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Chuck's engaging and collaborative approach to recording and mixing has made him a trusted partner to numerous music creatives. All of which is why dCS is proud to honor Chuck Ainlay as the latest recipient of our dCS Legends Award.



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T O N E



Number 103

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-Hi-Fi News (EISA Member)



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# In House

The soundtrack of assembling the issue...



It looks like we are still in the middle of a Prince groove this issue.

This previously tough to find disc was only available on CD as part of Prince's *One Nite Alone* box set.

Only the first 2000 box sets recieved the bonus disc of Prince performing solo on Piano.

This one's not like what you'd expect from Prince, much more a mellow mood.

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TONE103.005

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When John Atkinson came to measure, I insisted he listen...  
He let out an involuntary "Wow!" The presence of the images  
and the absence of reproductive artifacts were remarkable.  
It's what this hobby/pursuit is all about.

*Michael Fremer, Stereophile, May 2020*



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# TONE

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Sponsored By Qobuz

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By Jeff Dorgay



TONE is published 6 times yearly in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. And except for that one print issue, we've been online only, Saving the trees since 2005.





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## new arrivals...

Many of you have met industry veteran Lionel Goodfield at a hifi show over the years. He's worked in marketing and PR for Simaudio, MoFi Distribution and Totem - all great companies.

Like all the best people in hifi, he doesn't hang it up when the office closes. He's always been a mad collector of vintage gear, and FM tuners in particular. This issue, he's shared some of his favorites, along with some great tips for purchasing a vintage tuner to add to your system.

I guess they are all vintage now! Ha. Even if you are not looking for a tuner, his sage advice applies to any piece of vintage gear you might be interested in acquiring.

And yeah, the Lego thing is not going away.







mise-en-scene



### Cover Shot:

**R**otel is back, with their new line of Michi components.

They offer a preamplifier, a pair of monoblocks, and the stereo amplifier you see here.

They sound even better than they look, and they are very heavy!

And the power output meters are cooler than cool.

Shot in the studio, Sony A7R, 50 ISO, with Leica Elmarit-R, 90mm f2.8 lens.



Walnut **NEW**



Maple

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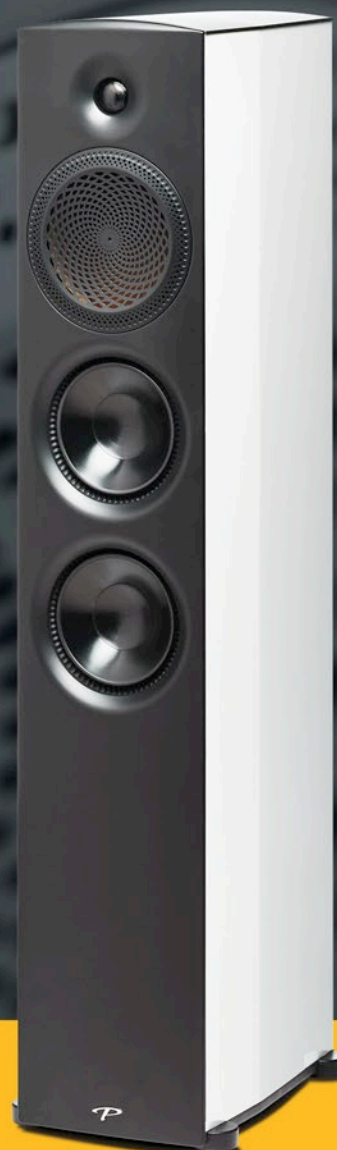


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# no.103

## P u b l i s h e r s   L e t t e r

**F**irst of all, how is everyone doing?

It just seems to get wackier and wackier out there. The virus rages on, and in my neck of the woods, the woods are on fire. A few days ago, Portland, Oregon had the worst air quality in the entire world. Yikes. I keep thinking Godzilla is going to rise up out of the water in the Willamette Valley and stomp through town. It's been somewhat frantic since we published the last issue.

Oddly enough, even though most parameters related to shipping and doing business as we once knew it, have been sporadically upset, those of you talking to us online seem to be leaning on your hifi system and music collection a little more than ever. It certainly can help to escape a bit when times are more difficult.

Our friends in the industry seem to be doing well, despite the complete absence of hifi shows, and are depending on online content and purchasing more than ever. A number of dealers have definitely made the most of transitioning to online service, and others have figured out how to service customers on a limited basis, so for now our industry seems to be hanging in there.

But mentally, how are you holding up?

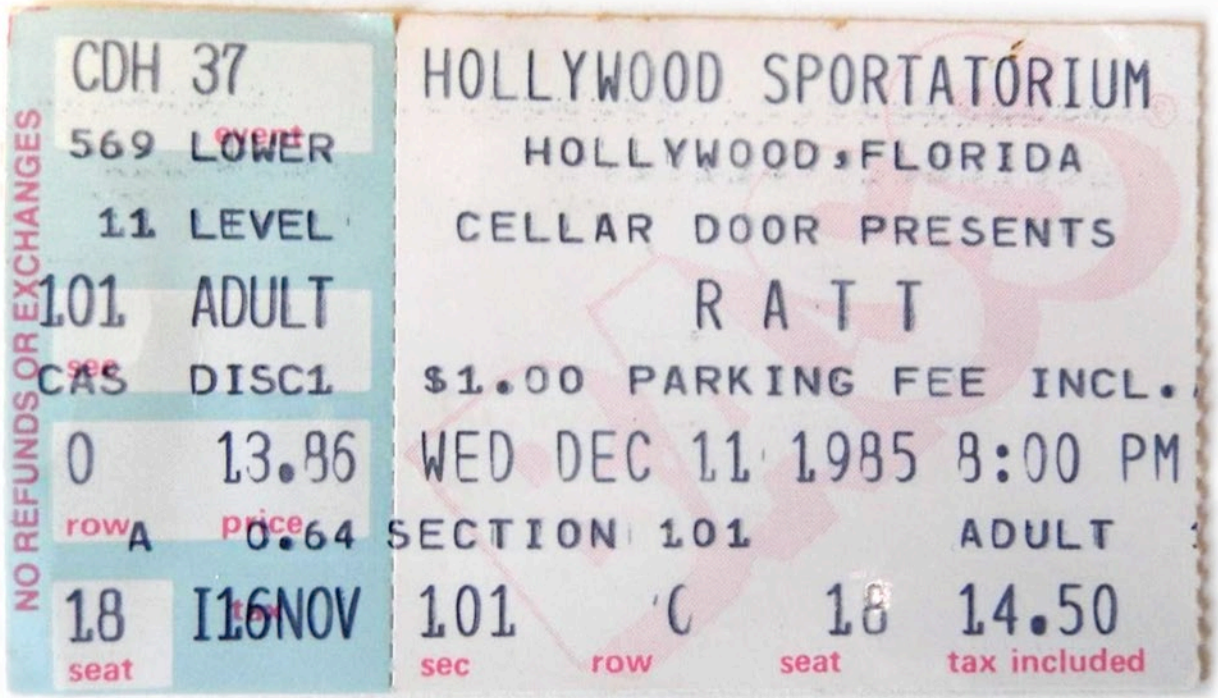
I understand that in the midst of the chaos we currently find ourselves, that mindfulness and escape can only take care of so much of whatever you happen to be going through right now. And perhaps, you've been untouched by any of what's going on. If you happen to be one of these people, bravo.

For the rest of you, now more than ever, thank you for reading, and staying in touch with us.



Don't ask us why. Maybe because some of us are still of a certain age that remembering hair metal still seems like fun. No matter what age you may be, you probably have something similar, no longer fashionable, but still great memories.

Rock on.



Ratt - Dangerous, But Worth The Risk

Lynch Mob - Wicked Sensation

Dokken - Lightning Strikes Again

Motley Crue - Piece of Your Action

Guns N' Roses - Patience

Poison - Nothin But a Good Time

KISS - Lick it up

David Lee Roth- Ladies Nite in Buffalo

Def Leppard - Action! Not Words

Faster Pussycat - Cathouse



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## Lessons Learned: Pursuing Vintage FM Tuners

**I**nterest in vintage audio gear has grown over the past decade, much like the ongoing resurgence of vinyl. Many like the warmer sound and the retro look, creating its own cool factor. Whatever your reason, if you are new to the vintage aspect of audio, there are no set guidelines for jumping it – and it's easy to get in over your head. I'll do my best to de-mystify.



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About fifteen years ago, before streaming audio, FM radio was a fantastic place to discover new music. The sound quality in major markets was a lot better than many of us realized. A quest for pre-1980 FM tuners at a time when there wasn't much information available on the internet was made easier with the help of a few fellow audio industry veterans with similar interests. As with other audio formats on the way out, good tuners could be found at reasonable prices, but you needed the patience to scour eBay and local shops taking vintage gear in on trade. Patience is a virtue when trying to zero in on a specific model.

A short list of five tuners, based on existing knowledge simplified the quest. As they became available, the next decision tree was based on whether said tuner would now become a full restoration, (most expensive) require some essential upgrades (less expensive) or a simple cleanup. Few fully restored units existed, and my knowledge base grew. Today this is easier because the resources are better. Now, I have nearly 20 vintage FM tuners in my collection and enjoy them all.

### The internet is your friend

Research a product thoroughly before you buy, to be aware of known issues and their solutions. The online forum AudioKarma is an excellent resource. This is a friendly group of hobbyists and advanced DIY'ers that can usually point you in the right direction for hard to find parts or even good techs, should you not want to break out a soldering iron.

HiFi Engine and Vinyl Engine are repositories of service and user manuals, are a tremendous help. The Vintage Knob also offers manuals and links to reviews, which can help fill in more gaps. Most let you download the actual PDFs to keep on your computer.



**Today many manufacturers** are starting to make tube hybrid amplifiers. Some claim to be manufactured in-house, while in reality they are simply bolted together from sub-assembled “kits” produced in off-shore factories.

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## Seek out a good tech

Finding someone local that can service things beyond your capability can make the difference between a great vintage audio experience and a waste of time and money.

This will allow you to rest at ease, and it will save you the expense of expensive test equipment. Even if you're good with a soldering iron, you may not know how to properly calibrate the tuner of your dreams. Getting to know a good tech can also lead you to a gold mine of gear. These guys often know the people with significant collections and the ones that are slimming down their collection. Fastidious customers usually take the best care of their gear, keeping the original boxes and manuals.

A good tech can also give you valuable information about what breaks more, what to look out for, and workarounds that will make your project easier. While we're talking service and repairs, even if you are buying your tuner from the original owner, any service history they might have will be helpful. This will give you some extra confidence, and save you from duplicating service recently performed.

## Replace consumables

These tuners are forty plus years old, so the electrolytic capacitors have probably gone out of spec at best, and are leaking at worst. You may not have the skill or patience to replace all the small ones on the various boards inside your tuner (again, a great reason to have that tech) but at least replace the large ones in the power supply.

Modern electrolytic capacitors are of much better quality, with lower ESR (equivalent series resistance) yielding less noise and better overall performance. This is a good time to swap out the diodes in the power supply for new, fast recovery equivalents. If possible, replace all incandescent lamps with LEDs. Be careful to observe correct voltages and lamp color temperature. Just like household lighting, they are available in warm white (3000K), natural white (4000K), or cool white (5000K and above). Check the web for pre-selected kits, they are available for some models, which will save you a lot of time searching for the correct ones.

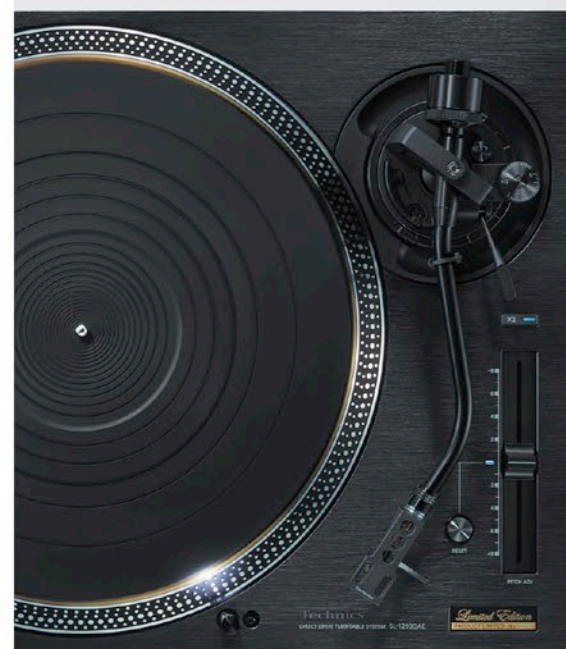
Quality LED lamps last over 15,000 hours as opposed to about 1,000 hours for standard bulbs – and the supply for these lamps is drying up. Finally, if your tuner is old enough to use vacuum tubes, plan on replacing these too. The debate of current versus NOS is the subject of another column, but unless you have access to a tube tester to determine tube condition, straight-up replacement is your best bet. This will require a full re-alignment of your tuner.



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Cosmetics

Often, the difference in price between a B-grade tuner and an A-grade tuner can be the unit's overall physical condition. More often than not, a hifi component in top physical condition usually has had more TLC in its lifetime than one that isn't. However, there's another side to this story – knobs, faceplates, and factory wood cases are not always available, and when they are, it can be staggeringly expensive. It can be a better ultimate value proposition to pay more for an example that is in excellent cosmetic shape, rather than trying to refinish it as you go.

Weight is the only downfall of pre-80s gear in this context – it's not uncommon for a tuner to weigh 30 or 40 pounds—another excellent argument for buying local if possible. If you've purchased any gear online, no doubt you've had at least one bad experience with packing and shipping. A 30-pound tuner properly packaged and insured can cost 100 dollars or more, just in shipping costs, depending on where in the world it's coming from. Don't forget about exchange rates and import duties if buying from outside your home country – it all adds up.

That clean tuner with a service history from the local dealer might end up being the better deal after all!

Even a unit in excellent physical condition can still have noisy controls. This can often be remedied with liberal application of your favorite contact cleaner (like De-Oxit) on any switches, potentiometers, and even the output jacks.

Seek, and you shall find

Once you've narrowed down your own list, try as best you can to be realistic – both in terms of what you want to spend, and how much elbow grease you want to put into the project. Patience is a virtue: now and then you will stumble onto a near mint example, but these units are getting tougher to find. Our current COVID situation makes it more difficult to encounter a stack of vintage Marantz or McIntosh pieces at a Saturday estate sale.

Sooner or later, everyone sells everything, so the piece you want will show up. Check local record stores and thrift stores like Goodwill. This was lower hanging fruit ten years ago, but good buys still lurk on their shelves.



Images by Lionel, retouching by Sean...



The best place to begin your search is the Danish site, HiFiShark Type in a brand name and model, hit the search tab and you're off to the races - a listing will appear that revealing an image (when available), a brief description, the country and site where the listing is located, the price in the local currency and the date the listing was initially posted. The site has other content, but it is best known as the end-all for searching out used audio gear.

Visit their FAQ(<https://www.hifishark.com/faq>) for full details.

HiFishark is a gateway to sites like eBay, audiomarts (USA, UK, Canada), Reverb, kijiji, many country-specific sites such as Subito (Italy), Hi-Fi (Russia), OLX (Portugal), Como Ficho (Spain), Allegro (Poland) and many more.

Regardless of the path you follow to acquire vintage audio gear, the sense of accomplishment, in the end, is worth the effort. You'll have a great sounding and most likely, great looking piece of audio gear gracing your domestic environment. With each iteration of this process, you will gain more knowledge and insight. Like any other process, reaching the final results in a great sense of accomplishment; in the case of vintage audio gear, it is more special since you can see, hear and feel the final result. After over 15 years of collecting, I still get an incredible rush when I put that restored vintage audio component into a system and experience the incredible benefits from this true labor of love.



# Shh...

The fine art of low level listening  
By Jeff Dorgay



More often than not, when you go to an audio dealer or HiFi show, whoever is doing the demo is usually cranking the hell out of the program material, and not in the most flattering way. This doesn't always attract people to the world of high-performance audio. A chorus in a Joe Jackson song laments being "brutalized by bass and terrorized by treble." You don't have to go there if you'd rather not.

Not that I don't like heading towards 11 on the volume control, now and then. If your system has the sheer dynamic drive to approach concert levels, a little bit of that can be fun. There's something about moving that much air in the room - giving you the feeling that you're experiencing a live performance, that's intoxicating. I find it not unlike driving a high-performance car faster than is reasonable and prudent. Now and again, absolute power does corrupt absolutely.



It's equally enticing to listen to a system that does a fantastic job of playing at a low level, however this a different kind of fun. Not all systems capable of sterilizing you with 120db playback can get the job done at lower levels. So, we're going to mention some components that work well together to give you that low-volume lounge groove. Because there are times you don't feel like putting on a pair of headphones.

The system assembled here happens to be in my living room, consisting of the new Gold Note IS100 streaming DAC, a pair of the new JBL L-100 Classics, and the Coincident Dynamo 34SE. We're using a TORUS TOT AVR for line conditioning and a full suite of Cardas Clear Sky cables.

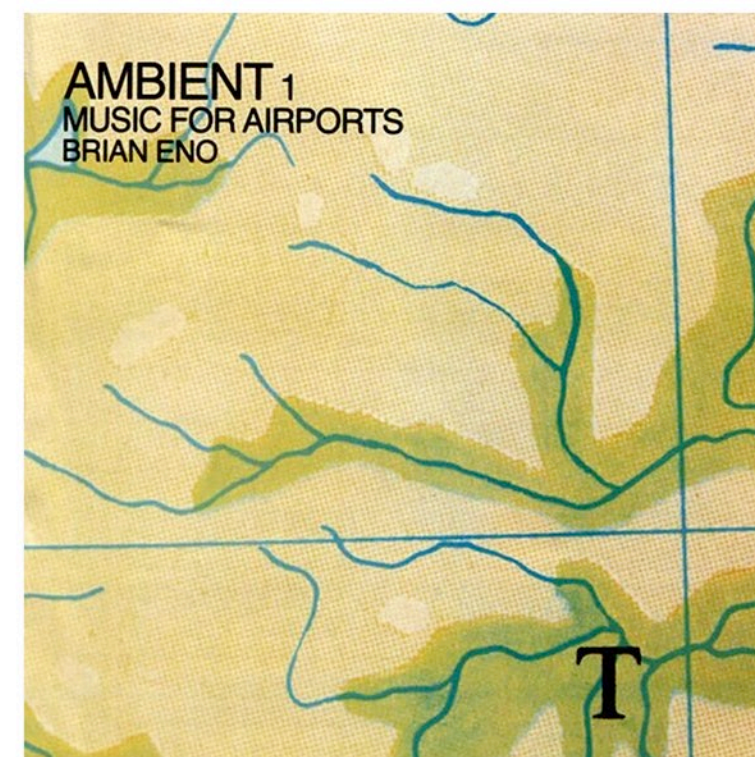




The L-100 Classics are one of my favorite speakers to come down the road in a long time. You could almost call them "anti-audiophile" speakers. I mean that in a significant way. Though the L-100 Classics have a sensitivity rating of 90db/1-watt, they aren't automatically a match for every 30 watt per channel amplifier in the house. The Classics have proven to be a case by case example of system synergy, so I've tried amplifiers I usually wouldn't.

Case in point: The Coincident Dynamo MK.II (now a MK.III model) supplying 8 watts per channel of single-ended EL-34 power. Granted, this amplifier won't quite rock the house like something more powerful, but its sweet sound is lovely for late-night listening sessions hanging out.

The inner detail at lower level that SETs are famous for is here in abundance, and its slight mid-bass hump works like a natural contour control for these speakers,



providing a seductive sound. I'd suggest the Line Magnetic LM-805iA (with 48 watts per channel of SET goodness) for those wanting more oomph, but this little Coincident amp with the matching footprint Gold Note DAC is out of this world good. Barely hitting 80dB peaks, this system truly satisfies. A good place to start your less than loud journey? Brian Eno's classic, Ambient 1: Music For Airports

Your audiophile friends might think you're crazy, but your music-loving friends will dig it. I guarantee it. And if all else fails, tune out and plug in a set of headphones.

We'll touch on a LM-805iA centric system in issue 104.





### Taking a spin with the Grado Timbre Master 3 cartridge

As many vinyl and headphone enthusiasts know, there's something terrific about Grado products. The Grado Timbre Master 3 low output wood body cartridge is no exception. This striking mid-range cart offers a perfect opportunity to enjoy your vinyl collection while benefitting from over 60 years of innovation, driven by a family that loves music.

In the early 1950's, master watchmaker and opera fan Joseph Grado began building phono cartridges at his kitchen table in Brooklyn, New York in an effort to improve the sound of his record collection. In 1953, he closed the family fruit business and began Grado Laboratories. He invented the first stereo moving coil phono cartridge in 1959 while the Grado line grew. In 1982, he was inducted into the Audio Hall of Fame and retired in 1990 with 48 patents to his name. His nephew John Grado has been President and CEO ever since and today, John's son Jonathan Grado is Vice President.

They've come a long way from the kitchen table.



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## Only A Few Engineers Become Legends

In the world of music production, there's a select group of recording engineers who have strived throughout their career to deliver the highest quality listening experience possible.

Over the course of his 30 year plus career, renowned engineer Tony Faulkner has made more than two thousand classical recordings which have been distributed worldwide by a long list of major and independent music labels. These albums, which have enjoyed much commercial success and won numerous awards, include acclaimed titles including *Berg Early Songs with Jessye Norman*; *South Pacific with Dame Kiri te Kanawa and Sarah Vaughan*; *Sibelius Symphonies with Sir Colin Davis*; *Gorecki Symphony of Sorrows with Dawn Upshaw*. And in 2005, Tony's recording of pianist Evgeny Kissin's Scriabin, Medtner, Stravinsky won the GRAMMY™ for Best Instrumental Soloist Performance (without orchestra).

A pioneer in digital audio, Tony also heads his own production company and has served over the years as a consultant to a number of technology firms and manufacturers. All of which is why dCS is proud to honor Tony Faulkner as the latest recipient of our dCS Legends Award.



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Shanon Says  
music and hifi from the great white north...  
By Shanon Sweetishnoff



### Beginning the journey

Legacy Grado fans take note, the new Timbre Series is a combination of what used to be the Statement and Reference Series, incorporating the latest improvements. The GTSM3 has an MSRP of \$1,000 (about \$1,350 Canadian) and is one model from the top of the series. Unpacking a Grado cartridge is always a sensory experience, to say the least. The hinged wooden box is almost as much a work of art as the cured Australian Jarrah wood bodied cartridge lurking inside. Even the stylus guard that protects the nude elliptical diamond stylus is made of wood!

Weighing in at 10 grams, it is slightly heavier than my reference Hana ML at 9.5 grams. Though Grado invented the moving coil design, their current cartridges embody a moving iron design meant to be loaded at 47k ohms. This can be a dilemma for some, which is why they offer a low output (1mv) version and a 4mv version. If you have a phono stage that can offer 47k loading with more output (my Gold Note PH10 is up to this task) the lower output models in the Grado line offer a bit more tonal delicacy. I went straight for the low output.

### The tech behind the masterpiece

The Grado bodies are a bit over 1 1/4" long (31.75mm) and as with my turntable, may need to be set a bit further

back in the head shell than what you are currently using. Make sure you have enough clearance before proceeding! Suggested VTF range is 1.6 – 1.9 grams, but I find the sweet spot at 1.75g in my setup. The GTSM3 breaks in quickly, but does have a bit of edginess combined with a reduced soundstage right out of the box. 20 hours later, it's gone. As with any premium cartridge, it's always a good idea to double check the setup after about two weeks of play, as the suspension can settle ever so slightly. Inside the red wood body, Grado's patented 'Flux Bridge' integrates twin magnets, a 5-part optimized transmission line cantilever and ultra-high purity oxygen-free copper coils. Grado has achieved 5% lower stylus tip mass with the Timbre series, resulting in increased trackability.

This aspect of Grado cartridge performance has been steadily improving over the last decade.

### Listening

My current table is an Acoustic Solid Vintage Exclusive, using the Gold Note PH10/PSU10 phono stage. The rest of the system is rounded out with a McIntosh MA252 integrated and a pair of Focal 826 speakers. Keeping my personal sonic perspective continuous, I use Focal Elear phones for personal listening sessions.





# ShannonSays

music and hifi from the great white north...

By Shanon Swetlishnoff

I lean on some new and old vinyl selections, Neil Young's *Everybody Knows This is Nowhere*, Jethro Tull's *Aqualung*, Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, and TOOL's *Undertow* for the heavy listening.

Lovers of female vocals will enjoy the midrange body that the Grado brings to the presentation: the sweetness that this cartridge serves up a lot of emotion.

Switching to headphones, with Joni Mitchell's "Little Green" offers a heightened emotional connection over what I'm used to. Maybe I need some Grado headphones as well? Every note in her high, delicate register combined with the acoustic guitar work is full of texture and clarity.

Neil Young's riveting guitar solo on "Cowgirl in the Sand," and Jethro Tull's driving piano on "Locomotive Breath" have a powerful midrange body that I suspect will be a bonus to all classic rock enthusiasts. Yet the Grado has no trouble keeping up with current classics – turning TOOL up to window shaking levels, the bass and drums are chest poundingly good.

Sorry neighbors. Ok, not sorry, this cartridge really rocks.

The GTSM3 put new perspective on a lot of old favorites. If you're tired of the sterility in some of the current cartridge offerings, I suggest auditioning the Grado Timbre series.

This might be just what you're looking for. A big thanks to Rich Grado for making this happen.

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Club Mix compilation expert, Scott Tetzlaff returns with a look East.

He says this playlist has him dreaming of faraway places and planning for future journeys. It also features two tracks from Peggy Gou, a Korean DJ living in Berlin.



CloZee - Koto

Onra - Loyalty

Peggy Gou - Hungboo

Fakear - Darjeeling

Sahale - Maangalye

Sigh - Geisha Blues

DJ Ravin - Digital Karma

Peggy Gou - Han Jan

Chinese Man - Miss Chang

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Tavlin Singh - Jaan



## THE NEW LOOK OF PROVEN PERFORMANCE

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A stylish new enclosure design updates the look, with performance-enhancing internal bracing, reinforced baffles, new fabric grilles, and a choice of three beautiful finishes.

"...the vocals sounded eerily lifelike, and the instrumental timbre was natural, with a depth so palpable I could practically reach my hands into it."

**David Martson**, The Absolute Sound, on Motion 60XT

[martinlogan.com](http://martinlogan.com)



1095

Great sound around a G...

By Jeff Dorgay

As someone who's heard a lot of great ELAC demos over the past few years, I'm the last to the dance to actually get a pair here for review – and credit for that goes to Upscale Audio's Kevin Deal. I've known Kevin for decades. We've been car buddies since way before my audio writing career began, but we both share enthusiasm for a bargain in audio. He was kind enough to send a pair along with the PrimaLuna Tube DAC that we'll have a full review on very soon.

Once again, we come in way under budget for the 1098 column – the DBR62s are only \$600 a pair. You could add the Rega io amplifier we just reviewed at \$399 and add 20 feet of Tellurium Q speaker cable and still squeak in under 1098. That's rocking.

If you've been following the current ELACs, all designed by Andrew Jones (formerly of Pioneer and the designer of the megabuck and mega good TAD monitors), you know they are one of the best values in audio going. Where the smaller ELACs have always come across a little flat and forward at shows – but still incredible for the low price asked, the DBR62s are somewhat warm in overall tonal balance.

All the more intriguing.

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**Debut Ref**  
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*Interesting  
aesthetic*



*High performance  
for the price*

*None to speak of...*

ELAC

Reference



## Not so random pairings

I love the Rega io, and this is a great pairing with the DBR62s, with an overall presentation that is slightly two dimensional. Moving upscale (ok, pun intended, you caught me) proves these little speakers are capable of oh, so much more. Swapping the io for my Prima Luna ProLogue ONE, that's been here for nearly 20 years now proves more engaging. You might think hooking these speakers up to a nearly vintage EL-34 tube amp would be way warm, but it isn't. Moving on to the current PrimaLuna EVO100 is even more revealing, and the VAC i170 even more, but that takes us out of the budget constraints set here.

A \$600 pair of speakers is a great building block for a budding audiophile/music lover, so I tried them with an incredibly wide range of amplification, as our readers always ask. Starting with high density guitar from Jeff Beck's *Jeff* album (which was incidentally released 17 years ago the day I'm writing this) checks the sheer dynamic ability box. These speakers definitely rock more than they've been given credit for. They are the perfect example of revealing what you feed them. Low current AV receivers will not allow the DBR62s to deliver all they are capable of. However, a couple of vintage Marantz and Sansui receivers prove more than capable.

## More listening

I must confess to enjoying the DBR62s more than just a little, paired with the PrimaLuna EVO100, splitting half of the listening time with the Gold Note streaming DAC and the other half with the PrimaLuna Tube DAC. (review in progress) If these speakers are "laid back," it would show up here. The tonal balance is full, with no real HF roll off that I could detect. The bottom end of these speakers is equally good, with much more grunt than you might expect from a \$600 pair of speakers.

Tracking through some bass heavy favorites, the DBR62s deliver excellent performance. Too often, inexperienced listeners mistake an overly bright presentation for detail.

The ELACs are not lacking in detail, they just don't shout at you.



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Depending on your room, you may even be able to position them somewhat tightly in the corner, to get a bit more low end oomph. The upper bass/lower midrange balance is key here. If you set the speakers up to deliver the most bass they can (taking advantage of room gain) the midrange balance will suffer – perhaps this is how these speakers have been labelled laid back by a few listeners.

The front loaded port offers more placement options, especially if you have to bookshelf mount, or in case you use these in a multichannel setup and need to get creative with placing a pair as rear speakers.

The DBR62s do an incredible job on the midrange to low treble part of the musical spectrum, avoiding the grainy tonal rendition that plagues nearly all of the speakers in this price range. Listening to a number of vocal and acoustic tracks reinforces how well these speakers do with the musical fundamentals. This is what keeps you in the chair listening actively, instead of passively.

With most listening done in our 13 x 15 room, and 13 x 18 room, these speakers should play plenty loud enough for most people. ELAC claims a sensitivity of 86db/1-watt, but again in the real world, 25 watts per channel with a bit of current to back it up will be sufficient.

Strictly in the name of punishing the DBR62s and finding their limit, we enlisted the Luxman L-509x, offering around 120 watts per channel. Push, we did, playing a lot of 70s heavy rock and hoping we wouldn't be paying for a pair of speakers. These little speakers prove up to the challenge, showing their ability to play loud and clean.

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# 1095

Great sound around a G...



## Final points

The physical size of the DRB62s is small. The cabinets measure only about 8 inches wide, about 14 inches tall, and nearly 11 inches deep. As with all small speakers, the more mass and rigidity your stands offer (along with attending to the stand/speaker interface effectively) will help the speakers deliver better, more extended bass response. These speakers offer good vertical dispersion, so they are relatively easy to just throw in the room, another critical point for those with small rooms, and music enthusiasts that must work around their environment for speaker placement.

The 6.5 inch woofer and 1 inch cloth dome tweeter blend together well – bias noted, we’d rather have a well implemented two way speaker than a poorly planned three of four way. Andrew Jones’ experience is worth its weight in gold here – there are a lot of speakers for twice this amount, assembled offshore from generic parts that are absolute rubbish.

## The DBR62s are the real deal at a budget price.

The DRB62s are available in a black baffle with walnut vinyl cabinet, or sporting a white front panel with a lighter, wood-ish vinyl (our review samples) that looks smart in my mid-60s living room. Keeping SKUs to a minimum keeps costs down. Personally, I like the white, because it seems to disappear into the room, a benefit in smaller environments. What’s not to like?

It’s tough to get granular with speakers at this level. They can cross a certain threshold and are musically engaging, or they can’t. The ELAC DBR62s Are top of the heap for \$600/pair. Great looks, great sound, easy to work with.

If you need a multichannel or theater configuration head right back to ELAC for matching floorstanders and a center channel sharing the same voice.





## LSA-10 Signature

**Big voice, small speakers**  
\$1,495/pair

[underwoodhifi.com](http://underwoodhifi.com)

Serious listening with the LSA-10 Signature speakers begins with a quick dial back on the way back machine, all the way to 1965 and some Gabor Szabo. If you aren't familiar, this Hungarian guitarist was quite the rage back in the day, with a clean style that reminds me a lot of Johnny Smith or Kenny Burrell.

Szabo's playing quickly showcases the coherence displayed by this 2 ½ way design from LSA. With a 6.5-inch woofer and soft dome tweeter on the front face, and a 5x7 inch passive radiator facing rearward, this "bookshelf" design might just fool you into thinking it's a floorstander with your eyes closed. The transition from the lowest bass notes all the way up to the top of the frequency spectrum has this Quad loving audio enthusiast nodding in approval. And as your favorite 80s game show host might say, "what would you expect to pay for speakers offering this kind of performance?" The Signature model reviewed here is now only \$1,495/pair.



The \$3,495 Statement model is the same, except for a beryllium dome tweeter. If you want a bit more resolution and a harder edge to the sonic picture painted, pony up for the Statements. This part will be strictly personal preference and related ancillaries. Underwood Wally (the man behind distributor Underwood HiFi) will probably be angry with me for loving the lower-priced model. Still, I confess to almost always preferring the sound of a silk dome tweeter. Bias exposed. While I'm making enemies - throw out the perforated metal grille while you're at it. (or put it back in the box for another day) The rest of the fit and finish would be better served by a well-executed fabric grill, or something with a finer perforation, more like what MartinLogan does. I'm guessing most of you listen without grilles, so this is really no big deal.

### Running the gamut

LSA doesn't specify sensitivity on these speakers, but even the low powered Pass Labs XA25 integrated (25wpc, pure Class-A) offers more than enough power and control to drive these speakers to a high level in my 13 x 18-foot living room. While several different tube and solid-state amplifiers were given a go with the LSA-10 Signatures, they are not at all difficult to drive.

After trying about a dozen different combinations, most listening was done with the PrimaLuna EVO400 power amplifier (85wpc, tubes) in concert with the Backert Labs Rhumba preamplifier and Gold Note DS10 DAC/Streamer, with a bit of vinyl on the side. 95% of the source music used was via Roon and Qobuz. The EVO400 proved to have more than enough drive and smoothness that really compliments the LSA-10s. As with the tweeter choice, those wanting a slightly more forward sound might prefer a non-Class-A solid-state amplifier.



## Where Have all the Good Stereos Gone?



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The Hegel 590 is in for review, and this amplifier offers up a punchier, more forward presentation. Substituting the Hegel for the CJ/PrimaLuna combo feels like moving up from row 20 to row 8 in the auditorium. I like the soft dome tweeter; those wanting a bit more aggressive overall sound have more options than a speaker with a tweeter that's already a little forward. But we can argue about this all day long; let's get back to listening to music!

### Splitting hairs

Just as the line between prince and frog can be thinner than you think, the same applies whether you consider a speaker smooth or laid back. After listening to the LS-10s for some time, I'm still going with smooth. For my money, laid back feels more like a loss of resolution, especially in the upper registers, and the LS-10s do not fall victim to this. Listening to more acoustic music illustrates that cymbals dither into nothingness with plenty of detail, and stringed instruments have the required amount of body to feel realistic. Like nearly all speakers relying on a soft dome tweeter, there is a slight softening of the hardest transients, such as drum heads and the initial strike of piano keys.

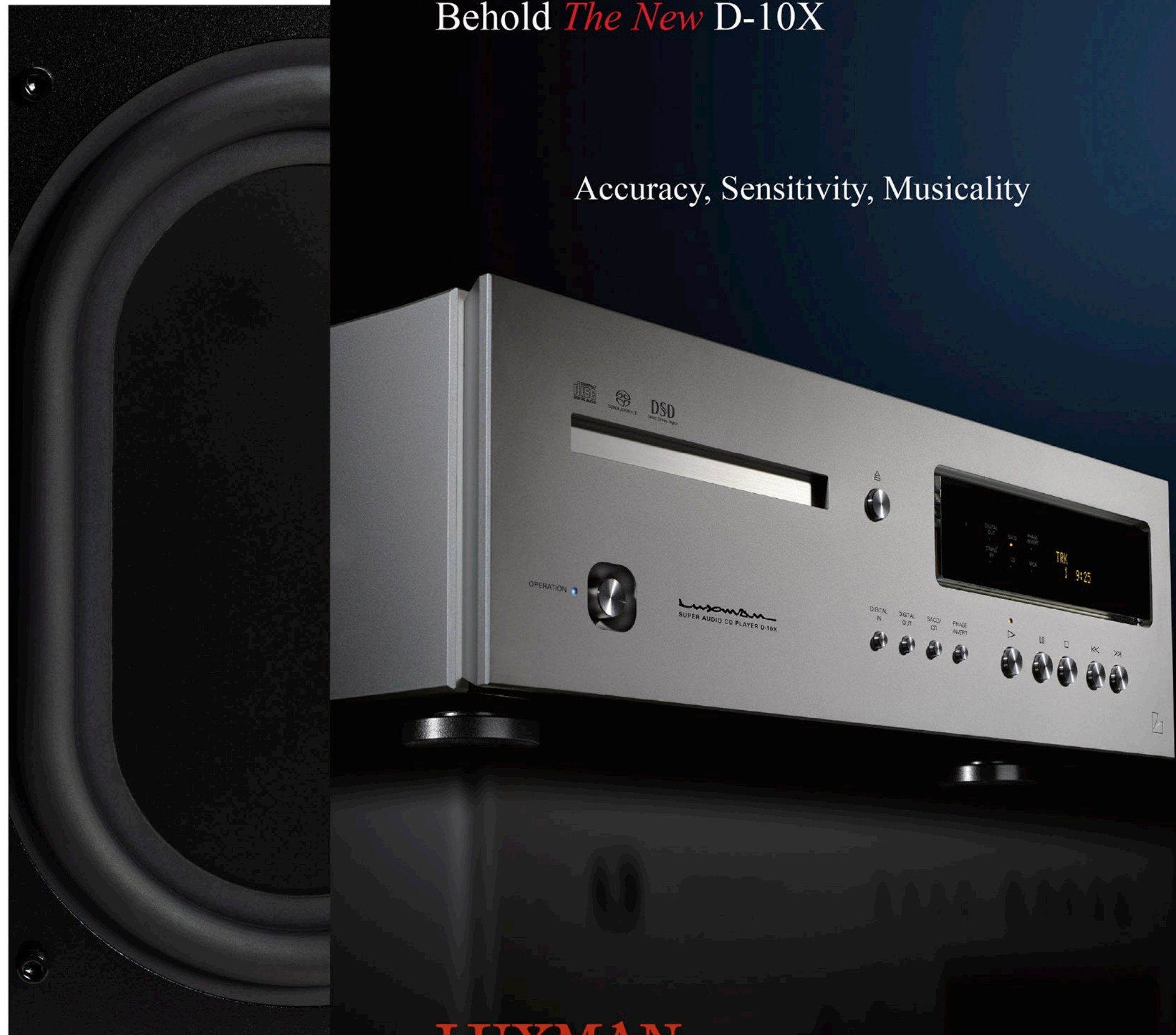
A long playlist of hard-rocking tunes clearly proves that the LS-10s ability to move air. That rear-firing passive radiator goes a long way to make these speakers feel like floorstanders. When playing material with heavy bass content (Kruder and Dorfmeister, Pink Floyd, Massive Attack, that kind of thing), these compact speakers demonstrate significant authority. In addition to delivering substantial low-frequency information, the quality of what is produced is excellent. Stanley Clarke has been in heavy rotation here lately and tracking through *If This Bass Could Talk*, proves the LS-10s more than capable.

### Setup

Those rear-firing passive radiators will require a bit more time to ace the setup, but your efforts will be rewarded. I suggest starting about a foot further out in your room than what you might be used to with other speakers lacking a rear driver or passive radiator. As always, the key is going to be adjusting around the bass presentation you want, and then adjusting the rest with toe-in and rake angle.

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Using a pair of filled 24" Sound Anchor stands with a bit of sticky stuff to improve the speaker/stand interface works like a charm. Small monitors always need great stands to deliver the most solid bass response, and these perhaps a bit more, because they go down further than many of the other small monitors we've used.

The LS-10s do not produce a stereo image that goes well beyond the speaker edges, so adjust speaker width, and toe-in with care. The more time you spend on this aspect of setting them up will produce the largest stereo image they are capable of. What these speakers lack in the last few molecules of stage width and pinpoint imaging, is more than made up for in natural tonality and lifelike sonics.

Every speaker has design compromises, and they've made solid choices here. That devil personal bias sets in again, but I'd much rather have a coherent speaker with a natural midrange over a speaker that produces a mile wide stereo image, yet falls flat on tonality.

### A major contender

Trying to stay more in tune with those not wanting a six-figure hifi system, yet still craving a great musical experience, we've been auditioning more speakers in this price range, and we all agreed that the LSA LS-10s would be on our top five list if we actually did that kind of thing. It's not often that a \$1,495 pair of speakers do this much right tonally and offer an excellent sense of scale too. Those needing more oomph can step up to the LS-20 floorstanders or add a pair of subs to the LS-10s.

Balance and nuance will always be my catnip, and this is something the LS-10 Signatures excel at. I can't imagine a better choice in the context of a \$5k - \$15k system. Different, yes, but in terms of sheer sonic quality, these are awfully impressive.

The design choices by the LSA team have made serve the music. I am very happy to give the LS-10s an Exceptional Value Award for 2020.



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## The Luxman EQ-500 Phono stage

Having owned Luxman products for longer than I can remember, I admit to having a soft spot for the brand.

My first hi-fi system, purchased in 1981, featured a Luxman L430 integrated amplifier and PD-284 turntable, still operating reliably in my living room today. This plays to their solid reputation of producing long lasting gear with a traditional flair – never flashy or the latest trend.

Should you own a Luxman product from the 1960s, you'll notice the similarity to the current products.

With aesthetic updates that pay homage to the past, yet respect the future.

2020 marks the 95th anniversary of Luxman, one of the audio industries' longest standing brands, with a house sound that has remained consistent throughout its history. The Luxman sound is natural, and elegant - the same can be said of the current Luxman EQ500 Phono Preamplifier.





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### Features and Functionality

The \$6,495 EQ-500 is the top model in Luxmans' analog range, above the solid-state EQ-250 Phono (\$2,295). It carries the same traditional look of its predecessors, with Luxman's hallmark toggle switches and rotary control knobs, yet the color and style of the front faceplate carry a younger and sportier look. Unlike the “38 range”, which pays homage to models with a wooden outer case, the EQ-500 features a metal chassis with a thick aluminum face with a satin silver finish. The chassis has a standard size of 17.3” wide and just shy of 4” tall. The casework shares the same level of fit and finish with the top Luxman components.

The EQ-500 is an all-tube design, featuring three RCA phono inputs, and three outputs. Two are unbalanced RCAs, and 1 balanced XLR. All 3 inputs can accommodate both MM and MC Cartridges, with 3 different settings accessible on the front panel:

MM - for MM cartridges with approx. 4 mV output.  
MC Low - for MC cartridges approx. 0.18mV output.  
MC High - for MC cartridges approx. 0.44mV output.

The plethora of toggle switches and rotary knobs on the front offer near endless adjustability. Fortunately, you won't need to use them much beyond initial setup, unless you are changing phono cartridges constantly. The meter switch on the front panel does allow for turning the meters, but why would you ever want to turn them off? A plethora of front panel switches also allow control of output mode, mono/stereo functionality, high and low cut filters and even the ability to change the polarity of pin 1 and 2 of the XLR output. This comes in handy with a system that is not “all Luxman,” to keep everything working smoothly. Finally, the switch marked “articulation” acts as a built in demagnetizer for your MC cartridges. Nice.



Following the instructions in the well written manual, (be sure to keep the volume control down all the way) leaving the articulation switch on for the required 30 seconds, though I could hear almost no difference before and after the demag operation.

The input, gain, and cartridge (MC/MM) rotary knobs are self-explanatory. Impedance allows infinite load adjustments between 30k and 100k ohms, while the capacitance control has six steps between 0 and 300 pF. Those with vintage MM cartridges will appreciate the ability to fine tune the EQ 500 in this manner.





What about loading selection for MC Cartridges? The EQ-500 utilizes step-up transformers as the first gain stage, with the load impedance defined by the turn ratio of the transformer. The EQ-500 has two MC gain settings, each corresponding to a specific gain ratio and therefore the actual load impedance is fixed for each setting. It's worth mentioning the owner's manual does not specify the actual load impedance seen by the cartridge. The impedance number printed in the manual corresponds to the recommended internal impedance of the cartridge for each input settings, not the actual loading.

The High MC position is suitable for MC cartridges with an internal impedance of up to 40Ω, translating to cartridges with an output of approximately 0.44mV. The Low MC position is for cartridges up to 2Ω, and these usually have an output of 0.18 mV. The actual loading impedance is not adjustable but is calculated to be approximately 50 4.4 ohms for the Low MC, and 110 40 ohms for the High MC input. This covers a wide range of cartridges on the market, except for the rare high output MC cartridges such as the Clearaudio Goldfinger (0.7 mV) which requires a loading impedance of approx. 270 to 300 ohm.

Under the Hood

Luxman America was tight-lipped about the circuitry design of the EQ-500, but they did give us some basic information. The design and engineering team features Mr. Doi, who conceived the product, Mr. Watanabe the actual engineer, and Mr. Nagatsuma, who did the final voicing/tuning on this project.

The first input stage for the MC section consists of 2 sets of discrete Step-Up transformers (2 for each channel) with a selectable gain ratio of 19 dB (Low MC) and 27 dB (High MC). This is followed by 2 discrete shunt regulated push-pull (SRPP) stages using 4 12AX7 tubes, and a cathode follower output stage with a pair of 12AU7 tubes. Paying homage to the highly respected E-06 phono released in 1987, the EQ-500 employs the same non-negative feedback capacitance resistance (CR Type) RIAA circuitry. The rectifier section does not employ the use of diodes, but a single EZ81 rectifier tube.

The internal layout of the EQ-500 is well thought out and pays respect to the Luxman heritage. The six tubes in the gain stage are hidden under a cover of solid copper. Each section of the circuitry is broken down into

individual modules, with plenty of shielding, neatly laid out in separate partitions. The critical capacitors in the signal path are sourced from German-made Mundorf M-Caps, unusual to be found inside a Japanese product.

As much as I respect the supplied Slovakian made JJ tubes, I prefer the sound of the old German made Telefunks. As soon as I put about 20 hours on the JJ Tubes, I swapped them with NOS Telefunks and never looked back. This entire review is based on Telefunken 12AX7, 12AU7s, and an RCA 6CA4 rectifier tube, instead of the stock configuration. As expected, the Telefunks are a major improvement with frequency extension, almost as if someone has physically lifted the frequency response curve at both ends of the spectrum. Higher notes are more extended, and lower notes are more weighty and solid. The holographic image projected in the acoustic space carries a lot more weight and presence, increasing dynamic contrast considerably. The tonality of the music became more natural and realistic. I highly suggest spending the additional \$600-\$700 for a set of NOS Telefunks to power your EQ-500.

I conducted this review mainly with 2 cartridges. The first is the My Sonic Lab Ultra Eminent BC, with an output of 0.2mV and a super low impedance of 0.6Ω, mounted on an Acoustical System Axiom Anniversary tonearm (\$ 30,000 USD, the first to land in N. America). The second is an Ana-Mighty Sound EMT Rebuilt TNT 15 with an output of 0.2mV and 6.5Ω impedance, mounted on a Glanz MH-124SD (Black Special edition \$ 20,000 USD, again the first in North America). Both of these mounted on a Micro Seiki RX-5000 turntable, and connected to the RCA inputs and set to the highest gain Low MC settings.

Extensive Listening

Long Play, an album by Taiwanese folk band “Xiao Juan and Residents of the Valley” is a reference quality recording produced by “Long Yuan” records of China. I was so taken with the quality of this record label that I decided to purchase the entire catalog! Playing the song “City of Heaven,” originally composed by Joe Hisaishi for the Japanese Anime “Laputa”, Xiao Juan voice came through with the utmost clarity and transparency. The album is particularly tricky to render, as the slightest hint of the lack of gain will manifest itself through a feeble or distorted voice. The sonic image will become a faint haze instead of a solid holographic image.



At 0.2 mV, or 0.0002 Volts, the EQ-500 has to multiply the cartridge signal by nearly 1000x to reach line level voltages. The EQ-500 delivered Xiao Juan's voice on the backdrop a pitch-black background with the complete absence of noise or hum. Her voice hangs in mid-air, with enough weight and presence to replicate her live presence in my audio room. The tonality of her voice veers slightly to the soft side of the spectrum than neutral, but not so much that she becomes fat and blurry, in fact it is perfect for my taste.



# Enjoy the Experience



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Onto a jazz album with slightly more instruments in the background, I pulled out Cécile McLorin Salvant's *For One To Love* album, playing the entire album. Cécile's voice is once again projected with clarity and realism, on the backdrop of a crisp yet weighty sounding concert piano. This time the vocal doesn't sound soft, but at no time does it become hard or abrasive. The individual notes of the piano of the velvet hammer were rhythmic and snappy, on lesser phono stages they can be muddy and jumbled together. The sounds of the cymbals are also distinctive and not intertwined with the piano - the EQ-500 passes the test with flying colors.

The EQ-500 pulled me through a major collection of long forgotten records, such as the Original Soundtrack of the 1970s movie *The Wicker Man*. I have almost forgotten that Sir Christopher Lee (Saruman in *Lord of the Rings*) can sing! In his deep and throaty voice, he sings the "Tinker of Rye" together with Diane Calento on the backdrop of a piano - again the sound is real and almost life like.

There's something special about old analog recordings which I can't say the same about with modern day digital recordings. Revisiting the high cut filter, it does take out some of the pops and crackle but at the same time it takes away the ambience which makes a recording feel real. I prefer to have the full unmitigated realism and imperfections come through the system and the Luxman EQ-500 does that exceedingly well.

I also pulled out the 1986 *The Mission* soundtrack by Morricone, which can be an audiophile's delight. Every track on this album is a never ending soundstage - expansive and deep, and somehow always infused with thunderous bass. If *The Mission* is not enough, then *The Emerald Forest* movie soundtrack will certainly shake the very foundation of your room. The album is worthy to be played in its entirety, but to satisfy my impatient nature, I play the "Initiation Ceremony & the Trance Dance" - well suited to show off the EQ-500's handling of explosive dynamics and soundstaging. The percussive notes are tight, distinctive, and chest pounding. The immediacy and the force of the instruments are rendered with an accurate sense of scale and dynamism.

In the end, the dynamic contrast exhibited by the Luxman EQ-500 almost reaches into the territory of the Burmester PH-100, or the Tenor P1. It does not have their frequency extension or solidity of holographic imagery, but the Burmester costs 3x as much, and the Tenor, 10x, so the Luxman EQ-500 is truly a bargain for what it does.

Over a period of 4 months I listened to hundreds of albums on the EQ-500. The sound reminds me of the McIntosh MP1100. It is slightly leaner than the warm sounding Ensemble Fonobrio, and not as voluptuous as the Aesthetix Rhea. It is slightly on the warmer and softer side of being neutral, and not as neutral as the AR Phono Ref 2 or Phono Ref 3, but it is most certainly not as sparkly, nor carry as much slam as the Manley Steelhead. It is a sound carrying enough natural realism to listen for hours without fatigue, yet not to the point of being heavily colored, drowning out other equipment in the reproduction chain.

Even with three other phono stages in my collection, all of which cost nearly 10 to 20 times the Luxman EQ-500, I liked it so much that I decided to purchase one, and it will likely be a permanent piece in my system.

[luxmanamerica.com](http://luxmanamerica.com)





# Can't Get It Out of My Head

Covid-19 Quarantine Edition by Emily Duff

Emily Duff remains undaunted in the midst of the current crises, staying madly productive (she's got a new album out, and it's awesome,) and always remaining an incredibly positive force. She's certainly a huge boost to all of us. Here's the five records on her mind right now - enjoy!

## Jamie Wyatt's *Neon Cross*

is pure ear candy and I'm throwin' it down like every day is Halloween! Produced by Shooter Jennings, who makes a memorable vocal appearance on "Hurt so Bad." This entire record takes Classic Country Confessional to a whole new level of Badass. With deafening echoes of Tanya Tucker (who Shooter just gave career restoring CPR to), Jamie's strung up on that neon for \$uccess on every level. Crazy good session performances with all the right slick, but not too slick, production on well crafted songs with phasers set on stunning. This record rocks, rolls and touches even the most subterranean soul. Welcome back to the surface Jamie Wyatt - and good on ya' for getting clean, coming out in Country Music to heal your beautiful woman-lovin' sober self! Hear this Now!

In 2017, before the music stopped, Chuck Prophet put out *Bobby Fuller Died for Your Sins* and I fell in love with that record. Lately, I have the song "Bad Year for Rock and Roll" stuck in my noggin.' Wonder why..... LOL! This song sums up what I've been thinking, feeling, crying about..."I wanna go out but I'll probably stay home" is the lyric here that keeps flying around my head like an crazy infected bat. "Where's my rock and roll?" Chuck asks at the end of the tune. That's where I start to tear up...and then I put the track back on again. And again. And again....



Emily Duff is a singer you won't be able to get out of your head.  
Find out more at: <https://emilyduff.bandcamp.com>

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## Can't Get It Out of My Head

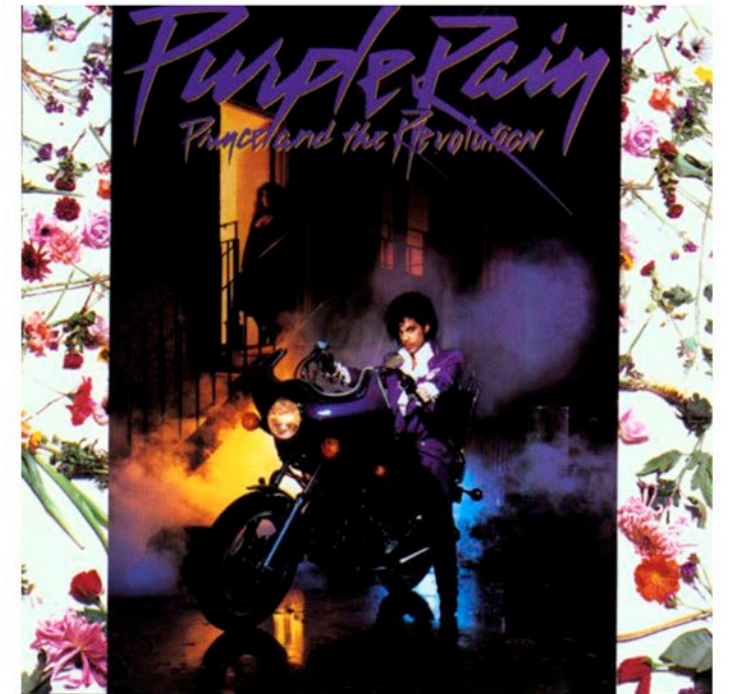
by Emily Duff

“Crisp & Cold” by Lillie Mae starts out like a traditional folk song with nasal harmonies and then drums enter suddenly, with electric guitars chiming like the Electric Prunes to bring on a psychedelic romp into the nymph ridden wood. It’s a great track that pushes all my “Nuggets Buttons” in all the right ways. The folk comes back and drops us back off on top of the mountain feeling like we might have eaten the dangerous mushrooms on that walk to the river.

It’s a lovely break-away from this hideous reality we are living right now and I recommend the entire record. “I Came for the Band (The Show)” is another charming song that vibes The Band and Lillie’s vocal always makes me smile bright.



Paul Cauthen makes me laugh. His voice is like Elvis’ when he really puts it on and his lyrics are so pithy I choke on them every time. Seriously, this guy’s a bonafide GENIUS. His song “Cocaine Country Dancing” is a HOOT and a HALF and you need to groove this shit immediately! If there is a musical antidote for what ails me right now, Paul Cauthen has the vile in his back pocket and he’s laughing about it right now. His 2019 LP “Room 41” is a MUST. Do not hesitate or prolong the gratification.....BUY IT and listen to it all day long. Headphones on this record are a moral and sonic imperative. You will write me a thank you note!



You know what else can pull your Covid-Ass out of a bad mood? PRINCE. Hell to the Yes on cranking up the Prince and Dancing by Yo’self in your “safe room.” When it comes to the Prince catalogue, it really is a “pick a card, any card” magic trick. Not a bad tune in the bunch IMHO — and you might even wander online to check out some newly remastered tracks from the vault, specifically “Cosmic Day.”

I was in LA when “Purple Rain” was huge and that soundtrack still, to this day, guides me like a spirit animal leads the shaman through the wild and reckless vision quest of our ancestors. Flawless production and visceral twists and turns of the super-sonic and super-natural. Turn it on. Turn it up. And Turn this Mutha Out!

Peace, xx.



## Welcome to MINE:

We're not just crazy about music and hi-fi here at TONE. While we can put many labels on our ethos, claiming to be music lovers, audiophiles, or perhaps even qualityphiles, that doesn't even cover it. Having met so many of our readers from all over the globe, I'd say our readers are playful and inquisitive to say the least.

You've told us you like automobiles, motorcycles, fine art, bicycles, toys, cameras... Well, you get the picture. Lumping this all under a banner labeled "Style" seems too limiting. Let's face it, we're all a little selfish when it comes to our stuff.

Let's call it what it is - MINE! We'll be sharing more of our favorites as we go.



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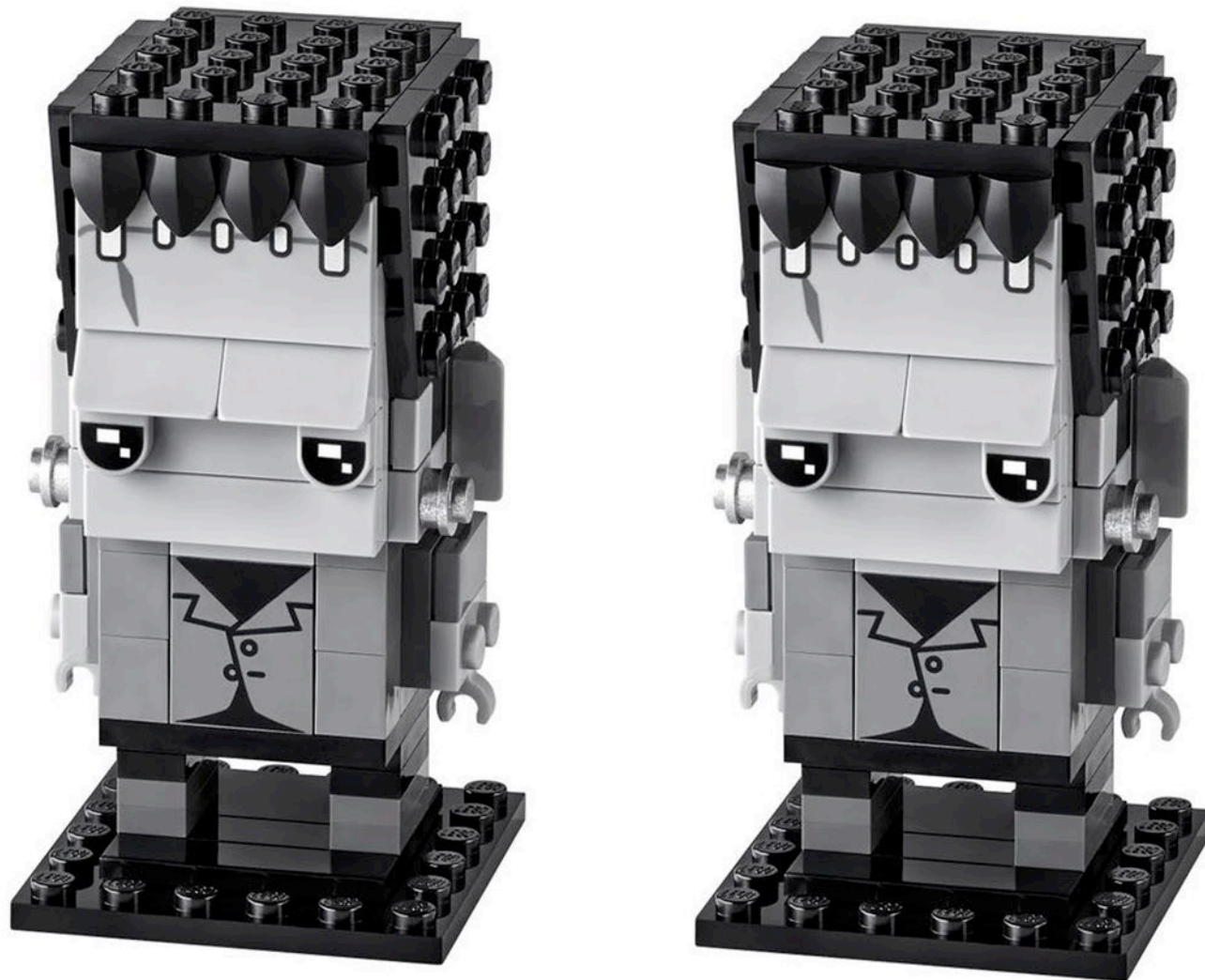
## Lego Brickhead Frankenstein

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lego.com

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Jeff Dorgay, Tone Audio

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To our readers that apply, before you buy that next piece of gear, think about throwing the person you share the cave with a soild, and making a detour to the LV store near you.

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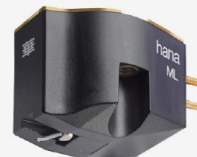
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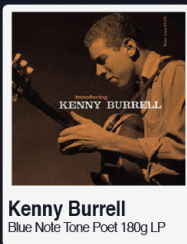
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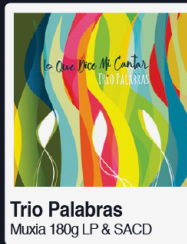
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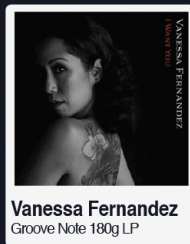
**Kenny Burrell**  
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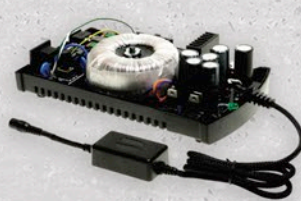
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# MINE: it should be yours

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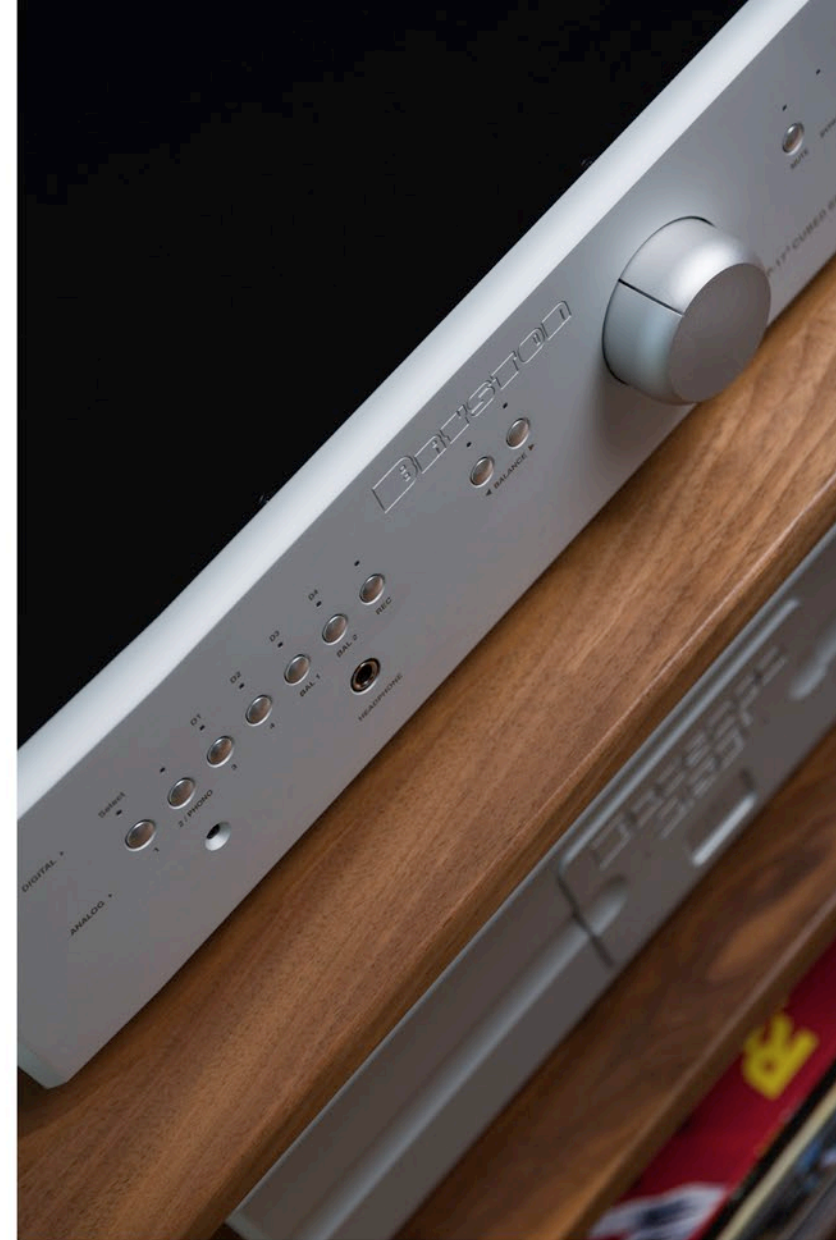
The same technology has been combined with a series of thick butcher block platforms in 15" x 18" and 16" x 22" in 1 3/4" thickness and 3" thickness. These will accomodate turntables up to 100 pounds.

Available in light maple and a darker walnut, these platforms work wonders with turntables lacking suspension, which are particularly affected by vibration.

The Delos platforms work equally well with your favorite components using vacuum tubes. Again, those delicate filaments produce better music when isolated from vibrations.



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*Soundstage! June 2017*

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## Display what you're playing: The Koeppel Design LP Block

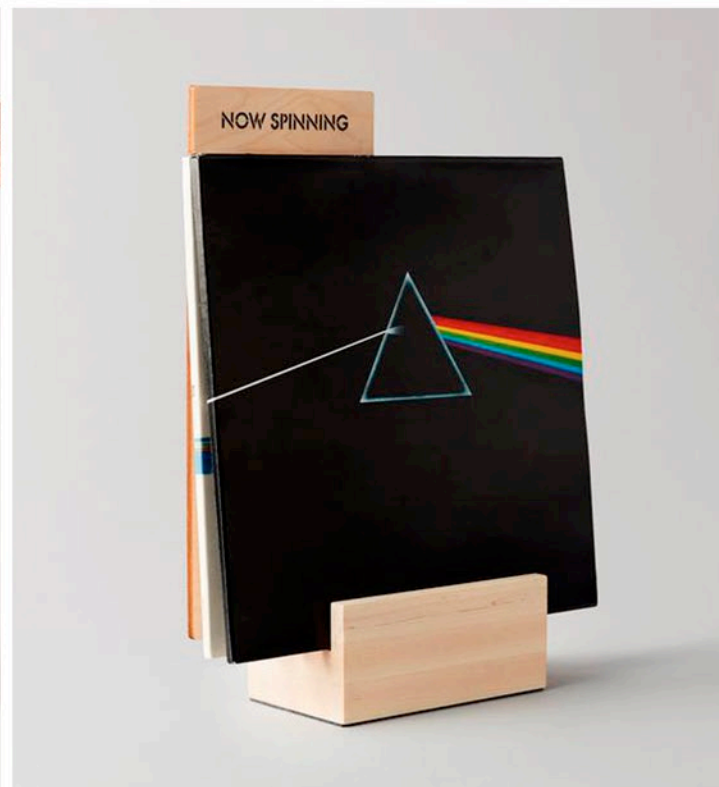
\$79

[koeppeldesign.com](http://koeppeldesign.com)

Koeppel Design solves the most common problem that plagues most record stands. And it's wider base holds a stack of up to ten records, so that you can queue up an entire evenings listening. Handy.

Exquisitely finished, this laser engraved hardwood base has a non-slip felt base to stay in one spot.

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[illegible]

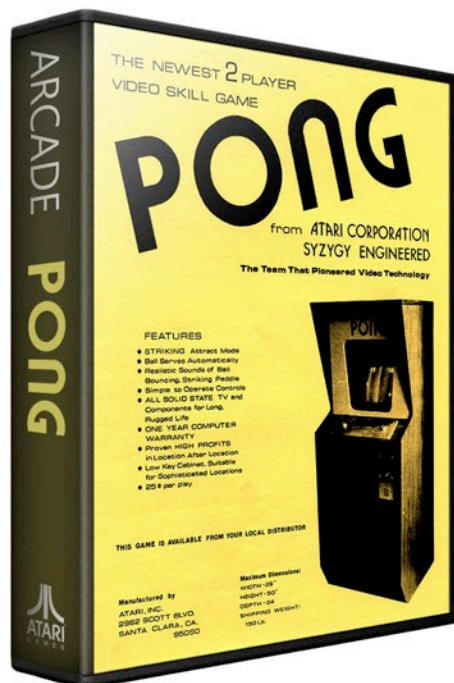


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*Francis Serblin*



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Handcrafted in Chino, California

# Swill

Sponsored by Cardas Audio

By Cameron VanDerHorst

At this point, it's safe to say that Summer 2020 is pretty much ruined. No baseball, no car shows, no theme parks, and no backyard barbecues. Just about all you can do is sit on your back porch, drink a few beers, and watch the fireflies.

Natural Light, Anheuser-Busch's trademark light lager, has been with us since 1977. Over the past few years, they've added some new twists to the classic Natural Light formula – twists that, for my money, seem like they could offer the ultimate in summer day drinking. In this installment of Swill, we're going to try out three varieties of Natural Light and pick our favorite for summer fun. Call it "Goldilager and the Three Beers."



Legal Stuff: While we all enjoy consuming adult beverages, (if you're of legal age, of course) TONE and Cardas Audio ask you to be responsible...



# Swill

Sponsored by Cardas Audio

by Cameron VanDerHorst

**T**he original Natural Light is cool and refreshing in a way that many light beers aren't. That comes at the expense of flavor, though – there's just not a whole lot going on here. There's a light wheat taste that's as simple and unassuming as possible. It doesn't challenge your palate any more than a slice of white bread.

Still, it ain't a half-bad way to while away those hot August nights. It's a pleasant beer for what it is, and having a strong opinion about it either way is sort of like having a strong opinion about a gas station hot dog. It gets the job done.

Next up, Naturdays announces that it's a summer beer from the first time you look at the can. A bright yellow and hot pink gradient design – resembling a summer sunset – is accented by patterned pink lawn flamingos. Those colors hint at the can's contents – a delicious combination of Natural Light and strawberry lemonade.

A lot of shandies are a little too heavy on the lemonade, and a little too light on the beer. Naturdays isn't really a shandy, nor does it claim to be. That's a good thing, in my opinion – they really nailed the beer-to-lemonade ratio. It tastes like beer and drinks like beer, only sweeter. The flavor is just complex enough to be fun, without getting in the way of pounding out a six-pack of tallboys like a frat boy with a 2.0 GPA and something to prove. It's sweet, but not too sweet.

In a prior column, I stated that Rolling Rock was my domestic brew of choice. However, when the temperatures rise and the days get long, I'm reaching for Naturdays. When it comes to summer beers, Naturdays is "just right."



Lastly, Natty Daddy may be some of the most dangerous stuff I've ever experienced, and you're talking to a guy who owns an aircooled Porsche, a 1200cc motorcycle, and a fine selection of fireworks of questionable legality. Allow me to explain.

Natty Daddy isn't quite as light as Natural Light, but it's far from what anybody would call "heavy," either. It's deceptively light, in fact. It drinks as easy as any other light beer, with one important caveat: Natty Daddy boasts 8% alcohol by volume.

While taste testing these beers, I drank two Natty Daddies after I already had a decent buzz going from a six pack's worth of Natural Light and Naturdays (I love my job). Several hours later, I woke up on my couch. My old Playstation was hooked up, with my childhood copy of Gran Turismo 2 spinning in the disc drive. I had apparently started a new file, won several races, and filled up a garage with a dozen cars. I don't remember a second of it. If you're going to drink any quantity of Natty Daddy, clear your calendar and have someone keep an eye on you.



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Staffer Shannon Swetlishnoff (say that 8 times as fast as you can) always indulges my love for rock from her native Canada.

This time she's given us a "cross section of Candiana, with some B-sides thrown in."

I'm loving it. I hope you do too.

-Jeff Dorgay



**Max Webster** - Here Among the Cats

**Anvil** - Metal to Metal

**Chiliwack** - Fly at Night

**Doug and the Slugs** - Drift Away

**Broken Social Scene** - Cause=Time

**City and Colour** - The Girl

**Blue Rodeo** - After the Rain

**Bedouin Soundclash** - When the Night Finds my Song

**Stompin' Tom** - Sudbury Saturday Night

**Lighthouse** - Sunny Days

**Bif Naked** - Twitch



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## Cover Story:

### Rotel returns to their performance roots.

**R**otel is a company that's gone about their business making high performance gear that is reasonably priced, in a relatively understated way. On one level, Rotel products have always been a gateway product for some, and a great destination for others.

If you've started your hifi journey with something like NAD, Cambridge, or Music Hall, (or something else along those lines) and would like to step up a few notches, but perhaps not ready to commit to vacuum tubes – Rotel is always a solid choice.

The launch of their new Michi line is completely different. With the P5 preamplifier at \$4,000 and the S5 stereo power amplifier at \$7,000 (with a pair of monoblocks at \$7k each, if you just have to have more power), this pair offers a serious insight into mega high end sound at an approachable price indeed.

## Michi P5 pre and S5 power

\$3,999.99 & \$6,999.99  
[rotel.com/michi](http://rotel.com/michi)



Let’s begin at the source

Unboxing the P5 preamp hints at what to expect. It’s heavy. 50 pounds heavy. Power amplifier heavy. Peeking at the internal view on the Rotel website confirms this is not just some fancy casework filled with air. The massive power supply capacitors are flanked by a fully populated circuit board, (with a lot of discrete components) and all the switching relays at the back of the chassis, to minimize noise. It’s as beautiful on the inside as it is on the outside.

Speaking of sources, the P5 is a true control center in every sense of the word. It features a DAC with the ability to decode DSD, MQA, and PCM files up to 32/384, so it is more than reasonably future proof. While there is no balanced XLR digital in, there are three optical and three RCA S/Pdif inputs as well as



an Ethernet port and a USB input. As a bonus, the P5 also features an aptX/Bluetooth input, so you can stream from your mobile device. (and so can your guests)

Vinyl enthusiasts will appreciate the option of MM or MC cartridge compatibility, selectable from the front panel, though there is only one phono input around back. As versatile as the P5 is, it’s a shame that Rotel did not provide separate MM and MC inputs. Not a deal breaker.

With two more balanced XLR inputs and four more RCA inputs, even those of you with an FM tuner, and a tape deck won’t run out of inputs. Rotel also includes two pairs of balanced XLR outputs, three outputs, three RCA outputs and a pair of mono sub outputs. In short, you’re covered!

Around front, it’s clean, crisp and concise. The front panel display is an off white that goes easy on the eyes and is very easy to read. Both controls (selector on left, and volume on right) turn smoothly should you feel the need to engage manually, but the multi-function remote is the way to roll, especially if you have a lot of sources plugged in. Bonus points – there’s a headphone jack just below the volume control, and it worked well with everything we had on hand, from original Koss Pro –AAAs to the latest from Focal. The Utopia phones cost more than the P5, yet this preamplifier is great for personal listening duties. The sweet spot here is probably phones in the \$200 - \$1,000 range, which covers a lot of ground.

Spinning a few records

Another anomalous behavior is the MC phono input, with loading fixed at 100 ohms. We can’t call the engineers at Rotel bad Smurfs, as a few other manufacturers (Luxman comes to mind) do this too. And there are a number of great MC cartridges you can work with, so it isn’t the end of the world. We did all of our analog listening with the Technics SL-1200GAE and a Denon DL-103r – a nearly perfect combination. However, this is a preamplifier that you will chose a cartridge for, because variable loading is not an option.

That said, working within given parameters, the Technics/Denon combination is a superb match for the P5. While specs don’t tell the whole story, the phono stage is claimed to have a S/N ratio of 80dB, and suffice to say, it is quiet. Putting the P5 to the immediate test and breaking out the classical LPs shows off just how quiet this combination is.

Putting this in context, think of the P5 as a \$2,000 linestage, a \$1,000 DAC, and a \$1,000 phono stage, with a bonus headphone amp thrown in. Not to mention, there are three three extra power cords and sets of interconnects you don’t have to buy. And the satisfaction of knowing it all works together perfectly. That’s value. Comparing the on board phono in the P5 to anything we’ve listened to in the last few years, it’s safe to say it’s as good or better than any outboard phono stage in the \$600 - \$800 range. Remember, you’re still going to need even a modest pair of interconnects... The only advantage to an outboard phono is possibly a wider range of MC loading options, but for convenience and high performance all on one chassis, the P5 can’t be beat.

Digital delights

Working with a MacBook Pro, a current Cambridge Audio transport and a vintage SONY CD ES player (via optical output), the P5 handles every file, from MP3/Spotify up to DSD without a glitch.





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Available in black or silver

As with the phono section, putting what the P5 accomplishes in context of comparably priced outboard DAC, it's fantastic. It resolves more than enough information to tell the difference between source quality in your files, along with a high level of musicality in its class. It does an excellent job with compressed, less than awesome 16/44 material. Zipping through a Kiss playlist, a Monkees playlist and Queen's Greatest Hits are all decoded with dignity. These tracks all sounded better than they had a right to, with an ample amount of airiness and dynamic range.

Moving on to better quality material, the P5 reveals even better performance. An old standby, Lyle Lovett's "North Dakota" begins with gentle bongos, and they manage to float out in space, offering enough detail to distinctly hear Rickie Lee Jones singing backup.

## Unless you're really buff, get a friend to unbox and move the 132 pound S2 amp to its final location.

With 500 watts per channel into 8 ohms and 800 into 4, there shouldn't be any speakers on your no fly list. Hint, hint, even if you aren't going to buy both Michi pieces, this is an excellent amplifier to drive Magnepans with. Staffer Jerold O'Brien and I faced a major dilemma: he helps me moose the S5 out of my listening room and up the 2nd story at his place where the Magnepan 3.7s are, or we rent a UHaul and bring the Maggies to me.

Avoiding as many people as we both can in this age of quarantine, we decided we'd both be exposed to fewer cooties, bringing the S5 to his place. Besides, now that I also have a little orange BMW 2002 stored in his barn, plenty of time to be car geeks after we're done listening.

Most Magnepans need a lot of power to really strut their stuff, and the Michi S5 is one of the nicest combinations for these speakers. 20.1 and 30.1 owners that need even more power, can buy the M8s (1080 watts each, into 8 ohms, 1800 watts into 4 – booyah) which should be enough to power a small outdoor music festival.





Overall, the big Michi amp has a neutral tonal rendition. Putting the S8 in perspective, we've always held Boulder amplifiers up as the ultimate in "just the facts" delivery. However, these are some pretty expensive amplifiers, even at entry level. Comparing to past solid-state designs we've listened to recently, the Michi has more tonal body and saturation than something from Simaudio, Krell, or current Levinson products, but less than our reference Pass amplifiers; any other great Class A amplifier from Luxman, Sudgen, or the Riviera monos we've just reviewed. You can stay with the Michi preamplifier and keep things extremely accurate, or for those craving a little bit of additional warmth, without sacrificing the control and dynamic power of a solid-state amp, add a tube preamplifier on the front end, to tune to your taste. An amplifier this neutral makes that easy.

### A system approach that works

At \$11,000 for the pair, the Michi P5 and S5 are a logical step up for the music lover that needs more power than an integrated can provide, and has a lot of flexibility as well. This pair is the perfect anchor for a \$20k - \$50k system, and only needs a turntable and a pair of speakers to enjoy every format available. Should you be a digital only listener, add your favorite speakers and roll. Should the vinyl bug hit, you're ready if and when you want to take the plunge. While you'll need a stout shelf for the 132 pound P5, a system built around these two components will have a minimal footprint. Thanks to timeless visual design, they will blend well into a design conscious environment – a final bonus.

[www.rotel.com/michi](http://www.rotel.com/michi)

Everything from the Maggies, to ESLs from Martin Logan and vintage Acoustats (i.e. the "really hard to drive" speakers) pose no issues to the Michi. Regardless of what speakers you have, this is an unassuming, yet highly capable and powerful amplifier that does the job it's asked to do without issue. It's a testament to the amplifiers massive power reserve and excellent design that it is not particularly sensitive to speaker cables either. There is enough resolving power to easily hear the difference between brands, but the S8 isn't touchy about cables in a way that some small amplifiers can be.

Power without finesse is nothing though, and again the Michi scores big points. If this amp had no logo on the front panel and you told your audiophile pals that you paid \$10k for the S5, they'd probably believe you. Even at low volumes, the effortlessness that the S5 offers adds to the musical presentation. This is why I like big amplifiers.



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# Backert Labs Rhumba 1.3 Preamplifier

\$4,000  
backertlabs.com

**In a world where many audio companies try to be all things to all people (or customers), it's very refreshing to stumble upon a company doing one awesome thing.**

Backert Labs builds line-stage preamplifiers. That's it, though they did mention that they have a new phono preamplifier almost ready for prime time. Close enough.

The Backert Labs Rhumba came highly recommended by a few of our readers, and their enthusiasm is more than justified. The Rhumba 1.3 is a fantastic preamplifier - period. That it is only \$4,000 is terrific - yet this is a perfect example of extreme focus. Backert Labs also makes a \$10k preamplifier, claiming the Rhumba is a more cost-effective version of. They also offer a Rhumba + for \$6,500 that kinda splits the difference. After extended listening it continues to engage at a high level. Andy from Backert reveals that they put close to 200 hours on every unit before shipping, so you won't have to wait to enjoy it.





And engage it does

Between the revolutionary power supply and a simple circuit consisting of a pair of 12AU7 tubes, the Rhumba delivers a mere 10db of gain but that's enough to drive anyone's power amplifier. Matching it with a wide range of amplifiers on hand, from a near original Dynaco Stereo 70 to a pair of Pass XA200.8s, there are no surprises and no disappointments. In my primary reference system, I can only detect a minute difference between SE and BAL outputs. The balanced outputs sound slightly smoother, and the SE outputs just a touch crisper on the extreme top end. I am splitting thin hairs here. It could also be the difference between SE and BAL inputs on all four of the power amplifiers used too. I feel safe suggesting this preamplifier to mate with any power amp you have at your disposal.

The difference between good, great preamplifiers, and the best money can buy is in the fine details. The world's premier preamplifiers provide a level of reach out and touch it communication, sometimes even fooling you into believing that you are listening to the real thing. Because a preamplifier doesn't have to do the work of driving a pair of speakers, and the potential mismatch between the power amp and speaker, it's usually not as dependent on what it's connected to. The Rhumba has an output impedance of 75 ohms, which is very low - and it drives a 30-foot pair of Cardas Clear interconnects (XLR or RCA) as easy as it does a 3-foot pair, with no sonic degradation whatsoever.

I'd put the Rhumba solidly between great and best. And for \$4k, that's a steal. If there are any of you listening in the late 80s/early 90s, Audible Illusions came on the scene with a preamplifier (the Modulus) that took a

simple, high-quality approach much like the Rhumba does. Back then, the Modulus was the answer for the audiophile that wanted something like a CJ Premier or an ARC SP10, but on a bit tighter budget. The Modulus was \$999 when the big boys were about \$6k. At least among the \$15k - \$30k preamplifiers I've heard, the Rhumba offers a lot of that experience. And it's a solid contender among the big name \$10k preamplifiers.

After getting enough of a listen in my main system to get a firm grip on the delta between this and my reference components in a familiar environment, the Rhumba comes in the house, placed in a system more in keeping with the way I'd expect it to be used. A pair of Dynaudio's new Confidence 20 speakers (mated to a six-pack of REL S/510 subs) and the Aqua DAC we recently reviewed, cabled together with Cardas Clear Reflection speaker cables, interconnects and power cords rounded things out nicely.

Using a wide range of power amplifiers for these listening sessions, the Rhumba was an excellent match for all of them. The McIntosh MC275 (with EAT KT88 tubes), the BAT VK60SE, PrimaLuna's EVO400 on the tube side, and a Pass XA30.8 and Nagra Classic on the solid-state side of the equation all make for a great amplification chain.

A solid contender

Most of the listening in this evaluation was done with the EVO400 - I like the price/performance ratio of this amplifier too, and you can put the Rhumba/EVO400 combination in your rack for well under \$10k. Personal bias: this is a very musical pair I could comfortably live with and forget the big dollar stuff.

The best of the best is still awesome and deserving of its place, but the Rhumba does so much right, that unless you've got everything (and I mean everything) else to go with, it can be a destination preamplifier for 90% of you. Adding your favorite \$5k-\$10k pair of speakers, an excellent DAC, and an equally good performing analog front end if you spin vinyl will give you a good portion of what the mega gear delivers at an approachable price. You may never want to go any further in your audio journey. More money for records and motorcycles, I say.

Attempting to identify the sonic fingerprint of the Rhumba, I'll call it ever so slightly on the warm side of natural/neutral. In the last year, I've listened carefully to the McIntosh 2600, PrimaLuna's EVO400 preamplifier, the Simaudio 390, Boulder's new 1110, Nagra's Classic, the CJ GAT2, ARC's LS28 and REF 6 along with a handful of vintage and near vintage pieces, so it's been in good company.

Tonality is one aspect of preamplifier sound. The most exciting aspect of the Rhumba is the lively, dynamic aspect of its sound - all part of the GreenForce power supply design. Listening to musical selections with wide dynamic swings, and music more in the acoustic vein makes it so easy to hear the complete lack of bloated, cloudy, overhang that some designs possess. The Rhumba still sounds slightly tubey, but just enough to convince you, there are indeed a couple of tubes under the hood. They are easy to get at with a clear window attached magnetically to the top of the case.





Another bias: I absolutely hate tube gear with tubes that stick out of the top of the case. Too easy to break something. The Rhumba gives you easy access to the tubes, both for service/rolling, and to see a little bit of a glow.

Thanks to designing around the 12AU7/ECC82, instead of the 12AX7/ECC83 makes the cost of pursuing different or NOS tubes much more reasonable – vintage 12AU7s cost considerably less than vintage 12AX7s. As easy as Backert Labs makes it to roll tubes in the Rhumba (and who knows, maybe I'll cave when they send that phono preamplifier), I avoided going down that path in the context of this review. After years of chasing that rabbit, I choose to give him a wink from afar, and it's not fair to a manufacturer to say their preamp only sounds great with unobtainium tubes. Not to mention how little fun that is for you, because you thought you were done after you wrote the \$4,000 check. But are we as audio enthusiasts ever done? Ha.

Seriously though, the Rhumba delivers such an engaging performance, I never felt the need to try something else, and sacrifice the good work they've done merely for different. Tube rollers, you know what I'm saying. If you have lobsters in your pants and can't wait to swap those tubes out and argue with people on your favorite audio forum - go for it. But I'll bet you a bottle of your favorite single malt, a year from now, you'll cave in and go back to the originals.

The Rhumba offers a very natural overall tonal balance that is very dynamic, with a touch of tonal saturation that seems to only happen with tubes. It never sounds like vintage tube gear, i.e., slow, rolled off, or overly saturated. If this is the sound you've been looking for, the Rhumba is what you want. This natural balance makes it easy to voice the rest of your system to taste while leaving the Rhumba as your anchor - again, this is going to be a destination preamp for a lot of people.

The sonic landscape, or to be more precise, the size and scale of the sonic landscape a preamplifier creates is equally important as tonal balance and dynamics. Again, the Rhumba excels, creating a massive soundfield in all three dimensions - it does a fantastic job at getting the Dynaudio's and two stacks of REL subwoofers to disappear in the listening room. Weeks after unboxing, I'm still surprised and amazed at how much music this preamplifier reveals. And how many late nights I'm spending listening to "one more record."

### The other stuff

Great as it sounds, the Rhumba is well built from a mechanical standpoint. There are no exposed screws in the casework, the minimal control set feels good, and the remote is simple, effective, and substantial. It feels good when you place it in your equipment rack. The front panel is finished to a high level, but this is not a blingy preamplifier by any means, so you aren't left feeling that half the cost of the Rhumba was squandered on a fancy case. However, there is only one thing I don't care for on the Rhumba - those paddle switches.

I can assure you I've broken at least one of these on everyone else's preamplifier. Not a deal-breaker by any stretch, but I caution you to place your Rhumba just inside the shelf enough on your equipment rack so you will not bump it. The slightest bit of torsional stress will break these. You've been warned.

The substantial remote is volume only. You'll either love it or hate it. I say the less remote switching going on, the better for the overall noise floor. Again, the Rhumba is damn quiet. I'd rather put my adult beverage down to manually walk over and switch sources for a few more dB of quiet. Are you with me?

### Nothing but joy

I'd like to take a minute to thank our highly interactive Facebook audience for suggesting the Rhumba. I was looking for something new, something that I hadn't heard before. In a Jeopardy type way, I put it out there - how about new preamps for \$5k? A number of our readers responded how much they liked their Rhumba, feeling it was something we should investigate.

The highest compliment I can pay to this preamplifier is that since it's been installed in my living room, I haven't thought about it. I've just been playing music. I don't spent one second pondering whether it does or doesn't do this or that. The Backert Labs Rhumba is one of those truly rare audio components that takes you on this kind of journey. If you investigate one for yourself, I hope you will enjoy this one as much as I have. It's a Goldilocks preamp - it's just right.

### The Backert Labs Rhumba 1.3

\$4,000

Backertlabs.com

*Enjoy the Experience*



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## Backert Labs Rhumba 1.3

### ***The Good:***

\$10k preamp performance for \$4k

Versatile, with XLR and RCA inputs

Super easy to tube roll (but you really don't need to)

### ***The Bad:***

Be careful for those paddle switches!

### ***The Verdict:***

For all but the highest of rollers, a true destination preamp for \$4k





# Pass Labs

## Xs150

\$65,000/pair

passlabs.com

PHOTOS: courtesy of pass labs  
COPY: Lawrence Devoe

The owner's manual accompanying the Pass Labs XS monoblock amplifiers opens with a reminiscence from company CEO and designer-in-chief Nelson Pass. "It seems like yesterday..." that segues into a brief chronology of Pass Labs' now-legendary power amplifiers, beginning with the Aleph 0 and culminating in the XS series you see here. A number of years ago, our publisher put the XS300 monos on the cover. This time we focus on the smaller XS150s.

### The Making of the Mighty Monoblocks

Similar to the XS line and phono preamplifiers, a two-box solution is employed for the XS150 to enlarge the power supply and separate it from the control elements. The massive banks of output devices are increased from four (as in the X and XA models) to six with a ten-fold increase in bias current from constant current sources. The result is a 100-fold expansion of the single-ended power range. New power MOSFETs are incorporated in the output topology which also includes a small amount of feedback.

The front end of the amplifier is completely redesigned, employing cascode local feedback, described as "an alternative method of controlling linearity around a single stage without the usual trade-offs. This innovation allows arbitrary shaping of the relative distortion harmonics and is tweaked to precisely complement the character of the output stage." The XS150 remains in Class A operation throughout its stated output range of 150 watts/channel @ 8Ω and 300 watts/channel @ 4Ω. The Martin Logan CLXs used in this review have a nominal impedance of 6 Ω, so, by my calculations, with these speakers, the XS150s would max out at 200 watts/channel.





## Yo, Heave Ho: Out of the Box

When four very large and heavy cartons appeared on my doorstep, I knew help would be needed to unbox them, let alone to mount them on Sound Anchors amp platforms. One hour later, with considerable assistance from two friends, these mini behemoths (230 pounds total weight for each channel/power supply chassis) were hoisted onto their respective platforms. Soon two large illuminated meters were beaming right back at me.

Set-up is straightforward. Hoist the amplifier chassis (the one with the meter) on top of the power chassis. Connect the huge Neutrik Powercon cables to their designated receptacles on the rear of each chassis. Attach the input and speaker cables to the channel chassis. Insert the power cord and add a 12-volt trigger wire for remote operation, if so desired, into the power chassis. Flip the power switch on the back and the power button on the front of the power chassis and you are good to go. The bright light on each meter where the 12-noon position indicates all is well can be turned off (which is what I soon did) by pushing the button on the front of the channel chassis. Be sure to allow plenty of open space around the XS150s, since Class A amplifiers generate plenty of heat. The XA monos require a lot of juice (700 Watts continuous); if possible, I would also recommend a dedicated line for each unit or, if not, at least one for the pair.

## The Sounds of Silence

After a break-in period of about one hundred hours, my initial impressions were as follows: a completely noise-free, black background from which music, studio reverbs, musical and mechanical sounds of instruments, and human voices effortlessly emerge in their respective glories. Imaging was holographic—this was a bigger, more dimensional experience than I’ve had in my system. The openness of the soundstage, the palpable presence of the performers, and the tightly controlled bass lines on great recordings must have been exactly what the engineers intended as they were laying down the tracks. Regardless of the music selected, the total sound experience far exceeded my previous experience with the Pass Labs XA-100.8 monoblocks that the XS150s replaced. Extensive listening sessions not only confirmed these initial impressions, but improved over time.

## And My Birds Can Sing

I confess being a sucker for female singers and the XS150s brings out the best in some of my favorite female vocal tracks. The remastered Fairy Tales SACD opens with the seductive voice of Radka Toneff and the reverberant chords of her pianist Steve Dobrogosz on Jim Webb’s haunting “The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress.” In “So and So” on her eponymous CD, Holly Cole’s voice runs a dynamic range gamut from full out to a barely audible whisper, again perfectly displayed. I have been listening to the hypnotic voice of Singaporean singer Jacintha for more than two decades since I got my hands on her Groove Note CD Here’s To Ben: A Vocal Tribute to Ben Webster. A recent acquisition of the limited edition 45 rpm 2-LP set reacquainted me with her rendition of “In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning,” opening with her voice and an acoustic bass fully fleshed out and standing right in front of me. In all of the above vocal cuts, there is an uncanny naturalness, again showcasing the high resolving power of the Pass amplifiers.

## Kittens on The Keyboards

Piano lovers will be impressed by how the XS150s nails the overtones, pedals, heft, and dynamic range of the grand piano in Joel Fan’s *West Of The Sun* (Reference Recordings DVD-A WAV 176.4kbps/24b), featuring a potpourri of Western Hemisphere solo piano works. Dick Hyman’s paeon to boogie-woogie specialist Fats Waller took a pre-recorded program from the Bosendorfer Reproducing Piano to the digital domain on a “better than live” rendition of “Ain’t Misbehavin’.” Every note, every pedal point, all of the stride-left hands and melody-right hands are there. No piano session would be complete without the genius of Keith Jarrett. On “For All We Know,” Jarrett and bassist Charlie Haden (ECM digital download 44.1k/24b) generate musical synergy that only comes from having spent much time together. The low ends of both instruments are well-defined, as are Jarrett’s occasional background moans.

## Go Big or Go Home

Antal Dorati’s London Symphony Orchestra 60-year-old recording of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Firebird* (Mercury LP) has long been considered a demonstration quality recording. However, I have always found the LSO strings to sound a bit strident. While I have listened to this LP more times than was probably good for me, there were now warmer-sounding violins, sparkling woodwind details and low string pulsations that are completely new to my old ears.





**S**peaking of 60-year-old recordings, Sir Georg Solti's ground-breaking rendition of Richard Wagner's Das Rheingold (Decca LP) concludes with Donner's sonorous hammer strike, followed by a beautifully balanced array of singers and a massive orchestral flourish. Overwhelming would truly be an understatement!

### What Is the Price of Happiness?

To reach this level of performance, you will lay out a good chunk of change, in this case, \$65,000.00. Yeah, it might have been great to have gone all in for the big brother XS300s for only \$20K more but their sheer size made this impractical from the start. So, if you "settle" for the XS150s and decide to mate them with their XS line and phono preamplifier stablemates (for which they were clearly intended), you will be writing a check for just south of \$150K. Good sound can be had for a lot less cash with other fine Pass Labs amps, like those in my other audio systems but if you want to go for an ultimate audio trip, then the XS150 will surely fill that bill. These massive monoblocks have given me the most engaging sound I have ever experienced in my main listening room. Period.

As I listen again to Jacintha soothing my ears with "In the Wee Small Hours of The Morning," I am thinking, if this is what heaven sounds like, just take me now

### Pass Labs XS 150 Monoblock Amplifiers

MSRP: \$65,000 (USD)

[www.passlabs.com](http://www.passlabs.com)

### PERIPHERALS

Preamplifier    Pass Labs XSPre

Phono Preamplifier    Pass Labs XSPhono

Analog Source    VPI HW-40/VPI Fatboy/Clearaudio Statement V2

Digital Source    PS Audio Directstream DAC and Transport, Esoteric K01-X CD/SACD player

Speakers    Martin Logan CLX (2), Martin Logan Balanced Force 212 Subwoofers (2)

Power Conditioner    Running Springs Maxim, Dmitri

Cables    Nordost Odin







In the world of Audio VPI Industries occupies an honored place among elite US based audio manufacturers. Founded forty years ago by Sheila and Harry Weisfeld, the company is now run by its second-generation President, Mat Weisfeld. Mat has been putting his stamp on the company with a number of new models including the new Prime Signature.

## VPI Prime Signature

\$6,250  
vpiindustries.com

By Eric Neff





Coming in at the top of their Production Line, the \$6,250 USD Prime Signature offers high end options such as a JMW 3D-10 3D printed reference tonearm using Nordost reference wire. I am unaware of any other turntable in this price range offering that high-end combination. You can also upgrade to the Rosewood finish for an additional \$799.

Digging into the details of the Prime Signature one finds some iconic VPI devices such as the VTA Base on the Fly allowing faster and more exact VTA adjustments that has graced higher-end VPI Tables for many years. The Prime Sig also utilizes the black vinyl wrapped MDF found on the Prime turntable but with two layers sandwiching an aluminum mid plate for added stability and vibration damping. Upgraded feet also enhance table stability and vibration damping. The substantial 20 lb. aluminum platter is driven by a 300 RPM motor offering very high-speed accuracy of +/- .0005" resulting in an overall accuracy of .04%.

The Prime Sig comes with a single neoprene belt, and it can be configured with up to three belts. The platter has a number of side grooves allowing for each belt to seat itself to best effect. Additionally, should you require even greater speed accuracy, there is an optional Analog Drive System (\$1000) that controls the motor more precisely for both 33 1/3 and 45 r.p.m. usage.

A newer option is the Dual Pivot stabilizer kit for the tonearm. Some owners prefer the classic unipivot design that comes with the table. The Dual Pivot means for some, more comfortable control over the tonearm. Ultimately, this is a terrific design, as it offers great performance out of the box, allowing owners many upgrade options as they continue down their vinyl path.

My Prime Signature was outfitted in black with the Ortofon Cadenza Bronze moving coil cartridge. The table was connected using VPI Cables to the Analog Drive System and to my Simaudio Moon 610LP Phono Preamp. The rest of the system was all PS Audio BHK reference gear. Speakers for this review are the Sonner Audio Legato Unum stand mount speakers. I have owned a VPI Scout turntable for many years and I was very curious how big an upgrade the Prime Signature would offer compared to the highly regarded Scout 1.1. The Scout was by many review opinions one of the best bang for the buck tables ever produced. Would the Prime Sig also offer a similarly high value quotient?

Kicking things off with an album by an old master I selected Alan Parsons' *Eye in the Sky*, the 2017 45 RPM master recording. (2017 Arista/Sony) "Silence and I" starts off with piano and oboe and soft vocals with strings in the background. The Prime Signature offers tremendous clarity and separation between instruments and vocals. Space around instruments was marvelous. The Scout 1.1 offered up the same presentation with everything more compressed. Still lovely but without the scale and detail. As the song moves on and brass enters the picture, the peal of the trumpets is clear and well defined without harshness. The French horns in this track were handled with equal fluidity.

Moving to the digital file of the song via Roon from an AIFF CD rip, the same track lacks the body offered by the vinyl presentation-even when processed by the PS Audio DirectStream DSD DAC. The digital file was pleasant, but lacked the fullness that the VPI offered.

Next, I'll take British music icons for \$200 and go with Elton John's *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* (2016 This Record Co. Ltd/Mercury Records) Someone Saved My Life Tonight. This all-time personal favorite track on 180 gram vinyl is so quiet, with no ticks and pops, just the best version of the song I have found. The air around the cymbals, the crispness of the Güiro, the snap of the tip of the drumstick on the drumheads, and the resulting room space was exciting to bathe in. This presentation was all about detail and clarity. As I listened, I realized I had never heard as pure a version of this classic pop song. The vocals and instruments blend into a seamless coherent musical treat. The pairing of the Prime Signature and the Ortofon Cadenza Bronze is a great match (and a recommended one at VPI) that extracts a lof of information from the vinyl and into your system.

I wrapped the note taking with a direct to disc recording of Tower of Power on Sheffield Labs. "What is Hip" shows off the incredible talent of one of the versions of TOP at their creative peak. The combination of brass, drums, guitars and vocals creates a wall of perfectly executed sound, capturing a level of dynamics that will test the limits of any system – an excellent last hurdle for the VPI to overcome.





This final track underlined where the Scout was left behind and the real value of the Prime Signature revealed. Previously, I had only heard this level of presentation on much more expensive turntables. It was ear opening to hear this much resolution coming from such an approachable table. This is where the vinyl (er, rubber) hit the road leaving tire tracks all the way. I played this track a few times at much higher than normal and grinned every time.

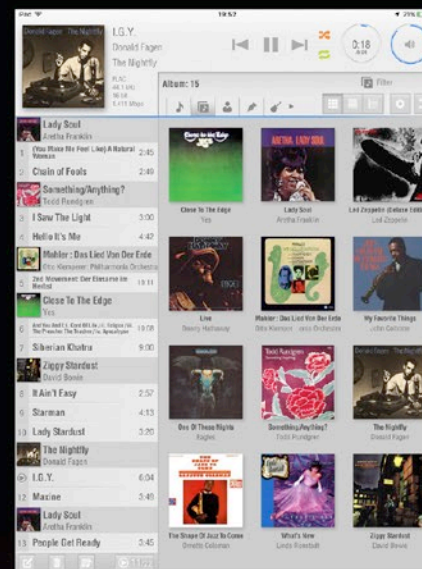
Mat Weisfeld's leadership at VPI is a shot in the arm for a company that always stayed true to itself when digital threatened vinyl's dominance of the audio world. The creation of the Production Line tables has brought terrific value to not just the vinyl curious but also to long-time vinyl fans.

While there are many super tables (Including VPI's own Avenger and Titan models) with five and six figure price tags, with incredible engineering and finish, I proclaim the Prime Signature as the reference value king of turntables. And though a fully maxed out Prime Signature comes in just under \$10k, it gives the cost no object decks some major competition. I'm happy to make the VPI Prime Signature my new reference.

vpiindustries.com



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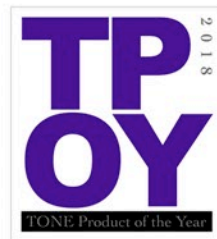
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### Technics SL-1210GAE

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[technics.com](http://technics.com)

Only 1210 of these black beauties will be built to celebrate Technics' 55th anniversary. Similar in mechanical nature to the 1200GAE released a few years back, this is your second chance to get your hands on one if you missed out.

These are spectacular.





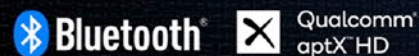
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### Michi X3 Integrated

\$4,999  
[rotel.com/michi](http://rotel.com/michi)

As you may have seen, we've been very excited about the Michi amp and preamp featured in this issue.

Rotel is a legendary company, and their new integrated offers much of the separate components, at a reduced price and more compact profile.

The X3 offers up 350 watts per channel, and the larger X5, 600 watts per channel.

Watch for a review very soon.







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silversonic.com

With phono cables starting to cost more than used cars, it's refreshing to hear one that offers high sonic performance at an incredibly reasonable price.

Using the silver coated copper approach that has made DH Labs an award winning product the world over, the Dimension cable is a welcome addition to budget concious, over achieving analog playback systems.

We've had excellent results with the tables we've tried it with.





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# FUTURE TENSE Reviews in our immediate future...

## Pass Labs INT-25

\$7,250  
[passlabs.com](http://passlabs.com)

We've had excellent luck with the Pass XA-25 power amplifier - it's a favorite among Pass fans, especially those craving the Class-A sound, but able to get along just fine with 25 watts per channel. (into 8 ohms, 50 wpc into 4)

By keeping the preamplifier single ended and simple, with only three inputs, this amplifier offers an incredible ability to deliver the control associated with solid-state, yet convey the nuance you'd expect from a low power circuit.







Thrax Enyo  
Integrated Amplifier

\$13,000 - \$18,000 (config. dependent)  
thrax.bg(factory)  
highendbyoz.com(US distribution)

This 50 watt per channel amplifier can be ordered strictly for amplification, or with a streaming DAC, and MM/MC phono section, to be a complete audio solution.

Expect some greatness here.

LE PHONO SE

Working strictly as a class A single ended device with no feedback, our phonostage uses only solid state components (no op-amps) with the shortest signal path circuit possible.



Tailor built for your cartridge with carefully selected and matched high end components, it works with any MC cartridge from 0.1mV (74dB of gain) up to 2.5mV.

Le Phono SE, a solid-state design without the usual issues of tube electronics.

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SCULPTURE A



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A.3

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made by Ana Mighty Sound

A.3 & A.4 SCULPTURE A  
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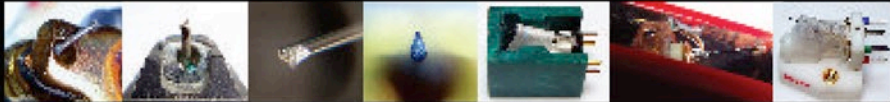
Already awarded by French press with a « Remarquable » award, the A.3 and A.4 phono cartridges display a minimum tracking of 90 micron @300Hz lateral that will allow you to get the full definition of your records. For this we have developed a specific damper and use only boron cantilevers with dedicated geometry diamond tips.

With outputs from 0.1mV to 0.3mV with either silver or copper coils and impedances between 3 to 40 ohms.

It is the perfect companion of our Le Phono Single Ended phonostage and others.

With a compliance of 12 @100hz and three bodies, mixing impregnated wood with pure brass, copper, silver or gold, we are able to fine tune the weight and fine tune the sound of your cartridge to match perfectly the mechanics of your tonearm.

The A.3 is a fixed characteristic design, the A.4 is a tailor made cartridge up to your requests.



retip

**Our insights on cartridge "repairs"**  
What if each cartridge was restored as unique artefact ? We do not believe that glueing a cantilever and diamond tip is enough. Aging has an effect on your cartridge as well as usage wear, dust, hygrometry and UV.

**Cartridge service :** your cartridge does not sound as good as you remember ? The damper might have been tampered with, the azimuth of your diamond tip is starting to be off or maybe the piano wire is getting loose ?

We can check it out and get back the original parameters without altering the parts of your cartridge.

**Fine-repair :** we are able to completely rebuild Neumann DST (or Lumière), Clément cartridges and most MC cartridges available. Open coils ? Stiff damper ? Broken cantilever ? We know how to deal with these issues and will do our best to get your cartridge as close to its original status, even though we can certainly alter your cartridge up to your requests.



Tubulus XS Umbilical

tubulus.net  
\$1,500/pair (approx. price, length dependent)

How do you wring more performance from the amazing Pass XS series components?

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Unconventional DNA



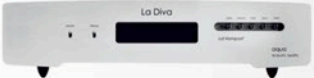
La Voce S3 dac



La Scala Optologic dac



Formula xHD dac



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Reviews in our immediate future...

## Hegel H390

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hegel.com

Hegel gear has always been understated in terms of aesthetic, but big on performance.

The H390 has been around for about a year now, and it still stands up in the premium integrated category.

With a class-leading DAC built in, and 250 watts per channel, this is an amplifier that can easily anchor a system with a pair of \$50k speakers, forget about playing records and just call it a day. (did we say that out loud?)





# In House

The soundtrack of assembling the issue...

## *Jazz at The Pawnshop (with a twist)*

Yes, yes, we know. *Jazz at the Pawnshop*.

But we tend to get a little bit punchy and hallucinogenic at the end of the issue, so when you stumble across this “classic” on cassette - what the hell? Plug it in and press play.

Though still somewhat pedestrian in delivery, this is still a great sounding record, or in this case - cassette.

Did it come on 8-track? Woo hoo.



“Rega’s new P10 is by far the company’s most sophisticated, refined, quiet, and subtle-sounding turntable yet.”

Michael Fremer, *Stereophile*, March 2020

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# Dealers That Mean Business:

You've read all the reviews, you've argued with the internet pundits,

and you're ready to write a check. Now what? If you're a slightly used customer that likes to shop for the best bargain you can find on Audiogon, this article is not for you. And, controversial though it might sound, I'm not against Audiogon. If you want a gently pre-owned preamp, love music, and just don't want to buy new, I get that – as long as you know what you're getting into. Audiogon can be a great place to buy pre owned gear if you know exactly what you want - and don't expect ANY service. But someone has to buy it new, so you can buy it used – remember that!

If you are the customer that likes to buy new, loves the feel (and the smell) of taking it out of the box for the first time, knowing no one else has touched it, I get that too. Personally, I'm about 50/50 on this experience, as I am with cars. Ask anyone who's bought a preamp or a used car from me, it's usually pretty pampered.

However, if you are going to spring for new gear, you need a good dealer. Someone who understands you, your music and most of all your perspective. You need someone to help you find the right components that will work together as a system, help you set it up in some cases, and offer support when things don't work out as planned. There's no substitute for experience, and a great dealer knows their products, and knows what will work best for you.

Nearly every audio system that has failed to achieve the greatness expected of it can be traced back to poor component choice (system and/or room) synergy and poor component setup. I've been to hifi shows, homes, and dealers all over the world – hearing sound good, bad, and somewhere inbetween. It always boils down to these two factors if something isn't truly broken, and it rarely is.

The solution is easy. Find a great dealer. While there isn't a hifi shop on every corner like there was back in the 70s, there are still some truly great dealers out there that will help you put together a stunning music system, regardless of your budget. And I'm on a mission to find as many of them as I can for you.

I'm starting with the folks I know, in this new section of the magazine. Most of the establishments in this list are running full page ads in the magazine – and there is a caveat. I will not accept advertising in this magazine from a dealer unless I've been to their place, seen the shop and have talked to a cross section of their customers to know they provide superior service. In most cases, these are hifi shops that I, or someone on the staff has purchased gear from as well.

These are not just people wanting to buy space in TONEAudio. Every one of these dealers carry my personal endorsement, and I hope that will help you on your journey. As we go forward, look for the "TONEAudio Approved Dealer" sticker on your favorite establishment. Know a great dealer, that you've had superior service from? Let me know, I would like to pay them a visit and add them to the list.



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lmche.com  
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Scottsdale, Arizona

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www.gryphon-audio.com



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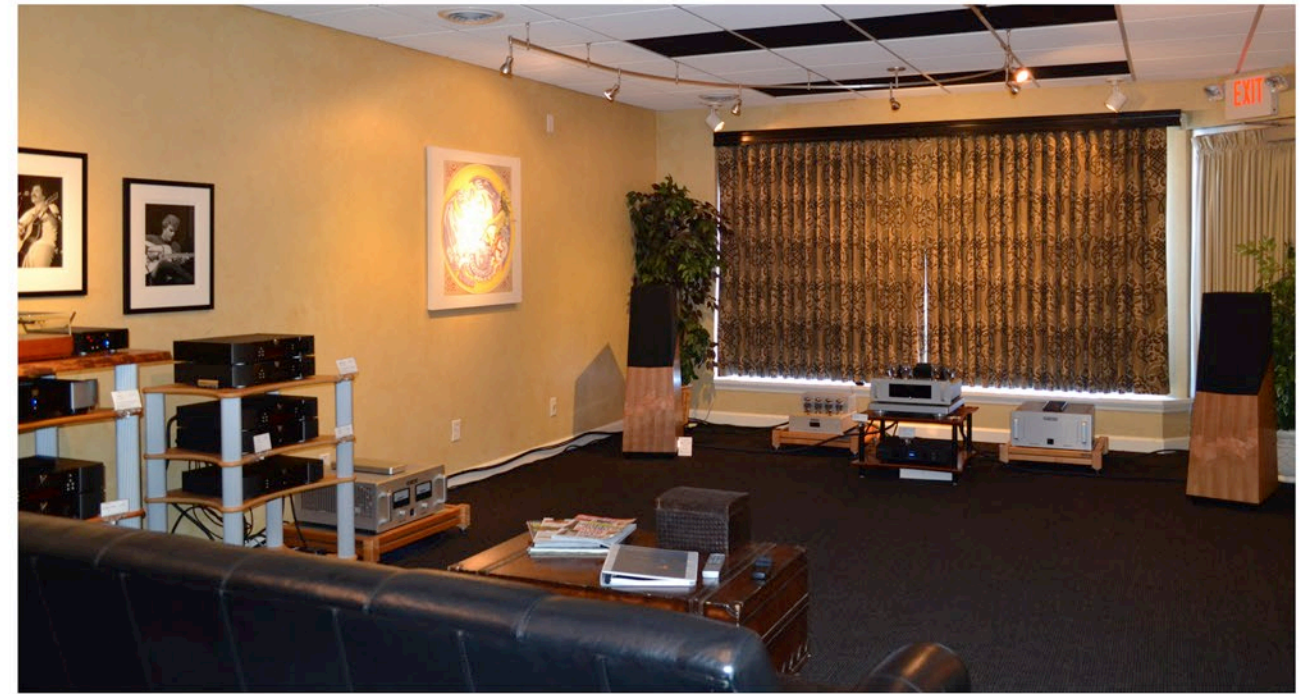
### Wauwatosa, Wisconsin - Ultra Fidelis

[www.ultrafidelis.com](http://www.ultrafidelis.com)

7125 West North Avenue

Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53213

414.221.0200



### Portland, Oregon - Echo Audio

[www.echohifi.com](http://www.echohifi.com)

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Portland, Oregon 97221

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Sarasota, Florida - Suncoast Audio  
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Sarasota, Florida 34240 941.932.0282



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www.nohosound.com  
62 Cooper Square  
New York, New York 10003



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[www.cardas.com](http://www.cardas.com)



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Marietta, Georgia 30060

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**San Diego, California - Deja VU Audio West**  
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Austin, Texas 78702      512.477.8503



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rega  
shinola  
sme  
sonos  
soundsmith  
stillpoints  
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woo audio

## Get The Gear: Where to find what you've seen in this issue.

Ana Mighty Sound	<a href="http://anamightysound.com">anamightysound.com</a>	Core Power	<a href="http://underwoodhifi.com">underwood hifi.com</a>
Analog Magik	<a href="http://analogmagik.com">analogmagik.com</a>	dCS	<a href="http://dcsltd.co.uk">dcsltd.co.uk</a>
Anthem	<a href="http://anthemav.com">anthemav.com</a>	Dynaudio	<a href="http://dynaudio.com">dynaudio.com</a>
Aqua Audio	<a href="http://aquahifi.com">aquahifi.com</a>	Echo Audio	<a href="http://echohifi.com">echohifi.com</a>
Artisan Fidelity	<a href="http://artisanfidelity.com">artisanfidelity.com</a>	Elusive Disc	<a href="http://elusivedisc.com">elusivedisc.com</a>
Audio Classics	<a href="http://audioclassics.com">audioclassics.com</a>	Esoteric	<a href="http://esoteric-usa.com">esoteric-usa.com</a>
Audio Research	<a href="http://audioresearch.com">audioresearch.com</a>	Exogal	<a href="http://exogal.com">exogal.com</a>
AudioVision SF	<a href="http://audiovisionsf.com">audiovisionsf.com</a>	Focal	<a href="http://focalnaimamerica.com">focalnaimamerica.com</a>
AVID HiFi	<a href="http://avidhifi.com">avidhifi.com</a>	Franco Serblin	<a href="http://francoserblin.it">francoserblin.it</a>
Boulder	<a href="http://boulderamp.com">boulderamp.com</a>	Gig Harbor Audio	<a href="http://gigharboraudio.com">gigharboraudio.com</a>
Bryston	<a href="http://bryston.com">bryston.com</a>	Gold Note	<a href="http://goldnote.it">goldnote.it</a>
Capture Cassettes	<a href="http://splicit.com">splicit.com</a>	Golden Ear	<a href="http://goldenear.com">goldenear.com</a>
Cardas Audio	<a href="http://cardas.com">cardas.com</a>	Grand Prix Audio	<a href="http://grandprixaudio.com">grandprixaudio.com</a>
Clarus Cable	<a href="http://claruscable.com">claruscable.com</a>		
Chord Cable	<a href="http://soundorg.com">soundorg.com</a>		
conrad-johnson	<a href="http://conradjohnson.com">conradjohnson.com</a>		





# T H E F I N E A R T S

In celebration of 40 years in the pursuit of high-performance in audio, conrad-johnson is pleased to present our new limited production ART150 (stereo 150 Watts/channel) and ART300 (mono 300 Watts) amplifiers, each a virtual window on the emotional experience of live music right in your home.



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## Get The Gear: Where to find what you've seen in this issue.

Gryphon	<a href="http://gryphon.dk">gryphon.dk</a>	Qobuz	<a href="http://qobuz.com">qobuz.com</a>
HiFi Centre	<a href="http://hificentre.com">hificentre.com</a>	REL	<a href="http://rel.net">rel.net</a>
Kiseki	<a href="http://kiseki-usa.com">kiseki-usa.com</a>	Rega	<a href="http://soundorg.com">soundorg.com</a>
Luxman	<a href="http://luxmanamerica.com">luxmanamerica.com</a>	Sonus faber	<a href="http://sonusfaber.com">sonusfaber.com</a>
McIntosh	<a href="http://mcintoshlabs.com">mcintoshlabs.com</a>	Sumiko	<a href="http://sumiko.net">sumiko.net</a>
Manley	<a href="http://manley.com">manley.com</a>	SVS	<a href="http://svsound.com">svsound.com</a>
MartinLogan	<a href="http://martinlogan.com">martinlogan.com</a>	Technics	<a href="http://technics.com">technics.com</a>
Musical Fidelity	<a href="http://focalnaimamerica.com">focalnaimamerica.com</a>	Tellurium Q	<a href="http://telluriumq.com">telluriumq.com</a>
Nagra	<a href="http://nagraaudio.com">nagraaudio.com</a>	TONE Imports	<a href="http://toneimports.com">toneimports.com</a>
Naim	<a href="http://focalnaimamerica.com">focalnaimamerica.com</a>	Torus	<a href="http://toruspower.com">toruspower.com</a>
Octave	<a href="http://octave.de">octave.de</a>	Totem	<a href="http://totemacoustic.com">totemacoustic.com</a>
PS Audio	<a href="http://psaudio.com">psaudio.com</a>	Ultra Fidelis	<a href="http://ultrafidelis.com">ultrafidelis.com</a>
Paradigm	<a href="http://paradigm.com">paradigm.com</a>	Underwood HiFi	<a href="http://underwoodaudio.com">underwoodaudio.com</a>
Pass Labs	<a href="http://passlabs.com">passlabs.com</a>	Upscale Audio	<a href="http://upscaleaudio.com">upscaleaudio.com</a>
PrimaLuna	<a href="http://primaluna-usa.com">primaluna-usa.com</a>	VAC	<a href="http://vac-amplifiers.com">vac-amplifiers.com</a>
ProAc	<a href="http://soundorg.com">soundorg.com</a>	Warwick Acoustics	<a href="http://warwickacoustics.com">warwickacoustics.com</a>
Pro-Ject	<a href="http://projectusa.com">projectusa.com</a>	Whammerdyne	<a href="http://whammerdyne.com">whammerdyne.com</a>
		Wireworld	<a href="http://wireworldcable.com">wireworldcable.com</a>





# In House

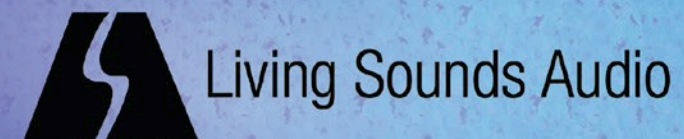
The soundtrack of assembling the issue...

## Todd Rundgren - Second Wind (via iPod)

Heading out for one last burger to wind up the issue, it just feels right to plug an old iPod into the old school 7 series.

No cover art, no color screen, no USB or Bluetooth.

But wow, does it sound good!



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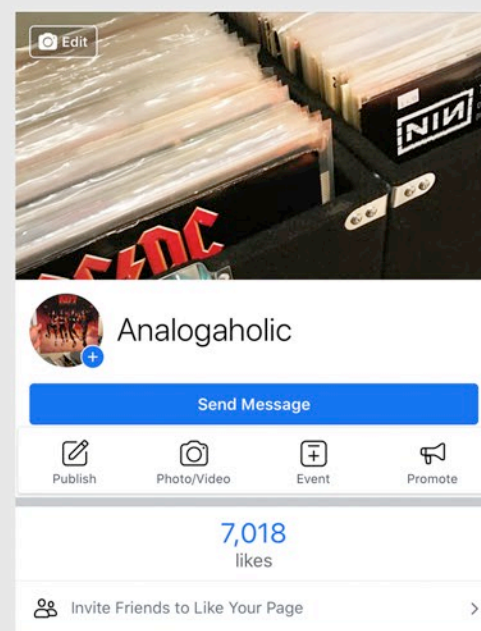
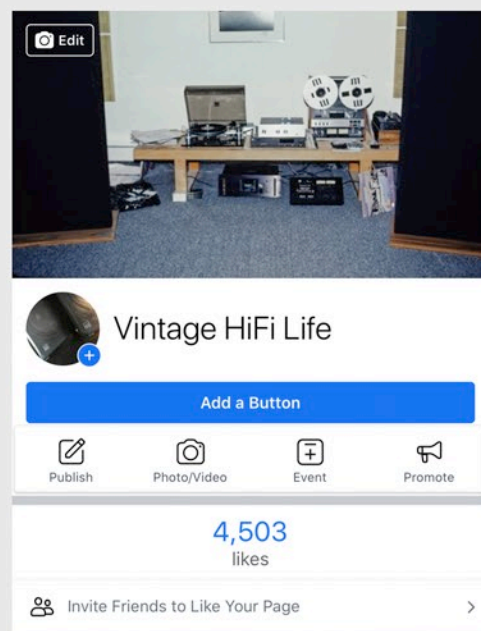
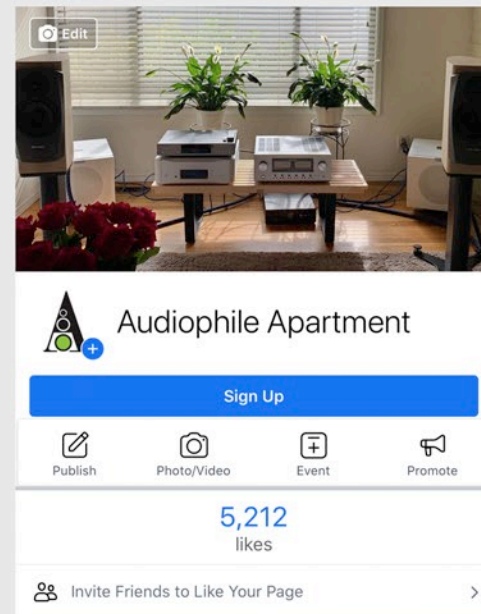
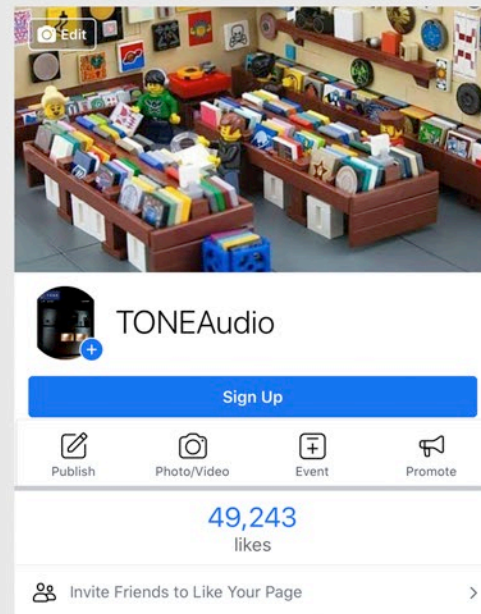
LISTEN TO THE SILENCE  
HEAR THE HIDDEN DETAILS





We've tried to make it pretty easy for you to find us out on Facebook, and have divided up our pages to be a bit more subject specific.

Here they are with links. Just click on the page that interests you most. We look forward to hearing from you when you have a spare moment.

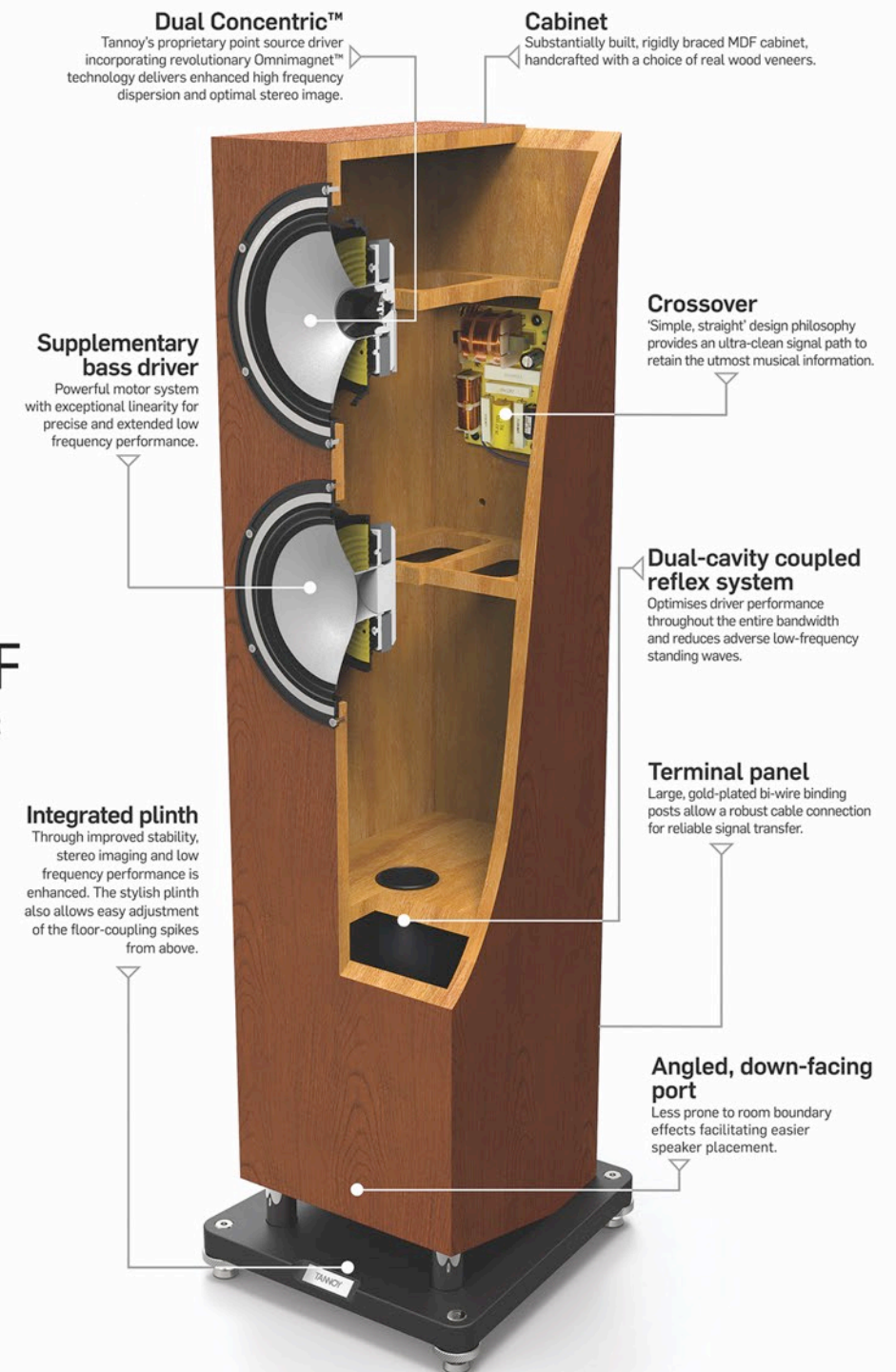


## Revolution XT 8F

THIS \$10K SPEAKER IS JUST \$2300 PER PAIR

AVAILABLE IN  
GLOSS BLACK  
GLOSS WHITE  
DARK WALNUT  
MEDIUM OAK

# TANNOY



"The Tannoy Revolution XT 8F was Robert Harley's top discovery at the 2015 Consumer Electronics Show. His first impression was as follows: 'After listening to it and looking at the real wood enclosure, I guessed the price at \$7000 to \$10,000. The Revolution XT's price was then revealed to be just \$2600 per pair.' After living with the 8F happily for several months, I was ready to declare it a sensational entry-level loudspeaker. But I see that I need to slightly amend that statement—the only thing entry-level about it is the price. The real wood veneers and level of finish don't suggest an entry-level product, and sonically it performs to a much higher standard. I'm in total agreement with Robert's assessment: The Tannoy packs a virtuoso midrange that is competitive with speakers approaching \$10k retail."

— DICK OLSHER, THE ABSOLUTE SOUND





Music and celebrity photographer Karl Larsen posted this image, at the drive to a cancelled music festival, earlier this year in California.

A few Facebook friends chimed in, saying “I should have taken that picture.”

Larsen calls it “The day the music died, #2020.”

Here’s to us all being able to tip back a beer and see some music, sooner than later.



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*-Jeff Dorgay, Tone Publications*

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## Next issue, **104:**

Gaining summer momentum. Next issue will be a lot of integrated amps. And another six-pack from REL.

More reviews, more fun to come. Keep an eye out for our YouTube channel and our podcasts.

And as always, drop on by our Facebook page and let us know how you are...



TONE