref line. A clean, modern appearance moves away from the classic, more industrial ARC look. The visual design of the REF 6 comes straight from the desk of Livio Cucuzza and his team, the ones responsible for the trend setting aesthetic of the highly popular G-Series. Tastefully integrating style cues from the past models with a more modern look and better finish work, Audio Research components finally look as good as they sound.

ARC's team also built in a greater level of structural rigidity intended to "assist in the dissipation of electrical and mechanical inter-

ferences." Immediately evident is the beautifully milled faceplate, available in either an anodized black finish or the natural aluminum finish of our review sample. Substantial handles on the front of the REF 6 pay homage to past models, offering a visual contrast to the otherwise flat front. The handles also offer a practical function when moving and placing the 36.5 lb. (16.6 kg) linestage. With overall dimensions of 19" (48 cm) W x 7.8" (19.8 cm) H x 16.5" (41.9 cm) D, the hefty REF 6 requires a fair amount of real estate on the audio rack.

When placing it, headroom is another important consideration. The tube complement generates a lot of heat and adequate ventilation is necessary for the long-term health of the unit. Under the REF 6's transparent, vented

Lucite hood, the owner can witness the tidy circuitry within. The tube complement consists of six 6H30P dual triodes, plus a single 6550C and a 6H30 regulating the beefy power supply.

Control freak

As part of the newly-adopted aesthetic, an elegant simplicity drives layout of the REF 6 control panel. In addition to the large input selection and volume knobs, six dime-sized buttons manage the rest of the adjustments. Specific buttons control power-up, a choice between mono or stereo playback, phase reversal, and mute. The remaining two buttons, "menu" and "enter" bring to life the REF 6 menu options, and allow the owner to customize his or her preferences for each.

(continued)

When super size won't do.

Getting great sound in a smaller space requires extra placement and planning. Large speakers usually won't do, components often need to be stealthier and neighbors in close proximity might not appreciate your need to rock out at all hours of the day and night.

We're here to help those living in smaller spaces find solutions that will keep smiles on everyone's faces.

Check out our website, and join our growing community on Facebook.



 **The Audiophile Apartment.**
Sonic solutions for small and stylish spaces.

AudiophileApartment.com Facebook.com/AudiophileApartment

To get the most from the REF 6 tube complement, one menu option allows the user to see the number of hours on the current tubes. According to AR, new 6550WE tubes should serve their owner for about 2,000 hours, and the 6H30 tubes offer roughly twice that life span. When the tubes eventually wear out, ARC offers carefully matched replacement tubes. As there are not a lot of variations on the 6H30 tube, just giving the factory a call is the easiest way to roll. To maximize tube life, owners will delight in another REF 6 feature. The owner can set an automatic preamp shutdown to engage at a one to eight-hour interval. This feature can be disabled if you prefer fully manual control.

The REF 6 also offers the ability to assign a specific input for home theater pass-through in instances where the linestage is part of a larger home theater system. In this scenario, the REF 6's volume control disengages when that particular source is selected, deferring to the surround sound processor's volume controls. The ability to assign names to each of the REF 6 inputs also makes it easy to keep inputs straight on more complex systems.

ARC has always offered a very basic, plastic remote. Keeping with the aesthetic of the new design a milled aluminum remote accompanies the REF 6 and REF Phono 3. It's a nice, but not ostentatious touch that complements the new look, and is roughly the size of the plastic remote of old. Prospective owners should note that the REF 6 sports a 20-amp IEC power socket, so if you are contemplating a power cord upgrade, plan accordingly or find a high quality adaptor, like the one from Shunyata.



Featuring four inputs, each having the option of single ended RCA or balanced XLR connectors makes the REF 6 one of the most versatile linestages going. Two sets of RCA and XLR variable outputs are joined by a fixed level, record out option – handy for those either stepping up to the tape game or digitizing some of their favorite music. 12 volt trigger and RS-232 interfaces are also available for those wanting to tie everything together, or in a custom install situation.

Music to my ears

When the power button is depressed, the REF 6 kicks into a 45-second warm-up mode, bringing the tubes up to temperature slowly, maximizing their lifespan. Mute is engaged automatically during that process, and must be un-muted before music can proceed.

Right out the gate, the REF 6 proves stunning in several ways. The immediately enveloping soundstage has musical elements bursting in all directions, projecting a seemingly limitless picture that defies speaker placement. Airy subtleties reside in the distance above, below, and behind the speakers offering a spooky level of realism, and the REF 6 is one of a very short list of special linestages that renders an incredibly real picture of the recording without crossing the line of being super sized for effect. Listening to Lucinda Williams "Can't Let Go" places her in my listening room at a correct size, making the presentation that much more believable.

Combined, these characteristics give not only insight into the subtleties engineered into a song, but a sense of the space used to record it.

(continued)

Clear Reflection

The geometry of Golden Reference.
The technology of Clear.



At the same time, the musical picture never seems artificially inflated. Similarly, the organ notes in Johnny Cash's treatment of "Danny Boy" found on *American IV: The Man Comes Around*, paint a palpable picture of the cathedral used as the recording location. Cash's gravelly immediacy, combined with the subtle reverberation in the recording hall has me looking over my shoulder, feeling if I've seen a ghost.

In my reference system, the REF 6 provides a very slight degree of warmth to the musical picture alongside its ability to retrieve tiny sonic details from a recording. In my experience enjoying equipment over the years, that balance can be a tenuous one for a product designer to achieve. A convincingly realistic and detailed presentation is desirable, but that sonic goal can sometimes lean toward an overly-lush sound, or be accompanied by etch or stridency. The REF 6 never

hints toward either extreme which can detract from the organic sense of the musical presentation. The REF 6 provides a relaxed and natural musical flow emitting from the speakers. It's easy to get lost in the sanctuary of beloved recordings and forget about everything else.

Bass reproduction represents another strong suit. On tracks like Jane's Addiction's "Three Days" all the pluck, resonance and rumble the sound engineer captured in the bass guitar track are projected with convincing authority. However, bass is never reproduced in an overly-accentuated, or one-note way. Again, the REF 6 reveals its innate character for organic reproduction. No apparent sonic manipulation colors the window into the music.

Regardless of musical genre, the REF 6 steps up to the challenge. Listening to classical, jazz, rock, electronica, reggae, vocal

performances and anything else thrown at the REF 6, it never fails to impress. When speed and agility are demanded by the music, it delivers. Similarly, when delicacy and nuance are dictated by a recording, REF 6 nails that as well. Green Day's *American Idiot* projects with all the angst and attitude one could hope from the album. In contrast, chamber music reveals the subtle differences between the various stringed instruments with ease.

Simply put, the REF 6 is among the finest linestages I've had the pleasure of hearing in my own listening space - it's hard to imagine expecting or wanting more from a preamplifier. It would be easy to live with this linestage for the long haul. This caliber of musical prowess doesn't come cheap, but at \$14,000 it's not crazy money either. Most importantly, the price has only increased \$1,000 over that of the outgoing REF 5SE, so that's major progress.

cardas.com/reflection



Additional Listening by Jeff Dorgay

Being a Midwestern native, I've always appreciated the sheer practicality of the folks at Audio Research. Unlike my days of writing about digital cameras, sometimes a year before product is available, ARC rarely puts review gear in to the review stream until they've delivered the goods to their loyal customers. Bravo.

Needless to say, TONE staffer Tom Caselli was one of the first guys on the list and had his a few weeks before ours arrived. "Amazing, way better than the REF 5SE that I traded in." Other fellow audiophiles I know that are doggedly loyal to the brand echoed the same sentiment, at a higher level of enthusiasm than normal too, so the buzz was building around here.

Having owned the REF 5 and 5SE models and going way back with numerous ARC preamplifiers over the years, the REF 6 is a wider jump up the evolutionary chain than the past few models. As Rob mentions, it draws heavily on what was learned in the development cycle of the REF 10. At some point it may just be time for a head to head comparison...

While many have been asking for said comparison with the GSPre that has been residing here for some time,

that's not a fair fight, as the GSPre includes an excellent phono stage along with a headphone amplifier. Think of the GSPre as offering about 2.5 quarts of what a gallon of the REF 6 does with the other bits thrown in. The REF 6 will more than likely appeal to a different customer a few clicks higher on the audio food chain.

On top of all the sonic improvements, ARC has drastically diminished the time to great sound with their products. They still mention in the owners manual that the REF 6 will take 5-600 hours to sound its best, but unlike past designs, this one sounds fantastic out of the box. Granted, it does improve with time, but the delta is not quite as dramatic as in past models.

Whether you use the REF 6 as a reviewer's tool or simply to relish your music collection, make no mistake: this is a destination component. There are a few others lurking that have a different sonic flavor, reveal a bit more music, or have a few more bells and whistles, but they will cost a lot more. In terms of sheer musicality, the REF 6 is the one to beat for \$13,000.

Whatever they are up to in the lab at ARC is working. The REF 6 retains all the strengths

of the outgoing REF 5 series, yet is more extended and dynamic, while adding more soul and musical saturation than the past model. That's not an easy achievement, and I always wonder how they do it.

Keeping the price at \$14,000 is impressive, especially in light of the major sonic and aesthetic improvements. The tough question is "should you trade up?" This depends on you. The REF 5 or 5 SE you currently own is certainly not rubbish by any sense of the word. They are currently fetching about \$9,000 on the secondary market, so if you just *have* to have more juice, you won't be disappointed. The REF 6 is not an update you have to strain to hear.

These are agonizing questions you ask when staring at the ceiling at 3a.m. Who would have ever thought 30 years ago that audio engineers in 2016 would be pulling still more performance from triode tubes to increase our musical listening pleasure? That's pretty cool. For those of you not suffering from trade up anxiety, run don't walk to your ARC dealer and check it out. This linestage offers so much legacy, performance and long term value, we are happy to give it one of our Exceptional Value Awards for 2016. Life is short. Buy one. ●



Audio Research
REF 6
MSRP: \$14,000

MANUFACTURER
Audio Research

CONTACT
www.audioresearch.com

PERIPHERALS

Digital Sources
Mac Mini, Roon Music Service, dCS Debussy, Synology DiskStation

Amplification
Burmester 911 mk3

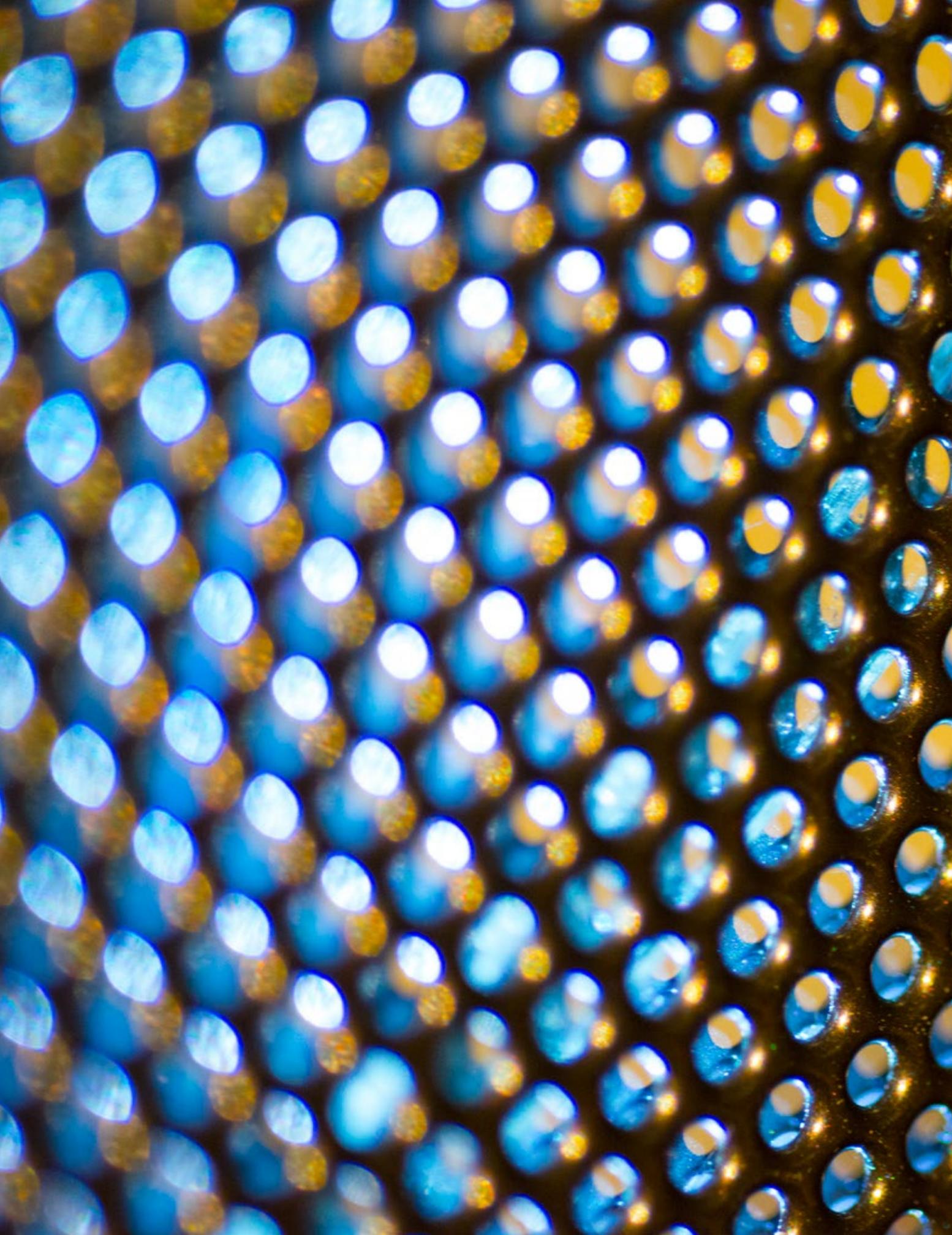
Preamplification
Coffman Labs G1-B

Speakers
Gamut RS3, JL Audio Dominion Subwoofers

Cables
Jena Labs

Power
Torus AVR 15 Plus, RSA Mongoose power cords

Accessories
ASC tube traps, Mapleshade Samson audio racks, Coffman Labs Equipment Footers, AudioQuest Jitterbug, Atomic Audio Labs Mac Mini stand



TONE Audio AWARDS 2016

Products of the Year

By Jeff Dorgay, *Publisher*

2016 was an extraordinary year in the sense that the products coming through our door were even better than usual, and we keep a pretty high standard as it is. The only problem was that it became even tougher than years past to pick “best of the best” components in any category. To reiterate for those new to the TONE fold, Product of the Year choices are the products we feel offered the most performance, regardless of price (high or low) in the stated categories.

The Publishers Choice awards are strictly “teacher’s pet” awards, and while performance is always an important factor, the PC award also weighs in cool factor, rarity, and even visual design. To me, the \$1,099 ELAC server is incredibly cool because it works so well and includes a lifetime subscription to Roon Essentials, yet the \$45,000 Pass XS Phono is equally exciting, offering performance beyond anything I’ve heard, and there are three phono inputs. And the Sonus faber II Cremonese speakers are just drop dead beautiful. I only hand a few of these out at the end of the year, so it’s my party. Cry if you want to.

As mentioned in the publisher’s letter, we have two overall winners this year, a first

in TONE’s history. The Simaudio NEO Ace integrated amplifier in the solid state category, and the DiaLogue HP integrated amplifier from PrimaLuna. While both of these products are completely different in nature, they both offer such a high level of performance for their respective price tags; I defy you to get more for the money elsewhere.

While I fully understand the artisan nature of high-end audio, and I’ve never been one to gripe about prices, accessible components that deliver a major “a-ha” moment are few and far between in this day of \$100,000 (each) boxes. Combine either of these products with a decent source or two, a great pair of reasonably priced speakers, and you’ll be rocking big time for under \$10,000.

Before you start squealing “ten grand for a stereo,” a cursory check of the internet reveals big-bore dirt bikes fetching about ten grand these days. So for the price of an entry-level pair of speakers from Wilson Audio, you can have a cool stereo and a cool dirt bike. I know how I’d spend the money.

Either way, I hope you enjoy or are at least amused by our choices. I’m ready for the nastygrams from those of you that don’t.

2016 Product of the Year

OVERALL

Vacuum Tubes

PrimaLuna DiaLogue HP Premium

\$4,399

(with EL-34 tubes, MM phono stage \$249 addl.)

www.primaluna.nl (mfr)www.upscaleaudio.com (US Distributor)

PrimaLuna has been making vacuum tube components for nearly 15 years now that sound great, look great, and are built to last. They feature top-notch components that you see under the hood regularly in much more expensive components, constructed with point to point wiring techniques like they did in the 60s in the golden age of hi-fi. Don't believe me? Scour the web for people that have had a PrimaLuna component meltdown. They aren't out there.

Lovely as past PrimaLuna components have been, the new HP, which stands for "High power and headphones," not only sets a new benchmark for PrimaLuna, but for tube amps everywhere. The sheer sound quality and amount of music that this amplifier reveals is stunning. Thanks to having the option of using EL-34, KT88/6550, KT120 and KT150 tubes (along with a few other variations on the theme) you not only have the ability to choose a power rating of 70 watts per channel to almost 100 wpc with the KT150s, but you can also custom tune the sound to your liking. Tube audio doesn't get any better than this, folks.



2016 Product of the Year

OVERALL

Solid State
Simaudio MOON Neo Ace
 \$3,499
www.simaudio.com

Hailing from the Great White North, Montreal's Simaudio makes some of the world's finest solid state gear, known both for its musicality and bullet proof reliability. (All Simaudio products carry a ten year warranty, and the last time I visited the factory, the repair department was neither full nor busy)

Their MOON Evolution series reference amplifiers and preamplifiers offer stunning performance, with an equally stunning price. The same engineers and craftspeople that design and hand build these five-figure components put the same amount of care and passion into the \$3,499 Ace. This compact integrated amplifier features a 50 watt per channel class AB discrete power amplifier, a versatile preamplifier (with headphone amplifier) a state of the art DAC, able to render high res and DSD files, and an excellent MM phono stage. Just add your favorite speakers, and turntable if you're so inclined and roll. Should you not be a vinylista, take advantage of the built-in MiND streamer, and plug into your network to enjoy your favorite tunes. If you've ever wanted the equivalent of a high-end audio happy meal, this is it.



2016 Product of the Year

ANALOG

Brinkmann Bardo Turntable

\$9,900 with Brinkmann 10.1 tonearm
www.brinkmannaudio.com

It's amazing how things can come full circle in just a little over 40 years. Back then, my first turntable was a Technics SL-1200 direct drive turntable. Happy as a clam until the audiophiles got hold of me; I followed the rest of the flock to a proper belt drive table ASAP.

Thanks to forward thinking and modern engineering, Helmut Brinkmann makes a fantastic turntable and it's *direct drive*. Who knew? Mr. Brinkmann follows a different groove with his turntable though. Instead of

a high torque motor geared towards broadcast use, his low torque, virtually cogless motor is a dream come true.

Personally, we feel the Brinkmann tonearms not only complement their turntables mechanically, but visually as well. This table is so beautifully executed, it just wouldn't look right with another arm. However, knowing how audiophiles like to mix, match, and just plain know better, Brinkmann gives you the option of ordering your Bardo sans tonearm.





AWARDS

2016 Product of the Year DIGITAL

ELAC Discovery DS-S101-G Music Server

\$1,099

www.elac.com

This one was a molecule away from being our Product of the Year, overall. If you've been struggling with computer audio since forever, this is the droid you want. I haven't torn so much hair out of my head since I installed Windows 95. But not the ELAC Discovery, it's the best. It comes with a Roon Essentials lifetime subscription (albeit limited to 30,000 tracks) and takes about 90 seconds maximum to get up and

running. There is no easier music server on the market, and you can take that to the bank. It sounds pretty damn good too.

If you don't need to manage tens of thousands of ripped discs, I can't suggest the ELAC Discovery highly enough. Grab a Discovery server, link a Tidal account to Roon, and start enjoying music again. You can finally stop being an IT guy whether you want to or not.





AWARDS

2016 Product of the Year S P E A K E R

MartinLogan Neolith

\$79,995/pair

www.martinlogan.com

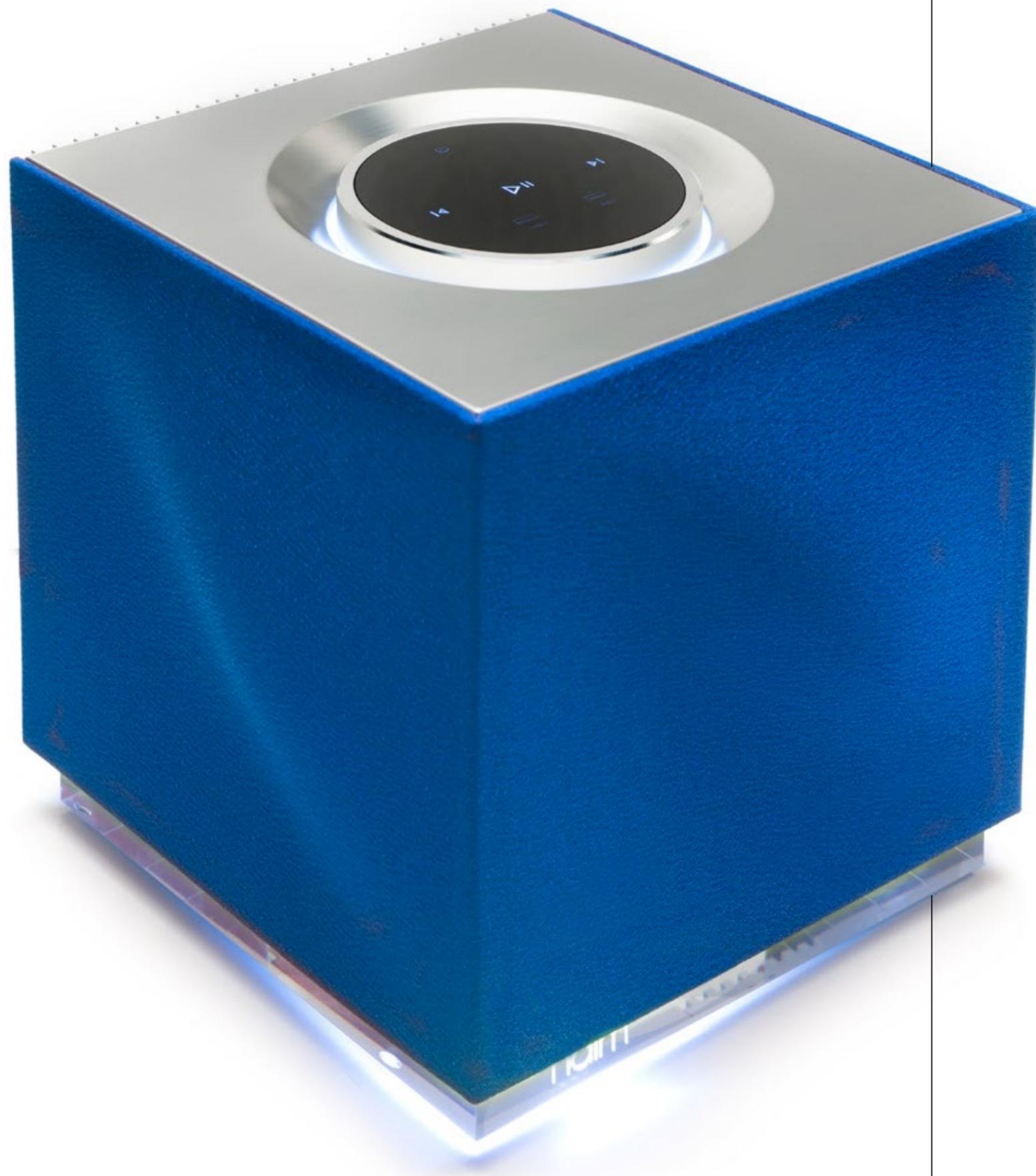
That's not a misprint. Considering that the Statement e2s went out the door for \$120k almost twenty years ago, some of you might think the single enclosure, 385 pound (each) Neolith a bargain. They are certainly easier to work with than the four enclosure Statement e2 was.

Taking everything MartinLogan has learned, combining it into a form factor that is reminiscent of the original Summit and then seriously enlarged, the Neolith is a different beast in the sense that while it features multiple woofers, they are not powered as in most of their current designs.

However, the Neolith offers major adjustability, unmatched by any of their other speakers, making them way more room friendly than the CLX ever was. Still working best with a *lot* of room, the Neolith performed more than admirably in our listening room. It's worth mentioning that the Neolith is also much more amplifier friendly than past hybrids have been, and this model is downright tube friendly.

That gigantic 48 x 22 inch ESL panel is a thing of wonder. More panel area means more efficiency and a bigger musical picture painted. While there are no amplifiers in the woofer cabinets, there must be a cloaking device, as we've never experienced a speaker this large virtually disappear in the room once the music starts playing. And these babies have tons of dynamic range. You can crank Nine Inch Nails (or whatever else you like) on the Neoliths and you'll never be wanting for the punch of a dynamic speaker.





AWARDS

2016 Product of the Year

COMPACT SYSTEM

Naim MuSo - Qb

\$995

www.naimaudio.com

Naim's original Qb was the hit of the Munich audio show in 2015 when it launched, incorporating so much of what Naim has learned building world class DACs, amplifiers and streaming products along with some rocking speakers.

The only thing holding the original MuSo back from being on everyone's shelf was its sheer size. At almost 25 inches wide, it won't fit everywhere. The cubelicious Qb comes in at about 8.6 inches all around and is much easier to carry around from room to room, should you need to. Thanks to 300 watts of power on tap, don't let the diminutive footprint fool you – the Qb kicks major ass, and thanks to onboard DSP, you can play *anything*. And you can play it loud.

Regardless of whether you're quietly lounging in the bathtub, or partying till all hours of the morning, the Qb easily allows streaming from Bluetooth or WiFi sources, as well as having an analog input, so should the need to go retro and spin some vinyl, it's a possibility.

Apartment and space-challenged dwellers may never need more than a Qb to enjoy their music, but because it is built to the same high level of mechanical and electrical quality as all Naim components, chances are high it will make you a convert to the brand if you aren't already on board. Remember, these are the guys that make the hifi system for Bentley. The only choice left is color: black, blue, orange or red.

AWARDS

2016 Product of the Year

P R E A M P L I F I E R

Coincident Statement

\$5,495

www.coincidentspeaker.com



The Coincident Statement line-stage delivers performance so far beyond what you'd ever expect from a \$5,495 box, all audiophile clichés are rendered irrelevant. Tightly focused in nature, the Statement delivers high performance and is beautifully packaged in polished stainless steel.

With two inputs and two outputs each (switchable between RCA and XLR), control flexibility is limited. But seriously, how many of you have more than a DAC/streamer and a phono stage anyway? If you can get by with this and forgo the flexibility of a remote control, the Statement delivers sheer performance that a lot of \$20,000 preamplifiers don't.

This two-tube marvel, with a massive 42 pound external power supply, renders a musical picture that is dynamic, tonally gorgeous and quiet. With replacement 101-D tubes only costing \$200/pair (a pair of premium, matched 101-Ds more, at \$700/pair) and a claimed life of 5,000 – 10,000 hours, this one won't break you when it's time to retube.

The Statement is as good as it gets and after 12 years of reviews, we'd put it right at the top of what is possible in preamplifiers at any price. That you can get one straight from Coincident for \$5,495 is the high end audio bargain of a lifetime.



AWARDS

2016 Product of the Year

AMPLIFIER

GamuT Di 150LE

\$12,990

www.gamutaudio.com

Perhaps better known for their fantastic loudspeakers, GamuT has always produced a very impressive line of electronics. Most don't know that this is where they started, with their original founder designing a line of broadcast amplifiers of very high tonal quality and low distortion.

Those wanting an all GamuT system can take advantage of their digital player, a pre-amplifier and mono block amplifiers for a homogenous system with great sound. However, with the trend moving more towards high performance integrations, GamuT has met the challenge head on with the Di 150LE. Borrow-

ing heavily from the technology in their separate components, the Di 150LE features two balanced and four unbalanced inputs, so it is able to accommodate a wide range of sources.

Producing 180 watts per channel and doubling into 4 ohms, the Di 150LE will power all but the world's most power hungry speakers, and pairs perfectly with the RS3i and RS5i that we have here in the TONEAudio studio. Of course you can always want more, but this amplifier has the tonal delicacy and contrast, along with a wide dynamic range, that it's a perfect place to hang your hat, sacrificing nothing to a rack of separates.



2016 Product of the Year

PHONOSTAGE

Pass Xs Phono

\$45,000

www.passlabs.com

If you have multiple turntables or are considering multiple table/arm/cartridge combinations, we not only vote the Pass Xs Phono as our product of the year, but best phonostage period. After 12 years of not using the b-word irresponsibly, we've earned it.

Our review in this issue goes into more detail, but the Xs Phono does an amazing job at handling the delicate signal from the world's top cartridges; it's built like a bank vault and has a wide range of settings all on the front panel.

And with a maximum gain setting of 76dB, no cartridge is off the list. Much as we love vacuum tubes, they can be a bit dicey in a phonostage. Not only will you not have to hunt for spendy NOS tubes, the Xs Phono will always sound the same thanks to its solid-state design.

Three inputs take the Xs Phono over the top, and unlike other multi-input phonostages, Pass offers separate gain stages for each input, essentially giving you three separate phono preamplifiers on one chassis. Crazy.



Xs Phono



AWARDS

2016 Product of the Year

PERSONAL FIDELITY

Woo Audio WA8

\$1,795

www.woaudio.com

Jack Wu makes cool stuff, but he's outdone himself on this one. About the size of a Sony Walkman Pro WM-D6 (the size of a paperback book for the rest of you), the WA8 includes a killer DAC and a vacuum tube amplifier together in one box, making for an amp that will drive any set of headphones with ease. Perhaps not quite small enough to take on an airplane without causing a major nerd alert, it's more than compact enough to easily take from room to room.

What captivated our publisher the most is its ability to be pressed into service as a preamplifier, making it a perfect cornerstone for a compact, yet high performance, two-channel system. Merely going out the headphone jack to your favorite tube or solid-state power amplifier makes for a captivating presentation.

This flexibility makes the WA8 the perfect way for a mega headphone enthusiast to easily branch out to a fantastic two-channel system when the time is right. That spells winner in our book.



2016 Product of the Year

ACCESSORY

Tellurium Q Silver Diamond Interconnects

(approx. \$2,600/pair, 1M RCA or XLR)
www.telluriumq.com

Like the Silver Diamond speaker cables reviewed last year, adding more of this cable to the rest of our reference system proves equally exciting. These cables are nothing short of fantastic and deliver the most neutral, grain-free presentation we've ever experienced.

Should you be a cable skeptic, this is the one to try. The results are not subtle, with no change in tonality or balance. Just more music everywhere is the word. The Silver Diamond cables impart less of a sonic signature than so many other, so much more expensive cables we've tried.

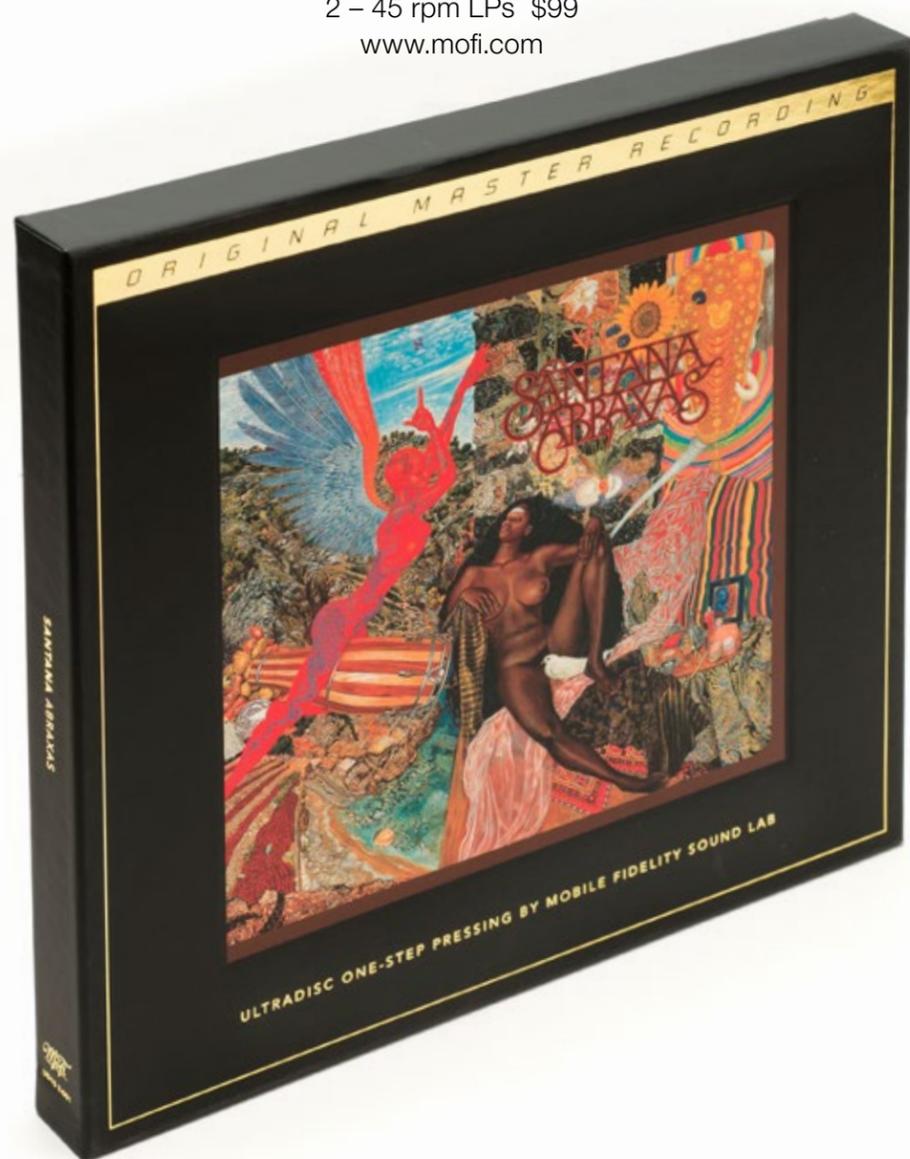
Every cable skeptic we know has been bowled over by the Silver Diamond cables. But with a subject this volatile, hearing is believing. We suggest an audition at your earliest convenience.

2016 Product of the Year

RECORDING

Mobile Fidelity Ultradisc One-Step

Abraxas, Santana
2 – 45 rpm LPs \$99
www.mofi.com



Mobile Fidelity's new Ultradisc One-Step process cuts two additional steps out of the process by which records go from master tape to finished LP. Eliminating the intermediate father and mother plating steps, going directly from the master tape to a fragile stamper which they call a "convert." The resulting record has much more inner fidelity, tonal clarity and dynamic range, bringing you the listener that much closer to the information captured on the master tape. Mobile Fidelity takes this even further, as they do with their Limited Edition Master Recordings by securing the original master tape and playing it at half speed during the mastering and cutting process, decreasing distortion significantly.

Yes, \$100 is a lot of money for a single record. However, considering what some music collectors are paying for standard faire, early stamper editions of favorite classic rock records, this is a drop in the bucket by comparison. Dusting off the original 1970 pressing is no comparison, and in case you don't remember, the channels are reversed, something not addressed until the 2008 MoFi remaster.

It only takes seconds to compare the already excellent 2008 version to see that this is indeed something incredibly special. If you've been wowed by selections from Tape Project at various hifi shows, this is just as good, if not better than most of the tape selections we've heard. The level

of clarity here, especially on the first of the two discs, is beyond our adjective gland's ability to describe. Everything is quieter, more dynamic, more resolving and more three-dimensional. The difference between the 2008 MoFi disc and the One-Step is like going from a Denon 103 and a Lyra Atlas. It's *that* good.

Mobile Fidelity has left everyone else in the dust with their new One-step process. The only bad news is that they can probably only produce so many records this way. It's a shame they can't all sound this good. And it's a shame they can't all come packaged like this as well. The MoFi Ultradisc one step process is vinyl's crowning achievement.

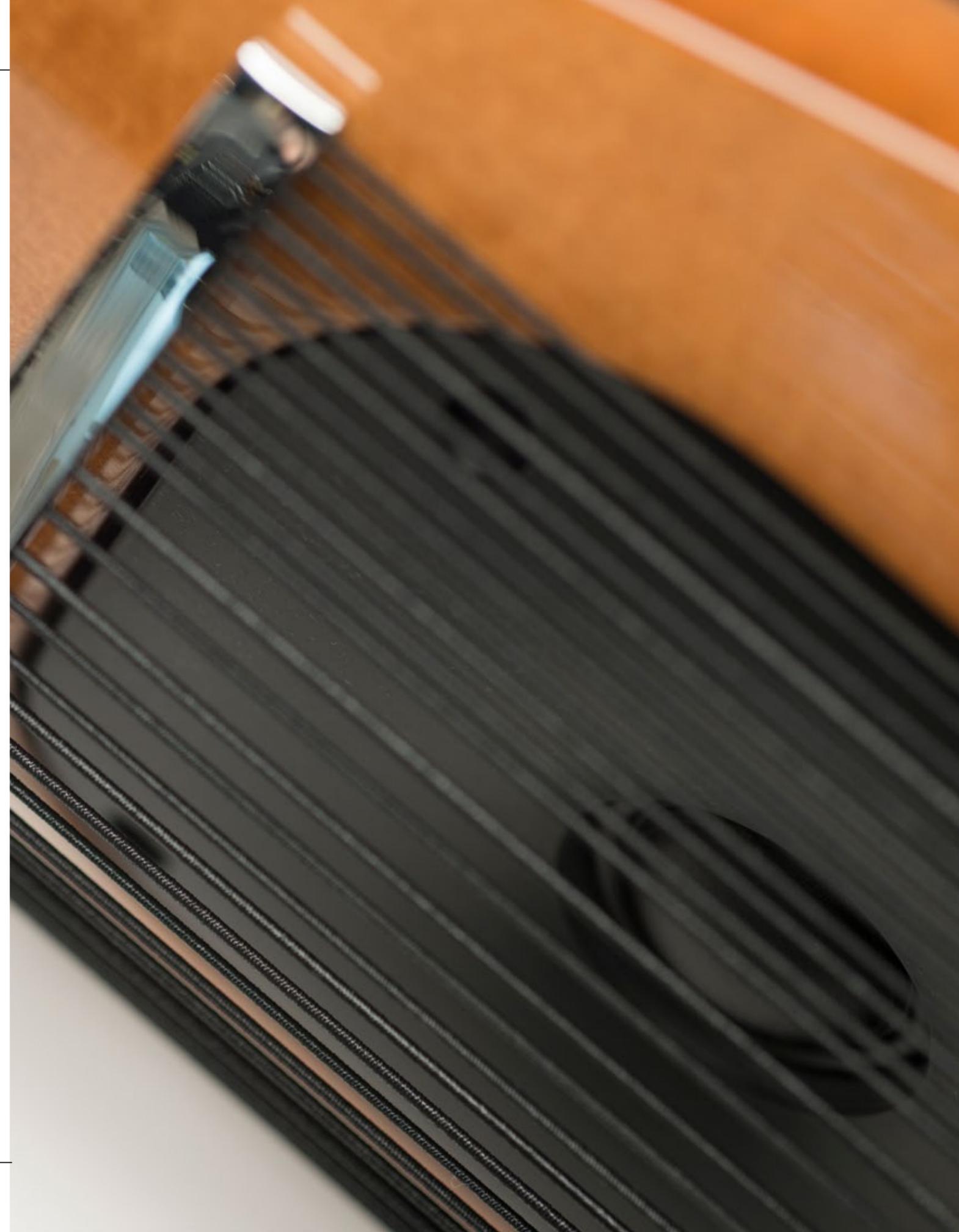
2016 Publisher's Choice

Publisher's Choice Awards

By Jeff Dorgay

It may sound like serious first world problems to decide what products get what award at the end of the day, especially when we don't hand a ton of them out. While you don't get a trophy just for showing up at TONE, I feel that keeping with my concierge mentality, everything we review is certainly award-worthy. If it's not awesome, we don't even want to consider it, because I feel you are too busy to wade through self-indulgent reviews that trash sub standard products.

That said, we had so much over the top gear this year. Here are my personal favorites, I hope that if they are products you happen to be on the prowl for, that you would consider giving them a serious audition, and that you might enjoy as much as I did.



Publisher's Choice

Plinius Hiato

\$10,450 or \$12,350 (with onboard phonostage)

www.pliniusaudio.com

This is a big, beefy integrated from the land down under. New Zealand's Plinius has been quietly going about their business for decades, making components that have a feverishly loyal following. Their amps have a reputation for great sound and build quality.

Their latest, the Hiato, delivers a monstrous 300 watts per channel and carries a fairly large footprint, but thanks to its stylish rounded edge casework, will fit in anywhere, whether you choose silver or black. While the epic remote control may not be used as a flotation device, it can be used to thwart an intruder or unruly party guest.

We did not get the chance to audition ours with the onboard phonostage, but every other Plinius phono we have listened to has been awesome, so should you go for the ultimate in flexibility and are not planning on plugging in a ten thousand dollar analog deck, this should fit the bill. Should you require mega phono capabilities, go for the Plinius Koru.

High quality integrated amplifiers are becoming more and more the rage for music lovers wanting high quality sound, but not a rack full of gear and a loom full of high priced audio cables. The Plinius Hiato is the thinking person's solution to high end audio.



2016 Publisher's Choice

Pass Labs HPA-1 Headphone Amplifier

\$3,500

www.passlabs.com

The toughest part of this headphone amplifier was whether just to write it up as the world's best \$10,000 preamp for \$3,500 or a \$3,500 headphone amplifier with an impressive preamp thrown in as a value-added proposition. Much like the Coincident Statement reviewed in this issue, the HPA-1 is so good that if you only need a pair of RCA inputs and a single output, this is all the linestage you need unless you're spending five figures.

If you don't need a preamp, you'll still be in headphone heaven with the HPA-1. This one's got everything; mega dynamics, super tonality and the ability to drive any set of cans you plug in with ease. And of course, legendary Pass build quality.



HPA-1

2016 Publisher's Choice

Conrad Johnson GAT Series 2 Preamp

\$24,000

www.conradjohnson.com

I've been using Conrad Johnson preamplifiers on and off since 1979. How's that for brand loyalty? After both generations of the ACT 2, an ART 3 and the first-gen GAT, the current model takes it all a significant step further. This one's at the top of my list with no restrictions.

There is a sense of elegance about the way the GAT 2 looks and sounds. For those not familiar with CJ, this one has single ended RCA

inputs and outputs only, so if you need to integrate balanced amplifiers and sources, your search will continue. But if you can work with this topology, I defy you to find a more musically revealing preamplifier at any price. The GAT 2 is a preamplifier without compromise; it does everything exceptionally well.

Considering my original PV-1 is still working well after 37 years, I'm betting a GAT 2 will probably outlive me.



2016 Publisher's Choice

Franco Serblin Lignea Speakers

\$5,995/pair
www.franco-serblin.it

As the ultimate swan song, the late, legendary speaker designer Franco Serblin's final creations live on through his son in law, Massimiliano Favella, who builds these speakers today.

If you happened to have the opportunity to enjoy the early Sonus faber designs, they were simple two-way speakers, yet well executed and real things of aesthetic as well as sonic beauty. The Lignea is the last design of Serblin's and perhaps the most impressive sculpture of the three remaining designs in Massimiliano's group. Shaped almost like a mandolin, with highly polished stainless steel bases.

Perhaps the world's most exquisite mini monitors, the Ligneas will shine no matter where you place them, but they do prefer a smaller room and nearfield listening to deliver their best performance. If we gave out an award strictly for industrial design and aesthetic beauty, the Lignea's would win hands down. They are definitely one of the most beautiful speakers to ever grace our listening rooms.



2016 Publisher's Choice

Questyle CMA600i Headphone Amp/DAC/Linestage

\$1,299

www.questyleaudio.com

Bruce Ball and his team at Questyle have hit it out of the park with the CMA600i. Keeping with our current fascination with compact, all in one boxes, this baby is another perfect way to transition from high-quality desktop audio to a full-blown two channel rig. With fully balanced XLR outputs as well as RCA's, you can drive any power amplifier with it as well.

The CMA600i is a major value no matter how you slice it. Each section is worth the \$1,299 asking price alone, so when you eliminate a few sets of audio cables and power cords, this is a mega front end that would set you back about

\$6,000 if you bought it and the cables separately.

The built in "True DSD" DAC can handle whatever digital files are in your collection and is as obsolete proof as a digital product can be today. Best of all, this miniature marvel is built in the Foxconn factory – the same people that build the iPhone. The level of detail and elegance sets the bar for build quality way beyond anything remotely near the CMA600i's price tag. A handful of other manufacturers could take a page from Questyle's play book for that matter.

Definitely one of the best surprises of the year.



2016 Publisher's Choice

Modwright PH150 Phonostage

\$7,900

www.modwright.com

We've had a lot of pretty amazing phonostages on both ends of the price spectrum over the last few years, with mindblowing achievement from the mega expensive and the budget columns. There is a gap in the \$5,000 - \$10,000 phonostage arena with precious few contenders.

The Modwright PH150 bridges this gap nicely, offering big bucks sound with tasteful aesthetics and major versatility for the hardcore analog enthusiast. With MC and MM inputs, it is perfect for a multi turntable/toner arm vinyl lover. What really puts it over the top is that all the controls are on the front panel and easily accessible. We put this phonostage through it's paces with some of the world's finest cartridges, and it delivers the goods.



2016 Publisher's Choice

Sonus faber Il Cremonese Speakers

\$45,000/pair
www.sonusfaber.com

Two models down from the top of the Sonus faber range seems to be the sweet spot in my 16 x 25-foot listening room. The majestic Aida is a wonder to behold, but they really need a much larger room to fully express themselves. They are one of the world's finest speakers sonically and aesthetically, but at \$125,000/pair, out of the reach of many music lovers.

\$45,000 for a pair of Il Cremonese speakers is still not petty cash, but one could still build a very potent and satisfying system around them for under \$100,000. And in a more modest listening environment, you might not even notice the difference. No speaker wins the hearts of non-audiophiles like Sonus faber, and everyone that visited my listening room during the review period was less than spellbound by these speakers. That's what makes them one of my favorites.



IL CREMONESE
M. J. Ferrarini

2016 Publisher's Choice

VPI Prime Turntable

\$3,995 with tonearm
www.vpiindustries.com

Mat Weisfeld has taken VPI to the next level on so many fronts; offering a new range of models, embracing 3D printing technology to produce some of their tonearms, and even a collaboration with watchmaker Shinola. He and his lovely wife Jane seem to be everywhere promoting the brand, and that's a great thing for hifi in general and analog specifically.

His latest creation, the Prime takes advantage of all this, offering an 8-pound aluminum platter, with one of their new 3D printed tonearms and a proven upgrade path with VPI accessories to take the performance of this table even further, once you get in the groove with it. If you loved the Classic 2, the Prime increases the performance envelope and holds the line on the price. What's not to love?



2016 Exceptional Value



Peachtree Nova 150

Review – Issue 79
\$1,599
www.peachtreeaudio.com

Peachtree founder David Solomon has to be the most enthusiastic dude in high end audio. His love for music, this industry and his products is unbridled. The original Nova set a benchmark for what we could expect out of a reasonably priced, high performance integrated amplifier with a high amount of style. Much like the blue power meters of a McIntosh or the row of lime green pushbuttons on a Naim, the rounded case of Peachtree amplifiers has become a style icon.

The latest amplifier features a MM phono input, 150 watts per channel and an impressive DAC built around the ESS Reference Sabre 9018K2M chipset. The only thing missing is the little tube in the glass window. The new Nova 150 is so quiet, they had to take it out, as it degraded the sound.

Paradigm 75F Speakers

Review – Issue 77
\$1,499/each
www.paradigm.com

Paradigm is known around the world for being big on performance at a reasonable price. This quiet Canadian giant has a giant manufacturing facility in Toronto and thanks to a huge investment in people and technology, designs and manufactures everything in-house. The resulting economies of scale make for a much better product at a price point than someone having to contract everything out.

The 75F's rock, no question. Whether you want to use them as the anchor for a theater or two channel system, this 2.5-way system delivers full-range performance. Very efficient, with a 92dB/1watt rating, these 8 ohm speakers can be driven with anything from your favorite 30 watt per channel tube amplifier to monster monoblocks.



AWARDS

2016 Exceptional Value



Simaudio MOON 780D Streaming DSD DAC

Review – Issue 76

\$15,000

www.simaudio.com

Simaudio's 780D is without question one of the world's finest DACs at any price; considering that it plays any format imaginable and combines their award winning MiND streamer as well, makes this a premium one box digital solution that is hard to ignore. Add rock solid build quality, great worldwide dealer support and a ten-year warranty sweetens the pie, making it one of our favorite EV appointees for 2016.

$$\Sigma \left(\text{future proof} + \text{benchmark performance} + \text{superlative sound} \right) = \text{Rossini}$$



Future Proof

We are pioneers who are constantly developing new technologies to improve the quality of reproduced sound. Our unique approach to product design means that Rossini can anticipate and support new formats and innovations in audio.

Benchmark Performance

Every *dCS* product must meet the extraordinarily exacting standards demanded by our military heritage. As a result Rossini delivers levels of consistency and reliability like no other.

Superlative Sound

When you listen to Rossini our state of the art technology, manufacturing effort and rigorous testing combine to create a magical experience that perfectly recreates every last emotional nuance of whatever music you choose to listen to.

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2016 Exceptional Value



Audioengine HD6 Powered Speakers

Review – Issue 78
\$749/pair
www.audioengineusa.com

Audioengine may not be the first company to figure out that it was a cool idea to put amplifiers in a pair of small monitor speakers, but they are the first ones to refine the concept to this level.

After a decade, their new HD6 speakers continue to impress with more power, better drivers, streaming capability for your favorite wireless music delivery, and now furniture grade cabinets as well. They always looked good in black and white but the new walnut and cherry finishes beg to take these out of the office and into the living room like never before.

Audio Research REF 6

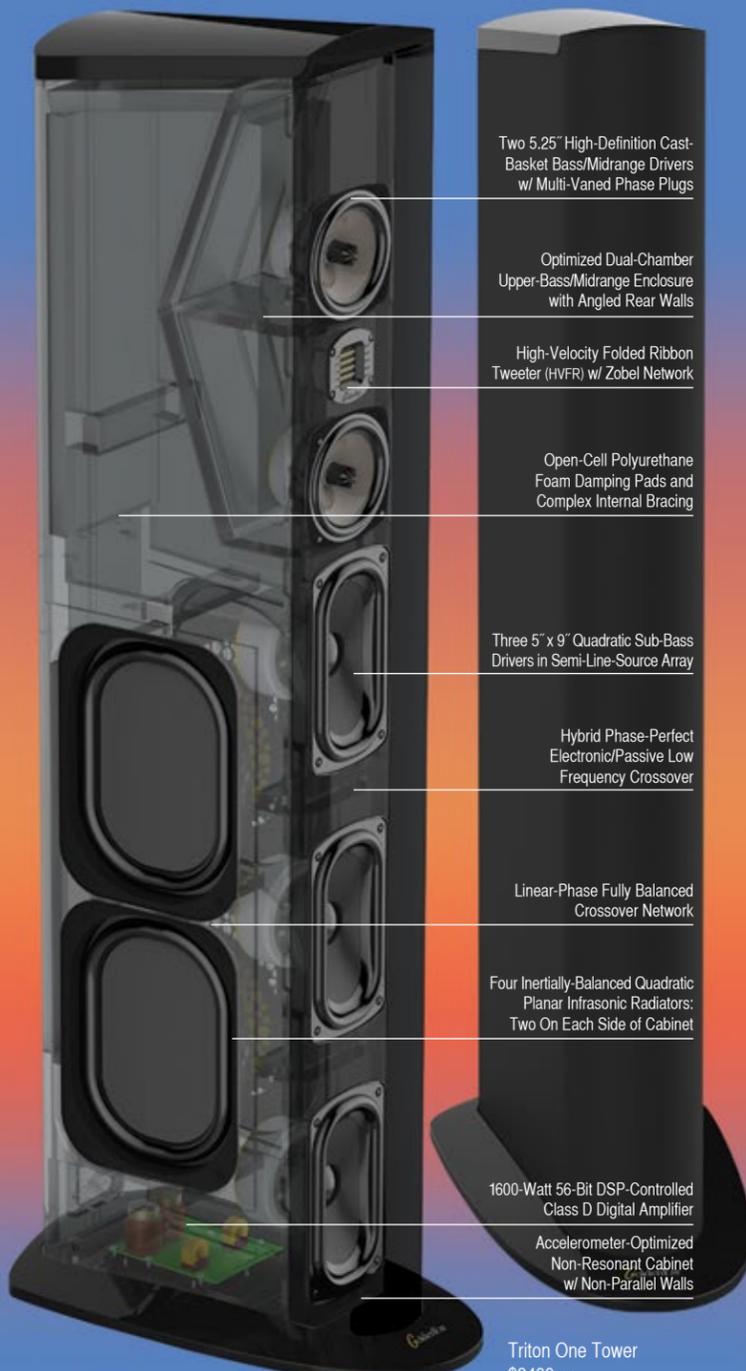
Review – Issue 80
\$14,000
www.audioresearch.com

Audio Research continues to improve the performance of their mighty REF series and the latest version takes a big leap over the last version. As ARC's Warren Gehl reminds us, "We are always trying new parts, new wire, even new circuit board materials in the quest to make our products better." They make it sound so easy, yet with all the improvements and highly improved casework, the REF 6 is only \$1,000 more than the model it replaces. That truly is an exceptional value.



GoldenEar has Engineered Our New Triton One to Perform Like a \$20,000+ Super Speaker!

“Revelatory ... cosmically orgasmic ... astounding performance-vs-price ... these speakers absolutely embalm the competition” – Darryl Wilkinson, *Sound & Vision*



Two 5.25" High-Definition Cast-Basket Bass/Midrange Drivers w/ Multi-Vaned Phase Plugs

Optimized Dual-Chamber Upper-Bass/Midrange Enclosure with Angled Rear Walls

High-Velocity Folded Ribbon Tweeter (HVFR) w/ Zobel Network

Open-Cell Polyurethane Foam Damping Pads and Complex Internal Bracing

Three 5" x 9" Quadratic Sub-Bass Drivers in Semi-Line-Source Array

Hybrid Phase-Perfect Electronic/Passive Low Frequency Crossover

Linear-Phase Fully Balanced Crossover Network

Four Inertially-Balanced Quadratic Planar Infrasonic Radiators: Two On Each Side of Cabinet

1600-Watt 56-Bit DSP-Controlled Class D Digital Amplifier

Accelerometer-Optimized Non-Resonant Cabinet w/ Non-Parallel Walls

Triton One Tower
\$2499 ea.

“Triton One shames some speakers costing ten times as much ... it is an absolute marvel”

– Caleb Denison, *Digital Trends*

“Best High-End Value at CES 2014 ... Sandy has created a speaker that defies its price point”

– John Sciacca, *Residential Systems*

“Best of CES 2014 ... stunning realism ... the sound was truly grand and majestic”

– Roger Kanno, *SoundStage*

“Best Sound for the Money at CES 2014”

– Jonathan Valin, Kirk Midskog and Neil Gader, *The Absolute Sound*

Introducing Triton One, an evolutionary speaker that builds upon advanced technologies that have made Tritons mega-hits around the world. Stereophile called them, “A Giant Killer Speaker” and Robert Deutsch further added, “it’s not unreasonable to compare the sound of the \$4998 Triton One with speakers costing tens of thousands of dollars more”. This new top-of-the-line flagship was engineered to deliver even better dynamics and bass than the extraordinary Triton Two, along with further refinement of all aspects of sonic performance. How well have we succeeded? In the words of HD Living’s Dennis Burger, the Triton One delivers, “... the sort of upper-echelon performance that normally only comes from speakers whose price tags rival a good luxury automobile”.

Triton One “creates visceral, tangible waves of pure audio bliss”

– Dennis Burger, *HD Living*

Great sound is what it is all about and the Triton Ones deliver, as The Absolute Sound’s Anthony Cordesman wrote “they provide sustained musical pleasure and exceptional realism ... extraordinary sound quality and value ... one of the best buys in speakers ... highly recommended”. The Ones were specifically engineered to excel with all types of music as well as movies. Best of all, they offer previously unheard of value, as Brent Butterworth wrote in *Sound & Vision*, “I heard a few people saying the Triton One sounded like some \$20,000-and-up high-end towers, but I disagree: I think they sounded better than most of them”. Hi Fi+’s Chris Martens raved the Ones are, “jaw-droppingly good ... one of the greatest high-end bargains of all time with a dazzling array of sonic characteristics”. And Darryl Wilkinson summed them up best, “A Masterpiece ... GoldenEar has fully ushered in the Golden Age of the Loudspeaker”. Hear them for yourself and discover what all the excitement is about.

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AWARDS

2016
Exceptional Value

Rega Planar 3 Turntable with TT-PSU and Elys 2 cartridge

Review – web

\$1,145

www.rega.co.uk

Every version of Rega’s Planar 3 has been an out of the ballpark killer value. Much like the infamous Audi 5000 and its “unintended acceleration” anomaly, that’s been harped on by a few others, we’ve never been able to recreate this phenomenon here. The publisher’s P25 from about 15 years ago ran a touch fast (eliminated by a motor upgrade), but all the Regas’ we’ve tested and owned since then have run true.

Silliness aside, the Planar 3 *sounds* absolutely lovely, and the constant evolution that Roy Gandy and his team have brought to bear on this classic is truly admirable. Add a pre mounted Elys 2 cartridge and spin some records. Analog doesn’t get any easier.



2016 Exceptional Value



Rotel RC-1590 Preamp

Review – Issue 76
\$1,790
www.rotel.com

A click under \$1,800 gets you a killer, full function preamp that does *everything*. The RC-1590 has a great DAC and a phono stage built in, along with a headphone amp and a front panel USB port. Rotel has made great gear for decades and the performance offered here is stunning. It's the perfect place to start your two-channel journey. Combine the RB-1590 amp (below) and you may never leave Rotel land.

Bowers and Wilkins 803D3

Review – Issue 79
\$17,000/pair
www.bowers-wilkins.com

Bowers and Wilkins is an engineering based company that continually refines their designs. To prove that, we located a pair of early 803 Matrix two speakers from about 30 years ago to do a side by side comparison and see how this legendary British speaker manufacture has progressed.

Quite nicely, actually. It doesn't take much listening to see where the core design brief was with the 800 series, yet the latest D3 is superb. A quick visit to the factory in Worthing, UK reveals a merger of world class engineering, procurement and manufacturing, with the addition of a human touch that is second to none. Though much of the 803s construction is automated to ensure uniformity, the amount of hand work and attention to ultimate quality control is indeed impressive.

No one, regardless of price does a better job of applying the finish to a pair of speaker cabinets than B&W. Fortunately, these speakers sound as great as they look, and if they had a Wilson or Magico badge on the front, they'd cost four times as much.



2016 Exceptional Value



Totem Kin Mini and Subwoofer

Review – Issue 78
\$1,000 (minis and sub)
www.kinmini.com

Totem is another Canadian great, producing small speakers that almost seem to defy physics, with room rumbling bass. If you've ever been to one of their demos, you know what we mean!

The Kin Mini and companion sub pack a much bigger wallop than you might expect, and their tiny (5 x 8.9 x 5.75 inch) footprint means they fit anywhere. The sub is not much larger, featuring a non-ported 6-inch carbon fiber woofer. Good as the Kin trio sounds, we were all pleasantly surprised at just how damn loud they can play without distortion, making for a versatile speaker system that goes anywhere. Invest in a pair of good, i.e., massive pair of stands for the satellites to wring the last bit of performance out of them.

Reference Reorchestrated



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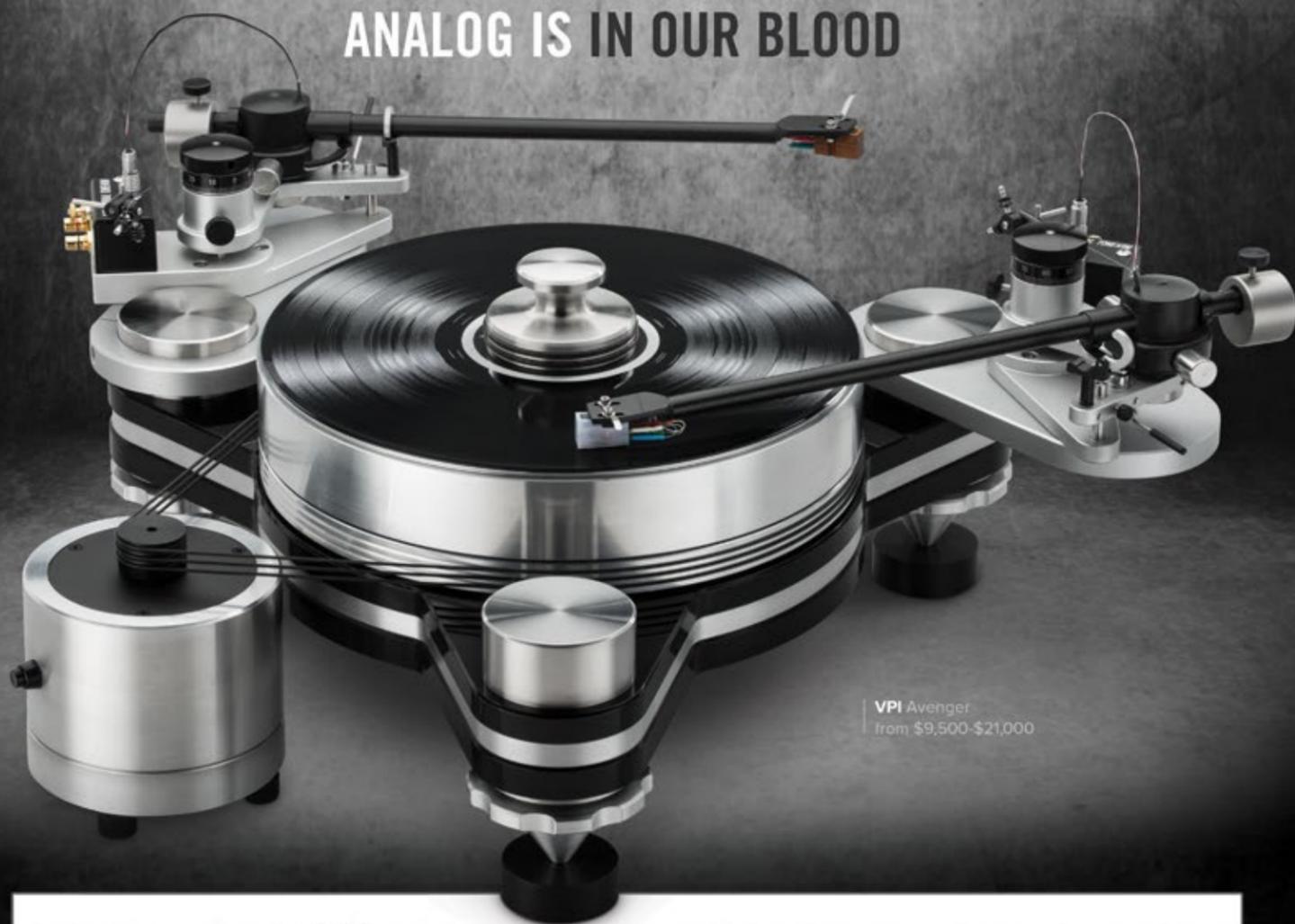
Everything we have done is simply a means to an end, to provide an unparalleled listening experience so real and engaging that you won't want it to end.

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\$5,495



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AWARDS

2016 Exceptional Value



Modwright SWL 9.0 Anniversary Edition

Review – Issue 77
\$2,900 (ss MM phono board, \$300 addl.)
www.modwright.com

13 years ago, successful modder Dan Wright introduced the first product of his own design, giving his career path a new turn. The original 9.0 was aptly named after his son, who weighed 9.0 pounds at birth.

Today, the Anniversary Edition still uses the 5687 tubes of the original, but the rest has been totally redesigned, with casework to match the rest of the Modwright gear and a built in headphone amp too. You'll only need a quick listen to see just how much this \$2,900 pre-amplifier has to offer.

AWARDS

2016 Exceptional Value



EAT C-Major Turntable

Review – web
\$2,495
(with Ortofon Quintet Blue cartridge)
www.vanaltd.com

EAT's C-Sharp table has captivated critics and music lovers around the world, with its application of technology and carbon fiber. The C-Major strips that concept down a bit, retaining all the core technology that makes the more expensive table such a great value.

\$2,500 is a highly competitive price point in the analog game, and the C-Major has it all. The Ortofon cart is a great value add, pushing it over the cliff, but even if this table was \$2,500 *without* cartridge, it would still be getting an award. We mounted a few \$2,000 - \$3,000 cartridges with excellent result. Ignore this package at your peril.

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Kanto Yumi Powered Speakers

Review – web

\$449/pair

www.kantoliving.com

In the world of cars, it's often said that "racing improves the breed." A little healthy competition is always good for things, and the Kanto Yumi speakers are the first we've seen to give the Audioengine's a run for their money. With some updated colors (white *and* red!) and class AB amplifiers, these Canadian marvels rock with authority. Keep an eye on this crew going forward.



JL Audio Dominion D110 Subwoofer

Review – Issue 77

\$1,099

www.jlaudio.com

Much like the Pass XA 30.8, JL Audio takes a lot from the cookbook of their flagship model (in this case the mighty Gotham) giving us the compact Dominion subwoofers. \$1,099 gets you the same build quality of the Gotham. What is missing is a more complex enclosure and JL Audio's Automatic Room Optimization DSP system.

However the same tight, tuneful, deep bass that has made JL famous is still here in spades. The D110s offer incredibly high performance, (hence the award) they just need a bit more flexibility in regards to room placement without DSP. At this price, it's easy to get two!

2016 Exceptional Value



McIntosh C52 Preamplifier

Review – web

\$7,000

www.mcintoshlabs.com

McIntosh's top of the line single box preamplifier is a control center in every sense of the word; it's got a fantastic MM and MC phono stage built in, a headphone amplifier with their new crossfeed circuit and a full blown DSD DAC – all on board! Throw in a pair of super cool, glowing, blue meters, an 8-band equalizer, as well as the capability for 16 inputs and you have the Death Star of high end audio. You will rule your world with the C52.

Cool as all this is, it sounds fantastic too. No one combines just the right amount of bling and performance as McIntosh – that's why they are a legend.

2016 Exceptional Value



Pass Labs XA30.8 Power Amplifier

Review – Issue 78
\$6,800
www.passlabs.com

Having used the \$85,000 Pass Xs 300 monoblocks for some time now as reference components, our enthusiasm for Pass Labs products is pretty evident. But not everyone has a spare \$85k lying about for a pair of monoblocks. If you have lesser dynamic requirements, fairly efficient speakers, but still want the gestalt of Pass at a reasonable price, the XA30.8 is your ticket to ride.

It's amazing how much of the Xs 300 DNA is present in this small (only 108 pound!!) Pass Class A power amplifier. Built to the same electronic and mechanical standard as the big boys, the XA30.8 has that same effortlessness and liquidity that is a hallmark of Pass amplifiers. And, it's got the big, circular, blue meter on the front panel too.

dCS Rossini DAC and Clock

Review – Issue 77
\$23,999 (DAC) \$7,499 (clock)
www.dcsLtd.co.uk

You might think we are entirely off our rockers awarding a nearly \$32,000 DAC/Clock combination an exceptional value award mad, but if you read the review in issue 77, we also took a close look at the dCS Elgar from nearly 20 years ago and it's still pretty awesome. As we're sure the Rossini will be.

For those who don't know, dCS takes a full blown software approach to processing and decoding, so over time, they merely send out a software or firmware update to keep you in the latest product. Where a chip and associated support can fall behind the curve pretty rapidly, the software updates to our Paganini has proved incredibly useful, providing a new digital experience with every one.

In addition, dCS also provides world class build quality and support. So if you make the investment, you can rest assured you're buying a player for life. That speaks major long term value to us.



AWARDS

2016 Exceptional Value



Rotel RB – 1590 Power Amplifier

Review – Issue 77
\$2,990
www.rotel.com

Like the companion RC-1590 Preamplifier mentioned above, removing the cover on this nearly 100 pound amplifier, reveals a 350 watt per channel monster that looks a lot like it came from a Krell or Levinson assembly line. To use an old audiophile cliché, the only sins of the RB-1590 are those of omission. Sure it lacks the ultimate detail and resolution of a \$30,000 Pass or Burmester amp, but the power produced is honest, and this is probably the only budget solid state amp that will drive a pair of Magnepans or ESLs with true authority. The RB and RC -1590 as a combination are scary good.

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FROM THE WEB

FROM THE WEB



Merrill Phono Jens and Christine Linestage

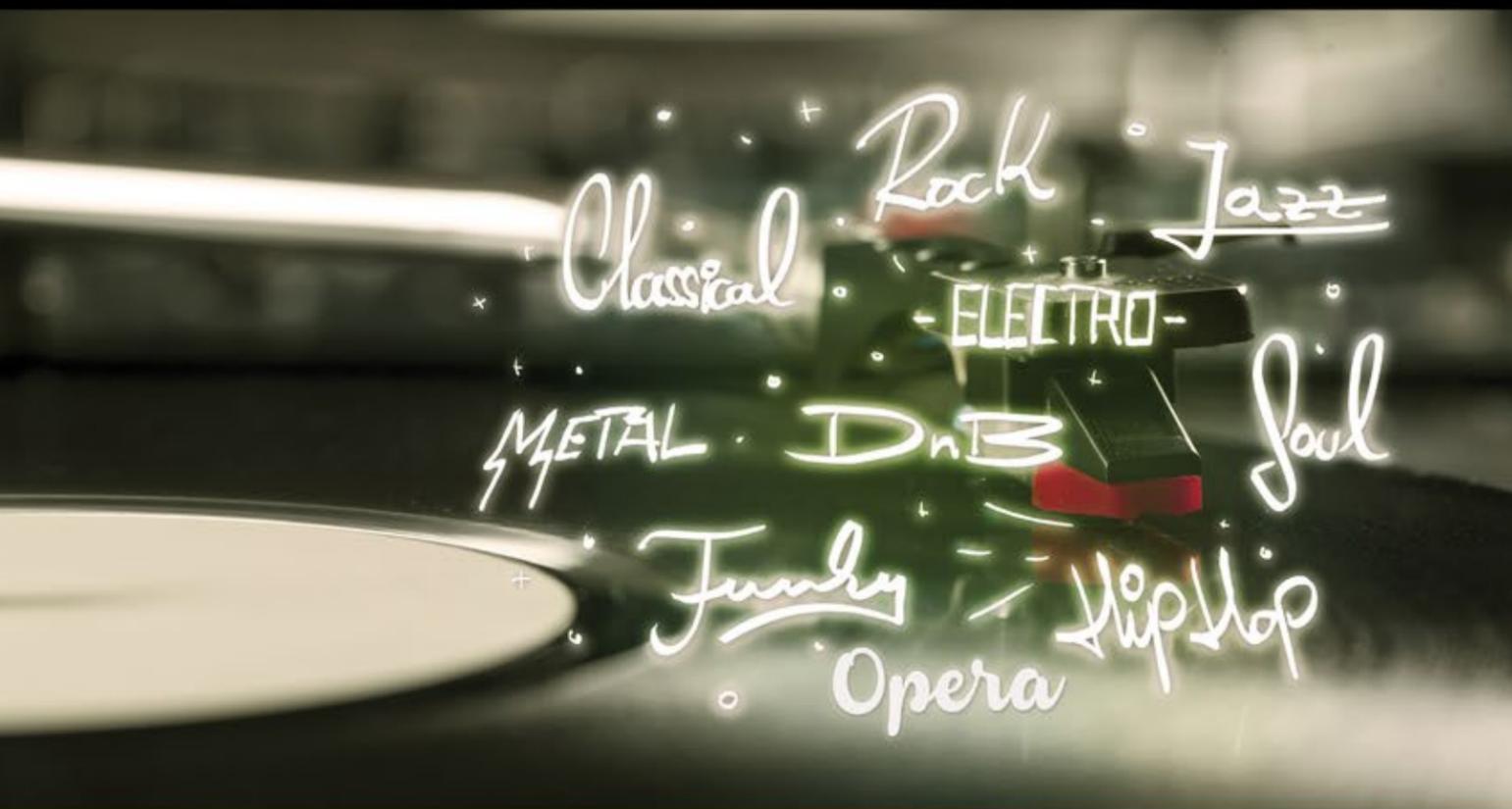
www.merillaudio.net \$13,000, and \$15,500

These two components are super blingy, with their gold plated front panel and AARP approved display (i.e. BIG font), but if you can overlook that, you'll be rewarded with some of the finest analog sound going. The Christine linestage is one of the most tonally neutral we've ever heard and with a wide bandwidth of practically DC to light, it preserves the most delicate musical nuances while defying you to decide whether there are tubes or transistors inside the case. And that's a good thing.

The Jens is equally well built and equally quirky. It only accommodates one phono input, but what it does with that tiny signal is nothing short of amazing.

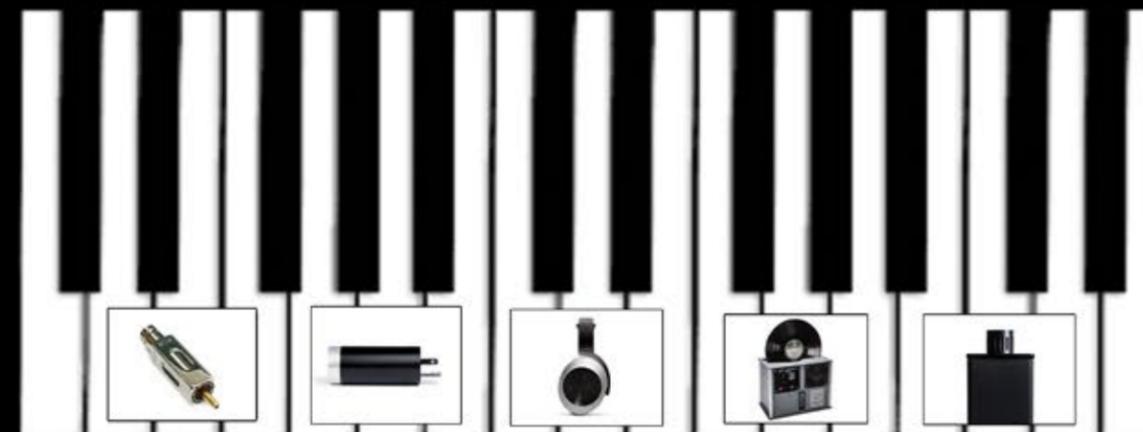
● Read about them both here.

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Carbon-Fiber Tweeter Descended Directly from Award-Winning Model Seven Mk II's Patented Perfect-Piston™ Carbon Drivers

"Better than some speakers I've heard that cost 20 times as much."
—Jeff Dorgay, TONEAudio

Patented Aerodynamic "Reflection-Free" Midrange Driver Prevents Back Wave Distortion from Reaching Listener's Ears In Time w/ Music

Vandersteen Audio today offers a remarkable line of high-end super speakers in which each model shatters all expectations of what's possible anywhere near its price point. Because Richard Vandersteen has always spent money on his speakers where it counts- on the drivers and crossovers that carry the delicate music signal- our entry-level floorstander the \$1,249/pr. 1Ci routinely **bullies bigger speakers costing two or three times as much**.

"...one of the biggest high-end speaker bargains out there..."
—Roy Gregory, The Audio Beat

The Treo (\$6,900/pr.) is a modern-day version of the Model 2 that's **beautiful to look at**, but **over-engineered** to be as silent as the enclosures of today's most exotic super speakers regardless of cost.

"My new reference speakers." —Anthony Cordesman, The Absolute Sound

The Model 5A Carbon at \$29,900/pr. features an advanced carbon tweeter and the patented Perfect-Piston™ carbon midrange from the Model Seven Mk II, plus **BIG powered bass with a 400-watt powered subwoofer with 11-band room EQ**.

"Unbeatable powered bass." —Michael Fremer, Stereophile

Advanced Cabinet-Within-A-Cabinet Construction Renders Enclosure As Inert & Sonically Invisible As Exotic Speakers Costing 10X More

The Model Seven Mk II (\$62,000/pr.) is the ultimate expression of Richard Vandersteen's design philosophies, a radically advanced take on long held design tenets. While other expensive speakers are seemingly "redesigned" every couple of years to turn new sales, the Seven has been in production continually since 2009 and updated just once. Model Seven owners can upgrade to Mk II status so **our best customers aren't left behind**. The Seven's legacy of Best of Show awards over the years is legend, and the Mk II earned four such designations in its first year. Yes, a super speaker in every sense of the word, designed and built to last.

Buy Vandersteen, Leave "Upgrade-Itis" Behind. When all of the information from the amplifier is faithfully retrieved, especially in the crucial time domain, you hear that something is missing. That something is the distortion of the original signal

Dual 8," 300-Watt Powered Subwoofers w/11-Band Room EQ In Each Speaker For Perfect Bass in Virtually Any Room

that leads to the inevitable feeling audiophiles experience called "upgrade-itis." Yes, moving up the Vandersteen line always offers more performance and ever greater musical pleasure, as will any other true upgrade to your system. But owning Vandersteens and upgrading **because you love the way your music sounds** is so much better than swapping out your gear because you *can't stand* the way your music sounds.

Vandersteen's Quatro Wood CT at \$13,900/pr. is a real-world super speaker. It's loaded with Vandersteen's most meaningful technologies including powered bass with room EQ for "perfect bass in virtually any room," Vandersteen's patented aerodynamic midrange, a naturally airy Carbon Tweeter and much more. A ton of speaker!

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FROM THE WEB

EAT C-Major Turntable

www.vanaltd.com

\$2,495 (with Ortofon Quintet Blue cartridge)



Read our enthusiastic review on one of our favorite turntables that makes it incredibly easy for an analog lover to open the box, check the tracking force on the pre-mounted Ortofon cartridge and roll. The C-Major is incredibly user friendly, and for those of you a bit further up the analog food chain, order it sans cartridge and mount something even better.

No matter which option you choose, this is a table that will take you a long time to outgrow.

● Read about the EAT C-Major here.

Pop, Rock & Country

In an effort to help you find the albums we've been reviewing, we've started this handy index at the back of the magazine. This issue, we have a listing of all the albums available, and as we go forward, we will try and link to all of the music that our gear reviewers use in their hardware reviews, in an effort to help you listen for the same things we are.

Wherever possible, each title will have a link to directly purchase the vinyl from Music Direct, as we have done in the past. To make the game even more interesting, we also have links to Tidal's digital music service, allowing you to stream if that's the way you prefer, or just to take a good listen or two before plunking down your hard earned cash for physical media.

Either way, we hope this helps expand your musical enjoyment.

Paul Cauthen

My Gospel

Purchase LP from Music Direct

[https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Paul-Cauthen-My-Gospel-\(Vinyl-LP\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/vinyl/Paul-Cauthen-My-Gospel-(Vinyl-LP))

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The Lemon Twigs

Do Hollywood

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Weyes Blood

Front Row Seat to Earth

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Hope Sandoval & the Warm Inventions

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Keith Jarrett

A Multitude of Angels

Purchase LP from Music Direct

[https://www.musicdirect.com/optical-disc/Keith-Jarrett-A-Multitude-Of-Angels-\(4CD-Box-Set\)](https://www.musicdirect.com/optical-disc/Keith-Jarrett-A-Multitude-Of-Angels-(4CD-Box-Set))

John Scofield

Country for Old Men

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Manufacturers Links

LINKS

Where to find the gear you've seen in this issue.

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| Anthem: www.anthemav.com | Plinius: www.pliniusaudio.com |
| Arcam: www.soundorg.com | PrimaLuna: www.primaluna-usa.com |
| Auralic: www.auralic.com | Primare: www.vanaltd.com |
| AudioVision SF: www.audiovisionsf.com | Rega: www.soundorg.com |
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| BAT: www.balanced.com | Upscale Audio: www.upscaleaudio.com |
| The Cable Company: www.thecableco.com | Wireworld: www.wireworldcable.com |
| Cambridge: www.audioplusservices.com | Vandersteen: www.vandersteen.com |
| Dali: www.soundorg.com | VANA Ltd: www.vanaltd.com |
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| Dynaudio: www.dynaudio.com | |
| Echo Audio: www.echohifi.com | |
| GamuT: www.gamutaudio.com | |
| Graham Audio: www.grahamaudiousa.com | |
| Focal: www.audioplusservices.com | |
| MartinLogan: www.martinlogan.com | |
| Mobile Fidelity: www.mofi.com | |
| Mystere: www.mystere-usa.com | |
| Music Direct: www.musicdirect.com | |
| Music Matters: www.musicmattersjazz.com | |
| Nagra: www.nagraaudio.com | |
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